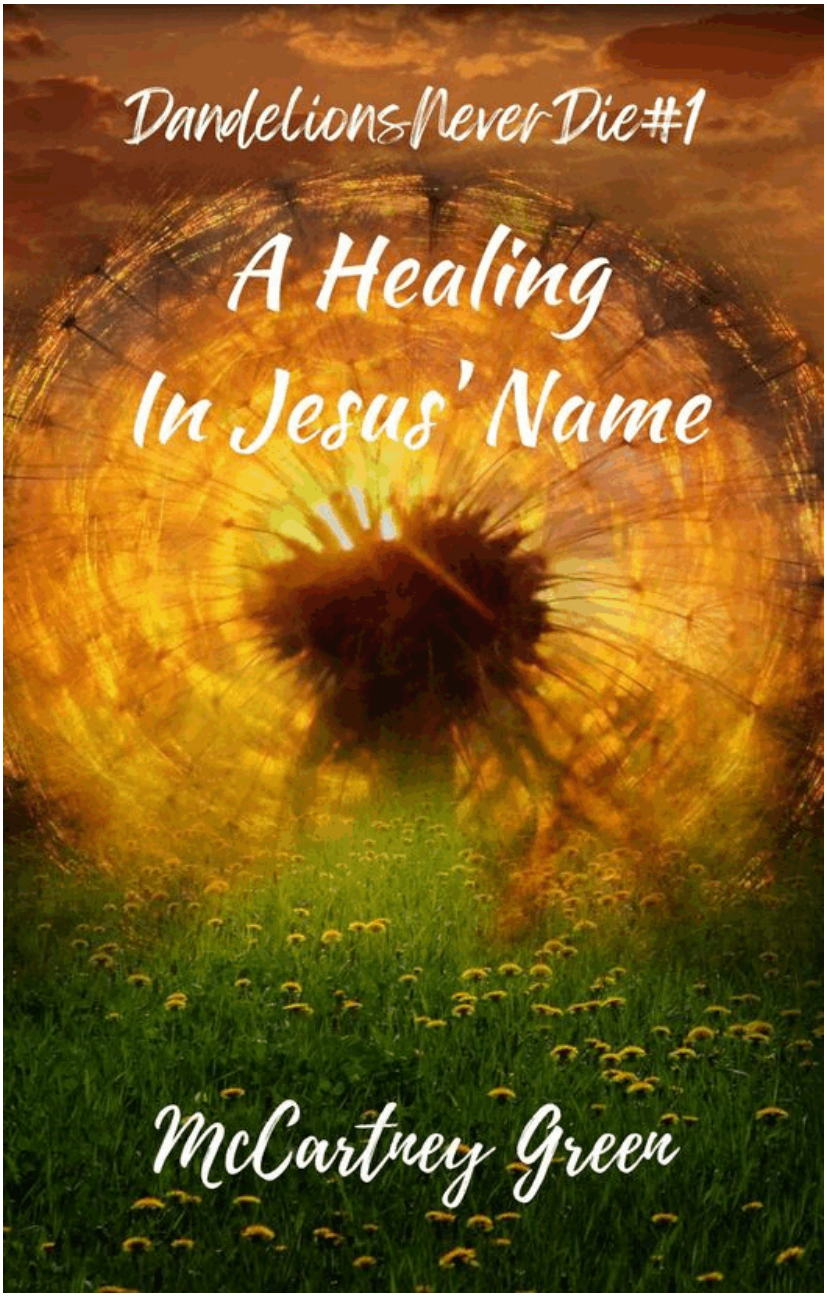

Dandelions Never Die #1
A Healing In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

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

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

Acknowledgments

With immense gratitude to the loyal friends and readers, (and readers who have become friends thanks to social media,) who have encouraged me, been patient with me, and believed in me.

Thanks to the flying fingers of my son Jonathon, who, when my hard drive burned up, typed an unedited fifteen hundred page hard copy of the manuscript back into my computer.

Thanks to my son, Daniel, the warrior, for the beautiful cover art.

Thanks to all of my warrior children, Daniel, Eryn, Jeremy, Terry, Kristel, Matthew and Jonathon for your support, your encouragement, your brilliant minds, and the lessons you've taught me. Each of you has contributed to my writing in numerous ways. From wonderful martial arts choreography, to proofreading, to cover artistry, to examples of your own work ethic. Most of all you gave perfect examples of the honor and integrity of the heroes and heroines in these stories.

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Thanks to my first husband, Terry, for part of the title for the series, *Dandelions Never Die*. We love you and miss you and know you are looking over us. Can't wait to see you again!

Thanks to my best friend and second husband, Larry, my biggest and bestest fan. His encouragement, his strength, his calm spirit, his strong support, his kindness, meant everything to me. COVID took him, and almost took me, but that is another story. He was my rock in this mortal life, and I am very much looking forward to seeing him again!

Most importantly, my Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. I give You all praise and glory, all gratitude, all my devotion. I pray Your blessing upon all who read this book, that they may be filled with Your Holy Spirit, that they may be healed, whether it be physically, mentally, emotionally, or spiritually. I pray that You will lead me, guide me, walk beside me in all that I do and say... and write. In Jesus' mighty and powerful name I pray, Amen

From the Author:

I am called and dedicated to creating these powerful and thought-provoking Christian dramas. These books are allegory. They teach, inspire, uplift and motivate. This is the first book of a 15-book series. At first it may seem like just an entertaining story with a little bit of a Christian theme. However, as you move through the series, you are building a base that will support Books 9—14. Those last books are the meat. They are the crux of the matter. DO NOT GIVE UP BEFORE YOU GET TO THEM. It should and will change your life, as the Lord Himself gave me the scenes and story lines to write. At first, I didn't even realize the plot or how things would come together, but I learned to trust Him. And God blew me away with the words He gave me.

The storytelling is aimed toward shedding light on the timeless truths found in the teachings of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Oh, how I LOVE the Lord. If you haven't read the most recent Word He gave me, please do so at my website, mccartneygreen.org, and go to Exclusive: A Word from Jesus. He gave me a glimpse into our life with Him in the Kingdom and explained why He did something as grand as send an angel to me to have me write this series of books.

"I will call upon the LORD, who is worthy to be praised: so shall I be saved from mine enemies. The sorrows of death compassed me, and the floods of ungodly men made me afraid. The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried unto my God: he heard my voice out of his temple, and my cry came before him, even into his ears."

Psalm 18:3-6

Note to Readers and ***Caution*:

This book addresses some pretty tough subjects. Bullying, sexual assault, teen pregnancy, emotional abuse, broken families, casual sex, attempted murder, torture, and self-defense. Except for the last one mentioned, these are evils that someone, somewhere, faces each and every day in this world. It seems we are being overtaken. But God has a plan.

Each time we are confronted with one of these evils, we have an opportunity to learn and grow, and more importantly, to get closer to God. He doesn't send us up against the darkness alone. God is with us. He also sends His warriors to do His will, to help, to protect, and to minister to His children.

The characters in the books are not perfect. They make mistakes. It might seem some of the storylines are condoning certain sins. They are not. There is repentance, there is overcoming, there is growth—in some cases, not until the end of the series—so don't give up. You must progress with the characters and grow with them. It will all come together in the last few books. Jesus told me to stop drawing conclusions. We, and even the most serious of Bible scholars, do not really understand and know the full truth of things. Many things have been sealed up until you are able to understand. So, study, learn, draw no conclusions and take everything to Him, the Lord Jesus Christ, for clarification.

I learned first-hand that God is real. Unfortunately, the dark forces that gather against us are also real. After stumbling and falling many times, I learned to put my trust in my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This is a healing book, especially for anyone who has been sexually assaulted. You can heal. The very first stranger that read this book contacted me with this comment, "I think you are an angel sent to heal people with your words."

Though I am definitely no angel, I hope and pray with all my heart that I am fulfilling God's will for me, and that He will bless you, the reader, with healing, with peace, and with the comforting knowledge of His presence. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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"Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;
heal me, O Lord, for my bones are troubled."
Psalm 6:2

✝✝✝

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Philippians 4:6-7

✝✝✝

"We are only victims if we allow ourselves to be."
~Eric Kino~

✝✝✝

Chapter One

Shelley struggled against the large hand that pushed against her chest. Confused and panicked, her mind was unable to grasp what was actually happening. The man wrestled her onto the ground beneath a giant pine tree, pressing her down into the soft bed of pine straw. She whimpered as she strove to free herself from his grasp. This just could not be happening, not to her, not here in broad daylight on the nature path she loved to walk.

He mumbled some ridiculous words about what he thought of women in general and even though she fought with every ounce of strength in her body, it seemed he held her down effortlessly.

"Be still and I won't hurt you," he growled fiercely.

His words brought her efforts to an immediate halt. She wondered what he meant by "hurt." Did he have a gun, or a knife? Would he actually kill her? She couldn't let that happen. Her children needed her. So, she did as he said. Tears welled in her eyes as she accepted her fate. It really was gonna happen – to her. This wasn't some news story on TV.

He'd come up on her from behind as she walked the path. He nodded a friendly hello and commented on the nice weather. She'd smiled and agreed and expected him to pass her and move along. Instead he turned and grabbed her arm, and when she tried to pull free he tackled her to the ground.

He was dressed nicely, khaki pants and a button-down shirt, looked to be about forty-something, had a nice smile. When she'd heard someone approaching from behind it didn't surprise her. Several regulars walked the peaceful paths of the nature preserve during their lunch hour to breathe fresh air and grab some exercise, though usually no one went as far up the big hill as she did. She found she enjoyed the quiet up on the high trail by herself.

He loomed over her now and she looked up into his hate-filled eyes and begged. "Please—please don't do this."

In her own ears her voice sounded like a small child and she hated it. She hated her voice, she hated begging, she hated what was happening to her and mostly she hated herself for being so weak. She had no idea what to do to get herself out of it.

She had no time to figure it out. His hands tore at her clothes and she did nothing. He ripped away her dignity and she did nothing. Had his way, and still, she did nothing. And for many minutes, after he left her in a heap on the bed of pine straw, she did nothing.

Slowly, her mind began functioning again and she knew she had to get up and get to her car. Her mind grasped at fragmented thoughts as they rushed through her brain. She needed to do something, like call police, call her husband, yes, she thought, had to do those things. But first, her children would be home from school soon and she was sure they would panic if she wasn't there. Maybe she should wait to call police. Maybe she would get the kids fed and settled and then tell her husband and then he would help her through the entire ordeal.

Hands shaking, she struggled to her feet and began gathering the remnants of her clothing– and her mind. She dressed, holding her shirt closed in her fist and began the frightful walk back to civilization along the path of the nature trail she'd taken, a trail that should've been safe in the middle of the day, a trail to which the local school brought children on field trips, a trail she'd once loved to walk and breathe in the rich aroma of earth and trees and flowers. Now, it was a trail where a complete stranger had assaulted a woman in broad daylight. Her stomach turned. She'd been assaulted in a public park in broad daylight and she felt the shame of that deep within her soul.

As she made her way down the trail and toward the parking lot her heart began to pound harder and harder. She wondered if the man had actually left the area or was he waiting behind a bush or tree to grab her again. The thought was paralyzing. She froze for a moment and then, spotting her car, she took off running, fumbled with the key, opened the door, climbed in and slammed the door behind her.

Once locked inside the relative safety of her little car, Shelley tilted the rearview mirror down and stared. The tear-streaked face of a stranger stared back at her. Images of what had just transpired flashed through her mind and with those images came nausea and despair and a terrible feeling of helplessness. She touched her face and the hysteria bubbled up. She wanted to scream and cry.

How could she have let this happen? How does a man think he can assault a woman in broad daylight and get away with it? Well, of course he thought he could—he just did. She hadn't even tried to fight, had she? Not really. She'd made it easy for him. That man was walking around this very minute, a greasy smirk on his face, smiling and speaking to his friends or family as if nothing had happened, as if he hadn't just destroyed her world. The thought forced the scream from her lungs. Shouting, she pounded the steering wheel, finally giving vent to all the turmoil she felt.

The car pulling up beside her, teenagers spilling out, music blaring, brought her to her senses. School was out. She had to get going. Taking slow, deep breaths to calm herself, she quieted, glancing back up at the mirror as she wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Get a grip," she whispered to herself. Sniffing, she turned the ignition and started home.

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Shelley gasped, her jaw dropping. “How can you say that?” She stared incredulously at her husband. “I brought it on myself? Are you kidding me?”

He shrugged. “You go walking around in those tight little exercise shorts, just begging some guy to have his way with you. Now that it's happened you want sympathy from me.”

“I can't believe you can turn this on me. I’m not the criminal here.”

“Admit it, Shelley, if you didn't think you shared some of the guilt why didn't you call the police right away?”

She shook her head as the tears began to fall anew. “I– I was confused. I needed to get home before the kids came home from school and I wanted to wait for you to get home. I needed you, Robert.” Wiping her face on her sleeve, she looked back up at him expectantly.

His mouth taut, he rolled his eyes. “Well, come on, then. Let’s go to the police. You’ve waited so long they probably won’t believe you now. I’m not even sure I do.”

“Are you saying I made this up?”

He shrugged again. “How did he subdue you? Did he hit you? Where are the bruises?”

Shelley could feel the blood drain from her face and she thought she might pass out. She hadn’t fought. Not much anyway. She’d frozen.

“Well?”

Shaking her head, she raised her eyes to her husband. “He, he pushed me down. He was so strong.” Noting her husband’s raised eyebrows, she threw her hands in the air. “I’m not lying! What reason would I have to lie about something like this? He was too strong, and he told me not to fight and he wouldn’t hurt me.”

Robert Adams shook his head. “So, you simply complied? Just get dressed and let’s go,” he answered as he turned to leave the bedroom.

As she watched the door close she realized she’d never felt so alone as she did at that moment. She lay back across the bed, staring up at the ceiling. The sense of utter and complete desolation threatened to engulf her. She'd thought she’d tell her husband what had transpired and he’d take her in his arms, hold her, comfort her, promise her everything would get better. Instead, he was acting like, like, actually, she realized, he was acting as if he couldn’t care less about her. He didn’t care. The light went on. He didn’t care because he didn’t love her. Maybe he never did. She’d needed him, but he wasn’t there for her. Had Robert ever really been there for her when she needed him? For that matter, had her own family? It hit her hard that she was very much alone in the world.

Shelley rose, went to the window and pulled back the curtain. It was dark outside now, and with the light on behind her she could see nothing but her own image in the window glass. Staring at her reflection, she mentally fought down the emotions, but the self-hatred kept surfacing. *I didn't even fight. I’d*

just lain there and let him do it. I am so weak. Even now, I'm just standing here crying like a big baby because my own husband doesn't even care.

She pulled the edge of her shirt up to wipe her tears then eyed herself in the glass once more. For just a moment the thought rushed through her brain that it would be better had she never been born. She shook her head, forcing that thought away. She had three beautiful children whom she loved more than her own life. They were her life. Without them she would have no one, she really would be totally alone.

"You are not alone."

She gasped, turned quickly to see who'd spoken, but there was no one there. I must be losing my mind, she thought, because now I'm hearing things.

Turning back toward her reflection in the window, she looked into her own eyes and the strangest thing happened. A feeling of peace came over her. Her emotions calmed, her heart rate slowed, and the nausea and pain she felt every time she thought of what happened, it eased a bit.

She drew a deep breath, stood up straight, and let the curtain fall closed. Her mind calmed and she seemed to be able to think more clearly. Searching her heart, she tried to analyze what she felt about her life, and she realized that she'd never really done that. She'd never stopped to question how she felt. She'd simply been moving through life like it was a chore, her head down, obediently placing one foot in front of the other. She asked herself now, what do I feel?

The answer was obvious. Miserable. She was miserable, and she'd been miserable for a long time. It reminded her of the time she'd been hiking with some friends as a teen and there was this pain in her foot. She'd walked with that pain most of the day before getting the idea to finally sit down and see what the heck the problem was. She'd taken off her shoe to find a small rock. Why hadn't she looked earlier instead of walking all day with that pain? It was like a light going on. Robert had been a rock in her shoe, a source of pain and discomfort in her life.

How did I let this go on for so long? And what do I do to change it? Counseling? Divorce? Would Robert agree to counseling? Would he ever see that he mistreated her? She drew a deep cleansing breath. Things are about to change. I have a right to be happy. I am NOT gonna just take it anymore.

"I have a right to be happy," she said aloud this time, and she realized as she spoke the words a transformation came over her. Declaring her intentions aloud not only felt really good, but seemed to spawn some spiritual occurrence. She felt exhilarated and strong and suddenly had a rock-hard resolve to obtain a goal.

The door opened briskly. "Shelley, what are you doing? I said get ready to go."

What I'm doing, she thought as she sat up and slipped on her shoes, is waking up.

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Ephesians 5:28-29
“In the same way husbands should love their wives
as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself.
For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just
as Christ does the church...”

Chapter Two

Kino Estate Crystal Cove, California

The moment she'd uttered the words, "Help me," he'd come immediately awake. He'd been dreaming again. Same dream. Same feeling of urgency. He glanced at the clock. 3:14 AM. Rising, he made his way to the bathroom, flipped on the light and reveled in the sensation of cool water as he splashed it on his heated face. He glanced in the mirror and gasped. Staring back, floating before him for a brief instant, were "the eyes." Raising a dark eyebrow, he shook his head and gave a soft chuckle. He could see the headlines now: *Martial arts master, Eric Kino, dies of fright in his own bathroom.*

He'd been having dreams and visions of "the eyes," as his son called them, for some time now. He had no idea to whom the eyes belonged. They were definitely feminine. Beautiful, but always sad and sometimes filled with fear. He'd been given precognitive dreams before, but they'd always involved someone he knew. These dreams were different and they were accompanied by an enormously intense feeling of desperation.

He'd struggled to interpret the meaning of the dreams. He'd prayed fervently, asking God to make known His wishes. Who is this woman? Is she going to be appearing in his life? What does she have to do with him? Tonight, he'd heard her voice clear as a bell. "Help me," she'd said, as if she'd been lying right next to him and whispered in his ear. He'd felt her breath against his cheek, felt the press of her body as she'd leaned close. He'd come immediately awake with a knowing that he had to find her and that he *would* find her, but no more waiting. He had to actively search for her and not just hope that one day he'd run into her.

He nodded, "I hear you, Father," he whispered as he returned to his bed. Taking long, slow breaths, he slowly sank into a deep sleep.

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The next morning, having felt compelled by a godly prompting, Eric tossed items into a suitcase as he packed for a regional martial arts tournament in Atlanta. He was glad to be on the move after the decision he'd made the night before. He intended to look for "the eyes."

When he and his son had first received the invitation to the Atlanta tournament they'd had to decline, but then suddenly Ricky's schedule opened up. Eric took that as a sign that he should attend. He would be there only as an

observer. The guy organizing the tournament called him an “honored dignitary.” Eric shuddered at the title. His son, movie icon Ricky Kino, was scheduled to perform one of his much demanded demonstrations. Eric hadn't realized at the time that passing his knowledge on to his son would make Ricky a celebrity. Eric wasn't immune to the pride a father feels when his son achieves success and he enjoyed seeing Ricky do his thing. After all, Eric was the one who’d schooled Ricky in the martial arts since he'd been old enough to walk. Ricky had the “package” as the people in the industry put it. The looks, the body, the talent, the personality. He'd begun as a child star and worked his way up to leading man. At only twenty-one years of age, Ricky was one of the hottest stars in Hollywood.

Even though thoughts of Ricky's success always lifted Eric's spirits, his mind was still heavy with images of the woman in his dream. It concerned him quite a bit because other such dreams had turned out to be a prediction of unpleasant things. He'd dreamt of his wife in great peril and pain a year before she was diagnosed with cancer. He'd seen a branch of a great tree snap over and over the week before Ricky fell out of one and broke his arm. There had been numerous dreams touching on numerous subjects.

Every once in a while he'd actually been in tune enough to be able to avoid disaster, like the speeding truck that ran the red light. He'd known not to go when the light turned green, avoiding his own death and the death of his son. And he'd known the time bad guys waited in an alleyway with thoughts of murder and mayhem. He'd revised their actions if not their thinking. Those events, however, involved himself and people close to him. Now, for some reason, he felt he was supposed to help a woman he didn’t even know. Still, he trusted that nothing is random. God’s universe is ordered, not chaotic. Things happen for a reason, and so he was anxious to find her.

“Cheer up.”

The cloud hanging over Eric dissipated at the sound of his son’s voice. Eric glanced over. Ricky stood in the doorway with his usual wide smile. He was a breath of sunshine wherever he went, and Eric could think of no one in the world he loved and treasured more.

“What’s up, Dad? You look like you’re going to a funeral.”

“Do I?”

“Yeah. And you’re not. You're coming to watch me and really, what could be more pleasant than that?”

Eric smiled. “Truly,” he said, not hiding the sarcasm.

Ricky grinned. “So really, why so down?”

“I’m not down.” Eric shrugged. “Guess I’m feeling a little– intense.”

Ricky circled around to massage his father's shoulders. “Whatever you want to call it, Dad, you gotta learn to lighten up. You know what they say– stress kills.”

“Really? What do 'they' say about the surviving children? Do they say

anything about the guilt that must consume them?"

"Funny, Dad. So it seems you have a sense of humor after all, be it ever so small."

Eric closed the suitcase. "Large enough to accommodate you every day." He placed an arm around Ricky's shoulder. "Let's go."

"You know, you don't have to come if you're not up to it."

"Are you kidding me? I'm looking forward to it. Besides, I'll be able to keep an eye out for my MART student."

Ricky smiled. "I have no doubt you'll find the right one." He thought about his father's legendary status as MART instructor. The MART, an acronym for Martial Arts Recruiting Tournament, had become a huge event. An instructor takes a rookie student and turns them into a black belt champion in one year's time. The MART, the Olympics of the martial arts world, had become big business, thanks in part to his dad. What Bela Karolyi is to the world of gymnastics and Vince Lombardi is to football, Eric Kino is to the world of martial arts.

"I *will* find the right one," Eric agreed. "And after last night's dream, I've decided that I also need to find the owner of 'the eyes.'"

Ricky nodded thoughtfully. "So, maybe 'the eyes' belong to the student," he suggested.

Eric nodded. "Maybe."

Throughout the long and tedious flight to Atlanta, Ricky kept up a steady stream of chatter. Hours later in the elevator of the Atlanta Hilton, Ricky eyed his father. "You've been awfully quiet."

Eric touched his son on the shoulder and sighed. "I guess I haven't been very good company. I'm okay, just a little preoccupied."

"As long as you're okay."

"You're starting to sound like your grandmother," Eric teased, trying to lighten the mood.

Ricky's smile flashed. "Well, ya know, Grandma DID tell me to take good care of you."

"That's funny. She told *me* to take care of *you*."

"Well, I was about to go straight in and order up a whole lot of room service for the both of us. Would you consider that trying to take care of you or just being polite?"

"I'd never think you were just being polite," Eric quipped, knocking Ricky in the back of the head as he swiped the key card.

Ricky headed straight to lower the thermostat and next, to the phone to order food. Atlanta in June was unbelievably hot and humid. Having been raised in Los Angeles, Ricky was accustomed to the heat but not the humidity. He placed his order quickly then plopped across the bed, bemoaning the heat.

Eric smiled at his son's discomfort and decided he would make up for being a lousy traveling companion by resorting to some of their old antics.

“Heavy air, lots of oxygen, this would be a great alternative to your training– give some diversity to your workout.”

“Yeah, until I have to fight on a mountaintop.” Ricky rolled over, grabbed a pillow. “Work out if you want, I'm already in great shape and even if I wasn't, I'm not leaving the air conditioning.” He grabbed the remote. “Let’s see what the Braves are doing.”

Nonchalantly, Eric made his way to the bathroom, ice bucket beneath his arm. “I don't know, Rick,” Eric called from the bathroom.

“You're looking a little soft to me.”

“No way, Dad, you're just jealous.”

“Of your youth, maybe,” Eric said quietly, as he crept up beside Ricky. “Or, maybe it’s more like I'm standing here all hot and sweaty and you're nice and cool.”

“What are you talking ab...”

The bucket of water hit him square in the face. Eric's laughter almost botched his quick retreat to the bathroom. He locked the door, but could hear Ricky sputter and threaten to do all kinds of ill will to his own father. Ricky's tirade soon ceased and the room became eerily quiet. Smiling, Eric folded his arms and waited.

It took Ricky only a few seconds to pick the lock. Slowly, the door eased open. Ricky stood calmly in the entry, grinning wickedly, dangling the tool he’d used, his nail clippers, before his father's eyes. “I'm gonna kick your butt, honorable father.”

Eric sprang forward with blinding speed, disarming his son and tossing him handily and unceremoniously into the shower. Before Ricky could get his footing, Eric flipped on the cold water. Ricky gasped for breath, reached out and grabbed at his dad, but Eric easily deflected his son's arm, leaving Ricky to clutch nothing but air and cold water.

“Honorable father kicks honorable son's butt, amazingly effortlessly.” He bowed to his worthy opponent. “Like I said, son, you're getting soft.”

Ricky returned the bow. “Well, you ARE 'the Master'.”

“And don't you forget it,” Eric called back as he left the bathroom to wait for room service.

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Shelley Adams stared into the mirror and wondered at the woman who stared back. She was the mother of three and had at one time believed there would always be a loving husband standing beside her. There was not. He’d forced her hand, shown her that he cared nothing for her. Remarkable as it seemed, she’d found some strength from somewhere, and removed him from her life. Her husband's nonchalant attitude toward her assault had been an eye-opener and the final nail in the coffin for their marriage. She’d gotten pregnant and married at age sixteen. She'd never been without him, and now that she'd gone through with the divorce, she admitted she wasn't used to the quiet house.

At times the loneliness threatened to engulf her. This was one of those times. The house was dark. The silence was deafening. The boys were with their father for the summer and daughter Bree was in New York. Taking a deep breath, Shelley reminded herself that she didn't need her ex-husband. She didn't need anyone, or so she liked to think. However, she hadn't been prepared for the fears that had begun to take over her life.

It surprised her because it seemed she'd been fearless in getting out of an emotionally abusive marriage. She never used to scare easily. Yet over the past few years she'd begun to jump at her own shadow. She was afraid of the dark. She never walked anywhere alone. She was overprotective of the kids. Allowing Bree to go to New York had meant a major fight between herself, her ex-husband, and her daughter.

Maybe the fear was because of what had happened to her, or maybe it was because she'd never really been alone until now. Over the past two years she'd learned to stand on her own and slowly, she was learning to be strong. Still, the fear was always there, hovering over her, or beside her, but she was working on it, and part of working on it would keep her occupied all day tomorrow.

In the morning she'd be participating in her very first martial arts tournament. The huge regional event included all styles from karate to taekwondo to jujitsu, and all belts. It was very exciting, but she had to admit she was more nervous than excited.

Maybe spawned by that random act of violence that had taken place almost two years earlier, or maybe by some new post-traumatic fear, she'd set a goal to master one of the martial arts. When she thought deeply about it, she had to admit, it was like a voice deep inside her was urging her toward that goal and it had grown into a burning desire. The police never caught the man who'd assaulted her. Sometimes she wasn't sure they even believed he existed. The counselor at the rape crisis center had helped her with the frustration, but not with the self-disgust.

It sickened her that she hadn't fought. She'd let fear paralyze her. She'd sworn she'd never let that happen again. She'd also sworn she would stand up to her husband, a considerable feat, considering her emotional dependency on him. She'd met him when she was fifteen. She'd clung to him, because unlike her parents and brothers, he made her feel important. But it was all a guise. She'd now learned that a man in college goes after a young girl usually because he needs to control her completely. The divorce had been a huge step.

Now, she had to become strong. Her counselor had supported Shelley's conviction that taking action would help to alleviate the feelings of shame and frustration. She told her, "Do something positive. Something you've always wanted to do. Do something for *you*. It will help you to feel empowered."

That's what had led to a Taekwondo class at the local "Y". It fit her budget, gave her something to focus on and had given her back some confidence. She worked hard, desperate to even the odds, to be on a little more

equal footing with the male species, and not quite so vulnerable.

Now, Shelley studied her reflection. Sometimes she felt so old, yet she was only thirty-four. “Thirty is the new twenty,” a co-worker had remarked. She admitted she was flattered when people thought she and Bree, her seventeen-year-old daughter, were sisters. I have great eyes, Shelley thought. Even her ‘ex’ had told her that. They were large and brown, and were framed with unique lashes that appeared to have been sprinkled with gold dust. Coming out of an emotionally abusive marriage, she was learning to be kind to herself and this was the first thing she'd allowed– pretty eyes.

Her hair was long and thick with large voluptuous natural curls. Bree let her know that her girlfriends would kill to have those curls and told her she’d personally kill her mom if she were to ever cut off her hair. That was no problem for Shelley, since leaving it long made it easier to put it back in the no fuss, long braid or ponytail she usually wore.

Making her way to the front door, she tested the lock, then headed into the kitchen to check the back door. She was a wimp, especially when the children were gone. Sometimes, in the dark, she could feel the panic take over. It was those times she questioned her decision to become single. It would be nice to have someone there to help her feel safe. She’d had a few offers, but she’d turned them down, mostly because she’d never met anyone who intrigued her enough to draw her interest, but also because she had to learn to stand on her own. For a long time she’d been both emotionally and physically crippled. Now, she was getting stronger.

Tomorrow’s tournament was a big deal because it was her first time competing. The goal to obtain a black belt meant she must compete. There were several different areas for competition in a tournament, including forms, sparring and weapons. She must spar, and spar well in order to reach black belt, but that would be down the road. The further the better, she thought. For her very first competition she’d elected to compete in forms only. Taking a breath, she repeated her new mantra.

“Strive for perfection. Strive for perfection. Strive for perfection.”

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As the early morning sun made its way across the plush hotel room, Eric emerged from the bathroom to find Ricky sitting on a bed, peeling a banana plucked from a complimentary bowl of fruit.

“It's about time,” Ricky laughed. “Come on Dad. If you don't hurry, we won't have time for breakfast and I'm starved.”

“Where have you been then? When I woke up, you were gone, and I assumed you were eating.”

Ricky gave a sheepish grin. “Naw, just checking out the scenery. Not much to check out though. I guess southern girls sleep late on Saturdays. However, I did accidentally attract the attention of a couple of kids in the lobby, so I signed a few autographs, let them snap a few pics, you know, just

enough to get the blood going."

Eric frowned. "I didn't realize your star status ego had grown so big that you now need a 'fix' in the mornings to get you started on your day. I think I'm gonna have to bring you down a peg or two."

"Can't even take a joke," Ricky grumbled as they left the room.

The tournament was being held in a large high school super gym in a suburban area just south of Atlanta. The huge event included competitors from most of the southeastern states and there would be several thousand spectators in attendance.

The limo arrived and, as celebrities, Eric and Ricky were escorted to the head judge's table where they were introduced to the local martial arts dignitaries and given a place of honor at the same table.

While Eric took a seat, a crowd quickly formed around Ricky, as usual. Eric watched as Ricky, ensconced in his element, signed autographs and chatted with youngsters, taking time to boost their confidence with a well-placed word. Local press took pictures and tried for impromptu interviews. Thankfully there were no paparazzi. They had a tendency to avoid the Kinos.

Watching Ricky now, Eric considered his son's bright, exuberant personality and compared it with his own more serious demeanor, marveling how they could be so close, yet so different.

Physically, they were similar. They both had straight-ish black hair. Ricky's just skimmed his shoulders, Eric's was slightly longer. They had bronze skin from the Hawaiian part of their ancestry, and dark eyes. One film critic said it was remarkable how Ricky's eyes could go from warm and compassionate to hard as steel. His eyes though, were only part of what made Ricky a star. He had a musculature that was rock hard, and a bright, alert mind. He was swift and agile and very good at what he did.

Ricky had earned a real black belt at nine years of age. Two years later his mother had died of cancer. Ricky and Eric immersed themselves in their art as therapy for their loss. Losing his wife had nearly defeated Eric, but his faith and caring for Ricky brought the light back.

Another glimpse in Ricky's direction made Eric smile. His son now had his arms around two giggling blondes. They posed, while a third girl took a picture, then turned around and took a selfie of the four of them.

"Thank you sooo much," the girls purred in their sweet southern accents.

"The pleasure is all mine I assure you," Ricky crooned back, glancing over at his father with a grin.

Eric rolled his eyes and pointed to his wristwatch, reminding Ricky that he had some arrangements to make for his demonstration. Ricky bid the ladies farewell, grabbed his bag and headed to meet with the lucky ones who'd been chosen to help with the show.

An hour later, at eight on the dot, the nervous tournament director

approached and bowed to Eric. “Uh, Master Kino, sir, uh, do you happen to know where Ricky is? It's time to begin and of course, we wanted to introduce our celebrities.”

Standing, Eric offered to go and locate Ricky himself. He passed up the locker rooms and headed toward the lobby where concessions were already being served. Ricky was an insatiable eating machine, and Eric had a feeling he’d find him there, stuffing his face with all manner of unhealthy delicacies.

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Cursing herself as she drove, Shelley pushed her old faded red Ford to its limit. *I know I turned the alarm on. I know I did. I checked it at least twice. Of all times for it to not go off.* “Stay green, stay green,” she chanted as she approached the next intersection. Beads of perspiration trickled down her forehead as she streaked into the high school parking lot at 8:03 AM.

Grateful that at least, the tournament was being held at her daughter's alma mater, only a few minutes away from her house, she hoped desperately they'd let her sign in late. Grabbing her bag, she sprinted to the gym, and jerked open the heavy door. Cool air rushed out to greet her, calming her. Sucking in a deep breath, she looked around nervously, to find a young man in a white uniform gathering papers from a long table. “Am I too late to sign in?” she asked in a panic.

“No ma'am. You lucked out. We're running a little behind,” he answered, thumbing through the papers in his arms. “Here you go,” he said pulling out a paper. “Find your events and sign in.”

Once she did, he looked over her form, checked off her registration number and nodded. “You are assigned to arena two.” He looked up and smiled. “So, locker rooms are through those doors over there and to the right. Better hurry.”

Shelley shot toward the doors in a run, then turned back to offer a belated thank you.

“*UUMPH*.”

Just as she turned forward again, her face smashed against something solid and she went down hard. The contents of the bag she'd never bothered to close tumbled across the floor. Putting a hand to her forehead, she gave a soft moan. Realizing she'd run into a person, even though she'd first thought she'd misjudged the distance to the door, she rubbed her nose and began apologizing profusely. “I am so sorry. I was running late. I should've been watching where I was going. I hope I didn’t hurt...”

She'd been crawling around gathering her things but stopped when a bronzed hand held out her folded purple belt for her to place back in her bag. Her eyes followed the hand up to its source and she found herself looking into the most incredible face.

He smiled. “Let me help you,” the man said politely.

He lifted her to her feet as if she were nothing more than a rag doll, which

both amazed and annoyed her. Amazed, at his strength. Annoyed, because it reminded her of her vulnerability as a woman. The latter thought stirred anger in her heart.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

His voice was calm, soft, and stole her anger immediately. She gazed at his face again. Dark eyes and long dark hair tied back at the nape of his neck, strong posture that gave a certain nobleness to his appearance, like that of a Native American warrior. And that smile. He had the kindest smile she'd ever seen. It made her feel safe, even happy. It took her breath away. He raised his eyebrows at her and she realized he waited for an answer to his question.

"Oh! Oh, yes! I'm fine. I'm so sorry. I was late and..."

For the second time she was unable to finish her sentence but this time it was because he raised his hand to quiet her.

"I'm the one at fault. I should've been looking where I was going and certainly should've been quick enough to get out of your way. Are you sure you're not hurt? You were moving pretty fast," he said with humor in his eyes.

She laughed, rubbed her forehead. "I'm fine, other than the fact that your chest is hard as a rock."

She felt the blush creep up her neck. *I did not just say that.*

"Are you competing?" he asked, not acknowledging her statement, as he handed her the rest of her belongings.

"No– I mean, uh, yes. Well, I mean, only in forms."

He smiled again. "Forms are important."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. Are you competing?"

"No, I'm not." He seemed amused by the question. "I came to watch my son, however, now, I have two people to watch."

"Two people?"

"My son—and you."

He smiled again and she thought she'd rise off the floor. He quickly brought her back to earth. "I think they're about to start."

"Oh, goodness, I have to go."

Eric turned and watched her as she walked away and disappeared inside the women's locker room.

†††

Shelley dressed quickly, hands trembling, as the fear of her first competition seeped into her mind. She smoothed golden brown strands of hair back into the thick braid that fell just a few inches short of her waist and hurried down the stairs to join the others already sitting on the floor along the edge of their designated mats.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, she took long, slow, deep breaths, to help center herself. She tried to clear her mind, seeking the strength she needed to perform this seemingly simple task. Looking her opponents over, she took measure of the eight other women competing in her division. None of them

were from her class at the "Y". Except for herself, only the younger students from the YMCA had opted to participate in the tournament. Her instructor had pretty much let her know she was on her own because he had to be there for the kids. She assured him she'd be fine.

She'd acted so nonchalant, but truth be told, she really wanted to do well. She'd practiced for hours with her two sons. Still, she reminded herself, the winning wasn't important. It was progressing that was important, and participating in competition signified progress in her quest to become strong.

Feeling calmer, Shelley exhaled, letting her mind relax. The minute she did, the traitorous organ wandered right back to the man she'd run into. Why was she thinking about him? She hated men. Well, most men anyway. Okay, she didn't hate them, but she sure didn't trust them. Especially strange men. Still, as men go, that particular one had been attractive. Even so, was she really so shallow that a hunky male could distract her from the important task she was about to undertake? She shook her head. What a fool she must have seemed, crawling around on the floor, collecting deodorant and hairbrush. Thank goodness she didn't have anything more personal in her bag.

Well, she thought as she rubbed her head, remembering the hardness of his body, he was an impressive specimen. The thing that really stood out though, was his kindness, and, something else. A glow. A calmness. There was a quiet calm that seemed to surround him. Realizing her mind had wandered again, she quickly regained her concentration. While she waited for the tournament to begin, Shelley closed her eyes, drew a deep breath and repeated her mantra.

Only a minute later the event director began speaking into the microphone. He gave a small welcoming speech and went over the rules of the meet. "And now I have a surprise for you," the director continued. "I know we said we were unable to get a celebrity to attend today's event, but it seems he was able to fit us in after all and he brought along a bonus. So, we're extremely excited to have with us today, two stars of the martial arts world!"

Shelley excitedly squirmed around to get a better view.

"I have the extreme honor of introducing to you a legend in our industry, a Master who's taught other Masters, three time MART instructor champion and black-belt hall-of-famer, Master Eric Kino!"

Shelley's jaw dropped. It was him, the guy she'd slammed into. She watched Master Kino stand from his seat at the head judges' table. He bowed to the crowd and then he seemed to glance in her direction with a slight smile. She looked behind her to see who he could possibly be smiling at. *Me? Is he smiling at me?* She was sure that steam rose from her red face.

"And we're very pleased and excited to introduce to you Master Kino's son, star of *Shadow Warrior*, *The Lone Wolf, War Zone*, and *To Master the Art*, just to name a few..." The applause all but drowned out the announcer. "I'm sure you all know– Ricky Kino!" The gym filled to its four thousand capacity,

made the wild applause and whistles deafening. Ricky stood and bowed to the audience very seriously, then broke into the famous broad smile, waving to all.

Shelley joined the crowd, applauding long and hard. *Ricky Kino! The boys are gonna die. Oh, how I wish they could be here.* She'd taken her sons to see *Shadow Warrior* just before they'd left to spend the summer with their dad. She couldn't wait to tell them.

"After our forms competition, Ricky will be honoring us with a demonstration."

The crowd erupted again. It took the director several minutes to regain control and get the tournament underway.

While the women in her arena were called on to perform, sudden stage fright overtook Shelley. *Maybe I won't compete after all. I don't really need to. I have nothing to prove to anyone.* She wanted desperately to rationalize her way out of it, but she couldn't. She really did have something to prove, if not to anyone else, at least to herself. She hadn't fought two years ago. She'd lain there and allowed him to have his way. As usual, her stomach churned at the memory. She would not just sit idly by today.

Pushing the unpleasant memory aside, she tried to focus her mind on something else, anything else, and found herself thinking of Master Kino again. Had she really asked him if he was competing? She shook her head and groaned inwardly. He must have thought her a complete idiot. She should have recognized him or at least realized he was not just a regular competitor.

"Shelley Adams."

Her head jerked around, the blood draining from her face as she realized her mind had been wandering all over the place, when she should've been paying attention. They called her name again, and she pushed herself into action. She rose and bowed, out of respect to her domain, which in this case was the mat, her home for the next few minutes. She walked bravely onto it, purposely avoiding any eye contact with the head judges' table.

In a voice as loud as she could muster, she called out the name of her form, her instructor and school. She then addressed the three judges sitting to one side of the arena. "With your permission, I will begin."

The judges nodded. She backed up three steps to the exact center of the mat, bowed and took her stance. Forms, hyungs, pumsé, or katas require intensity and concentration in order to be properly executed. The forceful and yet fluid movements are to be executed or "thrown" as though each blow lands on an imaginary opponent or each block counters an imaginary punch or kick. Inner vision and discipline are necessary. The judge can count off for the slightest of variations, such as an arm too high, fingers not together, or a foot turned out too far.

Shelley had worked hard perfecting her form. Every muscle of her body from her fingertips down to her toes was tense, yet she moved smoothly and gracefully as she stepped and kicked first one invisible opponent to her left,

then the other on her right. She became completely immersed, imagining the attackers coming at her from each side.

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"Watch her and tell me what you think," Eric said to Ricky as he pointed to the woman with the long hair in arena two.

Ricky waited for her to finish. "She's a looker, but I guess that's not what you mean, huh?" When his father didn't answer he got serious. "Well, she has potential," he allowed. "Someone you know?"

"No, but someone I'd like to know," Eric answered softly without taking his eyes off her.

"Hmm," Ricky considered. "I see."

Eric turned his head. "You see what?"

"Oh, nothing," Ricky answered with a sly smile.

Ignoring his son, Eric folded his hands together and rested his chin on them. He watched as she finished and returned to sit beside her mat, thinking about how she'd looked up at him in the lobby. He'd nearly grabbed her by the shoulders proclaiming her "the one." He'd looked into beautiful, big, brown eyes and felt hypnotized, because he'd seen those eyes before, in his dreams.

She'd blushed under his gaze which made her appear quite innocent. He'd had to fight an overwhelming urge to wrap his arms around her and comfort her. The need to protect was strong. Now that he'd found her, it seemed obvious that his task was to train her. Ricky was right, the woman in his dream and the student he was to teach for the MART are one and the same. And he probably had been led to her to train her because there was some unfortunate event lurking in her future.

So positive now of the direction he should take, he wondered how he should approach her about becoming his student. If he explained to her how he'd seen her before in his dreams, she'd probably think he was a lunatic. He knew he couldn't let the opportunity to meet her go by without taking action. Nothing to do but go with instinct. He was pulled from his thoughts when the forms competitions in each category neared their end.

Eric turned to his son. "Ready?"

"Always," Ricky grinned.

Ricky stood and stretched his thick, muscular arms above his head then walked back to a clear space behind the table to limber up. Eric pulled a box of boards out from under the table. Ricky would blast them to bits in his demo.

A group of kids leaned over the railing, looking down at Ricky as he warmed up, pointing and giggling. Ricky glanced up grinning and waved. They shrieked with laughter.

Leaving his son to his antics, Eric looked back to arena two but they had been dismissed. Rising, he walked slowly through the crowd and up the steps, but didn't find the woman he sought. He went into the lobby and grabbed a bottle of water and was detained by a few teenage boys who asked his thoughts

on a particular defense movement. He spoke with them briefly and set them straight. “The best defense is offense. Don't mess around. End it, and end it quickly, then there’s no room for error.”

He shook their hands, autographed their programs and started back, but pulled up short. There she was, at the top of the stairs, gazing out over the crowd. She’d changed out of her uniform and was dressed now in the clothes he’d seen her in earlier, jeans and an airy white blouse. Her light brown hair with streaks of gold, still crinkly from the braid she'd worn earlier, cascaded over her shoulders. It wasn't cut into one of the day's trendy styles. Instead, it flowed down her back in long, golden curls. It added to her inherent femininity and made a statement that she wasn’t your average woman. He found himself longing to reach out and touch the thick curls, lift them.

Eric watched her for just a moment as she went up on her toes and leaned over the railing, looking down on the activities below. Her hair stopped just short of a trim waist. Her jeans hugged her bottom. Wow, what was he thinking? He sighed. He was thinking like a man, not like a martial arts instructor, and not like the man of God he tried to be, because he envisioned touching more than her curls. Getting himself under control, he strode up to her and lightly touched the small of her back to gain her attention. She stiffened and spun to face him.

“Hello Shelley,” he said softly. “Sorry if I startled you.”

“Oh,” she said, drawing a breath to calm herself. “Oh, it’s you, Master Kino. You know my name?”

“I heard the judges call you. By the way, you did well.” He watched for a reaction in her eyes, but she looked down too quickly.

“Thank you, Master Kino.”

“Please, call me Eric,” he insisted.

She looked back up at him and nodded in agreement. “Have you seen the scores?” she asked anxiously.

He shook his head. “No, I have not.”

She shrugged. “It doesn't really matter. I'm just glad I got through it. This was my first competition and I was really nervous.”

“Well, if you were nervous, I certainly couldn't tell.” Eric gazed into her eyes. He could glimpse something in her. A quiet strength. He smiled at her. Simple words had been spoken, nothing of importance, and yet the feeling that something of magnitude was taking place was hanging there, waiting for him to grab it. He lifted his head heavenward for a moment, to ask for guidance.

Eric watched her as she glanced away, looking out over the huge gym as down below competitors and their families ran helter-skelter, trying to find the place that would offer the best view of Ricky Kino’s demonstration. He told himself it was merely a teacher observing a potential student, yet there was a certain pull that he couldn’t ignore. She was extremely attractive. She wasn’t all done up. Instead she had a natural beauty. There was an innocence about

her, a sweetness. And, well– and yeah, she was sexy, he admitted, though he would have to quell those kinds of thoughts. He was here to help her. In his dream, she'd been in peril. He needed to keep his mind clear if he was going to help her, and the need to help her was strong.

"Are you staying for the rest of the tournament?" he finally asked.

She turned back. "Oh, yes, I wouldn't miss any of this for the world," she gushed. "It's all so wonderful and everyone's skill is absolutely amazing. It's so amazing and I just love it!"

Her face was a delightful pink, her eyes sparkling, her enthusiasm refreshing. She rolled her eyes, and he knew she silently reprimanded herself for getting carried away.

He paused and took a deep breath. "So, please don't think it too forward of me, since we've only just met, but, when this is over, I'd love to have you join me for dinner."

He watched her face go from pink to fire-engine red.

Shelley went over his words in her mind, making sure she really did hear what she thought she'd heard. *Master Kino just asked me out. This can't really be happening. Why me? Why would this man ask me to dinner? Maybe it's like you always read about celebrities, they have girls in every town. One-night conquests. I don't even know if he's married. Why me? Does he see me as a groupie that would be just too easy to pass up? No. It can't be like that. He is, after all, a Master and someone in the public eye. He'd want to show irreproachable behavior, wouldn't he? If he just wanted to find a girl to have for a night, he could have his choice of any of the women here, most of whom are younger and beautiful and—Oh, what am I doing? Okay. Okay. Get a grip. I'd be perfectly safe with him. This is a once in a lifetime invitation. What could it hurt? Besides, the boys would never let me hear the end of it if I were to turn down Ricky Kino's father.*

"Well," she started slowly, trying to think of a clever way to accept his invitation, but nothing came to mind. "Yes, I'd love to," she finally blurted out.

"Wonderful," he beamed, hitting his fist gently against the railing. "May I meet you in the lobby as soon as the tournament is over?"

"I'll be there," she said, nodding her head.

"Then I'll see you then." He nodded and smiled as he walked away, pulling out his phone immediately. He needed to rent a car.

Shelley watched him walk, his well-muscled arms swinging down from broad shoulders. Her eyes followed, taking note of his powerful body. He wore a black shirt and black hakama pants, the kind that were snug at the waist, ballooning out at the sides. His dark, almost black hair, was back in a band, swaying gently as he walked. His voice had been soft, yet commanding. He'd spoken her name in a way that she could feel in the pit of her stomach. Almost as if he'd touched her cheek.

Taking a deep breath, she told herself she was not hallucinating. This

really had happened. She'd come to a martial arts tournament, she'd met a famous martial arts master and he'd asked her, yes her, out to dinner. Not any of the gorgeous young girls in any given direction, but her. Why? And why, with her aversion to men, had she accepted? She should be terrified to accept an invitation from a man she'd just met. So why did she? Because, she thought, somehow, he made her trust him.

Shelley maintained her place at the railing as the room grew quiet with anticipation. The announcer needed no other words than the few he spoke. "Ladies and Gentlemen— Ricky Kino!"

Accompanied by the roar of the crowd, and dressed in a black and gold martial arts uniform, Ricky entered the floor at a run, turned five back handsprings, ending with a full layout. He bowed and waited for the narration.

"In the martial arts world, nothing is as important as your reaction time in defending yourself against an attacker. If you're ever caught with your pants down..."

Ricky joked around, pretending to check his waistband and the subsequent laughter made speaking impossible for a few moments.

"If you're ever caught with your guard down..." the narrator corrected, though it was obviously scripted. "...it's all over and you may very well have made a fatal mistake. In actuality, it isn't reaction as much as anticipation. Some call this instinct. Truly though, it's a skill that with enough practice can be acquired by anyone."

All eyes were riveted on Ricky. Shelley looked around, amazed at how quiet the room had become, when just moments before the crowd noise had been deafening.

"For the next few minutes you will be witnesses to a sort of martial arts paintball, minus the paint, of course. Nothing has been preplanned. When a lethal punch is thrown, you must stay down. Let's see how Ricky Kino fares against these guys. By the way, he's never met any of them before today."

Shelley watched Ricky prepare to fight five black-belt assailants. His body tensed for a moment, then suddenly he straightened and shook his head, wagging his finger. One of the assailants didn't have on his headgear. Ricky motioned for him to put it on.

"What about you?" the young man asked.

"I'll take my chances." Ricky grinned.

Shelley giggled along with the crowd at the banter. It was part of the script, but the crowd didn't care. Finally, the competitors swung into action. Ricky was amazing as he worked against the men. It became quickly evident that Ricky wasn't just a movie artist. His skills were real. With Master Kino for a father, Shelley figured that was as it should be.

When the five attackers were down, the audience stood and cheered, none more enthusiastically than Shelley. Next, Ricky grabbed the nunchakus from Eric, which in this case was a pair of bright red and black hard wooden sticks

joined by a chain. Ricky spun them around to get their feel.

Suddenly, he stopped and dropped the weapon to the floor. Much to the delight of the young girls in the crowd, he untied his belt, and pulled his uniform top over his head. Shelley had to admire him along with the rest of the crowd. His golden skin glistened with perspiration, his broad shoulders and rippling abs eliciting "oohs" and "ahhs" from the females. One even called out, "I love you, Ricky!"

There was laughter as Ricky looked up and blew a kiss in her direction. There was an excited scream and more laughter.

A murmur of admiration hummed through the crowd as he warmed up by working through a series of movements with the nunchakus. His speed was absolutely incredible. He then proceeded to demonstrate his skills using kicking pads as targets, held by twelve assistants. The weapon made a loud "pop" as it hit each pad. A back somersault, "pop" as he hit another target, then speedily to all sides of the circle, more pops. It began to sound as if someone had set off a string of firecrackers and the audience roared.

In the last part of Ricky's demo he broke boards using hands, feet, elbows and fists. When he finished, Ricky knelt on one knee as thundering applause rocked the arena.

He finally rose, looked up smiling, bowed and ran off the floor. Immediately the tournament was set back in motion, but Shelley kept her eyes on Ricky, as he joined his father. Eric threw a towel at his son and patted him on the shoulder.

Shelley studied them both, deciding they were quite a pair, and apparently very close. They looked like brothers, she thought. She felt intense admiration, and was thrilled beyond words to have witnessed such perfection. Since Eric was the "Master", Shelley wondered if he ever gave demonstrations.

Moving down the steps, she settled into a seat. This tournament had been a long time coming and she wanted to soak in every bit of information she could. Soon enough it would be over and she'd sit across the table from Master Kino and speak with him, and listen to him and— *Oh no! What could I possibly have to say that would interest him? Okay, get a hold of yourself. Talk about the tournament. That's it. The tournament. Now sit and watch, you need conversational ammunition.* With as much patience as she could muster, she sat back and waited for things to begin. Things like– the free sparring– like– the weapons forms—and her life.

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Genesis 2:18

"Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone;
I will make him a helper fit for him."

Chapter Three

One of the judges spoke into the microphone. “Attention everyone. Before we move on to the next portion of our tournament, we want to announce the winners of the forms competitions.”

Eric looked up, curious to see Shelley’s reaction. He knew exactly where to look because this time he hadn't let her out of his sight. When they called her name for third place her expression fell and his heart went out to her. During their brief conversation she’d told him that winning didn't matter, yet he could see that it had.

He watched as she leaned forward, her elbows resting on her knees, her head in her hands, a childlike pout on her face. He had to smile. She was very readable and entirely too cute. He blew out a breath as he thought of his base reaction to her, acknowledging the fact that he found her very attractive. The chemistry was strong. Shaking his head at his weakness, he struggled to push the thoughts from his mind.

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When the women's sparring began Shelley sat totally entranced. Could she ever progress far enough to be able to hold her own in a sparring match? She noticed one girl in particular who stood out from the others. The girl was beautiful. Shoulder-length blond hair, tall and lean. A Taekwondo brown belt with a killer smile. She glowed with confidence, practically oozed with it. Shelley picked her to win and sure enough, she did, with ease.

When the tournament finally ended, Shelley watched as one by one the names were called and Eric and Ricky assisted in handing out trophies, ribbons, and certificates to the participants. Unable to sit still during the long awards presentation process, she left to freshen up in the restroom and then headed to the lobby to meet Eric Kino, excitement and apprehension building.

To calm herself, she strolled around, reading the plaques and trophies on display. Her daughter, soon to be a college freshman, had just graduated from this school. Shelley searched for and found Bree's name on two of the cheerleading plaques and allowed a proud smile to cross her lips.

Ambling around to the doors, she peered out. The early June temperatures had already reached record highs. Heat waves distorted the street and cars, but Shelley didn't mind the heat. In fact, she loved it. She loved getting into her car after it had been sitting in the sun with the windows up. It felt comforting, like slipping into a hot bath.

She turned as people began filing into the lobby area, signaling an end to the day's proceedings. Several of the female competitors entered the lobby together and Shelley went over to offer her congratulations to a few of the competitors she'd watched earlier.

"Thanks," drawled a pretty blonde, the one that Shelley had chosen to win her division. "I watched you do your forms. You were pretty good, but you should think about competing in the sparring. That's when it really gets fun. I think you could do fairly well."

Before Shelley could answer another piped in. "Look who's talking, Angel. You do pretty well yourself."

"Yeah," a third teased. "As long as there are male judges."

The blonde placed her hands on her hips and pursed her lips in a strategically cute little pout, obviously accustomed to using her beauty to get whatever she wanted, but not liking anyone to accuse her of it.

The blonde changed the subject. "Speaking of looks, what did y'all think of that Ricky Kino?"

Shelley smiled. This was a much better subject, she thought. It certainly piqued her interest.

"He was fantastic," one woman answered.

"Forget fantastic, did you see that body? He's gorgeous."

"Yeah," the blond girl named Angel said. "And don't forget about his dad. Oh, girl, you can see where he gets it."

"That man is definitely fine."

"He is F-I-N-E. I'd love to have a daddy like that," the blonde purred, causing giggles to erupt.

"What was the dad's name again?" the friend asked.

The blonde shrugged. "I don't remember, I only remember how his biceps bulged when he handed Ricky the nunchakus. After that, it's all blank."

More giggles from the friends.

Shelley decided to speak up and help out. "His name is Eric."

"Yeah, that's it."

"No, it's not Eric, is it? Are you sure?" the blonde asked.

Shelley smiled. "I'm positive. It's Eric. Eric Kino."

A sneering smile from the blonde. "Whatever it is— all I know is, I bet he looks as good under his shirt as his 'little boy.'"

"Well, if anybody can find out, it's you," Angel's friend assured.

Jealousy reared its ugly head. Shelley tamped it down. Jealousy was rooted in low self-esteem and she was working on that.

The blonde grinned with the challenge. "I suppose little old me will just have to see what I can do."

Shelley couldn't keep from rolling her eyes.

"You see what you can do, Angel, and I'll babysit the 'little boy'," Angel's friend offered.

Shelley considered telling them she had a date with Eric, but she came up with two good reasons not to say anything. First, she passionately hated catty females and she wasn't about to join their ranks. Second, they probably wouldn't believe her anyway. She barely believed it herself.

She endeavored to find a polite way to leave the group while the women continued raving about and lusting after various parts of the two men's anatomy. However, before she could excuse herself, one of the ladies nudged another and whispered loudly. "Speak of the devil." She nodded in the direction just behind Shelley. "Here he comes."

Shelley turned, feeling chills popping out all over her body. Master Eric Kino approached the women, his eyes on Shelley. Smiling, he joined the group, sending temperatures and heartbeats through the stratosphere. "Hello, ladies. I trust you all had a good time today."

The blonde gave a feminine squeal and spoke in her very best southern drawl. "Oh myyyy, yes!" She extended her hand. "It's been an amazing day. He-ey, my name is Angel."

Eric clasped her hand firmly. "Well, it's a great pleasure to meet you, Angel. I'm Eric."

"Oh, I know who you are," she tittered.

The others began offering hands and blurting out names.

Eric took each lady's hand as they introduced themselves. All, except Shelley, who was succeeding in self-control.

Angel nudged her. "Speak up, honey, don't be shy. He doesn't bite."

Shelley knew the words Angel spoke had been constructed to make her feel small and look silly, and it worked. What she didn't know was if Eric purposely rescued her with his words and actions, because he turned to Shelley with a familiarity that didn't yet exist, and gently brushed a stray hair back from her face, which for the umpteenth time that day, had reddened.

"Oh, this one, I already know," he said softly.

The others looked on, their faces a mix of surprise and envy. There was an eternal moment of awkward silence, which Eric finally shattered. "Are you ready to go?"

He lifted Shelley's bag. "Excuse us, ladies." He nodded as he turned and placed his hand on the small of Shelley's back. She wanted badly to turn to the group and make some kind of childish gesture, like sticking out her tongue. But no, no cattiness. She held her breath at the feel of Eric's warm hand resting gently on her back. The evening was about to become very interesting.

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Eric opened the passenger-side door and tossed Shelley's bag into the back seat of the charcoal gray sedan he'd rented, then held the door for her. Once she was settled he smiled at her, shut the door, went to his side and climbed behind the wheel. Turning to her, he held out a ribbon.

"I picked this up for you. You missed the announcement of your name

when it was called, so I kept it for you. I thought you'd like a keepsake of your first competition."

Shelley modestly accepted the green ribbon from his hand with "third place" boldly printed in gold. "Oh, thanks," she replied, obviously embarrassed that she hadn't picked it up.

Eric smiled. She was definitely adorable, and much too easy to read.

Shelley looked down at her hands. "I was out in the lobby during the announcements. When I didn't show to get the ribbon, I suppose that made me look like a sore loser." She laughed softly. "Maybe I am."

She had him smiling again because her honesty was refreshing. "Except, you didn't lose. Third place is nothing to be ashamed of. In fact, you should be happy with yourself. It's actually quite an accomplishment to place in your very first tournament."

"You're very kind," she answered, offering a small smile. She shrugged. "I suppose I wanted more."

He watched her as she rubbed her fingers over the ribbon, studying it. He reached over and patted her hand. "Well then, maybe we can do something about that."

Without waiting for a response or maybe to avoid one, he started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. If she allowed him, he thought, he'd give her more. He was about to present her with the opportunity of a lifetime. Others would give anything for what he was about to offer her, a chance to compete in the MART. To the world a MART competitor was a super athlete. We'll just see how much more she really wants.

They rode in silence and Shelley used the time to steal a look at the dark handsome man as he drove. He really was like something out of a fairy tale, and she found it difficult to believe she was in the same car with him. Her eyes were drawn to his strong hands where they rested on the steering wheel. He'd touched her hand moments ago, as if he'd known her a long time, and somehow, it felt as if he had. She rolled her eyes, because even in her own mind that sounded so cliché.

She wondered what he was thinking, what it was about her that interested him. Her attention was drawn to his driving as he maneuvered through traffic, around a raised median, into the parking lot and stopped suddenly enough to press her into the seatbelt. She gave Eric, who was looking rather sheepish, a sideward glance.

"Oops. I have a feeling I'm not in California anymore," he quipped.

Shelley laughed. She appreciated the semi-quote from one of her favorite movies. Her children would also have appreciated his remark. He was unknowingly playing their game.

He'd brought her to a local Italian restaurant at the corner of a busy intersection, yet the windows glowed with a soft welcoming light and the aromas had her breathing deep and smiling.

They were seated at a small table in the corner by a window. The atmosphere was subdued, with only a single candle on each table. Shelley loved the ambience, candlelight, soft music, the delicious smells of garlic and spices. She'd actually been here before, with her 'ex', but she didn't remember it being so cozy.

Eric peered across the table into Shelley's sweet face glowing in the flickering candlelight and wondered what marvelous thoughts were running through her pretty head.

A waiter brought menus and water. Eric was anxious to have the ordering and small talk out of the way and watched as Shelley perused the menu. "Are you a picky eater?"

She laughed. "Just the opposite. I have only one problem with food and that is I love everything. Well, except for boiled okra. I can't stand the slimy feel of it."

"Boiled okra, huh? We'll have to avoid it at all costs."

Shelley giggled. Eric marveled at the sound. He found he wanted to make her laugh again, soon, but business first. Once they gave their order, Eric turned to Shelley. Clearing his throat, he searched for the right way to begin. "So, tell me, how do you feel about the martial arts?"

Shelley brightened, her eyes shining. "How I feel? Well, I guess I've been in love with the martial arts since I was a little girl, but I'm a late bloomer and I've only recently started to learn."

"Well, it's never too late." He added a caveat. "As long as you're fully committed to your training. Are you?"

She never hesitated. "Absolutely."

"So, what is it you really wish to accomplish in the martial arts?"

Her lips pressed together tightly. She certainly wasn't gonna tell him that the next time a man tried to hurt her she wanted to be able to bash his face in, so she went in another direction. "I've always wanted to be able to, well, do what 'they' do. You know, Bruce Lee, Chuck Norris, Ricky Kino." She smiled, as did Eric. "I guess that's it. I want to be a martial artist like the experts, like the masters, I mean– like— you."

Eric momentarily lost his train of thought. He took a quick, deep breath and gathered his wits. "And so, doing what we do, what do you think that would get you?"

She looked down and he watched her as she seemed to struggle to find the answer to his question.

"Perfection," she finally said. "I'd like, sometime in my life, to say I've achieved some kind of perfection. You know, something I can be proud of, or even more importantly, something maybe my kids can be proud of."

Kids, Eric thought. Great. He'd looked for a wedding ring earlier and hadn't seen one. Okay, he'd get to that in a minute.

"Perfection? Is that the only reason? Because it seemed you were about

to say something else."

He watched her face. Her eyes saddened momentarily. There was something else, but she didn't want to share so he decided to give her a break. "Tell me about this 'perfection'," he prodded.

She smiled. "When I was a teenager, I saw a couple of old Bruce Lee movies. *Fists of Fury* and *Enter the Dragon*. People nowadays might think they're cheesy, but I thought Bruce Lee was just amazing. He had me totally mesmerized. I mean, he was beautiful, like poetry in motion. He was perfection. Watching him was like listening to Mozart."

"Mozart? How so?"

"You know, like, the music swells, the tears come to your eyes, and there is no way to explain what it is that fills you with such emotion. That's the kind of perfection I want."

Her answer blew him away. Okay, he thought, she's obviously serious about the art and she's intelligent. Wanting her to feel completely at ease, he kept his tone warm and friendly as he continued the interview Shelley had no idea was being conducted.

"You mentioned kids. You have a family?" He caught the change in facial expression, from a woman bent on achieving a goal to the most angelic expression of love he'd ever seen.

"I have three children. A girl and two boys. Bree is about to be eighteen. Mark is eight and Joey is six. They're great kids."

His eyes widened ever so slightly. "Eighteen? Wow. I don't mean to be rude, but, how old are you? I mean, you must have been a baby yourself when you had your first."

She shrugged. "I suppose I was. I'd just turned sixteen when I found out I was pregnant. I was actually only fifteen when I first met my husband."

He frowned. "You're married?"

"No! I wouldn't go out to dinner with you if I was married."

He smiled. "Sorry, didn't mean to insult you. Just wanna make sure I didn't overstep any bounds. Please go on. You were only sixteen..."

"Yes. Well actually when I met him I was only fifteen and he was in college. I was young and impressionable and thought I was very much in love with a very much older guy. I was very naive."

You were vulnerable, Eric thought, but kept that thought to himself.

"It all happened so fast, really," she went on. "Once I found out I was pregnant, before I knew it, I was married and whooshed away to be a wife and mother. I had to grow up very quickly. When my ex told my parents he'd marry me, they were all too happy to send me away. I didn't argue because, well, like I said, I was young and fancied myself in love. But really, my life was pretty much planned for me."

He tried to ignore the irritation, or even anger, that came with the information. What was a 'much older guy' doing getting a barely fifteen-

year-old child pregnant? How much older was he? Keeping those thoughts to himself, he tried to stick to the reason for the conversation and did the math. "So, that makes you thirty-three, thirty-four?"

"Thirty-four."

"Wow, I would never have guessed. I thought you were probably in your mid-twenties at most."

Shelley smiled at the compliment as the waiter arrived with a large bowl from which he served them a salad, and then set a basket full of warm, buttery garlic rolls on the table. Eric watched as Shelley dipped her finger in the butter that had pooled on the paper in the bottom of the basket and then lifted it to her mouth and sucked it.

"Ummmm, this is heavenly," she sighed.

He found himself unable to answer. His eyes followed her fingertip as she dipped it again, watching as her tongue caught the drip of butter. This woman had no idea how she affected him. He breathed deeply and forced himself to eat a bite of salad before he resumed his questioning.

Given the quiet moment, Shelley jumped in with her own question. "You must've done the same thing."

His brow furrowed. "Hmm?"

"Had a child when you were just a baby yourself."

"Oh." He smiled. "I was eighteen when we had Ricky. Married right out of high school. I'm thirty-nine. Actually, I'll be forty next week."

"Well, happy birthday a week early!"

He smiled. "Thank you. So, your children didn't want to come and see you compete today?"

"Oh, they would've loved to come, but Bree is in New York. She desperately wants to be an actress and she was lucky enough to get to do some summer theater off Broadway. The two little ones are spending the summer with their father."

"How long have you been single?"

"A little over a year. And you?"

"My wife died of cancer ten years ago."

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Shelley offered.

"Thank you." He smiled to change the subject and because he suddenly felt like smiling. She was divorced and he was happy about that. He knew the thought was not very charitable. He also knew, as a Christian, that divorce is not recommended. Jesus said, "It was not so in the beginning," meaning God did not include divorce in His plans for us, and yet other Christians are so quick to judge someone. They are quick to throw out Matthew 19:6, "What God has brought together let no man put asunder." But Jesus had whispered to Eric when he'd enquired of the Lord about this conundrum for a friend, that there are many marriages that God did not "bring together." It's an assumption that because two people marry, God brought them together.

When Jesus said, "In the beginning it was not so," what He didn't say was something again, He whispered to Eric while in deep prayer and meditation. "It was not so in the beginning. God created Eve for Adam. Adam is not the only one with this advantage. Many are deceived, or have the enemy interfere, or succumb to temptation, and do not end up marrying whom was meant for them. Therefore, do not let the condemnation of self-righteous others weigh on your soul. They do not understand the complexities of the heart of man, which is another reason they are NOT to judge." We don't really understand, Eric thought, and therefore, it is not for us to make that judgment. We are to live as holy as possible. We make mistakes. We also willingly commit sin. Jesus knows our hearts and He told us to not judge others. Be discerning, yes, but do not judge. There's a difference. Drawing a breath he smiled at the pretty woman across from him. "So, then, what do you do, all summer, all alone?"

"I'm so busy most of the time I don't have time to think about how alone I am. I work two jobs, and then I use the time without kids sort of like my own personal summer training camp, so I work out a lot. This is only my second summer without the children and I've found that the busier I am, the faster the time goes by."

"You miss the kids a lot?"

"I do," she said on a sigh. "They've been my only world for a long time. Well, since they were born, actually."

Eric watched her as she spoke. Her words spoke volumes more than she realized. They were saying she was lonely. That her husband hadn't been much of a companion to her during their years of marriage. That her children had become her companions, her friends, her only source of happiness. He'd had experience with that after his wife's death. The urge to change all that for Shelley was overwhelming, and the emotions that played over her face were fascinating. It was like watching a collage of pictures on a movie screen. She was mesmerizing. He gave himself a mental shake.

"Well, I have to say, as a single mother of three, you seem to really have your act together."

Surprise, a smile, a blush, a taking of command, a mask of aloofness ending in polite friendliness. She was absolutely fascinating. She'd never make it as a gambler, nevertheless, back to the subject. She was older than he'd thought, strike one, she has kids, strike two and she works two jobs, strike three. What he needed for a MART competitor was a full-time student who could put everything into it. His lips pressed together as he mulled this over.

Since there was a lull in the conversation, Eric bowed his head briefly to give thanks for the food, picked up a roll and took a bite.

Shelley noticed, and wondered about this extraordinary man. Who was he really? Did he just pray? She needed to Google him.

While they ate their salads and munched on garlic rolls, Eric tried to come up with some rationalization for continuing with this MART prospect, though

he already knew why. Because she was the one. God had sent her to him—or rather, He had sent him to her. He knew it the moment he saw her, and he would just have to find a way to overcome the obstacles. All of them. So why was he hesitating?

Maybe because she's lonely and vulnerable, he thought, and rather than put her through something as grueling as training for the MART, he'd rather protect her from whatever peril was about to befall her in his dream. He'd like to peel away the layers and learn who this unique woman is, what makes her tick. He'd like more than that, but he was usually pretty good about listening to his higher self so he uttered a silent prayer for strength to ignore his baser instinct. Shelley seemed relieved when he finally spoke.

"You said you had two jobs. What do you do?"

He watched her face again. This time he saw shame, then anger, perhaps pride, and finally, resolution all within the few seconds it took her to put together a response.

"Nothing very impressive. I'm a receptionist for a small attorney's office just down the street. He's a good guy. He's very honest and upfront. He hasn't really needed me since he got married and his wife took over the office. She's such a sweetie. I'm pretty sure they keep me on out of compassion."

"A lawyer who is honest and compassionate? That's a real find."

She chuckled. "I've told him that very thing."

"And your other job?"

"Oh, I have a friend who started her own cleaning business and sometimes when she gets more business than she can handle I help her out. Like I said, nothing important."

He shook his head slightly at the devaluing of herself, something he'd have to help her overcome if she accepts his proposal. "You say 'nothing important,' but I imagine you're important to those you work for. I have a close friend who's an attorney and he's completely grateful and indebted to both his receptionist and his assistant. And as for the cleaning business, if not for you, your friend would have to turn down clients, right?'

"Well, yeah."

"And that's not a good idea for a new business. What a great friend you must be to use your valuable time to help her."

"Well, she does pay me," Shelley laughed, then sobered. "It's really kind for you to see things that way. You seem to be a very positive kind of person, aren't you?"

"I suppose I am."

"So, why?"

"Why?"

"I mean, why are you being so nice?"

"Um, I don't think I understand the question."

"Okay, I guess what I'm asking is, why did you ask me to dinner? I mean,

why me?"

Eric took a deep breath. Time for some honesty. "Shelley," he began as she looked up at him, her big eyes questioning. "Your instincts are good. I did have an ulterior motive for asking you to dinner." He paused as he watched Shelley's eyes blink seemingly in slow motion. "I was impressed with you at the tournament today. I'm also impressed with your sincerity and dedication. I'm looking for a student to compete in the next MART and I'd like you to consider being that student."

Shelley froze as her mind raced. *Are you kidding me? The MART? I've never even considered getting to attend a MART, much less compete in it. But he did say those words, didn't he? He said the MART. And he's much too prominent a personality to be playing a cruel joke on some poor innocent, hometown girl. But this is crazy.* "The MART?" she finally said. "The MART? You're serious?"

"I am very serious."

"Me?"

"You."

"Seriously? Don't joke with me."

"I am serious. I am not joking. I wouldn't do that."

Eric began describing the event, the process of choosing a student and the year's time frame in which they had to work. At some point during the conversation the waiter brought a table full of food, but neither ate much, so intent were they on the conversation.

"As I'm sure you know, the MART happens only every other year and a MART competitor can begin no higher than an intermediate student. This shows the public that with the proper discipline, anyone can achieve what the MART participants accomplish and it becomes a test of the instructors as much as the competitors, because you must achieve black belt in the given year in order to compete."

"So, you think you can turn me into a black belt in one year?"

"No. I think *you* can turn you into a black belt. I'll just show the way. Sometimes give a push. However, mostly you'll learn from your own experiences."

"What experiences?"

"Well, most MART competitors compete in as many tournaments as possible during their training. If you decide to do this, there'll be as many tournaments as we can squeeze in between now and the MART."

"Am I at the same level as the other competitors?"

"Most are a little past where you are in experience. Still, no instructor is allowed to begin working with their student until June 1st the year before the MART, so we're only behind by a few days, assuming the other instructors have been honorable."

"And what if they aren't being 'honorable', as you put it?"

He shrugged. “Then that’s between them and God. There’s nothing we can do about it, except win,” Eric said with a gleam in his eye.

He went on to describe how hard she’d have to train and the tournaments in which she’d have to participate as part of the learning experience. As Eric spoke, Shelley became more and more excited, asking endless questions. He realized he was enjoying her enthusiasm. It made him see his profession in a fresh light. It also made him realize how naive she was. She’d definitely not be so naive at years’ end. She’d be a tough, seasoned athlete ready to take on the world. And then he wondered, do I really want to do this to such a sweet woman? He shook his head. That thought came from the enemy. God brought him to Shelley, he knew that for sure. Training her for the MART would be doing her a great service– putting her in a category most people could only dream of.

He ventured to tell her the MART champion would win by the best of three rounds, or a knockout and there would be only limited safety equipment. For just an instant, he thought he saw fear in her eyes, but he ignored it. “Any more questions?”

“Uh, yeah. Why me? I mean, you don’t know me. You still wouldn’t know me if I hadn’t coincidentally run into you.”

He wasn’t ready to tell her it was because he’d seen her in a dream and felt it was God’s path for her. Not yet. Still, he couldn’t lie, so he gave her truths. “First, there are no coincidences. God’s universe is not chaotic nor is it random. There is order and a reason for everything and I believe there was a reason for our meeting. Secondly, being who and what I am, it is second nature to me to act on instinct and I’m usually right where that’s concerned. You caught my attention when you ran into me, I watched you compete and you impressed me. I need a student and I want you to be that student.” He picked up his fork. “I guess we’d better eat before the food gets cold.”

In between bites Eric tackled the next portion of the ‘interview.’ “There are some problems to be worked out if you decide to become my student. The first is, I need a full-time student, someone who can train from early in the morning until the evening, six days a week.” He watched her expression fall as she shook her head.

“Well, that lets me out right off the bat. We just barely make it on what I make and the child support from my ex. There’s no way I could take a year off of work.”

“The answer to that problem is you’ll be backed by sponsors who will take care of all your living expenses.”

Shelley turned that piece of information over in her mind. She remembered he’d said this was the first problem. “What’s the other problem?” she asked, without committing to anything yet.

“The second problem is there’ll be times during the coming year you’ll have to travel to tournaments and childcare may be a concern.”

"Travel for how many days at a time?"

"Maybe two or three. Sometimes as long as a week."

She shrugged. "I think childcare can be worked out. Between Bree and Robert, he's my ex-husband, and my friend in the cleaning business, I think the boys will be fine." She grinned. "That's two down. Anymore problems you need me to take care of for you?" she asked sarcastically.

Eric's eyes sparkled at her use of sarcasm with someone she'd just met. It told him he did not intimidate her. He could already see her strength, even if she couldn't. "There's just one more. Your age."

Shelley's eyebrows shot up and she gave a soft laugh. "Unless you've found the fountain of youth I'm afraid there's nothing I can do about that."

"Well, the women you'll be competing against will be younger than you, some by as much as ten or fifteen years. What that means is you'll have to work twice as hard as them, no, make that four times harder. It won't be easy, but if I didn't feel you were capable of pulling it off, I wouldn't be talking to you." He waited for her response.

She took a bite of food, chewing it slowly as she thought. He watched her mouth move. Her upper lip was drawn up like a bow, making her appear to be smiling. She wore no lipstick, yet her mouth was full and pink. He wondered what it would be like to taste that mouth, and then quickly drew a deep breath and pushed the thought away.

"Well, what do you think?" he asked impatiently, more so with himself than with her. "But wait, before you answer, I think I should warn you. I'm tough. I mean, my students succeed because I'm tough, I'm stern, and don't allow any excuses. Now that you know *that*, what do you think?"

"Let me get this straight," she said, shifting in her chair. "You, Eric Kino, renowned master of the martial arts," she proclaimed dramatically, "want me, a nobody, to become your student."

He had to interrupt. "Well, you're not a nobody, but we'll talk about that later. Please go on."

She shrugged. "Not only do you want me to be your student, but you want to take care of all living expenses while I train. You also want me to travel around the country, which is something I've always wanted to do." She shook her head in amazement. "I don't see how in the world I could turn you down. I'd have to be crazy. It's just so hard to believe that little old me could be a MART competitor."

Eric grinned. "Then, you're saying it's a deal?"

"A very big deal," she exclaimed. "There is one more thing, though," she said timidly.

"Go ahead," Eric prodded, hoping it would be something that could be easily handled.

"Please don't think I'm trying to take advantage of you, but," she paused, struggling with herself. "I can't justify me suddenly getting everything I've

always dreamed of when my two little boys go without. You see, they love the martial arts just as much as I do." She pressed her lips together. "So, do you think you could possibly squeeze in a few lessons for them?"

Eric was pleased that her request was a noble one and that it was easily granted. "Oh, I think we could definitely work in a few joint sessions when they get back at the end of the summer. I doubt that would interfere with training, because you should have a good start by then. I also imagine I could talk Ricky into helping out. They'd enjoy his teaching methods."

Shelley's eyes lit up at the idea of Ricky Kino teaching her boys. Mark and Joey would be ecstatic. Shelley herself didn't think she could be more excited than she was at this moment.

Business out of the way, they finished their meal, and chatted, getting to know each other. Eric only spoke enough to prod her on to her next comment. He loved watching her talk. Her eyes lit up and her face was very expressive.

She told him about her daughter who would be attending AMDA, American Musical and Dramatics Academy, in New York. "She desperately wants to become an actress," Shelley explained. "Her father is a professional performer and it wore off on her. He owns a dinner theater in San Francisco and she spends a lot of time there performing when she's not auditioning or attending classes, but I'm sure she'll be home sometime this summer and you'll get to meet her." She looked up quickly. "Wait, we will be training right here in Atlanta, won't we? I mean, I wouldn't want to uproot the boys."

He nodded his head. "I have a friend who has a dojang not far from here. He only uses it at night and on Saturdays. He'll be happy to help."

"Dojang," she exclaimed. "That's Korean. So is Taekwondo! That's the art I've been studying at the YMCA."

He smiled in acknowledgment. "I know and I think we'll stay with that style for now."

Of course he knows, she thought, grimacing at her faux pas.

Eric glanced at his watch. 8:30. They'd been there nearly two hours, yet it'd seemed like only a few minutes. "Well," he began. "It's been a long day and I have a lot of arrangements to make."

Shelley frowned. He understood what she was thinking because he felt the same way. He didn't want the night to end.

It'd been cool and dark in the restaurant and as they walked outside the humid, warm summer air caressed their skin. Shelley rubbed her hands over her arms. "Umm, the warm air feels good," she sighed.

Eric reached out and touched her arm. "Shelley, your skin is like ice!

A little too much air conditioning?"

"Yeah, I think I was sitting right under a vent."

"Why didn't you say something?" Before she could object he circled behind her as they walked and rubbed his hands briskly up and down her arms. He leaned close to her ear. "There. Is that better?"

It took her a moment to find her voice. “Yes, thanks.” She swallowed, confused by her own body’s reaction. She normally would recoil from a man’s touch, especially one she didn’t know well. His hands were strong and warm and she could feel the heat from his body when he leaned close to speak to her. She’d actually been tempted to lean back and rest her head against his chest. Now where did that come from? Was she so needy? It disturbed her that she not only felt no repulsion, but she wished he wouldn’t stop touching her. How would it feel to have those strong arms wrapped around her and hold her close?

He opened the car door and she slipped into the seat, smiling at him as she did, hoping she gave no evidence of her thoughts. They drove silently back to the school to collect Shelley’s car.

Even though it was late, the orange summer sun was only beginning to set. The long summer days combined with daylight saving time made for late sunsets. Shelley leaned against her car and Eric against his.

“I love the sunsets in Georgia,” she sighed. “Long, slow, hazy. I wish they would last longer.”

“I know what you mean,” he said softly. “My home looks out over the Pacific and the sunsets are amazing. I’ll tell you what my teacher, Master Wong, used to say quite often,” he said, still looking upward. “With each sunset comes the night, and with each night comes the new day. Just like fall is followed by winter, and the winter by spring. We can’t hold onto it, but we can trust it to return. It’s the circle of life.”

She turned and gazed at the man, his handsome face tilted up toward the last rays of light. She could see tiny suns glowing in his eyes. It almost seemed like he wasn’t real. He was too perfect. She thought it was surely gonna be a treat to learn from him.

He smiled down at her. “May I get your phone number?”

She gave him both her landline and cell numbers and stood by while he put them into his phone.

He glanced back up at the last rays of sun. “It’s getting dark. Would you like me to follow you home, make sure you get in safely?”

She frowned ever-so-slightly. “No, I’m perfectly fine. I’m certainly capable of taking care of myself.” With that, she slid into her car and started up the engine.

Seeing he’d stepped on a sore spot, Eric raised his brows. He moved forward and leaned in as she rolled the window down. “Well, get plenty of rest, okay? Because, like we discussed, I’d like to start first thing Monday morning if you’re able to arrange everything with your employer.” He stood and patted the fender of her car.

As she drove away, Shelley realized she was grinning from ear to ear. She could hardly wait to call the kids and tell them. “You’ll never guess who I met,” she’d begin. They’ll just die, she thought excitedly.

Dreamily, she floated up the walk leading to her tiny, darkened house,

unlocked the door and turned on the lights. She went straight to her room, flopped down on her bed and lay there thinking about all the events of the wonderful day, but one particular image kept popping into her mind. Eric. Eric Kino. Master Eric Kino.

Yes, she agreed with the blonde she'd spoken to after the tournament, he's F-I-N-E. She thought of that silly conversation and said aloud, in an exaggerated southern accent, "Hello, my name is Angel and I'd like to ..." She stopped herself, giggled and rolled off the bed. That Angel, she thought, what a silly woman.

Still smiling, she grabbed her robe and headed for the shower. She wondered if she'd ever stop smiling.

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Matthew 6:33

"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

Chapter Four

Shining steel flashed, then disappeared, as the blade tumbled end over end, finally coming to rest deep in the wall of James Crane's inner office. As James watched his nemesis being interviewed on TV once again, he turned to his not-so-little brother, Tommy. "Why? Why is 'Good Day Hollywood' so interested in that overgrown chink?"

It grated on James' soul the way everyone revered Eric Kino. "I swear, he gets more TV hype than the Super Bowl," he hissed through clenched teeth. "Don't people even have enough brains to remember Pearl Harbor? It makes me crazy."

He raised the remote, at first with the intention of throwing it, then merely clicked the "off" button. James' eyes blazed with hatred. He watched Tommy shift in his chair. Barely restrained violence emanated from James but he knew his little brother wasn't at all uncomfortable with it, because Tommy had just recently been released from prison. Anyway, James knew Tommy shared the same feelings of hatred. He knew because they'd both been raised by the same man, a man who'd raised them on hatred like mother's milk. Hank Crane, their grandfather, had made sure his grandsons shared his views. 'Ol' Hank had been a veteran of "the big one" and a survivor of Pearl Harbor. He'd hated the Japanese with a passion. When his only son, James' and Tommy's father, died in surgery under the care of a Chinese doctor, that hatred expanded to include anyone who looked remotely Asian. Young James and Tommy learned the same hatred.

James looked past the fact that his father had been drinking when he'd run the car into a tree, and that the impact had killed their mother instantly. He chose to forget that the doctor had worked tirelessly against great odds to try to save his father's life.

Tommy sighed impatiently. "Kino had nothing to do with Pearl Harbor, James. He's not even Japanese. He's Hawaiian, or something like that."

James' eyes narrowed.

Tommy shrugged. "Sorry. Just want you to get your facts straight, because if we're finally gonna do something about him, we need to think clearly. So, tell me, what do you intend to do?"

Eric Kino had been a thorn in James' side since high school and it seemed his only thoughts since then had been of revenge. Their senior year Kino had stolen James' girlfriend from him. Beautiful Ann. Twelve years later James

had been on the brink of winning her back when she'd died. The obituary stated cancer as the cause of death, but James knew differently. Hank had taught him how tricky the Asians could be. Eric must have known Ann was about to leave him. He'd poisoned her. James was sure of it, probably in the guise of those herbal teas slant-eyes use so often. James breathed a sigh and looked his brother over.

Tommy had been an impressionable five-year-old when Ann left James and from that time on big brother had taught Tommy to hate. For more than twenty years James preached how life isn't fair. He guessed that's how Tommy had finally ended up in prison. James had no idea why Tommy had decided to steal that car. They had money. It was like a spur-of-the-moment joy ride kinda thing. And really, Tommy hadn't meant to hurt the guy.

It wasn't as if they didn't have the money to buy whatever they pleased, whatever Tommy wanted. James had become a prominent businessman as the owner and CEO of Golden Hotels. It had haunted James when they'd taken his younger brother away in chains. He'd worked tirelessly day and night to acquire his release on probation.

James watched as Tommy slowly made his way to where the knife protruded from the wall. Tommy grabbed the hilt and plucked the knife free, wiping it clean between his thumb and forefinger, not flinching when a line of blood oozed from the meat of his thumb. He turned to James and smiled.

"It's true, bro, Kino and his kid have the whole world worshiping at their feet and I say it's time you took care of him for good. Like, a knife in the wall? That's bull. But a knife in the gut, now that's what I'm talkin' about. I'm here for you, bro, to help you with anything you need." He paused. "Anything."

James pondered his little brother's offer. Had his short stint in prison made him lethal so quickly? Tommy's blond hair and blue eyes belied the darkness that lingered inside. Still, James didn't think he'd be taking

Tommy up on his offer. Tommy wouldn't abide being left out completely, but James would do his best to keep Tommy in the background because breaking probation could stick Tommy right back in prison, and even though James' powerful political ties were able to get Tommy out the first time, he didn't want to chance having to ask a second favor.

He pulled himself from those thoughts and smiled wickedly at Tommy. "I agree that it's time to take action, but these things must be done carefully."

"Yeah, carefully carving him into pieces. I'll go along with that. Him and his kid too."

James' lips pressed together at Tommy's reference to Ricky. His voice softened, saddened. "No, Tommy, that kid, he is a part of her, the only part of her in this world that's left– thanks to Kino."

"Come on, James, I'm sick of both of them. That little witch left you. She didn't care about you. She didn't care if it humiliated you or hurt you."

The red rage boiled up and over, engulfing James as it had over the years.

James was on Tommy with the agility and speed of a leopard, his thick hands closing around Tommy's throat.

He yanked Tommy's face up close to his own. "Do not ever– not– ever speak disrespectfully of her again. She was a pawn. She was a victim. She was way too innocent and naive and she fell for his lies. So, never again, Tommy, do you understand?"

Tommy barely managed to nod his head in the affirmative and was immediately released.

James drew a deep breath. "No," he said calmly, as if there had been no interruption in the conversation. "No one touches the kid. Kids can't help who their parents are, just like we can't help that our father killed our mother. So, we'll be patient and wait for the right moment. Reports say that the 'legendary Master Kino' will be participating in the MART again this year and that is a perfect opportunity. We'll slice him up all right, but only figuratively, at first, because I want him to suffer before he dies. I want to break him. No, I want to destroy him in the public eye and then break him. I'm gonna break him, Tommy. I'm gonna bring him down so low. Whoever he trains for the MART is gonna have some real-life difficulties."

The two men laughed as they made their evil plans, comfortable and content in each other's dangerous company, and certain of how rewarding it was gonna be for them to see their enemy suffer. A sick sort of happiness filled the brothers' pounding hearts.

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Yo, Dad. Hope everything goes well. Let me know if I can help in any way. In the meantime, I'm gonna take in some sun and surf and check out a few ladies. I have a couple of dates lined up. Nothin' serious so don't get excited. Take care, Rick

Eric smiled. Even Ricky's notes were full of sunshine. His son had flown back home alone, but he'd see Ricky soon enough because Eric was gonna have to fly back to Cali within the week. He needed to meet with some potential sponsors.

Sitting down at the small desk in his hotel room, he made a list of everything that needed to be taken care of, from meeting with his friend, Brian, about the use of his studio, to insurance policies, to sponsors and money, and everything in between. He began right away making calls and arrangements.

The first call was to Justin Lee. He and his younger brother Jason were Eric's dearest friends. The Korean brothers would be a big help during Shelley's training. Justin was an attorney and would handle all contracts and other legalities. Jason, a self-defense consultant for the military and the FBI and several state law enforcement agencies, would also be invaluable, especially as a sparring partner.

An hour later, calls taken care of, Eric stretched out across the bed. Closing his eyes, he allowed an adorable, wide-eyed woman with long golden

curls to drift into his mind's eye. She was strong, and yet, somehow vulnerable, or was she vulnerable and somehow strong? He blew out a breath. There was no question in his mind that hers were the eyes he'd seen in his dreams. It was a relief to end the constant search. She was here in Atlanta and she was real, not merely a figment of his imagination. For the first time in a long time, he slept peacefully.

The next morning, as he did every morning, Eric spent time in prayer. This particular morning, though, he sought direction in the coming endeavor of training his new student. Even though it was the Sabbath, he had to take time to finish making the arrangements to start teaching Shelley, and then finally, all arrangements made, Eric settled back to make one more call.

He found his pulse rate increasing and had to take a calming breath. I have to stop this, he told himself. This woman is now my student and I have to establish a strict student-teacher relationship and maintain it, otherwise, I'll accomplish nothing. That's the least I could do for a student about to face the most grueling year of her life. Still, the thought of her face, her eyes, her turned-up mouth, it made him yearn to be more than her teacher. He sighed and called her cell. When there was no answer he dialed her home number. A trio of voices answered.

"Hello! You've reached the A-dams-fam-i-ly." A sound of snapping fingers had Eric chuckling. "Please leave a message. Thanks."

Even the simple sound of her voice made him smile. He left her the address of the studio where they would train and told her to be there at 7:00 AM sharp. He asked her to give him a call if she was unable to begin training on Monday and then hung up.

He sat for a moment staring at the phone. He'd successfully battled being lonely for years, so why, for some reason, did it suddenly feel so pronounced? He lifted the receiver once more, this time to call Ricky. Eric told him all about his new student.

"So, what can I do to help?" Ricky offered.

Eric gave Ricky a list of things to pack for him, including clothing, household items, charts, and manuals. "...and make sure my training bags are completely stocked right down to the sweat towels, water bottles, and safety equipment– everything."

"Good grief, Dad, it sounds like you're moving out."

"Well, I am for a while." He paused. "Don't tell me you're gonna get all mushy on me. Besides, I thought you always wanted the place to yourself."

Ricky laughed. "Yeah, I finally get a chance to have a wild party and I won't have any time to do it. They pushed up the time for the shoot for the new movie. I'll barely be home myself, not for about the next four weeks, anyway."

Ricky then promised to get everything together and ready to go by the time Eric arrived home on Wednesday morning.

"Now, don't forget to brush your teeth and be a good little boy," Ricky

chimed, assuming the role of father.

Eric smiled. “Yes, son, I promise. And you promise to make sure the house is still standing when I get back.”

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Shelley threw her purse on the sofa as she passed and headed toward the kitchen with her groceries. Filled with zealous energy, she’d gotten an early start to her day. She’d already spoken to her boss, ex-boss now, who was excited for her and wished her luck. She’d cleaned house, finished laundry and been to the grocery store. The next thing was to call her children out in California and tell them the news. She smiled. *The MART. Shelley Adams is a MART competitor.* She glanced toward the phone, saw the light blinking and hit the play button on her old answering machine.

At the sound of Master Kino’s voice she grabbed a pen and paper and replayed the message, listening intently. Then, just because she liked the sound of his voice, she played it again.

Next, she dialed her ex-husband’s number to speak to her sons and told the boys the awesome news.

“Ricky Kino! You met him?” Six-year-old Joey could not contain his excitement.

“Well, actually, I didn’t meet him. I only saw him, but I *did* meet his father and had dinner with him.”

“Wow! You’re so lucky, Mom,” Mark said.

She told Mark and Joey all about the amazing demonstration Ricky had performed and all about Master Kino asking her to dinner and then asking her to compete in the MART. “But best of all, guess what?”

“What,” they cried.

“Master Kino said that he and Ricky were gonna give you guys free lessons when you come back in August.”

“No way,” Mark said loudly, imitating one of the Ninja Turtles, Shelley thought.

“Yes way,” she imitated back and then guessed, “Ninja Turtles, right?”

“No, Mom,” the boys chimed in unison. “That was *Bill and Ted’s Excellent Adventure*.”

“Oops, sorry. It sounds like turtles to me.”

Shelley smiled. This was a game their family had played for years. Someone would use a familiar phrase from an old movie whenever it fit into a daily conversation. Then the others would try to name the movie the line was taken from. She found herself playing it all the time. Their game was even more fun when they played it in the presence of strangers who had no idea what they were laughing at. Shelley couldn’t resist playing, even though sometimes it could be rather rude. Her husband had haughtily disapproved, which made it that much more enjoyable.

Once she said good-bye to the boys, she grabbed her keys and headed out

to find the studio, thinking she didn't want to get lost the next day in the wee hours of the morning and end up late. Twenty minutes later she found it located in a small strip shopping center, two doors down from a supermarket. Her heart skipped a beat when she spotted a white van parked out front with a martial arts logo in the window and next to it, Eric's rental.

She started to drive on, but the glass doors opened and the men stepped out, noticing her immediately. Eric waved. Shelley pulled into a parking space and he opened her door.

"Hello there," he said, surprise in his voice as he held out his hand and helped her out of the car.

"Hi. I got your message and I just wanted to make sure I could find the place." She turned and smiled at the other man.

"I'm Brian," he said, offering his hand.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Shelley."

"It's Brian's studio we'll be using," Eric explained. "He's a former student of mine."

Brian turned to her with a smile. "He's tough. I wish you luck."

"Don't scare her," Eric said quickly.

Shelley laughed. "Were you at the tournament yesterday, Brian?"

"No, actually, I have a wife who's been very ill."

"Oh, I hope it's not serious."

Eric laughed. "It's very serious. Incurable."

Brian smiled at the look of horror on Shelley's face. "He's joking. She's pregnant and having a rough time of it," he clarified. "And I'd better get back home. The morning sickness is killing me, uh, I mean her." He turned to his former teacher, bowed to him, then took his hand. "Eric, it's really great to see you and really an honor to be able to help. Let me know if I can do anything." He turned to what he was sure would be the next MART champion. "Shelley," he paused dramatically. "For what you're about to go through, you have my sympathies." Brian took off before Eric could grab him.

They watched him drive away. Eric turned to Shelley. "Would you like to come in? Maybe look around?"

"Sure," she said with a smile.

After a tour of the dojang, Eric sat cross-legged in front of the mirrors and patted the spot in front of him. "Sit down, Shelley."

She did, looking happy and excited.

He was silent for several moments, looking into her eyes.

"What?" she asked.

He drew a breath. "I was just thinking about how I'm gonna go about training you."

She raised her eyebrows. "As many people as you've taught and you aren't sure how you're gonna train me?"

"Well, each person is unique," he answered. "Each has different strengths

and weaknesses."

"That makes sense. So, what are my weaknesses?"

He smiled at her. "Your question shows a problem right away."

"What do you mean?"

"Some would've asked what their strengths are. You immediately jumped to the negative."

She nodded, wide-eyed.

He smiled. "We have a lot of work to do."

"Where will we start?"

Pressing his lips together, he shrugged then motioned toward the floor. "Lie back."

"Lie back?"

He placed his hand on her shoulder and pressed her back against the floor. When she was flat, he spoke to her soothingly. "I want you to relax. Close your eyes. Take deep, slow breaths."

He'd planned to test her breathing techniques but he was having a great deal of trouble keeping his eyes from roaming over her and finally gave in to it. He gazed at her, following a line from her pretty face, down her lovely neck. She was wearing a pink T-shirt over white shorts and he could see her shape well enough. He continued his scrutiny down her shapely thighs to her feet, which he noticed were slightly turned in. She seemed to be fairly firm, had some good muscle development, but there was a lot of work to be done. He brought himself back to his original experiment. Her stomach was rising and falling as she breathed. Good. He placed the flat of his hand on her belly. She startled briefly, drawing in a quick breath.

"Shhh, lie still," he ordered softly.

She rested her head back and closed her eyes. "What test is this?"

"No talking. Be still."

He smiled and patted her stomach. "Be still, but don't stop breathing."

She hadn't realized she'd stopped. It felt as if her breaths were coming in huge gulps and she was sure Master Kino could hear her heartbeat because it was pounding in her ears.

He pushed his hand against her and commanded, "Push up using your abdominal muscles. Try to make my hand rise."

Well now, that brought her back to reality. She did as ordered.

"Try again," he said softly. "Good." His hand left abruptly.

She sat up to face him. "So, what kind of test was that?"

"The strength and power of your waist and stomach will be vitally important and I was just wondering if, after giving birth to three children, there would be a problem regaining muscle tone in that area."

"Regaining muscle? After all the ab work I've done trying to get back in shape?" When he didn't answer, she prodded. "Okay, shoot. You can be straight with me. I can take it."

He frowned and nodded. “You’ll find when I’m training, I’m brutally honest. I just didn’t want to get into all that right now. That time will come soon enough. But I’ll tell you this...”

His entire demeanor changed and Shelley got a glimpse of the world she was about to face.

“You’re in pretty good shape for a thirty-four-year-old mother of three, but you’re not even close to where you’ll have to be in order to compete on the level of the MART. That means you’re gonna have to trust me, do everything I say and take the initiative to work hard on your own too. Can I count on you to do that?”

She frowned. Of course, she’d already agreed to have him train her, however, she didn’t like the way he put it. For some reason she did trust him, but the words “do everything I say” grated on her nerves. Still, she couldn’t go back now, so she pushed the feeling away. “Cross my heart,” she finally said.

He shook his head. “I’m not playing around, Shelley. Can I count on you to stick it out?”

She nodded. That one was no problem. She could stick it out. That was what she did best. “You can count on it.”

He looked deep into her eyes and then nodded. “I believe you.”

“So, what will we start on tomorrow?” she dared to ask.

“The first few days will be like a test. I need to find out where you are as far as strength, power, speed, flexibility, and knowledge. You see, I can’t decide which way to go if I don’t know where we are. You’ll be weighed and measured. We’ll max out on the weights, time you in the forty, drill you on forms and techniques, and test your flexibility and your knowledge.”

She smiled in excitement and anticipation. He frowned.

“I think I need to burst that bubble just a little. I know you think this is gonna be great fun. It will be, at times. It will also be hard work, pain, and stress. You’ll get angry and frustrated and will probably shed some tears. But, if you don’t quit, we *will* succeed.” He eyed her to see if he’d scared her off.

“I can totally give you my word that I won’t quit.”

“And I’ll do the same. I give you my word that I won’t quit either. I won’t give up on you, no matter what obstacles we come across.” His smile lightened the mood. “Now, go home, get plenty of rest tonight and I’ll see you at seven in the morning. And don’t be late.” Shelley agreed to do just that.

At home that evening, she wandered through her house in a daze of anticipation. She drank some water and tried to decide what to eat for dinner. After staring into the cabinets and rummaging through the refrigerator several times, she gave up. She wasn’t hungry. Besides, she thought it wouldn’t hurt to skip a meal and be a little lighter at the weigh-in tomorrow.

She wondered about Eric and what the coming days would bring. He was a lovely man to look at, that was a given. She figured she’d eventually get used to his appearance so that every time she saw him it would stop taking her

breath away. Her wariness came from the way he made her feel inside. She had no desire to have those sorts of feelings now, not when her ability to become strong and independent was about to get a huge boost. She understood that being trained by Master Eric Kino was an incredible opportunity.

He's a complex man, she thought. One minute he's smiling and joking and the next he's quiet and somber. If she was gonna accomplish her goals, she had to concentrate on him as a teacher and forget the ridiculous schoolgirl feelings that were surfacing. He wants a student, she thought, I'll be the best darn student he's ever had, but no matter what he says, I bet I do have fun.

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Proverbs 14:23

"All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty."

Chapter Five

Having tossed and turned all night from the anticipation of what her first training day would bring, Shelley rose groggily to begin her day at 5:30 in the morning. By six o'clock she stood dressed and ready in front of the mirror. "Oh yeah, ya blend," she mimicked from the old movie, *My Cousin Vinny*.

The studio was only twenty minutes away, and she didn't want to get there too early and sit in a dark parking lot, so she figured she had over thirty minutes to kill. "Hmm, eat breakfast or do a quick meditation to help calm my nerves?" she mumbled, as she perused the fridge. Deciding she was too edgy to eat, she went with the meditation.

Shelley sat in a living room chair and closed her eyes, letting her mind clear like she'd been taught at the "Y." Taking deep, slow breaths, she tensed then relaxed each part of her body until she began to relax and feel calm. When she opened her eyes again, she realized she'd drifted off to sleep. Slowly, she sat up, glancing at the clock to see if it was yet time to leave. She blinked, then blinked again, hard.

"Oh no. This can't be true," she cried aloud.

She dove for her purse and pulled out her cell phone. 7:30. "No!" She rose and grabbed her keys. "No, no, no! I can't believe I've done this. Oh, how could I let this happen?" In a panic, she grabbed her bag and purse and ran out the door. She drove madly to the studio, flew into a parking space and bounded out of her car. Glancing at Master Kino through the window, she swallowed hard and went in.

Eric, seated at a desk in the reception area with documents and papers scattered in front of him, didn't bother to look up when his student finally arrived. He continued writing for several moments as Shelley crept in and sat quietly in the chair positioned directly in front of the desk. When he set the pen down and regarded her, his plan to royally chew her out was spoiled. Pitiful. That was the word that came to mind as he studied her.

Her eyes wide, brow furrowed, her ponytail fell loose to one side and– were those tear tracks on her cheeks? Yes, she was pitiful, and so was he for not being able to bring himself to reprimand her. His harsh look vanished as he accepted that fact. "Are we having a bad day?"

"I'm so sorry I'm late," she began.

"I think I've heard those same words from you before." When she appeared confused he qualified.

"They were the first words I ever heard you speak. Only, I think you were attempting to explain why you were running in the lobby at the tournament. Is this gonna be like, a regular thing?" he asked, trying hard to appear cross.

A look of agony crossed her face. "No, really, it's not. You see, I was ready, but..."

"Please, don't explain," he jumped in, finally remembering that his pity wouldn't help her down the road. He needed to establish his authority quickly so she understood what he expected. There would be no breaks, not for a MART competitor. "No excuses. Just be on time, every time, from now on."

"Yes, sir, Master Kino," she shot back, her tone edging on sarcasm.

Eric's brows rose.

She had the good sense to lower her eyes. "Sorry. Sometimes the rebel in me rears up."

He nodded with a smile. "I like it. Shows spunk." He grabbed a clipboard. "So, let's get started. I'll need your signature on this release. Later, there are some medical forms to fill out. Even though we covered the important questions at dinner the other night, I need it in writing. Okay, follow me."

Shelley sighed as they stopped at the ever-hated scale. She held her breath and watched as Eric's brown fingers moved the weights back and forth. "One hundred thirteen and a half," he wrote. Shelley smiled. Her little fast had paid off. She'd lost over two pounds.

He measured her height and frowned as he wrote five feet, five inches.

"Too short or too tall?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You were frowning."

"Was I?" He smiled. "Neither one. Too light for your height. It indicates a lack of muscle. From here on out, you're an athlete, not a fashion model."

Now she frowned.

Eric grabbed the tape measure hanging by the scale and began measuring each part of Shelley's body starting at her neck. Moving down, he measured upper arms, forearms, shoulders, upper chest, bust, waist, upper hips, lower hips, upper thighs, lower thighs, calves and ankles. By the time he finished recording the last numbers, he couldn't help but notice her pink cheeks.

"Don't be embarrassed," he said calmly. "We're gonna be working together closely, so you might as well get used to it."

They moved to the weight room where Eric led her through a series of stretches. Next, beginning with the bench, he had her max out on every single piece of equipment, recording the maximum amount of weight she could lift, push, or pull. She pushed herself as hard as she could, trying to impress him, but by the time they finished, her legs were shaking and she could barely lift her arms from her sides.

Feeling as if she'd fall over if she moved, she looked closely at her teacher as he spoke. She was having a difficult time hearing, mostly because

of the buzzing in her ears. He was saying something about not wanting to push her too hard before she had her doctor's exam on Wednesday. It seemed to Shelley he was talking in slow motion. He told her they would take a break and get some water, she was looking pale. Dutifully, she followed him back to the front where the water cooler awaited, but she only made it halfway.

She must not have actually passed all the way out because she was vaguely aware of things going on around her. Strong arms lifting her from the floor and laying her on a couch in another room. She felt a cool cloth on her forehead and she opened her eyes to a very concerned face.

He smiled at her with such kindness, it was difficult to believe it was the same face that seemed so hard and cross earlier. He placed his fingers on the side of her throat and stared at his watch then looked into her eyes. "Talk to me. Tell me what happened."

Shelley spoke softly. "I'm not sure. I feel so silly. I don't understand what could've happened."

"Nothing like this has ever happened before?"

"No. I've always been extremely healthy."

Eric's eyes were thoughtful. "What did you have for breakfast?"

"I, uh, haven't eaten," she answered timidly.

He sighed. "Okay, then, what about last night? What did you have for dinner? Could you possibly have eaten something spoiled?"

"I didn't eat last night either. I haven't eaten since early yesterday."

Scowling, Eric stood and placed his hands on his hips. He walked away from her, then turned abruptly. Though his brow was furrowed, he spoke softly. "Okay, listen up, Shelley. You are now an athlete in training. You will absolutely never skip a meal unless I tell you to do so. Not only that, you might as well know that as part of the training, you will eat what I tell you to eat, buy the brand of foods I tell you to buy and you will even cook how I tell you to cook. There will be NO exceptions. Is that clear?" He stood over her waiting for an answer.

"Very clear," she said softly.

Eric had expected another sarcastic retort. When he didn't get one, he realized she was still feeling puny. "Lie here. I'll be right back. I'm gonna lock the studio door behind me. Don't let anyone in." He freshened the cloth on her head before he left.

By the time he'd returned she'd drifted off to sleep. He stood in the doorway to the dressing room where he'd carried her earlier and gazed at her still form. She's gonna be a difficult one, he thought. It would help if he could figure her out, but she's like several people rolled into one. He shook his head. She's childlike and womanly. Weak and strong. Timid and bold. Then again, he absolutely knew better than to try to put a label on anyone.

Quietly, he knelt beside her, started to wake her but halted midway. There was something about watching someone sleep that tugged at the heart. Her

brow was furrowed, her mouth pouted. There was an attraction, he admitted to himself. He allowed himself the indulgence of reaching out and touching her lips with the pad of his thumb. Incredible pleasure took him by surprise. Years of self-discipline was the only thing holding him back from stealing a kiss. Luckily for him she stirred at his touch. He stood back and watched her awaken. Smiling up at him, she rose to a sitting position.

"Feeling better?"

"Much better."

"Well, we can't move on until you've eaten something so I want you to eat this." He presented her with a tray holding half a banana, half an orange, one piece of whole wheat bread, a jar of honey and a cup of herbal tea.

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "I know I need to eat, but I don't think I can. I'm a little queasy."

"You just told me that you were feeling much better."

She grimaced. So did he. Now was as good a time as any to initiate her to his teaching methods. He put on a stern face. "Better or not, which is it?"

She looked up at him showing an instant of fear, anger, then finally resolution. "I'm still not feeling very well."

"Then why did you say otherwise?" he pressed, eyebrows raised.

"I guess I hated looking like a weak, whiny female."

He nodded. "Good. That's an honest answer. You'll learn over this year to be honest with yourself and to do that, you must also be honest with others. However, Shelley, let me just say that you don't appear weak. You passed out because your blood sugar is low. Simple science. Here..." He sat down next to her, dipped the spoon in the honey and then into the tea, stirring until the honey had dissolved completely. Lifting the cup, he handed it to her.

She wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

He was not deterred. "Just try," he coaxed.

Slowly she took a small sip, waited to see if it would stay down and nodded her head. He then offered her a slice of banana. She chewed it slowly and smiled. "I really do feel a little better now."

"Good. Then as soon as you finish everything on this tray, we can get on with our day."

"Everything?"

"Yes. Everything." He took the spoon, dipped it into the honey again, this time spreading it on the piece of bread. "There," he commanded as he handed her the bread. "Every single crumb."

He rose from the couch and stood over her. "I'll be back."

She watched him leave the room and had to giggle. "*Terminator*," she whispered.

When he returned, she followed him through the weight room into a large room lined with mirrors where a punching bag hung from the ceiling near the far wall.

"Since you've just eaten, we won't do anything strenuous. We'll just see how flexible you are." He led her through a series of stretches to loosen her up. Once she was warm, he began pushing her legs, knees and hips this way and that to see how far they would go. He made notes every few minutes.

Shelley was dying to see what he was writing about her. Whatever it was, she knew he was disappointed she couldn't do a side split.

He shook his head. "No side split. No side kick. Work on it every day, morning and night. Flexibility is priority."

"Yes sir, Master sir," she quipped mockingly, letting him know she really did feel better.

Over the course of the day he tested her extensively. He had her demonstrate every form she knew and made notes about incorrect positions and lack of hip rotation. He called out names of kicks and she'd do her best to show what she'd learned thus far. When she was unsure of how to execute one, he'd demonstrate.

"There is no kick that is unimportant," he explained. "Every kick is crucial, from what you may consider a simple one, to the most difficult. Its effectiveness depends on your situation, but, one day you may be grateful you took the time to master each one."

He went on. "The power of your kick doesn't necessarily come from your legs. It comes from your waist and your breathing. If you're weak here," he patted his stomach, "then you're weak everywhere. I'm not saying it doesn't matter whether your legs are strong. They're like the baseball bat. We wouldn't want them to crack when you swing them around. Still, ask any baseball manager what the power hitters have over the others and they will tell you, it's not really strength, it's bat speed and timing. The speed with which you kick will come from your core strength. The timing, you will learn."

She listened intently, trying to digest every word. When perspiration began running from her forehead, he led her through some cool-down stretching. "Okay, so when we come back after lunch, we'll work on one and two-step sparring."

Somehow, she'd thought the afternoon would be easier than the morning, but no such luck. They started by going over all the one-step sparring movements she knew. He then showed her several more and he made a comment about her being a quick study which lifted her spirits.

They worked on the sparring movements for two solid hours. Shelley found herself breathing hard yet Eric barely broke a sweat. "We'll look into your aerobic fitness in the morning. Get some water and come right back."

She obeyed.

"How many abdominal exercises are you doing daily?" he asked when she reentered the room.

"One hundred," she beamed.

Obviously unimpressed, he made some notes on his clipboard, then stated

matter-of-factly, “Okay, we’ll up that to two hundred, twice a day and see if we can make some headway in that area.”

He’d expected an adverse reaction. He could already tell she was gonna be a handful, regardless of the promises she’d made. He almost smiled as he watched her bite her tongue. He worked her through a series of ab exercises, working each set of muscles beginning with the lower abs, outer obliques, inner obliques and finally the diaphragm.

Shelley’s muscles were burning fiercely, but she wouldn’t let herself give up. She was beginning to think the torture would never end when he finally stopped. She collapsed with a moan.

“It’ll get easier,” he reassured her.

Finally, at 5:00, Eric decided to call it a day. “Brian has a class soon. Besides, we don’t want to overdo it on the first day,” he said with a grin.

Shelley rolled her eyes. She felt like she’d been hit by a train and wondered what would have to hit her had they ‘overdone it.’

Back at the desk, Eric was writing again. “This,” he said, handing her a piece of paper, “is what you’ll eat tonight and tomorrow morning.

Do you remember what I said was priority?”

“Flexibility,” she replied.

“Right. Okay, from now on, in the morning when you arrive, go through this series of stretches.” He handed her another piece of paper with black-and-white pictures of a little girl in the various stretches. “You’ll know these by heart soon. For now, just remember to stretch slowly. Once you’ve stretched, then go through all forms from white belt all the way to black belt—twice. I know you don’t know them now, but you will by the end of the day tomorrow, and if you have trouble remembering some of them, I’ll be right here for you to ask. After forms, work on your first two hundred abdominals, just like I showed you today. Remember, if you don’t concentrate and isolate the correct muscles, the exercises will not be as effective. The same routine I just described is to be done in reverse each night beginning tonight. Remember, begin and end each day with flexibility and don’t stop breathing. Got it?”

She appeared completely overwhelmed. He smiled at her. “You’ll do fine. Now go home and be back here at what time?”

“Nine o’clock?” she quipped as she headed for the door. Eric only shook his head.

✝✝✝

Tuesday morning, as Shelley arrived at the studio, she peeked at the clock. 7:05. Eric glanced up at her from the desk where he seemed to have mounds of paperwork piling up. He looked at his watch and then back at her and then went back to work without a word.

“Well, good morning to you too,” she quipped.

His lips pressed tightly together. “Had you walked in five minutes ago it may have been,” he replied calmly.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, it's only five minutes," she snapped.

Eric's face darkened. "Let me help you to understand. It's not the five minutes that matters, it's the obedience and the self-discipline that it takes to make sure you're here on time. That is what shows you have the desire, besides the fact that being late shows a lack of respect for me."

The last part got to her and she was immediately contrite. "I'm sorry and you're right. It won't happen again."

"Don't ever make promises you can't keep," he stated.

"I said I'm sorry. What more do you want?"

"For a start, you can give me two hundred push-ups as soon as you finish your warm-up."

"Two hundred? You can't be serious."

Their eyes met and the look he gave her let her know he was indeed serious. She turned away muttering, and headed for the main studio to begin her stretch and that's where the problem began. She was so stiff and sore from yesterday's activities that she found she couldn't even touch her toes. Every inch of her body screamed in protest.

She tried again and again, and began to worry that he'd be angry if she couldn't even force herself to do her morning routine. She pounded and rubbed her hamstrings, but they were tight as a steel drum. She groaned. Her muscles were not gonna give in easily and it was gonna take quite a while to warm up and stretch out sufficiently.

"A little stiff from yesterday?"

She looked up at the soft voice, a pained expression on her face. "More like a lot stiff."

"I thought you would be, so I've arranged a surprise for you." He handed her a white sheet. "Go in the dressing room and get undressed and wrap this around you. You're gonna get a massage."

"A massage?"

His smile faded. "Have you never had a massage?" She shook her head.

"Well, you're in for a treat. Now go get undressed."

"Completely undressed?" she asked, wide-eyed.

Eric rolled his eyes at her. "You can keep on your under clothing. But the oil used in the massage needs to touch your skin. It's gonna help a lot with the stiffness and soreness."

She nodded and did as instructed, albeit reluctantly. When she came out, a padded cloth-covered table was set up in the back of the studio. He patted it. She moved forward apprehensively and he helped her up onto the table.

"Shelley," Eric said. "This is Claude."

Startled, she looked up to see a large man walk up to the table.

"Bonjour, Madame," he said, in a thick French accent.

Shelley nodded politely, but her eyes registered the distrust she felt. Eric smiled. "Just lie down here, on your stomach."

Shelley did as ordered and he helped her adjust her sheet to be sure she was comfortable.

Claude picked up a bottle of oil and nodded. “I weel nut be needing vous Ahhreek. Merci.”

Eric patted Shelley’s arm. “Then I’ll leave her in your hands. I’ll be up front if you need me,” he said as he left the room.

Shelley opened her mouth to speak, but she had no chance. Claude went to work on her right away. “Wait a minute,” she shrieked at him, trying to readjust her covering to be sure her body was still covered.

He worked on her back and shoulders until she actually began to relax. He moved to her feet, which felt like heaven. He worked his way up her calves, speaking to her in French as he went. Her thighs were especially sore and he seemed to take that into consideration. Running his palms over her in small circles, her muscles began to feel warm and not quite so sore to the touch. She was just starting to feel at ease when he apparently decided it was time to go deeper into the muscle. She stiffened immediately.

“Ow! Ohh! Will you please lighten up a little?” she complained.

Either he wasn’t listening or he didn’t understand English, because the rough treatment continued. Just when she thought she could take no more his hands went higher until they were actually under the sheet, way up under the sheet. “Hold it. Stop!”

She grabbed the sheet, tried to turn over, but his large strong hands held her in place, as if he were used to people trying to get out of the deep massage. She felt the panic overtake her, could feel the terror bubble up from somewhere deep inside and the scream ripped free. The sound startled Claude enough to let her go and she sat up, scrambling to pull the sheet around herself. He tried to motion her back down but she screamed at him again and jumped from the table. “No! You keep your hands off me!”

Eric came rushing into the room as Claude yelled something about a peasant.

“What’s going on?”

Shelley looked at him, her eyes wide. “You– you tell him to keep his hands off me,” she cried, her voice shrill with panic.

Puzzled, Eric nodded. As ridiculous as it seemed, there must be a good reason for such a strong reaction.

“I’ve neva bean so eensulted,” Claude exclaimed. “Madame, I am a pro-fessional.”

Eric spoke to him in apparent fluent French. Whatever he said seemed to appease the man. Claude nodded. Eric chuckled and slapped him on the shoulder, making Shelley feel awkward and childish.

Without another word, Claude folded his table and gathered his supplies. Eric saw him out, leaving Shelley alone, trembling and trying to pull the sheet tighter. As she stood there thinking about what just happened, she came to

some realizations. Mainly, Claude must've cost Eric a great deal of money and he had been extremely thoughtful in arranging a massage for her. Suddenly she felt very stupid and silly. For the second time in as many days, tears welled up and spilled over. Using the tip of her sheet she tried to blot her eyes.

"Here." A dark hand held up a tissue.

"Thank you," Shelley mumbled as she wiped her face.

Eric smiled kindly and touched her hair softly. "Why the tears?"

"I'm sorry," she began. "It's just that, well, it's just that..." She only shook her head.

When Eric remained silent her flood of jumbled emotions came tumbling out. "I know you were doing something nice for me and I ruined it all and I know you must think I'm a real ditz, but I just couldn't stand his hands on me, I just couldn't." She stopped long enough to sniff and wipe at her eyes, muttering the next sentences between hiccups.

"I guess my husband was right all those times he said I was about as uncultured and lowbred as anyone he'd ever known. He said I couldn't do anything right and he was right, wasn't he? I can't do anything right, not even lie still for a perfectly normal massage and I feel like such an idiot. I'm not even sure what happened."

"Whoa now, hold on a minute. You aren't..." Eric began, but she spoke over him.

"No. No, I'm an idiot, all right. I'm just realizing—he was right. My husband was right, and if he was right about that then he must've been right about everything else."

When Eric tried to take her by the shoulders she pushed away. "Don't you see?" she cried. "When that– that– man– did what he did, my own husband said I deserved what I got. I always thought that was ludicrous. I thought he was being mean or cruel when he said that, but maybe I did. Maybe I deserved just what I got. Maybe I *did* bring the whole thing on myself."

Slowly and gently now, Eric reached out and pulled her into his arms. "Okay. It's gonna be okay," he murmured, rubbing her back.

"It's never gonna be okay," she cried, burying her face against his chest as she sobbed. He said nothing more. He only held her until there were no more tears and as he did, he thought carefully about every word she'd spoken.

The mistake was completely his. She's shy and timid about her body. He should've seen that. From what he'd just heard, her ex-husband was, at the very least, verbally abusive. Years of telling someone they can't do anything right is gonna leave them with serious self-esteem issues. The biggest issue however, seems to be much larger. *When that man did what he did?* So something happened to her. A sexual assault was the logical conclusion. Hot and extreme anger at that thought engulfed him so quickly he was barely able to control it. He took a deep breath, and waited for the tide of fury to slowly subside. *His* anger was secondary to what *she* was feeling. Somehow, he'd

have to help her work through the anguish.

When she was quiet, he let her go and tilted her chin up to look at him. "Do me a favor and go get dressed so you're more comfortable and then we're gonna talk. Will you do that?"

She nodded, and headed to the dressing room, a look of defeat on her face. He joined her a few minutes later on the green leather couch in the women's dressing room. He began by asking her about her childhood and found she was the youngest of four children, and the only girl. She'd been disowned by her parents and brothers when she'd become pregnant as a high school sophomore. She'd not only been a source of embarrassment, but would also be a financial burden.

When Robert Adams had decided to "do the right thing by her," it had been a huge relief for her family. They didn't blink twice before shipping her off, glad to be rid of the whole messy situation.

Eric asked her tough questions and she answered him honestly, baring her soul to a man she barely knew. She spoke of growing up poor, of, at the age of fifteen, meeting her future husband who was already a senior in college and was so distinguished and so attractive and was gonna teach her about life and give her things she couldn't imagine. She told of discovering she was pregnant and the whirlwind marriage.

Not once during this did she say her father or brothers tried to step in to defend her honor, and yet they had much disdain for her. Eric knew if he'd been her father he would've had the guy arrested, that is, if he didn't kill him first, God forgive him for that thought. She spoke briefly of the birth of her daughter and then of her two young sons before she came to a lull.

"Tell me something, Shelley. You said that your ex-husband said 'you deserved what you got.' What was it he thinks you deserved?"

She looked down. "I said that?"

"You did."

"You listen very well, don't you?"

He smiled kindly, waiting while she wrestled with the words.

She looked up into his face and took a deep breath. "I was walking, on a nature trail, actually not too far from here..."

She went on to tell the story, appalled that her teeth began to chatter. "I don't know why I didn't fight. I once read about a woman who went so far as to bite off her attacker's nose. I always thought I'd be tough like that if anything ever happened to me, but I didn't even fight. I..." Her voice broke off as a tear ran down her cheek.

"You were frightened and fear can cause paralysis." He said the words slowly and calmly, pushing his own need to confront the man back into the recesses of his mind. He had to remind himself, "*Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.*"

Shelley shook her head to disagree. "I can't use fear as an excuse because

he didn't even have a weapon and I just lay there. It was like I was watching from outside my body somewhere. I should've fought, but I just lay there. He—oh God, I should've fought."

He reached for her as her sobs erupted from deep inside and overtook her. He held her as she filled in all the details of what a man had done to her and her husband's reaction. After listening to her story he wondered that she could function at all. His dream, he realized, wasn't about something that *would* happen to her, but about something that had *already* happened. He sighed. He'd wanted so much to keep whatever peril awaited her from taking place. Now, the only thing he could do was to help her through the aftermath. It became clear to him that helping her to heal was why he'd been sent to her.

Her emotional status would be a huge obstacle to overcome and had now become a priority. In order to compete in the MART, her mind had to be completely clear. She had to be at peace. Eric had a gift for helping his students sort out their emotions and problems. His doctorate in psychology certainly helped in that area, but much greater help was his relationship with God. He knew if he couldn't get through, God could. Jesus would lead him and guide him to say and do the right things.

She impressed him though, with her persistence and with her strength. Strength she didn't even know she had. Strength to remove herself from a seventeen-year emotionally abusive marriage. And now, she strives for something above and beyond the ordinary. To him, she was remarkable. His problem was he was finding, is the more he got to know her, the more he is tempted to think of her as a woman and not merely a student. An extraordinary woman. He organized his thoughts, took her hands in his and gave them a gentle squeeze.

"Shelley, let me talk to you a minute. First, the little surprise I arranged for you this morning was totally thoughtless and I apologize for that. Second, you certainly didn't ruin anything at all. Actually, you've given me a gift. You've shared some of your innermost thoughts and feelings with me, things that are very private. I'm honored you'd trust me with those things."

Shelley sniffed and offered a small smile. "You always say such nice things. You know, you're very kind and really sensitive for a man." She looked up, eyes wide. "Oh, I didn't mean that like it sounded."

He was pretty sure that she most certainly meant it exactly like it sounded and he couldn't blame her. "Listen, we're gonna work through these feelings as the year progresses. I'm a doctor of psychology and I can help you, if you let me. Right now, there's only one thing I want to say to you. It's something you are not going to agree with and please know that it's not said to make you feel guilty in any way. It is something that will eventually empower you, so, for now, I just want you to think about it, okay?"

She nodded.

"We are only victims if we allow ourselves to be. What that man did to

you can hurt you only if you let it."

She protested immediately as he knew she would.

"I didn't allow it. I didn't ask for what he did!"

"Of course not. I'm talking about how what he did affects you now."

"Don't you think I'd stop feeling this way if I could?"

"Yes, if you knew how. Look, I know it's painful to you and that's an honest feeling and feelings are never bad. They're just feelings. Listen, we're gonna work through all that pain that you're feeling. Pain has to be experienced fully, wallowed in completely and then let go. I'm asking you to trust me. It will get better."

He decided to move forward rather than dwell any longer on the subject. "So, I know it appears we've gotten off to a rough start these first few days, but it's actually a good thing to get the bad stuff over with right away."

"Thank you," she whispered. "Thanks for putting up with everything."

"You're welcome," he said as he stood. "Let's see if we can stretch out those sore muscles."

✝✝✝

Matthew 11:28
"Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden
and I will give you rest."

Chapter Six

Eric timed Shelley in the forty and then had her run two miles. She pushed herself hard, almost to the point of collapse. This time though, he noticed and made her stop and walk.

"Usually, I have to make my students work harder," he teased.

She shrugged. "I really want to do well."

"So, I know I said this is a test, but it's not one you can fail. It's just to see where you are. I'm not gonna change my mind if you can't run two miles. In a few months, ten miles will be nothing to you."

He smiled at her furrowed brow. "Stop worrying. You'll be fine." He tugged gently on her ponytail. "Let's get some lunch."

They heaped mounds of greenery onto plastic plates at an all-u-can-eat salad bar. Cold from the air conditioning, Shelley found a seat near a window where the sun was providing a nice greenhouse effect.

"So, Ms. Adams, you are gonna have some personal time tomorrow," Eric stated as they ate.

Shelley looked up, her eyes questioning.

Momentarily distracted, Eric allowed himself to take in the beauty before him. Sunshine danced in Shelley's golden-brown hair, giving it strong red highlights, her cheeks were pink from exercise and her smile made him smile.

He pulled himself back and focused. "Because I'm not gonna be here," he finished. "I'm flying to LA early in the morning and I won't be back until very late, actually not until the wee hours of Thursday morning," he explained. "Don't worry though, I'm making a huge list of things for you to do while I'm gone. The most important is to go to your doctor's appointment at 10:30. Then, I'm hoping you'll do me a favor and meet with my realtor at 1:00."

"Your realtor?" Shelley asked.

"Yes. She's finding an apartment for me. Her name is Candace Baker and she has all the preliminary work done. All you have to do is go with her to see the three options, choose one and pick up the key. She's already been paid for a full year of rent. Just tell her I'll be in to sign the lease when I return."

"A full year of rent? Wow! And you want *me* to choose?"

He smiled. "Yep. I trust you."

"I'll take care of it," Shelley promised.

They slipped into silence and Eric could tell Shelley was concerned about

something. He wondered if she was unsure about handling the apartment situation. He was about to ask her when she spoke.

"Eric," Shelley began timidly, looking down at her salad. "So, what kind of doctor's appointment is this gonna be?"

"It's a complete physical exam." He could sense her wince inwardly even though she tried not to be obvious.

She looked up at him briefly and then returned her gaze to a crouton lying on the table, but said nothing.

"I have to have it on record," he explained. "If I'm going to insure you, and I have to insure you if I'm gonna get sponsors. Why? Is there a problem I need to know about?"

She pushed the crouton around the table with her fork. "No, no. I just hate going to the doctor." She took a deep breath and gave him a quick smile. "So then, what else do you need me to take care of? I'm at your service."

Eric thought a minute about whether he should pursue what was bothering her now and get it out of the way, or wait for it to surface on its own. He decided she'd already had a rough day and so he'd let it go for now. Anyway, she made it obvious. She hadn't wanted Claude to touch her earlier and she did not want the doctor to examine her, and at the moment he felt it would be extremely satisfying to have access to the man who'd done this to her.

He took a deep breath, wiped the thought from his mind, said a quick prayer and went on. "Oh, I have lots of things for you to do. There's some grocery shopping, some papers to be typed up, hard-copied and filed, some reading, plus, your regular morning and evening routines, with a mile added to the morning."

"Wow, sorry I asked," she moaned.

Eric smiled at her. He'd been smiling a lot lately. It seemed everything she did or said made him smile. They finished their salads and headed back to the dojang.

The rest of the afternoon was spent working on forms, and by the end of the day she knew, roughly, every form in the art of Taekwondo from white belt to black belt.

He left her practicing them as one long sequence while he went to the desk to try to finish up loose ends before his trip in the morning. Forty-five minutes later, Shelley drank some water and sat down in front of the desk. She watched Eric work on what appeared to be ten different things at once.

"I've got them down," she said breathlessly.

"Good," he said without looking up. "Keep practicing."

She remained in her seat, however, and a few minutes later Eric looked up. "Do you have a question?"

"Yes. It's almost 6:00. Doesn't Brian have a class?"

"Not on Tuesdays or Sundays." He looked at his watch. "Tired?"

"A little," she lied and then at his sharp look, amended. "Yes, I'm tired,

but I think I've got the forms down," she said again, as if unsure he had heard her the first time.

"That's good," Eric said cheerfully. "Remember though, every time you do them, you need to perfect another movement. Also remember they're just forms. Katas. You haven't developed the strength and power that comes from here," he patted his stomach, "or the knowledge and the technique that comes from here," he touched his head. "Most of all, you haven't made a place for them to come together here." He placed his hand over his heart.

Shelley listened intently, trying hard to understand, but eventually gave in to her urge to giggle. "You sound like Mr. Miyagi. You know, from *Karate Kid*?"

Eric pointed a stern finger at her. "Yes, I know Mr. Miyagi, both the character and the actors who've portrayed him, and you know who *you* sound like? You sound like my son."

She gave a sheepish grin. "Speaking of your son, when do I get to meet him?"

"Eventually," Eric replied as he began typing on a laptop. "Right now he's working on a movie, so he won't be free for several weeks."

Disappointed, Shelley leaned her head in her hands and sat watching him. She watched his fingers tap the keys, and then trace some information from a book. She watched his hands flip though pages of what looked like a handwritten journal, the same hands that could throw lethal punches and break boards and just this morning had held her hands. So strong and yet so gentle, she thought.

"What is all this you've been working on?" she questioned.

"Well, you see, there's a lot more to it than just coming and working out every day. Training an athlete for anything has become very scientific. There are definite and precise goals to be met. Formulas of health and strength to follow. Progress charts to be kept, records of everyday activities, menus, financial records and reports, your needs physically, emotionally and financially and even my needs. All this goes into the computer and gets sorted out to a plan of action."

"I've been trying to get things done so while I'm gone tomorrow, you can type some things up, and set up folders for each category. With all that out of the way, by Thursday we'll be ready to roll."

He showed her the system he was working on, the program where they'd chart her course and progress and all the online forms on the business side. When Shelley yawned, he realized it was almost 7:00.

"It's been a long day. Let's get out of here. Wait though, what are you gonna do in the morning?"

Shelley counted on her fingers. "Be here at the regular time." She eyed him but he held his tongue. "Flexibility, forms, abdominals, run two miles, shower, dress, doctor appointment."

"Good, and what are you gonna do tonight?" he asked.

On her fingers again, Shelley counted, "abdominals, forms, flexibility."

Eric shook his head. "You missed one. You have to eat, but since it's so late, let me take you out to eat so you won't have to cook."

"Thank goodness," Shelley said. "I'm too tired to cook."

"You wanna run home and change and I'll pick you up?"

"Sounds good."

✞✞✞

Eric pulled up into the driveway of a small, brick, split-level home in a modest neighborhood. Except for one small peculiar patch of high grass covered in weeds, the tiny front yard was neat and tidy. One tree stood as sentry near the street and bright yellow flowers filled two small flower boxes that lined the tiny front porch. Decorative grasses ran along either side of the short concrete walkway leading from the driveway to the porch. Simple, clean and bright, it reminded him of Shelley.

She opened the door before he was able to knock. "Come in," she said quickly and dashed up a small flight of stairs. "I'll be right down."

Looking curiously around the room as he waited, Eric learned more about the woman who'd so quickly become a part of his life.

The first to catch his eye were the pictures of her children that lined the walls. She'd never bragged about them, but she could have, Eric thought. They were beautiful. Her dark-haired daughter was especially breathtaking. The two younger boys were adorable with their light brown hair and impish grins. Both boys had inherited Shelley's big, brown doe-like eyes.

The room was simply furnished with a plain brown sofa, a table with an old lamp and an old turntable with several records on the top. A basket of silk yellow daisies graced the living room table along with several kung-fu/karate magazines, which made him smile. He could see more yellow flowers through the entrance to the kitchen, both on the table and adorning the curtains. A glance down the stairs to a den showed a picture on the wall of a field of yellow flowers.

The home didn't speak of money, but it did speak of love, the love of a large family. He could imagine the record player blasting out tunes while the children made fun of mom and dad as they "rocked out" to their favorite music. Then again, he knew that wasn't how it had been for Shelley's marital life. Eric looked up to see what he thought was an angel floating gracefully down the stairs. Shelley wore a flowing white gauze skirt paired with a white blouse. A fringed leather belt hung loosely around her waist and a matching leather beaded hair clasp gathered her hair back from her face. The contrast of the soft white material paired with the tough leather was a contradiction and so like her. She'd caught him off guard and he breathed out slowly. "Wow. You look wonderful."

"Thank you," she said, blushing.

Eric tried to find something to talk about that would get his mind off what he was thinking. "You have a lovely home."

"Thanks."

"I take it you like yellow flowers, uh, daisies, right?" he said with a smile, as he motioned toward the several examples. It had been an innocent comment which didn't require a major response, but it received one anyway.

"I do like daisies but actually they're just a substitute for my real most favorite flower."

"Which is?"

"Which is a dandelion. I'd bring them in and put them in vases all around the house, but you see, you can't just pick dandelions and bring them in the house. They wilt and die too fast."

She'd piqued his interest and he smiled. "Ya know, most people consider dandelions a weed."

"I know." She shrugged. "But I love them. I think they look fresh and happy, sort of like tiny yellow suns. They grow wild and free. They're so strong. Really, you can't kill them. If left alone they never die. Not even in their old age, because they become fairies and fly away to live again. They remind me of people."

"People? Are you saying that people become fairies and fly away?" he asked with a chuckle.

"Haha. No, I'm talking about freedom. Dandelions have to be free. If captured, meaning, if you pick them, no matter how much water you put them in, they wither and die. People are like that. People need to be free. Without freedom we wither and die. Without freedom there is no will to live." She paused and caught herself. "Anyway, dandelions make me feel happy. When I look over at my little patch of tall grass, it's almost like they say hello to me, like they understand me and I understand them. You know, live and let live. Respect for life. Respect for each other's worth. It's hard to explain." She smiled up at him. "You must think I'm out of my mind."

"On the contrary, what I think is that you're gonna be a wonderful student," he uttered softly. He opened the door and they walked out into the evening, the lowering sun casting a soft glow on her modest home. Glancing over at the dandelion patch, which he'd earlier thought of as weeds, he smiled.

He took her to a local steakhouse where they ate and talked about their kids and laughed. They laughed a lot and they stayed too late. At 9:00, Eric knew he needed to get her home, but he was enjoying himself so much he wanted to stay with her. Just a little longer, he told himself. He invited her for a drive asking her to show him around the area.

When they came to a small park near Shelley's home, he swung in. They walked down a path to a bench overlooking a small pond. Eric had only intended to sit there for a few minutes, but their conversation turned to

religions and philosophies.

Shelley's childlikeness disappeared. Eric raptly listened to her expound words of wisdom about the power of love. She believed anything was possible. Her mind was completely open and Eric knew that was why she was progressing in her life.

They talked and talked, as one subject led to another, until they realized they shared the same views on an amazing number of subjects except for one. Shelley didn't seem to have any beliefs about God. She wasn't closed to the idea that God exists, though she seemed doubtful. She'd never been taught about anything spiritual. That realization brought them to a lull in their conversation and they sat silently, staring into the night sky.

Eric's thoughts were directed heavenward, asking for guidance in opening Shelley's heart to the concept that God exists. For Eric knew, not just believed, but knew since he was ten years old that God was real. He is very real. Eric knew because he'd experienced a miracle. As a child he'd been trapped deep under the earth in a cave when he was visited by a heavenly messenger.

Shelley's yawn broke the silence and Eric immediately responded. "I need to get you home."

"Yes," Shelley agreed. "It's late and I still have my evening routine to do, as you know."

Eric looked at his watch and was surprised to find it was 11:30. He sighed, disappointed in himself. "Well, I guess you can skip the routine this one time," he suggested.

Shelley's eyebrows rose. "Uh, what about self-discipline and obedience?"

He shrugged with a sheepish smile. "I guess a tree must learn to bend." He gave her no chance for a comeback. He stood and pulled her to her feet.

Keeping hold of her hand, they walked back to the car. Shelley was so sleepy after her long hard day, her eyes had begun to water and somewhere between the park and her home, she fell asleep. Eric found it difficult to watch the road. Finally he swung the car into the narrow driveway. He thought he'd have to carry her in, but she woke when he turned off the engine. He led her into the house, and not only opened the door for her but accompanied her up the stairs and to her room.

She sat wearily on the bed. "What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"I'm making sure you get to bed and I'm making sure your alarm is set. You have a tendency to be late."

She smiled and closed her eyes. It seemed strange to have another man in the bedroom she'd shared only with her husband. It also seemed strange to have him in the room where she'd spent so many incredibly lonely nights during the past year. Strange, yet, the familiarity of Eric putting her to bed didn't bother her at all. In her half-asleep, half-awake state she allowed herself the thought that it felt wonderfully safe to have him here and it wouldn't hurt, just this once, to let someone take care of her for a change. It was almost a

foreign concept.

He helped her slip off the leather belt. She immediately lay back and closed her eyes. Regarding her as she lay there, he realized this was not the platonic relationship it was supposed to be. He pulled the spread down, moved her up onto her pillow and slid off her shoes. She curled up on her side, smiling a contented smile as he pulled the blankets over her.

He checked the alarm clock on the bedside table. She gave a little sigh and he realized she was already fast asleep. He gazed at the woman who was a bundle of inconsistencies and shook his head. Curled up like a kitten, she appeared fragile but she was nowhere near. She had power. He could feel it. Now it was his job to help her use it.

He turned off the lamp beside her bed and turned to go. Immediately, Shelley gasped and sat up, her hand searching for the switch in the darkness. Eric quickly turned it back on. "What's wrong?"

Shelley shrugged, looked down at her hands. "I, uh, usually sleep with the light on."

Eric's heart dropped. He wanted to pull her close in his arms and hold her and protect her from all the demons that haunted her. Instead, he sat down next to her on the bed and spoke quietly. "You're a little too big to be afraid of the dark, aren't you?"

She looked ashamed as her quiet words tumbled forth. "I know, but sometimes, when the lights are off, I get this spooky feeling, like someone is standing over me. It's usually only when I'm alone. When the kids are here, I'm fine. I know it sounds crazy and you must think I'm a complete idiot."

"Not at all, Shelley. You've been traumatized and haven't actually healed. Scoot over."

"Um, scoot over?"

He nodded, waved his hand at her and she scooted over. He sat, leaning his back against the headboard and stretching his legs out on the bed beside her. "You've had some experiences in your life that would give anyone a phobia. So now, let's finish this thing together." He reached toward the lamp and they were in darkness once more. "I'm right here. You can sleep without fear," he said as he touched her face gently. "I'll say a prayer and ask for your healing and your protection. You'll eventually learn to let go of fear. Fear lowers your vibration."

He wanted her to know that she was never alone. God is with us, and He is real. He spoke softly as he prayed. Her hand reached out for his in the darkness. He took her offering and gave her hand a squeeze. When he finished the prayer, they were quiet. Eric shifted his weight, trying to get comfortable. He sat silently, stroking the back of her hand. As the minutes ticked by, her grip loosened, until she fell asleep and her hand slid onto the bed. She seemed so vulnerable now compared to earlier at the park, he thought, when she was telling him how she'd change the world and make it a better place.

Looking up at the glowing numbers on the nightstand, he sighed heavily, closed his eyes and tried to rest his head against the wall. He had to be at the airport at 5:00 AM and he realized tomorrow, or rather, today, was gonna be a hard day.

His body yearned to get prone. Finally giving in to temptation, he slid down on the bed next to her. She immediately turned to him and snuggled close. His arm wrapped around her waist. Her face was so close to his, he couldn't resist. He pressed his lips to hers.

He woke with a start. Drawing a deep breath, it took several moments for his heart rate to slow. Realizing he'd been dreaming, he wasn't sure if he felt disappointment or relief. He was sure however, that a cold shower would be very helpful right about now. A glance at the clock told him there was no time for that, because apparently he'd slept for hours. Eric slid quietly off the bed and out of the room.

He laid a set of keys to the dojang along with a note on the living room table. Pausing at the front door before stepping out into the wee hours of the morning, he looked toward the upstairs where Shelley slept. He could sense the loneliness she must feel each night. It sickened him, thinking of her frightened and alone. At least by the end of summer her children would come home and make her happy. Happier than the dandelions could. He left silently, locking the door behind him.

Eric hit the hotel at a run, packed, checked out and made it to the airport by 5:15, fifteen minutes later than planned. He chuckled as he worked his way through the security checkpoint and ran through the terminal, headed for the train that would take him to his gate. Fifteen minutes late, he thought. Now she has me doing it.

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James 3:1

"Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly."

Chapter Seven

Fatigue was becoming a huge factor as Eric's afternoon meetings progressed in the plush Los Angeles office. Several sponsors showed their interest in Eric's student and were willing to back her based on Eric's reputation alone. However, the main potential sponsors were not so ready to jump on the bandwagon, mostly due to Shelley's age. Big money was involved. Winners of the MART had the potential to earn millions in endorsements.

Eric hadn't discussed with Shelley all the financial gains possible. He didn't want her to focus on the money. She had to want this for herself or to be in service to others. Money cannot be the focus ever, not in any goal. To make a true warrior out of her, the focus had to be deeper. Heaven knows, money would be inspirational for her, but even money means nothing when you feel you can't go any further. There must be something more, something deep inside one's soul.

Relieved when, meetings over, he was able to walk out into the fading sunlight of early evening and head for the restaurant where he and Ricky had arranged to have dinner. A lively place with good healthy food, great music and a small dance floor, it was one of their favorite places to dine. He'd thought being early would give him a chance to sit quietly and catch his breath, instead he started to nod off.

"I guess it's a good thing we're not hired assassins."

Eric's eyes blinked open. He straightened in his chair. "Sorry, it's been a long day," he said, chagrined at having been caught unawares. Rousing himself from his semi-conscious state, he stood abruptly, frowning, when he realized Ricky had brought guests. Displaying his usual flair for the dramatic, Ricky had a beautiful woman on each arm.

Eric breathed a weary sigh and waited for the introductions.

"Dad, I'd like you to meet Amber and Ashley."

Eric forced a smile and nodded a pleasant hello. He held a chair for one of them and glared over her head at Ricky who raised his eyebrows and shrugged with a smile. "It was a situation I couldn't politely get out of," he explained quickly in Mandarin.

It became evident almost immediately which one Ricky brought for his father. Ashley was aggressive and intent, a bad combination. She began by rubbing her hand over his as she spoke. He took a deep breath. He should've warned Rick he was in no mood to entertain. This was gonna be a rough night.

Thank goodness he had to be on a plane in a few hours. At least then he could close his eyes for a little while.

The dinner conversation spanned several painfully boring subjects, from glamour magazines to favorite television commercials to "designer doggies," all of which wasn't nearly as hard dealing with as removing Ashley's wandering hand.

Ricky asked Amber to dance and so as not to hurt her feelings, Eric made Ashley the same offer. Ashley tried to snuggle close as they danced, but Eric's mind was three thousand miles away, wondering how a sweet, doe-eyed lady was doing. Given the time difference, she's probably at home by now, he thought. He smiled as he imagined her going into her little house and turning on all the lights.

Ashley sighed and pushed herself closer to Eric. He pulled back and looked down into her pretty face. It would be so very easy to take advantage of her, but that was not what he was about. Being a master of one's sexual urges was not just a moral belief, but a spiritual one. Besides, he didn't believe in using people, which was exactly what casual sex is all about. Using people for your own gratification. He also understood that sex outside of marriage was a drain on the light of one's soul, separating us from God. That's why it's a commandment. God knows what's best for us even when we don't.

"I'm sorry," he said aloud. "I'm tired and I have to be at the airport soon. Do you mind if we sit this one out?"

She gave a disappointed pout as they headed back to their table. The music ended and Ricky and Amber approached to find Eric looking at his watch. Ricky took his cue. "Ladies, it's been a lovely evening, but I'm afraid I've gotta get this old man off to the airport."

The girls made sighs and whimpers. "Maybe we can do it again sometime," Amber suggested.

"Maybe so," Ricky offered before turning to Eric. "I'll see the ladies off and be right back."

"That will be fine," Eric said. He turned to Ashley and shook her hand. "It was a pleasure meeting you."

Ashley smiled wickedly. "Believe me, honey, it could've been."

Both men's eyebrows shot up.

At the airport, father and son embraced.

"I'll see you in four weeks then?" Eric asked.

"Four weeks," Ricky confirmed. "Unless we run into complications on the shoot, though I don't anticipate that. I can't wait to meet Shelley."

"I can't wait for you to meet her."

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A darkness had hung over Eric from the moment he'd slipped from Shelley's home early Wednesday morning. Physically, he was totally drained. Yet, emotionally, he realized, the closer he got to Atlanta, the lighter his mood

and the better he felt.

The four-hour flight arrived in Atlanta in the wee hours of the Thursday morning, leaving only a few hours for sleeping before he'd see Shelley at their appointed seven o'clock. He carried his two smaller bags and arranged for the larger trunks to be delivered later that morning.

Rather than checking into a hotel for a few hours, Eric decided to go straight to the dojang and collapse on the couch. Upon arrival though, he noticed the lights were on and Shelley's car was in the parking lot. Could it be that Shelley had come in early to get a head start on their day? Of all the times, she would have to do it when he was in desperate need of sleep. He peered through the glass and saw no trace of Shelley in the front reception area. Eric unlocked the door and locked it behind himself.

In an exhausted stupor, he dumped his suitcases by the desk and went in search of Shelley. He found her, not stretching or working out, but lying sound asleep in the dressing room on the big green couch, the very spot he'd envisioned himself. Why in the world is she sleeping here? She looked so sweet lying there and though his heart felt happy to see her, he needed to sleep.

Wandering back out through the dojang, he eyed the floor and sighed. Looking over the rough, thinly carpeted floor, he vetoed it quickly. He tried out a few of the padded benches. Too narrow. Rubbing his face, he made a decision. He flicked the lights off, unbuttoned his shirt, took off his watch and belt, went back to the dressing room, and sat down on the edge of the couch. "Shelley," he said as he gently shook her. "Shelley, wake up."

She startled and sat up quickly.

"Shh, it's just me," he soothed.

"Eric?" she asked, peering through the darkness.

"Yes," he whispered. "Would you mind moving over and sharing the couch?"

"Huh? Oh, of course. Here," she said sleepily.

She shifted positions and he scooted in behind her. They lay at opposite ends, their feet near each other's head.

"How did it go in L.A.?" she whispered.

"Shh. We'll talk later."

"Did you see Ricky?"

He kicked her softly in the back of the head. "Shelley, stop talking. I have to sleep."

"Sorry," she answered, but this time he didn't respond. Eric slept deeply and soundly.

He awoke to the sunlight streaming through the front window, making its way across the carpet and into the room they occupied. He was hot and sticky, somewhat because of the sun, but mostly due to the woman who slept next to him. Shelley had shifted positions during the few hours they'd slept. She now lay cuddled next to him, her head on his chest, her arm and leg thrown across

his body.

Well now, this is nice, isn't it, he thought. He wondered what made her change positions. Maybe she needed a pillow and had decided to use him. He certainly had no complaints about that, however, he did need to get up and get going and so did she. He stroked her arm a few times, hoping to wake her gently, but it only caused her to move her leg across him. Drawing in a deep breath, he groaned inwardly and knew he had to get up off the couch.

He touched her shoulder. "Shelley."

"Huh?" she answered, disoriented.

"Let me up."

She moved away slightly. He lifted his body up and over hers to the floor. Stretching as he walked, he went into the reception area and drank down a cup of cool water, then refilled the cup and poured it over the back of his neck.

Rubbing his eyes, he looked up at the clock. He couldn't believe it was already 10:30. He shook his head in disgust. He'd meant to sleep only a few hours. "I've gotta get my act together," he mumbled.

He made a stop in the restroom then walked briskly back to the dressing room. Shelley was sitting on the couch, her head in her hands.

"Good morning," he said softly.

She smiled sweetly. "Hi."

He sighed. "Well, today is shot, with it being as late as it is, and I still have to get moved into my apartment."

"At least I can say I was here at 7:00."

Smiling, he sat next to her. "I guess that's right. The problem is, there's so much for you to learn and you're not gonna learn it very well when I oversleep for three hours. I apologize for that."

"I overslept too."

"Well, then we'll have to do our push-ups together, won't we? Anyway, what I'm trying to say is, starting tomorrow, we really need to stick to our schedule. The day begins at six. Here by seven. Lunch from twelve to one. Here until 5:45, then home to eat and perform your evening routines and in bed by 9:45. Sunday is the only day off. I intend to hold us to that schedule and I guess what I want from you is your word to do the same from now until the end of the summer when your children come home. Then, it can be revised to fit the needs of the kids."

She'd almost promised without blinking, but there was that feeling again, the niggling fear of losing control of her life. He wanted to teach her. He wanted her to compete in the MART. She wanted that too, desperately. It would put her at the top of the game. Yet it had to be his way. She'd have to submit. Submit. She hated that word. He held all the cards. Even though he'd told her how tough training would be, it was beginning to sink in.

"Well?" he prodded. "If you're having second thoughts, now's the time to speak."

She decided quickly. “I give you my word,” she finally said.

“And again, I give you mine, as your teacher, to do whatever it takes to prepare you for the MART. That is what you want, isn’t it?”

“With all my heart.”

They shook hands to finalize their vows.

“Now,” Eric said, “fill me in on your day yesterday and tell me why you slept here at the dojang.”

“Well, everything on the list is done except I have a little bit of the medical history I still need to put into the computer. I’m not very good on the computer which is why I was still here last night. I worked all through Brian’s classes and into the night. I thought if I could just lie down for a few minutes, then I’d be able to finish. Obviously, it didn’t work out that way.”

He touched her nose and smiled. “No problem. How did your doctor appointment go?”

“Fine. I’m healthy. The forms are all filled out and in the file. Lab work results won’t be in for a week or so.” She looked up. “The key to your new apartment is on the desk.”

At that moment, someone knocked on the glass and Eric went to unlock the door. Three trunks sat on the walk. The man who brought them helped Eric move them inside and left with a smile and several large bills.

Eric immediately began digging through one of the trunks, removing books, manuals, water bottles, ankle wraps, wristbands, sparring equipment, and several white uniforms among other odds and ends.

Shelley helped carry most of it into the dressing room where she placed them in a large empty cabinet. The books and manuals they took to a shelf near the desk that Brian had cleared for Eric’s use.

The uniforms Eric handed to Shelley. “Here ya go, these are a start. I’ve ordered more. You are to wear a clean fresh uniform every day of training out of respect for Brian’s dojang, respect for me and respect for your art.”

Shelley grinned. “You think of everything, don’t you?”

He only smiled in response. “Okay, we’ll probably have to make two trips to the apartment because I don’t think we can fit a trunk in your car and mine will only carry one. So we’ll load my car and you follow in yours. Oh, and I guess we’ll make a stop at the smoothie place to get some breakfast.”

Shelley helped carry the one trunk out, struggling with the weight. Eric lifted it into his car with ease which made Shelley marvel once again at how truly powerful he is. It reminded her of the day she’d run into him at the tournament. That day seemed like eons ago, yet it hadn’t even been a week.

After all was loaded, Shelley followed Eric to get a smoothie and then she led the way to the apartment. She’d chosen one that had been decorated in light colors and had plenty of windows. A comfortably furnished one-bedroom flat with a patio not very far from the dojang.

The next several hours were spent unpacking and organizing. When the

last trunk was retrieved and emptied, they closed it and sat wearily on its lid.

Shelley looked around at the new surroundings and smiled. “This is nice. I just love fresh starts.”

Eric agreed. “New beginnings mean progress is being made and that’s a good thing.”

“Do you ever stop teaching?” she asked teasingly.

“Never.” He smiled. “Are you as hungry as I am?”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“I’ll need to do some grocery shopping, so for now...”

Shelley interrupted him. “For now, go and look in your refrigerator.”

He did and found it fully stocked. He found the cabinets the same way and looked back at her. “You did this?”

She nodded. “I went through the menus you had for me and pretty much bought you the same things.”

He smiled at her gratefully. “You don’t know how much I appreciate not having to go shopping.”

She grinned. “I know what you mean. I hate to shop.”

“What?”

She frowned. “If you’re about to make some chauvinistic comment about women and shopping I’ll lose respect for you very fast.”

He grinned. “Number one, no one is perfect. Number two, I call it like I see it and I’ve never met a woman who didn’t love to shop, so this is a first for me and I guess makes you sort of special. And number three, I have no worries about you losing respect for me because I can easily teach it to you again.”

“Oh, wow, how very cocky.”

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess it was.” He clapped his hands together.

“I’ll make it up to you by cooking you dinner. How’s that?”

“Sounds great.”

“And I’ll reimburse you for the groceries.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem. I figure finances are tight for a single mom.”

She nodded. “Financially, life has been a struggle. Guess you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

“Well, I have money now, but I didn’t always. My father didn’t give me money but he did give me his knowledge of the martial arts. He taught me everything he knew and when I exceeded that, he turned my instruction over to a good friend, an incredible master.”

“The Master Wong you mentioned? Were you a good student?”

“Yes, Master Wong, and yes, I tried to be.”

“Well anyway, at least your parents gave you something.”

Eric pulled chicken breasts from the refrigerator along with the makings of a salad. “Hmm, that sounds like you think your parents didn’t give you anything, but I think they did. You just don’t realize it yet.”

"What is it you think they gave me?" she asked doubtfully.

He looked into her eyes. "Everything. Everything in your past made you into what you are today, so be grateful. Even for the pain. You have a warm heart, a brilliant, intelligent mind, a strong body, and an inner strength you don't even realize you have."

He was silent for a moment while she pondered that. "And now, by my teaching you, I will give you something too. Like I said, my family didn't have a lot of money when I was young either. I studied hard in school to qualify for college scholarships. I also taught martial arts classes three and four times a day. I was tired but I was doing what I loved. I taught even when I thought I'd fall over from exhaustion. My father taught me to realize or believe, that I could be, do or have anything I wanted, so it never crossed my mind that I wouldn't succeed. Master Wong added something very important to that."

"What was that?"

"He taught me that my thoughts have energy. Everything begins with thought. When God created the world, it began with His thought. He spoke the world into existence. He is God, and we are not, but we are His children and in our own much lesser capacity, our thoughts can be manifested in the physical world. Thoughts actually are energy and energy is matter."

"Interesting. I haven't thought about that kind of thing, but I am interested in learning."

He smiled. "You know, your mind is like a sponge. It's one of the things I really like about you, how humble you are."

"How is that humble?"

"Only humble people have the ability to learn something new. Humility can be defined as being teachable. Arrogant people are very difficult to teach. Anyway, Master Wong made me realize that what I think about and what I accomplish are correlated. My belief in God along with belief in myself as a child of God, and knowing I'm doing His will, it helped me to reach for my goals. Financial goals, yes, and physical goals, and most importantly, spiritual goals. I learned how to invest my money, my martial arts studio became a chain and I've had some great success. God blessed me and I am grateful for it, but if I hadn't taken the step of faith to believe and reach for my goals then where would I be? With my blessings I've been able to bless many others. Also, I've passed on what I know to my son and he is also reaping the benefits. Actually, if you ever want to razz someone about having money, he's the one rolling in dough."

Shelley laughed. "I'll keep that in mind if I ever need a loan."

Eric briefly entertained the thought of telling her how much money she could make if she did well in the tournament, but decided against it. The tournament money wasn't important. Shelley's wealth and abundance would grow as he taught her to stop the negative thoughts she had so often. She would soon realize her true power as a child of God, and that sometimes

reaching for your goals brings you more than you could ever imagine, and even more, that sometimes what you think you want can change completely, because you learn that true joy and security only comes with your relationship to God and not through money.

Eric touched her shoulder. “Really though, whatever you need, don’t be afraid to ask.”

Shelley nodded. They worked together in the kitchen preparing chicken breasts with brown rice, and salad. Sitting down to their meal at a small kitchen table, with the late afternoon sun shining through the window, there was an atmosphere of peace and contentment.

They ate slowly, sharing small talk about Shelley’s children and Eric’s trip home. When they finished Shelley stood and began clearing the meal away. Eric watched her, taking pleasure in the way she moved. She wrapped leftovers, and wiped off counters and put things away in the refrigerator, using her hip to close the door. The clasp holding her hair had slid down toward the end of her ponytail and her hair was falling around her face. She hadn’t bathed or dressed all day and wore no makeup, yet, Eric decided he much preferred the way she looked standing there in the kitchen sunlight, compared to Ashley’s polished glamour at last night’s dinner.

He stood and went to the sink to help, rinsing the dishes while Shelley loaded them into the dishwasher. Eric felt a sudden nostalgia. Memories of doing dishes with Ann as Ricky ran around the kitchen crept into his brain. “Watch this kick Mommy,” Ricky would say, and a few years later, “Want to see my back handspring?”

“Is something wrong?” Shelley asked. “You’re suddenly very quiet.”

“Hmm? Am I? No, there’s nothing wrong, I was just thinking about Ricky, remembering when he was little. I guess I am tired though. I may be suffering from a little bit of jet lag.”

Shelley decided it was her turn to put Eric to bed. She stood up straight and motioned with her thumb. “Go take a shower,” she commanded.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me. If we’re gonna keep our promise, then we need to catch up on our rest and start refreshed in the morning. So, go shower and get ready to retire. Now move it buster.”

“Yes ma’am,” he said, amused.

This, he thought, was one of the sides of Shelley he hadn’t seen. The mother. He’d seen the little girl, the wise matron, the athlete, the student, the woman. She was so many things. He rose and went to do her bidding.

When he emerged a short time later he was wearing a white uniform bottom and drying his long hair with a towel. Yet, it wasn’t how Eric was dressed that was odd, it was how Shelley was dressed.

Kitchen towels had been stuffed into her shirt sleeves to imitate a man’s large muscles and she held a lock of her hair across her upper lip.

"Bonsoir Ahhreek," she imitated hoarsely. "J'm'appelle Claudette and ah veel now give to vous a pro-fessional maahsaage. Here, let me help vous." She grabbed his arm and twisted it behind his back, roughly pushed him into the bedroom and threw him on the bed.

He tried to rise up but she forced him back down again. "There. Comfy?" she asked with an evil grin.

Beginning with the neck, she dug her fingers into his steely muscles as she knelt across the small of his back. Moaning with pleasure, he tried to focus on the massage and not let his mind roam to anything carnal. He rose up to try to show her a particular sore spot, but she pushed him back down roughly. "Sir," she cried as if insulted. "Vous do not need to tell moi how to do eet. I am a pro-fessional!"

Eric laughed and decided he'd better lie still or she might decide to end her ministrations.

Shelley rubbed and patted and squeezed until her fingers ached and cramped. "There, vous are finis," she said as she reached down and pinched him hard.

"Ow!" He bounded up, his movement tossing her onto the bed. "See what you've done," Eric complained. "You ruined the whole effect. Now you'll have to do it again."

He settled back down and waited.

"Ookaay," she said grinning. "Eef you eenseest " She pinched him again, even harder.

"Ow, you die," he yelled as he scrambled up and grabbed her.

He pinned her down and started tickling her. "Nooo," she screamed. "Please stop– I– can't– stand– to– be– tickled," she cried through fits of laughter. She kicked and wriggled and squirmed until she finally fell off the bed. She lay on the carpet, catching her breath and waiting for the tingly heat of his touch to fade away.

Eric fell silently backwards on the bed. Honestly, he wanted her. Wanted her bad. He could pull her up next to him right now. He could kiss her. He could easily seduce her. She might pretend to resist for a second or two, but he could tell it wouldn't take much. He sighed. This was hardly the way a teacher should be thinking about his student.

Definitely not what he should be thinking as a man with moral integrity. What was it about her that made him think this way? This had to stop. He had to muster some self-discipline and do his job.

Shelley, having composed herself, rose and stood next to him. "Now go to sleep like a good little boy." She adjusted his pillow and covered him. Suddenly solemn, she moved close to him. "Eric?"

"Yes?" he said, looking into her beautiful eyes.

"I have to say, I'm really not the wimp I seem to be. I just feel like I should tell you of that."

He smiled kindly. “I don’t see you as a wimp. I’m not a bit worried.”

She nodded. “Okay. Well, good. Still, I want you to know that I’m really grateful. I do realize that you’ve given me the opportunity of a lifetime and I don’t take it for granted and I won’t let you down.” Quickly, before he could respond, she pressed her lips to his forehead, turned out the light, and closed the door behind her.

Eric heaved a long, heavy sigh. He was thinking how much he wanted her to stay and how he couldn’t wait to see her again in the morning and how hard it was gonna be to spend eleven hours a day with her and still keep his feelings under control. But he would do it. He’d given his word to be her teacher and he always kept his word.

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Shelley remained true to her word and for the next four weeks she worked harder than Eric had ever seen anyone work. She was definitely improving. Her body was getting stronger, form and technique hardly ever had to be corrected and her punches and kicks were becoming much more accurate and powerful. Constant repetition was helping her body to respond instinctively, however, Eric still considered her reaction time below par, and a weakness they would focus on. Yet, her demeanor was cheerful and her intensity during training would rival that of any Chicago Bears linebacker.

The Fourth of July came and went. Eric waited for Shelley to ask for the day or evening off. When she didn’t, he knew she was truly learning self-discipline. He had to fight off a twinge of guilt for not giving her time off and celebrate the holiday with her. He concluded though, that one year without fireworks wouldn’t kill her and would go a long way in making his point.

That day, and a large part of every day was spent doing one thing. Sparring. She was timid and afraid. Eric’s job was to help her overcome that fear. It was a common phobia shared by many martial arts students. They loved to learn the forms, the techniques, the beauty of the art, but for the average person, actual contact with another body was rare.

Brian had come in to spar against Shelley so that Eric could be free to stand back and observe. The best thing to conquer fear of contact was to *have* contact and lots of it so that eventually she’d get used to it. When Eric informed her she’d soon be participating in a tournament in Daytona, the fear had overtaken her immediately. “Participating?” she’d asked. “In what way?”

“Fighting, of course,” he’d answered coolly.

“Do you think I’m ready to fight?”

“I think you’re ready to *learn* to fight. You need experience in a tournament situation. You need a lot of experience. This tournament will be the first of many but since this one is the first, we’re gonna treat it special. We’re going down to Daytona a week early to train down there.”

Nodding her head, she’d come to terms with the situation and worked even harder and longer, giving every ounce of effort she could find within

herself, every single day.

On the fifth Friday evening since Shelley's life had so drastically changed, Eric called her to the desk. "I have a surprise for you," he said as he put his pen down.

"We're not going to Daytona tomorrow?" she asked hopefully.

Eric didn't smile. He wouldn't ever make light of her fear and wouldn't let her either. He ignored her statement. "Ricky will be joining us to help work with you during the week in Daytona. With his help, I think you'll be ready for the tournament next Saturday. We'll pick him up at the airport in the morning."

She perked up. "Ricky's coming to work with me?" She clapped her hands together. "Awesome! Finally, I get to meet him."

Pleased to see Shelley's excitement, Eric realized Ricky would be helpful in more ways than one. Ricky was a little wild, a little crazy, completely uninhibited. Exposing Shelley to that kind of positive energy would help her to overcome her frustrations and fears.

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When Shelley opened the door to her handsome teacher early the next morning, he caught his breath at the sight of her. She was dressed simply, in white shorts and a sleeveless blouse covered with tiny yellow rosebuds. A yellow ribbon held her hair loosely back from her radiant face. Her tennis shoes and socks set off the newly bulging muscles in her calves. She looked like the breath of spring and Eric was taken with her bright, fresh glow. "Ready?" he asked softly.

"Been ready," she beamed.

At the airport Eric knew exactly when Ricky was about to appear because it seemed to him that a golden light always preceded his son. There was a murmur as Ricky emerged from the escalators and some of the early morning travelers recognized him and pointed him out to others. Within seconds cameras were flashing.

Ricky spotted Eric immediately and Shelley watched as the two men embraced. Ricky, she thought, had a magnificent aura that affected everyone around him. It was obvious from the large smiles on both men's faces that they had a pure love and respect for each other.

Letting go of his son, Eric turned to Shelley. "Shelley Adams, I'd like you to meet my son, Ricky." Shelley held her hand out, which he took as he gazed into her eyes.

"Enchanté, Madame," he cooed as he brought her hand up to his mouth and kissed it.

Eric jumped in quickly with a grin. "I wouldn't speak French to her if I were you. It makes her crazy."

"Oh really?" Ricky answered, eyeing her suspiciously.

Shelley made a face at Eric.

Ricky grabbed her arm and briskly walked her through the airport. Eric

only heard the first line of their conversation. “So tell me Shelley, do you think my dad is truly mean and horrible?”

Eric shook his head with a smile as he brought up the rear.

They went to breakfast and chatted merrily over eggs, croissants and orange juice.

“I must say, you’re much easier to look at than some of Dad’s other MART students,” Ricky said. “Really, I expected some mean old jock with a shaved head.”

“You were only wrong about the shaved head part,” Eric laughed.

“She’s a jock and she’s definitely mean and old.”

“I’m younger than you,” Shelley quipped.

Ricky’s eyebrows rose. He’d never seen one of his father’s students bait ‘the Master.’ Not even in jest. He grinned. “Touché, Dad. Yep–I like her.”

“Well,” Eric said, changing the subject. “We have some time before our flight to Daytona. What shall we do?”

“Ricky, would you like to see the Zoo Atlanta?” Shelley asked.

“Shelley loves the zoo,” Eric explained to Ricky. “She goes there every chance she gets.”

“Well then, the zoo it is,” Ricky agreed.

Thirty minutes later they wandered slowly down the paths of Zoo Atlanta, stopping to stare in wonder at the different species of animals. Even though Shelley had seen them hundreds of times, she couldn’t get over their beauty and awesome power. Their purity. She loved being near them, yet she would set them all free if it were possible.

They cooed over the pandas. They laughed at the elephants. They gazed for a long time at the gorillas, whose massive muscular bodies, so closely resembled that of a human. Ricky startled Shelley when he spoke suddenly and loudly to someone unseen.

“What? You want who? No way,” he yelled. “You can’t have her, ya big ape. She’s mine.” With that, he grabbed Shelley, tossed her over his shoulder, and bending his knees, he walked around in circles, dragging his knuckles on the ground, grunting like a gorilla while some nearby children giggled.

“Put me down,” Shelley shouted between fits of laughter.

Eric sat back on a bench watching Ricky “play” with Shelley, glad they were getting along so well, because they would be together quite a bit during the coming year. Of course, she may not like him so well once she’s sparred with him a few times.

They moved along to find Shelley’s favorite animal, the tigers. She watched them silently, trying, as she usually did, to communicate her thoughts to them telepathically.

“Watch him pace,” Shelley said. “He’s pacing off his territory, his

domain. Normally, out in the wild, that could cover more than twenty-five square miles, but he's doing the best with what he has here."

Sighing at the tiger's captivity, she watched him another minute while Eric watched her.

"He seems so serious. So ferocious," she whispered. "So powerful and strong, but so quiet." She glanced up at her teacher with a smile. "Actually, he reminds me of you."

Eric blinked. "Well now, that's quite a compliment."

She shrugged as silently they both turned back to face the tiger.

Ricky raised his eyebrows. "Hello? What about me?"

Shelley grinned. "I don't think they have the animal anymore that reminds me of you. They used to have one, but sent it back to the Chicago zoo."

"Okay, so? What animal is it?" Ricky asked.

"The laughing hyena," Shelley giggled.

"Hyena, huh?" Ricky said as he threateningly moved toward her.

She quickly stepped behind Eric for protection.

They moved on and stopped at a concession area where a few kids and their parents interrupted them for Ricky's autograph. Once that was done, they munched popcorn, and sipped cold drinks at a round, covered picnic table. The conversation led to Ricky asking why speaking French made Shelley crazy.

"Oh, it's a long silly story," Shelley offered. "One I'd rather not share right now."

Ricky shrugged. "Okay, but I mean, most women love it when I speak French to them."

"Do you speak fluently?" she asked.

"Yeah, Dad made sure of it."

To prove it, Ricky jumped into a five-minute French conversation with his father, leaving Shelley out completely. She had the feeling Eric was filling Ricky in on her adventures with Claude, nevertheless, she was totally impressed with their ability.

"I'm totally impressed that you guys speak French," Shelley said.

"It helps to have parents and grandparents who are bilingual. My grandfather was French," Eric answered.

"Dad and I have been all over the world," Ricky added. "It was part of my education. So not only did we study French, but we also speak Korean, Chinese and Japanese—oh, and Spanish."

"I'm so impressed. I'd love to learn another language."

Eric smiled. "You are learning another language, but it's a body language." Eric leaned back on the bench, yawning.

Ricky couldn't help it. It was too tempting. He kicked the bench, sending his father crashing to the ground.

Ricky scrambled out of his seat. “Uh oh,” he said, winking at Shelley. He took off running.

Eric was right behind him though. In seconds, they were out of sight. Shelley stood and peered around the edge of the concession building. She was amazed at how quickly they’d disappeared from her view around the curve of the path.

Slowly, she walked over and leaned against the split-rail fence, keeping an eye on the direction they’d vanished. They were wonderful, she thought. The love and happiness they brought to each other was almost overwhelming.

The next thing Shelley knew she was being pulled backwards, a hand covering her mouth and an arm encircling her waist.

Eric caught up just in time. “Wait, Ricky. Let her go.”

The serious tone of his father’s voice had him complying immediately.

Ricky had merely been playing and had no idea he’d blundered. Eric gripped Shelley’s shoulders and peered into her face. “Shelley?” Her entire body trembled. She gasped for air.

“What happened? I was just playing. Did I hurt her?” Ricky asked, the worry evident in his voice.

Eric spoke quickly to Ricky in Chinese, choosing a language Shelley wouldn’t recognize as he filled Ricky in. Ricky’s lips pressed together in understanding and regret.

“Shelley,” Eric said softly. He pulled her against his chest and patted her back. “You’re okay. Everything’s okay. Look up, now. Talk to me.”

“I’m– I’m fine,” she finally said. “You startled me, that’s all.” The words were meant to sound casual, to pass it off as nothing, but the tear that escaped and fell over her cheek betrayed her.

Ricky stood watching his father comfort his student. In the few words he’d spoken, his father told him of Shelley’s assault and her difficulties in recovering. Once Eric had her calm and smiling again, Ricky moved forward to put his arm around her shoulders.

“I am really sorry. Forgive me?”

She laughed as she wiped away the last of her tears. “The question is, do you forgive me? I’ve gone and ruined such a pleasant day.”

“You haven’t ruined anything,” Ricky assured her. “Meeting you has *made* my day.”

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Arriving back at Shelley’s house before their flight to Daytona, Ricky’s mouth dropped open. “Wow! Who is that?”

Eric glanced up at the picture of Bree above the sofa. “That would be Shelley’s daughter, Bree.”

“She is ho...” Ricky glanced at Shelley, “...uh, really— pretty.”

“Thanks,” Shelley answered. “She’s away at school in New York and

won't be home for a long time."

"Did you hear that, Rick?" Eric asked.

"Loud and clear."

Shelley laughed. "I'm gonna change. Be right down."

While waiting for Shelley, father and son caught up on the last four weeks. When she finally emerged, both men stood. Earlier, Eric thought, she'd looked fresh and young. Suddenly, she seemed very womanly. She wore rose-colored slacks that fit snugly around her hips. The matching summer sweater had a scalloped neckline that fell casually off one shoulder.

Eric couldn't take his eyes off her. Each time he saw her, she was a different person. He smiled approvingly. "You look nice."

"Nice?" Ricky questioned. "You look good enough to eat."

"See what I mean," Eric laughed. "Always hungry."

Grabbing her luggage, they piled into the car and left for the airport. It was a short flight and Shelley and Ricky did most of the talking. Eric tried to listen but found himself distracted as he noticed small things, like the way Shelley sometimes chewed on her lower lip, or how her laughter sounded like wind chimes. She was mesmerizing. It seemed like no time at all before they landed and by 6:30 they were in a rental car on the way to a beachside hotel.

Once in her room Shelley unpacked and began dressing for their eight o'clock dinner reservations. Holding up the black dress that belonged to her daughter. Bree had suggested it and Shelley was having regrets about listening to her daughter. The dress suddenly seemed way too youngish. Nervously she slipped into the garment, adjusting the straps and tugging at the material that seemed to cling to her body.

When she turned and looked into the mirror though, she was pleasantly surprised. Bree had been right about black being classic and the six weeks of constant workouts had sculpted Shelley's body much more than she'd realized. Biting her lip, she piled her hair up in a twist and pulled some strands down to soften the look. She was just putting the finishing touches on her makeup when her escorts came calling.

She opened the door to two handsome, exotic-looking princes, their suits showing off their broad shoulders and trim waists. "Hey, guys. Wow, y'all look so handsome!"

Ricky's mouth fell open. He nudged his father.

Eric spoke softly. "Shelley, you take my breath away."

She blushed and she was pleased because his reaction tickled her feminine side. "Thank you, Eric." He offered his arm.

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1 Timothy 4:8

"For while bodily training is of some value, godliness
is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the

present life and also for the life to come.”

Chapter Eight

They arrived at an exclusive restaurant in the heart of Daytona and as they entered, heads turned and people nodded, smiled and pointed in their direction.

"Do you always cause such a commotion everywhere you go?" Shelley whispered to Ricky.

"Huh, I believe it's you they're all gawking at," Eric answered.

"Oh puleeze," Shelley returned, but admitted the elegance and ambience of the restaurant did make her feel like a real-life Cinderella.

After being seated, the waiter brought a wine list. Eric glanced over at Shelley. "How about some champagne?"

"Champagne? Oh, well, I mean, I don't usually drink. And actually, I didn't know you did."

He smiled. "I don't very often, but tonight is a celebration of sorts."

"What are we celebrating?"

"You."

"Uh, me? It's a little premature, don't ya think?"

"We're celebrating your very first sparring tournament. You've come a long way and I'm proud of you. More importantly, I hope you're proud of yourself."

"I'll wait until after the tournament before I let myself feel pride."

He shook his head. "We'll talk about the results of the tournament after the tournament. Like I said, you've come a long way. So then, would you like some champagne?"

"I'm not sure, I mean, I've never had any and I've never really liked the taste of alcohol."

"Okay, well, you can try it and if you don't like it, that's fine. Mind you, this is only one time. Tomorrow we go right back to training."

Shelley nodded in agreement. Eric ordered the drink along with appetizers and their food, winking at Shelley when he spoke French.

While they waited, he and Shelley chatted about the coming tournament.

Shelley noticed Ricky's abnormal silence. "You're awfully quiet,

Ricky. You must be tired."

He grinned. "Nope. I was just watching you two."

"Watching us what?"

Ricky shrugged. "Can't pinpoint it yet." He quickly changed the subject.

"I'm starved. Anyone else hungry?"

As if on cue, the waiter appeared at their table with shrimp, oysters, stuffed mushrooms and champagne on ice. Eric poured and Shelley hesitantly tried a sip, wrinkling her nose. The men watched her with delight.

She made a sour face. "I guess it's okay," she said, not wanting to disappoint them. She continued to sip, trying to get used to the taste as Eric served her appetizers and Ricky dove in.

While Ricky inhaled food, Eric and Shelley talked about what to expect during the coming week. A few courses into the meal Shelley excused herself and both men watched her leave.

Ricky shook his head. "If she fights anywhere near as good as she looks, you have a winner."

Eric nodded in agreement. "She doesn't yet, but she will."

"How are things holding up on the financial end?" Ricky asked.

"I've had some donations, but a lot will depend on the outcome of this tournament because the sponsors will be here to watch. If they like what they see, then we're in business."

"They'll like what they see, unless they're blind. Either way though, there's no problem because you've always got me and you have to know what's mine is yours. I'll back her completely."

Eric patted Ricky's hand and smiled. There was no need for words to let Ricky know what a fine young man Eric thought him to be. He appreciated the offer, but he was not lacking in funds if it came down to it. However, Ricky's generosity and loyalty were duly noted.

"So, Dad," Ricky began anew. "Let's get serious a minute, and tell me, how long have you been in love with Shelley?"

Eric almost choked on his champagne. He looked at Ricky incredulously. His son wore a sly smile. At first, he thought he'd deny it, if only to keep his own feelings in check, but he realized he'd never be able to be anything but truthful with Ricky.

He sighed and shrugged. "I think I fell in love the moment I laid eyes on her at the tournament in Atlanta. And every day the feelings grow stronger." He shook his head. "But it really makes no difference what I feel for her."

"No difference? What are you talking about? You're in love with this woman. Heck, *I'm* in love with her. Dad, there hasn't been anyone in your life since Mom. How can you say it makes no difference?"

Eric eyed him calmly. "I say it because it's extremely important for me to maintain a strict master-student relationship with Shelley. I..."

Ricky broke in. "You've already failed there. Even I can see that."

Eric frowned. "As I was saying, I've made her a promise to prepare her for the MART and I won't break it. I can't do anything that might distract her or cause her to think about anything else."

Ricky sat regarding his father for several moments. Finally, he spoke.

"Dad, that is such bull. The MART is nothing compared to finding someone you truly love. Haven't you always taught me to put my competitions in perspective, make sure my priorities stay straight? Maybe you should take your own advice."

"I'm not doing this for me, Rick. The MART is what *she* wants and I intend to give it to her."

"Well, don't be so noble that you screw up and lose her."

"You don't understand. I believe it was her destiny to become my student for the MART and I have to see it through."

"Okay, I can buy that, but have you thought that maybe it was her destiny to become your student just so you could find each other and the MART was only a means to an end?"

Eric sat gazing at his young son and wondered when he'd become so wise. Yet Eric had no response, because in his heart he knew Ricky could be right. Shelley showed up just in the nick of time, saving Eric from the conversation, and both men stood as she arrived.

Eric noticed her pale face and was immediately concerned. "Shelley? Are you alright?"

She raised her fingers to her temple. "I just have a little headache, that's all. I'll be fine."

The meal progressed and the evening turned out to be delightful. The food was exquisite, the service great, the company wonderfully entertaining. Shelley giggled at their stories, feeling more and more uninhibited with each sip of the champagne. She even told some of her own adventures. Eric watched her sigh in contentment.

"Here I am, eating food I've never heard of, sipping champagne, orchestra playing beautiful music, and flanked by two gorgeous men. I feel as if I'm in a dream world." She closed her eyes and hummed to the music. Ricky broke her trance by asking her to dance.

Eric watched them as they moved onto the dance floor. Shelley moved gracefully. Another facet to the diamond, Eric thought.

"So," Ricky said softly into her ear. "I have a question for you."

Shelley smiled and nodded. "What is it you'd like to know?"

Ricky smiled. "How long have you been in love with my dad?"

Shelley pulled back and looked up into Ricky's face. His words had taken her by surprise. She opened her mouth to repudiate his assumption, but he spoke again before she could. "Don't even try to deny it."

"Is it that obvious?" she asked.

"The vibes you guys are sending out are pretty strong."

Shelley sighed and then frowned. "Your father is the most wonderful man I've ever known."

"You say that like it's a bad thing."

"You don't understand. I don't want to feel this way. I'm just beginning

to find myself. I, well, I'd rather not get into it, but there are personal reasons." She put her hand to her head. "I don't know why my tongue is so loose. Please don't tell him what I said. All I know is, for the last five weeks I wake up thankful every day that of all the women he could've chosen for the MART, it was me."

Ricky was taken by her sincerity and honesty and understood completely why these two had found each other, or even more accurately, why God had brought them together.

"Do you intend to tell him how you feel?" Ricky asked her.

She shook her head. "Oh goodness no. It's all I can do just trying to be a good student."

He frowned. "You're as bad as him."

Shelley didn't get to ask him what he meant because Eric's strong hand grasped Ricky's shoulder.

"All right, you two, break it up. It's my turn." Eric stepped in and pulled her close.

Speaking with Ricky about her feelings made Shelley admit how good it felt to have Eric's strong arms around her, to be close to him, to feel his breath in her hair. No. She didn't want to feel this way. She didn't want to need him. She didn't want to need any man, yet she was afraid it was already too late. She moved closer to him, breathed in his scent. Maybe, it was time to fill that void in her life.

Eric spun Shelley around and she looked up at him with starry eyes. "What?" he asked with a smile.

"This night doesn't even seem real." She sighed with pleasure, though even as she spoke, the pain in her head was growing. It seemed the dizziness would overtake her if not for Eric holding her close. She leaned her head on his chest for support.

Eric thought about her words. *It doesn't seem real.* Maybe because the reality was something he didn't wish to face. Still, at this moment, the reality was, it felt wonderful to have her in his arms. He was tempted to confess his love for her. Certainly they were mature enough to continue her training, regardless. Just the thought of telling her what he felt made his heart swell and his pulse quicken. "Shelley," he began, whispering her name softly.

She looked up at him, but she was no longer smiling. There was panic in her eyes. "Something's wrong," she said.

Eric stopped. He felt her body go limp briefly before she caught herself again. Moving quickly, he helped her off the dance floor.

"I'll get the car," Ricky offered immediately.

The waiter showed up to see what he could do. Eric signed the check and helped Shelley to the car.

Laying her down in the back seat, he climbed in next to her and peered down into her face, his eyes full of worry. "Tell me exactly what the problem

is," he commanded kindly.

"I don't know what's wrong. I'm dizzy and this headache– it feels sort of like a buzzing in my head. I'm so dizzy, like I'm spinning around.

I've never felt like this before."

Ricky suddenly laughed out loud.

"You find this amusing?" Eric questioned.

"Dad, I think I know what's wrong with her," Ricky chuckled from his place behind the wheel.

"Well, son, by all means, fill us in."

"I believe she's describing the symptoms of intoxication."

Eric looked down at her with a smile. "Of course! It's the champagne." He rubbed the back of his knuckles over her forehead, relieved that it wasn't something worse. "You're gonna be okay."

She smiled warily. "I'm drunk?"

"Ever so slightly."

"I'm sorry, Eric. Again I've ruined everything."

"Ruined it?" Ricky chimed. "Dramatically rescuing a gorgeous woman is the perfect end to a perfect day in any movie."

Back at the hotel, Eric waited in Shelley's room until she came out of the bathroom, to make sure she was okay. He took her hand. "Get some sleep. You'll feel better in the morning," he assured her. "We're running at seven on the beach. That gives you eight hours to sleep it off, or were you hoping to use this as an excuse to get out of a training day?"

"Go away," she mumbled.

"Fine," he said. "Then I'll see you at seven. You know, seven? Ever heard of it?"

She stuck out her tongue. He laughed and left her room.

Closing her door softly, he turned and leaned against it. He'd come so close to telling her how he felt. Her sudden reaction to alcohol had prevented him from spilling his guts. He shook his head. Maybe it was a sign. Maybe it was for the best, he thought resolutely.

"So, how's she doing?" Ricky asked as Eric came through the door of their suite.

"She'll survive," he answered, ripping off his tie and unbuttoning his shirt. It had been a very long and very nice day and both men were tired. Even though Ricky hadn't complained, Eric knew his son could have.

After all, he'd flown in from L.A. to Atlanta long before Eric and Shelley's day had begun. They took a few minutes to pray together and both slept hard and awoke refreshed to a beautiful summer morning.

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Eric looked Shelley over when she opened her door the next morning. Her cut-off sweats, paired with a simple sports tank top was a sharp contrast to how sophisticated she'd looked the night before—and was every bit as appealing.

They walked down to the beach in silence, the breeze blowing fresh salt air in their faces. Seagulls fussed at each other in the early morning fight for food. The sun was still very low in the sky giving the water a steely gray hue.

Shelley stretched her arms over her head and breathed deeply. “You know, I’ve only seen the ocean two times in my whole life.”

“You’re kidding me?” Ricky exclaimed.

“No, really. So, every time I look out over the water, I mean, it like, takes my breath away. It’s so big, and it feels, like, so powerful. I’m in awe of it.”

“I agree,” Eric said. “I think I’ve missed the ocean most of all over these past few weeks.”

“Uh, thanks, Dad.”

Eric chuckled. “Other than you, of course.”

“Yeah, right.”

Shelley laughed. “Is your home close to the ocean?”

“The ocean is our backyard. Ricky and I have a morning ritual of a family prayer and meditation with the sun rising over the ocean. Then we run or train on the beach. And then in the evenings we like to go down and do forms or some Tai Chi. The sight and sound of the surf, it energizes me. It’s as if I can feel the life and force of its power, the source of its power, which is God.” Eric smiled as he glanced out over the sea.

Ricky nodded in agreement. “Yeah, it’s cool. Totally cool.”

“Sounds amazing,” Shelley agreed.

They took time to stretch before Ricky tugged on Shelley’s braid. “Come on. Let’s go.”

With the tide out there was plenty of room on the flat wet sand for the three of them to run abreast. Even at the height of the summer season the morning belonged only to a few early risers. Some children scavenged for shells and an older couple walked hand in hand. The trio ran silently down the mostly deserted beach. Ricky teased Shelley about having to slow his pace in order to stay with her and she assured him that they didn’t have to stay with her at all.

“Go on ahead, Rick, and we’ll catch you later,” Eric urged.

“I’m not running ahead without you. It’s no fun if I can’t show you up sometimes.”

“Uh, right. Ya know, I’m thinking it’s time I put you in your place.”

“All I know is, if we go any slower we’ll be running backward,” Ricky teased.

Breathing hard, Shelley finally came to a halt. Hands on knees, she tried to catch her breath.“I’m sorry Eric,” she panted. “I can’t make it.

I think I’m still feeling the effects of last night.”

“It’s possible. Are you dizzy?”

“Uh-uh, just can’t seem to catch my breath.”

“Not enough oxygen in the blood. Sounds like you’re dehydrated. You did

drink your water this morning, right?"

She grimaced. "Well, no. I felt a little nauseated so I went without."

He shook his head at her.

"Okay, don't say it. I messed up. I'm sorry. Listen, I've been holding you two up. Why don't you two run on ahead and show Ricky who's fastest while I rest a bit."

"Oh ho," Ricky crowed. "Yes, Daddy dear, come show me just how fast you are."

Eric touched her shoulder. "You'll be okay?"

"I'm fine. Go. You're making me feel guilty for holding you up."

"Okay, cuz, I really need to teach this kid a lesson." Eric patted his cell phone. "If we get out of shouting distance, call me if you need me."

Shelley nodded and watched as they took off. She smiled as Ricky took the lead. Walking slowly, she took large deep breaths, trying to slow her heart rate. She hadn't gone twenty yards before she became aware of a ruckus between some kids at a nearby picnic area.

Since the commotion involved a young teenage girl, perhaps a little younger than her own daughter, Shelley couldn't help being a little nosy. One of the boys was pawing at the girl.

"Stop, Bobby," the girl shouted as she pushed the boy away.

She was the only girl in the group, Shelley noted. Beer cans and blankets littered the sand where they stood and she figured the four kids had probably been there all night.

"Don't tell me to stop," Bobby smirked at her. He pulled her close to him, but the girl pushed him away again.

"You don't own me, Bobby. I said I have to go home and besides, you smell awful. Now let me go."

Shelley shook her head at the teens and turned to walk away, deciding to mind her own business, but what she heard next stopped her in her tracks.

"Come on, Bobby, let us have some of her," one of the boys sneered while the others voiced their agreement. "What are friends for, man?"

"Not funny," the girl said, wrenching her arm from his grip.

Bobby yanked her back. "Who says we're kidding?"

Shelley tried to look into the boy's face to see if he was serious. She couldn't get a read and worriedly, she peered down the beach to see if she could spot Eric and Ricky.

One of the boys approached the girl, grabbed her roughly and pulled her close. "Come on, don't be a tease. Give me a little something."

"Stop," she yelled and then stomped on his toe.

He cried out in pain and slapped the girl, knocking her to the ground. The slap startled Shelley. She thought for sure there would be a scuffle now between the boy named Bobby and the one who'd just hit his girlfriend, but instead, they crowded around, laughing and jeering. Surely that guy wouldn't

hurt his own girlfriend, Shelley thought. And he'll stop the others in just a moment. They're only bluffing.

Shelley tried to walk away again, only she could hear that they weren't stopping. She wanted to cover her ears and just make the whole scene go away, but the girl, who'd at first been angry, now seemed panicked, maybe even scared. Shelley could feel that fear in her own heart. There was a time she'd done nothing and she'd vowed that would never happen again.

Running up the beach a few steps, she realized she'd never catch up to Eric and Ricky. Squinting her eyes, she could see they were walking toward her, or were they? She pulled out her phone and texted, '*need help now*.' Nervously, she looked back up at the kids to see if she was making a big deal about nothing, but the boys were pulling at the girl, trying to kiss her, and she was struggling to get away. Shelley hit the send button. She jumped up and down, waving her arms. They started running. Shelley nervously watched their progress, turning back and forth between them and the girl, who was now crying. One of the boys was on top of her. Shelley couldn't wait any longer.

Swallowing her fear, she charged over to where the helpless young girl wrestled in the sand with a boy twice her size. "Okay, guys," Shelley said loudly, trying to sound commanding. "You've had your fun, now you need to leave her alone."

She got their immediate attention. The astonished boys all turned toward Shelley, eyed her up and down and grinned.

"I'm not kidding around, now let her go," Shelley demanded.

The boys were hardly intimidated. "I think the lady wants to join the party," the one called Bobby said, eyeing her coolly.

The girl scooted away as the boys focused all their attention on Shelley. Shelley swallowed hard, reaching the very late conclusion that she'd definitely gotten in over her head. She drew a deep breath, trying to calm herself, and keep her voice from trembling. "Don't be ridiculous. I don't want to join your party. I'm old enough to be your mother."

"That makes you a MILF," Bobby answered.

Shelley had no idea what that meant. Now that she was getting a closer look at the boys, she realized their pupils were dilated and darting back and forth. They seemed to be high on something. No wonder they lacked reason and judgment, and with that thought came the realization that she'd just stirred a hornet's nest.

One of the boys grabbed Shelley by the arm and tried to pull her to him. "Me first."

She reacted quickly, twisting her arm out of his grasp, she spun and instinctively kicked full force, landing a spinning back-kick to the ribs. The boy went sprawling across the sand.

He got to his feet. "I don't know who you think you are, but you just messed up." He cocked his fist and swung. She ducked and found herself

automatically delivering two punches in return. One to the stomach and one to the cheek.

The feeling that took her over was a surprise to Shelley. It actually felt good to take action. She didn't freeze. She didn't cower or run. She instinctively fought back. Pleased with herself, she couldn't help but smile, thinking that Eric would be proud.

Bobby laughed at his friend. "Man, she made you look bad." Then Shelley realized she was congratulating herself too soon. Before she could stop him, the third boy grabbed her from behind locking her arms against her sides. Taken by surprise, and overpowered, she struggled to remember what she should do but her mind went blank. Wiggling and kicking in an effort to free herself, her foot accidentally connected with Bobby's chin.

Infuriated, Bobby towered over her while the other two held her. Bobby's chin was bleeding and it was clear that he meant to seek revenge. He may be just a kid but he was big and strong and obviously not thinking straight. He struck out hard and fast, so fast it surprised her. He backhanded her, his knuckles catching her mouth.

Shelley's knees buckled. She would've fallen to the ground had the two boys not held her fast. The force of the slap dazed her. She licked at a small trickle of blood that ran from her lower lip as her mind raced. *Oh Lord, what have I done? I'm in trouble now. Didn't Eric get my text? I know I saw them head back, at least, I thought I did. Maybe they weren't headed toward me. Maybe it was an optical illusion.*

And then he was there. Eric's calm voice seemed to come out of nowhere. "Let her go, boys."

The young men dropped their hold immediately. The trio whirled to face the man who'd spoken. Dazed, Shelley turned to see Eric and Ricky standing side by side. Eric grabbed Shelley and shoved her behind him.

She'd never seen Eric fight. She quickly discovered that his skills were very real and very lethal. Two of the boys tried to jump Eric, one from behind, but Eric moved so fast. He merely dodged or blocked everything the boys tried to do. He threw no punches. It seemed obvious that he was being very careful to not hurt the boys, whom she assumed were minors. In only a few seconds, he had both boys pinned in the sand. With his knee held to the back of one boy, Eric offered a choice. "We can do the cops and parents thing, or we can work this out calmly. Choose now," Eric warned.

"Okay, okay," the boys cried.

Eric released his hold. "Sit right there."

"Ahhh, Oww, Ohh, ooooeeeewh."

Shelley turned to see Ricky mercilessly "playing" with his foe, who currently was Bobby. The boy was coming at him with everything he had, yet Ricky was jumping around easily blocking punches and making crazy, silly "Bruce Lee" sounds. Again, it was obvious that he was trying very hard to not

hurt the kid. Shelley giggled at Ricky's antics. Ricky paused to look over at Eric with a grin, but Eric wasn't smiling. He rolled his eyes at his son.

Ricky shrugged his apology. Bobby took that moment to run at him, and Ricky immediately flipped the guy onto his back. Bobby moaned and sat up slowly. Eric frowned and Ricky smiled at his father. "Don't worry. He's okay. I went easy on him."

Sighing, Eric went immediately to Shelley and took her by the shoulders. "I'm okay," she offered before he had a chance to ask. "But boy am I really glad to see you."

Frowning, he used his thumb to wipe the blood from her mouth. Eric's teeth clenched hard and Shelley saw something in his eyes that almost frightened her.

"What happened?" Eric asked softly.

Shelley quickly told the story while at the same time, the young girl knelt in the sand beside her boyfriend.

"Why'd you have to go and hurt him?" she whined. "He was just playing. He didn't mean it."

Shelley's jaw dropped.

"Classic," Eric muttered. He sighed, hoping this wasn't an omen to the forthcoming year. Rounding the boys and young lady up, he laid into them about making poor choices and the consequences of them. More sober now, the boys were only too happy that Shelley didn't intend to press charges.

Seated on a rock, Shelley waited. Nearby, Ricky stood quietly watching his father, and decided to let Shelley in on what he knew was about to happen. "Shelley, I think you should know that Dad is, well, he's pretty angry."

"Yeah? I thought he was being so calm."

"Dad being calm in stressful situations is a bad sign."

"Oh. Well, he shouldn't be mad at them. I'm okay, and really, those kids just weren't thinking very clearly."

"Actually, I don't think he's mad at them. He's mad at you," Ricky said, almost apologetically.

Shelley glanced in Eric's direction. "Me?"

"Trust me, Shelley, I know when he's gonna blow, and he's gonna blow big time."

"But why?" Her voice shook slightly, echoing her confusion and dread, because she hated it when Eric was angry.

"I imagine, it's because you put yourself in danger."

"But, I mean, I had to help that girl, right?"

Ricky shrugged. "Look, I'm not saying what you did was right or wrong. I'm just saying that he's really mad."

She looked Ricky over. "I guess you'd know, huh? I suppose you've faced his anger before."

"Oh, I'd say more than a few times," he said with a wistful smile.

Her eyebrows rose and her fearful, wide-eyed expression made Ricky feel sorry for her.

"So, what should I do?" she asked. "How should I handle him?"

"Handle him?" Ricky chuckled. "You're kidding, right?"

She shrugged.

He sighed. "Okay, look, the best thing to do is just be quiet and let him blow off steam. What I mean is, no matter what *he* says, *you* don't say anything. Just be quiet and let him get it all out."

Shelley nodded in agreement just as Eric joined them.

"Let's go," Eric ordered without slowing his pace.

Shelley saw his eyes flash and realized Ricky was probably correct. Silently, they headed back toward the hotel, but they only got as far as a concrete picnic table when Eric stopped suddenly.

"You," he said firmly, pointing at Shelley. "Have a seat." He pointed at the picnic table.

"Excuse me?" she asked haughtily.

Ricky's lips pressed together and he shook his head. That wasn't exactly how he'd told her to "handle him."

Shelley gasped in surprise when Eric abruptly grabbed her around her waist and whisked her up onto the end of the picnic table.

Shelley's startled expression made Eric remorseful. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, but what I have to say won't wait."

"And just what is that?" she demanded.

Ricky cleared his throat to get her attention and raised his eyebrows.

Remembering Ricky's tutorial, she pressed her lips together, lowered her head and tried to look demure.

Ricky stepped back and watched, bracing for the storm he knew was about to come.

"What in the hell did you think you were doing?" Eric demanded, his voice no longer calm.

Ricky's mouth fell open. He'd never in his twenty-one years, heard his father use any kind of disrespectful language. Shelley only continued looking down at her feet and said nothing. "Good girl," Ricky thought.

"Do you think now that you've been training for what, five whole weeks, that you're some kind of kung fu master? Are you out of your mind? What if there had been a knife or a gun? What if we had arrived just a few minutes later? What if we hadn't gotten your text? Are you aware of what was about to happen? Those kids were totally wasted. They were capable of anything. You could be hurt, or, worse. Damn it, Shelley, what were you thinking? What was going through your head? You put yourself in danger. I know you can't be that stupid."

Ricky noticed that last word had a noticeable effect on Shelley. Her demeanor changed. Sitting up straight, her chest puffed out, her chin jutted

defiantly and there was fire in her eyes. “Uh oh,” Ricky mumbled.

“So? I’m waiting. Do you have anything to say for yourself? I’d really like to hear it. Speak.” Eric demanded.

Shelley gazed at Eric coldly for just a moment before she exploded right back at him. “What the *hell* do you think I was supposed to do?”

Ricky had been surprised at his father’s language, but when Shelley threw it right back at him, Ricky practically fell over laughing.

Shelley continued, her voice thick with sarcasm. “I mean, maybe I should’ve gone over to the girl and told her flat out, ‘I’m sorry, honey, I’d like to help, but I’ve only been studying self-defense for five weeks. If you wouldn’t mind scheduling this altercation for a little later in the year, I’m sure I can be much more helpful.”

She paused only long enough to take a huge breath. “Good grief, I didn’t know what to do. I texted you and I thought that you were on your way. In the meantime, they were hurting that little girl and she was crying, and I just couldn’t stand it. Tell me what good comes from studying martial arts if when the time comes, you can’t use it to help someone? If I could’ve chosen when this little incident happened I would’ve waited until I was ready to do things right, but it chose me and I did what I thought I should. Heaven knows there was a time when I sure as *hell* wished someone had stepped in to help me. What I did, Master Kino, may very well have been *stupid* like you say, but if so, then why don’t you tell me, what– was I– supposed– to do?”

They stood glaring at each other breathlessly. Time stood still as Eric digested Shelley’s words. Dear God, she is so beautiful, he thought. And right. So right. Yes, she’d put herself in danger, and yes, she’d had no other choice. And yes, her lips were drawn up in an adorable pout and no, there was no stopping what he was about to do. He needed her, needed to taste her. Moving suddenly forward, he took her face in his hands and lowered his mouth to hers.

Shelley’s mouth opened in a gasp of surprise. The intimacy of the act had her heart tripping. She melted into him completely, forgetting that they were in public, that Ricky stood just feet away, observing. The world was only her and Eric. Her heart soared, heat gathered in the pit of her stomach, and her mind went completely haywire.

✝✝✝

Hebrews 13:14

“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let
the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will
judge the sexually immoral and adulterous.”

Chapter Nine

Eric abruptly pulled away. Growling in frustration, he ran a hand through his hair and backed away. Breathing hard, he glanced at Ricky and looked into Shelley's eyes. He shook his head. "Sorry. I'm sorry." He sighed. "I need a moment." He then turned toward the hotel. Shaking his head, he walked briskly up the beach. He threw his hand in the air and called to Ricky, his voice thick with the emotion of defeat. "Ricky, please, take Shelley up to her room."

Shelley sat dumbfounded on the table. Ricky came slowly to her.

She looked into his face, her bewilderment evident. "He— kissed me."

"I know," Ricky said with a smile.

"Wonder what that means," she mumbled.

Ricky shrugged. "*You* gotta figure that one out."

He pulled her up, put his arm companionably around her shoulders and walked her up the beach.

"I guess I messed up, huh?"

She asked the question so pensively that Ricky couldn't believe it was the same woman who'd spoken to his father so fiercely just a few moments ago.

"No," Ricky answered. "I think you did good. Real good." He dropped Shelley off at her room. "Are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine," she said listlessly.

"Well, anyway, we still have to eat, so get a shower and we'll be back for you in a little while. And Shelley, chin up. He'll probably apologize all over himself during breakfast."

✝✝✝

Ricky entered the room he was sharing with his father to find him just coming out of the shower. Eric didn't speak and respecting his privacy, Ricky said nothing and went straight to the bathroom to take his own shower. He emerged a brief time later to find his father dressed and gazing out the patio doors that overlooked the ocean.

Eric shifted his gaze to his son. "I guess I messed up, huh?"

Recognizing the exact same words Shelley had used, Ricky only smiled as he finished dressing.

"I should apologize to her," Eric continued.

"So, like, you want me to make myself scarce?" Ricky asked.

Eric shook his head. "No, that's okay. I yelled at her in public. I guess I

should apologize in public."

Ricky shrugged. "Okay then, whatever you say." He paused to choose his words carefully. "Sooo, you know Dad, it took a lot of guts for her to stand up to you like that."

Eric nodded and spoke quietly. "Think about it, Rick. She didn't just stand up to me. She rushed in to help that girl, going against every survival instinct she had. Everything she did took guts. Everything she said was true and logical. Everything about her is amazing." Eric shook his head in disgust. "I broke my own rule."

Ricky chuckled. "If the rule you're talking about is that student-teacher thing, you won't get any sympathy from me."

Eric sighed. "You know, wanting to uphold a student-teacher relationship isn't out of a moral code. It's simply what I need to do in order to properly prepare her for the MART and I hope I haven't completely screwed things up."

"What's done is done. But Dad, at the risk of great peril to myself, let me tell you about a rationale I used when I was little and you told me I couldn't go swimming. It goes like this, if you accidentally fall in and get wet, you may as well swim around a while, you're gonna be in trouble anyway."

There was silence for several seconds. And then Eric chuckled. "I guess that explains finding wet clothes under your bed." Eric looked back out the glass door. So, he fell in. Should he swim, or get right back out? He didn't know. He only knew he had to apologize.

"Okay, well, Dad, are you ready to face the music?"

"Why the rush? Are you hungry?"

"How'd you guess?"

"Let's go," Eric said as he drew a fearful breath.

Ricky smiled. He'd seen his father face all kinds of dangers fearlessly, yet this small woman could make him tremble.

✝✝✝

Shelley stood under the shower spray, going over events in her head. What in the world happened this morning? Eric was furious at her one moment, kissing her the next. She sighed, remembering his mouth on hers. The kiss had done things to her, to her insides. He'd been sweaty, and sandy and smelled so very male. The touch of his calloused hands on her face sent liquid fire through her.

Admittedly, over the past weeks she'd wondered what it would be like to have him kiss her. As close as they'd been working, any female would have thought about that, wouldn't they?

She'd confessed to Ricky at dinner last night that she was in love with Eric, nevertheless, did she want the complication of a relationship? Many times over the past two years she'd said she hated men. She knew that wasn't fair. She certainly didn't want herself to be judged by the actions of other women. She never really meant it when she said it. It was just her way of

keeping herself emotionally distant. That is until Eric came along. There was a time she thought a relationship with another man was impossible. She thought she'd never actually feel love or desire again. Not since the ra—, the attack, and the divorce. Yet here they were. Love and desire.

So what should she do? Whatever was between them, was too valuable to toss away just because she didn't feel ready. She certainly hadn't been ready to fight this morning, but she knew it had been the right decision.

Eric's kiss had to mean he had feelings too, just as she does. She hadn't been searching for someone to love just yet, she'd been searching for her own strength. She didn't even want to love him. Yet, she knew one thing, an opportunity to taste real love lay right in front of her. She'd never had any relationship other than the one with her ex and she needed to know true love, mature love, not the love of a little girl. She couldn't just let this opportunity pass her by.

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Eric and Ricky came to Shelley's door together. She answered wearing a white terry cloth robe, her hair hanging in wet tendrils. Shelley smiled and held her hand up to stop Eric before he could even open his mouth to speak.

"Sorry, I'm not dressed yet. I've been thinking, and I have two questions," she began. "One for each of you. First, Ricky, would you mind eating breakfast alone?"

Ricky pretended to be sad and muttered something about managing somehow.

"Eric," she said softly. "Do I..." She stopped. She almost chickened out. "I mean, well, that— kiss, do I— only get one?"

It took a second or two for her words to reach him and when they did his heart leapt. It was an invitation, an exquisite invitation. He couldn't turn it down. He'd fallen in the pool and would, as Ricky put it, "swim around." He moved forward through the threshold and took Shelley in his arms, mentally taking the rule he'd been struggling with and tossing it out an imaginary window. The relief was immediate. He tilted her face up, and lowered his mouth to hers. He kissed her slowly, softly, sweetly.

Without relinquishing the kiss, he gave a swift back-kick, slamming the door on a grinning Ricky.

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Eric kissed Shelley several more times before he made himself stop. He led her across the room to sit in a chair, then rose, keeping his eyes on her. "I need to tell you something."

She smiled. "If you're gonna call me stupid again, I really couldn't deal with that right now."

"Shelley, I'm sorry about that. I don't think you're stupid. I was just so upset that you were hurt. It made me crazy."

"Let's see," she said sarcastically. "You couldn't stand me being hurt so

instead, you hurt me with words?"

"I know, it doesn't make sense does it? I was wrong and I apologize. Please forgive me. Really, I think I was upset more with myself and took it out on you."

"With yourself? Why?"

"For leaving you there. For not being there when you needed me."

"That's silly, Eric. You can't be with me all the time."

He sighed. "I shouldn't have left you." He gazed at her. Her hair was wet and she'd apparently just gotten out of the shower which probably meant she had nothing on under the robe. Not a good situation for a gentleman. He swallowed hard, and then drew in a sharp breath. "So, I need to tell you something, Shelley."

Her huge brown eyes blinked up at him, waiting.

He blew out a breath. "I'll just come out with it. I've fallen in love with you. I know I'm not supposed to feel this way about a student. I've tried to fight it. I've tried even to deny it. Yet, how can I teach you to be honest without being honest myself? I love you."

"Oh, Eric," she sighed, standing and reaching for him.

He went to her immediately. She rose up onto her toes and their mouths melded. There was so much heat. Eric broke away, backing up far enough to get control. He was in a situation that was not conducive to maintaining control. He needed to remove himself from the situation before he did something he regretted. The anticipation of finally being able to free his pent-up emotions and allow himself to give her all the love he felt was overpowering, but special things are reserved for the marriage covenant. Besides, this relationship was new. Shelley was suffering from past trauma, and his beliefs did not include casual sex outside of marriage. He cleared his throat. "So, I'd better go and let you get dressed."

She nodded.

He came close again, gently he took her hands in his. "Your hands are trembling."

She winced. "It's just that, well, I've only been in one relationship, with my ex-husband, and that was a very long time ago. I know it

sounds silly, but I'm not sure what to do anymore."

Eric rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek. "It's been a long time for me as well. We'll work our way through this together." He couldn't help himself. He bent down and kissed her again, pulling her close against him and the fire burned hot within him, forcing him to end the kiss and step back abruptly.

"Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "No." He sighed. "Let me be honest. There is nothing I'd like more right now than to make love to you."

"I feel the same way."

He almost shuddered with the desire that statement brought. He drew a deep breath. “But I don’t want to ruin this new relationship by rushing into things. It wouldn’t be good for either of us. And I have personal values that I’d like to think I’m in control enough to keep.” He smiled. “Why don’t you get dressed and I’ll order some room service and we’ll eat and talk.”

“I’d love that,” she whispered.

With that, he moved forward quickly, pressed one more kiss on her lips, turned and left the room.

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Shelley sighed and wiggled up against Eric as they cuddled on the sofa. This must be how an unborn child feels, she thought, floating in his mother’s womb, warm, happy, contented, loved. Loved! What a wonderful feeling, to feel loved, and safe and secure. She hadn’t felt this feeling with her ex even during the time that Mark and Joey had been conceived. Sighing, Shelley snuggled closer and looked up into his smiling face but his smile quickly faded.

“What?” she asked.

“Your lip is swelling.” He shook his head as he touched her cheek. “I don’t know what it is about you that makes me so crazy protective. I haven’t lost my temper like I did today in a very long time. Those boys, they were just kids, but when I saw the way they hurt you, I wanted to hurt them.”

“But you didn’t. You looked to me like you were in perfect control.” Shelley sighed. “I’d love to know how to fight like that. You were so good.”

“I hardly think beating up some little teenager is good.” He was quiet for a moment and then heaved a sigh. “It’s over. Let’s forget it.”

“I won’t likely forget it anytime soon. In a way, that little incident is what brought you and I together today.”

“That little incident also just put us behind another day in your training.” He smiled. “Yet, somehow, I can’t find a way to complain about that just now.”

“Eric?”

“Hmm?” he answered, allowing his finger to trace the shape of her cheek.

“What’s a milf?”

His hand stopped. “Where did you hear that?”

“That’s what one of those boys called me.” Eric chuckled.

“What’s so funny?”

“It’s not really funny, but I can’t seem to help myself. It’s actually a compliment in a crude degrading sort of way.”

“What does it mean?”

“You really don’t know?”

“No.”

“You don’t want to know.”

“Yes I do. Please tell me.”

"Okay, if you say so." He leaned over and whispered in her ear.

Shelley's face reddened. "Oh."

Eric laughed. "Well, you *are* incredibly se... pretty."

"Really?"

"Uh, yeah, really." He tilted her face up and kissed her softly and then lifted her fingertips to his lips and kissed each one.

He made her feel so cherished. How could this steely martial artist be so completely gentle?

Eric smiled at her, but his expression changed quickly. This beautiful time was amazing, however it was only making things harder for him. He wanted her– badly. But he wanted her the right way and for the right reasons and in the right order. A real relationship was about much more than sex. It was obvious to him that Shelley didn't know much about God. She'd told him as much a few times in the course of conversation. Though, that too, was a part of his mission, to teach her about Jesus. This relationship with Shelley was even more complex because he was her teacher, her MART instructor, and they had goals and commitments to fulfill. He needed to make her understand. "Shelley," he began, his tone shifting.

She placed a finger to his lips. "Uh oh. I know that tone and I bet

I know exactly what you're about to say."

"Oh really?" he chuckled. "What am I about to say then?"

"How about, Shelley, we simply cannot let this interfere with what we're trying to accomplish. Training must continue if we are to

succeed. Self-discipline is the key. How's that?"

Eric smiled. "That about covers it. Still Shelley, I don't think you realize how difficult it's gonna be."

"You mean the training?" she asked.

"No. I mean keeping our feelings for one another separate. If you really and truly desire to fight in the MART, then I *will* train you. I'm just saying that having a relationship will make it much harder. During training hours we have to stick to a strict student-teacher relationship.

I have to feel free to teach without hurting your feelings."

"You haven't hurt my feelings so far," she said flippantly.

"We've barely begun."

"Eric, I really do understand, and I will not let our relationship interfere with the MART, because I really and truly want to compete in the MART, more than anything."

Eric watched her. Earlier he'd said he loved her but she hadn't responded, at least not verbally. He wondered exactly what her feelings were. He'd made himself vulnerable by declaring his love and he was certainly strong enough to handle that. Still, it would be nice to know what she thought, what she felt. His pondering was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Bet I know who that is," Shelley said as she rose. She opened the door

to a large tray of food and a pitcher of iced tea sitting on the floor. Setting the tray on the bed, she read the accompanying note.

Dear Dad and Shelley, Did I miss anything? I thought you might get hungry if you ever came up for air so—Bon appétit (sorry about the French, Shelley) Don't worry about me, I have a date, whom you'll get to meet when you arrive at the Seafood Inn at 7:00 for dinner. See Ya tonight, Ricky.

Shelley laughed. "Ricky is so silly, but he's a great kid."

"He's an awesome kid," Eric agreed.

Eyeing the tray, Shelley realized she was famished. Between the two of them, they made short work of the club sandwiches, fruits and cake that Ricky sent. They spent the rest of the afternoon talking and laughing the time away. The time to dress and meet Ricky arrived too soon. Reluctantly they emerged from the hotel to find the *Seafood Inn.*

Shelley must have eaten a hundred meals with Eric already, but this time everything seemed different. He reached silently across the table and took her hand. A current shot through them, a vibration, fed by their newfound love. They looked up to see Ricky arrive with a beautiful young girl standing beside him.

"Bethany, I'd like you to meet my father and, one of his students, Shelley Adams."

Eric smiled. Shelley was suddenly so much more than merely one of his students. He still wasn't sure how he was gonna handle that. He'd have to take it one day at a time.

The foursome spent a delightful evening together. Nineteen-year-old Bethany was from Nashville and vacationing with a couple of friends who'd been quite jealous when *THE* Ricky Kino asked her to dinner. Shelley was glad when after dinner Ricky dropped Bethany off at her motel and came right back. After all, nineteen was practically a baby. Shelley didn't know that Ricky adhered to the same standards as his father.

Back at the hotel, Ricky went straight to his and Eric's room while Eric walked Shelley to her door.

"You're not coming in?" she asked.

He shook his head. "No. Your training resumes at 7:00 AM and we need to get some sleep."

Shelley pouted and made the cutest puppy dog face. Her childlikeness always got to Eric. He tried to be strong. "Shelley, remember we made a promise to not break training? Remember how we were supposed to train today? As your teacher I just really cannot let the lack of discipline continue."

"It won't continue," she said resolutely. "You could just come in and help me stretch and then maybe kiss me goodnight and after that, I will go straight to bed."

Ricky opened his door. “How could you turn that down?” He closed the door quickly.

Eric rolled his eyes and turned back to Shelley. “Okay, you win. Get changed. I’ll be right back. We’ll stretch and then you have to keep your promise.” He unlocked her door for her and took the card with him, shaking his head with a sigh. What did they think he was? Some paragon of virtue? Heck, he was a man, and apparently a weak one.

Delighted, Shelley quickly changed into some black stretch pants and T-shirt and then ran into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She was acting like a schoolgirl, she knew that, but she couldn’t help the nervous energy that was coursing through her. Now that she knew Eric loved her, the thought of spending more time with him was exciting and being away from him seemed unbearable.

Staring into the bathroom mirror she let her hair down and tackled the chore of brushing it. She hadn’t made much progress when Eric walked through the door. He wore a brown silk traditional Chinese gung fu uniform. “Oh, Eric, that’s beautiful,” she breathed.

“Here then,” he offered cheerfully. “I’ll give you half.” He took off the top portion, and placed it around her shoulders. He looked her over and sighed. Her hair falling loosely across her shoulders made him realize that keeping his hands off her wasn’t gonna be easy. “Let’s get to it,” he said firmly.

Shelley made a face. “I have to finish brushing my hair.”

“Let me,” he offered taking up the brush. Slowly, reverently, he pulled the brush through the long golden-brown tresses. Once he’d completed the task he breathed a deep sigh. His voice husky, he ordered her again to begin the stretching routine.

Obediently, she stood beside him in the center of the floor and followed his lead. He’d taken off his silk jacket and given it to her which left him bare-chested. It was hard to keep her eyes off his sculpted, rock-hard body. He didn’t seem to notice her trouble.

They finished stretching and Eric took her hands. “Okay, it’s bedtime. I should be going.” Shelley pouted again.

“Please Shelley,” he said softly, “don’t make this difficult.” He pressed his lips against her forehead. “Good night.”

In his own room Eric stepped out onto the balcony and drew deep breaths of the ocean air. He needed to clear his mind and transform his energy. Nothing that some prayer and meditation couldn’t help.

Eyes closed in prayer, he rededicated himself to God as he listened to the rhythm of the waves crashing on the sand.

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Shelley hit the mat.

“Take it easy, Rick,” Eric ordered, eyeing him sternly.

Ricky raised an eyebrow. “Sorry.”

Five minutes later Ricky's foot connected with Shelley's swollen lip. Ricky looked at his father and shrugged.

Eric knew Ricky was practically moving in slow motion, giving Shelley as much warning as possible as to what was coming. He was not pleased. He hadn't been pleased all week. Shelley's first tournament was twenty-four hours away and she hadn't progressed as well as he'd thought she would with Ricky as her sparring partner. As a matter of fact, she seemed to be getting steadily worse. Her weakness from the beginning, other than her fear of contact, had been her reaction time. Not reacting to what came at her would definitely get her defeated in a tournament world, dead in the real world. Well, it's now or never, Eric thought. Here goes.

"What's the problem, Shelley?"

"I don't know," she answered softly.

"Are you ill?"

"No."

"Let's go again Ricky, but this time I want you to talk to her. Tell her what's coming."

Again, in only a few seconds, Ricky had been able to strike Shelley several times.

"Okay, Shelley, dig deep and tell me what's happening."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, 'I don't know'? Think about it and tell me," Eric sternly demanded. "What is the problem?"

She looked up at him defiantly. "I don't know what the problem is. *You're* the teacher, you tell *me*," she snapped.

He let the challenge slide. "You do know. You just won't admit it. Now think. C'mon, talk to me. What are you feeling?"

She shrugged. "I uh, well, I guess I can't tell where the strike is coming from."

"Why can't you tell? We've practiced for hours upon hours. All the sparring moves over and over. We've done them until they should be instinctive to you. Your conscious brain may not recall but your body remembers. It's muscle memory."

He punched at her and she correctly blocked and countered. "See," he said, "you do know, so what is it? Are you afraid of Ricky?"

"No, I don't think so," she said timidly.

Eric swung at her, softly slapping her cheek. "Block," he commanded.

"I can't," she answered, raising her hand to her reddened cheek.

"Why not?" He swung at her again, lightly striking the other cheek. "Stop," she said, frowning as she backed away from him.

"Not until you answer the question." He swept her leg and she fell to the mat.

Ricky stepped aside and leaned back against the wall, grimacing. There'd

been many times that he'd suffered through similarly painful scenarios at his father's hands. However, the pain came not from the physical contact, but from being forced to reach inside oneself and figure out where the weakness lies. This was what his father was good at. This is what set him apart from the other teachers. It was for this ability his father had pursued his doctorate in psychology. Ricky stood back and watched his father in action.

Shelley raised herself off the mat and faced Eric. He swung at her head and she blocked it well but never saw the other hand coming and he caught her again in her sore mouth. She raised her hand to her mouth and then yelled at him, "I don't know!"

"You do know," he countered calmly. "You're afraid of something, what is it?" he asked as he cleanly knocked her to the floor again.

She stood to face him once more, this time her eyes glistening. "I guess–" She stopped.

"I guess what?" he demanded.

"I, I guess I'm afraid of being hurt."

He shook his head. "I do not accept that answer." He placed a roundhouse kick neatly to her side. "If you were afraid of being hurt you'd block the punches, you'd block the kicks or at the very least, you'd try to get out of the way. So what is it you're afraid of?" he demanded again, as for the third time, he knocked her to the floor.

This time she remained on her knees, the tears now flowing freely down her cheeks. Ricky couldn't help but feel a little sorry for her even though he knew, in the long run, it was for her own good.

"I'm afraid of..." She stopped. She didn't know what to say, yet she knew she had to find something. Her mind scrambled to think. What is she afraid of? He's right, it isn't fear of getting hurt. So what is it?

"Afraid of what?" Eric asked abruptly. "Figure it out. We'll stay right here until you do 'cause I'm not giving up." She sighed. "I'm afraid of..." She stopped again.

"Say it," he urged softly.

"I'm afraid, of, maybe, of not being able to learn it all?" Her eyes opened wide as she realized she may have stumbled across at least part of the answer.

Eric nodded. "Go on."

"Or maybe I'm afraid of— I guess of losing. And– I don't want to lose because I don't want to disappoint you." She looked up into his eyes. "I really don't." She sniffed.

Having apparently acquired what he wanted, Eric knelt down in front of her, gathered her in his arms and tilted her face up to his.

"Listen to me carefully. I've taught a lot of people, so you'll have to just trust me when I say, you will eventually learn what you need to know. Not in five weeks, but eventually. And Shelley, as far as the tournament goes, this one tomorrow, or the MART, even if we lose, we win. A tournament is a learning

tool and that is *all* it is. Nothing more. Now, about disappointing me. As long as you discipline yourself, work hard and try your very best, *without* giving up, then I'll never be disappointed."

Ricky smiled. How many times had he heard that speech?

Eric didn't give Shelley long to feel sorry for herself. "Now, go wash your face, get a drink of water and get back here." He helped her to her feet. She walked away, head down. He leaned back against the wall next to Ricky and heaved a weary sigh.

Ricky patted him on the shoulder. "I don't know how you do it. Dad, or how you even know what to do, I just know you do it well."

Eric shook his head. "It's too hard. Too hard to love someone you're trying to teach."

Ricky pondered that, his brow furrowed. "Well, Dad, you taught *me,*" he countered.

"This is a different situation. She's vulnerable. You weren't. You knew you were loved and cherished. You've never known anything else. She knows how it feels to be frightened and alone with no one to care. Do you know that her family pretty much disowned her when she became pregnant as a young teenager? Even once she had the baby, they had nothing to do with her."

"They didn't even come see their grandchild?"

Eric shook his head. "Hard to imagine, huh? She told me her parents came to the house one time after Bree was born. Once. And they've never even seen the boys. She had only her husband to depend on, and that didn't work out too well. She's been on her own for a long time." He sighed. "Maybe I'm the problem. If I'm weak she can't be strong. It's difficult to do what I need for Shelley when my heart goes out to her."

Ricky shrugged. "I don't see what you just did as being weak."

"I waited all week to do it, didn't I? Put it off as long as possible. Then when it was over what did I do? I comforted her and babied her. When I feel sorry for her I'm giving energy to the problem. The past is in the past. If I'm to help her let go of all the bad stuff, I have to let go

of it too. This whole situation is gonna be rough at best."

"Rough?" Ricky growled like a caveman. "We can handle rough. Arrrgh!"

Eric chuckled. It seemed he could always depend on Ricky to make him smile.

Shelley returned and the three of them worked hard. She made slow but sure progress and by the end of the day her response time had slightly improved. Eric praised her for the improvement, but Shelley's mood was dour. Eric realized he needed to help her clear her mind before the tournament.

"Ricky, take a break. Shelley and I need to talk."

Shelley watched Ricky take his leave then turned slowly to look at Eric. "What do we need to talk about?"

Eric noted the dread in her voice. "I think we'd better talk about what

happened earlier today. Do you have any thoughts or comments you'd like to share?"

She gazed at him as she thought. She truly didn't know what to say. She wondered if she should tell him so. After all, the last time she'd said she didn't know something he'd practically beat it out of her. Well, that wasn't exactly fair. He'd been teaching. She knew that.

He patted a table in the corner of the room. She sat and he stood in front of her at eye level. "Listen, I know I was hard on you. I had to take advantage of a learning situation, but I can tell you're upset."

"I'm not complaining."

"No, you're not. Maybe that's the problem. You're not anything. No smiles. No frowns. No temper. No emotion. Nothing. Come on, Shelley, talk to me."

She thought a moment. "You know," she explained, "how if you turn off your feelings it seems you can function better? Nothing gets in

the way. You stay consistent, no ups and downs."

Eric's lips pressed together as he digested what she was saying.

"So, me being so hard on you, that's what made you decide this?" She sighed. Shrugged.

"Did I hurt your feelings so badly that now you think you'd rather not feel anything at all?"

Shelley hadn't known why she was feeling the way she was, but now that Eric said it, she realized maybe it *was* because her feelings were hurt.

"Maybe," she answered him, feeling a bit ashamed. She knew he'd been functioning as an instructor and not as her new boyfriend. She'd told him there would be no problem separating their personal feelings, yet she already had them all mixed up.

He smiled. "It won't work, you know?"

"It won't?"

"You can't be a robot. You're a human being. You have emotions. You have feelings. They're essential to life. With them, yes, you feel pain and sorrow, but you also experience love and joy. You won't be happier by shutting out the world. People are always trying to avoid pain, and right now I'm talking about emotional pain. We will go to great lengths to shut out that pain, but it's impossible. The pain will find us. If we don't address it now, it will manifest later. So, rather than avoid it, though you may not believe me, it's better to experience it. You have to feel it. Deeply. Completely. Feel the anguish. Feel the heartbreak. Feel the remorse. Allow yourself to feel it and accept it, and then, and only then can we move past it enough for it to fade. So, that means we don't turn off our emotions. We embrace them. And believe me, without emotion you certainly won't be a better fighter."

Letting out a heavy sigh, Shelley lay back on the table with her arm across her forehead.

He came around to the end of the table, moved her arm off her face and peered down at her. “And, if you think for one moment that you can do away with your emotions and I’ll let you just shut me out of your heart, then I’m afraid you’re gravely mistaken.”

She looked up at the man who had come to mean so much to her. He touched her nose. “So, whaddya have to say about that?” She spoke quietly. “I’ve fallen in love with you, Eric. I love you. I don’t want to, but I do. You are everything I never thought a man could be. You’re kind. You listen. You’re patient. You’re understanding. You have a calmness about you, and a strength I can depend on and I love you.”

His eyes closed briefly to relish the feeling. He was happy she admitted to loving him. Not so happy about the part where she doesn’t want to love him, still, those were her honest feelings, and she trusted him with them. That was an honor. He’d have to help her sort through the tangle of emotions over the coming year. For now, she’d declared her love and that deserved a kiss.

Lowering his head he kissed her mouth softly. He’d only meant to steal the one kiss, but she welcomed him and he couldn’t stop. He kissed her again and again like a man so thirsty he couldn’t get enough cool, sweet water.

He raised up, stepped back and drew a deep breath. His hands ached to touch her and he could tell she certainly wouldn’t stop him from doing so. Nevertheless, his respect for her would show his love a thousand times more than taking advantage of the moment. He bent down once more to give her a soft parting kiss.

“Getting a little warm in here, don’t you think?” Ricky said with a smile from the doorway. They jerked apart.

“Ricky, as always, your timing is impeccable,” Eric said dryly.

“And yours stinks. Now can we get back to work?”

“Actually, no. We’re at the point that whatever will be will be. Time to nourish the body and rejuvenate the spirit.”

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1 Corinthians 10:13

“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.
God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted
beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide
the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”

Chapter Ten

After a supper of complex carbs and clean protein, Shelley retired alone to her room. She knew she needed to rest and hadn't expected to hear from anyone until the morning, but half an hour later, Ricky knocked on her door. He was dressed in a beautiful black silk traditional Chinese uniform similar to the brown one Eric had worn the other night. He offered a gift-wrapped box and spoke reverently. "This is for you. Dad would like you to change and come to our room." He handed her the box and left the room.

Shelley quickly opened the box to find a beautiful white silk uniform, again, similar to the one Ricky wore only hers had white roses embroidered on the shoulders and collar. Delighted, she changed quickly and went next door.

Entering the room was like entering another world. Lit only by candlelight and filled with the essence of sandalwood it appeared holy. Eric sat on the floor in front of a small intricately carved table. He was also dressed in white silk and his eyes were closed as if in a deep prayer. Ricky held his finger to his lips and motioned her forward.

Shelley smiled as she recognized the setting on the table as part of the Japanese tea ceremony. She knew the ceremony because she and Eric had discussed it after watching *Karate Kid Part II.* She'd thought it was a Buddhist ceremony, but Eric explained to her that it was influenced by Zen Buddhism, but was actually not a religious ceremony. He told her that he used it himself at times when a special occasion warranted a time of reflection and reverence. He said he'd taken the quietness of the ceremony and combined it with his own Christian practice of being mindful and reverent as he thought over his many blessings. Shelley was pleased to see that he thought tonight warranted a time to use it.

Eric opened his eyes, his admiration evident as they moved over Shelley, taking in her taut body and the silk material shimmered and caught the light. Finally Eric's eyes rose to her face which was aglow with candlelight.

Ricky motioned for Shelley to sit opposite Eric, and then moved to sit on the floor by the adjacent wall and curled up into a full lotus position to watch the proceedings.

Eric worked silently. Shelley watched his powerful hands handle the delicate china as he moved through the ceremony. Each movement was simple and precise. Through the open balcony door, the sound of the ocean waves washing upon the shore offered a rhythm to each movement and Shelley found

herself hypnotized.

She watched Eric's face, his dark eyes totally focused on his task, the sternness of his jaw, the fullness of his mouth. Her eyes moved back up to see his eyes upon her. He smiled the same kind smile, the one that melted her the very first time she'd seen him.

"The tea ceremony is Japanese," he began. "The mode of dress from China, and the form you've been learning, Korean. Tell me, Shelley, what does that say to you?"

Shelley smiled. The humorous side of her wanted to make a joke about maybe Eric being a little bit mixed up, but she realized this was not the time.

"Um, it says we can comfortably combine these things?" she half answered, half asked.

Searching her face, he nodded in satisfaction.

He handed her the cup and motioned for her to drink. She gently pressed the cup to her lips, swallowing the bitter brew, feeling suddenly warm inside. Energy, strength and power seemed to fill her, consume her. She felt calm, peaceful, centered and she wondered aloud what was in the tea.

"Nothing unnatural." He returned to his original question. "So, Shelley, there is a reason for bringing these traditions together. Have you ever heard the term 'Zendo Ryu'?"

She shook her head.

"It means the school of the complete way, or whole school of thought. It is a Japanese phrase but isn't just about a style of Karate or Jujutsu or Judo, which are all Japanese. It's an entire system of training, fighting, techniques and forms drawn from all styles from each country. It isn't mixing them to form a new art but blending them to use the best of each art to suit your purpose. Do you understand?"

She smiled. "Yes. It's like doctors and chiropractors."

His brows rose. "Doctors and chiropractors?" he questioned.

She shrugged. "Yeah, you know, like doctors, chiropractors, nutritionists, acupuncturists, herbalists, counselors, therapists and even pastors– they're all healers and they all accomplish good works but just imagine what they could do if they worked together. Their power would be awesome."

Eric looked over at Ricky who was wearing his usual grin. He turned back to Shelley and reached out to touch her face, love shining in his eyes. "I guess you do understand," he said softly. He cleared his throat. "The objective behind Zendo-Ryu is complete mastery of self. This is what I work and strive for. I am seventh dan in two forms, sixth dan in two others. I train in several other techniques but some don't use belts as an indication of skill level.

"The knowledge and skill I possess are what I desire to pass to you. We began in Taekwondo because you already had some knowledge in that area. It's a powerful art, a beautiful art and is good for smaller, quicker people, as long as you use your waist power, because the kicks increase your reach.

However, what I teach you from here on out, includes many styles from many countries and I want you to keep your mind completely open. No style is the best way and all styles of fighting are good. The victory comes in making them work for you no matter what your situation. Your hero, Bruce Lee, knew this as do many other wise teachers." He paused. "Is all I say clear to you?"

Shelley nodded.

"Good, then this is for you," Eric said as he handed her a box tied with colorful ribbons.

"Another gift?" Surprised, her brown eyes began to tear as she opened her gift and found a brown belt inside.

"I didn't even know I was being tested for it," she cried.

"I know. Every day you're tested. You've worked hard and you've earned it. Actually, you've progressed past this point, but all things must come in order, step by step, until you reach the top."

She threw her arms around his neck. "Thank you, Eric," she cried as she kissed him hard on the cheek and then ran over to Ricky to deliver the same.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Model it for us," Ricky prodded.

She jumped on the bed, wrapping the belt around her waist.

"Exquisite," Ricky cooed.

"Absolutely," Eric agreed.

She bowed. "Thank you, thank you." Sighing with pleasure, she calmed herself enough to sit on the bed. "So, tell me something, if you don't mind me asking. We've talked about all these different countries, it makes me wonder, what exactly is your cultural background?"

Eric came to sit next to Shelley on the bed while Ricky laid across the other bed on his stomach, his face in his hands.

"My mother's mother was Chinese. She left her home in China because she fell in love with a French sailor. He was also of mixed descent, mostly white, part Japanese. It wouldn't have mattered if he'd been all Japanese, he wasn't Chinese which was the problem as far as her parents were concerned. They disowned their child because of it."

"That's terrible," Shelley murmured.

Eric nodded, his brow furrowed. Shelley was no stranger to how that felt. However, he would not feel sorry for her. Commiserating with someone only adds energy to the problem. He went on. "My father's father is Chinese Hawaiian, his mother, is white. She was an American naval nurse stationed in Hawaii. My grandparents on both sides suffered a lot of intolerance because they chose to cross boundaries. Silly boundaries as we are all human beings. So my mother is half Chinese, part Japanese and part white and my father is half Hawaiian, which is in itself a mixture, and half white."

Shelley nodded and turned toward Ricky. "And, if I can be so bold, what about your mother?"

"Ricky's mother was white," Eric added. "And that is our background. It's

a large mix of people. So, what would you call me? I've never really put a label on it. Part Caucasian, part Chinese, part Japanese, part Polynesian. I'm not sure what to call it."

Shelley didn't even hesitate. "I believe that makes you Zendo-Ryu, the best of all worlds."

Ricky rolled over on his back. "Lord, I love this woman," he said softly as if in prayer.

Eric reached out and pulled her to him. He kissed her gently and then tilted her face to look into her eyes. "Me too," he said quietly.

Shelley flopped backward onto the bed, wondering if she could possibly be any happier. Feeling peaceful and mellow, it was as if she were floating off the bed but had no desire to stop herself.

Eric and Ricky watched her as her eyes fluttered closed.

"I was worried that I would be so nervous I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight," Shelley said, her eyes still closed. "But actually I feel so relaxed."

"You worked very hard today. You should be exhausted and you should sleep like a rock."

"I think you're right, 'cause I could fall asleep right now." She yawned as a leg slid off the side of the bed. She was gone.

"What *did* you put in her tea?" Ricky asked with a smile.

"Hmm, maybe a little too much chamomile," Eric said facetiously. "I hope she comes out of it before the tournament." He gathered her in his arms thinking how small and vulnerable she suddenly seemed. Ricky opened doors as Eric carried Shelley to her room.

Laying her on the bed, he looked down at her sleeping form as he untied the brown belt and laid it aside. "My little warrior," he whispered, "I'm not sure I even want you to fight. I think I'd rather protect you and take care of you," he sighed. "But I realize I have to let you progress and learn to take care of yourself. As much as I want to, I can't keep you safe and isolated in a little golden cage." He pulled the blankets up over Shelley and kissed her face.

She slept deeply and peacefully, waking only once in the dark, but felt no fear and drifted immediately back to sleep.

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Shelley awoke to the sound of the ocean, and seagulls. Eyes still closed, she sighed and thought about the day to come, surprised to find she wasn't apprehensive or nervous like she thought she'd be. Instead she felt calm and self-assured, maybe even– powerful. It was a good feeling, she decided. It was what she craved.

A drop of water splattered on her cheek and she opened her eyes to see Eric's face.

"You startled me," she said. "I didn't even hear you come in."

"Ahh," he replied, "the art of Ninjutsu, maybe one day you will learn it." He sat down next to her.

"I see you've already had a shower," she said tugging on a lock of his long wet hair.

"A shower? Ricky and I have run, worked out and eaten breakfast. I just came in after my shower to see if you intended to get up today."

She stretched her body and closed her eyes. "Oh, I don't know. Is there any good reason why I should get up today?" she asked coyly.

"There was one," Eric said softly, "but right now I can't remember what it was."

"Ha, very funny. It was a tournament," she said quickly, "and I don't want to be late."

"Then I'd better hurry," he murmured as he leaned down and kissed her. Unfortunately, he realized it was a bad mistake, because all he wanted to do was stay right there kissing her all day. She was lying there in a bed and all he wanted to do was lie down next to her. This was impossible. He thought of himself as a master of his art which meant he was supposed to be a master of his own body. It was clear he was not, which meant he had to stop putting himself in the position of having to resist. Pulling away, he stepped back, putting distance between them.

Shelley's eyes had closed when he'd kissed her and she found herself waiting patiently for his touch. However, she didn't get what she expected.

He grabbed her big toe through the blanket and wiggled her foot.

"Now go take a shower."

Her eyes opened wide. "Oh. Okay. I guess I'd better get to it."

He could tell she was disappointed and he didn't want to have her fight with any emotional baggage, so he sat down on the edge of the bed. "Shelley."

She nodded and sat up. "Yes?"

"I just want you to know that there is nothing in the world I'd rather do than make love to you right now."

Her eyes opened wide.

He sighed. "But I am a man of God and I don't engage in casual sex. My love for you, my honor and my respect for you is better shown by displaying a little bit of self-control. Or, to be honest, a lot of self-control. You deserve real love, a real relationship and you deserve to not be used to satisfy my stronger than usual carnal urges."

Shelley pushed off the covers and swung her legs to the floor and took his hand. "Thank you, Eric."

"For what?"

"Well, first, for being honest with me. I mean, about the way you feel, because I've been feeling the same way. But also, thanks for not wanting to use me, as you put it. I have to admit, I've been nervous about that part of a relationship. You know, I mean, it's been a while."

"I understand. So, I just didn't want you to think that I don't want you. I just don't believe in giving in to my every urge. That can be destructive. It's

also one of the Ten Commandments. And I do my best to live by God's laws."

Shelley only nodded.

"So, I mean, please don't take it personally."

"It's okay. I won't. I think I actually like the feeling, you know, the nervousness, the excitement of what's yet to come in our relationship."

He laughed. "Yeah, and being a little hungry actually makes you fight better too."

"Hungry? What do... Oh! You mean, horny? Ha! We'll just see if I fight better. Now get out of here and let me get ready!"

He smiled, nodded and rushed out of the room.

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At the tournament hall Shelley made her way into the locker room while Eric went to find the potential sponsors he'd invited to observe his student. Donning a crisp, white uniform, she wrapped her new brown belt carefully around her waist and sat on a bench to braid her hair back out of the way.

"Hey, I know you, I think. Didn't I see you in Atlanta?"

The voice was southern and slightly familiar. Shelley looked up into a pretty face with blond hair and blue eyes.

"Angel?" Shelley asked as she rose.

"Yes! You remember me? My goodness I just can't believe it's you. Last time I saw you, you were leaving the Atlanta tournament with that gorgeous man, you know, Ricky Kino's father. So tell me, what did ever happen, because I remember you left with him."

"He's my teacher now," Shelley admitted with some pride. "He needed a student for the MART and he chose me."

Angel's mouth opened wide. "You are kidding! The MART! You're soooo lucky."

"I am lucky," Shelley admitted. "I think that every day."

"Wow, that means he's here, huh?"

Shelley nodded with a contented smile. "Yes, he's here, and

Ricky's with him."

"Oh– my– Gosh, I've got to tell my friends."

"Oh– my– Gosh," a mocking voice repeated from around the other side of the lockers. Several voices laughed. A large woman, young, with extremely short hair and long dangling earrings stepped around the corner along with two others. "So, you're a MARTian, huh?"

Shelley nodded.

The woman shrugged. "Don't look so tough to me."

Shelley couldn't help but think about when she'd first met Ricky and he said he'd expected her to look like, "a jock with a shaved head." This woman wasn't exactly what he'd described, but close enough. Shelley pressed her lips together to try to suppress her giggle.

"What are you grinning at?" the woman growled at Shelley.

Shelley's brows shot up. Did this woman really intend to pick a fight right here in the locker room like something out of a B-movie? It was too classic. Shelley didn't bother to answer her. She merely rolled her eyes in disgust.

Angel stepped between them. "Okay, come on now, y'all go on, Betty, and leave her alone."

"Don't tell me what to do. I want to see what makes her so special." The woman shoved Angel aside and moved toward Shelley. "Come on, show me what ya got."

"You've gotta be kidding. Look, I don't know you, so back off, okay?" Shelley tried to sound tough and fearless. She didn't think it was working since her voice quivered with fear.

The woman moved closer and Shelley swallowed hard. "Okay, now, this is just ridiculous," Shelley said, trying to control the situation.

"I don't see nothin' special," the woman said. "So tell me, why'd they choose you?"

Shelley drew a breath. "Look, I don't know why I was chosen for the MART. I just know that *I* was— " She should've left it at that but couldn't resist. "— and *you* weren't."

The woman grabbed her by the hair and pulled her close, taking Shelley by surprise.

"Feel lucky you're only a brown belt and won't have to face me today," she smirked, giving Shelley's hair a hard tug.

It was that tug that pissed her off. Shelley glared at her. "I am not afraid of you, now let go of my hair."

The woman's face grew red and she used Shelley's hair as leverage to sling her around and slam her face into the nearest locker.

Shelley's lip, still swollen from her little fight on the beach, began to bleed again, and she was sure if she hadn't turned her head slightly her nose would've been broken.

Angel jumped in, yelling and pushing the woman back. "C'mon, Betty, save it for the ring. This girl isn't important. C'mon, let her go." Betty released her grip on Shelley's hair. Victoriously, she and her friends strutted out.

Angel looked Shelley's face over and patted her on the shoulder. "You okay, honey?"

Shelley's eyes flashed. "Oh, just fine," she answered sarcastically. She whirled around and stormed out to find Eric and Ricky. The split lip and red spot on her forehead only served to raise Shelley's ire and her teacher's curiosity. She held her hand up and shook her head.

"Don't ask."

Eric and Ricky shrugged their shoulders and obeyed.

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Waiting for things to begin, Shelley paced back and forth, a feral look in her eyes.

"What's wrong with her, Dad? Do you think she's nervous?"

"No," Eric replied, "I think she's angry– at whatever happened in the locker room." He shrugged. "I'll use it." He went to Shelley and took her by the shoulders to gain her attention. "I know you're angry, so control it. Direct it to the point of impact." She nodded and drew a breath.

"Let's go over the rules of engagement one more time. No punching to the head or face in today's tournament. That's for black belts only. You can kick to the head but it must be controlled. In other words, you can't knock somebody's head off. You have to stay in control of your body. If you draw blood from your opponent you'll be disqualified. This is real, Shelley. The judges will award points for body displacement or take points away for illegal punches. Got it?"

She nodded again.

"Keep your hands up and don't forget to breathe. I'll coach you if I think you need direction. Now, go out there and kick somebody's butt, and don't turn your back to an opponent."

The first three opponents Shelley faced never scored a point on her. However, Shelley did get some penalty points, for illegal punches, not intentionally thrown, just mistakes because of inexperience and lack of control. Mostly though, they were clean and easy bouts and Eric's smile told Shelley of his approval.

Bout number four was more difficult. Shelley took several blows before she finally adjusted to the problem. Having to block kick after kick, her forearms ached, regardless of the arm pads she wore. Following Eric's direction from the sidelines, she moved quickly with several spinning back and hook kicks. He figured she'd connect at least one. She did. That connection brought her to the semi-finals. If she could win this next bout she'd make it to the championship round.

Eric leaned in close as she rested. "I know you're getting tired so I want you to do some deep breathing, try to focus and center yourself. With this next opponent stay on the defensive until we can calculate her speed, then we'll decide how to strike."

The bout began and Shelley defended well considering it was her weakness. Eric could see though, she was tiring and moving sluggishly. She tried to move in to score with a kick but missed completely.

Her opponent countered easily and connected a jumping reverse to Shelley's headgear, stunning her and sending her to the mat. She stood while the referee warned her opponent for excessive force. Her head was reeling, but she told the ref she was fine. Shelley focused just in time to partially block the side kick coming in. She landed one punch, but her joy in finally connecting was short-lived. A roundhouse kick smashed Shelley's mouth, knocking her off her feet again.

There was a lull in the action while the refs tried to decide if they should

disqualify her opponent for drawing blood or allow Shelley to continue. Shelley knew that Eric wanted no victory by default. That wasn't the purpose of the tournament.

He looked Shelley over. "How do you feel?"

"I'm good. Let's finish this."

He nodded and turned to assure the officials that Shelley's lip had been previously injured and only the slightest brush would start it bleeding again and it wasn't the opponent's fault.

For Shelley, the room began to spin. She knew if Eric had known how badly she felt he might have allowed the disqualification to end the fight. She shook her head trying to stop the spinning, but the motion made her dizzy and nauseated. She looked up into her opponent's face who was already smiling with the victory. This gave Shelley the strength to go on. She nodded at the official when he asked her if she wanted to continue.

She hadn't expected though, that her body would simply completely stop obeying the signals from her brain. She was standing, that was about it. She seemed unable to block the next several kicks, which seemed to her to be coming at an incredible speed, most of them connecting with her head. Wearing headgear as she was, she couldn't understand why her head reeled so fiercely.

Eric realized she was in trouble and considered pulling her. She was almost out on her feet. He hated to do it with the potential sponsors there watching. Yet, Shelley's knee took a hit, sending her down again. She rolled over in pain and slammed her hand down on the mat in anger. Bravely, she rose once more and nodded to the official.

"Dad?" Ricky muttered, his worry evident.

Eric nodded. He tossed a white towel out onto the mat, effectively ending the bout.

Shelley stood shakily. Limping, she bowed to her opponent, then to the judges. A few seconds later the ref raised the hand of her opponent. Shelley shook hands briefly and bowed to the victor and her instructor, as did Eric.

Eric smiled at Shelley with genuine pride. "My beautiful little warrior," he comforted. "You have far surpassed my expectations."

She looked up at him, trying to smile and to hold back the stupid tears. He put his arm around her and held her close against his side.

"I expected you to win a few bouts but I never expected you to make it to the semi-finals. I'm so proud of you."

She began to feel better. She knew Eric well enough to know he didn't say things that weren't true.

"C'mon, we'd better see about your knee."

They went to a room that had been set up for first aid and a doctor checked her out. He wrapped an ice pack around Shelley's knee, but was more concerned with her dizziness. Her pupils were slow to react. Shelley wanted

desperately to go back out to watch the brown-belt championships but the doctor advised her to lie down until the vertigo and nausea subsided.

Eric leaned over her, stroking her head and expounding on all the things she did well and how impressed he was with her. Then he told her about the possible sponsors who had come to watch her. "And I really need to go out and speak with them," he said.

"I'll be fine, you go," she replied. "And by the way, thank you. I mean, I'm really glad you didn't tell me about them earlier because I would've been a nervous wreck."

"Ya think?" he remarked with a smile as he backed away.

She made a face at Eric as he left her. He found Ricky standing in the lobby talking to several men in suits.

"Eric, good to see you," one said as he offered his hand.

Eric greeted each of them and exchanged pleasantries. "So, what do you think?" he finally asked.

"Well, she's tough– did well for her first fight," one man said.

"And if she were to win the MART her looks will definitely make her big bucks," another said.

The third man nodded. "I agree. I'd really like to talk to her, get to know her a bit. How about dinner tomorrow?"

The other two agreed.

"That'll be fine," Eric agreed. "Dinner tomorrow." The men shook hands and took their leave.

Eric turned to Ricky. "So, where are Justin and Jason?"

"They're watching the finals."

"I'm going back to see about Shelley. She's pretty banged up. Meet me down by the locker rooms when the tournament is over." Eric turned and walked briskly back to find his warrior, but she wasn't there.

"I told her not to leave," the doctor complained. "She's suffering from a mild concussion and needs to be watched, but she insisted on going to get cleaned up."

"Thanks." Eric said with a nod and went to find her.

Shelley was just coming out of the women's locker room as Eric approached, his eyebrows raised.

"I left you in the care of that doctor. He says you have a concussion, so, I'm asking you to cooperate, Shelley. You should have stayed put."

When she only nodded, he shook his head and sighed. Her face was pale, her hands trembled. He insisted she go back to the first-aid room where he helped her back up onto the padded table. The doctor once again took her blood pressure and checked her pupils.

"Blood pressure's low. Pupils are sluggish. She has a concussion. She needs to take it easy, rest, and you should wake her up a few times during the night to check on her. If there is vomiting or severe dizziness or, of course, if

you can't wake her and have her be coherent, then bring her into the hospital immediately." Eric promised he would.

Shelley closed her eyes, willing the nausea to subside while Eric spoke softly to her, heaping on the praise for a battle well fought.

"I knew you were tough."

She opened her eyes. "I lost," she reminded him.

"In my book you won. You've come a long way."

The nausea swept over her in waves. She sat up. "Excuse me, I need to use the bathroom." She limped slowly toward the nearest restrooms. She didn't want Eric or the doctor to suspect she was ill. No freakin' way was she gonna spend the night in a hospital.

She turned on the water and caught herself on the sink, breathing hard, head pounding. Stumbling toward a stall, she knelt down at the toilet and tried to shake the feeling back into her tingling hands. Finally, the torturous relief came. She washed her face, rinsed her mouth and limped slowly back out to the medical room.

"Looks like some color is coming back," the doctor said.

Shelley smiled stiffly, but kept her secret. The male competitor shuffling in, holding a towel to his nose, convinced Eric it was time for him and Shelley to leave.

"Remember, go home and rest," the doctor cautioned.

Eric and Shelley left the doctor and approached the lobby where Ricky stood with two men of Asian descent.

"Shelley," Eric said. "I'd like you to meet two of my closest friends, Justin and Jason Lee."

Jason extended his hand. "Hi Shelley, it's nice to meet you. I watched your matches. You fought well. I was impressed."

"Wow. Coming from him," Jason's brother Justin chimed, "that's a real compliment. But really, I thought you had that last girl."

Shelley grinned at the two, extremely handsome men. "Ha, I not only didn't have her. I couldn't even see her."

Justin took her hand to shake it. "Well then, that means that you showed a whole lot of courage."

"Oh, is that what that was," she joked as she drew a deep breath to force the nausea away." Well, it's very nice to meet you both." She clapped her hands together excitedly. "So, Eric, what are we gonna do to celebrate the fact that I didn't die?"

Eric shook his head. "We're not doing anything," Eric said sternly. "You heard the doctor, you have a concussion and you need rest."

Shelley put on her childlike face and pulled on Eric's arm as if she were only five years old. "Please Eric, don't make me spend my last days in Daytona in my room. We could at least go to the beach and I'll just lie in the sun. I promise I won't move. We've worked so hard all week and like I told you, I've

actually only seen the ocean twice in my whole life. Please, please, please," she begged.

Justin and Jason watched with delight as Eric's face softened. Never, ever, would they have guessed Eric would give in to the pleadings of a student against his better judgment. It was pretty easy to see how he felt about her.

Eric reached out and touched her swollen lip. "Only twice?"

"I simply cannot believe what I'm hearing," Justin began, as he spoke to his brother. "But I think he's saying 'yes'."

Jason nodded. "That's what it sounds like. It kinda makes you wonder which one is the Master, huh?" Jason replied.

A sweet southern voice joined in. "Did I just hear y'all say you're going to the beach? So are we! Let's all go together. This will be fun."

Shelley turned to look into Angel's pretty face and three other women standing with her.

"Hi Angel," Shelley murmured with a sigh. "Eric, do you remember Angel from Atlanta?"

"Yes, I do." He offered his hand to her. "It's nice to see you again."

"Oh, you too, honey."

Shelley rolled her eyes. "How did you do in the tournament?" Shelley asked Angel in an effort to be polite.

She smiled. "I won, of course," she bragged. "I always do. And I guess you'll be happy to know I personally eliminated Betty for you."

"Who's Betty?" Shelley asked.

"You know, the ugly mama who beat you up in the locker room," Angel said with a laugh.

Shelley glanced up at Eric's arched eyebrows and turned back to Angel quickly. "She didn't beat me up."

Angel shrugged, "Whatever you say, hon."

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Philippians 2:3-4

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit.
Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,
not looking to your own interests
but each of you to the interests of the others."

Chapter Eleven

Shelley lay on a large towel on the beach. She wore a light pink one-piece bathing suit. The sun on her skin gave her a healthy glow, but having had another meeting with what some call "the porcelain god" while changing in her room, she felt far from healthy. Instead, she felt weak and drained.

She raised her head slightly to sip water as Eric sat next to her, his bronze skin shining in the golden sunlight. Shelley watched the wind play with his hair as it hung loose around his shoulders.

"Look who I found," Ricky said as he approached with his date from a few nights ago.

Shelley smiled up at her. "Hi, Bethany." She rose slightly and immediately her head throbbed and the nausea returned.

Angel arrived carrying a volleyball. "C'mon, let's play."

Shelley gazed up at her. She was devastating with her dark tan in her white bikini. Shelley glanced around to observe the men's reaction to her. All four, Justin, Jason, Ricky and Eric each did their own sweep of Angel's body and looked away. Then everyone ran off to play volleyball except Eric. So, Angel reached down and grabbed his hand.

"C'mon, Eric. Shelley won't mind, will you, hon?"

Shelley sighed. "Please go play, Eric," she prodded. "If you don't I'll feel like a party pooper."

Conceding, Eric turned to Shelley. "Okay, but you lie still," he commanded before he ran off with Angel.

Lie still, Shelley thought as she eased back down. I'll be lucky if I ever move again. She did raise her head every once in a while to watch the others play ball. Once the volleyball game ended some of the girls rented surfboards and begged the 'California boys' to teach them how to surf. Shelley couldn't resist watching. Eric was helping Angel onto a board and showing her how to paddle straight. His hand came to rest on her back.

Shelley had been working on not giving in to the baser instinct of jealousy, but something about Eric's hand on Angel's beautiful body irritated her. She didn't have long to think about it though. Her vision blurred and her respiration increased as the sick feeling moved up her throat again. It appeared the crowd was coming in from the water, so Shelley decided to head for the restroom before her illness became obvious to everyone.

There was nothing left to come up. Dry heaves were all she could manage.

She realized between throwing up her guts and perspiring in the sun she was more than likely dehydrated. Common sense made its way through her thick skull. Slowly, she started back toward her towel to let Eric know what was really going on, but stopped short when she heard her name from somewhere on the other side of the small building.

"You're kidding me? Shelley and Eric are like, together?"

"Yes, why is that so hard to believe?"

Shelley recognized Angel's and Bethany's voices.

"I mean, Shelley's sweet and all," Angel's voice crooned. "But, like, they don't really go together, ya know? She seems so much older than him and that's why I was really surprised when he picked her for the MART. Anyway, maybe it's just a passing fancy. It probably won't last long, and when they break up, I'd like to be around to step in, ya know what I mean?"

"Well, I happen to think that Shelley and Eric make an awesome couple," Bethany responded.

Shelley's heart was broken. Did she really look so old, she wondered? Maybe she didn't deserve a man as wonderful as Eric. She felt the tears well up in her eyes and she turned to head back to the restroom to wash her face, but Ricky stood right there in her way. "Don't doubt yourself, Shelley. Or my father," he whispered.

Shelley blinked up at him, realizing Ricky had heard the exchange. She shook her head. "Your father, I would never doubt. The question is whether *I* deserve him."

Ricky shook his head. "That is a ridiculous statement that doesn't even deserve a response."

"What's she done now?" Eric asked as he joined them.

Ricky backed away. "The only thing I see her guilty of is making you happy. She's looking rough though, Dad. Maybe you should take her back to the room."

"I think you're right," Eric agreed, looking her over, noticing her pale lips and flushed skin.

This time she made no argument. They made their departure much to everyone's dismay, especially one very southern belle. Once in the room, Shelley was grateful for the cool darkness. She sank onto the bed.

Eric leaned over, scrutinizing her face. She had a slight bruise on her cheek from one of the many kicks to the head she'd taken. Her lip was still swollen, but at least the red spot on her forehead from whatever happened in the locker room had faded.

"Are you gonna tell me about the woman in the locker room?"

She was so dizzy, she truly didn't feel like talking. "Nothing really happened. I chose not to fight, that's all."

"That sounds like a wise choice," he whispered.

She smiled a weak smile.

"I'm gonna go to my room and take a shower. I'll be back soon."

Shelley was too weak to even respond. As she listened to the door close, her head spun and she couldn't focus her eyes. She closed them, hoping to drift off to blissful sleep, however, the sensation of spinning and floating didn't go away even with her eyes closed. Nausea swept over her like a flood and she sat up shaking. She was sick. Really sick. More than just a little dizzy. She needed to let Eric know how bad it was, but one step onto the floor and it gave out from under her.

She fell into what seemed like a dark bottomless pit. Falling, falling, falling, slowly, quietly. This wouldn't be so bad, she thought, if she could just stop the constant spinning. Finally, she succumbed to the comfort of complete and total blackness.

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Ricky, Justin and Jason came running the minute they got the call from Eric. By the time they arrived at the hotel Shelley was already being loaded into an ambulance.

"Dad, what happened?"

"I took a shower and came back to find her collapsed on the floor." Eric shook his head. "I couldn't wake her." He stopped, breathed.

Ricky's face was white. "Did she ever come to?"

Eric could only shake his head.

At the hospital they waited a forty-five-minute eternity before the doctor came out to see them.

"She's fine," he began. "She has a concussion, but there appears to be no inner swelling and her scan is normal. Her collapse was more from the dehydration than the concussion."

"Dehydration?" Eric and Ricky both questioned. "We made sure she was taking in fluids."

"Yes, well," the doctor continued, "with that much vomiting, it's not unusual for dehydration to occur."

"Vomiting?" Eric asked. "She's been..." He didn't finish his sentence because the truth hit him.

"We're administering IV fluids now. I'd like to monitor her overnight. As long as the night goes smoothly she can go home in the morning. We'll keep in touch if there's any change. She's awake now, and asking for you, Mr. Kino. But keep it short."

Eric stepped quietly into her room. Peering down at the small pale woman, his heart swelled. He took her hand and kissed it and before he could reprimand her, she offered her apology.

"I didn't want to mess up another day," she explained. "I thought I could make it. Please don't be angry."

"I'm so relieved you're all right I can't find it in me to be angry right now. Maybe later," he warned. "You scared us, Shelley, all of us but mostly me,

because I don't know what I'd do if I lost you. Dear Lord, I just found you." He paused, choosing his next words carefully.

"Shelley, listen, sweetheart, I've been thinking, well, maybe we should call the whole thing off."

"You mean us?"

His heart swelled with compassion. "No, silly, I meant the MART. You don't realize how tough training for the MART can be. The MART is merely a tournament. As long as we can be together, that's what's important, isn't it? You don't need the MART. I'll take care of you. Always," he added. "You'll have no need to learn to fight."

"But I WANT to learn. Eric, let me tell you something. I allowed myself to be totally consumed once before, when I married Robert. I lost who I was. I put all my stakes in him. I lost confidence until I almost couldn't think without his help. I learned that when you truly love someone, you allow them to be free to express themselves. Either Robert didn't know that or he didn't really love me. That doesn't matter now, but what does matter is once I was a young girl with a lot of talent and potential I never did anything with and I want to continue my training. I have to do this. I have this need to accomplish something in my life. I need to fight in that tournament and I can't do that without you. Please, don't stop teaching me, Eric, I'm begging you. Besides, you did promise you wouldn't give up on me."

He sighed. He'd as good as offered himself to her forever and she'd turned him down easily enough. He pushed the hurt aside, going over her words in his mind. *When you truly love someone you allow them to be free*. She spoke truth. "You don't have to beg, Shelley. I understand what you're saying. There's just this selfish side of me that wants to keep you safe and secure just for me. Forget that though. I'll give you what you want, but, you have to do something for me."

"Anything," she said earnestly.

"You have to trust me. I mean completely trust me. I can keep you safe and healthy, but not if I don't know everything and I mean everything. If you're ill, I need to know. If you're injured, I need to know. If an eyelash falls out, I need to know." He waited for an answer.

"I give you my word," she said, sighing deeply.

The door softly pushed open and Ricky stepped inside. "Sorry to interrupt, but I wanted to say 'Hi' before they throw us all out, which they're getting ready to do, so—hi."

He smiled his sunny smile. Shelley gave a little wave. The nurse briskly entered the room, checked her IV, ordered the men out and turned out the light over the bed.

Eric noticed the fear that sprang into Shelley's eyes.

"I'll see you in the morning," he whispered as he kissed her cheek.

"Close your eyes and sleep. You won't even notice the darkness."

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Eric couldn't believe the difference in Shelley's appearance by morning. Her color was back, her eyes shone, and a big smile brightened her face when he walked through the door bearing gifts.

"For you, m'lady," Eric said as he laid a single daisy on her stomach. "Because they're fresh and sunny and remind me of you." A teddy bear was next. "Because he is cuddly and cute and also reminds me of you." Next he placed folded clean clothes on the bed. "Because you don't look great in that hospital gown," he teased.

Shelley looked up sadly. "Is that all I get?"

"Oh no, I saved the best for last," he murmured as he leaned down and kissed her gently.

Shelley cherished the moment, taking in each detail. His smell, his clothing, his hair falling across his shoulder to brush against her cheek, the muscles in his neck and arms contracting. Everything about him was beautiful. She lifted his hand and placed it on her belly.

"Do you feel that?" she asked.

"What?"

"It's growling because it's completely empty. I'm so hungry."

"They haven't served you breakfast yet?" he asked, glancing at his watch.

"No, they haven't and I haven't had anything since yesterday morning and I think I could eat a whole cow," she whined.

The door burst open and a young, pretty tech came in wearing a smile and carrying a tray of food. Shelley's eyes lit up.

Eric smiled at the girl. "Good morning. You are just the person she's been waiting for."

Shelley sat up as the girl placed the tray on a table and pushed it up to the bed. She immediately began spreading jelly on toast and was just about to devour it when the doctor appeared.

"Hello," he said cheerfully. "Sorry I'm late on my rounds. We had a little emergency. Let's see now– you want to get this lady out of here I bet." He pulled the table bearing the tray of food away from the bed.

Eric laughed softly at Shelley's frown as she watched her food roll across the room.

The doctor quickly slid his stethoscope across Shelley's chest and back, requesting her to breathe.

"If you hear a strange sound, it's my stomach growling," she offered sarcastically.

"Shhh," the doctor put a finger to his lips. He took out a light, shined it in Shelley's eyes, examined her swollen lip and lifted her hands to look at her forearms which were covered with bruises.

"So, you're a fighter?" he asked shaking his head. "You look more like a punching bag," he laughed, but stopped abruptly when he saw the scowl on

her face. “Anyway, for now, you’re gonna be okay.” He turned to Eric, “I’ll have her discharge arranged.”

“Wonderful.”

“Uh, Mr. Kino, the word spread in the hospital that you’re here. I realize you’re a busy man, but we were wondering, well, the kids in the children’s ward would get a big kick, excuse the pun, out of meeting a movie star. Would you consider popping in and saying hello to them?”

Shelley thrilled as she watched Eric smile that beautiful smile that she loved so much.

“Well, I’m not a movie star, but my son is, and he is waiting down in the lobby. I’d be happy to get him and we’ll go visit the children.” He turned toward Shelley. “You don’t mind, do you?”

“Not as long as you push my breakfast back over here.” The doctor patted Shelley’s leg, shook Eric’s hand and left.

Pushing the table back in place, Eric took Shelley’s hand and kissed it. “I won’t be too long.” He stopped at the door. “Shelley?”

“Yes?”

“A very cute punching bag.”

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It was late morning when Eric sheepishly peeked back into Shelley’s room. He hadn’t intended to stay gone so long, but the kids drew him like a magnet. Shelley was fully dressed, lying sideways across the bed, asleep. Leaning over the bed, he whispered in her ear.

“Hello, beautiful.” Her brown eyes fluttered open and she reached up and hugged him.

“I’ve never been so happy to see you.”

“Aw, come on,” he said, “it can’t be that bad.”

“Not really,” she admitted. “I just want to get out of here.”

Eric helped her up. “You’re all checked out. We’re just waiting on the wheelchair. I have a surprise for you. I didn’t get to tell you last night,” he began, “but the sponsors who came to watch you are definitely interested and they want to meet you at dinner tonight.” Eric noticed but ignored Shelley’s look of dread. “So, there are several shops in the mezzanine area of the hotel. How would you like to buy a new dress for tonight?”

“Oh, so, the black one’s not good enough?” she asked, twisting her hands together. “I mean, I hate to shop.”

He laughed. “You are definitely a strange woman. Yes, the black one is fine, I was just thinking that you’d like something special for a special night.”

She shrugged. “Oh. Okay.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

Once they arrived back at the hotel, Shelley wanted to get the shopping out of the way immediately and she impressed Eric by taking only a few minutes to pick out a dress and shoes. The rest of the day, Shelley lounged in

Eric and Ricky's room since it was a larger suite.

Jason and Justin joined them. Shelley thought Eric's Korean friends were adorable. They were both big and strong and very handsome. What made them adorable though, was the obvious love and respect they had for Eric. The older one, Justin, the attorney, was a year or so younger than Eric and had a more serious demeanor. While his younger brother Jason, twenty-seven, seemed to be much more outgoing. The five of them lounged around the entire afternoon, sharing stories and laughing.

Shelley thrilled at the stories of friendship between the Lee brothers and Eric, and at the tales of the mischief and even brawls in which they'd participated. They laughed about her hungry hospital story, which led to stories of the births of her children, which led to stories of Ricky's birth which led to Eric's late wife, Ann.

Shelley watched Eric's face as he spoke about her and realized how deeply he'd loved her. The Lee brothers also loved her. They'd known her before she and Eric married. Justin and Jason had been there for Eric and Ricky through it all and it was evident the four men were as close as any friends could be.

Shelley suddenly realized she was an outsider and feeling somewhat uncomfortable, she rose. "I, um, I think it's about time for me to get ready for the evening," she announced. She excused herself and went to her room.

The hot shower felt good on her extremely sore muscles. Closing her eyes, she tried to relax but kept seeing Eric's face as he talked about his wife. Poor little Ricky, losing his mother when he was only eleven, Shelley thought. And poor Eric. Ann must have been an extraordinary woman for an extraordinary man like Eric to have loved her so much.

She left the shower, bundled up in her thick robe and combed out her hair. Totally relaxed now, she stepped out onto the balcony. The breeze from the ocean felt good on her face and the smell, from now on, would always remind her of Eric. Musingly, she looked down, calculating the distance to the ground.

"Thinking about jumping?" a deep voice asked from behind.

Shelley looked back at him with a faint smile then turned and gazed out over the ocean. He came to her, wrapping his strong arms around her waist, kissing the back of her neck. She leaned into him. He'd just showered and shaved and smelled wonderful.

He spoke softly into her ear as if he'd read her mind. "Ann would've wanted me to find someone to love. Ya know, I thought when she died I could never love another woman, and for ten years I didn't, but then I found you, and you freed me from a prison of hurt and pain. I didn't even realize how lonely I was until you came into my life. You made me love again, Shelley. You made me laugh again. Even though you and Ann are as different as night and day, I think she would have liked you, Shelley, and I think you would've liked her."

Shelley let her head fall back against his chest. "Eric, you seem to always

know just what I'm thinking and how I'm feeling. Am I really that transparent?"

"Yes." Eric laughed. "Of course, I have help."

Shelley smiled. "Help?"

"Yep. Supernatural help. God's help. For example, my choosing you for the MART. I'd had dreams about you. I'd had so many dreams that I knew you the moment I laid eyes on you."

"You're kidding."

"I'm very serious."

"How can that be?"

He shrugged. "How? Well, with God all things are possible. I began having precognitive dreams when I was very young."

"How young?"

"Ten. I had— an experience, an amazing spiritual experience. A real awakening. It's too long a story to tell right now, but it was a significant happening in my life. Once I realized God was real, I mean, truly real, then it became my daily goal to talk to Him and to communicate with Him. Talk to Him through prayer and listen to Him through meditation. Once I came to know His voice, I began to have dreams and visions and other things too."

"And so, like, you became psychic?"

He chuckled, holding her tighter. "Everyone is psychic. It's just that not everyone has quieted their mind and allowed the connection. And not everyone who has, is hearing God's voice, but that's a whole other subject to be discussed at a later time."

"And so now you can read my mind?"

"Yes," he laughed, "but not because I'm psychic. You're just very easy to read."

"Hmph, whatever. Tell me more about your dreams."

"Well, many of them seemed to have very little significance, as if they were just practice. Some have been important. Like in one dream, I saw a truck skid out of control right into my car while I was driving Ricky to school. The dream was so clear that I went a different way for two weeks. Then it happened. A truck lost its brakes and flew across an intersection. It hit a school bus and several children were seriously injured. I wish I could've prevented it, but I didn't know a time frame and I hadn't seen the bus in my dream. I'd only seen Ricky lying on the street and paramedics covering his face with a sheet."

"Oh, that's horrible."

"It would've been, but I listened to the signs being given me."

"How wonderful to have been given this power."

"I wouldn't call it a power, though it is, as you said, a gift. Still, I had to work for it. Constant prayer and meditation, tuning into the Lord's voice, and opening my mind to receive His love and light, through that anyone can develop a bit of a sixth sense. It's just a matter of recognizing God's voice.

When you awaken to who you really are, a child of God, you too can become powerful because you begin to realize that all things are possible with God."

"I know we've talked about God, but I didn't realize you were so religious. You haven't said anything about attending a church."

"Ricky and I, and the Lee brothers too, we are very dedicated to God, to Jesus, and there are a few congregations we attend back home because fellowshipping with others who believe in Jesus is important. Though, when we can't attend, we make sure we take time on the Sabbath to read the Word and maybe listen to an online sermon, or serve others in some way."

"You haven't done that for the past six weeks."

He smiled. "Are you sure about that?"

She smiled. "Okay, I stand corrected."

Eric nodded. "I'm really glad we've been able to talk about these important things. I'm grateful God gave me this opportunity to broach the subject with you. I knew He would present just the right time. Shelley, are you at all 'religious,' as you put it?"

"Not really. I'm not sure what I think about that kind of stuff. I don't really know much about it."

"Would you like to learn?"

"Sure. You might as well be my teacher in that too."

"Awesome! From here on out I'll include you in my worship time. For now, let me tell you one thing. God is real, and He has a plan for you. Our meeting was not a random happening. We were meant to be together. So think about that and also, think about what you want to accomplish, Shelley. Put it out there. Tell your Father in heaven. As I've already said, with Him, all things are possible."

"All things? Anything I want?"

"Well, yes, though when you're connected to God, you may find you want something different than what you thought, because your priorities change."

She nodded in understanding. "So, what do you want, Eric?"

He turned to face her. "Well, my main goal is to be standing with my loved ones in the presence of my Savior. But, at this very moment I am totally content. Still, I do have goals I'd like to obtain. All I want at this time though, is to be with you. I also want to go to this dinner and get these sponsors."

"It makes me nervous. I wish we could skip the dinner. Could we?"

"We could. But— we don't operate that way, do we?" Eric went from boyfriend to Master in the blink of an eye. "We face all challenges head on, not that this is a challenge. They've already seen you perform. They only want to meet you. There's no challenge." He gave her a squeeze. "We'd better get moving. I'll leave you to dress."

Thirty minutes later Eric knocked on Shelley's door. She opened it and stood nervously waiting for his approval.

His eyes moved over her. The dress was a silky, cream-colored confection

with golden threads. It fit her curves, flowing gracefully down over her hips, flaring out at the floor. She turned slowly and there was a sound of breath being released.

She turned back to face him. The dress came softly across Shelley's shoulders in the front, dipping down to show just a hint of her soft skin.

Her hair was taken up on the sides, accentuating her lovely face. "Well?" Shelley asked. "What do you think?"

He shook his head. "I can't think of words to express what I see."

"Sure you can, Eric, you're an educated man," she teased.

She turned to look into the mirror and frowned.

"Is everything okay?" he asked from behind, as he admired her image in the mirror.

"Hmm, just thinking that maybe I should've worn a br– ." She glanced up realizing she was talking to Eric, not her daughter. Her cheeks turned pink. "Um, never mind."

But Eric could finish the sentence in his mind and glanced again at her image. He cleared his throat. "Uh, shall we go?" he muttered.

They met the others in the lobby. "I only have one thing to say," Justin announced. "Eric, you are one lucky man."

Shelley giggled and kissed him on the cheek. "And don't you all look nice in your suits," she praised.

Justin offered Shelley his arm, then offered his other arm to Ricky who offered Jason his arm. "You guys are so silly," Shelley laughed.

"This looks like a scene from *The Wizard of Oz."*

They headed toward the door and Shelley's eyes grew wide. "We're going in that?" She pointed to a huge limousine parked out in front of the hotel.

"Yes, we're going in that," Eric mocked, eyes twinkling.

"Oh, wow!" Shelley exclaimed gleefully. "Oh, this is gonna be so cool!" She caught herself, looked around at the smiling men, and raised her chin. "I mean– how lovely."

Inside the limo the men got a kick out of watching her play with all the amenities. They arrived at the restaurant and were led to a large table where the three sponsors were already seated.

Shelley's hands began to tremble and Eric gave them a squeeze. "You'll do fine," he whispered.

His hands were warm and strong and she wished he wouldn't let go. The three men stood at their approach.

Eric spoke first. "Shelley Adams, I'd like to present Alan Bearden, Dick Johnson, and Lyn Fontaine. Gentlemen, our newest champ."

Shelley smiled and extended her hand which each man shook, but Mr. Fontaine didn't let go.

"This simply cannot be the same woman we saw fight yesterday."

"I must've looked a fright yesterday," Shelley said.

"You looked very tough and maybe a little worse for wear, yet this evening, you look like an angel." He held a chair for her. She sat gracefully, glancing at Eric who smiled reassuringly.

The men shook hands and were seated. Mr. Bearden ordered champagne. Eric winked at Shelley.

"Okay, Shelley, Alan here is a representative of Nike," Eric explained to Shelley. "Dick is here for Mattel and he specializes in dolls and Lyn deals mostly in film promotion."

Eric asked the men about their wives and children which led to a long explanation of how Alan Bearden's grandson got the raw end of the deal from a high school football coach.

Mr. Bearden turned apologetically to Shelley, "I suppose we're being rude and boring. Maybe we should change our conversation to something other than football?"

Shelley shrugged. "You don't have to do that. I mean, my heart really goes out to your grandson. I think high school football can do a lot to make or break a young man, don't you? I think there's probably an awful lot of raw talent out there that never gets noticed or acknowledged just because of politics. They say high school football, and even more so, college football, is big business and unfortunately, where money is involved, there is corruption."

She shook her head. "It would be nice to think that the coaches truly care about the students and about their futures, push them toward colleges, hype them to college scouts, but from what I'm hearing from you, and from a few friends of mine, that isn't always the case. I think if your grandson really believes in himself, he should just walk on at a Division I school."

All seven men gaped at Shelley. Eric grinned at her and she suddenly felt self-conscious. "I– I'm sorry," she stammered, "sometimes I get a little carried away with my thoughts."

"How refreshing," Mr. Johnson finally spoke. "Eric, I believe you've chosen well. Ms. Adams would you care to dance?"

Shelley ended up dancing with all seven men before the food arrived. She sat down heavily.

"Oh, come now," Lyn Fontaine teased, "an athlete isn't supposed to tire so easily."

"Well it is seven to one," Shelley reminded him. Still, she admitted to herself, she was even more tired than she should be and thought she was probably still feeling the effects of her injuries.

As they dined they chatted about yesterday's tournament, with Shelley venturing to offer her opinion, when she had one.

"So, tell us, Ms. Adams," Mr. Bearden began. "Why do you want to participate in the MART?"

Her heart began to race. This was the part she'd dreaded. Shelley put her fork down and thought carefully about her response. "Well, I mean, I really

love the martial arts. There's a nobility and beauty. I love the sincerity and character of those involved. Most of all though, I guess, I want to learn to be master of myself, so I never have to submit to anyone simply because I'm smaller or weaker."

She stopped and looked slowly around, trying to decide if maybe she'd said too much.

"Anything else?" Mr. Johnson prodded.

"Well, there's the spiritual side of things. I mean, the gathering of knowledge and light is important to me." She glanced at Eric. "I'm told the universe is full of mysteries just waiting to be discovered. Becoming perfect in something, in anything, even in martial arts, it's like a foothold into that realm. Watch a ballet, listen to Mozart or watch a martial artist in action. They're all moving toward that perfection, that light and knowledge."

Eric's gaze held pure admiration.

"So why the martial arts?" Mr. Fontaine asked. "Why not ballet?"

Shelley nodded and smiled. "Actually, I tried ballet. I loved it, but the finances at the time didn't work out. That's okay though because I think a martial artist displays just as much beauty and perfection." She held her breath.

"You haven't even mentioned the money," Mr. Bearden said. "Is it not motivational to you?"

Her brow furrowed. "The money?"

All heads turned toward Eric. Darn, he'd forgotten to ask them to not mention the financial aspects. "I, uh, I didn't tell her about the money. I didn't want that to be her motivation. I wanted her to want the MART for other reasons," Eric explained.

"What money?" Shelley asked again.

"There's a significant amount of cash for the winners of the tournament in each division," Mr. Johnson answered.

"Oh, I think I do remember something about that," Shelley admitted. "And I have to say that ten thousand dollars would be a huge help, if I were to win."

"I'm not sure where you got your information, but you're a little off on the amount," Mr. Fontaine corrected. "In the women's division the prize is $500,000."

Shelley's eyes opened wide. "Half a million?" She grabbed her glass of champagne and downed the entire contents, which Mr. Fontaine refilled immediately.

"But, that's not all. As a matter of fact the winning jackpot is only the beginning," Mr. Fontaine added. "The winners make millions of dollars in endorsements and film proceeds."

Shelley drained her glass again. "Millions?"

"You've heard of Chevez Alta and Mimi Ray? They received their start at the MART."

Mr. Fontaine tried to fill Shelley's glass again but Eric placed his hand

over it.

"I had no idea there was that much money involved," she smiled. "But it certainly makes the pot sweeter." Dudley Moore in the movie *Arthur* popped into her mind when he says, "*I took the money, I'm not stupid*." She giggled.

"Well, Eric, it looks to me like we have ourselves a real winner," Mr. Bearden announced, his companions in agreement.

Mr. Fontaine filled everyone's glass. "To our most lovely new champion, may she bring us many happy returns." Glasses clinked and were emptied.

With Eric distracted with the legal discussion that ensued, between Justin and the three sponsors, Shelley felt more and more like giggling as she guzzled champagne. Propping her elbows on the table, she rested her head on her hands and tried to pay attention, but her eyes slowly began to close.

A loud bang woke her and she realized her elbow had slipped off the table. "Oops," she smiled, pushing her hair back out of her face. "I thin I lozzed my place."

Bearden's eyebrows rose. Ricky covered his face with his hand to smother his laughter and Eric stood. "Sorry, the champ isn't used to drinking. I'd better get her back and sobered up before our flight."

Mr. Bearden turned to Justin who would be representing Eric and Shelley. "We'll have some contracts drawn up and get back to you." The men shook hands and took their leave.

Eric led Shelley out to the car. Half way out though, Shelley stopped. "Wait," she said a little too loudly. She pulled the hem of her dress up, exposing her ankles and politely slipped out of her shoes. "Thaz better," she murmured as she walked away.

Eric rolled his eyes, scooped the shoes up and placed them in her hands. He opened the car door and Shelley she turned to him urgently. "Eric!" she said loudly.

"What is it?" he answered, concerned at the urgency in her voice. "Do you think I'm pretty?"

Ricky and Jason couldn't control their laughter. Eric only smiled. "Yes, Sweetie, I think you're very pretty."

Satisfied, she climbed into the limo. Feeling completely content, Shelley leaned her head on Eric's shoulder and began to sing. "I feel pretty, oh so pretty, I feel pretty and witty and gay..."

Suddenly she sat upright and spoke to the three who were sitting across from her. "Did you know– that Natalie Wood– never sang one note in *West Side Story*? It was all dubbed."

Ricky laughed. "I'd heard that. Did you know that, Jason?"

"No. How about you Justin?"

"It's news to me," Justin chuckled.

She turned to Eric, "I think Natalie Wood izz one of the mozt beautiful women that ever lived, don't you?"

He patted her knee. “Natalie Wood was beautiful.” They arrived at the hotel and pulled Shelley from the car.

“Wait ” she yelled urgently, pointing an accusing finger at Jason. “Do you have my shoes?”

Chuckling, Jason held up his empty hands.

“You’ve got them, honey,” Eric whispered.

Ignoring him, she looked hard at Jason then to Justin, back to Jason and back to Justin.

“Did anybody ever tell you two you could pazz for brothers?” A burst of laughter erupted from the men.

“Oh, Shelley, we should liquor you up more often,” Ricky wheezed, holding his side.

Their jovial party caused a stir as they entered the hotel lobby. The two men standing at the front desk turned immediately.

“Oh, Mr. Kino, excuse me, Mr. Kino?”

Eric looked up to see two of the directors from the tournament Shelley had just competed in. Glancing at his watch he wondered what business could possibly be so important.

“I’m glad we caught you,” one began. “We heard you were heading to Atlanta early in the morning.”

Eric nodded. “We are. Is there a problem?”

“We, uh, we heard that your student had been roughed up in the locker room and ended up in the hospital.”

They stood in the center of the lobby talking while Eric tried to set them straight about what actually happened, glad that Shelley had finally let him in on what had transpired in the locker room.

Shelley, bored with all the talk, meandered around the large mezzanine, stopping first to peer in the shop window where she’d bought her dress, then moving on to other shops.

Ricky kept track of her while his father reassured the directors that no complaint would be made.

A well-dressed man stepped off the elevator. Noticing Shelley immediately, he approached her, smiling and obviously thinking she was alone and available.

Upon talking to her he also discovered she was very friendly and very intoxicated. The man, himself not completely sober, had no idea four extremely lethal men watched his every move.

The man put his hand on Shelley’s shoulder as he spoke to her. Shelley laughed. Slowly, his hand slid down her back. Shelley stiffened slightly and pulled away, but he leaned forward and talked to her reassuringly, while his hand caressed her back.

Enough. Eric motioned toward his son to go see to Shelley.

“Want some help?” Jason asked.

"Thanks, Jason, but I think I can handle it. Be right back."

Ricky calmly made his way over to Shelley and took her by the hand. "C'mon, honey," he said, paying no attention to the man.

The man stopped Ricky with a hand on his shoulder. Ricky's eyes glanced at the offending hand then moved slowly back up to the man's face. The guy was too inebriated to realize the danger he was in.

"Excuse me, but the lady and I were about to have a drink," he slurred as he slid his arm around Shelley's waist.

"She's obviously had enough to drink," Ricky said softly.

"Is she your date?" the man asked.

"She's my sister," Ricky lied. "And I advise you to remove your hands from her." He tugged on Shelley's hand to pull her away, but the man had hold of her other arm.

Shelley seemed quite amused, tossing her head back and forth to eye each man as he spoke.

"She's certainly old enough to decide for herself who she wants to go with, aren't you, gorgeous?" the man asked.

Shelley smiled and energetically nodded 'yes' to the question.

Ricky watched the stranger's hand glide over Shelley's arm and prayed for control. He'd grown tired of the game. He leaned forward and whispered something into the man's ear.

The man's face paled. He stepped back, looking Ricky over carefully. Ricky stood patiently waiting, his eyebrows raised. Finally, the man threw his hands up in surrender and left quickly. Ricky took Shelley's hand and led her back just as Eric's conversation ended.

As the group stepped onto the elevator, Shelley began to sing again. "I could've danced all night, I could've danced all night and still have begged for more..."

She turned to Ricky, "Did you know— that Audrey Hepburn— never sang a note in *My Fair Lady*? It was all dubbed."

"Really?" Ricky answered, beginning to chuckle again.

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes dreamily. "I think Audrey Hepburn is one of the most beautiful women that ever lived don't you?"

"Yes," they all agreed.

"Eric?" Shelley asked as they stepped off the elevator. "Did we get the money?"

"Yes we did," he answered softly.

"Good. Because I need some new shoes," she said pulling up her dress, "I lozzed mine."

Ricky laughed so hard he tripped over Jason's foot and Jason was laughing so hard he could barely pull him back up. A man opened a door and glared at them as they went by. Shelley put her finger to her lips, "Shhhhhhhh," she hissed at him.

Eric pulled on Shelley's arm and apologized to the man.

Finally making it to Shelley's room, Eric leaned her against the wall while he fished for the keycard.

Jason, Justin and Ricky moved down one more room.

"By the way, Rick," Jason asked. "That guy that was hassling Shelley, what did you say to make him run away like that?"

Ricky appeared a little ashamed and shrugged his shoulders. "I, uh, I introduced myself."

"And?" Justin prodded.

"And then I told him that if he touched her one more time I was gonna tear his freaking arms off."

"Freaking?" Jason asked.

Ricky shrugged. "Close enough. I may have to repent."

"Ha," Shelley laughed heartily. "Tear his freaking arms off! Thazz really great!"

Eric clapped a hand over Shelley's mouth and pulled her into her room as Ricky, Jason and Justin tried again to control their laughter. Eric sat Shelley on the bed and took her shoes out of her hands.

She lay down, giggling. "Tear his freaking arms off. I'm gonna tear your freaking arms off," she mocked loudly, laughing in delight.

Eric ignored her jabber. "Shelley, can you get out of that dress and get to bed by yourself?"

"Silly question. Yes, of course I can," she said as she stretched out and closed her eyes.

Sighing, he pulled the blankets out from under her and covered her. She reached out to him. "Let's snuggle," she pleaded.

He smiled at her. "You're in no condition to snuggle or do anything else. We have to catch a 5:00 AM flight and we'll be lucky if you're sober enough for them to even allow you to board the plane."

Shelley sat up. "Are you saying I'm drunk?"

Eric pushed her down. "You are most definitely drunk."

She sat up again, "Well, only a teensy-weensy bit."

He pushed her gently down again and reached behind her head to gently pull the clasp out of her hair.

"Eric," she asked dreamily, "did you know that you're my father?"

"Excuse me?" he asked, clearly baffled.

"Did-you-know-that-you-are-my-father?" she said slowly, enunciating each word.

"Shelley, I don't understand."

"Well, if I'm Ricky's sister and you're his father then that makes you my father too, right?"

Eric shook his head. "Shhh, tell ya what. We'll talk about it in the morning, okay?"

Smiling sweetly, Shelley agreed and snuggled up to her pillow.

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Jeremiah 33:3

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

Chapter Twelve

Tommy leaned against the wall and smiled as he patiently waited for James to finish ranting and raving. The two men to whom James was directing his comments cowered and flinched with each wave of bellowing profanity.

"Why can I not get correct information? She's nothing to worry about? She's old? She's not in very good shape?" He cursed God. "She's just picked up the top sponsors so I'm thinking she must have something going for her."

The Chinese man looked up. "Yeah, she's got Kino as an instructor." James struck out. The young man staggered to his feet. "Sorry, Mr. Crane. I only meant that..."

Tommy interrupted. "We know what you meant. There's no need to remind anyone of Kino's influence." Tommy patted his friend on the shoulder. "Don't pay any attention to my brother's temper."

At Tommy's words both the young Chinese man and his companion turned fearful eyes toward James.

But Tommy only smiled. "As I was saying, pay no attention to James's temper tantrum, because it will be over as soon as I tell him the other little piece of information." He paused dramatically.

"What information?" James asked impatiently.

"Something you'll find amusing."

"Tell me," James ordered.

Tommy smiled. "Our friend has not only found himself sponsors for his student. He's finally found himself a new love."

James looked into Tommy's cold blue eyes. "A new love? Just what are you saying?"

"I'm saying, dear brother, that Kino has committed the unpardonable sin. He's fallen in love with his student, I mean, with *the* student. He has it bad, bro. He lives and breathes for her. His world revolves completely around her."

Tommy watched the information plant itself in James's brain. A wicked, evil grin spread across his older brother's face.

"Kino is doing Shelley Adams?" James asked, moving slowly to his desk.

Tommy shrugged. "Well, I don't know about all that. He's some paragon of virtue, right? Which is cool, if you think about it, because, I mean, wouldn't it be fun to get to her and take her before Kino does?"

James tapped a finger on the edge of the polished wood, deep in thought. A chuckle began in his stomach, worked its way up his throat and burst forth.

His eyes met Tommy's and for a brief moment, they reveled in the possibilities of the new twist.

James recovered quickly though and turned toward the two men who stood slightly confused, waiting for their next orders.

"I want to know everything. Schedules, addresses, family, what she has for breakfast, where she buys her groceries, her dog's name– everything. Is that understood?"

"Uh, she don't have a dog," the man offered.

Tommy rolled his eyes. "Take Dirk and Louis and don't waste any time. Now get out of here."

When they were alone, the brothers smiled quietly at each other. Eric Kino was making it almost– too easy.

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Shelley awoke in her own bed to strange smells and the sound of male voices. Pulling on a pair of blue-jean shorts and a t-shirt she made her way downstairs.

The aroma of cooking food was alternating between pleasant and nauseating. She could just barely remember the flight home and began to wonder if Florida had merely been a dream. At the entrance to the kitchen she came to a halt.

Everyone had apparently made themselves at home. Eric was at the sink, the water running. Jason was cooking something on the stove, Justin sat at the table reading something on his phone and Ricky leaned back in his chair, happily peeling a banana. They chatted softly amongst themselves yet to Shelley their voices boomed in her head.

Justin looked up first. "Hi, sleepyhead," he said with a smile.

Eric shut off the water and turned, his smile brightening at the sight of her. She crossed the room to him and he hugged her fiercely, then looked into her eyes. "How are you feeling?"

"Not great."

He nodded. "Here. I was just about to bring this up to you. It will help." He shoved a mug of strong tea at her.

She sipped it gingerly and found a seat on the countertop.

Ricky came to her. "I realize you probably don't remember too much about last night, but I want you to know you were amazing. You won those sponsors over like a pro and we were all terribly impressed." He took her hand and kissed it.

"Thank you, Ricky," she said sweetly as she touched his face then pushed her cup of tea into his hands. "And now– I think I have to throw up." She jumped off the counter and dashed up the stairs.

She came back a few minutes later feeling a little better but looking a little worse for wear. She went to the cabinet, pulled out a bottle of ibuprofen and poured four of them into her hand.

Peering over Jason's shoulder, she tried to see what he was stirring around in the pan.

Eric took her hand, removed the pills she was about to swallow and replaced them with the tea. She frowned at him. He smiled. "I promise, it will work wonders, if you drink it."

"If you say so, Master Kino," she answered smartly.

He smiled. "I have some calls I really need to make. Do you mind if I go up to your room for some privacy?"

"Not at all."

Eric took his phone from his pocket and headed up the short flight of stairs. Justin began telling Shelley about her adventures the previous night and had her laughing despite her pounding head.

"Shelley."

Everyone looked up at Eric as he re-entered the room, mostly because of the controlled tone of his voice.

"What is this?" he asked, though it was obvious he already knew the answer. He held a piece of mail in his hand.

She approached him slowly, squinting at the paper he held up. "Oh that," she said flippantly. "It's no big deal. They just want me to come back in and redo my pap smear. I've been meaning to make an appointment and go back in, but it's such a hassle and I sort of forgot, what with getting ready for Daytona and all. Besides, we really haven't had much time."

"You forgot?" he asked incredulously. "How could you forget? This is important. And don't give me the time excuse. We would've made time. Do you realize what this says?"

"Yes, I realize exactly what it says," she snipped at him. "It says that the pap smear was unclear and to come back in for another test. That doesn't mean anything. More than likely some lab technician dropped the slide."

He shook his head at her. "Or, did you think that it could mean there's an actual problem?"

"Okay. I'm sorry. I forgot." She nodded toward the others in the room. "This is kind of personal, Eric."

"You're right. Sorry," he murmured as he walked back upstairs.

She stood alone looking so pitiful that Justin felt the need to comfort her. He went to her and put his arm around her shoulders. "Ya know, Ann died of uterine cancer."

Shelley looked up into Justin's dark eyes and then over at Ricky, who nodded.

She found Eric in her room, sitting on her bed on his phone. She sat down next to him. "Justin told me about Ann. I'm sorry, Eric."

He patted her arm. "Shhh."

"I'm sorry I forgot," she whispered.

Eric put his hand over the phone. "Shh, I can't hear," and then, "Yes, that

will be fine. Thanks."

He ended the call, put his arm around her shoulders, tilted her face up and placed a kiss on her forehead.

"So, you're not angry anymore?" Shelley asked.

Without speaking a word he kissed her.

Shelley sighed. "This is nice. We could just stay here and talk all day like we did in Daytona."

"No, actually, we can't, though I would love that."

"Why not?" she purred.

"Well, because you have a doctor's appointment in thirty minutes."

Shelley's eyes opened wide. "What? You made an appointment for me?" She frowned. "I can't believe you did that. Eric, I was just in the hospital a little over twenty-four hours ago. Can't this wait?"

"I know you hate going to the doctor," he said, "but sometimes we have to do things we don't like. It has to be done. Wouldn't you like to just get it over with?"

She shrugged and then ran her hand over his chest. "We could be late," she offered provocatively.

Eric groaned and stilled her hand. "It would be rude. They did me a favor by working you..."

His words were stopped by her kiss.

"You're making me crazy," he said breathlessly.

"That was my intention."

"Then you succeeded. Shelley, please don't think I don't want to stay here with you, but we really need to get this done. If you'll get ready, I'll take you there myself."

He stood, but Shelley lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Eric turned to her. "So, is there anything else you need to tell me about your health? Maybe something else you forgot?"

She ignored his sarcasm and sincerely thought a moment. "Nothing comes to mind."

"Good. Because I don't want any more surprises."

They left the others at Shelley's home, which didn't bother her a bit. It was when they returned a few hours later that she was bothered.

She walked in the door feeling irritable, so the shoes and socks and luggage all over the living room seemed to jump out at her. Normally, something like that would never have bothered her. As a matter of fact, she hated women who made a big deal about a house being spotlessly clean at all times, but today was different.

She walked into the kitchen to find another mess and the same for the bathroom. She looked out the bathroom window. Ricky had found the trampoline in her backyard and appeared to be sleeping on it.

Eric was in the hall as she came out of the bathroom. "Now, that's a sour

face. What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she snapped. "Just nothing. Where are your little friends, Justin and Jason?"

Eric shook his head. "I haven't seen them but they're around here somewhere, because their luggage is in the living room."

Shelley found them, though, one asleep in her sons' room and one asleep on her bed. She turned and stomped down the stairs and out to the living room, picking things up with a vengeance.

Eric grabbed her around the waist. "What's wrong?"

"Look at this place. It looks like a hurricane hit."

"It's a lot of people in a small space. I'll help you clean things up but I don't think that's what's actually bothering you. Talk to me."

She turned on him. "You think you know everything. You men are all alike. You make a mess and expect a woman to clean up for you. You push us around. You take us for granted and you know we can't do anything about it because you're bigger and stronger. We always have to submit to you. Always. And I'm sick of it. It doesn't really matter how skilled I become, there is always gonna be some man better that can force me to do whatever he wants."

Jason and Justin sat up listening, which wasn't very hard to do since Shelley was shouting at the top of her lungs. Eric walked away from her a few steps and then turned to face her.

"I realize, Shelley, that what I'm about to say is probably gonna make you madder than you already are, but what you just said is absurd and irrational. Number one, not all men are alike. Number two, Ricky and I have been cleaning up after ourselves all our lives, even before Ann passed away, and we will continue to do so. Number three, I've never pushed you around or taken advantage of my strength except as your teacher which I'd do with any student, male or female. And number four, yes, you are absolutely right about one thing, there is always gonna be someone bigger, stronger and more skilled than you. Always. So get used to the idea." He sighed and softened. "But, Shelley, I would never force you to do something you don't want to do, and I certainly wouldn't allow anyone else to."

Shelley came right back. "Except you did. You just forced me to go to the doctor today."

"Finally, you admit what this is all about. Shelley, sweetheart, that was out of love and concern for you. You could've refused, but you didn't because common sense told you to take care of business."

She turned away. "I know," she said quietly.

Eric put his arms around her. "Why does going to the doctor upset you so much?" he asked her gently. He knew the answer, but thought having her say it would help.

She turned to face him, lips trembling. "It makes me feel– violated. It's having to take your clothes off and submit yourself to a stranger. I know it

sounds stupid...” her voice trailed off.

“Feelings are never stupid. They’re just feelings. Now, I know you don’t like to talk about what happened to you, but, have you considered that the rape has something to do with how you feel about doctors?”

“Of course I have!” she yelled. She stopped, took a deep breath, calmed herself and began again. “Of course I have. But knowing that doesn’t get rid of the feeling. I realize they’re not connected, but one reminds me of the other.” She lowered her head. “I’m sorry for being so mean and taking it out on you.”

Eric pulled her close. “I can take it. Don’t worry, sweetie, we’re gonna work through all these feelings that cause you so much anxiety.”

Justin and Jason came down the stairs.

“Wow, you guys are back already?” Jason asked, politely pretending they hadn’t heard the conversation.

“We were gonna clean everything up before you got home, but we were so tired from last night we sort of fell asleep,” Justin offered.

Shelley smiled at the fear on their faces.

She turned to Eric. “You haven’t been able to spend much time with your friends. So, why don’t you guys all go out for the evening and give me some alone time?”

He didn’t even question her. They quickly gathered their belongings, woke Ricky from the trampoline and left, each one kissing her cheek as they walked out the door.

Ricky turned to her at the door. “Jason said you’re mad at us.” He got down on his knees and grabbed her legs. “Please don’t be mad at me, Shelley.”

She laughed. “Even if I was, it would be hard to stay mad for very long because you’re so cute.”

“She’s talking about me,” Jason said.

“Is not,” Ricky argued.

“Is too.”

“Is not.”

“Goodbye,” Shelley waved, cutting them off.

Eric rubbed a hand down her arm. “I’ll be back tonight.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised.

Lowering his head, he kissed her slowly.

“Anytime, now,” Ricky called.

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Birds singing cheerfully at sunrise didn’t quite match Shelley’s mood. When she woke and realized she’d slept through the night, disappointment washed over her. Why hadn’t Eric come back to see her like he’d said he would?

At that very moment, someone knocked on her front door and she rushed to answer it.

"Good morning, Shelley. Are you feeling better?"

"Physically I feel better. Emotionally, I feel sad."

"Why are you sad?"

"Because, I was looking forward to you coming back last night."

"I did come back."

"You didn't wake me?"

"It was so late, the house was dark, I decided to let you sleep. Is this a relationship buster?"

She smiled at the silly question. "Oh, no, not this time. You get three strikes before you're out," she teased.

"Whew, glad to hear that." He clapped his hands together. "It's time to get down to business. We have to get moving."

"First things first," she said as she went on her toes and kissed him.

He smelled good. Freshly showered. She wanted to stay home and cuddle with him all day. She shook her head. What was she thinking? She wanted to win the MART. As Eric had said, they need to keep their priorities straight. She realized she felt different, inside her mind. Small things like she kissed him instead of waiting for him to kiss her. That was not like her at all. Apparently, she'd found some kind of confidence during her time down in Daytona. She suddenly realized she felt much more powerful than she did before the tournament.

She smiled at Eric. Yep, her confidence level had definitely jumped since the trip to Daytona. Maybe it was the tournament experience. Maybe it was that little altercation on the beach or maybe it was their confessed love. This morning she felt downright brazen.

She would keep her priorities straight. She would work hard. She was definitely looking forward to the coming days, both for the training AND FOR the time she would be spending with her new boyfriend. Though Eric was not a boy in any way, she thought. He was a man. A good man. This coming year is gonna be awesome!

Strict training resumed, and life went back to normal– as normal as it could be for a future MART competitor. However, the very first week back from Daytona turned into a disaster. Staying up late, laughing and playing when they should be hard at work, talking and kissing and ultimately resisting the urge to take things further, falling off the routine over and over, Eric finally made a drastic decision.

Shelley was furious when he informed her of the new plan. He explained that the routine of each day had to be completely consistent, and that consistency meant no distractions and, unfortunately, he was a major distraction. "Therefore," he said, "whatever relationship we share will be shared only on Sundays. I will not be accompanying you home and having dinners with you and spending evenings with you Monday through Saturday. During those days I'll act only as your teacher. Also, when we are out of town

at competitions, we will completely maintain our student-teacher status. You have to believe me, it's for the best."

Her anger came mostly from him not bothering to discuss the decision with her. He told her there was no room for discussion. He made the decision as a MART instructor and not as the man who loved her. She didn't speak to him for days during which time he explained how he had to make the separation between those two different roles or she would end up losing in the first rounds of the MART. Then he told her that she was gonna have to make the same distinction.

She finally came to terms with it, but was disgusted with herself for missing Eric so much. Like some schoolgirl, she found herself looking forward to each morning with great anticipation just to be near him and she longed for Sundays when they were able to spend time together. He began teaching her about God, about Jesus and His great love. They would also cuddle and kiss and talk about their feelings. She yearned for him and all those yearnings made her angry with herself for needing him so much. She was disgusted with herself for the weakness. She didn't want to need him, yet she gave in to that need every Sunday.

Yep, Sundays were the best. Though they weren't intimate physically, mentally and emotionally they grew closer and closer. They developed a trust and a friendship that was deep and abiding. They talked, sometimes about nothing important, sometimes about politics, or books, about world hunger or something as simple as cooking or favorite colors.

Eric talked to her about the amazing spiritual experience he had as a child which brought about his deep faith in God and His Son, Jesus. Shelley had attended church with her family when she was young, though she couldn't really remember much of anything about it. Her parents hadn't really taught her anything. They were too busy trying to make a living. So, listening to Eric tell his miraculous story and bearing his testimony to her, the tiny mustard seed within her began to grow. Shelley took great pleasure in watching Eric's face as he spoke. There was so much light in his eyes and she reveled in his love.

One Sunday, as summer neared its end and the time for Shelley's children to come home approached, Shelley was busy doing the lunch dishes when her phone rang. Since Shelley's hands were wet, Eric took it upon himself to answer it for her.

"Shelley's phone," he answered jovially. "Oh, yes, she's right here, give her a second to dry her hands....This is Eric Kino...Oh, yes, of course, I'm anxious to meet you too....Sure....Yes, that would be fine....Yes, I'll be here. Here she is, one moment." He placed his hand over the receiver. "It's Robert."

Grimacing, Shelley took the phone.

Eric watched her facial expressions as she spoke to her ex-husband. When the conversation ended, she sat down at the table and stared up at the ceiling, something she did whenever she had problems on her mind. Eric smiled at her.

She was so easy to read.

"So, what did Robert say?" he asked her.

"You first."

"Okay, well, he said he'd like to meet me next Sunday when he brings the kids home."

Shelley began to chew on her lip.

"Your turn," Eric coaxed.

She sighed. "He said he was bringing a friend with him, a woman friend, and he wanted to prepare me."

"That was considerate of him."

"I guess."

"What's the problem?"

Shelley shook her head. "I don't know. He just makes me feel so..." Eric waited patiently.

"So– low."

"Do you feel yourself to be– low?"

"No, of course not."

"Really?"

"What are you getting at?"

"If you truly feel good about yourself, then what he thinks of you shouldn't matter. No one should be able to make you feel any way that you don't want to feel or you don't feel yourself. If they do, it's because you already feel that way."

She looked down, trying to take in the information.

Eric reached over and took her hand. "Don't worry, honey, everything's gonna be fine."

"I'm sure I'll survive, anyway." She flashed him a smile. "Positive side is, my boys are coming home. I can't wait for you to meet them. I wish Ricky could come down next week."

Eric tugged her hair. "Well, surprise! He'll be here on Saturday."

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Eric surveyed Shelley's room. Clothes were everywhere. Apparently, Shelley had tried on every piece of clothing she owned. He shook his head. "You don't have to impress Robert or his friend. Just be yourself."

Shelley frowned and nodded. "I guess you're right," she conceded. "But really, who am I?" she asked wistfully.

"You're a beautiful, talented, intelligent, loving woman who still seems to suffer from low self-esteem. Love yourself, Shelley. I do."

Shelley shrugged. "What do you think I should wear?"

"Clothes." But, spotting a white negligee` on the bed, he held it up.

"So, you're saying I'm nothing but a sex toy?"

A bit of temper crossed his face. "It was a joke. What you are to me is everything. What you're doing is annoying and I refuse to play the game." He

left her alone.

Noon came much too swiftly for Shelley. The plan was for Robert and his new lady friend to stay for dinner, making the transition easier on the kids. Barbecued steaks, baked potatoes, salad, rolls, iced tea and watermelon was Shelley's menu plan. She was still working on the salad when Eric let her know a car had pulled into the driveway.

Shelley entered the living room as the boys came running through the front door.

"Mom! Hi ya, Mom " they called happily.

Shelley scooped them up, one in each arm and hugged them to her. "Wow, Mom, you got strong." Joey said with surprise.

"Wow, Joey, so have you." Shelley teased as they planted kisses all over her cheeks.

Eric watched the scene with pleasure. Mark and Joey, he thought, were two of the cutest kids he'd ever seen. Of course, they did look an awful lot like Shelley. Big brown eyes and dimples were their dominant features. Their light brown hair was streaked blond from the sun. Mark was large for his age and Joey small, making the two-year age difference seem more like four.

Shelley put them down and rose to give Robert her hand.

"Hello Shelley, you're looking well."

"Thank you." She looked him over. As always, he was very GQ. A handsome man. He'd begun to show his forty-two years with some graying at the temple, which, of course, made him look more distinguished. Shelley turned to smile at the woman by his side. "I'd like you to meet a friend of mine, Eileen Shore."

Shelley shook the hand of a tall elegant woman with chin-length black hair and bright blue eyes. Her pale skin made her look like a porcelain doll. She was dressed to the hilt in a blue sundress with matching hat, and sandals. Eric could tell by the way Shelley smoothed her hands over her jeans, that she felt plain and shabby by comparison. She'd taken his advice to be herself and pulled on jeans and a white blouse and tied her hair back in a low ponytail. Eric thought she was stunning.

"Hello Shelley," the woman smiled sweetly at her. "I've heard so much about you. I'm happy to finally meet you."

"Hi," Shelley said casually. "It's nice to meet you, too."

There was a slight lull, so Eric stepped forward and introduced himself to Robert and Eileen, shaking hands and smiling warmly.

Shelley watched him with pride. He was so completely self-assured, so confident, so calm. He was in a house that once belonged to the man whose hand he shook, the man who was the father of her children, yet Eric's presence was commanding and everyone felt it. Maybe, Shelley thought, it came from being master of oneself. There is nothing to prove and therefore no ego involved, just a heart full of warmth and love enough for everyone. Eric knelt

down to eye level and spoke to the boys.

"You must be Mark and you must be Joey."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison. "Well it's a great honor to meet you."

Both boys offered a wide grin.

Shelley reached out and touched Mark's shoulder. "You guys sure look great all dressed up. I've never seen two handsomer boys."

Eileen spoke then, her voice sweet and rhythmic like music. "Okay boys, remember what we talked about. Go straight to your room and change clothes." They grabbed their suitcases and ran up to their room.

Shelley tried not to be offended by Eileen usurping her authority in her own home, but it was a slap in the face and it stung. The old feelings of low self-worth seeped in. Eric's glance and smile in her direction let her know that he understood.

"Y'all, sit down and let me get you something to drink," Shelley offered curtly.

When she returned Eileen accepted a glass and turned toward Eric. "Mr. Kino, I understand you're a fighter?" she asked innocently enough.

Shelley practically choked on her tea, while Robert gave her a disdainful look. A fighter? Eric was a Master. Soon to be a Grandmaster. His name appeared in the Black-belt Hall of Fame.

Eric smiled at Eileen. "No, I'm not really a fighter, I'm an instructor. Shelley here is the fighter."

"Oh, yes, Shelley, please tell us about your tournament. I understand you did well." Eileen focused in on Shelley.

"I won four bouts before I was eliminated."

"Oh dear," Eileen pouted. "What happened? Not that I'd understand. A woman fighting in a tournament is beyond my comprehension, but I suppose to each his own."

Fire blazed in Shelley's eyes.

"I'm trying to understand, though. So, tell me," Eileen continued sweetly, "what could possibly have happened in the fifth fight that was so different from the first four?"

"What happened," Shelley said as she rose, "is I got the crap kicked out of me." She smiled sweetly.

Eileen did a ladylike job of being offended.

Shelley smiled stiffly. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a few more things to do to finish the salad."

Eric also excused himself to follow his lady into the kitchen. Shelley was cutting things up with a vengeance as Eric approached her.

"Don't say anything," Shelley warned.

"No problem," Eric said as he grabbed her knife hand and held it down. He kissed first one cheek and then the other and then her forehead and then her chin. Finally she smiled.

"All better?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I guess I'm being a little sensitive." She turned at the sound of the boys bounding down the stairs.

"Master Kino, will you show us some stuff?" they begged.

"Not now," Shelley said, "but soon, okay?"

Robert and Eileen joined them in the kitchen.

"Where's Bree?" Robert asked with a frown.

"Oh, she ended up having to take a later flight, but she's being picked up at the airport as we speak, actually, they should be here any minute," Shelley answered cheerfully.

"Picked up? By whom?" Robert asked.

"By Eric's son, Ricky."

Screams of delight filled the kitchen. "Ricky's coming here? Today? All right!"

"Quiet boys," Robert snapped. "I hadn't realized Bree was acquainted with Ricky Kino."

"They're not acquainted, but they will be by the time they get back here," Shelley answered glibly.

Eric broke in. "I assure you, Bree is safe with my son."

Shelley smiled. There was hardly anything Robert could say to that, unless he wanted to argue with Eric over how trustworthy Ricky is, and she was pretty sure Robert wouldn't want to do that.

"Let's head out back," Shelley suggested.

"I'll get the steaks," Eric offered.

Outside, the boys headed straight to the trampoline.

"Be careful," Eileen called after them.

Shelley took a breath, intending to tell her that her boys were perfectly at home on the tramp, but had no chance because Robert was addressing her while Eric was in the kitchen out of earshot.

"Shelley, do you really think it was wise to send a stranger to pick up our daughter?"

Shelley's gaze drifted to Eileen and back to Robert who were both looking extremely self-righteous.

"There is no one in the world that Bree would be safer with and he's not a stranger. He's like a son to me."

"Oh honestly, Shelley, when are you gonna grow up? You've known this boy for just a few weeks and he's already like your son? You should give as much devotion to your own children."

Shelley opened her mouth to defend herself, but was interrupted by the shriek of a beautiful young lady bursting through the screen door.

"Daddy, hi!" she cried as she hugged Robert then turned to offer her hand to Eileen.

"Hi, I'm Bree."

Bree hugged her Mom next. “Hi Mom, how’s it going?” she whispered in her ear.

“Not great,” Shelley whispered back. “Where’s Ricky?”

Bree sighed. “He’s taking my luggage up to my room for me. Oh, Mom, he is so sweet and soooooo good looking,” she drooled.

Shelley could hear Ricky’s voice in the kitchen.

“Hey Dad, whaz up?”

Eric’s reply was spoken in Mandarin. Ricky spoke to his father a few minutes more, getting the gist of Shelley’s situation then came bursting out the screen door.

“Shelley! Man, oh man have I missed you,” he cried as he swooped her up and spun her around, ending with a kiss directly on her mouth, making a huge smacking sound. He then turned from a blushing Shelley to introduce himself to a frowning Robert and a surprised Eileen. Mark and Joey came running and Ricky surprised them too by scooping them up in his big arms.

“So, these are the two little monsters? Your mom has been telling me all about you and she says I should kick your butts.”

Bree giggled and Shelley laughed as Ricky got on his knees and kung fu’d the boys to the ground.

He jumped up.“I win. As usual,” he bragged. “C’mon guys, I just love jumping on a trampoline.”

They raced over, Ricky doing a flip onto the trampoline. The boys jumped on and they played King of the Tramp. A minute later, Ricky jumped back off the trampoline, grabbed Bree and threw her on. “We have a prisoner boys,” he yelled as they jumped on her, tickling her. Bree screamed with delight. Ricky jumped off again, this time grabbing Shelley around the waist and throwing her on the trampoline.

Eric watched a moment through the screen door before calling Ricky to help. Ricky jumped off the trampoline, did a double flip with a twist and landed neatly on the ground. He pointed at the kids. “Don’t try that at home, at least, when I’m not around.” He cruised inside, smiling at Robert and Eileen as he passed them.

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Proverbs 15:18

“A hot-tempered man stirs up strife, but he
who is slow to anger quiets contention.”

Chapter Thirteen

The meal turned out pleasant enough, except Shelley burned the rolls, giving Robert room to joke about her lack of culinary skills. Ignoring him, she turned her attention to the dinner conversation which focused mostly on Bree and her summer stock experience. However, Shelley knew that wouldn't deter her ex-husband.

It was later that afternoon that he showed his stripes. Robert thought he had Shelley cornered alone out back, while Ricky and Eric played ball with the boys in the front yard, where there was more room.

"Shelley, now that the boys are home, what type of, uh, arrangements have you and Eric made?"

"Arrangements?" Shelley asked, her eyes wide.

Robert's voice held irritation. "Yes, Shelley. I mean, how have you decided you'll handle things?"

Shelley shrugged. "I don't understand."

Robert pressed his lips together and placed his hands on his hips. "Will you please stop acting so innocent. It is an act and we both know it. You're so annoying sometimes, now will you please simply answer my question?"

Shelley's chin quivered, which made her angry at herself. Why did she allow him to get to her like she did? What about him made her feel like cowering? She sucked in a breath. "Ask a question that makes sense and I'll answer it."

He lashed out. "Okay Shelley, I'll put it so even you can understand. Are you screwin' this guy?"

Shelley's face reddened, more from anger than from embarrassment. She and Robert stood, glaring at each other. They turned when they heard a rustling sound coming from the side of the house and Ricky emerged, carrying the ball he'd been searching for in the bushes. He didn't acknowledge that he'd heard them, smiled, held the ball up and headed back to the front yard. They remained silent as they waited for him to leave the area.

Once he was gone Robert dove right back in. "Do you understand,

Shelley, that with two young boys in the house you have to be discreet? Have you thought about them at all?"

"What? No living room orgies?" she returned sarcastically. "That is a ridiculous question. What about you and little Miss Snow White?

Did I ask how *you* were handling things?"

Robert shook his head in disgust. “You never accept responsibility Shelley. You always try to turn things back on me.”

“I’m not trying to turn anything on you. I’m just saying that I didn’t ask you how you are ‘handling things’ with Eileen. It never crossed my mind to second guess how *you* handle the children. You should give me the same credit.”

“It never crossed your mind because you never have a deep thought go through that head of yours. Maybe sometimes you should...”

Shelley held her hand up to end the lecture before it started. “Just stop.” She turned toward the front yard and called, “Mark—Joey, come spend some time with your father because he’s going- to- be- leaving soon.” She glared into Robert’s eyes as she spoke the last words, then turned and stormed into the house.

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A little later, Eric and Ricky sat in the living room on the couch with Bree on the floor in front of them. She giggled as they told her funny stories from the movie sets Ricky had been on. When time neared for Shelley’s ex-husband to take his leave, Eric excused himself, rose and moved to peer out the window so he could think for a moment.

Ricky told him of the conversation he’d overheard and Eric searched for the right way to handle the problem without causing any backlash on Shelley. He could let it go, say nothing, but that would be a coward’s way out, and he was no coward. It was time someone stepped in to defend the woman.

Robert entered the room, a little boy holding each hand. Eric turned to face him. “Robert, may I speak with you candidly for a moment?”

Immediately Ricky rose. “Um, c’mon guys,” he motioned to the boys. “Show me your room.” Bree followed Ricky’s lead, grabbed Mark and Joey’s hands and went upstairs.

Robert approached Eric, who stood his ground. A tactic of mild intimidation on both men’s part.

“Ricky told me of the conversation,” Eric began calmly, “he overheard between you and Shelley, and I just wanted you to know that

I completely agree with you.”

Robert’s eyebrows rose. Eric continued.

“Those little boys of yours and Shelley’s are adorable and it’s obvious they’ve been raised well. I’d never think of exposing them to anything that would be considered risqué or unwholesome. Please be assured that mine and Shelley’s relationship will be handled very discreetly and in good taste.”

Robert smiled at him and extended his hand. “You seem to be a fine intelligent man, Eric. I appreciate your cooperation.”

Eric nodded. “There’s just one more thing,” Eric added as he took Robert’s hand. “As the mother of those boys, Shelley has every right to be spoken to with respect, and we both know the way you addressed the subject

with her was not respectful in any way."

Eric's eyes were piercing and Robert's expression fell. Eric smiled warmly then. "So, we have an understanding?"

Robert cleared his throat. "Of course." He withdrew his hand from Eric's grasp. "Eileen," he called. "Are you ready? It's getting late and we need to get going."

Eileen entered, looking relieved. Quickly grabbing her hat and purse, she stood by the door and waited for all of the goodbyes.

When Shelley finally closed the front door, she turned, surveyed the mess, decided to ignore it, and went upstairs to her room. Safe and alone she lay down and stared at the ceiling. Why did he always make her feel like she was nothing? Why did she let him? She tried to sniff back the threatening tears and scrubbed her hands over her face. Finally exhaustion overcame her.

She woke with a start, blinking in the dark. Wondering what everyone was up to while she'd apparently taken an impromptu nap, she made her way downstairs. She found the kitchen spotless, the dishwasher humming a contented tune. Peeking out the back door, she found the lot of them outside, lying on the trampoline, talking softly. She walked out and joined them.

"Thanks everyone, for cleaning up for me," she said as they raised their heads at her approach.

"Don't thank us," Bree answered. "It was Ricky's idea. He said he owed you one."

Eric held his hand out to her, and pulled her onto the trampoline where she squished in between Eric and Bree and stared up at the darkening sky.

"I feel terrible," Shelley whimpered.

Mark sat up. "That's *Star Wars*."

"Nuh uh," Bree corrected. "*The Empire Strikes Back.* It's the scene after they just finished torturing Han Solo."

"What are you talking about?" Ricky asked.

"It's a game we play," Bree answered. "We love old movies, so if a famous line from a movie fits into an everyday situation, we use it and one of us has to guess the movie it came from or the character that said it. Sounds silly, I know, but sometimes it's really funny."

Eric smiled at the picture Bree painted. "Well, anyway, you may feel terrible now, Shelley, but I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning after you've worked out."

"Oh, yeah, right," Shelley agreed sarcastically.

"C'mon Ricky," Joey pleaded. "Hurry up and try your triple."

"A triple?" Shelley asked.

"Yeah, I sort of talked myself into a jam. I told the boys I can do a triple flip and they don't believe me. So now I have to prove myself. The problem is your trampoline is sprung, and I'm not sure I can get enough height, but I gotta give it a try anyway."

"Remember," Shelley said. "There is no try. There is only do."

Joey jumped up. "That's Yoda in *Empire Strikes Back* again."

Everyone moved off the trampoline to give Ricky room. He jumped several times before trying the triple. Unfortunately, he didn't make it quite all the way. He lay moaning.

Bree hopped back on the tramp. "Can you move at all?"

Mark cried out in a feminine voice, "If you want, I could fly "

Shelley laughed and turned to Eric to explain. "That's from *The Princess Bride*."

"It's our favorite movie," Joey offered, as he climbed back on the tramp and began to bounce.

Ricky stood, to show he was okay and pulled Bree up with him.

"C'mon Bree. Your turn."

"No way," she protested.

"C'mon, I've got you," Ricky coaxed.

"You've got me? Who's got you?" she laughed. Shelley, Mark and Joey all gave the answer. "*Superman*."

"Superman?" Eric asked.

"Yes, the one from a long time ago with Christopher Reeve," Shelley explained.

Eric smiled at their game. What an adorable family. He wanted to be a part of it. "Okay, give me some one-liners and let me try," he said.

Everyone climbed back onto the trampoline, sat in a circle and tried to think of easy ones.

"They're hee-eere," Joey said.

Ricky jumped in excitedly. "Oh– oh– that's *Poltergeist*!"

"Very good," Shelley sang as if he were a little boy. Mark came up with one. "Snakes? I hate snakes." Shelley whispered in Eric's ear.

"*Raiders of the Lost Ark*," he repeated.

"You're cheating, Mom," Mark complained.

"Well— we're back— in the car again," Bree called out. They waited for Eric and Ricky to answer but none came.

Shelley laughed. "*That's Jurassic Park*. The first one."

"I got one you'll know," Mark said. "Boards don't hit back," he said trying to imitate a thick Chinese accent.

Finally a light went on in Eric's brain. "That's Bruce Lee in *Return of the Dragon*."

"Yaay," everyone cheered for Eric. "He finally got one."

"Well, only sort of," Shelley announced. "It's actually *Enter the Dragon.*"

"I don't think so," Eric defended.

"No, believe me," Bree said. "If Mom says it's *Enter the Dragon*, she's right."

"Yeah, because Mom's in love with Bruce Lee," Joey laughed.

"Oh really?" Eric teased.

Shelley only giggled.

"Okay, Mom," Bree said. "These guys need some help. We're gonna call them out to you real fast and you, Eric or Ricky answer as fast as you can. Ready?"

"Yes, but don't say any of Ricky's movies. That wouldn't be fair."

"Okay, here goes. Nice plant— Big "

"*Little Shop of Horrors*."

Bree whispered in Joey's ear.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Joey said.

"*Wizard of Oz*." Shelley elbowed Eric. "Come on you guys, that one was easy. You shoulda had that."

"Guns? We don't need no stinkin' guns," Mark said.

"*Three Amigos*."

"I, I, I– want the knife— please."

"*The Golden Child*. So far you guys haven't been much help," Shelley laughed.

"We're trying," they whined.

Bree, Mark and Joey continued their onslaught.

"You weigh a little more than 108 pounds. Oh really?"

"That's *Batman*. One of the really old ones."

"You're cold because all of the blood is running out of your body.

You're going to be dead soon."

"*Point Break*. The original."

Joey giggled. "Mom likes that one because Bree and her are both in love with Keanu Reeves."

Bree elbowed Joey while Mark continued with the game. "Surfin's a source. It'll change your life, swear to God."

"That's *Point Break* again," Shelley said.

"Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?"

"Ooo, ooo, *Rush Hour*," Ricky yelled. "Yes. I finally got one!"

"Take me to bed or lose me forever," Bree said.

Eric's eyes lit up. "That is Meg Ryan in, in, uh, *Top Gun.*" Shelley punched Eric. "It figures you'd know that one."

"I'm not sure he's right. Say it again, Bree," Ricky said.

She did. "Oh yeah, Bree. I think I remember now. Say it just one more time."

"Take me to bed or– " She stopped, finally realizing what Ricky was doing. Her face turned red. She glanced over at him to find him smiling at her. He winked.

"Yo, Rick, there are minors present," Eric said. "Not to mention, Bree's mother."

Shelley cleared her throat. “Well, I think that’s enough for tonight.”

“Just one more,” Joey yelled. “I promise it’s an easy one.”

“Okay, one more,” Shelley allowed.

“I LOVE BEING A TURTLE!” Joey yelled.

“*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*,” they chanted together.

Shelley smiled and squeezed Eric’s hand. Maybe it hadn’t been such a bad day after all.

Mark and Joey crawled over to either side of Shelley and snuggled up close. Only a few minutes later the boys were sound asleep.

“It’s been a long day for these little guys,” Eric said. “Flying all the way in from California and all the excitement of seeing Mom again, I’m sure they’re exhausted. I’ll help you carry them to bed.”

Eric lifted Mark and Ricky offered to take Joey but Shelley refused. She climbed down off the tramp and let Ricky place him in her arms.

Once the boys were tucked snugly into their beds Eric took Shelley by the hand and led her to the kitchen table and handed her pen and paper. “We have things we need to work out.”

“Now?” she asked with a yawn.

“Now is always a good time to accomplish something.”

While Bree and Ricky chatted in the living room, they worked out a schedule allowing Shelley to keep training intensely, the boys to be properly taken care of, and extra time to give the children their promised lessons. Once they completed the chore, Shelley stood and silently made her way upstairs to her room, motioning for Eric to follow. Once there, she closed and locked the door behind him.

He smiled at her. “What are you up to, little Dandelion?”

She shrugged. “I guess I just wanted to be alone with you. I feel weird. Like things are changing.”

Eric smiled again. “You’re getting much better at sorting out your feelings and emotions. Yes, Shelley, things are changing. It’s not just you and me anymore, but we got this handled. There’s enough love to go around for everyone.”

“If that’s so, then why do I feel so drained?”

Eric sat her down on the bed and knelt in front of her. “You’ve had a hard day. That’s all. Some of your pride and dignity were taken from you, but that’s okay because I’m just the man to put it back.”

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently. “You are so lovely,” he whispered.

Shelley reached out to him. “I need you.” She entwined her fingers in his hair and pulled him forward.

“I’ll always be here for you,” he promised as he kissed her sweetly.

†††

Over the next several months Ricky and Eric made time to work with

Mark and Joey and promoted them to their blue belts. The boys teased their mom about soon catching up to her and promised to pass her. Shelley competed in a Rhode Island tournament and performed poorly, winning only two bouts by the skin of her teeth. Eric simply told her to shake it off. "There's a lot to correct and a lot of hard work ahead, so get ready." He wasn't much on pity.

His expertise as an instructor paid off at the tournament in Austin, Texas, where she went all the way to the championship round before she lost. She looked good. Her speed was better, kicks more accurate, defense more effective, and most importantly, she seemed focused. Ricky, Brian and Jason had each taken time to come in and work with her and all felt she was improving.

Bree and Ricky's friendship grew and he flew to New York to see her often. Shelley wanted desperately to ask him about things between himself and her daughter but decided not to interfere. After all, they were adults. Well, Ricky was, anyway. Bree was her little girl and always would be.

The boys were scheduled to spend the Christmas holidays with their father, sending Shelley, who'd reveled in the holiday thing before the divorce, into a bit of a depression. Eric, concerned about her psyche, tried to help make things festive for her and the boys.

On the Friday and Saturday before the kids left, Eric and Shelley, with Ricky and Bree, planned a huge holiday celebration of their own which made the boys feel lucky. Eric gently guided Shelley in focusing more on celebrating the birth of the Son of God. They had always just celebrated Christmas in a secular way. When Eric taught them all about the birth of Jesus, the boys seemed to be genuinely touched by the information. Mostly though, they were excited that they "get to have two Christmases."

Sunday afternoon, after seeing Mark and Joey off at the airport, Shelley and Eric lay stretched out on the living room carpet, exhausted from the weekend's festivities. Ricky and Bree had taken off for an extended ski trip and Shelley's mood was dark, to put it mildly. She glanced at Eric, beside her as he gazed lazily at the ceiling.

"This is exactly what I was afraid of," she sighed.

"What were you afraid of?" he asked, innocently.

"Me loving you and you losing interest in me. After all, I guess the thrill wears off after a while."

Eric rose up and glared down at her, irritation flashing in his eyes. "Shelley, what are you talking about?"

"I'm lying here right next to you and you don't even make a move to cuddle or kiss me or anything. Maybe you need someone smart and sophisticated like Robert's Eileen, or maybe a real looker like Angel." He sat up to face her, his legs in a half lotus. "Are you serious?" She shrugged.

He sighed. "I didn't make a move, as you put it, because I'm tired. Let me

try to explain something to you. I'm trying to get you ready for the MART, and Shelley, you're not the easiest student to work with. At the same time, I'm trying to help you with the kids, which, let me say this now before you jump to conclusions, which is no problem. It does, however, take time and energy. We have another tournament in January and a big important one at Mardi Gras in February. I'm just tired. There's nothing more to it than that."

Shelley gazed back up at the ceiling, feeling ashamed of what she'd said to the man who'd seemingly dedicated his life to her. "I guess I'm just tired too," she said softly. "I know you love me even though I can't imagine why."

"Shelley, Shelley, Shelley, what am I gonna do about this self-esteem problem you have. You cannot, I repeat, can– not– fight in the MART and continue to look at yourself the way you do."

Shelley looked at the determination in Eric's eyes and knew this was gonna be one of those learning situations. He never just let things drop. She wished she'd never said anything at all.

His eyes filled with compassion though when he saw the miserable look on her face. "Why can't you believe that I can love you completely?"

She shrugged. "Maybe you did but have already lost interest."

He shook his head at her. "You know, I could be hurt by what you're saying. In essence, you're saying that I'm incapable of real love. However, I realize what you're really saying is you don't feel worthy of my love. Shelley, how can you be so unsure of your worth?"

The confusion in her eyes made him ask a simpler question. "Did you date much in high school?"

"Not really. Not until Robert."

"Why not?"

She shrugged. "I was a tomboy. I was more into playin' ball with boys than going out with them. I suppose that's because I had brothers."

"How was your relationship with your father?"

"Good, I think, at least when I was little, but as I got older, all he ever did was criticize me."

"Criticize you? About what?"

She shrugged. "You name it. Pretty much everything I did. My grades, being lazy, but mostly about my appearance."

"What about your appearance?"

"He said I was gettin' fat, and what's so bad is, I believed him. So, I wore these huge baggy shirts and fasted constantly. Then when I was older and had given birth to a few children and really *had* gained weight, I looked at the pictures of me when I was a teenager and I realized, I was *not* fat at all. Actually, I'd been slim." She ignored Eric's heavy sigh and continued on. "It made me so angry to realize I went through all those years thinking I was fat and ugly. It kinda messed with my head, ya know? So now, when someone tells me I'm pretty I just lap it up like a starving kitten. Do you think that's

vain?"

"You don't have a vain bone in your body. Everyone needs to feel good about themselves. That includes their physical selves. Still, Shelley, everyone also needs to let go of past hurts. What's done is done. You have to let go. Don't let your past define you. You are a valuable person. Your father's verbal abuse doesn't take away from your value unless you let it. Nor does—" He hesitated to mention it, and then decided to go for it. "Nor does being raped. No one can take away your value as a person unless you allow it." When she didn't react he went right on past it.

"As far as your appearance, I'd say you're close to perfection. I'd put you up against anyone. Your face, your hair, your eyes, your body, all are breathtaking and, what's so good is they're like the gift wrap covering the treasures inside."

When she frowned he smiled and crooked a finger at her. "Come closer, Shelley."

"Why?"

"It's obvious you don't believe me when I tell you how beautiful you are. I'm gonna give you a lesson."

"Um, what kind of lesson?"

"Trust me?"

"Of course."

"Then come here."

Slowly, she did as requested.

"Okay, now, let's get a closer look."

His eyes traveled over her, making her blush. His fingers skimmed across her cheek, her hair, her shoulder, her arm, stopping here and there to linger, all the while whispering his appreciation of her beauty. Finally, he pulled her into his lap where he sat on the floor and brought her forward for a kiss before he spoke. "I want you to repeat after me—I am beautiful."

She laughed.

"I'm not playing around. Now say it. I—am—beautiful."

"Eric," she whined.

"You said you trust me. Now do as I say. I am beautiful." She sighed. "I'm beautiful," she said half-heartedly.

He shook his head. "I'm afraid that won't do. Try again. I am beautiful," he said loudly.

"I am beautiful," she giggled.

He reached out to gently touch her cheek. "Say, I am loved," he commanded.

"I am loved," she said softly, beginning to realize that maybe she truly was loved.

He went on and on, making her repeat different phrases. I am beautiful. I am loved. I am special. I am wonderful. I am smart. I am a child of God.

Somewhere in there, a barrier began to break down. Tears filled her eyes and spilled over, but he didn't stop. He continued having her repeat phrases until she could barely speak at all.

Finally, Eric reached out to pull her close against him and chanted with her, "I am beautiful, I am loved, I am beautiful, I am loved." It ended with a deep and passionate kiss.

He pulled away again so he could see her face clearly and look deeply into her eyes. "Say it for me one more time," he demanded.

Barely able to speak she whispered. "I– am– loved."

Eric wiped the tears from her face. "How do you feel?"

Shelley sighed. "I'm not sure. Different, I guess. Drained."

"Loved?"

She laughed. "You do make me feel loved." She looked up into his eyes. "But you still don't want to make love to me?"

"Oh, I want to. Sitting here with you on my lap, I mean, I'm human. I want you. But not yet. It's not right yet."

Shelley nodded, accepting his values. "How many women have you ever been with?"

"You're kidding."

"No I'm not. How many?"

He pulled her back to him, kissing her before he spoke. "You expect me to answer that?"

"Yes," she laughed.

"Get used to disappointment." She laughed again.

"What's so funny?"

"You're playing the game. That was from *The Princess Bride*."

"Oh. Ya know, I'm gonna have to rent some old movies so I can stump you sometime."

"Not possible."

"We'll just see about that." He rose and walked to the door. For now, I have to go home and take care of some business. You get some rest and don't be late tomorrow. We don't have a lot of time without the kids before the New Year's tournament, so you know what that means?"

"Yeah," Shelley answered. "Torture and hell—I meant hard work and reaching goals."

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Proverbs 31:25

"Strength and dignity are her clothing,
and she laughs at time to come."

Chapter Fourteen

Monday morning, Eric moved absently around the studio, straightening up, doing a few reps on the weight machines, checking his email. Unable to fall back to sleep after he was awakened by one of his nightmarish dreams, he'd come in a full hour early. The dream had been disturbing to say the least. He'd thought those dreams were over. He hadn't had one since he'd found Shelley. The disaster had already happened when he'd met her. He figured he was here to pick up the pieces. Last night's dream made him reconsider the possibilities. Was she safe? When Shelley wasn't locked up safely in her home she was with him. Nevertheless, when she came in today he'd sit her down and have a talk about being more aware of her surroundings at all times.

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Shelley was running late— again. Madly pulling on sweats and frantically dashing down the stairs, there was no way she could've been prepared for what happened next.

She grabbed her keys, jerked open the front door and never even had a chance to scream before the steely, gloved hand covered her mouth. Another hand closed around her throat, strangling her as he lifted her backward into the house. He was large, so large her toes barely reached the floor as she struggled in her panic. With a flick of his wrist he tossed her onto the sofa.

"Stay there," he commanded in a gruff voice.

He turned his attention to speak to another man and immediately, she shot for the door, her heart pounding in terror. She got the door open and almost made it through before he grabbed her by the hair, dragged her backward and threw her onto the floor in front of the sofa.

Before she could right herself he rolled her over face down, roughly pulling her arms behind her. She cried out in pain, thinking her arms would snap at any moment. "Shut up," he barked, his tone a deadly warning. She heard a ripping sound and realized he was taping her hands together with duct tape.

Fear numbed her brain, paralyzing her. She couldn't think. This can't be happening. Not again. Not right here in her own home. Don't freeze up, she told herself. Please, don't freeze up. Do something. Fight, yell. Do something! "Somebody help me!" she screamed but found she could barely make a sound with her face smashed into the carpet.

Realizing that screaming wasn't gonna help her, she focused her energy

and when the man turned her over, she aimed a kick at his face. He laughed and easily grabbed her legs and taped her ankles, then stood glaring at her for a moment, then turned and walked away.

He barked orders to someone. "Destroy everything that belongs to her but don't touch the kids' stuff. Kids shouldn't have to pay for their parents' sins."

Parents' sins? What is he talking about? What sins have I committed? Is he talking about my relationship with Eric? Is this some wacko religious guy here to give me a moral lesson? We haven't done anything. It was the sound of glass breaking and cloth ripping that stopped her speculations.

It dawned on her that he'd left the room. She rolled over onto her knees and inched her way toward the door. Please, just let me make it out the door where I can scream for help, she thought. The neighbors will hear me. It was hard work. She got there and was able to stand, hopping around to get her hands on the knob, again she opened the door and started across the threshold only to have him step in front of her. She opened her mouth to scream.

The big man covered her mouth and slung her up into his arms. "I'm toying with you, Shelley," he whispered in her ear. "I'm not gonna let you through this door. I am, however, having a great deal of fun watching you get your hopes up so I can dash them. No, Shelley, there is no escaping what I have planned for you today."

Back in the living room, he tossed her onto the floor again, this time grazing her head on the side of an end table. Searing pain shot through her, time slowed. She moaned as he rolled her over onto her back, painfully pinning her taped arms underneath her.

She looked up at him, genuinely bewildered, and finally found her voice. "Why?" she cried. "Why are you doing this?"

"To show you that I can," he answered her. "Or, to show someone that I can."

She shook her head slowly. "I don't understand."

"Not very bright, are you?"

A burst of laughter caused her to peer around. Two other men stood watching, but the leader blocked her view when he knelt down over her.

"Not very bright, but definitely a looker," he muttered.

He touched her with a large, gloved hand. Shelley fought down the wave of nausea and sheer panic that enveloped her.

"If— if it's money you want, I don't have any."

The man's eyes narrowed. Seemingly furious, he backhanded her across the face, her head turning violently with the blow. "I don't need your money!" he raged at her.

Shelley turned her head back to face him, her eyes now wide with fear and dread as blood ran from her nose and mouth. Even the teenager who'd hit her that day on the beach in Daytona hadn't used such force. Only in movies had she ever seen anyone hit in the face. She never imagined it could hurt so much.

She needed to get a grip. Pain is no big deal, she told herself. So what? He slapped me in the face. So what? She tried to keep her voice from shaking. "If– if you don't want money then why are you doing this?"

His eyes bore into hers. "An eye for an eye."

Her mind searched frantically for a time that she'd wronged someone. Nothing. As far as he knew she'd done nothing to deserve this. Yet he *did* know her name. Had she inadvertently done something horrible to him? "Wh– what did I do to you?"

"Not you. Your slant-eyed lover-boy." Slowly, as if contemplating her beauty, he ran a gloved finger down her cheek. "Tell me, what do you see in him?"

She didn't answer, actually, couldn't answer because his hand closed over her nose and mouth. Eyes wide, she bucked, struggling to breathe. He held her there until her world began to close in around her, and then suddenly, he let go, smiling at her as she gasped for breath.

"I'm sick and tired of hearing about Kino's greatness. He's a freakin' chink. I want him ruined. I want him to hurt, and I want you to be the one to do it."

His voice was so full of intense hatred, it caused large tears to well up in Shelley's eyes but she choked them back. She wouldn't cry. Eric would tell her to use her brain. Think. She had to think. Calming, she bravely looked up at the large man kneeling over her, his cold blue eyes glaring with hatred.

She regarded the others. Eyes were all she could see. Each wore a mask and gloves. Each dressed completely in black. Drawing a shaky breath she closed her own eyes so she could focus and command her mind to function. They probably don't want to kill me, she thought or they would have by now. That thought comforted her for only a moment, because the very next moment her mind said, 'Not necessarily.'

No. She mustn't think that way. She had to assume they didn't intend to kill her, and no one would go to this much trouble to rape a woman, would they? He said he wanted Eric hurt and he wanted her to do it, which is insane. She'd never hurt Eric. Does he think a little rough treatment is gonna intimidate her into doing harm to Eric? She can't be so easily intimidated– not anymore.

Fearlessly, she looked the man straight in the eyes. "There's no way I'd ever hurt Eric," she hissed at him.

He had no verbal response. He simply drew back his fist and punched her square in the mouth. Wincing in pain, she tasted blood as she tried to get her bearings.

"You are hurting him for me," he argued calmly. "Your existence is all that's needed."

Her anger flared. "How does my existence hurt Eric? You don't make any sense. Just do what you came here to do and get out. If Eric catches you here,

he'll kill you."

There was a murmuring around her. The man rose and walked away then turned and regarded the brave woman who would look death in the face and tempt it.

"Ah, sweet Shelley, you're much braver than I anticipated, but let me just say, you should pray that Eric doesn't show, because then I'd have to kill him."

Shelley laughed out loud at him.

"You won't find this so funny." He came to her, drew her taped ankles up toward her body and pushed her knees apart forming a diamond. "A little flexibility test," he chuckled. He placed his knees on her inner thighs, resting all his weight on her, digging his knees into her muscles. Shelley moaned with the agony.

"Now, why was it you were laughing?" he asked sarcastically.

She glared at him through her pain. "Because your hatred gets in the way of your thinking. You and..." Grunting in pain as he again ground his knees into her thighs, she struggled to finish her statement. "You and your little friends are cowards. Why else would it take all of you to attack one woman? If Eric showed up, you'd run scared."

She raised her chin defiantly as another blow struck her across her face. She wondered if he hit the same spot each time on purpose. Dizzy now, her head and face throbbing, her stomach roiling, she wondered how much more she could take.

He dug his knees harder into her sore thighs before he spoke again. "I'll tell you what, if you drop out of the MART, I'll let you live."

Puzzled, she looked up into his face. His thought patterns were indiscernible. There was no logic involved that she could see, and no way would she drop out of the MART. "Go to hell," she breathed, bracing for the next blow.

It didn't come. He chuckled instead. "Well now, that's attractive."

She gasped as he pulled out a small knife. He made a cut through the ribbing at the neck of her sweatshirt, calmly folded the knife, put it away then grabbed her shirt and ripped it open. Shelley shrank down, wishing she could disappear into the floor.

Somewhere in the background she could hear the phone ringing. That would be Eric calling to fuss at her for being late. She sensed movement around her and opened her eyes. The two men who hadn't spoken moved toward the door. Could it be that Eric's call was chasing them away? She looked up into her captor's eyes.

"Next time we'll take this further. For now—" he said, rising. He pulled a black marker out of his pocket and began writing on her stomach.

He then ripped off a piece of duct tape and held it up. "We can't have you screaming for help when we're trying to leave, now, can we?" He started to put the tape over her mouth when she giggled hysterically. "What are you laughing

at now?"

She sniffed. "I was just thinking that what they say is right. You really can use duct tape for just about anything."

He hit her again. Bull's-eye—same spot. Shelley felt something warm splatter across her face."

"You won't laugh again, I promise." He slapped her over and over, her head being thrown back and forth with the force of each blow.

"Let's go, man. Car's here."

The statement came from one of the men by the door. Shelley was immediately grateful to him. The man who loomed over her seemingly intent on her destruction regained control of himself. He pressed the tape over her mouth, grabbed her by the hair and pulled her up close to him. The next contact with his fist sent her into a fetal position. It was the parting kick to the back of her head that had Shelley slipping gratefully into oblivion.

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When Shelley hadn't shown up on time, Eric let it go, after all, she'd been extremely tired and emotionally drained the night before. But seven-thirty was his breaking point. He called her. No answer. He forced himself not to panic. She was probably on her way. He called twice more, both phones, but she still didn't answer. He drove to her house, the feeling in the pit of his stomach telling him he should've come straight from his apartment early this morning.

Bill, Shelley's elderly next-door neighbor, was just emerging from his garage, arms full of colored lights. He walked over to shake Eric's hand. "Late again, is she?" the man asked with a laugh.

"Looks like it," Eric answered, looking nervously toward her door. Bill started chatting about Christmas or something but Eric wasn't listening. He hurried up the walk toward Shelley's front door.

Eric paused. Something wasn't right. "Hold on a minute, Bill."

Eric moved stealthily up to the door, turned the knob and pushed it gently. Shelley lay face down on the floor by the sofa, the carpeting stained with her blood.

He looked back out the door, his face pale. "Bill, call nine-one-one. Tell them we need ambulance and police. Hurry."

Bill moved as quickly as his old legs could carry him. Eric moved inside and knelt by Shelley, his eyes scanning his surroundings as he reached his fingers down to her throat searching for a pulse. Immensely relieved to find one, he went swiftly through the house to be sure no intruders remained.

He returned to Shelley and untaped her hands before rolling her gently onto her back.

"Oh my," Bill's voice sounded from the doorway.

Eric blinked, then gazed up at Bill. "Untape her feet," he ordered as he gently pulled the tape off her mouth.

Her shirt was torn open and a short message written across her belly.

"*TOO EASY*." His lips pressed tightly together, he ordered himself to get control.

Her face was covered in blood. Eric ran a hand over her head, searching for the source of the blood and found a cut on her cheek and another cut on the back of her head. He was grateful when only a few seconds later he heard the sirens.

Shelley moaned and opened her eyes. "Eric?" she croaked.

"Yes, baby, it's me," he whispered, cradling her head.

"Some men broke in. He wanted me to hurt you, and I told him no, and he wasn't very happy about that."

His throat clogged. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm so sorry." He held her, rocking her in his arms.

It wasn't long before police and paramedics converged on the tiny house. While medics took care of Shelley, Bill and Eric told what little they knew to the police. Bill felt guilty that neither he nor his wife had heard anything out of the ordinary. Detectives arrived and Eric requested their cooperation in keeping the media at bay. They pledged to do what they could, though not promising anything since it was probably an impossible feat considering he was 'Ricky Kino's' dad.

Once at the hospital, Eric was allowed to see Shelley after an initial examination. Standing by the bed where she lay slipping in and out of consciousness, he kissed her forehead and allowed his emotions to vent for a few seconds. Then he let go of them– or at least, he tried to. He laid his hands on her and prayed for healing.

A doctor approached, smiling kindly. "There are no broken bones. There is a concussion, however, and we'll need to keep her for at least a few hours for observation though we'd rather it be overnight. There is a cut on her cheek and one on the back of her head that will require stitches. I'll take care of that in just a minute. Obviously, she's taken quite a beating and there'll be some major bruising. Another concern right now is– " She trailed off, an uneasy expression on her face.

"What else?"

"She does have quite a bit of bruising on her inner thighs and the police want to do a rape exam. She's refusing. She insists she wasn't raped, but she was unconscious and you never know what could've happened. The police say they need all the evidence they can gather for the case." She grimaced. "It's not a fun procedure."

"No." Shelley's eyes were open and defiant. "I wasn't raped, and I don't want anyone touching me."

Sighing, the doctor shrugged at Eric.

"Please Eric," Shelley begged. "Please don't make me do this."

"Hey, I promise you, no one is gonna make you do anything, but don't you want to help the police?"

"It won't help them because I wasn't raped. You have to believe me, Eric. Please don't make me go through this."

He grimaced as he thought, running his hand through his hair. Maybe, just maybe James had been careless, though Eric doubted it. There was no way the police were gonna be able to find who attacked her, much less link James to her in any way. The rape kit would be useless. It was James who attacked her, that much he knew, and James wasn't stupid. Eric would be asking Shelley to submit again to something he knew would yield nothing. What the doc said was true, she had been unconscious. It could've happened, yet he doubted it. James wouldn't have bothered putting her clothes back on her if he'd raped her. Eric looked at the doctor. "We'll have to honor her wishes."

✝✝✝

In the car several hours later, Eric squeezed Shelley's hand. "It's gonna be okay."

Shelley blinked slowly at the passing scenery as they drove. "Eric, who would hate you so much?"

Eric spoke quietly. "His name is James Crane."

"He said 'an eye for an eye' Eric, what did he mean? What did you do to him?"

"This isn't a good time to tell you a very long story."

Besides the fact, her question put him on the defensive. James had started it and Eric had finished it. Only it seemed it wasn't finished. Eric sighed. He'd spoken to the detectives again when they'd arrived at the hospital to interview Shelley. He told them who'd attacked Shelley. He also told them there would be no proof, James would leave no evidence, and they certainly wouldn't accuse a powerful businessman with close political ties such as James without evidence. Frustrated, Eric tried to get his need for retribution under control. He had to stay positive in order to truly help Shelley.

He glanced over at her as her eyes drifted shut. He'd been able to convince the doctor that she'd be better off in his care in a private home than in a public hospital. James had really done a number on her. He'd hit her so hard it actually split open her cheek. Somehow he'd missed breaking her nose, but it looked like he'd tried. She began to shiver. Eric reached over and turned up the heater in the car. Though she'd been released from the hospital, Eric realized she was still in shock and he was worried about her both physically and emotionally.

"I'm so tired," she said wearily, her teeth chattering.

"I bet you are. We'll be home soon and you can curl up in a warm bed and sleep."

"That sounds like heaven, except my head is pounding."

"We'll fix you up soon, baby."

Eric took her to his apartment and to his bed. "Are you hungry?"

She shook her head. "Just so tired."

He had her sip an herbal tea solution that would ease her headache, tucked her in and held her until she slept. Her face seemed to change minute to minute, swelling and bruising and she whimpered and moaned as she slept making Eric feel completely helpless. He'd been silently praying over her the whole time she was at the hospital. This time, he laid his hands on her, lifted his head and in a strong voice prayed for healing, both physically and emotionally. She immediately calmed. When he felt certain she was sleeping soundly enough, he left her side to take care of business.

He'd already made several calls, some on the way to the hospital, some while he waited for Shelley's release. He'd called his network of friends to task. He needed to check to see the progress of what he'd put into action.

Taking out his cell, he went to work. His goal was to set up security for Shelley and track down James Crane with the help of his friends and his son. It was early evening when he sat back wearily. He'd been able to reach everyone except Ricky, who was probably on the slopes.

Stretching his aching muscles, he went to the kitchen and dumped a jar of an organic brand of chicken soup into a pot. It would have to do, but he would pick up some fresh raw foods to help her heal. While the soup heated he ate a sandwich. Placing the bowl of soup and some wheat toast on a tray, he went to the bedroom.

Shelley still slept. Looking at her he realized he needed to start some ice therapy to bring down the swelling and inflammation. He'd do that right after he got some nutrients down her. He looked her over as she slept. He hadn't thought it was possible, but the swelling had worsened and now one eye was completely black.

The pain in his heart was staggering. How could he have underestimated his enemy so badly? He'd heard nothing from James in ten years. Why now? The answer was so simple. Eric hadn't loved anyone for ten years. Until now, James had nothing to use against him.

Setting the tray on the table beside the bed, he gently touched her shoulder. "Shelley, sweetie," he said softly trying not to startle her.

She opened her eyes, blinking slowly, trying to remember where she was. Reality hit. She moaned softly.

"Come on Shelley, sit up for me."

She sat up slowly, dizzily. The muscles in her arms and shoulders were sore and she could barely lift herself. Her vision was blurred and she squinted, trying to focus.

"You need to eat a little, hon," he coaxed.

"I don't think I can," she answered through slurred speech.

"Let's try," he replied gently.

"I can't see you very well, and I'm having trouble talking."

He swallowed. "You can't see because your eye is swollen shut and you can't speak because your mouth is swollen as well. It will get better, baby.

Now, let's try to get some nourishment down you."

He put the spoonful of broth to her mouth but most of it dripped down her chin onto her shirt.

"Oops, sorry," he said, forcing a smile.

He had her tilt her head back a little and tried again. This time she choked, the broth spattering. Eric put the spoon back in the bowl and wiped her off.

"Ready to try again?" he asked cheerfully.

In response, one tear ran down her cheek. She shook her head.

Eric took a deep breath as she leaned forward and rested her forehead on his shoulder. He pressed her to him. "Don't cry, sweetheart. Everything's gonna be all right. We'll make it through this. I promise. I have an idea."

He left and came back with a straw. Drawing the broth up with his mouth, he then transferred the straw to Shelley and let it drip slowly. The warm liquid felt good on her raw throat.

He then dipped tiny pieces of the bread into the broth, and placed them on the back of her tongue. It was a long tedious process, but they did finally complete it.

He smiled at her. "If I told you I love you with every part of my being, does it help?"

She nodded and tried to smile.

"What can I do for you?"

She held her hand out, showing the blood caked under her fingernails.

"A bath?"

She nodded.

Grimacing, he ran a bath for her and then held a robe out, turning his head to protect her modesty as she undressed. Eric helped her to the bathroom. As he entered, he was careful not to let her see her reflection in the mirror. There was just no reason to confront that now, he thought.

Easing her down into the warm bubbles, he sat on the floor beside the tub, his back to her. Not wanting to get her face and stitches wet yet, they decided not to wash her hair. Instead, Eric suggested she use a washcloth to rub out some of the dried clumps of blood.

Eric glanced over his shoulder to see Shelley scrubbing at her stomach. She might be able to get the writing to fade, but he was sure it was definitely gonna be there for a while. She looked so pitiful trying to wash it away that Eric's anger came close to boiling over. He made himself remember it and pushed the rage down to save for another day.

He gave her his brown silk uniform to wear and helped her back to bed. She snuggled down into the pillow. "It smells like you," she said, sighing. Carefully placing a few ice packs on the worst areas, he stayed with her until she relaxed and fell asleep. When Eric's cell phone went off, he quickly left the room.

"Hey Dad, saw you called. What's up?" Ricky asked cheerfully.

"Are you alone?"

"Bree's up in her room changing for dinner. What's happened?"

"James Crane got to Shelley. He hurt her bad, Rick."

"Oh no."

"I'll need your help."

"I need to arrange some protection for Bree. I'll be there soon."

"Thanks, Rick."

✝✝✝

Justin and Jason arrived predawn Tuesday morning. After embracing, Eric filled the brothers in on the happenings of the past twenty hours, pausing at times to gain control of his emotions.

"I'm gonna kill him," Jason swore. "I'm gonna rip his heart out."

Justin placed a hand on his younger brother's shoulder. "We're gonna get him, bro, but not like that. Don't lower your vibration to match his. C'mon now, Eric needs cool heads to help him."

Jason nodded and the brothers sat down and waited for Eric to continue. Eric didn't bother to let them know how much he himself wanted to carry out that same threat. He knew better, but couldn't seem to help himself.

The three agreed that until James was found, Shelley should never be left alone. Finding James would be difficult, they knew, but they also knew he couldn't stay invisible forever. They would eventually find him. However, making something stick was another game.

They were law-abiding citizens, Justin kept urging, therefore they would let the police handle it once they located the man. Eric and Jason agreed a little too quickly for Justin's comfort. Eric kept his thoughts to himself, those thoughts being that James Crane was a dead man.

As the day dawned, the men went into the kitchen to prepare food. They turned when they heard Shelley in the hall. She shuffled slowly toward the kitchen.

"Good morning," Eric said as he kissed her forehead. "Look who's come to visit."

Justin stood, staring in disbelief. Most of Shelley's face was dark blue and one eye had disappeared completely behind a swollen cheek. Her lips were so swollen it appeared her top lip touched the tip of her nose. He felt sick to think of the beating she must've taken to have caused so much damage.

"Are you hungry?" Jason asked her.

"I tarred."

Justin's hand balled into a fist as he realized that because of the beating, she was unable to even speak.

Eric jumped in. "You're starved? Good, your appetite is returning."

However, Shelley didn't seem pleased. Actually, she seemed quite agitated. "Ut eh ack," she said.

Eric had been ready for the confrontation because he'd removed the

mirrors from the bathroom and bedroom. He simply didn't want her to have to deal with her appearance now, if he could help it. "I'd rather not put them back."

She stomped her foot. "I aunt to see."

"Trust me, sweetie, you don't want to see. Not yet, anyway. Please, just wait a few days for some of the swelling to go down, okay?"

She put her hands up to her face, trying to determine the extent of her injury.

Eric put his arms around her. "Can you not just trust me? Haven't I had your best interest at heart so far? So please, no mirrors, and don't cheat by looking on your phone."

She looked up at him defiantly through one eye.

"C'mon now, go back into the bedroom and I'll bring you a delicious healthy shake," he coaxed.

Defeated, she did as ordered.

Eric watched her go. He should've known, he thought. He should've been there for her. Why hadn't he come straight to her the next morning after he'd had the dream?

"Guilt won't help you," Justin said, reading his friend's thoughts.

Sighing, Eric nodded and opened the refrigerator to prepare Shelley's breakfast.

"Anyway," Jason said cheerfully, "she seems as spunky as usual."

✝✝✝

Hours later, it was a different story.

"The doctor said you needed to sleep more than anything, so your body will have the energy to heal."

She nodded. The defeat in her expression tore him up. And, of course, that was exactly what James had been after. "I'll stay with you, if you'd like."

Again, she nodded. He helped her get settled into bed. "I sent Brian and his wife Meg to pick some things up for you."

"Okay," she said listlessly.

Everything that belonged to Shelley had been destroyed. Every piece of clothing, shoes, personal items, everything. Except for the children's room, her home had been destroyed. "Why?" she'd asked.

"Because they knew it would hurt you," he'd answered. "And if they hurt you, they hurt me."

Now, she lay there twirling her matted hair in her fingers. She held out a bloodied clump from her head. "I need to ash I hair," she whispered.

Eric sighed and offered a kind smile. "I know, sweetie. Sleep first and when you wake up we'll take care of everything."

✝✝✝

Shelley awoke alone. Newly purchased items lay at the end of the bed so she changed out of Eric's clothing into her own new things, then went looking

for Eric. Justin and Jason sat in the living room, speaking softly and looked up when she appeared.

"'Here's Eric?" she asked, meaning 'where" but she was unable to pronounce her 'w.'

"He's not here," Justin told her. "He wanted to get another look at your house and went to meet with a detective. Is there something I can do?"

She shrugged, looking sad. "Look at i hair. I aunt to ash i hair."

"Well, little lady," Justin said cheerfully. "I'll have you know I used to be a great 'shampoo girl' in my aunt's salon when I was a teenager. How would you like a royal treatment?"

Her lip curled slightly, which Justin knew was the closest thing to a smile he was gonna get.

"You go get the shampoo, conditioner and towels and I'll get things ready here in the kitchen."

Justin and Jason cleared everything off the counter in the kitchen and removed dirty dishes from the sink. When Shelley returned they swept her up onto the counter and had her lie with her hair dropping down into the sink.

Between the two brothers she really did receive a royal treatment. Her hair was carefully washed and conditioned, her hands and feet were massaged. She sat at the kitchen table while they meticulously combed and towel dried each strand of hair so as not to disturb the stitches. They teased her and teased each other, using the joking around to try to get her to cheer up. Even though she talked a good game, she'd withdrawn into herself since the attack. Somehow they needed to get her to buck up.

Shelley knew they were trying to boost her. She tried hard to respond. Only, once they were finished with their ministrations a cloud of anxiety washed over her. She needed Eric.

"Are you hungry?"

She shook her head.

"There's nothing we can get you?"

"No."

"Would you like us to stop pestering you and leave you alone."

She nodded.

"Okay. We'll be right here in the living room if you need anything. Anything at all."

"Okay." She reached out to stop them. "Hen is Eric co-ing hone?"

Justin smiled at her. "It shouldn't be too much longer."

She wanted Eric. She needed him. Without him around she felt nervous and alone. Peering around the messy kitchen, she sighed and made a decision that staying busy would probably help. She began to straighten up, but as she rinsed a plate she saw cold blue eyes staring back at her. Her hands began to shake.

When she closed her eyes a moment to get control, big black letters

floated in front of her face—TOO EASY. Backing away from the sink, she took a calming breath, but when she loaded cups into the dishwasher, flashes of large gloved hands came at her.

Forcing herself to concentrate on her task, she finished loading the dishwasher and switched it on. It sounded like people laughing at her, and glass breaking and duct tape being torn. She put her hands over her ears. Stop it, she told herself. Clear your mind.

Breathing deeply for a few moments, she got control. Feeling better she went about putting things away. Picking up a jar of preserves, she opened the refrigerator and there he stood, all in black, glaring at her. His hand reached for her throat. She screamed. "Noooooo!" she cried and threw the jar at him.

There was a loud crashing sound. Shelley fell to the floor and tried to crawl away, but he was coming after her so fast. He grabbed her around the waist. She turned over on her back and kicked with all her might. This time she connected and he rolled away moaning.

Before she had time to rise and run someone else grabbed her from behind. Strong, thick arms wrapped around her, pinning her arms to her sides. She screamed and kicked his shins but he wouldn't let go. She was tiring. She was weak. Someone was talking to her.

"Shelley, it's okay. It's me, it's Justin. Come on, now, calm down."

"Justin?" she cried.

"Yes, it's me."

"Justin, he's here," she said, the fear in her voice very real.

"No, Shelley, you were imagining it. No one is here."

"Yes, he uss. I know. I kicked hin, and he let ee go."

"No Shelley, you kicked Jason."

"Jason?"

"Yes, Jason," Jason said, holding his nose. "And you did a good job of it."

She looked over at him. There was blood all over his shirt. Horror filled her eyes. "I losing it. I going crazy."

Justin held her, "No you're not. You've had an anxiety attack. It can happen, especially after what you've just been through."

She looked down at her hands. They were bleeding where she'd slid them across the floor over broken glass. She held her hands up for Justin to see as she sank down to the floor.

"I sorry," she cried.

He knelt in the mess on the floor, holding and rocking her when he looked up to see Eric walk into the kitchen, laden with bundles.

✞✞✞

Psalm 140:1-2

"Rescue me, Lord, from evildoers; protect me from the violent, who devise evil plans in their hearts and stir up war every day."

Chapter Fifteen

Eric threw everything he'd just purchased onto the table and knelt down to Shelley, looking around him in disbelief.

"What in the world happened?"

Justin and Jason got the story out in Korean while Eric helped her up, ran her hands under water, examined them to make sure no glass remained, then bandaged them.

Meanwhile, Jason sat in a chair holding a cold towel to his nose.

Justin looked Jason over and spoke in Korean.

"Broken?" Jason cried.

Eric smiled.

Shelley was horrified. "I roke his nose?"

"No," Eric whispered. "Justin's just teasing him."

Shelley looked sadly at Eric. "I don't know how ut ha-ened. Eryting seed so real."

Eric walked to the refrigerator and opened it to the sound of tinkling glass. "See," he pointed inside. "No monsters in here." He eyed the mess in surprise. The light bulb, a jar of mayonnaise, a jar of pickles and a casserole dish had been broken, the contents oozing everywhere.

Shelley stood. "I'll clean it ut," she volunteered. "No way," he said. "You're going back to bed."

"I een slee-ing or two days straight, I not tired."

Eric held up some suspicious looking boxes of herbs. "Well, you will be."

Shelley giggled. "Dats Yoda."

Eric smiled. He motioned Shelley over to the table where he took out the things he'd just purchased. A nightgown, slippers, robe, some clothing including a winter coat, sweats, and socks.

He tugged at the new sweater he'd left earlier on the bed, now covered with food. "Well now, that didn't last very long, huh?"

Sighing, she shook her head and began gathering her new things. "Guess I'll go change."

By the time she rejoined the men, Eric and Justin had the mess cleaned up and her tea ready. Completely relaxed now that Eric was home, she settled on the couch. She felt comfortable and warm in her new robe and slippers and snuggled up next to Jason.

"I sorry," she whispered in his ear.

He put his arm around her. “I sure hope you kick like that at your next tournament.”

“What’s going on here?” Eric asked as he entered, carrying a cup of his famous tea.

He sat down next to Shelley and held the cup out to her, while she motioned at the TV where the thumbnail for ‘The Princess Bride’ was clearly visible.

“What’s this?” Eric laughed. “A deal? Okay, hand me the remote. I’ll put on the movie, you drink.”

Thirty minutes into the movie Shelley’s head lay gently on Eric’s lap, her legs sprawled across Jason as she slept.

✝✝✝

The next morning, Shelley arrived in the kitchen, dressed, but with hairbrush in hand. “My ars are still sore. I can’t reach ehind ee to ut I hair ut.”

Her words were hard to understand, but Eric caught the gist of her predicament. Turning her around, he did his best to gather her hair into a clasp just as there was a knock at the door.

Jason opened the door to find Ricky had finally made it. “Hey. So what did you tell Bree?”

Ricky sighed, shaking his head. “I didn’t want to lie, so I told her that a friend of mine had been hurt and I needed to go offer some support.” He shrugged. “It’s the truth.”

“Yes, but, she will still see it as lying when she finds out that the friend you were talking about was her own mother.”

He nodded. “She’ll have to understand that honor dictates that Shelley should be the one to make the decision as to when she is told.”

“Is Bree coming back here before she heads back to college?”

“No, a friend will be escorting her back to New York next week.”

“Well then, that works out doesn’t it?” He motioned toward the kitchen. “They’re in there. She looks pretty bad so be prepared.” Nodding, Ricky headed in.

“Ricky,” Shelley cried, showing her first spark of enthusiasm in three days.

He approached slowly and hugged her.

“Ut are oo doing here?”

“I had to come to make sure you’re okay.”

“Where’s ree?”

“She stayed on with some friends. Don’t worry,” he said quickly. “She’s safe. I have two friends who won’t take their eyes off her. She’s having a blast.”

“Here you go, Shelley girl,” Justin said as he handed her a breakfast protein shake.

Obediently, Shelley sat and carefully spooned the shake into her swollen

mouth. Ricky watched her for a moment, before turning away, fury building.

"Shelley," Eric said softly. "Now that Ricky's here, I need you to go over with me, with us, exactly what happened. Every detail. Everything."

She looked from caring face to caring face and then down at her hands as she began to speak. "He hurt ee," she said softly.

Eric breathed deeply. "Start from the very beginning." He switched on a voice recorder.

"I us late — ," she began.

She told them everything that happened. Everything she felt. Everything she said and everything he said to her.

"I know it's hard to eelieve, ut, I us actually retty rave. All I could think us, ut ould oo aunt ee to do." She looked at him. "I anted so adly or oo to ee roud o ee."

"I couldn't be more proud of you, Shelley."

"We all are," Ricky added.

Shelley tried to smile. She put her hands to her face and felt it. "I tink da sellings going down, don't oo?"

"Maybe a little," Jason answered. "What do you think, Eric?"

"Slightly. No mirrors until next week."

✞✞✞

They took Shelley to her home to survey the damage. The blood stain on the carpet in the living room caught everyone's attention immediately. What finally brought Shelley to tears though, was finding her brown belt and the cream-colored silk dress Eric had bought her in Daytona, shredded to pieces on her bed. However, between all four men, they had her cheered, especially when they promised to replace everything that had been ruined including her entire wardrobe and all of the damaged furniture and might as well add in a complete renovation, new carpets, new floors, paint, and appliances.

Justin stayed to inventory the damage, Ricky and Jason, a wannabe chef, went back to Eric's apartment to start dinner and Eric took Shelley to the doc for a follow-up appointment. By the time Shelley and Eric arrived home, Jason had their meal prepared.

"S ells good," Shelley said. "Ish I could eat."

Jason handed her a mug of beef broth and ushered her to a chair. He then placed a plate on the table holding a piece of bread, applesauce, and a special protein bowl of chocolate pudding.

"I etter get ell soon. I already losing eight. Ii I gonna in that tourna ent, I got to get stong."

Jason kissed the top of her head. "Ooo got to eat what I ut in runt uh oo."

Shelley jumped up and came at Jason with her fist. Jason cowered, protecting his nose with his hands. "Help."

Eric laughed. "I wouldn't make fun of her if I were you."

Justin finally arrived and what seemed to have become their little family

sat at the table to make plans.

"Okay. So Justin and Jason fly out tonight to take care of their appointments while Ricky stays to help me with bodyguard duties for at least a week, maybe two," Eric clarified.

"What a-oint-ents?" Shelley asked.

The brothers eyed Eric before speaking. "I actually have some court cases and Jason has some classes he's supposed to attend," Justin answered. He didn't mention they would also be on an active manhunt.

"Ut classes are you taking?" Shelley inquired of Jason.

Jason smiled. "I'm not taking them. I'm teaching. I teach martial arts instructors, who will in turn be teaching a bunch of navy brats. I think they call them SEALs," he said with a grin.

"I didn't ealize you urk or the guh-ent."

Jason chuckled. "Yes, well, working for the government is a dirty job, but somebody has to teach those poor boys how to stay alive."

"He doesn't literally work for the government," Justin added. "Jason is a security consultant, so that means anyone can hire him to instruct or set up their security department."

"Anyone who can afford me," Jason laughed. "By the way, Eric, I just landed the MART."

"Well now, that doesn't surprise me a bit," Eric said.

"Jason has many friends in very high places," Justin added for Shelley's benefit. "Like, government friends."

"Look who's talking," Ricky put in. "Counselor Lee here, breaks bread with every judge in the country. And then there's Dad. I can't believe how many people Dad knows. I'm talkin' 'bout people in every state, heck, in every country, right up to several of the Presidents."

Jason laughed. "And poor little Ricky only has every female in the free world hungering after his body."

Ricky shuddered. "Well, that's a scary thought if you think about it."

"Yes, it is," Eric said. I guess it's a good thing he knows how to defend himself," he jested.

"Ya know," Shelley began. "There is an aw-ul lot o ower sitting ight here in dis tiny ittle uh-art-ent," she said reverently.

"Let's hope so, Shelley girl," Justin said. "Let's hope there's enough power to take care of this mess."

Shelley sighed. "I gonna iss you guys," she pouted.

"Eee gonna iss oo too," Jason teased.

Shelley raised her eyebrows. He being a teacher of Navy SEALs didn't intimidate her one little bit, and she quickly dumped the glass of water she was holding over his head and dashed away. Ricky laughed as Jason went after Shelley, but the game came to an abrupt halt when Shelley slipped in the water and went crashing to the floor.

She sat up slowly. “I okay.”

A short time later the brothers kissed Shelley goodbye and bid Eric and Ricky farewell, speaking what Shelley assumed was their native language of Korean. She made a face. They’d been speaking Korean an awful lot lately and she wondered what it was in particular that they didn’t want her to hear.

Once the brothers were gone, Eric wrapped his arms around Shelley. “I have some business I need to attend to tonight. I don’t know how late I’ll be, but Ricky will be right here with you, so, you gonna be okay?”

Shelley frowned but nodded. He kissed her cheek and left.

“C’mon Shelley,” Ricky prodded, noticing the wistful look on her face. “It’s late. If you try to get some sleep, he’ll be back before you’re awake. And if you need anything, I’ll be right here on the couch.”

Agreeing, she headed to Eric’s room and tried to sleep, but her eyes just would not close. She missed Eric and realized she’d become extremely dependent on him since the attack. It was disturbing. She was supposed to be getting strong and independent, yet it felt just like before. A crippling fear, a giant monster threatened to destroy all she’d been working for.

She was walking in circles around the room when she finally grabbed some paper and pen and went to find Ricky. He sat on the couch, reading. Sunshine came from his smile as he looked up at her.

“Can’t sleep?”

Shelley shook her head.

“Dad left some tea for you,” Ricky offered.

She shook her head again. “Lay a gane ith eee,” she asked, holding up the paper and pen.

“What kind of game?”

She sat next to him and took his book to use for a writing surface. She drew a gallows to play hangman. Ricky laughed and consented. They played several rounds before Shelley became bored. She took the paper and wrote, “How’s Bree?”

“She’s fine. She’s a great skier for a beginner. I left her with some good friends who will take good care of her for the next two weeks.”

“Do you think she’s safe?” Shelley wrote.

“Yes I do. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have left her. We have some friends outside the ones I left her with, who know the situation and are keeping an eye on her.”

“Does she know what happened?”

“No. When she is told is up to you. If she is told, is up to you. Unless the media spills the beans, which, I have to say, is entirely possible, so be forewarned.”

Shelley thought for a few moments, then wrote. “Are you and Bree in love?”

Ricky quickly looked into Shelley’s eyes. He’d rather not have this

conversation, but he was cornered. He sighed. "Well, there's definitely something there for me. I could very easily fall in love with her. She's a special girl— like her Mom," he added with a smile. "But, she's not that interested in me."

"She seemed very interested to me," Shelley wrote.

"Yes, well, that's a chemistry kind of thing, if ya know what I mean, but I want more than that with Bree. I want a real relationship." Shelley's brow furrowed as she tried to understand. She wrote, "So, you're saying that she's attracted to you physically, but she doesn't want a relationship?"

He shrugged. "I guess that about sums it up."

"She must be crazy." Shelley tapped the pen against her mouth but stopped when it caused her pain. She wrote again. "Ha, I guess you're not used to being turned down."

He chuckled. Shelley had a way of getting right to the heart of things. "I guess not. She has other prospects. There's a few guys she's dating regularly and apparently one in particular. He's a producer at one of the theaters in New York."

Shelley wondered why Bree hadn't talked to her about this guy. "A producer? How old is this guy?"

"Not sure exactly but I'd guess in his late twenties, early thirties."

Shelley watched Ricky's face, then wrote. "What are you *not* telling me?"

He shrugged. "I've met him, and I don't like him."

"Why not?"

He sighed. "He's one of those smooth talker types, like a lot of guys I know in Hollywood. Throws money around. Thinks he's a big shot. Bree, she's so young and he's so worldly, it makes her an easy target. I don't like it, but there's not much I can say to her about him because she thinks I'm speaking out of jealousy." He shrugged. "Maybe I am. Look, I don't mean to worry you. I've been up in New York quite a bit keeping an eye on the situation."

Shelley squeezed his arm then wrote. "Thank you, Ricky. You are a knight in shining armor."

"Believe me, keeping an eye on Bree is my pleasure."

Shelley frowned again then wrote. "But you two did date a few times anyway, didn't you?"

"Yes, we did."

She looked at him expectantly. When he offered no more she wrote. "So? How did it go? What happened between the two of you?"

He shook his head.

"Please tell me. The curiosity is killing me."

He sighed, looking into Shelley's eyes. "Okay, okay. I'll tell you." Looking away, he tried to gather his thoughts.

"Hello?"

He sighed. "Just trying to figure out how to say this." He scrubbed his

hand over his face. “Okay.” He shook his head. “I can’t believe I’m gonna tell you this— but— yes, we dated several times. And we had a blast. Bree is awesome. She’s great fun. She’s funny, she’s sharp, she’s not one bit shy. So, anyway, one night when I kissed her goodnight, we– you know– we got– we became– very– romantic.” He sighed again, shaking his head. Man, this was hard, but his dad says confession is good for the soul.

He drew a breath and forged on. “Okay. So, like I said, we became, um, romantic and we wanted to take things further.”

Shelley’s eyebrows rose, but he hurried on. “I admit, it seemed like if we kept kissing, it was gonna lead to, well, to what is reserved for marriage. In the heat of the moment I was struggling. Then Bree mentioned something about being the only virgin left in New York City and she was glad her title was about to come to an end. I don’t know why I was so surprised. I guess I figured she was just so beautiful, surely she’s had a few men.”

He glanced at Shelley and plowed on. “I mean, most people our age are not, you know, we’re not usually still virgins. So, I’m like, what was I doing? My dad and I, we believe in being in control of our bodies, not just in our martial arts but in, you know, everything.”

Shelley nodded.

“We don’t believe in casual sex and we don’t use women for our own gratification. A sexual relationship is for the sanctity of marriage.”

Shelley wrote, “So you are also a virgin?”

Ricky turned his eyes heavenward, pleading for help, but he already knew he must be honest and face the consequences of his actions. “No, I’m not. I made a mistake.” He shook his head. “I’m not as wise as my father. Or as strong. I knew I was in the wrong, but I did it anyway. Fortunately, God is a loving God, and a forgiving God.”

Shelley wrote, “You’re a young man, it happens.”

He shook his head. “No excuses. I know right from wrong, which is why I finally came to my senses that night with Bree. It was her talk about being a virgin that sank into my brain, and for that I am grateful. So, suddenly, I’m faced with telling her, right then, in the middle of a passionate situation that it won’t be happening. I realize that if I don’t finish what we started she’s gonna be hurt and angry. I mean, there she was, offering herself to me and if I turn her down it’s gonna be a real slap in the face. I mean, I knew she wasn’t in love with me, so I had no business letting things get that far. I also knew I had to face my dad, and you, and God again, so I stopped.

“And boy was she mad. For two weeks I apologized and sent flowers and begged her to understand. I even told her about how much I missed my mom and how lonely it had been with just Dad and me my whole life. I told her how the times I’d spent here with you and Dad, Mark and Joey and her were the happiest times I can remember and I wasn’t willing to throw it away for a moment of pleasure.”

Shelley's eyes welled with tears as Ricky continued.

"I explained how she probably took having brothers for granted and how I'd secretly longed for siblings all my life. I told her I was in love with her but I knew she wasn't in love with me and if I couldn't have it all, then I wanted her to just let me be her friend. And if I'm gonna be her friend, then I can't be intimate with her."

"So, she finally forgave you?" Shelley wrote.

He shrugged. "I guess so. She treats me like a good friend now, but there's still underlying tension. Really though, Mark and Joey are like my little brothers, however, I can't think of Bree as my sister. But you, Shelley, are like my Mom. My very young mom," he added.

Shelley pressed her fingers to her mouth and placed them on Ricky's cheek. He pressed his hand over hers.

"But," Ricky said cheerfully, breaking the spell. "Tonight, don't think of me as your son." He rose from the couch and offered his hand to pull her up. "Tonight, my father left me as your protector, with strict instructions for you to go to bed and sleep so your body can heal. So what can I do to help you accomplish that? Do you need some tea?"

She shook her head.

"Okay, then," Ricky said as he leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, Mom," he whispered.

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She tried really hard to sleep, but not having any physical exercise in several days and being constantly told to rest, was a prescription for insomnia. After an hour of tossing and turning she kicked the covers off. She probably should have accepted some magic tea. Not wanting to go back out and disturb Ricky though, she busied herself poking through Eric's dresser drawers. Boring quickly, she moved to the closet. There, she found something provoking her curiosity; a small red, leather-covered box with oriental lettering neatly engraved in gold across the top. She opened it.

In front of her lay a wedding ring, a round locket and a stack of pictures. She tried on the gold band. It was much too large. A man's ring. She slipped the ring off and placed it neatly away, picked up the locket, and opened it. A beautiful smiling face stared back at her. Ann.

This must be Ann. She was beautiful. Shelley frowned. She was so very beautiful. Petite, pageboy-style black hair and an angelic face. Shelley closed the locket carefully and put it away.

The pictures turned out also to be mostly of Ann. Ann and Eric, Ann pregnant, Ann and Eric again, Ann with new baby Ricky, Ann with an older Ricky, the three of them together, three of them and Justin, three of them and Jason, Ann in the hospital and finally, Ann in a bed at a home, hers and Eric's home, she surmised.

Emotions flooded through Shelley. She could feel Eric's and Ricky's

pain, but she also felt jealousy. She became angry with herself for being jealous of a dead woman and for going through Eric's personal things so, she carefully replaced the box in the closet. As she went to close the door an object on the floor in the back of the closet caught her eye. She reached in and pulled out something rectangular and heavy wrapped in bath towels. The mirrors.

Finally, she'd be able to see how severe her injuries were. She sat down on the carpet, leaning the terrycloth package carefully against the wall in front of her. Her stomach tensed as she counted to three, lifted the towel and peered into the mirror. A hideous, grotesque demon stared back at her. Gasping, her fingers went to her face to see if she truly viewed her own reflection.

Her right cheek had a small bandage where she'd been stitched, but that was the least of the problem. The right side of her face was two or three times larger than the left. There seemed to be no right eye, for it was hidden behind the swollen flesh. She could see the left eye though; it was blood red. There was no evidence that her eyes had once been brown. Her entire face was blue and purple and green and yellow and pink. Her lips were huge and cracked.

"No, ooh no," she cried softly. She thought of Ann's beautiful picture, and the tears she'd been trying to control over the past few days came again. She wept silently, looking into the mirror, hypnotized as she watched the tears run down the horrible mask.

The bedroom door opening broke her trance. Slowly she looked up to see Eric standing in the threshold.

"Oh Shelley, I asked you not to do this," he said kindly as he knelt and gently took the mirror away.

"I thought, ju un little eek. I so ugly. It's horri-ule," she cried. "How can oo stand to een look at ee?"

He pulled her into his arms. "Shelley, you won't look like this forever. It's only been three days. I promise, in a few weeks you'll hardly be able to tell."

She shook her head. "It's so ad. I ont ee how I can eh-er look like ee again."

"Baby, I promise, it'll get better. You will look like you again." Slowly shaking her head, she cried openly.

"Aww, I love you, Shelley girl."

She wept and shook her head. "No."

"Yes," he said softly, gently kissing her forehead. Softly, delicately, like one would kiss a sleeping baby, he kissed her face.

She pressed her forehead against his chest, "No," she whispered, "I ant to die."

"Please don't say that. You can't die and leave me behind. Please don't say that. Shelley, you're a beautiful woman and you will heal."

"No," she cried.

Realizing there was no way to convince her right now, he simply held her until she slept.

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"I'm worried about Shelley."

Ricky placed the fifty-pound dumbbells back on the rack, used his towel to wipe the sweat from his forehead and turned to face his father. "Something new, or same old, same old?"

Eric finished loading weights onto the barbell and straddled the bench. He and Ricky felt they needed a release and asked Brian to keep Shelley company while they slipped in a quick workout. "She's slipping into a depression. She's listless, and spends her time sleeping or staring at the ceiling. She only leaves the bedroom to use the bathroom. She doesn't even come out to eat anymore. It's all I can do to get her to down a protein drink."

Ricky circled behind the bench to spot. "Yeah, when Meg came over to do Shelley's hair, she barely tolerated her. She wasn't rude or anything. Actually, she was polite to a fault, still, definitely not her normal friendly self." He quieted while Eric lay back, lifted the barbell and pressed out ten reps. Ricky helped guide the bar back to the stand.

Eric spoke from his prone position. "I phoned Ray Chin."

"Your old psych professor?"

Eric nodded. "He said I've been doing all the right things. Encouraging Shelley to talk about her feelings, giving her space to work things out. But she's slipping further and further away. I can't seem to snap her out of it. I'm thinking we may have to call in professional help, so I think I'll get Ray to recommend someone in the Atlanta area."

"You're a psychologist, Dad."

"Yeah, but we need someone who has patient experience and someone not so close to the patient that I can trust." He sighed. "Come on, let's finish up. I'm sure Brian would like to get back to his wife."

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By Saturday morning Eric had arranged for a special bedside consultation with a highly recommended psychiatrist, Dr. Goldstein, who would arrive the next day midmorning. By Saturday night the swelling had gone down a good bit, allowing Shelley to speak and eat much better, yet she wasn't doing much of either.

"So, Shelley, do you want to come out and watch some TV with us?" Eric prodded.

She didn't answer, only lay on the bed looking up at the ceiling.

"Shelley, it's looking better."

She glanced at him, but didn't respond.

"You know, the boys are coming home in another week. You're gonna have to pull out of this."

She pulled herself out of her trance long enough to focus on Eric's face. "Please call Robert for me and tell him not to bring them home."

Eric frowned. "You just finished battling with Robert over them coming

home when all this mess hit the news. You want to give up your rights just like that? Those little boys need their mother. Don't you miss them?"

When she didn't answer, he started for the door. "Well, *I* miss them," he said as he left the room.

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The peace of Sunday morning came to an abrupt halt with the sound of shattering glass. Both Eric and Ricky raced toward the sound, and made it to the bathroom door as Shelley calmly opened it and walked back to the bedroom as if nothing had happened.

Eric peered into the bathroom. Shards of glass from the recently replaced mirror covered the sink and countertop.

Eric shrugged. "At least she's not lying passively in bed. I'd rather her show some emotion, even anger."

"I don't know if she's angry, but I do know she's bleeding," Ricky answered, pointing to the carpet.

"Oh, hell." Eric grabbed a towel and went to her. She sat on the bed watching the blood run down her arm. Eric took her hand and examined it. Wrapping the towel around her hand, he pulled her up and ushered her to the door.

"Rick, it's gonna take stitches. If Dr. Goldstein gets here before we get back, ask him to wait."

Four stitches and an hour and a half later, Eric and Shelley arrived home and were greeted by both Ricky and Dr. Goldstein. Eric felt extremely relieved to have Dr. Goldstein's help. He was a rare bird. A psychiatrist who'd stumbled down the path of a natural healer, and he came highly recommended.

However, Shelley showed no interest in an introduction. She said a polite hello and headed straight to bed. A minute later Eric and the doctor appeared at the bedroom door. She lay on the bed as usual, staring at the ceiling.

Dr. Goldstein entered and placed a kitchen chair by the bed. Eric walked to the other side of the room and leaned against the wall, staying out of Shelley's line of vision.

Shelley eyed Dr. Goldstein suspiciously as he sat down and discreetly put a black case on the floor by the bed.

"Hello, Ms. Adams," he said quietly.

"I could've sworn I just said hello to you a moment ago," she answered curtly.

"So you did. Do you know who I am?"

She sat up and studied him, marking the bag on the floor. "It appears that you're a doctor," she hissed, then laid right back down. "Well, you may as well pick up your little bag and leave because you're not touching me."

"I've no intentions of touching you– or leaving," he replied calmly.

She glared at him. "What then?"

"Just talk."

She rolled her eyes. “So, talk.”

Dr. Goldstein smiled. “I guess you’re pretty frightened about what happened to you?” he began.

She shrugged.

“What do you feel?” he asked.

She was quiet.

“Do you think maybe the problem is that you feel a lot of conflicting emotions and you’re not exactly sure how you feel?”

She glared at him. “Right now, the problem is, I don’t want to talk to you.” She rose and walked toward the door.

Suddenly Eric was there, blocking her way. “Shelley,” Eric pleaded, “please sit down.”

“I don’t have to stay here,” she shot back.

Hurt in his eyes, he reasoned with her. “No, you don’t. You have your free will. I guess I just assumed that we were in this thing together. I know I’d do anything for you. Won’t you consider doing this for me? Just talk to the doctor. Just talk. That’s all.”

With the defeated look she’d recently mastered, she turned and sat on the end of the bed and eyed the doctor. “I suppose now you’re gonna tell me all about how I feel,” she said sarcastically.

Dr. Goldstein smiled. “How about you tell me.”

Shelley looked down and shook her head. “I guess you’re right. I don’t know how I feel.”

“That’s understandable. You’ve been through a lot and different emotions will continue to surface. Let’s just think about a few. Go back now to fear. Are you afraid?”

Shelley looked down at her hands. “I don’t think so. I mean, someone’s always here with me so, no, I’m not afraid.”

“What about your children? Eric tells me you don’t want to see them. Are you afraid for their safety?”

“I didn’t say I don’t want to see them,” Shelley shot back, glaring at Eric. “And no, I’m not afraid for their safety. Apparently, that horrible man wasn’t interested in them.”

Doctor Goldstein nodded. “So, tell me this, if you want to see your children and you feel they’re safe, why do you not want them to come home?” he probed.

She shook her head. “I don’t want them to see me,” she whispered.

“I understand the children aren’t due back for another week. You’ll be much better by then.”

“It’s been a whole week and I’ve seen no improvement,” she said.

“Well, Eric says there has been a great deal of improvement. He says just a week ago you couldn’t even speak. But let’s come back to your condition later. Do you feel anything else?”

Shelley shrugged.

"What about anger? It seems to me you're very angry."

Shelley's hands closed into fists. "I can't talk about this."

"Why not?"

"Because I'll go crazy," she said, her eyes wide.

Dr. Goldstein sat quietly and waited.

"Okay, yes, I am angry. I'm so angry I want to kill someone." Shelley held her fists up. "I want to rip that man apart with my bare hands. That's a great mother image, huh? I lie here and try to clear my mind. I try to control it but I can't. I feel like some caged animal who's wild and unpredictable. Is that what I should bring my kids home to? I'm full of hatred. He hurt me. And he laughed at me. He made me look like this." Out of pure frustration, she pounded her thighs with her fists.

"Is this anger why you broke the mirror today?" Dr. Goldstein asked calmly.

She shrugged. "I guess."

"Who did you see in the mirror? The man who attacked you?"

"No, I saw an ugly, horrible, weak, pitiful woman whom I hate." She slammed her fists on her legs again.

Eric sighed, realizing any progress he'd made with Shelley since June had been neatly disposed of in a thirty minute expanse of time.

"Why is this woman weak?" Dr. Goldstein asked, picking out what he thought was the key word.

"Because, she let it happen." Shouting now, she went on. "She couldn't think fast enough to get out of it. She's been training extensively for six months and never even got in one punch. Not one! Don't you see? He took me down like I was a kitten, like I was nothing. He even said it himself. It was too easy. And now I look like this and I cry all the time and I can't control my emotions and I hate it. I just hate it. I hate me."

Tears came to her eyes and this time instead of hitting her thighs, she slapped her hands against her face, yelling at herself. "Stop it."

Eric quickly grabbed her arms and held them down by her side. She struggled against his strength.

"Please, baby," Eric pleaded.

"Be her teacher," Dr. Goldstein urged. "I think your guilt is getting in your way."

Sighing, Eric nodded. "Shelley, get control of yourself."

"Why should I?" she cried.

"Because you're hurting yourself and when you hurt, I hurt."

"Is that what you want?" Dr. Goldstein asked.

Shelley stilled and slowly shook her head. "No, of course not." She buried her face against Eric's chest, sobbing. "I'm sorry, Eric. But it feels like I'm losing my mind."

"Shhh, no apologies," Eric whispered. "Dr. Goldstein is here to help you. Will you let him do that? For me? Will you talk to him?"

Sniffing, she raised her head. "I'll talk to him."

"That's good, Ms. Adams. Stay right here. Eric, let me speak to you outside please."

They walked into the small hallway.

"What do you think?" Eric asked.

"I think she's having a normal reaction to a severe trauma. I don't think she's suicidal, but I'd like to spend more time with her alone tonight and several more times over the next few weeks. Ray told me all about you and about the MART and the importance of your situation. I'll make time, but I need you to bring her to my office."

"That will be no problem, and thank you," Eric said.

"Good. Now if you'll excuse us."

Eric nodded and joined Ricky on the couch. They sat quietly, both deep in thought. After a time Eric's thoughts turned to his son.

"Ricky, I want you to know how much I appreciate your help with all this. I owe you so much. When things like this happen, people tend to count their blessings and I count you as a major one."

Ricky smiled. "Backatcha, Dad, but you don't owe me anything. I owe you everything. Ya know, I love Shelley too. She's like a mother to me. I hope that doesn't upset you."

Eric was surprised by the statement. "Why would you think that would upset me? Your happiness is my happiness."

Ricky shrugged. "I mean, I thought you might see it as being disloyal to Mom."

Eric frowned. "Your mother has left this world and Shelley is here. I love her and I'm happy you feel the way you do."

Ricky sighed. "Well, it's killing me to see her like this, Dad, so I can't even imagine what it's doing to you."

Eric ran his hand through his hair and pulled out the elastic holding it back. "I don't know, Rick. If I'd only taken action on that dream. If I'd only been there. I pray every day and every night, I ask the Lord to stay close to me, to help me, He gives me a prophetic dream, a warning dream, and I hesitated. I didn't act immediately and because of that, Shelley is suffering."

"Dad, I understand you feeling guilty. I wish you'd been there too, and yet, that's not how it was planned. He waited until he knew she was alone. You gotta stop blaming yourself. You always told me that guilt is a useless emotion. Do you not really believe what you taught me?"

"I do, of course. I guess some things are easier said than done. Still, there is a difference between guilt and regret, and maybe I'm feeling regret. Guilt is more about wrongdoing, and regret about lack of action. Either way, you're right, Ricky, I'll do away with the guilt or regret because it's time to move

forward. I can't argue with you now anyway. I'm so tired I can't think straight."

"Then I suggest you go to bed for a while," Dr. Goldstein said as he entered the room.

Eric stood. "How is she?"

"She's calmer, I think. She'll learn how to handle her anger as the bruises and memories fade. However, she's a lot stronger than she gives herself credit. She's simply a person who feels things very deeply."

Eric thanked the doctor and saw him out.

Ricky pointed to the sofa. "I get the floor tonight. You get the couch. Get some rest, Dad. Sleep now, before I kick your butt."

"I will. Let me just check on Shelley first."

He stood at the door. Shelley seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Eric grabbed one of her new gowns off the chair and sat down on the bed to wake her gently, but she opened her eyes as soon as he sat.

"Hi there," Eric said. "You okay?"

Shelley shrugged. "I guess."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"I wasn't mad at you, only at me," she said softly.

"Shelley, would you mind if I tell you something?"

"Go ahead."

He reached out and stroked her hair. "You said James took you down like you were nothing. Someone who's been training for a mere six months is no match for someone like James. First, he's a giant. And James has been studying Ninjutsu for a very long time and Ninjutsu is a deadly art."

"Ninjutsu. I remember you said you'd teach me one day. So it's one of your skills?"

"Yes. Unfortunately, some people use their skills in dishonorable ways. The thought of using my strength against a defenseless woman is repulsive to me."

Shelley moaned at his words. "I'm not supposed to be defenseless."

"You're so impatient. In a few years, you'll be an awesome martial artist. Right now, you're an awesome student. Trust me. With each tournament you get better, you get stronger, and more confident." He sighed. "I hate that you have to miss the New Year's tournament."

Shelley sat up. "What?"

"You didn't think you were gonna fight in two weeks did you?"

"I guess I wasn't thinking at all," she said slowly as she yawned and snuggled back down against the pillow. "Do you really think the swelling is going down?" she asked sleepily.

"Yes, I do."

Shelley sighed deeply as sleep began to overtake her. "She was so beautiful."

"Who was?"

"Ann. Her pictures were in your closet."

Eric drew a breath and pushed emotions aside. "Yes, she was, but Shelley, she was no more beautiful than you."

Shelley smiled as she dozed. "I wish I looked like her," she whispered.

"I like you just the way you are."

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2 Corinthians 7:10

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads
to salvation and leaves no regret,
but worldly sorrow brings death."

Chapter Sixteen

Shelley awoke early, feeling refreshed. For the first time since the attack, she felt somewhat lighthearted. Sharing her feelings with the doctor seemed to have helped her more than she would've thought. She'd been able to work through much of the clutter in her mind.

Smiling, she donned her new sweats, and running shoes, wrote a note to Ricky and Eric, placed it on the kitchen counter and slipped quietly out the front door. The note read:

My two cute sleepyheads. This is official notice that my training has resumed as of six a.m. December twenty-third. If you are awake before I finish my six miles, please have the decency to have breakfast waiting for me. I weighed this morning. I've lost eight pounds!

You are loved. S

Thirty minutes later Ricky came out of the kitchen with the note in hand. "Dad! Look at this."

Eric sat up. "What is it? Where's Shelley?"

Ricky handed Eric the note. Eric read it and sprang off the couch.

"You go left, I'll go right," Ricky said as he pulled on his coat and grabbed his phone.

"Okay. She won't make her six miles," Eric calculated as he grabbed his clothes. "She probably won't get two before she realizes she can't make it."

"Dad, I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault. I can't believe I didn't hear her get up."

"And I can't believe I didn't hear her open the front door." Ricky took off. Eric left a few minutes later.

Ricky's search didn't last long. A small figure ran toward him out of the gray dawn light. She slowed to a walk as she approached him.

"Ricky! Good morning." She bent over, her hands on her knees. "Whew, I can't believe how fast I've gotten out of shape. I am totally winded. I barely made two miles. It's gonna be hard to get back in shape. I hope I survive the next few weeks of training."

Ricky smiled. "I hope you survive Dad's wrath," he mumbled.

"Huh?"

"Never mind," Ricky said, hugging her. "It's really good to see you smile.

Actually, right now, it's just really good to see you. C'mon we've gotta hurry back." He pulled out his cell phone.

Eric pulled out his phone and read the text. Relieved, he offered a prayer of thanks, turned and headed back. When he came through the door, she was stretching out in the living room. He reached down, pulled her to her feet, searched her face for a moment, hugged her fiercely and spoke to her softly.

"Shelley, you scared us. Honey, please don't leave this apartment alone. Not ever again. Not until we find this guy."

The happy feeling left her as she realized she'd erred. "Oh, Eric, I am so sorry. I was just trying to be a little independent. Like, I've been such a burden with you always having to take care of me, so I thought I'd do something on my own, ya know, take the initiative and also show him that I'm not intimidated at all."

"Well, sweetheart, I'm not trying to scare you but– be intimidated. You already showed us that you're brave. You're feisty. You have nothing else whatsoever to prove." He hugged her again. "But your note was adorable and I'm glad you're feeling better. You are feeling better aren't you?"

She nodded and smiled.

"That's my girl." The smile left his face. "So, listen, Shelley, before I make breakfast I'd like to talk to you about the MART."

She smiled up at him. "I know we need to catch up on some training, but I promise I'll train harder than ever."

He sighed. "Shelley, what I'd like to say is, well, I'm thinking maybe we should back out. It's not because we're behind in training. It's just that, well, he did make that threat. With you in the limelight, it may be easier for him to carry out than we think."

She lifted her chin, her eyes fierce with determination. "I'm not only gonna participate in the MART—I'm gonna win it."

"Shelley, I know that's what you want, but maybe we should reconsider. I can't stand the thought of anything else happening to you."

Her brow rose. "Eric, now that we know there's some crazy guy out there who wants to hurt us, we can be prepared. It won't happen again because we can avoid it. Right? Besides, if you allow your life to be controlled by someone, then you're like a prisoner and I'd rather be dead than lose my freedom of choice. So, I choose to compete. Anyway, you made me a promise you'd train me no matter what, so you can't back out. I'm gonna show that, that, that horrible man, that nothing he did to me made a bit of difference."

Ricky, smiling with admiration, raised his eyebrows at his father. But Eric was worried and his frown reflected it. Shelley put her arms around his neck.

"We can face this together. Isn't that what you once said to me in the dark?"

Eric ran his hands down her arms to her waist and pulled her close.

"Yes, though this time, it's me who's afraid."

†††

"Found his Atlanta contact," Jason stated, phone pressed to his ear. "He stayed with a local Atlanta politician, Virgil Johnstone, who's making a run for mayor of Atlanta. Right now he's the assistant DA. He lives in Buckhead. Huge estate. High security. Steel gates, electric fences, dogs, cameras. A lot of money for his current job."

Eric stepped outside to make sure Shelley didn't overhear. "Can I get in?"

"Hold on, now. Justin already had the investigator speak with him. He denies even knowing James, much less admitting that James was in Atlanta during the time of the attack."

Eric sighed. "A crooked politician, who would've guessed."

Jason chuckled. "Anyway, don't expect the investigation to go any further. I mean, the guy is a DA. Different counties, but still..."

"So, what you're telling me is we're no closer to finding James than before," Eric said impatiently.

"He's gone to ground. His secretary at Golden Hotels in LA says she doesn't know where he is, only that he's on an extended vacation. The company VP is running things in his absence. Listen, he can't stay hidden forever. If he's afraid of arrest, he's gonna have to come up with an alibi."

Eric shook his head. "He's not afraid of being arrested. He knows we have no way to link him to the attack on Shelley. What he's afraid of, is us, as well he should be. If I were him I wouldn't show my face for a long time. However, he will eventually. Because he won't be able to resist seeing his handiwork. He'll be at one of Shelley's tournaments. I'm sure of it."

†††

Happy to be back in her own home, Shelley began to feel lighthearted and content again. She stood at the front door telling Ricky goodbye as Justin pulled up in the drive.

Shelley hugged Ricky as he walked out the door. "Give that to Bree."

Ricky grinned. "I sure got no problem doin' that!" He held the door for Justin to come in as he left.

Shelley smiled. "My, people come and go so quickly around here."

Ricky smiled as he walked to his car and called back over his shoulder. "That was *Wizard of Oz."*

Eric stood with her in the threshold and waved to his son. Turning to her he touched her face. "I can't tell you how beautiful your smile is. Are you happy to be home?"

"Ecstatic. Thank you, Eric, for getting everything fixed and all the extras. It's like a brand-new home."

He shrugged. "The insurance company paid for most of it. I was happy to put my two little cents in."

Later that evening he tugged on her arm. "So, we need to talk."

Cuddling up with her on the gorgeous brand-new sofa he smiled proudly.

"Your demeanor has turned an abrupt one-eighty. You've really worked hard this week and I'm very proud of you. You've gained back five pounds and a hundred percent confidence."

Shelley smiled. "Do go on."

Eric touched her nose with an adoring smile. "You attack your training with great determination. Your face is almost healed, and may I take this opportunity to say, 'I told you so?'"

Shelley looked smug. "No, you may not. Besides, it still looks as though I've mated with a rainbow."

Eric laughed. "An interesting concept."

"So, is this all you wanted to talk about or is there something more serious? And if you're gonna try to talk me into giving up the MART again, let me just stop you now."

Eric sighed. "No, that isn't my intention. Tonight, I have to tell you about James Crane. You need to know why he attacked you. You have a right to know and I did say I'd fill you in."

She nodded. "Go ahead. I think I'm ready."

"I've known James for many years."

"Did you tell that to the police?"

"I did, but it seemed to make no difference and that's because there's no physical evidence linking James to what happened. He's too smart for that."

"Why does he hate you so much?" she asked.

"It goes all the way back to high school. He was the big popular athlete, you know, the stereotype bully. Only he found he couldn't bully me. I wasn't afraid of him or at least I didn't show him any fear."

"So, let me guess, you ended up having to kick his butt and he hates you for more than twenty years? That's ridiculous."

"There's a lot more to it than that. You see, he had a girlfriend. She told me that once she got involved with him and was witness to his temper she didn't know how to break up with him. So, she stayed with him mostly out of fear. It was our coming to blows that became her avenue of escape. It gave her the courage to leave him."

"So, all this was over a girl?"

"No. It was a racial sort of thing. You see, his grandfather had been at Pearl Harbor in World War II and he hated Asians. I learned all of that after the fact. James had a habit of picking on the Asian students.

I guess I looked like an easy target."

"I don't understand. I mean, you don't really look Asian and you certainly don't look like an easy target. You're almost as big as him."

He smiled. "He's got at least four inches on me and I must have looked Asian enough to him. And, I did hang out with the Asian kids. I admit, I brought myself to his attention, when I stepped in to help out a couple of friends that he and his buddies were messing with. I couldn't just stand by and

allow him to pick on kids a lot smaller than him. So, I warned him to back off. He'd bragged to everyone how he was gonna get me for mouthing off. As it turned out, he was the easy target. He made the fatal flaw of underestimating his enemy. I took him down quickly and easily, but the bad thing is, I purposely shamed him. I mocked him. I went too far. I was young and I was angry and I didn't go easy on him and I did it in front of all of his friends."

Shelley nodded. "So, where does the girlfriend come in?"

"Well, soon after that fight, his girlfriend came to speak with me. She actually apologized for James trying to bully me. So, she and I became friends and she began to feel safe enough to break up with him. Soon after that, she became my girlfriend and eventually— my wife."

He stopped a moment to allow this piece of information to sink in.

"Oh, that was Ann?"

Eric nodded. "Yes. But I didn't coerce her away from him. Taking her from him was never my intention. It just happened. Chemistry I suppose. Of course, he didn't see it that way. Her being white and me having Asian blood grated on the guy. I think it really tormented his soul. I actually think he lost his mind. He vowed to win her back. After Ann and I married, he literally stalked us. He sent threatening letters to Ann. Did stupid stuff like keying the car, throwing rocks through the windows. He backed off though, when Ann became pregnant with Ricky."

"Were you still in high school then?"

"Oh no. We were eighteen, just graduated. Actually, I was seventeen when I graduated and turned eighteen the next month. Ann and I married right after high school graduation, I was headed to college, and she lived with me in off-campus housing. We had over five years of peace. But after Ricky's fifth birthday, the threats began anew. I'm not sure why it started back then. It was difficult to understand his sick reasoning and we worried about Ricky being in school away from us."

"Was he at a public school?"

"Yes. Money was tight back then. We scraped some together, though, to hire a bodyguard for a little while, actually one of my students, however, it became apparent that James wasn't interested in Ricky. He would call Ann when I wasn't home, tell her how much he loved her, how he forgave her for leaving him, but when she wouldn't reciprocate, he'd become enraged and threaten to ruin me. He's not dumb. He'd become pretty powerful in the business world. He owns *Golden Hotels*."

"*Golden Hotels*? Wow." She frowned. "So, you said he studied martial arts. Was that before or after the big fight?"

"He began studying Ninjutsu right after I kicked his butt and he's never stopped. He never gave up trying to win Ann back and when she became ill, he blamed me in his own twisted way. In fact, when she died, he wrote me a letter accusing me of her murder and saying he'd never forgive me for taking

his woman from him and...” He stopped and took Shelley’s hand.

“What? And what?” she demanded.

“I don’t want to frighten you,” he said.

“Well, Eric, I’m already frightened; I may as well know what to be frightened of.”

Eric looked into her beautiful brown eyes. “He said he would never forgive me for taking his woman and one day he’d reciprocate. I didn’t think much about it because, after all, the woman I loved had just passed away. I never dreamed that ten years later I’d fall in love with the most wonderful woman in the world. I’d forgotten all about the letter. I hadn’t heard from him all these years. He’s so sick that he waited all this time for the right circumstances and now, he has you to use against me. This time, it was me who underestimated my enemy and you ended up paying for it.

“When I found you that morning, Shelley, I thought you were dead. I’m not even sure why he didn’t kill you, except for what he told you, that would be too easy. Well, I don’t intend for him to get another chance.”

Shelley chewed on her lip. “Then, what happens now? I mean, do we just wait around until he tries again?”

“I have friends in almost every state on the lookout for him. He’s smart, but eventually he’ll surface, and when he does, it will all be over.”

“What will you do?” she asked fearfully.

“That’s one thing you don’t need to know.”

“Then you’re thinking of doing something outside of the law?”

Eric’s face darkened. “I will do whatever has to be done to make sure you are protected.”

Shelley looked up into Eric’s eyes. “So, you’re calmly sitting here talking about what– killing a man? Is that what you’re saying? Not because I care at all about the man’s life, but Eric, you could go to jail and be lost to me forever. Killing a man would ruin you. Then he would win. Don’t you see that?”

“Yes, I do. When I’m calm, I see that. When I’m calm, I turn to God and remember that I believe in peace and love and kindness and finding other ways to solve problems other than violence. When I’m calm, I remember my covenant with Jesus and I pray always for His spirit to fill me and to help me forgive. But then, I look at your bruised face and all rational thought seems to slip away.”

“Eric, I’m afraid for you,” she whispered. “Please, I have to know you won’t take matters into your own hands. Please. You don’t want me to be afraid? Well, that frightens me more than anything.”

He sighed. “Okay, I promise to handle things within the confines of the law. Still, one way or another, I have to keep you safe.” He smiled to ease her fear. “Don’t worry though, babe, because I have a feeling something good is gonna happen.”

“Really? Are you using your psychic powers to say that?”

"Yes, and really. And I have this for you," he said with a smile. He handed her an envelope. She opened it quickly and read:

Dear Ms. Adams, we hope this finds you much better than the last time we spoke to Eric. Please use this money to help with any little expenses that may have been overlooked in getting your life back to normal. We're still completely behind you and Eric and trust that you'll continue to train hard and make us proud. We know you're a winner. Sincerely, Lyn Fontaine, Richard Johnson and Alan Bearden.

Shelley peeked at the check. "Five thousand dollars! Oh my goodness, Eric, do you see this?"

Eric smiled at her.

"Of course," she said, "I guess this is nothing to you."

He shook his head. "A gift is never nothing," he corrected, as he pulled a box out from beside the sofa. "This is also for you."

Grinning, she opened the box. It was a white silk Chinese-style uniform, similar to the one he'd given her in Florida, which had been destroyed. She held it up to her. "You are a saint," she purred.

"There's more," he said.

She laughed. "That's Tom Hanks, in *Splash*." She turned back to the box and lifted the paper. Her eyes opened wide. "Oh wow. Oh, yes!" she exclaimed, holding up her new red belt. "Oh Eric, I didn't expect this at all."

"I know," he smiled. "You didn't expect it and that's why it's so much fun to give it to you."

"Somehow I knew you were gonna say that." She jumped into his arms. "Thank you, Eric, thank you." She kissed him over and over.

He laughed. "I should give you gifts more often."

She grinned. "I don't see how you could."

At that moment Justin came from the kitchen holding a tray of grapes and cheese and finger sandwiches.

"Justin, look," Shelley exclaimed, holding out the red belt.

"That is awesome, Shelley. You've earned it." He set down the tray and gave her a big hug. "Of course, I already knew. I just got off the phone with Ricky and Jason, you know, touching base, synchronizing our watches, making sure our decoder rings work and they asked me to congratulate you on your promotion. So, this is from Jason," he said as he kissed her cheek. "And this is from Ricky," he said as he kissed her other cheek. He tilted her head up and lightly kissed her mouth. "And, that's from me."

"Uh, Justin, I believe you're pushing the best friend thing just a little too far," Eric warned.

Justin grinned. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

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Jeremiah 33:6
"Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security."

Chapter Seventeen

"We're gonna treat New Orleans as one big street fight."

Shelley listened, alert and attentive to her teacher as he instructed.

"What have I told you about street fighting?"

Shelley took only a moment. "Get in and get it over with fast."

"Exactly. And defensively countering an assault with a kick can quickly stop a confrontation because the kick is so powerful. You want to stop the confrontation quickly because the longer you fight, the greater your opponent's chances become." Eric was pulling out a kicking bag as they spoke.

"This will be good for you as small as you are. It will increase your reach. I want you to go for your opponent's midsection mostly, because the higher the kick the more power you lose." He patted the area of the bag he wanted Shelley to aim for. "Left leg, roundhouse, go."

Shelley moved forward and kicked hard, over and over, changing legs, and changing kicks.

She worked tirelessly as Eric knew she would. The training regimen and daily schedules had been adhered to religiously since her recovery, and after five weeks Shelley's teacher and sparring partners felt her chances of finally winning a tournament were good. The last few weeks before Mardi Gras were spent focusing on jujitsu grappling techniques and the quickness of Kung Fu. Shelley was more excited and more confident than she'd ever been. Eric, not willing to let Shelley be alone and unprotected, had moved into the small downstairs bedroom off of the den in Shelley's house, so she felt safe and secure. Since his apartment was paid up until June, he held onto it for times Ricky or the Lee brothers were in town.

The night before they were to leave for New Orleans, quiet and pensive, dressed in a thick gray sweat suit, Shelley slipped out the back door into the chill night air to sit on the trampoline. Eric gave her the space she needed to work things out. He'd been content to watch her from the window until he saw her shiver. It was then he pulled a large blanket from the closet and joined her.

She sat cross-legged in the center of the trampoline staring up at the stars but smiled at him as he approached. He sat down behind her, wrapping his arms and legs around her and pulled the blanket around them both.

"Better?" he asked.

"Yes, thanks," she answered softly.

"Worried about things?"

She shrugged, rubbing her hands over the surface of the trampoline. "Ya know, it's too bad they didn't cut this up. We needed a new trampoline."

"Shelley, if you want a new tramp, I'll get you one, but be careful what you say, babe. There's power in words. So, is that what you're thinking about? The men who attacked you?"

She sighed and shook her head. "Not really. I guess I was just thinking about what the future holds."

He nodded. "Okay, then, let me ask you a question, have you decided yet what you think about God?"

"What do I think about him?"

"You told me once you weren't sure if He was real or just some fairy tale that people make up to feel better. I've taught you many things over these past months, so I'm wondering, do you believe in Him yet? I'm not pressuring you, I'm just wondering because you asked what the future holds, and the Lord has a plan for you, for your future."

"You really think so?"

"I absolutely know He does. He sent me to you, Shelley. He brought us together. He has a plan."

"Did his plan include James Crane attacking me?"

Eric smiled. "This is a common question. Why does God allow bad things to happen. He gives all of us free will. James will face God's consequences for his actions. God allows things to happen so that we can grow. He hones us in the fire. And, really, Shelley, if you think about it, you have grown so much stronger because of the difficulties you've faced."

Shelley nodded thoughtfully. "Yes, that's true, and I have to admit, our little Sunday Bible sessions and the few times we visited those churches, it's not just been enlightening, but also I've begun to feel different. Calmer, stronger, I mean, I think, I do feel like God is real, it's kind of like I can feel Him smiling down at me sometimes. Does that sound crazy?"

Tears welled in Eric's eyes. He lifted his face upward and whispered a soft 'thank you, Jesus.' "No, Shelley, that doesn't sound crazy at all. You're beginning to build a relationship with Him. He is sending you His Holy Spirit to bear witness to you that He is real, that Jesus was/is the Son of God, that He died to pay the price for our wrongdoings, and that He was resurrected, making it possible for all of us to be resurrected, and be with our families and loved ones eternally. His plan takes away the pain and sorrows of life."

Shelley nodded. "Now *that* sounds like a good plan. Do you think His plan includes me winning the MART?"

"Have you asked Him that?"

"Not really."

"Talk to Him, Shelley. Every day, every night, through prayer. Take time to develop a relationship with Him. You *will* begin to hear His voice, sometimes a still small voice inside your head, and sometimes He makes a very

loud statement."

"Like your dreams?"

"Yes, like that. And when you build this relationship, you'll know of a surety that He is real, He is alive, you can trust Him, and that in the long run, all will be well."

She sighed. "I'll do that."

Eric smiled. "I know when you say you'll do something, you will. So, tell me, at this moment, what is it you want for your future?"

"Hmmm, I guess I want to win the MART, but I'll settle for doing well in New Orleans."

"Well, you should never settle for less than what you want. We'll do some praying and some visualizations for the MART soon. Right now, like you just wisely said, let's focus on New Orleans. You know this tournament will be the biggest one you've fought in yet."

"You keep saying that. How is it so different from all the others?"

"Because, as we discussed, it's bare knuckles. No holds barred. No headgear, no chest protection, no anything except your mouth guard. You'll have to depend completely on the strength of your body and the quickness of your mind to protect you, similar to the MART. So, does that frighten you?"

She thought a moment. "You know, for some reason I'm not afraid at all. I think I'm actually looking forward to it."

Eric nodded. "Good."

"I'm glad we're going a few days early. I'm really excited."

He touched his lips to her cheek. "I'm glad you're excited. So, listen, I know you've arranged for Bree to take care of the boys while we're gone, and I've taken it upon myself to ask Brian to keep an eye on both Bree and the boys while we're gone."

"What about Ricky? Is he not available?"

"Ricky, Jason and Justin will be joining us in New Orleans."

"Oh, wow, I guess this really is an important tournament."

"It is. It's a turning point."

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They arrived during Mardi Gras. Shelley's excitement was short-lived however when, over dinner, Eric put a damper on her plans.

"What do you mean we can't go out for a while? It's Mardi Gras. You know, Mardi Gras? I've been dying to actually see and be a part of a real live Mardi Gras." Shelley could scarcely believe her ears.

Eric shook his head. "I hadn't realized you thought you were gonna attend the festivities. I'm sorry, but no way. Not only is it based in paganism originally, but it is in essence, a celebration of sin and debauchery. There are all kinds of people acting foolishly and irresponsibly and therefore it is not the best activity to indulge in, but besides that, we have one day to prepare for the tournament and you, my love, are gonna be in bed by nine."

"No, I'm not," Shelley replied rebelliously. "I'm going out. I want to see the parades and hear the music and collect some beads. Shout all you want but I'm going out."

Eric calmly placed his fork down beside his plate, but his cool facade didn't fool the others at the table. Eyebrows raised, Ricky and the Lee brothers steadied for the blast.

"You are here as my student and only because you are my student and you will absolutely do as I say. Sometimes I am truly amazed at the lack of respect you display." Her lips pursed and he softened. "Shelley, why do you have to be so difficult?"

"Difficult?" she cried. "You don't know what difficult is, you're so used to everyone jumping whenever you snap your fingers."

The others at the table exchanged glances as Eric's face darkened. "You're the one, Shelley, who's so used to getting your way. I've completely spoiled you to the point that you don't know what to do when someone finally tells you 'no'."

His words rang true. True enough for Shelley to calm down a bit. "Eric, please, just for a little while. Wasn't it you who said a tree must learn to bend?" she pleaded.

"Not this time. Not when you're about to fight in your most important tournament this year. We have a precise plan to follow so that you'll be at your optimum. Sorry. The reason we're here is to fight in a tournament. Keep your priorities straight. Eight hours of sleep, not one second less. There's a reason for self-discipline."

Shelley rolled her eyes. "I can't believe this." She sat back during the rest of the meal, arms folded on her chest.

"You need to eat," Jason coaxed.

"I'm not hungry."

Ricky put his hand on her shoulder. "C'mon Shelley, don't be upset. I hate it when you're upset. You know, Dad only has your best interest in mind."

She conceded that. "I know, but he's just so stubborn. What could a couple of hours hurt?" she said more to Eric than to Ricky.

It was Justin who answered the question though. "It's really a matter of self-discipline and self-restraint."

"And a couple of hours could make all the difference in the world if you get involved in a long battle," Jason added.

Shelley looked from face to face. "You men are all alike," she said bitterly. "What is it? Some sort of brotherhood?"

Eric only shook his head.

They left the restaurant and headed back to the hotel, an old, white, two-story building with an outer walkway running along both levels. They were on the upper level opening the doors to their rooms when a southern voice called to them.

"Eric, Shelley! Hey, it's me, Angel!"

They peered over the balcony to see the beautiful blonde standing in the parking lot looking up at them.

"Hi, Angel," Ricky called.

"Hey Ricky! Are y'all here for the tournament? Of course you are. What a dumb question. Me too! But I'm goin' partyin' tonight first. " Angel ran up the stairs before she continued. "Shelley, why don't you come along. You and Eric both."

Shelley's eyes pleaded with Eric who stood stoically.

"I wish I could, but Eric won't let me go out. He says I have to be in bed by nine."

Angel gasped. "Oh, you poor thing. Goodness, I'm so glad my instructor isn't here telling me what to do. I'd go crazy. Oh, Eric, no offense honey. I'm just glad you're my friend and not my teacher."

He remained silent. He was just realizing that he'd never seen her with her teacher and he wondered who he was.

"So Shelley, what belt are you now?" Angel asked.

"Red," Shelley answered shortly, still pouting over her curfew.

"My goodness, you're moving right along! You finally made it to my rank. We just might end up competing with each other." She winked at Shelley. "Don't worry honey, I'll go easy on you."

Out of curiosity, all four men turned to see the look on Shelley's face. They had to keep from laughing.

"Don't look so sour honey. I was just teasing ya'."

Shelley smiled stiffly.

Angel looked at her watch. "Well, I've gotta go and it's almost Shelley's bedtime, so—bye y'all. Guess I'll see you at the fights." She scurried off.

Silently, Eric turned, let Shelley in her room and handed her the key. "Jason and Justin are on one side and Ricky and I are on the other side if you need anything. Now go inside, do your stretching, praying, meditating and then go to bed."

He put his finger under her chin to raise her mouth to kiss, but she pulled away and slammed the door in his face. Madly, she threw off her clothes. She'd washed her hands and face, brushed her teeth and begun to stretch when she thought she heard someone knock on her door.

She peeked out the curtain. It was Angel. However, she wasn't knocking on Shelley's door. She was knocking on Eric's. Shelley watched a moment. She couldn't hear what they were saying but after a few moments Angel went inside his room.

Shelley turned from the window and threw herself down on the bed. Don't be jealous, she told herself. It's probably nothing. It's probably very innocent. Besides, Ricky's there too.

Still though, there was pain in her heart that she had to go to bed like a

little girl and Angel was in there with Eric. She heard the door close. "Good, she's leaving," Shelley thought.

She peeked out her curtain again and her mouth fell open. Angel and Eric were walking arm in arm down the stairs. Shelley stood on her tiptoes. She could barely see over the balcony to Eric's rental car. He was opening his car door for her. Shelley turned around in a rage, too mad to cry. Surely, he doesn't think that he's going out to party with Angel while she's stuck here in her room. Immediately she went to her suitcases and pulled out the red dress and shoes that she'd brought, thinking she would get to attend the festivities.

Moments later, she modeled in front of the mirror, smoothing her dress. "Not bad," she murmured. She brushed her hair back, letting it fall loosely over one shoulder, grabbed the key, stuffed it in her purse, turned off the lights and slowly opened the door. In her stockinged feet she tiptoed past Jason and Justin's room to the stairs.

Once she was down the stairs she stepped back into her shoes and was out into the streets in a flash. Ten minutes later she slipped into the crowd and happily wandered down Bourbon Street. They'll never even know I'm gone. They won't want to wake me, she thought with a smile.

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The sights and sounds of the street were bright, noisy, irreverent and wonderful. Brilliantly colored costumes, beads everywhere, music drifting from every building and the people acting so wild and crazy, Shelley couldn't help but laugh aloud.

She stopped to watch a passing parade. Someone threw a huge handful of beads at her and she scrambled to catch them and put them on. A policeman on horseback smiled at her and tipped his hat.

She wandered through the crowd and drifted down a side street where a group of onlookers gathered around a window. Shelley curiously peeked over someone's shoulder. An elderly black man sat at a piano, hammering the keys. He looked ancient, yet was playing the most amazing jazz piano Shelley had ever heard. His gnarled old hands pounded the keyboard. They moved so swiftly Shelley couldn't believe the sound could be so clear and melodic.

Here it was! Perfection! She loved it. She pushed herself inside so she could hear and see better. That's when she noticed, the man was blind. Leaning on the piano, she let the music carry her away and found tears coming to her eyes. He was magnificent.

She noticed a large glass jar on the piano filled with money, mostly dollar bills. Grabbing the only money she had, a twenty-dollar bill, she stuffed it in the jar, then moved back to listen, just a while longer, she thought.

"Hi," a female voice said.

Shelley peered over at a tall, pretty woman with short brown hair. "Hi," Shelley answered.

"I couldn't help but notice you've been here a long time. He's wonderful,

isn't he?" the woman asked.

Shelley smiled. "Oh yes he is. He's amazing."

"They call him 'the piano man.' He's pretty famous around here. It's nice to see someone who appreciates good jazz. Do you live here in New Orleans?"

"No," Shelley replied.

"Then you came in just for Mardi Gras?" the woman asked.

"No, actually I'm here for a martial arts tournament."

"You're kidding? Me too! Are you competing?"

"Yes," Shelley said, turning her full attention to the woman.

"Me too. What division?"

"Red belt," Shelley replied. "What about you?"

"Black belt."

"That is so awesome. I can't wait to be a black belt."

The woman smiled and held out her hand. "I'm KC."

"I'm Shelley."

The women shook hands and KC spoke again. "Come over and have a drink with me."

"I'd like to," Shelley said, "but I don't drink and I just gave all my money to the piano man anyway."

"Why don't you drink?" KC asked.

"I've never liked the taste."

"I'll bet you've never had a Strawberry Daiquiri. C'mon, try one, my treat," KC coaxed. Shelley relented.

They giggled as Shelley pretended to be afraid of the drink. She finally took a sip.

"Mmm, this is really good," Shelley said, surprised.

"I told you so," KC laughed.

They stayed and listened to the piano man, drinking Strawberry Daiquiris and talking about the upcoming tournament.

A few daiquiris later, KC grabbed Shelley's arm. "I have an idea. Wanna do shots?"

"Shots? You mean like the little glasses of whiskey?"

"Yeah, but you can shoot anything. Let's do schnapps. Peppermint schnapps is my fav. It doesn't taste so bad." She motioned to the bartender.

"Hmm, I don't know about this," Shelley giggled, looking at the glass set before her.

"Just one. How much could that little bit hurt, huh?"

"Yeah, really, it's so small, how much could it hurt," Shelley repeated, already tipsy from the daiquiris.

Several shots and hours later they walked out into the street, mingling with the crowds, enjoying the festivities and laughing at everything. The alcohol made Shelley feel happy and suddenly her little spat with Eric seemed silly and unimportant.

Some of the crowd had thinned out and KC and Shelley wound around, balancing carefully on their heels, until they came to a small night club with the sign "*Amateur Hour*" in the window. They slipped inside to check it out.

A woman on stage danced and sang karaoke while people laughed and cheered. Shelley and KC giggled.

"How about it Shelley," KC said. "This is gonna be great. Let's do it." KC had a wild look in her eyes.

Shelley laughed. "You do it. I'm not going to."

"C'mon Shelley, there's a fifty-dollar prize for the best act of each hour. Let's do it."

Shelley anxiously bit her lip. "You first."

They spoke to a man who put their names down on a list. While they waited, they had more of Shelley's new favorite drink and watched the other performances. Finally, it was their turn.

KC climbed up on the stage, singing and dancing to an old 'fifties' tune. She went all out, shimmering and shaking and everyone went crazy. Shelley was on her feet applauding when KC stepped down.

"Your turn sweetie pie," KC laughed.

Shelley's eyes went wide with stage fright. "I've changed my mind. Besides, I don't sing."

"Oh, no," KC said. "A deal's a deal."

"But how do I choose my music?"

"You don't," KC said as she pushed her up on the stage. "You sing and dance to whatever they play."

Shelley stood nervously on the stage waiting for the music. The crowd was already on their feet. The music started. *You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling*.

"Oh great," Shelley said. "They give me something with no beat."

"Do something," KC yelled as she applauded.

Shelley began to sway to the music. Her long hair swinging from side to side, the alcohol removing all inhibitions, she thought about Eric and floated over the stage, hips gently rocking, as she crooned out the tune. When the music ended the crowd was on their feet.

"We have our winner," the man said, waving a fifty and then stuffing the money in her hand.

She stepped down off the stage and KC hugged her. "You were great. Have you ever done anything like that before?"

"Uh uh," Shelley answered. She sighed. For some reason some of the happiness she'd been feeling earlier was wearing off.

KC answered her cell phone. When she hung up she grinned at Shelley. "Come on, superstar, I've got someone I want you to meet. Cute guy. His name is Micky." KC pulled Shelley along, heading out the door to a dark nightclub on the next street.

Two men stood up as KC introduced them. "Wow, you didn't say she was

such a looker," Micky said. He immediately put his arm around Shelley and sat her down in the chair next to him.

Shelley began to feel uneasy. She tried to shrug his arm off, but he wouldn't budge.

KC hugged the arm of a rotund man with long sideburns and mustache who'd been introduced as Ike. KC frowned. "I can't hear a thing. Let's go in there," she said, pointing to a door next to the currently unoccupied stage.

Shelley, grateful that Micky removed his arm from her shoulders so they could move, went quickly. Inside was a couch, chair and large table. It looked like an employee's break room.

"Here," Shelley said to KC, offering her the money she'd just won. "For all the drinks. I have to be getting back."

"Oh no. The drinks were my treat," KC grinned. She folded the bill neatly in half and then half again. Smiling, she slowly pulled out the top of Shelley's dress and stuffed the money down into her bra, giving it a little pat.

"Have you ever been with a girl?"

Shelley's eyes opened wide. Making its way through her fatigue and the fuzz of the alcohol, a warning light finally went off somewhere in Shelley's brain. "Um, ya know, I really need to be going."

"Oh, c'mon Shelley, don't be a party pooper," KC cried.

Micky came up behind Shelley, wrapping his arms around her waist, whispering into her ear. "Yeah, we just met. Don't leave now."

Shelley pressed down to make him release his hold on her. "It's been fun KC, but I need to go. If Eric finds out I'm gone, he'll kill me."

"Eric?" KC asked innocently, even though she already knew who Eric was. Everyone knew.

"He's my instructor," she answered.

"And he doesn't know where you are?" KC asked as she laughed.

Fear struck Shelley and she began backing toward the door.

KC sprang up quickly though and grabbed Shelley's hand. "Aw, c'mon, don't leave now."

"No, I really need to go," Shelley said, her voice quivering.

Micky put one hand on her back. "I don't think so, honey," he said, grabbing her wrist with his other hand.

KC moved in close to Shelley and stroked her cheek. "You're not leaving just yet," she purred.

Shelley struggled against Micky's hold. Laughing, KC sashayed over to the fat man who'd been sitting on the couch only watching up to this point. He was smelly and dirty looking, but KC didn't seem to mind. She sat on his lap and planted an open-mouthed kiss on him. Shelley felt the darkness of evil and debauchery surrounding her. She suddenly felt the need to run. Twisting her arm from Micky's grasp, she moved toward the door, but Micky grabbed her beads and pulled. "You're not going anywhere, sweetheart."

Shelley wasted no more time. She pulled back and delivered a blow to each temple. Beads scattered across the floor. He let go of her, but she slipped on the beads. KC and the other man were on her before she could get up. Shelley punched KC in the face and rolled away. She started to run but the fat man grabbed Shelley by the arm. She kicked, catching him right in the face, as her shoe went flying, but he didn't let go. Before she could try again, KC grabbed her other arm and together they pulled her backwards toward the couch. Sitting on the couch they pinned Shelley's legs in between their own and twisted her arms back from the elbows.

Shelley found herself immobile, and Micky walking toward her holding a pair of scissors. She was completely sober now. Oh, man, what had she done? She'd snuck away from the one person who had her well-being uppermost in his mind.

Micky held the scissors out with a crooked grin, grabbed the hem of her dress and slowly began cutting the material making a line toward her abdomen. Shelley struggled, trying to wiggle out of their grip, which made KC and the fat man shriek with laughter.

As they laughed though, Shelley's leg slipped from between KC's. Shelley reacted immediately, placing a front kick to Micky's forearm. The scissors flew up in the air. The fat man released his hold on Shelley to dodge the scissors coming down. Shelley swung her now free arm around toward KC, delivering a blow to her nose. KC fell over, grabbing her face and cursing.

Shelley scrambled to her feet and kicked to Micky's knee. He went down. She turned to face the fat man as she kicked off her other shoe to ready herself, but he only sat on the couch laughing, apparently having no intention of coming after her.

Shelley groped for her purse and shot out the door. She flew down the streets in her bare feet but she was turned around in her panic and couldn't find her way back to the hotel. It seemed she ran down countless alleyways. Everything looked alike. Stopping to catch her breath, she leaned against the cold brick of a building.

Eric told her many times about reaching out to God, especially when you feel all alone, or confused. He'd prayed with her many times. She'd been praying on her own lately and it seemed right now might be a good time to pray for herself. "Dear Lord," she whispered, "I made a bad decision and I'm lost and I'm pretty scared and I really need your help. Lord, I won't blame you if you don't want to help me, because it's my fault that I'm in this predicament. I'm so sorry. I messed up. Please Lord, if you are willing, please help me find my way back."

Only a moment later, Shelley felt the most amazing peace come over her. Tears welled in her eyes as she felt the presence of the Lord, so clearly, so immediately. He was acknowledging her. He knows her! He hears her! He's real! She suddenly realized that she no longer felt any fear. She began to run,

laughing as she did, giddy with the new feeling of being present with God. "I got away," she said aloud. "And I was thinking I did it by myself, without anyone's help, but I did have help. God has been with me! Thank you, Jesus," she said loudly. She giggled with glee. "Now, if I can just get back in bed before Eric finds out I'm gone."

"Look around you," she thought she heard.

So she did. Collecting her wits, she looked closely at the landmarks and recognized the piano man's place. It was empty now and dark, making Shelley wonder what time it could be.

Now that she'd gained her bearings, she ran as fast as she could, until the hotel finally came into view. It was a beautiful sight. Digging through her purse for the key, she tiptoed past Justin and Jason's door and slipped quietly into her room.

Four tired, worried faces stared up at her. Three of them smiled.

One glared with anger.

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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 Eighteen

Shelley smiled sheepishly. “Oops, busted,” she said, trying to joke her way out of the trouble she was in, but it seemed no one thought her very funny. It was several moments before Eric finally broke the silence with his eerily calm voice.

“Do you know what time it is?”

She shook her head.

“It’s five-thirty in the morning.”

Her eyes opened wide. Eric moved toward her.

“We’ll leave,” Justin said, moving toward the door.

“No,” Eric commanded. “I want her to know what you’ve all been through because of her. I want her to know you’ve been out all night searching for her.”

Shelley’s eyes widened and she swallowed hard as Eric approached her.

“I’m sorry,” Shelley whispered, looking up ashamedly toward Justin, Jason and Ricky.

“Why did you not answer your phone?” Eric asked.

“I, uh, I guess I never turned it back on after our flight.”

He moved closer. “You’ve been drinking?”

She nodded.

“What did you drink?”

“Strawberry Daiquiris and um...”

“And ‘um’ what?”

“And some shots of peppermint schnapps.”

His face like stone, he asked, “How many?”

Shelley shrugged.

“How many?” he demanded.

Her own temper beginning to ignite, she raised her chin. “I don’t know how many. Five, six, seven, fifteen. I don’t remember.”

He stood inches from her. “I ought to turn you over my knee.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” she said indignantly.

He put his finger up in her face. “Don’t push me hard enough to find out.” He grabbed her by the upper arm and shoved her toward the bed. “I suggest you get some sleep. You might as well, because you’re not leaving this room.”

“You can’t do this. I am not a child.”

“Well you’re certainly acting like one.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how late it was. I was only gonna stay out for

just a little while."

"I told you how important it was for you to rest. I was speaking as your Sensei. You know, your sensei? Your teacher? The man for whom you have no respect?"

When she started to protest he held up his hand. "As I said before, you need to rest. Now sleep. We'll have to postpone everything we were supposed to do this morning until later this afternoon." He started to leave, but halted midway. "Where are your shoes?"

"I lost them," she whispered.

He shook his head in disgust and finally asked the obvious question. "And what happened to your dress?" Eric kept his voice light, showing only slight concern that the dress had a slit from the hem almost to her navel.

"It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?"

She shrugged. "I don't want to talk about it."

He nodded. If she'd been assaulted she'd be in much worse condition emotionally. If she'd been unfaithful to him he didn't want to know about it. Not now anyway. It was then he noticed something protruding from the top of her dress. He moved closer, reached and pulled out the fifty-dollar bill. The joke would've been too obvious. He crumpled it up and tossed it back at her, grabbed the key and walked out the door.

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Eric sent Ricky to go get Justin and Jason and he looked up as the trio entered his room.

"Now," Eric began, his tone fatherly. "I would just like to know if any of you really and truly believe that I don't know that over the past two hours you've all been in to see Shelley?"

They looked down at their feet.

"How'd you know, Dad?" Ricky asked.

Eric smiled. "I'd expect nothing less. So what did she say?"

"She said she saw you leave with Angel and she thought you'd gone out with her," Ricky answered.

"That's ridiculous. Did you tell her I went to help Angel get the keys she'd left at the tournament hall?"

"Yes. She feels terrible about the whole thing."

"I'm sure. Anything else?"

"She asked me to ask you to forgive her," Justin said.

"And?" Eric asked.

"And I told her that was between the two of you."

"Jason?" Eric continued. "We haven't heard from you."

He shrugged. "I told her we searched for her all night. I told her how the police were not helpful and suggested we check back in twenty-four hours. And I told her about Ricky getting jumped."

"Oh man, why'd you have to go and tell her that?" Ricky whined.

"I was trying to put a guilt trip on her. And it worked. She was pretty upset."

"Did you tell her I wasn't hurt? Did you tell her it was the other guys who wish they'd never chosen to pick on me?"

Jason smiled. "No, I didn't happen to mention that. What? Is your pride hurt? Anyway," Jason sighed, "I was pretty hard on her."

"So Dad, you're like, going in there and make up with her, right?"

Eric shook his head. "Not just yet. I'm gonna let her anguish for most of the day. This is never– going– to happen– again."

He looked around and had to smile at their worried faces. "She'll be okay, guys. Stop worrying." He frowned at their sullen expressions. "You've all turned soft on me."

Justin sighed. "It's just that, well, Shelley's special. Ya know?"

Eric blew out a breath. "Yes. I know."

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Eric entered her room carrying breakfast and sat down on the side of the bed, gazing at the small figure curled up in the very center.

"Shelley," he said softly.

She turned over. "Eric?" She reached out and touched his knee.

"Eric, I'm so sorry."

"I'm sure you are," he said firmly.

She closed her eyes with the pain. The pain came from knowing she'd disappointed him.

Eric watched her silently, finding it difficult to feel anger when she looked so contrite. Determined to teach a lesson though, he hardened his heart and handed her a small bag. "Here, eat some breakfast."

She shook her head. "I don't think I can. I'm not feelin' too good. I'm sick to my stomach and my head is pounding."

"Deservedly," he said sternly. He held out a cup. "Well then, drink this, it will help detox your body. Then get a shower and come to my room. We have things to do this afternoon." He turned and left.

Shelley eyed the cup. Whatever was in it didn't look very appealing. Sighing, she sipped the concoction and wondered how long he could stay mad. Surprisingly, by the time she got out of the shower she felt much better. Eric knew his herbs. She actually had an appetite.

She ate quickly, pulled on sweats and athletic shoes, and gathered her hair back in a braid. Looking at herself in the mirror she was pleased with the body. It was muscular and trim. The face on the other hand was pale and drawn with dark circles under her eyes.

She went to Eric's room and cautiously stepped inside. They were all there, all tired and sullen. She came in silently and sat down. No one spoke to her. Eric shuffled through papers. After a few minutes, Shelley couldn't take

it any longer.

"Okay guys, look, I know I screwed up. If I could take it back I would, okay? I'm sorry. Really– I am. Ricky, I hate that you were hurt. I can't stand everyone being mad at me. Come on guys, can't you just forgive and forget? Please, somebody say something."

Ricky stretched out across his bed. "We would, but we're too tired. Besides, I was never mad in the first place," Ricky said with a grin. "I was a little bit proud of your rebellion."

When Eric turned his head sharply, Ricky quickly added, "but mostly worried." He frowned. "And by the way, I wasn't hurt."

Jason chuckled.

Justin patted Shelley's head. "Anyway, Shelley, surely you know that I'm not mad at you."

"Me neither," Jason said, still chuckling.

Shelley smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Ricky's pride," Jason answered.

Shelley shook her head. "You're all crazy."

Eric looked up from the form he'd been filling out. "No, it's just that they're so tired from being up all night looking for you that they're not thinking clearly."

"Eric, please, I'm sorry."

"Yes, so I've heard," he said as he rose. "Let's go, we have a lot of work to do."

The tournament was being held in a large civic center and the place was a madhouse. Competitors were stretching, sparring, talking, running, weighing and registering.

When they arrived Eric was to take Shelley to register while the others had their assignments, including Ricky working out the details for an impromptu request for a demonstration.

Justin's assignment was to obtain the list of red belt competitors and films of the ones he hadn't been able to procure earlier. Eric and Shelley made their way to the registration line to await their turn when a grinning young man approached Shelley.

"Hiya' Shelley, I sure enjoyed last night."

Shelley couldn't believe her eyes. Micky stood not three feet from her, grinning ear to ear. She looked quickly at Eric, who wasn't smiling. Micky was either very brave or very stupid. Shelley thought probably the latter. He obviously had no idea who he was dealing with.

"We should do it again some time," Micky said. "You were great. I think you lost these though," he said as he held out the red shoes.

Shelley took them quickly.

Micky turned. "All right then, so, see ya' gorgeous and oh, by the way, sorry about the dress."

Eric caught Jason's eye and nodded toward the man who'd just left them. Jason was gone.

Shelley turned her brown eyes up to Eric, sighing at the displeasure written all over his face. "How many are you up to now?" he asked sarcastically.

She wanted to slap him but he'd only block it. Besides, she deserved the slight. She didn't bother to answer him though.

"When do you intend to tell me about last night?" he asked.

"When do you intend to forgive me?" she countered.

"Were you hurt?"

"No, not really," she replied, thinking how nice it felt to hear the concern in his voice.

"What's that in the shoe?" he asked, pointing to a folded piece of paper inside one of her red shoes.

Shrugging, she took the paper out, unfolded it and read it. The words on the paper jumped out at her. "TOO EASY." She made only a soft moaning sound.

Eric caught her as her knees gave out. He found a first aid room and laid Shelley on a couch. A tournament official brought a wet cloth explaining that the doctor wouldn't be arriving until tomorrow.

Eric took her pulse and wiped her brow. She opened her eyes.

"It's okay, Shelley, you're okay," he soothed.

"I can't take you being angry anymore," she said softly.

He melted and touched her face. "Okay, I'm not angry anymore and Shelley, I'll never stop loving you, but do you see now why what you did was so bad?"

"Yes. I see."

"You have to tell me everything about last night."

She nodded.

Ricky burst through the door with Justin right behind.

"What happened?" they asked.

"Someone returned Shelley's shoes," Eric replied. "They had this note in them." He held the paper out to them.

Justin went silent.

Ricky mumbled a curse. "Where's Jason?"

"He's on it," Eric replied.

Justin knelt by Shelley. "Getting lazy on us?" he teased.

She sat up. "I thought I wasn't afraid anymore, but the moment I saw those words it all came back. I guess I sort of fainted."

"There was no 'sort of' to it," Eric said.

"You fainted and Dad scooped you up. I think you were just trying to get Dad to feel sorry for you," Ricky teased.

She looked up at her teacher. "Did it work?"

"No," Eric frowned. "Feeling sorry for someone is a negative concept. It adds energy to the problem and it helps them to buy into the 'woe is me' syndrome. We don't do victim mentality."

He took her pulse again. "How do you feel?"

"Fine," she answered.

"Well then, C'mon you wimp," Ricky said. "If we don't hurry, we're gonna lose our sparring time."

By 6:00 PM Shelley had registered, received her tournament schedule, and used two sparring times, which had gathered a crowd, Shelley was sure, due to her famous sparring partner.

Jason hadn't returned and they left the hall without him, much to Shelley's distress.

"Am I the only one who's worried about Jason?" she asked.

"He's capable of taking care of himself," Justin replied as his cell phone buzzed. He spoke briefly into the phone, then to Eric, in what Shelley had learned to identify as Korean. He turned to Shelley where she sat in the backseat. "That was Jason, Shelley, he's okay."

The drive back to the hotel seemed to last forever and Shelley fell asleep against Ricky's shoulder. When they arrived she woke as Eric lifted her from the car. "Shh, I've got you," he said. She closed her eyes and allowed his strong arms to carry her to her room.

Placing her on the bed he knelt beside her as she turned to him. "I'm so hungry. Do you think we could get a hamburger or something?"

He smiled. "It'll be something. Sleep until I come back."

She closed her eyes, then opened them. "Eric, you never said you forgive me. I don't think I can fight tomorrow unless you say you forgive me."

He looked into her big brown eyes and sighed. "Tell me, do you forgive yourself?" he asked.

"I guess not," she answered with a sigh.

"Then how can I?"

"Because you love me?"

"Don't you love yourself?"

"Eric, stop being philosophical."

He laughed. "Well, maybe I can love you enough for the both of us, for now anyway. Still, if I say I forgive you and you don't win the tournament you have to do something for me."

"What?"

Taking his time, he thought for a moment rubbing his chin and then smiled. "Clean my apartment for a month."

She made a face. "I barely have time to clean my own house."

"That's your problem."

She was silent. "Okay," she agreed.

"Okay," he said. "Then you're forgiven." He stood to leave.

"That's it?"

He laughed again. "Oh, you wanted maybe some fancy words? Okay. I forgive you for being stupid, careless, selfish, childish, stubborn, inconsiderate, irresponsible, spoiled and jealous. Is that better?"

Shelley grimaced. "Now I feel even worse."

He knelt down again. "And I forgive you for being intelligent, sweet, funny, brave, and very, very beautiful." He let his lips glide over her face as he spoke. His mouth came to rest on hers and she sighed in relief as she basked in his warmth once again.

"Now, rest baby, and don't open the door for anyone. I will not knock. I have the key."

An hour later Eric was pulling a sleepy lady into his room. A meal had been set up buffet style along the tops of the dresser, compliments of a local Italian restaurant. Several different steaming pasta dishes, garlic rolls and salad made the room smell heavenly.

"Jason's not back yet?" Shelley asked sleepily.

"He will be any minute," Justin answered.

Shelley stumbled over to a bed and stretched out. A moment later Jason burst through the door.

Shelley sat up, gasping at the sight. "Oh no, Jason, you're hurt!"

He smiled. "Don't worry. It's not my blood. Give me a minute to clean up. I'll be right back."

Jason came back quickly, freshly showered. Justin lit candles, poured wine. As Shelley watched reverently, he raised his glass, speaking again in Korean. His speech ended with a sip of his wine.

Eric, Ricky, and Jason said something in unison before chaos ensued as they piled plastic plates full of pasta. Eric handed a plate to Shelley and sat on the bed next to her.

"What did Justin say?" she asked.

"It was a prayer. He gave thanks for the bounties of the earth, and he blessed our food. He then gave thanks for our friendship and especially for you. He asked that you be valiant and strong in tomorrow's battles and then, he asked that in return for the love you so freely give, you be protected threefold."

"That is beautiful. And then what did the rest of you say?"

"We said– Amen brother," Jason said with a grin.

Shelley laughed, then nodded toward Justin. "Thank you."

He gave a slight bow.

There was silence while they filled their empty stomachs. When everyone was on their second or in Ricky's case, third helpings, Jason briefed Eric on Micky's version of what happened the night before.

"Micky didn't volunteer the information eagerly, but I convinced him that he should fear me more than his boss," Jason finished.

"So, James sent KC and Micky to scare Shelley? Why? What did he hope to accomplish?" Justin asked.

"Mind games," Eric stated. He turned to Shelley. "It's time to hear your side of it, Shelley. Fill us in on last night's events and don't leave out any detail," Eric said, touching her arm for support.

She began with taking off her shoes to tiptoe past Jason's and Justin's door. They had fun watching her eyes as she described the people, sounds and excitement. Her tale of the piano man made them want to hurry down to find him. Then she told how she met KC, that she was gonna be in the tournament.

"Oh, KC. Not Casey. KC Jones?" Justin asked.

Shelley's brows rose. "Yes. You know her?"

"You have to fight her tomorrow."

"That's impossible," Shelley said. "She's a black belt."

"Not according to the printout. She's registered as a red belt."

Shelley put her hands to her face. "I can't believe this. I can't do this. I can't fight a black belt."

"Belt color doesn't mean anything and you CAN do anything, like maybe finish the story," Jason said impatiently. "Besides, maybe she was lying about being a black belt."

"And maybe she's lying about being a red belt," Shelley responded, eyebrows raised.

He didn't seem concerned. No one did but her. She took a deep breath and continued. When she got to the part about winning the song and dance contest, they tried to talk her into doing her dance for them but no way would she show them that. They also tried to get her to give them detailed directions to the night club, which proved to be impossible since she'd been quite intoxicated when she'd arrived there.

She described the struggle in the back room. "It all went by so fast," she explained. She also told them how much she'd longed to be in the circle of their protection, and understood what a huge mistake she'd made. Then she realized it was up to her to save herself. She told them about getting lost and the amazing feeling of relief when she finally found the hotel.

When she quietly told of her conversation with God, they sat silently, everyone's thoughts going to the same place– how hard they'd been on her when she walked through the door. God had forgiven her quickly enough.

Eric slid his arms around her now. "Well, Shelley girl, it sounds like you had quite an adventure."

Shelley leaned against him. "I'm just happy to be here with you."

He leaned his forehead against hers. "I get mad again just thinking about the worry you put us through."

"Chill, Dad. She's suffered enough," Ricky said as he stood and began collecting plates.

"Well, at least I know why he cut your dress," Jason added.

"Why?" they all asked.

"He was gonna write 'the' message on you."

Eric smiled at Shelley's gasp. "Don't get all worked up about that, because he didn't get to, did he? And he didn't get to because you stopped him. You fought. You didn't freeze. High-five for that."

She half-heartedly slapped his raised hand. Dinner over, everything cleaned up and food put away and still the five of them lounged on the beds, too exhausted to move.

Shelley turned over on her stomach, her head facing the opposite bed. "Tell me some of your wild stories," she said sleepily.

Eric laid beside her while the others lay across the other bed facing them. Justin told a story about Jason in high school. When he finished, they all began telling stories, but Shelley drifted off before the next one was finished.

The men however, continued sharing memories until, like teenage girls at a slumber party, they fell asleep one by one.

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Shelley awoke the next morning as she had the morning of each tournament since the first, with Eric's wet hair dripping on her face. It had become a tradition of sorts.

She smiled as the water hit her skin. "Mmm," she whined, "is it morning already?"

"Yes, it is," he said softly.

She sat up, looked around. She was back in her own room."Where is everyone?"

"They're not here is all that matters to me." He tilted her face up and kissed her.

"Oh no," she said, pushing him away. "You're not gonna tease me this time just to make me fight better."

He looked at her innocently. "Moi? Oops, sorry," he grinned.

"Yes, you," she answered ignoring his French. "Besides, I don't feel romantic. I feel mean," she said as she pushed him again.

"Mean?" he laughed. "Even better. I can deal with mean." He grabbed her arms and pinned her down.

"Stop it Eric. I'm not kidding."

She brought her knee up sharply but he pivoted his body and blocked her with his thigh.

"Oh, that was dirty," he said then kissed her again.

He released her for just a second to get a better hold, but she took advantage of it and rolled away quickly.

"Very good," he laughed. "You're quick."

"And it's a good thing too," she quoted from her favorite movie.

She tried to make it to the bathroom but he caught her and pulled her back. She took a swing at his face but he ducked.

"Whoa there, Buttercup, you *are* feeling mean, aren't you?" he said with a chuckle.

She struggled to keep from giggling as he lifted her up into his arms. She pushed away with all her strength and he let her go. She went sprawling backwards onto the bed.

He pounced and commenced a tickling battle. She managed to turn over and scramble away but he caught her from behind and pulled her up. She arched her back to escape but it only made her fall forward on her face with Eric on top of her. She struggled a few minutes more before finally lying still.

"Fine, Eric, do what you want," she said, "but when I get up I'm gonna hurt you bad."

Eric chuckled.

"Go ahead, laugh," she continued. "I may not be able to get you right away, but you have to sleep sometime and at the moment you least expect it, I will get you."

"I'll take my chances," he quipped. Instead of tickling her though, he leaned down and lightly kissed her neck.

At that she stopped struggling.

"Surrender?"

"For now."

He let her go and she immediately went to shower. However, when she emerged from the shower, she renewed her threat. "How does it feel to know that doom hangs over you waiting for you to drop your guard?"

"I'm really and truly very, very scared," he laughed. He tried to hug her but she pushed him away. "Good," he said, "still mean as ever."

They arrived at the civic center and Shelley stormed past Ricky and Jason to the locker room.

"What's with her?" Ricky asked his father.

"She's got her game face on."

"Whoa, she looks mean. Good job, Dad."

Eric smiled. "It was my pleasure."

Shelley returned about ten minutes later dressed and ready. They went to their assigned arena. Shelley began stretching with Ricky's help. She didn't speak and she didn't smile.

She was scheduled third fight out of ten in the first round. She watched the first two fights, letting details soak in. Eric spoke. "Remember, stay calm, stay focused. Strike first and strike hard." It was her turn.

Justin was the one who'd reviewed the films, so he spoke next. "Your first opponent is taller but I think weaker. She actually lacks some coordination, so you can throw her off balance. But don't underestimate her reach."

"You're quicker. Use your speed," Eric added.

She moved on to the mat. She heard nothing, saw nothing, but the girl's eyes. There was fear in them.

The girl came at Shelley with a roundhouse kick. Shelley moved quickly

toward the girl, closing the distance and throwing her off balance, just as Justin had said.

Shelley came around with a jumping spinning hook kick to the face and the girl went down and did not get up. That was it. With one powerful, well-placed kick the fight was over.

"Holy moley," Ricky muttered. "What *did* you say to her?"

"Nothing really," Eric answered with a smile. Shelley joined him on the sideline. "You were lucky," he reprimanded. "I said to go for the midsection."

Shelley nodded. "Sorry, it just felt right."

"You can't afford to make any mistakes," he answered. "Now, you have to fight the winner of this next bout in the second round, so watch her closely."

Eric and Justin leaned over and whispered to Shelley, pointing out the weakness of her next opponent which Shelley tried hard to see.

There were ten fights, twenty competitors in all, in the first round. Shelley paced, trying to stay loose and warm but watched each bout intently. A large cheer from the crowd had Shelley turning to see Angel walk onto the mat. She possessed such charm, even Shelley found it hard to stay mad at Angel, and obviously the crowd loved her.

Angel looked up at Shelley's section and blew a kiss. Feeling a little ashamed of her jealousy, Shelley offered a slight smile. Angel won her bout easily and left waving to the cheering crowd.

Justin was making notes when Shelley sat down between him and Eric. Ricky and Jason sat just behind. Shelley sighed with pleasure. It felt good to be surrounded by these wonderful men whom she loved.

The next two fights were uneventful. Of the ten bouts in the first round, it was fight number eight that put dread in Shelley's heart. KC walked out on the mat, a bandage across her nose. She came straight to their section, touched her nose and pointed up at Shelley. She then took out her opponent in just a few seconds.

"How long do you think that took?" Ricky asked.

"I'd say about five seconds," Jason answered.

"No," Ricky mused, "I think it was more like five and a half, don't you Shell?"

Shelley only glared at him.

Two fights later they were finally in the second round. Shelley began pacing again and stretching. She'd fight second this time. She was anxious and glad when they finally called her name.

The women bowed and faced each other. The girl was quick, so Shelley dug in and focused on her eyes. She came at Shelley and without thinking, just as Eric said would happen one day, the very first sparring move Shelley had ever learned leapt out of her. She blocked the incoming punch with her left hand, pulled her opponent forward and delivered an elbow to the temple.

The girl staggered away but Shelley didn't give her time to recover, delivering a roundhouse kick to the abdomen. The girl fell back on the mat and

the official waved Shelley off.

A moment later they squared off again. She came at Shelley with several ill-placed kicks which Shelley blocked easily but made the mistake of letting her close the distance.

Shelley saw the powerful punch coming and her adrenaline took over. Somehow she was able to block it at the last moment, then jumped and delivered a devastating side kick to the girl's chest.

Her opponent was airborne for a few seconds before she landed hard on her back knocking the air out of her. Again the official waved Shelley off and she waited.

Finally, he spoke, "The winner, Ms. Adams."

Shelley helped her opponent up, shook her hand and walked off the mat. The crowd cheered, appreciating the show of good sportsmanship.

Justin threw her a towel and Eric patted her on the back. "Good job, sweetie. You're using your head. I'm proud of you."

"Thanks," she said breathing hard and without cracking a smile.

She walked away to pace again, grabbing a water bottle as she left.

"She's intense today," Jason remarked.

Eric smiled. "She just hates to clean house."

Shelley impatiently waited through the next three fights before round three began. Both Angel and KC won their bouts and Shelley was sure she'd draw one of them next.

It turned out to be Angel.

Eric spoke to Shelley calmly. "The only thing Angel has over you is experience, and she has a lot of that, but I've watched her and I don't think she's learned from it. If you don't learn from your experience then what good is it? That's probably why she's been a red belt for so long. You're in better shape. You're a lot faster and you've got a heck of a kick. I don't think you'll be able to strike first because she's gonna come at you quickly and with everything she's got in order to save face after running her mouth. Be light on your feet, block and counter her attack with kicks whenever possible."

The crowd roared as Angel approached the mat.

"Don't be intimidated by the spectators," Eric cautioned. "They're fickle. Block them out of your mind."

Angel came at Shelley just as Eric said she would, with everything she had. Shelley blocked well, but stumbled a few times, however, she didn't go down. Finally, she was able to spin and deliver a back kick to Angel's abdomen. Shelley bounced away to regain her balance. Angel appeared surprised by the force of the kick.

They sprung at each other again, Angel doing most of the swinging, Shelley cleanly blocking until she fell. As Angel drew close though, Shelley saw her opening and fired a side-thrust kick up into Angel's jaw. Shelley sprang up as Angel went down and the spectators showed their approval.

Angel shot right back up and gave Shelley no time to think before she

attacked again. The bout went on back and forth all the way to round three when Angel delivered an elbow to Shelley's jaw.

Shelley hit the mat but was surprised to find herself unhurt. She jumped back up. This was the prolonged battle that Eric had warned her about. Tiring quickly now, she knew she needed to end it.

Angel came at Shelley again and again. Shelley blocked left and right and then fired her own spinning hook kick catching the back of Angel's thigh and bringing her to the floor.

Angel was slower getting up this time and Shelley took advantage of it. A jumping spinning kick caught Angel in the head. Shelley went for two in a row much to the crowd's delight. The second one put Angel down hard.

Angel stood slowly but Shelley charged in and finished it with her powerful side kick. Angel lay still on the mat as the official declared Shelley the winner.

Shelley, however, seemed more concerned with Angel and knelt down beside her. Angel opened her eyes and smiled. "It never hurts to milk the crowd for sympathy."

Shelley grinned. "Angel, you are one of a kind." She helped her up and they hugged each other.

"You did good, Shelley," Angel said genuinely.

✝✝✝

2 Timothy 4:7

"I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course,
I have kept the faith:"

Chapter Nineteen

On the sidelines, Eric hugged her and Ricky gave her a thumbs up, but Shelley still wasn't smiling. She knew she was gonna have to face KC eventually and it wasn't a pleasant thought. She struggled to quell her fear. Please let me draw the bye in round four, she silently pleaded. Round four came, however, and the bye went to the girl who had just fought and won.

"Okay," Eric said calmly, as usual. "That leaves you and KC."

"Why don't you protest this fight, Dad? I mean, she's a black belt and—never mind. I know the answer," Ricky said sheepishly, looking around at the raised eyebrows of his father, Justin and Jason.

Eric nodded at Shelley. "Black belt means nothing. Let it go. Just go out there and beat her. I know you can do it, and I want you to know you can do it. Besides it'll be good experience for you since the purpose of this tournament is not to win but to learn and prepare you for the MART. That's my opinion. Do you want me to protest?"

Shelley's face was tense. There was no denying that she was afraid to face KC and that she'd love to get out of it. Still, she'd already fought her once and won. She shook her head. "I'll always wonder if I could've beaten her. Besides I owe her."

Eric smiled. "That's my girl."

"Okay, then, huddle up," Ricky said, smiling. "Here's the plan."

All five friends gathered together, interested in hearing Ricky's words of wisdom.

"Don't—get—hit," Ricky said in a thick accent, quoting Mr. Miyagi's line in *Karate Kid.*

They groaned. "I'll take care of this," Jason said as he lifted Ricky upside down and carried him toward the trash can.

The spectators who noticed, loved their antics, but Shelley wasn't amused. Eric took her by the hand and walked her around.

"Shelley, we have no films for KC. So you tell me– what are her weaknesses?"

"I don't think she has any," Shelley said with a sigh.

He shook his head. "Everyone has weaknesses. Like maybe she's overconfident," Eric suggested.

"Maybe. And maybe a little slower than me," Shelley added. "Or possibly out of shape?" she allowed.

"Okay, good," Eric said, nodding his head. "She's ruthless, we know that

and she'll probably go for illegal punches that could hurt you so you have to keep the left hand high and ready. Protect the eyes and throat. Listen to me if you can. As I pick things up, I'll let you know, but remember, counter kicks and defense."

She nodded, but a figure behind Eric caught Shelley's eye. They turned to see Micky standing there, sporting a black eye.

"Excuse me," he said timidly. "I just wanted to tell Shelley that I'm– uh– sorry. Didn't really mean to cause any harm. I– uh, needed the money. I guess I sort of got involved with the wrong people." He turned to walk away, then stopped and turned back. "I wouldn't have really hurt you, you know? I wouldn't have let it go any further than, well, you know– writing on you."

"You may not have been able to control the others," Eric chided.

Micky nodded, conceding the point. "You're right. I'll make it up to you somehow." He turned and walked away.

Shelley said nothing. She didn't know what to say. She tried to refocus her mind on the fight.

Eric looked into her eyes. "My little warrior, you can do this. Just keep in mind— dirty dishes and laundry and dusting and vacuuming."

She sneered at him and walked out on the mat. As usual, Eric turned out right. The first kick KC connected was to Shelley's kneecap. She went down, rolled over and came back up. She bounced a little testing the sore joint. The two women began a staggering exchange of punches and kicks. Shelley was barely able to keep up with the offensive onslaught KC was throwing at her.

Finally a glancing right hand to the throat sent Shelley down again. She jumped back up coughing and the official warned KC who was smiling a wicked smile.

Between rounds Eric spoke to her. "Clear your mind Shelley. You should've seen that coming. Roll and trap. When she advances use your jumping side kick. Stand still, dig in and let her come."

Shelley did as she was told. The roll and trap was almost 'too easy.' Shelley smashed her forearm into KC's mouth. KC staggered away and Shelley dug in again allowing KC to come at her.

KC glared at Shelley, blood running from her mouth. She charged in. Shelley jumped high into the air and directed a side kick to KC's ribs but KC was able to sidestep.

Instinctively, Shelley turned and fired a back kick the moment she came down catching KC in the chest. KC staggered again and Shelley knew it would be her chance.

She spun around and landed a roundhouse to the ribs, spun again landing a hook kick to the head and then moved in to fire a punch to the nose and right hand to the temple, but KC still didn't go down. Instead she just stood there grinning at Shelley. Clearly frustrated, Shelley jumped high again and with a thundering kiyai, she plowed a side kick into KC's midsection. The woman went down and didn't get up.

Shelley stood over her a moment, then turned her back and walked off the mat, bowing to the judges and the crowd. The entire audience was on their feet cheering and whistling.

Eric smiled at her as she approached and motioned toward the cheering crowd. “That’s for you, babe.”

Surprised, Shelley looked up, then shook her head. “More like for YOUR student.”

Eric hugged her. “Except for that last remark, I’m proud of you.”

Finally, she smiled.

“Where are the guys?” Shelley asked Eric.

“They’re preparing for their demonstration.”

“They missed me beating KC?”

Eric smiled. “What do you think?”

She nodded with a smile. Of course they watched. “So, what’s next?”

“Well, as soon as all the divisions catch up and everyone is down to their final championship round, Ricky’s demo is on, and then my lovely warrior, it will be your turn.”

Shelley drew a deep breath and looked up at her teacher. “Master Kino, do you think I even have a chance?”

He pulled her close, encircling her waist with his arms. “Yes, Grasshopper, I do. Are you still feeling mean?”

“No, just sweaty and tired and a little hungry.”

Eric ran his hands through her hair above her braid. “Well, I can find a place for you to rest, I can wipe the sweat from your brow and I’d be happy to make you feel mean again, however, you’ll just have to stay hungry, especially with your tendency to get nauseated.”

Shelley giggled. “Well, if I can’t have it all, I don’t want any.”

She grabbed a drink and towel and sat down to watch the demonstration. She loved to watch Ricky Kino do his thing, and with Jason and Justin helping him, this should be a real treat. Surprisingly, Angel came to sit with her.

“Are you okay?” Shelley asked her.

“Oh I’m fine. I’m just not used to losing.” She paused and smiled. “I was watching you and Eric a minute ago. You two are truly in love, aren’t you?”

Shelley smiled. “I’d gladly and willingly give my life for him.”

“Well, that’s good to know,” Eric quipped as he came to sit on the other side of Shelley, “but hardly necessary.”

He possessively placed his hand on Shelley’s knee and she was grateful for his thoughtfulness. He knew that Shelley had been jealous of Angel and this was his way of showing his devotion to her in front of Angel. Somehow though, it didn’t seem important anymore. Shelley had won Angel’s respect.

They watched the demonstration together and delighted in the antics of the three warriors on the floor. Shelley called them the three warrior stooges since they’d incorporated a good deal of slapstick comedy into their routine, including a bit where they’re trying to build a house but keep accidentally

breaking the boards. It was a wonderful and hilarious demonstration of skills but when it was over, Shelley began to get anxious again.

The championship rounds for the different divisions would be fought, one at a time, in the center arena. Shelley would be third, after the two brown belt matches. She walked away to stretch.

When she came back the guys had joined Angel.

"You guys were great," Shelley called up to them.

"Thanks," Ricky answered. "Of course it was rather difficult to follow your act."

"Yeah, right."

Eric spun her around. "Okay, let's get down to business. Your opponent's name is Kathy Chow. She's strong and she's fast. Actually, she reminds me of you. Her kicks are powerful and she's not as good with her fists, just like you, though not for long," he added. "Soon we'll turn your weaknesses into strengths. Strike hard, strike fast, center and focus, hands up, strong defense. Watch her eyes and waist."

Finally they were introduced. They bowed, faced the judges, bowed, faced each other and bowed.

The two women turned out to be evenly matched. Kathy was a good martial artist, a clean fighter and Shelley was actually enjoying the match as one would appreciate a worthy tennis opponent. It was a pleasure to face someone who was really good—and not out to kill her. Trying to figure her next moves and outsmart her though was no easy task and Shelley found herself fighting the most difficult fight thus far in her career.

They traded kicks and punches, sometimes connecting but mostly blocking. The fight seemed to go on for hours. Shelley delivered a jumping spinning back kick to the crowd's delight.

Kathy countered with two side kicks in a row, the second one connecting with Shelley's stomach. They continued this maneuvering and kicking, maneuvering and punching.

The time factor was becoming evident. Shelley was getting tired and Eric knew it. "Take her down," he called.

She obeyed him. As Kathy came forward, Shelley dove under the punch grabbing Kathy around the waist. Placing her leg behind Kathy's, she forced her down onto her back and delivered a stout backhand to the diaphragm.

Kathy rolled over though, and rose even before Shelley. Shelley panted as she stood. They exchanged several more rounds before Kathy finally caught Shelley off balance and drove her side kick straight into Shelley's face.

The mat felt heavenly as Shelley landed on it. She'd be happy to stay right there. Reluctantly, she rolled over, resting her cheek against the smooth material as she did. She stood again, shakily. She was so tired her legs and arms would barely do what she commanded.

Kathy was also feeling the fatigue, Shelley thought, or she would've finished her by now. The spectators were on their feet, cheering in admiration

for the two lady warriors who had fought so valiantly for so long.

Unfortunately, Shelley had no energy left. She moved forward for one last effort. Within a few seconds she was on her back again. She willed herself to move but her body simply would not obey her mind.

She closed her eyes in defeat as she heard the official declare Ms. Chow the champion.

Kathy came to Shelley, helped pull her to her feet and hugged her.

The spectators showed their respect and appreciation for both women. Shelley had definitely won the approval of the crowd. Back with her entourage, she immersed herself in the comforting hugs and smiles of the men she'd grown to love so much.

"Not enough energy from too much partying," Ricky chided.

"Will I ever live that down?"

"Not anytime soon I'm sure," Justin answered.

Shelley sighed. "Ya know what? I am so tired and so hungry, and I'm thinking Angel and I will go take a quick shower, and you guys can take us out to eat."

Angel's eyes lit up at the thought of being included.

The guys all bowed and quoted the same words from the same movie. "As you wish."

Shelley took Angel's arm. "C'mon, let's go get gorgeous."

Loosening her long hair from the braid she usually wore, Shelley went straight to the shower. The warm water felt soothing on her tired aching muscles. She smiled to herself. She didn't win, but she'd made it through a bare knuckles tournament without blood, without a concussion, and her head was still connected to her body.

Meanwhile, the men stood in the lobby waiting for Angel and Shelley while keeping an eye on the red belt men's competition and talking about how well Shelley fought.

"She's come a long way since the first time I saw her fight in Daytona," Jason remarked.

Eric nodded in agreement. "Yet even then you could tell she had a lot of potential," he added.

"She's something else," Justin agreed. "She hasn't won a tournament yet though. Is she in line with where you want her to be?"

"She's right on. She's done better than winning. She's learned from every mistake, from every loss. She soaks up information like a computer. She's tough. Did you notice there were no tears from losing today? That's because she feels like a winner. And to me, she is. I have a strong inclination to believe she will be a champion."

"Don't say that, Dad. You might jinx yourself."

Eric frowned. "That's a mind game you don't need to play. Speak only truth and you'll be okay."

Ricky laughed. "You're a poet."

Jason rolled his eyes and slapped the back of Ricky's head.

In the locker room, Shelley talked herself into leaving the comfort of the shower. Wrapping one towel around her hair and another around her body, she stepped around to her locker.

She heard Angel still talking to some of the other competitors so she poked her head around to the row of lockers closest to the door.

"Hey Angel, I'm starved. If you don't go get your shower now, we're gonna leave you."

"Don't leave," Angel cried. "I'm going right now." She said goodbye to the girls she'd been jabbering with and quickly headed toward the shower.

Shelley sat down on the bench in front of her locker, too tired to stand while she dressed. Thinking about how the crowd had cheered for her brought a smile to her lips. The locker room had become quiet except for the water running back where Angel showered. The silence brought a delicious feeling of peace. She was exhausted yet euphoric. Having accomplished putting on her underclothing and shirt she tried to decide whether she should actually stand up to put on her jeans or just sit a moment longer.

Choosing to sit, she took a deep breath and began to hum. Bending over, she took the wet towel from head and shook out her hair. She existed in a world that was happy, carefree, secure, and warm.

The cold hard steel of KC's gun on her temple brought Shelley quickly back to the violent world she actually lived in.

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The girls, who moments before had been talking to Angel ran from the locker room yelling something about someone with a gun in the women's locker room.

Hearing the commotion, the four men who stood in the lobby asked the group of girls what was happening.

"A woman came into the dressing room– she has a gun– she told us to leave, but there's still people in there," she shrieked.

The men ran, reaching the door the same time as several police and security officers.

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"Don't move. Don't even breathe," KC ordered.

Shelley stared straight ahead, her heart pounding. Either KC had lost her mind completely or James Crane had ordered Shelley dead. It didn't matter. Either way a gun was pointed at her head and the danger was very real.

"We're going for a little walk," KC stated.

Shelley tried to reason with her. "Any minute someone could come through that door. Why don't you just put the gun away and we'll talk about this? You don't have to do this."

KC grinned. "I locked the bolt lock and lifted the keys from the maintenance guy and they're the only keys in the place, so no one is coming in to save you."

Shelley's stomach roiled. She could hear someone pounding on the door. Did Eric know her predicament? Would KC really kill her? The keys KC had couldn't possibly be the only ones.

Shoving her ahead, KC pushed her back toward the showers. Unexpectedly, Angel appeared, dripping wet, wrapping a towel around herself. She looked up startled.

The adrenaline pumped through Shelley's body.

"Oh, God," Angel cried.

Shelley tensed. She could feel KC's hand shaking through the gun. "You're about to be one of those statistics," KC said to Angel. "You know, the one about the unlucky victim who was in the wrong place at the wrong time?" She pointed the gun at Angel.

"Noooo!" Shelley lunged as KC pulled the trigger. Shelley grabbed KC's hand as the gun went off. She pushed KC up against a wall.

Angel fell to the floor.

Shelley slammed KC's hand against the tile wall again and again. The gun fired once more before it finally fell and Shelley immediately kicked it out of reach. It slid the distance of the locker room and came to rest under one of the sinks in the far corner. Shelley drew back and punched KC in the stomach, grabbed her by the hair and smashed KC's face into her knee. KC slid down the wall to the hard floor.

Shelley started toward the gun but KC grabbed her ankles as she went by and Shelley tumbled downward. They grappled on the floor for several minutes, rolling, over and over, each one trying to get the upper hand.

KC got it first, slamming the back of Shelley's head into a locker. Shelley was dazed long enough for KC to wriggle free. KC turned to crawl away but Shelley grabbed her by the foot and pulled her back, twisting KC's ankle until she flipped over onto her back.

Shelley sprang up, pummeling KC's face with her fists until both were bloody. Struggling to stand, Shelley started again toward the gun, leaning on one of the sinks for support.

Somehow though, KC rose once more and screamed her frustration as she grabbed Shelley by the hair and swung her with all her might into the mirror. Pain shot through Shelley's forehead and blood poured, covering her face, essentially blinding her.

Wiping at her eyes in an effort to see, she stumbled away from the mirror. KC grabbed her from behind, pinning her arms to her sides.

Throughout her training, Eric had preached about utilizing the axe kick and she kept forgetting. She remembered now. Kicking as high and hard as she could, Shelley's foot bashed into KC's forehead.

KC released her as she slumped to the floor, landing on her back. Shelley lifted her foot and stomped on KC's stomach. She wiped at her eyes, struggling to see as she stepped over KC's unconscious body.

Not unconscious, Shelley thought as KC tripped her and Shelley landed

on the hard floor. They each scrambled toward the gun, reaching toward the corner. KC grabbed Shelley by the hair. End it, Shelley thought, her logical mind kicking in. Stop going for the gun and take care of what stands in your way. She maneuvered onto KC's abdomen straddling her. Barely able to see what she was doing through the blood that ran from her forehead, she swung at KC's face, over and over until, finally, KC stopped moving.

Shelley reached toward the gun once again, but it wasn't there. She wiped madly at her eyes, trying desperately to see. She blinked hard. There it was, in KC's outstretched hand. With trembling hands, Shelley reached forward and scooped it up. She then pointed it at the head of the woman Shelley had once thought was a new friend.

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When the gun fired, Eric's heart stopped. Not being able to get to Shelley was absolute pure agony. He thought he'd go out of his mind before Ricky found keys and came back to open the large, heavy door. When he saw Ricky running full speed toward him, keys held high, a slight relief washed over him. Relief and also dread as to what they would find on the other side. A security officer grabbed the keys from Ricky and two police officers, weapons drawn, shoved Eric and Ricky aside as they waited for the door to open.

They burst through the door.

Angel lay on the floor in a puddle of blood.

Shelley sat, in her pink tailored shirt, on the abdomen of an unconscious KC, pointing a gun at her head. All Eric could see though, was that Shelley still lived and breathed.

Blood covered Shelley's face and shirt. She hadn't even noticed they'd entered the room. The police had their weapons drawn and pointed at Shelley. One spoke. "Put the gun down– now!"

Eric was incredulous. "Put your guns away you idiots," he ordered, his voice like thunder, as he quickly walked past them slowly and into Shelley's line of vision.

"Shelley," he said softly. "Shelley, give me the gun." He moved toward her slowly. She looked up at him. "Give me the gun, hon," he coaxed as he covered her hand with his and gently took it from her. He slid it across the room toward the police officers.

Before Eric had a chance to take her in his arms, two officers came at Shelley and pushed her roughly down, face first onto the floor and handcuffed her. Eric tried to stop them, tried to explain that it hadn't been Shelley who'd first brandished the weapon, but they wouldn't listen to him. They turned her onto her side. The look of confusion and fear on her face devastated Eric.

Meanwhile, Jason knelt beside Angel as the EMTs worked on her.

Angel opened her eyes to find Jason smiling at her.

"You're gonna be okay."

"Thanks to Shelley," she whispered. "She saved my life. That woman was gonna kill me."

"Did you hear what she said?" Ricky cried to the police officers. "Get a freakin' clue. It wasn't Shelley who shot her. It was KC. Now let her go."

"Hey, you just calm down," the officer that cuffed Shelley snapped. "We'll get to the bottom of this down at the station. For now, she stays as she is. And as for you, movie star or not, you're not in charge here, so keep your mouth shut or leave."

Ricky's eyes narrowed. No one had ever dared accuse Ricky of using his star status for special treatment. No one with any brains anyway. He was trying hard to control his temper.

Jason touched his arm. "Let it go, Rick."

The officer roughly pulled Shelley from the floor and pushed her down to sit on a bench. Shelley looked around her blankly.

Realizing that she could barely see through the blood, Eric grabbed a towel, knelt in front of her and gently wiped the blood from her face. Disoriented, she looked up at him. "What's happening? Why did they handcuff me?"

"Because they're stupid," Eric answered matter-of-factly and loud enough for the officers to hear.

"Eric, you're not making my job any easier," Justin firmly reminded him.

Shelley watched them take Angel out to the ambulance. "Is she gonna be okay?" Shelley asked.

"I think she's gonna be just fine," Eric answered.

Next they rolled a moaning KC out and Eric knew that they would take Shelley soon.

"Shelley, listen to me," Eric said trying to get her attention.

She looked at him and nodded blankly.

"The police are gonna want you to ride in their patrol car," he said softly, bracing for her reaction.

Her chin began to quiver and Eric's heart began to break.

Ricky cursed, then looked heavenward and apologized.

"I need my things from my locker," she said softly.

"I'll get them," Ricky offered quickly.

"Eric, can I put on my jeans?" she asked in a tiny voice.

"Of course you can," Eric answered, silently cursing himself for not thinking about protecting her modesty earlier, and daring an officer to stop him. He helped her dress.

Tugging at the cuffs, Shelley tried to swing her hair out of her face. Eric pulled the mass of wet, matted, bloody curls behind her.

"They're gonna take you to the hospital, Shelley and I'm gonna be right behind you. Okay?" Eric said gently.

She didn't respond.

Eric rose to speak to the arresting officer. "She's in shock. You'd better hope nothing happens to her while she's in the back of your patrol car, because if anything happens to her, I swear I'll..."

Justin grabbed Eric before he had a chance to finish and pressed him against a locker. “We’re not gonna threaten the nice policeman,” Justin said in a fatherly tone. “And you’re not helping me. I have to work with these people to get her out of this. Now get a grip.” Eric breathed, nodded.

They took Shelley through the lobby and outside.

The officer put her in the patrol car and closed the door. She looked like a little lost puppy as she gazed out the window.

Jason and Justin spoke briefly. With her consent, Jason took Angel’s car and left. The media called to Ricky to fill them in on what happened. Justin pulled him aside first. He knew Ricky had a way with the press. “Listen, Rick, make it good enough to get her out,” he said before he left for the hospital with Eric.

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Ricky held his hands up to quiet the crowd and the press. “I’ll tell you what happened,” he said, and knowing the media, he added, “but you have to be quiet and listen to the whole story or no deal. Anyone tries to talk over me, I’m done.”

After that, Ricky’s charm and intelligence came into play. “A woman named KC,” he began as he told the entire story.

“And so, the police arrested Ms. Adams only to follow procedure, after all, she was the one holding the gun in the end. I’m sure they realize she saved Angel Prichard’s life and her own too, and once they get all the statements from everyone, they’ll release her. As a matter of fact, they’ll probably give her some sort of commendation.”

He asked if anyone could give him a lift to the hospital. Dozens volunteered and he chose a gorgeous brunette standing close by.

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Eric arrived at the hospital and found Shelley sitting on the edge of a gurney in the hallway, an expression of utter bewilderment on her face. Handcuffs still in place, the arresting officer stood close by. Eric approached, his eyes daring them to say anything as he put his arm around Shelley.

“I’m so tired,” she said as she leaned her sore head on his shoulder.

“Here, why don’t you lie down on your side?” he suggested, forcing one of the officers to step aside as he helped her lie down.

She curled up and closed her eyes.

A few minutes later a nurse came to check on her and demanded they take the cuffs off so she could treat her. They rolled her into a larger room and pulled the curtains. Eric stayed with her, again daring anyone to deny him.

“I don’t think she needs stitches,” the doctor said. “There are several small cuts along the hairline. We’ll clean it up and disinfect the area and bandage it.”

The doctor took Eric aside to speak to him. “Her blood pressure is low and she’s suffering from shock but it’s not bad enough to keep her here. I’m afraid they’re gonna take her down and book her.”

Eric thanked the doctor for his kindness and concern. The doctor and a nurse worked quickly. The doctor took his leave and the nurse went to get paperwork. As they waited, Ricky and Justin barged in, passing the officers with attorney privilege.

"How's Angel?' Eric asked Justin.

"She's in surgery. The bullet hit no arteries, but took out a piece of her spleen. It missed her spine by a few inches. The doctors say she's lucky and should recover quickly."

Eric filled them in on Shelley's condition, then turned to her, dreading the next words he would have to speak.

"Shelley, they are gonna take you down to the police station for a little while," he said as gently as he could.

She bit her lip to keep it from trembling. "Am I," she began, but stopped as the tears welled up in her eyes. She bit her lip again until she was able to fight the tears back then tried to speak. "Am I going to jail?" she whispered.

Eric found himself fighting his own emotions. He knew he had to tell her the truth. She trusted him. He drew in a deep breath. "Yes, Shelley you are," he said placing his hand gently on her face. "But only for a little while," he added quickly. "I know this is hard, sweetie, but I want you to be brave. Can you do that for me?"

She nodded, then stopping to change direction, shook her head, her eyes filling with fear. "No, I can't do this," she said the tears finally spilling over onto her cheeks. She put her arms around him. "Please don't let them take me. Please Eric, I want to stay with you," she pleaded through her tears.

He held her a moment. "Shelley, please know, if there was any way in the world I could keep you from having to do this, I would. But there isn't. I can't stop the process. I promise to have you out soon. Jason's already working on it and Justin will take care of everything else. Remember how we talked about creating your own reality? You can be in anguish or in control. Take control. Remember we talked about God is with us? Talk to Him, He will help you find a way, my love, to turn this into something good."

She sniffed. "How do I take control?"

Eric smiled kindly. "Well if I tell you then you won't learn how to figure it out yourself. But sweetie, you can do this. You can handle it."

She shook her head. "I didn't shoot Angel," she said.

He hugged her hard. "I know, baby."

"And KC, she tried to kill me," she said, as if she thought someone ought to know that.

"I know," he said again. "They're gonna question you and you can tell your side and Justin will be right beside you. It'll all come out." Kissing her cheek, he held her until one of the officers came back from filling out the paperwork.

He took her by the arm. "Let's go," he said gruffly.

She stood up and he turned her around and leaned her over the gurney,

pulling her arms behind her to replace the handcuffs.

Eric's eyes flashed with anger. "Is that really necessary?"

"Sorry, it's policy. We wouldn't want her to do any further damage with her 'lethal' weapons," he retorted sarcastically.

Eric thought about how pleasant it would be to use his own lethal weapons to penetrate the man's throat and neatly tear out his Adam's apple. Justin kicked his leg.

Eric blinked. "It was just a thought," he murmured innocently.

They watched Shelley being led out the automatic door. She looked back at them, panic in her eyes for just an instant, and then she turned and walked away with the officer.

Blowing out a breath, Ricky leaned back against a wall. "I can't stand this," he murmured, his voice filled with emotion.

Eric placed his hand on Ricky's shoulder. "Well, Rick, if she can, you can. Our Shelley is a lot tougher than you think. She always comes through when things are at their worst."

They walked out through the emergency waiting room but stopped to listen to the news when they saw Ricky's face on the TV screen. They smiled as they heard what Ricky said to the crowd and reporters. "Man, I'm good." Ricky bragged.

"You were perfect," Justin agreed. They both turned for Eric's comment.

"Yeah, yeah, good shootin' kid. Don't get cocky," Eric quoted.

"*Star Wars*," Justin said, glad to finally recognize one.

Eric grimaced. Playing Shelley's game in her absence was disturbing. They hurried to the police station.

✝✝✝

Isaiah 54:17

"No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper;
and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment
thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord,
and their righteousness is of me, saith the Lord."

Chapter Twenty

Making it through the processing and questioning, Shelley was ushered into a holding cell, the door slammed shut behind her. There were several other women in the large white room sitting in hard plastic chairs around small tables or in a line along the far wall.

Shelley found a spot on the cold tile floor in a corner, sat down in a half lotus and closed her eyes. *I will be strong, this is no problem, I can handle this*, were the words running through her tired brain.

"What you in for, honey?" a voice asked.

Shelley opened her eyes to see an attractive woman, about thirty years old, looking at her.

"I got in a fight," Shelley answered her simply.

The woman looked Shelley over, taking note of the bandages on her forehead. "Man or woman?"

"A woman," Shelley said quietly.

The cell became silent.

"So, why didn't they arrest her?" someone asked.

"Good question," Shelley mumbled. She looked around at all the eyes staring at her and wondered why she'd become so interesting.

"No, really. Why?"

Shelley shrugged. "I guess because she's in the hospital."

"You put her in the hospital?" the first woman asked, in admiration. The next to speak however, wasn't so impressed.

"So, I guess you think you're pretty tough?"

Shelley heaved a deep sigh, wondering if maybe there was a neon sign that floated just above her head saying: for a good time, pick a fight with me. She sized up the woman. Large, about five feet eight inches tall and close to one-eighty. Shelley had no desire to get into any kind of a rift with her. She answered her in a slow, deliberate manner.

"No-it-just-happened."

"Were you fighting over a john?" a young girl asked. Shelley looked her over. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-one," the girl answered.

"Bull, she's barely eighteen," the first woman said.

"So, tough lady, you ended up here with the whores, huh?" the large woman taunted.

"Look," Shelley said calmly. "I don't want any trouble, okay?"

The woman stood over Shelley. "Well, honey, you gotta know, you gonna have trouble, look where you at."

Shelley only shook her head slowly. Closed her eyes again and tried to ignore her.

The woman nudged Shelley with her foot and addressed her using a profanity. "Hey, I'm talkin' to you."

When Shelley didn't answer her, she grabbed Shelley by the shirt and pulled her up, but Shelley was at the end of whatever patience she had left. She stepped even closer to the woman and spoke softly.

"You do not wanna take me on."

"Hey, I know who you are," the younger girl suddenly exclaimed. "You're that karate lady that Ricky Kino was talking about on TV. I saw it when they were bookin' me. Do you know Ricky Kino?"

"Yes," Shelley replied flatly, keeping her eyes on the other woman, who simply let go of her and moved away. Grateful for the apparent reprieve, she blew out a breath.

The young girl continued with Shelley's story. "Yeah, some woman tried to shoot her and this one practically beat her to death with her bare hands."

Shelley shook her head. "It wasn't like that," Shelley amended. "I was just trying to survive."

"So, the other girl had a gun, how'd you take it out of her hand? Was it like, one of those martial arts things, where you flip it out of her hand so fast she doesn't even know what happened?"

Shelley smiled. "I wish. I haven't learned that kind of stuff yet."

"Still, you turned it on her. I heard Ricky Kino say it. Man, it would be nice to know how to handle things in a scene like that. You know, like Scarlett Johansson. If I could do that, I wouldn't have to worry so much about uh, well, you know, about my 'clientele.' Know what I mean? That would be so cool."

"She don't care, y'all," the large woman remarked. "To her, all we are is just some low-down hookers."

"That's not true," Shelley said quickly. That got the attention of most all the women in the area. "I mean, everyone is important," Shelley said. "Everyone. Even you. So, like, what I mean is, if you think you're low-down, that's on you."

The large woman turned abruptly. "Don't be tryin' to feed us some bull, little miz fancy pants."

Shelley directed her words toward the others. "I mean, you want to sell your body, that's your business, unless, of course, you're a minor." She glanced at the young girl. "I'm not judging you, but, I have to say, it's not a very wholesome thing to do. It's not cute. It's not cool. It's not respectful, because disrespecting yourself isn't cute or cool. It's not empowering women, like some people think. You don't really have autonomy over your body, it's just the opposite because it does put you in a dangerous situation."

"Would you do it?" the young girl asked. "I mean, like, if you had no other choice, would you do it if you had to?"

"No."

"Be real," another woman said. "You don't know what you might do. Let's say you're homeless, or, you're about to be homeless and you got a kid and you can't find a job, or the kid don't have no food."

Shelley pressed her lips together tightly and nodded. "Okay, honestly, I really don't think so. I don't think I would, or even could. I mean, I can't even imagine having to do that to make money to live." She shrugged. "Then again, being honest, never say never. Still, I'm guessing, doing what you do, it's gotta be pretty hard on the emotions. But I really gotta look at the bigger picture. I mean, you're offering something to men that they would normally have to work for, right? They would normally have to meet someone, talk to her, take her to dinner, see if she likes him. You're cutting all of that part out. You're taking advantage of something, a man's sex drive, and he's willing to pay good money for something other people get for free."

The women didn't say anything but only nodded.

"But really, and again, being honest, it's like you ladies, and all those men who are not in control of their lustful desires, you're ruining the system, like, uh, the way God set it up. It messes up the system. The system of courtship and love. Real love, and yeah, that actually is a thing."

"You're kidding me, right? So, what is up with you? Are you like, some kind of religious freak?"

She gave a soft laugh. "Hardly. I really don't know that much about God. But I know it doesn't seem right."

"Listen honey. All men want it and none of them is in control of, what did you call it? Lustful desires?" She laughed at the term.

Shelley shrugged. "Some men are in control. I know several of them. My man, my guy, he is very much in control. And it doesn't make him look unmanly. It's just the opposite. It makes him look strong. He's the strongest man I know."

"How long you been together?" the young girl asked.

"Almost nine months."

"And you've never done it?"

"No. He says that sex is reserved for marriage and to show me how much he loves me, we'll wait."

The large woman made a snorting sound.

The rest of the room was silent as if they were having trouble comprehending that scenario.

"So, when you gettin' married?" the young girl asked. Shelley sighed. "Well, he hasn't asked me yet."

"Uh huh," another woman said with a knowing nod.

Shelley smiled. He hadn't asked her to marry him, but he had said he loved her hundreds of times now. She dreamed of the day he would propose.

Surely he will eventually.

She turned her mind back to the women. “So anyway, I’m not judging you, and weirdly, I *do* care about you. I’d love to see all y’all in a profession where you weren’t so vulnerable, and also where what you do doesn’t undermine the fabric of a family. Still, I understand being desperate for money just to keep the lights on or to feed your children, so, I can’t judge you. What you do is between you and God.” Shelley smiled again. She’d heard Eric say that and was just repeating it, but it fit this situation perfectly and she suddenly could see the wisdom in it.

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Jason met Justin as he came in the door and they feverishly went to work to get things straightened out and arranged for Shelley’s release. Between the expertise of the two brothers and their nationwide contacts, the New Orleans police department never stood a chance.

Once the arresting officer had been thoroughly chewed out by his superior, he was only too happy to quickly arrange all the paperwork for Shelley’s release.

An elderly officer came to open the cell door for Shelley and looked around in disbelief. The women were crying and hugging and promising to write each other. Shelley walked out the door and past the man with a smile and a shrug.

Her eyes searched for Eric’s face as she walked out. When they landed on him, standing there so strong, and happy to see her, she ran and jumped into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and squeezing him hard.

It was several seconds before he gently set her on the floor.

“I neva seen ennathin’ like it,” the older officer said. “She turned dat whole jail full o’ women into a bunch of choir gals in two hours. They was cryin’ and bawlin’ and talkin’ bout dey families. Young lady, you is wailcum in my jail ennatime.”

Shelley grinned. “No offense, but no thanks.”

Justin placed a hand on the top of Shelley’s head. “I am in complete awe of you.”

Eric tilted her face up to him. “I’m so proud of you. Like always, you made the best of a bad situation. I love you, Shelley girl.”

She grinned. “Well, tell ya what. I never wanna be in that situation ever again. Being held captive, knowing you’re not free to simply walk out the door, it’s a terrible feeling. I guess it doesn’t help that I’m extremely claustrophobic.”

“It’s like you said a long time ago, when I first met you, remember? About the dandelions? You said, as long as they’re free they survive. Well, you are like a dandelion, Shelley girl, in so many ways.”

“What ways?”

“Well, you’re sturdy like a dandelion, and resilient, and I’m sure KC Jones finds you very hard to get rid of, like a dandelion. Aaand you’re as bright

and beautiful as sunshine, just like a dandelion."

She hugged him hard. "Eric, I'm very impressed with your analogies, but right now– I am starved."

He laughed. "Let's get you cleaned up and we'll go eat."

As they exited the police station, the arresting officer approached Ricky. "Hey, listen, I uh, saw what you said on TV and I just wanted you to know that I appreciate you not making me out to look bad. You understand, I was only doing my job."

Ricky's lips pressed tightly together. "Yeah, well you can kiss my..." he stopped himself and sighed, "Sorry, look, I get it. So, like, maybe just try thinking, and listening, before you make an arrest. I know cops get a bad rap, so show them what a good cop looks like."

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Back at the motel, Shelley sank into a hot bath and let the day's happenings leave her mind to be pondered another time. All she knew was she was hungry and extremely tired, her arms and legs were achy and sore and she had a headache.

After a thorough scrubbing she dressed and hurried to Eric's room. "Let's go, I'm starved."

"Yes, ma'am," Eric laughed. Minutes later, the five of them piled into Eric's rental car.

"Where to?" Eric asked Shelley.

"I want junk food. Greasy, fattening junk food," she said, knowing that after what she'd been through, Eric would be only too happy to indulge her.

They decided on a local fast food hamburger joint. Shelley wolfed down her cheeseburger and chocolate shake and then batted her eyes at Eric. "That was so good, but I think I need something else."

"What else?"

"I don't know, let me go peruse the menu."

"You need money?"

"Nope. I have the fifty." She glanced at the others, silently daring them to make a smart comment. "Anyone else want anything?"

"Sure," Ricky said immediately.

"What do you want?"

"Surprise me."

She left them, headed for the counter and came back a few minutes later with an assortment of goodies. Fries, apple pies, ice cream sundaes and large chocolate chip cookies. Eric's eyes opened wide at the sight of all the food.

"Just this once," Shelley said with a smile. "I've had a hard day. Besides, it's not all for me. It's for everyone."

As they ate, they asked her more details about the fight with KC in the locker room and how it ended up the way it did. She filled them in and as she did their respect for her grew.

The men continued to talk, but Shelley, growing weary, rested her head

on her arm and only listened. Their male voices were melodic and soft yet strong and deep.

She reached over to touch Eric's hand, lifting it and playing with it as if it were a toy. Opening it, measuring it against hers, then closing it back to a fist. She brought it to her mouth and kissed his fingers. This got his attention for a moment and he rubbed the back of his hand against her cheek before he went back to his conversation, which had turned to Korean.

She continued playing with his hand, becoming absorbed in its shape, its strength, its power. She spied a grain of salt on his fingertip and brought it to her mouth and licked it clean. He looked down at her. She smiled up at him, then closed her eyes. She truly was exhausted. Sighing deeply, she opened her eyes to play with Eric's hand again. Several times she dipped his fingertip in some salt that was in the bottom of the little cardboard container her fries had come in, and then licked the salt off his finger.

In her own sleepy world she played for a while until she noticed that the men's conversation had silenced. Looking up, she found them watching her, comical expressions on their faces, except for Eric. His expression was that of raw desire.

"Reminds me of tequila shots," Ricky said.

"Tequila shots?" Shelley asked.

"Yeah, you lick the salt off the back of your hand before you take the shot. Though I'm thinkin' that following the salt up with a shot of tequila has a lot bigger impact."

Eric cleared his throat. "I don't know about that." He touched her nose. "Are you ready to go back to the motel?"

Shelley's eyes opened with sudden excitement. "No, actually there's something else I'd like to do."

"You're kidding? What?" they all asked.

"I want to go by the hospital and check on Angel."

Eric smiled. "It's a nice thought, hon, but it's eleven o'clock. I'm sure visiting hours are over. Besides, you have to be exhausted."

"I am, but, I was sitting here thinking about Angel there at the hospital all alone. No family. No friends. I don't even know enough about her to call someone for her to tell them she's been hurt. I don't think I'll be able to sleep until I see her," she said steadfastly.

"Well, I love that you're such a compassionate person, Shelley, but still, they won't let us in to see her this late."

Shelley pouted, moved the plastic tray and brushed the salt off the table. She sat silently for a moment, then smiled a mischievous smile.

"We could sneak in," she said, comically raising her eyebrows.

Ricky grinned. "Cool."

"How?" Jason asked, becoming interested, much to Justin's amazement.

Shelley shrugged. "How hard could it be? Create a distraction and I'll sneak by."

Jason was smiling now.

Justin looked at the three of them incredulously. “Have you all lost your minds? Don’t do this. Shelley, didn’t you just get out of jail? Are you so anxious to go back?”

She laughed. “They like me there. But really, Justin, don’t be such a worry wart. If we get caught, all they’ll do is throw us out. They won’t send us to jail.”

Justin shook his head. “Tell her no, Eric, or I will.”

Shelley frowned at Justin, then stood and put her arms around Eric’s neck. “Please,” she said sweetly.

He pulled her arms away. “I don’t think this is a very good idea. The responsible side of me wants to say ‘no way.’”

Shelley frowned. “And who is responsible for poor Angel? Have you ever seen her with anyone? Have you ever seen a family member or teacher with her at a tournament?”

“No, I haven’t. So, what if I promise that we’ll go see her right after breakfast?”

She touched Eric’s face and leaned close. “What if she’s lying there in the dark all lonely, unable to sleep? Worried? Or even scared?”

Eric sighed. “Okay, okay. I give. We’ll go see Angel.”

Shelley clapped with delight. They decided Ricky would strike up a conversation with the nurses and lay on the charm, while Justin would pretend to be a new father who couldn’t find his way back to labor and delivery. Eric, being a poor actor at best, was told to tag along and keep his mouth shut. While those three had the nurses occupied, Jason and Shelley would find Angel’s room.

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The plan worked like a charm. Justin ended up speaking Korean to pretend there was a language barrier and one of the three nurses took him and Eric to the elevator herself while Ricky Kino flirted with the other two.

Jason and Shelley made it easily to Angel’s room and peered over the bed railing at her. Her eyes were closed and a monitor sounded her heart rate. An IV tube was connected to the top of her left hand.

“I’ll stand watch by the door,” Jason said softly as he moved back to peer out the tiny window.

Angel opened her eyes at the sound of his voice.

Shelley smiled at her. “Hi there,” she said softly.

“Shelley? I thought they put you in jail,” she said in a weak voice.

“They did, but I broke out.” Shelley joked.

Angel smiled. “What are y’all doing here?” she said slowly.

“We snuck in to see you. How are you feeling?”

“I’m fine really, thanks to you. They’ve got me all doped up with pain killers,” she paused. “I can’t believe you went to all this trouble to come and see me.”

"Of course we did," Shelley said as she squeezed her hand. "What are friends for?"

A tear ran down the side of Angel's face. "Friends? That sounds wonderful."

Shelley squeezed her hand. "Angel, is there someone I can call for you? A family member maybe?"

Angel shook her head. "No, there's no one."

"But, there must b..."

"There's no one."

Shelley didn't want to push it. "Okay, well, anyway, I'll let Jason say 'hi'." She exchanged places with Jason.

"How's the patient?" he asked softly.

"She's much better now," Angel smiled.

Shelley listened as they exchanged timid bits of conversation and she realized that Jason was sweet on Angel.

"There's a nurse coming down the hall," Shelley warned.

They were quiet a moment until she passed by.

"We'd better get out of here," Jason said.

"We'll be back in the morning, Angel," he whispered. "Get some rest and get better and know that we'll be here for you. You are not alone." He bent over and kissed her forehead.

"Oh, my," Angel cooed. "I imagine I won't sleep at all now."

Jason smiled at her.

Shelley leaned over the rail. "See you tomorrow."

"Bye Angel," Jason whispered as they left the room.

They walked brazenly past the nurses' station. Three startled nurses looked up.

Shelley smiled at them. "Hi, I, uh, think we made a wrong turn. Is this the way to the elevator? Oh, there it is. Gosh I just get so turned around in these places. Well, thanks, have a nice evening."

The nurses smiled and nodded as Shelley and Jason stepped on the elevator and burst out laughing.

Shelley jumped into Jason's arms with excitement. "We did it," she squealed. "That was fun."

Jason held her away for a moment and looked into her eyes. "Eric found a real treasure when he found you."

"I could say the same thing about you," she laughed, hugging him again as the elevator doors opened.

The sound of men clearing their throats broke them apart. Shelley turned and threw her arms around Eric.

"Thank you Eric. Oh, man I'm having so much fun and guess what? Jason's got a new girlfriend," she sang.

"Oh really? Who? Angel, or you?" Eric asked, pretending to be jealous.

"Angel of course," she laughed. "Don't you know there's no one else for

me, but you?" Shelley stood on her tiptoes to kiss him and then turned away quickly jumping up and down like a child.

"This was too much fun. Let's do something else!" They shook their heads at her as they exited the hospital.

"I know," Ricky said, his voice full of excitement. "We could go knock over the nearest convenience store."

Shelley jumped on his back. "Let's do it."

Ricky galloped her around the parking lot and circled back.

Justin pulled her off Ricky. "I believe we've created a monster."

"Really, Dad," Ricky agreed. "I've seen the symptoms before. She's becoming an adrenaline junkie."

"What would Mark and Joey say if they knew what you've done over the last few days?" Justin asked her.

"They're not gonna say anything, because no one is going to tell them," Shelley answered firmly. She pouted. "I've been a mom for so long, why can't I have a little irresponsible fun? I married so young I missed all that."

"You can have all the fun you want," Eric said.

The four men exchanged glances. Eric actually did worry how Shelley would handle going back to a normal daily routine after all the excitement. Given her history, depression was a distinct possibility. As they drove back to the hotel, they turned their conversation to Korean and discussed the best way to handle Shelley's fragile emotions. She'd been through so many traumas over the past few months, they were sure her state of mind was suffering more than she realized.

In the car, when the men began speaking in another language, Shelley rolled her eyes and talked aloud to herself. "There you guys go again, leaving me out of your conversation. I suppose you're talking about me, or maybe you're telling dirty jokes. It doesn't matter. I don't care what you're saying anyway," she announced loudly. "Really, it doesn't bother me that you exclude me from your conversations."

Ricky put his hand over her mouth while he made a point to his father. She pulled his fingers back until he moved his hand. "Fine, I'll be quiet so you guys can go on being rude."

"Shelley?" Eric said.

"What?" she answered madly.

"I love you," he said softly.

"I love you too," Justin added.

"I love you too," Jason said.

Ricky smiled at her. "Ditto."

She smiled back. "*Ghost.*"

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Shelley slept like a rock. In the early morning hours, she turned on her side, smiling as she realized Eric was still in the chair in her room where he'd been as they talked last night. She watched his chest rise and fall with each

breath. Feeling mischievous, she giggled softly. Perfect payback time.

She quietly rolled out of bed, went to the bathroom, filled a glass with cold water and tiptoed to the chair. He made a soft groaning sound and Shelley knew she needed to act fast, before he woke. She dumped the entire glass of water on his head.

Eric sprang up, sputtering. "You rat," he barked as she dashed back to the bathroom.

Eric grabbed a towel and sat on the bed waiting for her to come out. A few minutes later she emerged, completely dressed and quietly walked to the door, opened it.

"Shelley? Where do you think you're going?"

"Out," she purred.

"Out? Oh, no. You come here right now, we have some unfinished business," he commanded.

She smiled innocently. "Remember the threats I made to you yesterday?" She paused for just a moment, giving him time to recall. "Well, consider threat number one fulfilled," she giggled as she started to close the door.

"Wait," Eric said loudly, then let his body fall back on the bed with a sigh. "Okay, okay, you win. But you still can't go out alone. Now come in and close the door."

She stuck out her tongue. "No can do. I'm going out. Byee."

"Shelley. I'm not kidding now. It's not safe."

She turned her back, and smacked her rear, then ran out, slamming the door behind her.

Eric sprang from the bed and immediately tripped over the shoes he'd taken off last night. He quickly tried to put them on.

Shelley ran directly to Ricky's room, and rapped on his door.

"Ricky, Ricky, quick, open the door."

Ricky came to the door, startled. "What's wrong?"

"Someone's after me," she said breathlessly.

Quickly, he pulled her in and closed the door. "Who?"

She laughed. "Your Dad."

Ricky collapsed on his bed as Shelley ran around the room in a frenzy. "Where's the ice bucket? Oh, here it is. Good, it still has a little ice left."

Shelley filled it the rest of the way with cold water and went to the door to wait for Eric.

"Ricky, open the door, hurry," Eric said urgently.

Ricky rose up on his elbows to watch Shelley's antics. She opened the door and doused his father with the cold water, taking his breath away.

"That's two," she giggled.

He lunged at her. She shrieked and darted onto the bed where Eric cornered her.

"Oh, really good Ninja-ing there Eric," Shelley teased as she jumped up and down on the bed. "Don't you think you should've seen that coming?"

When Jason and Justin heard Shelley's scream, they bounded from their beds. Finding Shelley's room empty and the door ajar, they pounded on Ricky's door.

Ricky stood. "Really you two– just keep right on doing what you're doing. I'll get the door. No problem."

Ricky opened the door and the two brothers charged in. "What the heck is going on?" Jason asked.

Ricky gestured toward Eric and Shelley. "Dad and Shelley are– playing."

Ricky, Justin and Jason sat down on Ricky's bed, their heads in their hands and watched Eric and Shelley "play" as they took a moment to recover from their heart attacks.

Shelley jumped on the bed as Eric grabbed for her.

"Hey Shelley," Ricky called, "So like, did you decide on this little plan all alone?"

"What in the world are you talking about?" she asked, dodging her pursuer as she spoke.

"Well, first you throw water on Dad, and then you back yourself into a corner. I mean, did you think up that strategy all by yourself?" Ricky chuckled.

"Oh, Ricky, I thought you knew much more about women than that," Shelley said.

"What are you talking about?"

"Silly boy. Getting caught was part of the plan. Don't you know women allow men to catch them so as not to bruise their inflated egos and make them feel manly?"

Ricky laughed. "No, I don't know that."

"Wait a minute," Eric interrupted. "Are you trying to say I couldn't catch you if you didn't let me? I beg to differ."

"Go ahead, beg, but it's true," she argued.

"Sorry Shell, but I can catch you anytime I please."

"I seem to remember," Shelley answered slowly, "just a few days ago all four of you tried to catch me all night long and couldn't do it."

"Ooooo," the others mumbled.

"Oh, Shelley, you should never have brought that up," Eric chided.

"I think we still owe her for losing an entire night's sleep, don't you boys?" Justin asked.

"I'm all in," Ricky agreed.

The three men sprang at her, grabbed her and held her down on the bed. Ricky held his hand over her mouth to muffle her screams while the others performed 'torture by tickling' until tears were running down her face.

Finally, after much begging, they let her up and she crawled like a wounded kitten into Eric's arms, cuddling up close to him.

"I suppose you're letting me hold you now and protect you from them," Eric teased.

"Shut up," she said with a pout.

Eric stood, pulled Shelley up and started toward the door. “Shelley and I have some things to talk about. I’ll meet up with you guys at breakfast,” he said as he left.

He stopped and stuck his head back in. “Oh and Rick, will you do me a favor and pack up for me?”

“Sure Dad,” Ricky answered sarcastically. “I’ll be happy to— and I suppose you want me to wash– oh, never mind.”

“Oh, oh, that was the butler guy from *Arthur*,” Shelley called back with a giggle.

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At breakfast, the group of friends said goodbye to each other.

“I’m gonna miss you guys so much. I wish we didn’t have to leave,” Shelley said softly.

“Ah, sweet Shelley,” Justin began, “You know, I’ve truly grown to love you and that makes me forgive you for taking Eric so far away from his home. I’ll miss you both, but I do have a life of my own. I have a much neglected law practice and a girlfriend who’s mad at me for seemingly spending more time with you than with her.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend,” Shelley exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You never asked.”

“Justin doesn’t talk about his girlfriend because she’s mean and he just keeps her around for well, I’m not really sure. It’s definitely not for good times,” Jason said.

Shelley’s eyebrows rose as she looked back at Justin.

“One of these days, little bro, I’m gonna take you down,” Justin threatened, then turned to Shelley. “She’s not mean,” he argued as Jason nodded his head frantically. “She’s— assertive.”

“Why don’t you bring her along next time? She’d probably like to be included, and I’d love to meet her,” Shelley added as Jason’s head changed directions.

“I might just do that,” he answered as he knocked his little brother in the forehead.

She turned to Jason, “What are your plans?”

Jason frowned as he rubbed his head. “I’m stickin’ around for a few days until Angel is released from the hospital. I’ll make sure she gets home okay. I have some seminars scheduled at the end of February and first week in March but after that you’ll see both me and Justin again because we’re flying into Atlanta to see your March tournament.” Shelley clapped her hands together. “Good. I don’t think I could fight if you guys weren’t there.”

“That’s not true,” the teacher spoke. “You do what you have to do. The fight comes from you, not them. Not Ricky, not me. You.”

“Yes, master,” Shelley quipped.

“I suppose you have to fly out today too,” Shelley asked Ricky.

"Actually, yes," he said with a smile. "I have a demo in Las Vegas and have several TV appearances to make to promote the new movie."

"So, I guess it will be only you and me and the kids," Eric stated. "That may not be exciting enough for you but..."

Shelley stopped him. "I think I could manage with just you. After all, you were the one I allowed to catch me, weren't you?"

Eric smiled. "Watch what you say. Next time I may not protect you from these hoodlums."

"As I recall, you didn't do much to protect me this time."

"But I did take you away and make it all better, didn't I?" All eyes turned to Shelley.

"Methinks the lady blushes," Ricky sang. "But alas, the hour grows late and fly I must to the castle of yonder kingdom. Adieu. Adieu. Parting is such sweet sorrow."

They laughed at Ricky's acting as everyone said their goodbyes and went their separate ways.

At Shelley's insistence, she and Eric headed over to the hospital with Jason to see her new friend. She chatted with Angel, telling her about her experience in jail which Eric and Jason hadn't yet heard. The story to them was fascinating and Angel seemed profoundly touched by it. Shelley worried that something she said had upset Angel, but then Angel smiled and changed the subject.

"Just three more months until the MART," Angel reminded Shelley. "Are you nervous?"

Shelley jerked a thumb at Eric. "He doesn't really give me time to be nervous, but, to be honest, I am a little worried about making my black belt before June."

"She's being tested in May," Eric clarified, "and she's worried, of all things, about breaking boards. Though, I'm sure she'll make it."

"Wow, black belt so soon. I've been a red belt forever."

"Why?" Jason asked. "If you don't mind my asking."

Angel shrugged with a smile. "I guess I sort of gave up. Lost direction. I started taking Taekwondo in college when they offered a self-defense class for the students after a few female students had been assaulted. I met a guy in the class and we started dating. He was doing the tournament rounds and he got me interested in it. It was fun and I made lots of friends, some of whom you met in Atlanta. I was having a blast. Then me and the guy broke up and I stopped going to class so I never progressed past red belt. Still, I was having too much fun traveling around and partying going to tournaments. Lately though, it doesn't seem like so much fun. Feels kind of empty."

"Who did you take from?" Eric asked.

"Don Price. He has two studios in Mobile. Do you know him?"

Eric shook his head. "The name is not familiar. So, your home is in Alabama?"

"Yes, just north of Mobile."

"Do you mind if I ask how you funded traveling around doing tournaments?" Shelley asked.

"No, I don't mind. My father pays for it all."

"Oh. I thought you said there is no one to call?"

"I did. There isn't. He is an importer, or exporter, or something like that. I don't ask too many questions because frankly, I never wanted to know, because I'm pretty sure he's crooked. He's a wheeler dealer, he's rolling in the green stuff and he travels the world and at this moment, really at any moment, I have no idea where he is."

"Surely there must be someone he works with who knows where he is," Jason said.

"Yes, his assistant, his young, beautiful assistant who is the same age as me, with whom he is having a relationship. And she would never tell me where he is. Look, bottom line, he doesn't care where I am or what I'm doing. I just get a monthly stipend and a card at Christmas."

"What about your mom?" Shelley asked.

"My mother died when I was born. I'm told my maternal grandparents haven't seen me since I was one. My paternal grandparents don't keep in touch with their own son, much less with me. I have no brothers, no sisters, no aunts or uncles that I know of. I think my father has an illegitimate kid or two, but I don't know who or where they are. I am alone."

"Not anymore," Shelley said softly. "You have us."

Angel blinked at the tears that formed. "Why? I mean, really, I haven't been very nice to you."

Shelley smiled. "We may have gotten off to a rough start, but as Eric says, that gets all the bad stuff out of the way."

Angel nodded. "So, no more talk about my father. What were we talking about? Oh yeah, your black belt. So, Master Kino, do you think she'll make it in time?"

"Yes I do, if she works hard once we get back to Atlanta and sticks with a strict routine."

Shelley rolled her eyes. "Eric's big into self-discipline, routines and schedules," she explained to Angel.

"Well, it must work. You've come a long way in a short time," Angel admitted.

"See there, Shelley," Eric teased. "Someone appreciates my teaching techniques."

Jason jumped in. "Speaking as one of your students, it's not that we don't appreciate your gifts as a teacher, we just wonder sometimes if we will survive your methods."

"My methods are in place to bring about your survival," Eric returned.

"Yes, Master," both Jason and Shelley brought their hands together and bowed their heads as Angel laughed.

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"The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"
Psalm 27:1

Chapter Twenty-One

Shelley slept on the flight home giving Eric time to think. James was toying with him, playing mind games, and even though Eric knew he shouldn't let them, they were getting to him. The Atlanta detective on the case didn't seem to actually believe Eric's story about James Crane, even after Eric produced the letter James had written threatening reciprocation. The detective actually seemed more interested in how Eric's first wife had died, evidence of the far-reaching hands of crooked politicians. Eric was beginning to believe he'd have to take matters into his own hands. Would he become the judge, jury and executioner? He was a man of peace and light, a man of God, yet he would not, could not stand peacefully by and let another harm those he loves.

Needing to communicate with God, thoughts of home floated through his mind. He missed the ocean desperately. It was a place he often prayed and received answers. Turning, he gazed at the sweet face that had enchanted him away from all he knew. Golden lashes fluttered against cheeks rosy with sleep, and his heart swelled with love. He wondered if she'd consent to be his wife and share his home on the beach. They would head there the first week of June, just one week before the MART.

When the MART is a memory, will she stay with him? Would she even consider moving to California? He knew she struggled between the need for independence and the need for his love and companionship. The fact she also needed his protection didn't help matters. Especially since it was his fault she needed that protection.

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Shelley found being home with Mark and Joey brought her a wonderful feeling of warmth and security. The day-to-day routine they fell into wasn't depressing at all but, instead, comforting. Even without marriage, it seemed they were becoming a family. Over the next few days, Eric worked with Shelley extensively in prayer and meditation, helping her to sort her feelings and become centered once more.

Shortly after Valentine's Day, as Eric and Shelley tucked the boys into bed the conversation turned to whether Eric had given their mother a valentine. Glad that Eric hadn't forgotten their mom, they encouraged him to pursue her, reminding him that their father and mother were divorced and Mom needed a boyfriend. Shelley recognized Bree's not-so-discreet instruction.

Eric smiled, realizing the same thing. "Thanks guys. I appreciate the show of support. Now, time to sleep."

"Yes, sir," they said in unison. Shelley kissed them good night, wishing they responded to her authority as well as they did to Eric's.

Eric sat on Joey's bed. "Keep up the good work on homework and chores and keep practicing your martial arts and you'll have your black belts before you know it."

Joey surprised Eric by jumping up and throwing his arms around Eric's neck. Touched, Eric responded in kind. It'd been a long time since he'd felt the small arms of a little boy's hug.

Eric went to Mark and mussed his hair with a smile.

Shelley watched the scene with pleasure. "Good night boys," she whispered as she and Eric left the room.

They sat together at the kitchen table, drinking tea in silence.

"Is something wrong?" Shelley asked.

He sighed. "I was just thinking, since James attacked you, I never really asked your permission to stay here. I just moved into your extra room downstairs. Then when you and Robert had it out once he learned what happened and that I was staying here with you, I didn't volunteer to leave and make things any easier on you."

Shelley shrugged. "Really, Eric, what could you have done to make it easier? I mean, you were here for our safety, and Robert threatening to get full custody of the boys after what happened to me was just for show. The kids would interfere too much with the lifestyle he's got going on out there. He would never admit it, but I'm sure he's glad you're here."

"Yes, but I once promised Robert we would be very discreet with our relationship and..."

"You did? When?"

"Last August."

"I didn't know that."

He shrugged. "I didn't mean for you to know. Anyway, I wonder if the boys are being affected in any negative way, with me here all the time. I'm sure they know I'm in love with their mom. I was thinking, maybe you could speak with them, and just make sure everything is okay with them."

"Well, you promised we'd be discreet and we have been, haven't we? Anyway, my kids are very well adjusted, Eric. I think it's because I've always been open and honest with them. We've had several talks about you and me. I think what they just said in there was their version of giving you permission to be part of our lives."

He smiled. "I should've known, when it comes to the children you always deal with it in just the right way."

"Not always the right way, but at least I do deal with it. You've taught me I can deal with anything."

Eric smiled. "You, my love, are making definite progress."

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March came and Shelley's mood began to shift. Excited about the coming

tournament and the coming spring she was smiling a lot. One week before the March tournament Eric decided it was time to have a talk with his champion. On Friday evening they tucked the boys into bed, cleaned the kitchen and went over some technical problems she'd developed in her kicks.

Finally he led her into the living room, lit candles to set a peaceful mood and led her through a prayer before he began to teach.

"Are you worried about the upcoming tournament?"

"No, I'm excited about it. For the first time, everyone will be there, even Robert. I hope I do well," she sighed.

"If you're thinking about who's there to watch you then you most assuredly will not do well. Block them out and focus on your task and you'll be successful. The question is, can you do that?"

Sitting cross-legged on the carpet face to face with only a candle between them made it easy for Eric to watch her facial expressions. He did so carefully.

"I think I can," she said slowly.

Eric shook his head. "No, Shelley, there is no maybe to it. Either you can or can't. What is it Yoda said? 'Do or do not, there is no try, there is only do?' And how about Mr. Miyagi who said, 'Walk middle of road, get squashed like grape.' I'm using your game to illustrate a point. So back to my original question, can you focus and block everything else out?"

"I'm not sure," she answered truthfully.

"He smiled. "I love the honesty. Okay, so, when you were fighting for your life with KC, what were you thinking about?"

"I don't think I was thinking about anything."

"Exactly," Eric said. "You were going on pure instinct. You weren't thinking of how tired you were, or how hungry you were or of me or anyone. Your mind focused on one thing, your survival, and everything you knew came flooding in to take over. You can do it again," he said.

"Yes, I can," she said firmly.

"That's what I wanted to hear."

"You always help me work through things Eric. Who helps you?"

"You do, without even knowing it. And then, there's my teachers. GrandMaster Li Ken Wong, who'll be testing you for your black belt, is my Master. I seek him out when I feel the need for his councel or strength. However, since meeting you—you have become my strength."

Shelley put on a stern face. "No Grasshopper, your strength comes from within yourself."

He laughed. "Well, my true strength comes from God. He's my light, my strength, my shield and armor."

She nodded. "I think I'm beginning to understand that."

"That's a great feeling, huh?"

"Yes, it really is. Remember I told you about how I found my way back to the hotel in New Orleans, how I asked Him for help and it seemed like God spoke to me? First, I felt such calmness and peace come over me, and then it

was like, God told me to look around, get my bearings. God really DOES answer prayers."

Eric smiled. "Yes, He really does. We don't always hear Him, but He always answers."

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At Brian's studio, two days before the Atlanta March tournament, Eric rubbed the back of his neck with a sigh. Ricky, Justin and Jason had just arrived at the airport. Swamped with paperwork, he called Shelley to the desk.

"These financial forms and statements have to be hard-copied and mailed in today and I was supposed to have reports for your sponsors prepared by the end of February."

"You need me to pick up the guys?" Shelley asked.

"Yes, but not at the airport. They've rented a car and are at the hotel, but they want to leave the car with the ladies so they can join us later."

"The ladies?"

"Yep. Angel came with Jason and Justin's girlfriend came with him."

"Awesome! I can't wait to meet her!"

Eric smiled. "Now, please don't stop anywhere. Just go straight to the hotel. You know I don't like you going out alone."

"I think I can make a thirty-minute trip with no problems."

"Just be careful. And thanks, hon."

She grabbed her purse. "I'm outta here," she called, but turned around to look at Eric.

He looked so pitiful sitting there all alone. She went back to him, pulled the chair out from the desk and leaned close.

"I promise to help when I get back and we'll get it all done," she said pressing her lips against his cheek.

When she tried to move away, he pulled her back to him and kissed her mouth, making her want to stay with him.

"If you don't go, I won't be able to let you go," he mumbled.

He took her hands in his and kissed them.

"We can continue this tonight?" she asked.

"Definitely."

She turned the keys hanging in the lock to let herself out and again looked back at Eric.

"What is it?" he asked.

She made a face. "I don't know. I guess you look so tired and lonely sitting there working so hard."

"I am. Now go, so you can hurry back."

Smiling, she left while Eric went straight to work shuffling through the receipts and trying to get organized. He'd barely made a dent in the work when the eight men walked through the door. Eric was surprised he hadn't even noticed them walking up to the door.

"Hi," a tall man, well built, late twenties with red hair spoke to him.

"We're interested in seeing about taking some lessons," he said.

"Great," Eric replied, "but the guy you need to talk to won't be here until tonight. You can come back around 6:30 and he'll be glad to get you started."

Eric glanced up at the keys in the door. He wished he'd remembered to lock the door behind Shelley so he wouldn't have to handle this distraction.

"Do you teach?" a black man asked.

Eric eyed the man. Body builder type, nervous manner.

"No, I don't teach," Eric said bluntly and stood to usher them out.

"That's a shame," another man said. "So, does that pretty little thing that just left, is she an instructor?"

The red-head laughed. "Yeah, 'cause if she is, I'll sign up right now."

The warning signals that had been going off in Eric's head reached the red alert stage. He carefully looked over the eight men that filled the small area. Three white, three black, two Chinese. All big, powerful men. All between twenty-five and thirty-five. All a little uneasy.

"No, she does not teach either. Now if you'll excuse me, I have a lot of work to do."

Eric started toward the door but Red stepped in front of him while one of the Chinese locked the door and removed the keys.

Eric backed up, looking for position and spoke calmly. "You boys need to turn around and go have your fun somewhere else."

They chuckled as one moved toward the desk. Eric eyed him. He was the largest of them all. Maybe six-four, blond hair, ice blue eyes and he reminded Eric of someone.

"What's the problem? You worried about getting your paperwork done? I can help you with that," he sneered as he swept papers, phone, laptop and files off the desk onto the floor.

Eric decided not to prolong the inevitable. He jumped onto the desk and fired a roundhouse kick to the nearest temple.

Jumping into a back-flip off the desk, he kicked another in the face, then landed behind two who turned to face him just in time to get their faces smashed in by the same hook kick.

Eric was surrounded, but wasn't deterred. His left leg delivered a back kick, a side kick and front kick then, he changed legs to a jumping side kick to his right. Four men briefly fell away.

Eric backed again, working toward the doorway into the weight room where there would be more space. Someone landed a kick to his back sending him flying into the weight room and knocking over the bench press.

He rolled over and rose quickly, his eyes shifting but not focusing, allowing his senses to tell him where each enemy stood.

He threw a side kick to the closest man but the man had been expecting it and grabbed Eric's leg. Instinctively, Eric jumped high into the air and kicked the man with his free leg. Eric landed hard on his side but rolled quickly away toward the free weights to rise again.

These men are trained, he thought as he blocked several punches coming in from each side. James' men. Not James himself. He's too much a coward—the thought process stopped while he smashed a face into his knee— too much a coward to face me himself.

"This guy lives up to his rep," one of the black men said.

"He thinks he's Bruce Lee," a Chinese spoke in Chinese.

"You may meet him soon," Eric spoke back to the Chinaman in his own language.

Both Chinese charged at Eric, who grabbed a dumbbell and punched with it in his hand, hitting both of them directly in the face at the same time.

Changing his hold on the weight as if it were a baseball bat, he spun and crushed the face of the one who moved in.

The man fell blindly against the rack holding the free weights, which came tumbling down on Eric's legs, distracting him for a moment.

In that split second, someone grabbed Eric from behind, pinning his arms to his sides. Both Eric's legs came straight up over his head and locked around the neck of the man holding him. Eric's powerful thighs squeezed. The man dropped to his knees as he lost consciousness.

Eric came down too, but used his legs again to throw another man that came at him over his head. Eric rolled back onto his shoulders and sprung to his feet. They came at him then, all at once, giving Eric no time for rest. He blocked and countered with lethal accuracy but inevitably some punches got through to him, mostly in his midsection and ribs.

Red's fist smashed Eric's mouth. Eric turned and delivered his powerful spinning backhand to the man's temple and moved toward a clear space.

He spit blood from his mouth and settled into a back stance. He knew he was in trouble. Seven men were still standing, all but the one whose face he'd batted with the dumbbell, and Eric was quickly tiring.

Someone moved in from behind. Eric hit him with a ridge hand to the diaphragm and followed up with a kick to the nose. The man staggered to his knees, holding his face. Now only six men left.

Eric backed out of the weight room into the class area. Surrounded by the mirrors he was reminded of the scene from *Enter the Dragon*. He shook his head, trying to refocus his mind, because this was no time to be playing Shelley's game.

One of the black men charged low toward Eric's legs, obviously going for a takedown, but Eric easily sidestepped him. Grabbing the back of the man's collar and pants, Eric bashed the man's head into the mirror. Glass shattered and blood spurted. There were now three down.

The battle raged on and on. Eric blocked most everything, but he would dispense with one man, only to have another in his place. Multiple attackers was actually one of his specialties, but he knew it wasn't like in the movies.

In films, the hero does not tire and each villain waits his turn to attack. Eric was defending himself against all five at one time and it was taking its

toll. As he knew it eventually would, fatigue was becoming a major factor.

Another man grabbed Eric from behind but a shoulder throw landed the guy on his back. Unfortunately the man had a good hold of Eric's shirt and pulled Eric with him as he went down.

Eric landed prone. A Chinese immediately stomped on his abdomen. Moving slower, Eric rolled over to stand but was caught by a front kick that landed just under his jaw. Blood gushed from his chin as he struggled to rise. That one might be the one he thought, because now he was dizzy.

He was losing ground. He tried to block, but the kicks were coming in too fast, one after the other from all directions. Kick to the stomach, a roundhouse to the back, stomach, ribs, a front kick to the groin and Eric staggered.

Red closed in for the kill, drew back and punched hard, catching Eric in the temple. Eric fell to the floor, semiconscious, where he received several more kicks.

He heard laughter and voices talking, but they sounded like they were speaking from the far end of a tunnel.

Somehow, he was able to get his feet up under him once more. He rose, which seemed to surprise his attackers. He didn't wait for them to come at him again. He threw a vicious kick to the nearest man's knee, shattering his kneecap. The man fell screaming to the floor.

Four. Four left. If only he had some energy reserves, he could deal with four, but the reserves were gone and he was moving slow. His vision blurred. One man, enraged by the blow dealt to his friend, leapt at Eric, clasping his hands around his throat. Eric staggered back, only to be grabbed from behind by the hair. Eric brought his hands together, forming one large fist and hammered it down on the one who had his throat. The man fell, but before Eric could do something about the one who held him from behind, a foot smashed into his cheekbone. He stumbled and fell face down, blacking out for a few seconds. He felt hands on him and the next thing he knew, he lay on his back.

Four men had hold of his arms and legs. He struggled against them, but another groin kick had him curling into a ball to try to protect himself. As the men held him, one of the Chinese knelt beside Eric, pulling his hands together. Eric closed his eyes in defeat when he heard the sound of the duct tape as one of the white men wrapped it around his wrists several times. He was pretty much defeated, he knew that, but he wouldn't give in. He bucked and used his legs to land a few more kicks into a few more faces before they were able to subdue him. It took three men to wrap that tape around his ankles.

The Chinese spoke to him in Chinese. "You lousy half-breed, you're the one who will soon be dead."

Eric grunted when the man kicked him hard in the stomach.

The red-head, whom Eric thought to be the leader, spoke. "We should've planned better. We thought your little girlfriend would be here to enjoy the show. That was pretty good timing to send her out just before we got here. Maybe we should wait for her to get back."

When Eric didn't bother to speak, the kick came swift and hard to the ribs. Eric grunted in agony. He finally spoke, hoping the truth would scare them off. "By all means, guys, hang around. I have some friends dropping by. I'm sure they'd love to meet you guys."

Red laughed. "It's you who'll be hanging around." He motioned to the punching bag that hung in the far corner. "Take the bag down and hang him from there."

Several of the men lifted Eric from the floor and carried him toward the punching bag. They removed the bag from where it hung and using the duct tape, suspended Eric from the remaining steel plate.

Eric's feet didn't reach the floor making the strain on his wrists and shoulders excruciating.

At first, Eric had been naive enough to think having done their damage, they would hang him up and simply leave. Red however, moved into Eric's line of vision with a horrible grin on his face and Eric knew it wouldn't be the case. Then the large, blonde with the blue eyes stepped forward. This, Eric thought, this is the real leader.

Slowly, the man unbuckled his belt and pulled it from his waist.

One of the men advanced and ripped Eric's shirt off.

Eric drew in a breath, blew it out slowly, and closed his eyes. How many times had he told Ricky, when he was little, "it's okay to be afraid, it's how you handle your fear that makes the difference." Eric fought desperately to handle his now.

His only escape would be through his mind. Somehow he'd have to separate his mind from his body. He prayed silently, 'Father, I need your help. I pray that the evil confronting me today will not succeed in taking my life. Help me to endure. In Jesus' name.' He then visualized a white force field of light coming from the hand of Jesus to surround his body as the first blow landed across his back. He was able to focus and concentrate for a time, until the skin became raw and the pain increased. Even though his breathing became labored, he didn't cry out.

After several minutes the lashing of both his back and chest stopped and blue eyes peered into Eric's face.

"You show no pain, Kino." He moved closer, spoke softly. "But you don't fool me. Every inch of your body is screaming right now. It's like a beautiful symphony to me. Still, I admit, I want to hear you cry out in pain. Maybe I should turn the belt around and let the buckle make a little contact."

One of the others laughed. "That should get a reaction."

"What do ya say Kino?" the man asked.

Eric looked him straight in the eye. "Knock yourself out."

The man's eyes glinted with darkness and then he stepped back, drew his arm back, and swung hard.

Eric grunted in anguish as the buckle made contact with his chest. Again and again the belt and buckle bit, eating Eric's skin as he winced in pain.

Sweat poured from his body and his head fell back in defeat.

He tried to concentrate on something– anything. He found he was able to take four breaths between strikes. One, two, three, four, brace. One, two, three, four, brace.

Eric knew though, that his mind was slipping, seeking refuge, yet he resisted letting go, mostly for fear of never coming back. Then he remembered his prayer and decided to let go and trust God. The thought of Shelley and Ricky standing over his grave gave him a little more strength, but eventually the darkness closed in around him. He let himself drift into the blackness of space. Immediately, the pain eased off. It was quiet and peaceful there.

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Romans 12:12

"Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer."

Chapter Twenty-Two

Shelley and the guys chatted merrily as they approached the door to the dojang where they would do some sparring with Shelley.

"That's not like Eric to leave the door unlocked," Shelley commented. She saw the mess on the floor as they walked in, but her mind was slow to realize there was a problem.

The men with her however were not so slow. Shelley gasped as Justin's hand clapped over her mouth and jerked her back.

Ricky grabbed a staff from the shelf near the entrance to the weight room as he and Jason passed. Stealthily they made their way, noting weights scattered across the carpet, exercise equipment on its side and blood spatters.

Shelley struggled against Justin's hold, fear rising in her throat, but he held her fast.

Making their way through the weight room, Ricky and Jason turned right toward the open floor to see the mirror smashed, blood smeared along the indentation. Finally, they turned to see Eric hanging in the corner where the punching bag had once been.

"Oh, Dad, no," Ricky uttered.

The words pierced Shelley's heart and she struggled again, but Justin wouldn't let her go until he'd heard Jason's signal.

"Clear," Jason finally called.

Justin released his grip. Shelley charged into the room. She gasped, her hands flying to her face. Eric's body dangled limp and lifeless. Large welts covered his back and chest. Blood ran from his chin down his neck and from numerous small points all over his body. He looked literally like a piece of beef hanging in a meat freezer.

Jason climbed up and cut through the tape. Eric's body fell into Ricky's waiting arms. Gently, he laid his father on the floor.

"He's alive," Ricky said softly, relief in his voice. He freed his father's wrists and ankles.

Shelley knelt beside him, her eyes filled with tears. "Oh Eric, Eric, can you hear me?" She carefully ran her hand over his face.

Ricky stood and walked away. A moment later his fist went crashing through the sheetrock.

Justin went to him and grabbed him by the shoulders. "He's alive, Rick, and he's gonna need you. Be there for him."

Eric moaned and opened his eyes to look into Shelley's tear-stained face.

"Are you crying again?" he asked softly.

She tried to laugh at his feeble joke, but sniffed instead. The others gathered around him.

He drew a slow, deep breath. "There were eight of them," he explained, "or I wouldn't look this bad."

"Only eight?" Jason laughed. "You must be getting old."

Eric closed his eyes. "I feel old."

"Eric, what did they do to you?" Shelley cried.

He grunted as he sat up. "They beat the hell out of me. Guess I made someone mad. If you're asking specifically about the artwork on my body, it's compliments of a belt buckle."

"Look at you," Shelley whispered, reaching out to touch a large welt. "We need to call an ambulance."

"No," Eric said quickly. "No ambulance, no police."

"Eric," Shelley pleaded. "Let me take care of you."

"I will," he answered. "But only you."

"You need a doctor's care," she cried.

"I'm fine. A little banged up is all. No head injuries, just abrasions. I'll have Rick check me over to see if any ribs are broken."

"No head injuries? Your mouth is bleeding," Shelley lamented.

"My lip. And it was a glancing blow."

"You need stitches in your chin," she argued.

"A butterfly bandage will work fine. Shelley, please, honey, I don't really feel like arguing," he said weakly.

She hugged his head to her. "Sorry. I'm sorry. Of course, whatever you want, Eric. It just looks so bad."

"Right. It *looks* bad because of all the little cuts on my chest and back, but once we wash all the blood away, it won't look so bad."

She stroked his hair until the men were ready to get him out to the car. They pulled the car up to the doors, and he stood and walked out as if he hadn't just been beaten half to death. They took him to Shelley's house and downstairs to his bed. Like a well-oiled machine, the group swung into action to take care of whatever needed taking care of.

Shelley was worried about her children, but Jason assured her he'd take good care of them. He left to pick the boys up from school while Justin got in touch with Brian about his dojang and to ask for video from the security cameras.

Shelley and Ricky worked together to cleanse Eric's wounds and get him tucked comfortably into bed. She scrutinized his face. He wasn't all beat up in the face like she had been. His upper lip was a little swollen, which he currently was holding an ice pack against. They had cleaned and butterfly bandaged a tiny cut under his chin that had at first looked much worse than it was. Eric had been right, once they'd cleaned all the rivulets of blood from each cut, some of them mere pin pricks, he didn't look nearly as bad as he had

when he was hanging in the dojang.

Ricky checked him for broken ribs or signs of internal bleeding. Apparently, Shelley learned, both Eric and Ricky had extensive survival training, which included both being certified EMTs. Ricky was satisfied that his father's strong musculature protected him from any broken ribs and internal injuries. He checked him for signs of a concussion, but his pupils were equal and reactive. The only other injury they could find was it looked like there might be a bruise forming on one cheek.

Jason called to let Shelley know that instead of bringing the children home he was taking them out to eat and then to a park. He eased her mind that they were fine and well-protected.

Shelley stayed by Eric's side until he drifted off to sleep. She realized suddenly how hard it must have been for him to watch her suffer when she'd been hurt because she was dying inside to see what they'd done to him. She finally left the bedroom when Ricky asked for some private time by his father's side.

Out in the living room Shelley found Justin on his cell phone, she supposed he was speaking to Sing Lei. He spoke in Korean, but Shelley could tell from the tone of his voice that a heated discussion ensued.

She felt at a loss as she tried to figure out what she could do to be a help to Eric. She remembered the paperwork he'd been so worried about. Quickly, and without thought to her own safety, she jumped in the car and drove to Brian's studio.

Brian and Meg both were there, surveying the damage. They hugged Shelley, asked about Eric. Shelley filled them in. Meg was sympathetic. Brian was purely mad, not about his studio but about the attack on his former teacher.

Shelley gathered all the papers, files, receipts, record books and laptop together and turned to Brian. "Let us know what the estimate is for repairs," she said, shivering as she gazed around the room. "I'm so sorry about the dojang."

"It's fixable. The only thing I'm concerned about right now is Eric," Brian replied.

Shelley nodded. "Thank you. Well, I guess I'd better hurry back."

"I can't believe they let you out alone," Brian said. "Not after this."

Shelley cast her eyes down.

Brian shook his head. "They didn't, did they?" He held up a finger. "Hold on a minute. We'll accompany you back."

"Oh, for heaven's sake, I'm okay. I'm sure those guys are long gone. They'd be too afraid of getting caught. Besides, you need to take care of things here." She glanced at Meg. "And the baby is due anytime now, isn't it?"

"Pretty soon," Meg nodded with a smile as she placed her hand on her swollen abdomen.

Shelley smiled too. "I can't wait. Babies are so precious."

"Meg, let's go. We're gonna see Shelley home," Brian said sternly.

"No need. I promise to go straight home," Shelley said, brushing off Brian's concern.

She turned and hurried to her car. Shelley had no idea Brian called Ricky to let him know where she was and that he and Meg were following her home to be sure she made it safely. Carrying everything in her arms, she fumbled at her front door which Ricky opened for her. Ricky nodded at Brian and Meg as they drove on.

"Here, you'd better let me get those for you," Ricky offered, knowing what was waiting for her inside.

Justin stood in the living room, his face dark with anger. He took her by the arm. "We need to talk," he said as he practically dragged her through the living room and into the kitchen. Once there, he grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her. "Eric may never lay a hand on you, but I want you to know I won't even think twice about keeping you confined."

"What are you t..."

"Do you think we want to find YOU hanging somewhere, hurt or worse? Somewhere, possibly close by, there are eight men who have no qualms about breaking the law or hurting you. Do you get that? Do not leave this house alone. I'd better not have to tell you again."

Surprised and angry, Shelley stormed at him. "You have no right to tell me what to do. I had to do something for Eric. I will go where I want, when I want and there's nothing you can do about it."

"Do you really believe that, Shelley? There certainly is something I can do about it. You are not invincible, I'm a man, and I've studied with Eric a lot longer than you."

"Are you threatening me?"

"Now you're getting it."

"You wouldn't dare touch me."

His eyebrows rose.

"And you can't physically keep me here." She turned to leave.

He caught her and had her pinned to the wall in mere seconds. "Do you believe me now?"

She struggled free. Breathing hard, she glared up at him. "That wasn't fair. You, you took me by surprise."

He nodded. "Okay then. Come on, Shelley, you think you can take me on, take a swing."

She didn't hesitate to take him up on his offer and snapped out a fist as fast as she could, but he blocked it easily, caught her arm, spun her around and promptly pinned her to the wall again. When she stopped struggling against him and seemed to calm, he let her go.

Shelley immediately pulled her fist back and struck out again. Justin's iron fist closed around her wrist before she ever made contact. "Convinced yet?" he asked. But when he saw the defeated look in her eyes, he let her go.

She turned away, her face red with indignation and embarrassment.

Contrite, Justin spoke again, only much calmer this time as he ran a hand over his face. “Look, we’re both a little shaken up by what’s happened, so we may not be making the best choices right now, but Shelley, you scared me to death. I couldn’t find you. Eric entrusted me to your protection. That makes me responsible for you. I don’t want to have to walk down those stairs and tell him something has happened to you, which is exactly what I was about to do, right before Brian called to let us know that you were at the studio.”

Shelley took a jagged breath and swallowed the lump in her throat as Justin left her to digest his words. She realized she’d erred, she just didn’t want to admit it yet. She kept going out by herself. She did it back in December when she went for a morning run. She did it in New Orleans, and she did it today. She was so used to doing what she needed to do on her own, that she just did it without thinking. She needed to do better, she knew that. It was just strange to her to think that she couldn’t run a small errand safely. Still, she was a little miffed at Justin literally strong-arming her.

Silently, she turned to the business at hand, feeding everyone. Once she had a tray of food ready for Eric she set bowls and platters of food on the table along with a pitcher of lemonade. She eyed Ricky and Justin who now sat at the kitchen table, speaking in Korean, yet again. That in itself was maddening.

“Eat whenever you like,” she said sharply, turning to take the tray downstairs to Eric.

She stopped short though, set the tray on the table, reached into a cabinet, pulled out a small vase and placed it on the tray. Grabbing some kitchen shears, she headed toward the back door. Eyeing Justin defiantly a moment, she unlocked the back door and stepped outside.

Justin sighed and buried his face in his hands while Ricky leaned back in his chair so he could watch Shelley from the window.

She clipped some short branches of forsythia, came back inside and placed them in the vase.

Ricky stood. “Would you mind if I took Dad’s food to him?”

Though disappointed, Shelley handed over the tray.

Jason arrived home with the boys and Shelley took them quietly to their room. “I think you guys are old enough to hear what’s going on,” she began.

They looked up at her intently.

“Some bad guys broke into the martial arts studio today and hurt Eric. He’s downstairs in his room right now and Ricky is with him.” Their eyes lit up at the mention of Ricky’s name.

“But Ricky’s pretty upset right now, ya know, because somebody hurt his dad. Uncle Justin and Uncle Jason are pretty upset too.”

“Did he get shot?” Mark asked.

“Oh, no, thank goodness, but they beat him up really bad.”

Mark and Joey frowned. “Is he gonna be okay?” Mark asked.

“Yes, sweetie, he’s gonna be fine. I promise.”

"Can we see him?"

"Not tonight. Maybe tomorrow, okay?" she asked sweetly.

"No sweat, Mom," Mark answered. "Right Joey?"

Wide-eyed, Joey only nodded his head.

Shelley smiled at them. "So anything happen today in school?"

"Uh huh, a girl in my class, she got sick and threw up all over her desk," Joey offered.

"Oh, the poor thing."

Joey nodded in agreement. "Yeah, and a bunch of kids laughed at her, and made fun of her, but I kinda felt sorry for her."

Shelley stroked his soft hair. "Good for you. It's always good to be kind. What if you got sick and everyone made fun of you? That would be a pretty bad time, huh?"

Joey smiled. "Yep. That's the same thing Mark said."

Shelley smiled at her sons. "Ya know, you guys just make me so proud. Do you know how much I love you?"

Mark grinned. "Yep. This much." He held his thumb and forefinger together to show only a tiny space between them.

Shelley laughed. It was a joke that had started a few years ago, but they all knew it really was their code to mean to infinity and back, which was a whole lot of love.

"Did you guys have fun with Jason?"

"Oh yeah! He is so cool. Did you know that he can stand on his hands for five minutes?"

Shelley giggled as she imagined Jason having to demonstrate his ability to do so. "No, I didn't know that."

"And we threw the football around at the park. Uncle Jason is good at everything," Joey said. "Just like Ricky."

"Yeah," Mark added. "Except he doesn't do movies cuz he only does real stuff. That's what he said, anyway."

Shelley giggled at the thought of Jason getting in another dig at Ricky. "Okay, well, guys, it's time to settle down. So, who has homework?"

Both boys frowned.

"Or, who needs help with their homework?"

"Not me. I just have to copy my spelling words," Joey said.

"Mark?"

"Naw, I just have to read two chapters in my library book and write what I think about what I read."

"Okay, well, you guys get started and I'll be back to tuck you in."

"Okay, but Mom," Joey began. "I was just thinking, I mean, how could someone beat up Master Kino?"

Shelley smiled, her eyes glistening. "Well, Joey, he's not Superman, ya know."

The boys frowned at that. Shelley understood their response. She realized

she too thought of him as invincible. Sighing, she kissed them and left the room.

✝✝✝

Ricky came up the stairs from visiting with and praying with his father. "Dad would like to see you. All of you."

Quietly, they went to his room. Shelley sat next to him on the bed while the others stood, one leaning on the dresser, one by the door, and Ricky slouched against the wall.

Eric told them in detail what happened, including specific descriptions. "When you get the video I'll point out each one. Obviously this is James' work," he added. "So Jason, you have guys already working for you, to cover security at the MART, correct?"

"Yes, they're being trained."

"So then, do you think that they are capable of some detective work, like trying to find these guys?"

"Absolutely. We'll get on it."

The men discussed what could be done, how they should proceed and Eric's health. Shelley took his hand as he spoke and squeezed it hard. He looked at her briefly, pressing her hand in return.

He finished by telling them that in complete honesty, he already felt better and would need to see them again in the morning. They prayed together and then the men left the room.

Shelley picked up the tray and carried it out with her. Eric silently watched her. She blew him a kiss as she left. Upstairs she rummaged through her cabinets looking for the tea Eric always used for her. She wanted one that might ease the inflammation and finally had to get Ricky's help. She made the tea, grabbed some antibiotic ointment, and some capsules Ricky handed to her and headed downstairs.

She held out the capsules. "Ricky says these are an herbal proprietary formula to take in place of antibiotics to ward off any infection." She handed him the cup and he took the pills and drank the tea down quickly. He certainly was a much better patient than she'd been, she thought. She studied his face.

"You have only a slight bruise here on your cheek and the swelling in your lip has already gone down."

He nodded. "I told you, they were only glancing blows. The one that got to me was the kick to the side of my head, and of course, the groin shots."

"Well, if the kick to the side of your head knocked you out, I'm surprised you don't have a concussion."

"I guess I have a hard head," he joked.

She sighed. "Can you turn over onto your stomach?"

He turned as ordered. Gently, she stroked the ointment onto each abrasion on his back. He winced.

"Does it hurt?"

"Just a little bit."

Shelley patted his backside and he turned back over for her. He watched her face as she smoothed the salve over his raw chest. Her eyes were full of compassion.

"You've been awfully quiet," he said to her.

She shrugged. "I don't know what to say."

He smiled. "Well, that's a first."

Shelley only slightly smiled. Finishing up, she touched his face gently, started to speak, then stopped.

"What?" he asked. "Come on, talk to me about how you're feeling. You know we're gonna have to talk about this sooner or later."

"Okay. I'd rather take a thousand beatings than have this happen to you," she finally said, choking back tears. "You didn't deserve this. You're so kind, so giving and full of love. I hate this. I hate them. Why couldn't they just come after me?"

He knew exactly how she felt. He'd felt that way not too long ago. "Well, if they'd come after you this time, you'd probably be dead. I'd much rather suffer a few scratches than make your funeral arrangements. I'm so grateful you left when you did. It's strange. Usually, I would never send you out by yourself. I don't even know why I did. Maybe it was a divine urging. Maybe we were becoming a little lax. Whatever made me do it, I feel very blessed."

"Blessed? What happened to you is not a blessing!"

"You weren't there and that IS a blessing. Ya gotta learn to focus on the positive, sweetie."

She sighed heavily. "I'll try." Gathering the cup and ointment, she pulled the sheet up over him. "Sleep," she said firmly.

✝✝✝

Justin woke at 3:30 in the morning. Rising off the couch, he entered the kitchen to find Shelley asleep, her head cradled in her arms on the table. Papers lay all around in neat little stacks.

Gently he gathered her up into his arms, took her to her bedroom and placed her on the bed. Convinced she was sound asleep he bent down and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

The next morning Shelley was ushering the boys off to catch the school bus when Justin sat up on the sofa where he'd spent the night.

"Hi, Uncle Justin," the boys said in unison. "Are you gonna get the guys who hurt Master Kino?"

Justin eyed them, their innocence touching him. "The most important thing to do right now is to help Eric get well."

At the sound of a knock on the front door, Shelley turned off the alarm and let Ricky in. The boys screamed with delight and jumped into his arms. Ricky hugged them close, his love for the six- and eight-year-olds evident.

"Will you take us to school?" Joey asked.

Ricky grinned. "Huh, you're just using me to be popular."

"Yeah," Mark admitted.

Ricky laughed. “Okay, as long as we know where we all stand. But, no one gets in my car until they do a flying hook kick.”

Both boys did it easily. They hugged and kissed their mom and Ricky drove them happily away to school.

Shelley prepared breakfast and took a tray down to Eric.

“I hope the boys didn’t wake you,” she said.

“No. I wasn’t sleeping. Guess I’m not used to being in bed for so long.”

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Honestly, a little down.”

“You, down?”

He shrugged. “Lying here in bed, people having to wait on me, makes me feel a little, well— unmanly, I guess.”

“You question your manhood? You, Eric, are the manliest man I’ve ever known. I mean, really. So much so that I can’t even imagine what you see in little old me.”

He sighed heavily. “You’re good for a bruised ego, but I thought we’d come past that low self-esteem stuff.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not sure where that came from.”

“Shelley, what am I gonna do with you?”

She shrugged. “It seems like sometimes I forget all I’ve worked for and revert back to my old pre-divorce ways.”

Reaching up, he stroked her cheek, then cupped her face and gently pulled her forward.

She placed her hand on the headboard behind him to keep herself from touching his sore body or knocking over his tray, then lowered her face for his kiss. He kissed her deeply and she wanted to just sink into him. Slowly, she pulled away.

“Eat your breakfast. You need your strength,” she coaxed.

He ate slowly, thoughtfully, looking her over and finally spoke again. “You look tired.”

“I’m fine.”

“I hear you and Justin had a little rift,” he said softly.

Shelley’s eyes flashed. “He– he– put his hands on me,” she said indignantly.

“Put his hands on you?”

“He beat me up.”

“Are you maybe exaggerating a bit?”

“Maybe.”

Eric chuckled. “Well, from what I understand you pretty much deserved what you got.”

She folded her arms and pouted. “I went to the dojang to get your paperwork so I could take care of it for you. Ricky was with you, Jason was out with the boys and Justin was on the phone fighting with Sing Lei. I just left. I didn’t think.”

"I bet you'll think next time."

"Eric," she whined. "Look, I know I made a mistake, okay. I'm sorry. But, he pushed me, like up against the wall."

"Were you hurt?" he asked. "Because if he hurt you I'll tear him apart." He threw off the covers as if to go after Justin right then.

"Ha ha, very funny. No he didn't hurt me."

"Except maybe your ego," Eric prodded.

She shrugged. "I admit that. Still, he shouldn't push me around."

"He shouldn't push you around but *you* can hit *him*?"

"I didn't hit him."

Eric laughed. "Not for lack of trying."

"He told me to try."

"He was trying to make an impression on you. You scared him."

She pursed her lips in a tiny pout.

He smiled at that. "What is it you want me to do?"

She thought a moment. "I don't know. Yell at him maybe?"

Eric chuckled. "I certainly can't yell at Justin for doing exactly what I asked him to do, which was, whatever is needed to protect you, even from yourself if necessary."

Shelley's lips pursed. "You men are all alike."

"I know, I know," he replied. "We're mean and unfair," he said as he reached to take her hand. "And we use our strength to—" He kissed her fingertips tenderly "...get what we want and— we all stick together..." he said as he ran a finger along her jaw line to her lips. "And we have the nerve of trying to protect the women we love."

Her heart sped up at his touch but she pulled away. "Hmph, don't even start what you have no intention of finishing," she said as she grabbed his tray.

He sighed. "Oh, but I absolutely do have intentions of finishing– one day," he murmured.

"What did you say?"

He smiled. "Nothing."

She made a face.

"Do me a favor and ask the guys to come in."

Lips pursed, she went up to do his bidding. Ricky had returned, Jason had arrived and they sat at the table eating breakfast with Justin. "How's he doing?" they asked as she came up the stairs.

"He suffers from an incurable case of chauvinism," she said curtly.

The men smiled, knowing that meant he was feeling just fine.

"And he wants to see you all."

Gathering the paperwork, she stormed back down the stairs.

"I can't tell you how much I appreciate everyone's help," Eric began once everyone was present. "It seems I'm always having to call on our friendship to help me through."

"I'd be devastated if you didn't," Justin reassured him.

"Again, thank you and I thank God for you. So, now, we have a lot to do to prepare for tomorrow's tournament."

Shelley gasped. "You still expect me to fight after all this? I figured the tournament was off. Besides, I am so tired, and I can't focus. How can I focus when all I can think of is you."

Eric shrugged. "Well, if you don't fight then they win and I've failed. And, Shelley, I don't like to fail, so, yes, you're gonna fight. Will you let this little incident deter you from your goal? C'mon, Shell, you have to fight. Do it for me. Use this tournament to get my revenge."

There was nothing she could say to that. Sighing, she looked into his eyes. "Get your revenge?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Well, believe me, James will be watching this tournament, or have someone watching or videoing for him. What I'd like him to see is me, standing by your side as you fight more fiercely, more focused, than you've ever been. That would be the best revenge."

She heaved out a sigh. "Well, of course, Eric, since you put it that way, I mean, I'd do anything for you, but I have to tell you, I'm not feelin' it."

He turned to the three men. "Well then, that will be your job– to get her into a fighting mood."

Ricky laughed. "Justin's already got a head start on that."

Shelley glared at him.

Eric chuckled and then gave them a list of everything that needed to be done, including getting registered, sparring, pre-tournament dinner, and keeping her away from her family on Saturday until after the tournament so that she CAN focus.

He turned to Shelley. "Now, why are you so tired?"

She smiled and handed him the stack of papers. He quietly went through them, stopping to read the financial forms carefully. He looked at Shelley.

"You did all this?"

Shelley nodded.

"This was hours' worth of work."

"Oh how I know," she answered with a smile.

"You did this last night?" Eric asked then looked at Justin. "Why didn't you make her go to bed? You knew she needed her rest."

Justin looked down.

Feeling compassion for her friend, Shelley jumped in to rescue him. "I had him scared to look at me much less tell me to go to bed."

Eric smiled. "Yeah, she *is* scary when she's mad, isn't she?"

They all agreed, a little too quickly for Shelley's liking. Eric grabbed a pen and put his signature to several papers and handed them to Justin.

"Send those first thing, please. Ricky, you and Jason have your assignments and Shelley, you sleep for a few hours."

Shelley waited for the others to leave before she turned to Eric.

"Would you like a sponge bath?"

"Are you saying I'm smelly?"

"Yes, but I mean it in the nicest way."

Eric laughed. "No, I'm not bedridden. I'm actually getting ready to go take a shower."

"Uh, ya know, that will probably sting like crazy," she warned.

He shrugged. "Probably, but I think I can handle it," he said dryly. "You go sleep," he commanded as he slowly swung his legs off the bed to stand.

Shelley eyed him as he walked. Each movement appeared to be painful. The welts, scrapes and cuts already seemed better, though she noticed there was now a large bruise on his side. He'd said they'd landed most all strikes on his torso. She sighed as she watched him walk stiffly into the bathroom. Taking note of his powerful form, she was reminded of the tiger, pacing at the zoo. Stripes and all.

Ricky came back in a few hours and took Shelley off to register and get her oriented at the tournament hall. Justin left to pick up Sing Lei. By the time Ricky brought Shelley back to her house, it was full of people and food. Angel and Jason were in the kitchen cooking up a storm. Justin and Sing Lei sat on the couch in the living room and Mark and Joey were downstairs in the den watching a martial arts video.

Ricky waved hello to everyone and went down to join the boys.

Shelley greeted Justin and was introduced to Sing Lei.

"You have a beautiful name," Shelley commented.

Angel came running from the kitchen. "Hey girl! Goodness, it's good to see you. I swear, Shelley, you sure have a knack for finding trouble," she declared as she hugged her.

"Hey, it wasn't me this time. How are you feeling? Good as new?" Shelley asked.

"Much better, but I won't be fighting for a while."

Jason had his hands full of wet vegetables, but he came out and kissed Shelley's cheek.

"How'd the sparring go?"

"Ask Ricky. All I know is, I spent a lot of time on my backside."

Shelley turned to Sing Lei. "Sorry things have been so crazy."

"You seem to have everything under control," Sing Lei said sweetly. "Justin seems to think he's indispensable here," she continued.

Shelley leaned over and patted Justin's shoulder. "He is. We couldn't get along without him."

"Then you're not mad at Justin anymore?" Angel laughed.

"Mad at Justin?" Sing Lei asked. "Why were you mad at Justin?"

"It was nothing," Justin said. "Just a difference of opinion."

"Well, I'm gonna go say 'hi' to my boys and then check on Eric," Shelley said as she trotted down the steps.

She took time to ask the boys about their day, and to make sure they knew they were loved and could talk to her about how they were feeling. In Eric's room she found him asleep. Shelley stretched sideways across the bed and blew lightly in his face.

He opened his eyes and smiled at her. "Hello there," he said softly.

She didn't answer but just kissed him gently. Lying beside his powerful form made her feel so close to him. She loved him so much. Sighing, she stood. "Dinner will be ready in about an hour."

He rose slowly, bit by bit, working the kinks out of his muscles, and headed toward the bathroom. "If I'm not out in ten minutes, come and rescue me."

"Are you sure you don't need help?" she asked, provocatively.

He laughed. "I think I can manage," he said, waving her off.

Eric dressed and slowly made his way up the short flight of stairs. Everyone gathered around and helped him to get comfortable on the couch. Mark and Joey sat at his feet and he patted their heads. Justin spoke for everyone.

"Eric, I hope you realize how much we all care for you. We hate seeing you hurt and we feel extremely blessed that you're still with us."

"Thank you. I'm feeling pretty blessed myself." Shelley smiled.

"Do you feel well enough to bless the food?" Justin asked.

Eric nodded. They poured wine for everyone save Mark, Joey and Shelley, who had juice instead.

"You don't drink wine?" Sing Lei asked.

"She drinks, just not very well," Ricky laughed.

Eric held up his wine and spoke in Korean. "We are grateful Father, for the Earth and her bounties providing us with this good food. We are especially grateful for good friends, for their love and their strength. I love them and I pledge myself to them for any need at any time. And to my beloved who owns my heart, I offer all that is mine. May she be protected and fight valiantly to defend my honor against those that would have otherwise. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen."

Shelley had no idea what he'd said in his prayer, but she could feel the power of his words and glowed with the love he bestowed on her.

They drank, and everyone moved forward to pile their plates full of food. Shelley noticed Sing Lei say something to Justin that had his face darkening in anger. She glanced at Jason who sat near enough to hear. He was shaking his head with a grimace. She wondered what Sing Lei said that caused such a negative reaction.

A little later, in the kitchen, curious as to what Sing Lei said, Shelley pulled Justin aside, described what she'd observed, and asked him if things were okay with Sing Lei.

Justin sighed. "Well, Shelley, I guess you could say that sometimes she has a knack for getting under my skin."

"What did she say? If you don't mind me asking."

"She asked if he also walks on water."

Shelley's brow creased. She was tempted to play the game, because that was a line from *Tombstone*, but instead she asked, "so, she doesn't like Eric?"

Justin shrugged. "She thinks I worship him, but never mind that. So, tell me, what's the answer to Angel's question? Are you still mad at me?"

"Aww, Justin, how could I stay mad at you? Besides, you were right and I'm sorry I made you worry, but no more lessons, okay?"

He shook his head with a smile. "I'm not promising anything."

She held up her fist and he grabbed it and kissed it.

"There you are," Sing Lei's voice sounded from behind.

Back in the living room, they sat around Eric as usual, everyone telling their funny stories. Shelley loved the evenings before a tournament. The room always seemed filled with peace. Her mind drifted back to her first tournament in Daytona, when Eric had given her a tea ceremony, and to the most recent tournament in New Orleans, when they all fell asleep together.

She closed her eyes and gave her own thanks that somehow they'd made it this far. Eric's finger rubbed across her face and she looked up at him as he winked at her.

"Well, I guess I need to get moving and put the boys to bed," Shelley said, rousing herself.

"Please, let me," Ricky offered and Shelley conceded.

Mark and Joey kissed Shelley, bowed to Eric, hugged Jason and Justin, shook Angel's and Sing Lei's hands and jumped into Ricky's arms. They wouldn't see Shelley in the morning until after the tournament, so they yelled back one more thing.

"Hey, Mom, kick butt!"

Angel laughed. "You've done a great job with those kids, Shell."

Sing Lei leaned against the wall watching. "Is there anything you can't do?" Sing Lei asked.

The room became eerily quiet. Everyone noticed the sour tone in Sing Lei's voice and they wondered what Shelley's response would be.

"So, um, Shelley, isn't that a line from a movie?" Eric said, trying to make light of the comment.

"*Sound of Music*," Shelley answered. "The Baroness says it to Maria." But Shelley turned her focus on Justin's girlfriend.

"Yea, Sing Lei, there are a lot of things I can't do. And one of them is to tolerate rudeness in my home."

"And here we go," Jason whispered to Angel.

Sing Lei's eyes flashed. "Are you saying I'm being rude? Don't beat around the bush. By all means, just come out and say it."

"What is your problem?" Shelley asked. "You act as if I've done something to offend you."

Justin decided he'd better step in. "Don't worry about it, Shelley. Sing Lei

is probably just tired."

Sing Lei's face turned red with the heat of anger. "Don't you dare speak for me, Justin Lee." She turned toward Shelley. "You *do* offend me. I saw Justin kissing you earlier in the kitchen."

Justin shot up almost as fast as Eric's eyebrows. In shock, Shelley's mouth opened wide, but no words came out.

Justin turned to Eric. "I give you my word, it's not what she's making it out to be. I was..."

Eric waved him off. "You don't have to explain anything to me."

Justin turned back to Sing Lei. "You stop this right now. This is an important time for Shelley and I don't want you messing it up."

Sing Lei pushed away from the wall where she'd been leaning and came forward, fire in her eyes. "This is an important time for Shelley. Shelley, Shelley, Shelley. If I hear you speak her name one more time I might scream. Look at you," Sing Lei said disgustedly, approaching Shelley. "Surrounded by all your little servants. You control everyone. It's not enough you have your own man. You must have everyone else's too. And they stand around waiting for you to bat an eyelash so they can fulfill your slightest desire. It's sickening to watch. Especially someone like Angel who doesn't even realize her man belongs to you. They all belong to you."

Shelley's eyes filled with outrage that this stranger who didn't really know her at all would say such things. She couldn't hold it back any longer. She drew a deep breath.

"All this isn't about *me.* They're not serving *me*. It's about Eric. *He* asked me to be his student. *He* plans all of this. *He* plans everything. And Jason and Justin have been his loyal friends since they were kids and yes, they take care of me, not because I demand it, but because Eric has asked them to help train me. They are the best friends anyone could ever have, loyal and true. And they know if they ever needed anything from Eric, he would be just as accommodating to them.

"And I'm gonna set you straight on something else, little Miss. Your problem is not with me or with Eric. It's about your own lack of, of, I guess of self-esteem. You're upset because all this is not about you. You're worried that Justin thinks too highly of Eric or of me. Well, if you're not woman enough to hold onto your man, don't go looking for someone else to blame. You need to look inward. Because Justin's a wonderful man and a good friend and that is all. Instead of looking outside for your troubles, maybe you should examine yourself. You seem to be full of jealousy and bitterness and hatred and I think Justin deserves more than that. As a matter of fact, if I were Justin, I would've dumped your ass a long time ago."

Sing Lei's gasp along with her arm swinging back warned Justin.

He quickly jumped in, grabbed Sing Lei and pulled her away.

"Protecting your lady again?" Sing Lei asked sarcastically.

"Protecting you," he replied.

"What a complete joke," she said.

"Believe me, hitting her would be a mistake," Justin returned.

Shelley didn't move for several seconds. Tears stung her eyes. "I'm, uh, I'm sorry for using bad language," she muttered.

"Apology accepted," Jason said quickly. "Tell ya what, Shell, me and Angel will get the dishes for you," he offered.

Angel jumped in. "Yes, Shelley, I'm sure you're tired."

Jason began pushing Shelley toward the stairs. "Why don't you go on up to bed and we'll clean?"

"I'm fine," Shelley insisted.

"No, you're not," Jason said as he hefted Shelley over his shoulder, took her upstairs and tossed her onto her bed.

"Am I being punished for saying what everyone else was thinking?" Shelley asked.

"Of course not," Eric's voice answered from behind Jason. "Jason was simply trying to defuse the situation. And it *is* bedtime. And I am a little tired. Please stay here," Eric soothed.

Ricky came out from the boys' room. "What's going on?"

Jason told him what transpired. Ricky laughed out loud. "Man, I missed the good stuff."

Ricky and Jason went back down to help with the cleanup. In her bedroom, Shelley threw herself backward across the bed. "That girl's a real b..., witch. Sorry I'm wanting to use bad language. But you know, I like to give everyone the benefit of the doubt, but that girl got to me." She looked up at Eric. "I guess you're disappointed in me."

He smiled. "You haven't disappointed me yet. See that you don't tomorrow."

"Good grief Eric, there's nothing like a little pressure to help someone sleep."

"Pressure? This is nothing compared to what's to come, but I know you can handle it, baby."

"Yeah, well, I'm glad one of us is so confident." She sighed. "I need to go apologize to Justin."

"Save it for tomorrow, babe, and Justin will probably be the one apologizing for Sing Lei."

Shelley made a face. "Ugh, she just made me so mad."

Eric smiled. "Good. Remember that, and, remember our revenge."

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Psalm 5:1-4

"Listen to my words, LORD, consider my lament. Hear my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray. In the morning, LORD, you hear my voice; in the morning I lay my requests before you and wait expectantly. For you are not a God who is pleased with wickedness; with you, evil people are not welcome."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Once again, Shelley woke up Saturday morning the way she always did on tournament mornings, with Eric's wet hair dripping on her face. She smiled before she even opened her eyes. "I didn't think you'd make it this time," she said.

"Well, I never want to disappoint you."

"How are you feeling?" she asked.

"Much better. Still a little sore, though. How are you feeling?"

"Anxious, nervous, unfocused, scared, and upset."

He frowned. "Well now, this isn't good."

She laughed. "It's also not true. Actually, I'm feeling pretty calm, and centered, energetic and— mean," she said loudly.

He grinned. "Good. Hold that thought all the way. I guess there's no need for a little foreplay, then?"

She pulled his wet hair. "If you call beating me up or tickling me foreplay, then the answer is no," she assured him.

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Ricky had already gathered the boys, who were always happy to be in his company. He knew that would eventually wear off, but secretly hoped it never would. Together they went to pick up Bree and her father from the airport and go to breakfast.

Meanwhile, Eric and Shelley dressed and ate a light breakfast. At the end of that breakfast, Shelley proclaimed dramatically, "I feel the need to kick some butt and show the world that Eric Kino— IS THE GREATEST TEACHER OF ALL TIME!"

They arrived at the tournament hall and she immediately looked up to view her cheering section. Mark and Joey were waving madly. Sitting next to the kids, Angel waved, cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled some sort of woot woot sound. Bree, and Robert both smiled and waved. Sing Lei didn't show.

Shelley laughed as Angel, Mark and Joey all jumped up and down, doing a mini-wave.

"C'mon Shelley," Ricky said, grabbing her braid. "It is time to get warm and stretch out."

Eric spoke to Shelley as she stretched. "Okay, babe, so you've said hello to the family, now I need you to put them out of your mind. Focus. Center. Breathe." She did exactly that while she waited patiently for the tournament

to get underway.

Justin filled them in on her first opponent. She listened intently. When it was finally Shelley's turn, Eric and Justin each kissed a cheek and sent her out to battle. She drew a deep breath. She thought of the men who hurt Eric, thought of the man who hurt her, even thought of Sing Lei, and then she took out her first opponent without ever being touched. The crowd went wild.

Shelley had become a favorite and fairly well known in the martial arts community. Much of that had to do with Eric's and Ricky's notoriety, yet slowly, she was becoming known for her own prowess and skill on the mats. If anyone had any doubts about that, she was erasing those doubts today.

The entire tournament seemed to repeat New Orleans. She stayed intent and focused. She felt no fear. She felt no intimidation. She was the one intimidating. Justin kept track of her opponents. Eric remained standing by her side the whole time. He did his best to move about naturally, so that whoever wanted to hurt him could see he was just fine. Other than a small butterfly bandage under his chin and slight bruising to his face, he appeared perfectly fit and healthy.

Shelley fought her second bout against an eighteen-year-old who had lots of energy. Shelley might be older, a lot older, but she was also stronger and quicker. Shelley blocked several incoming punches and kicks, then whipped around and sent the girl down hard with a spinning hook kick. When she didn't get up right away, Shelley went to her side, took her hand. "You okay, sweetie?" Shelley asked.

The girl moaned and opened her eyes. "I'm okay, I think," she replied softly.

"You wanna get up?" the official asked.

"Don't think so," the girl said.

As Shelley was declared the winner, she helped the girl stand and hugged her. Her instructor bowed and helped her off the mat.

Shelley reported back to Eric.

"Don't let that get in your head, hon," he said as if reading her mind. "That was you in Daytona. She'll be okay and both her and her teacher will learn from this experience. Now, what you need to do is go give someone else a learning experience."

Shelley nodded. She remained focused and won each round easily. Then, just before the championship bouts, the tournament directors did something that took Shelley by surprise.

"We have three competitors here today," the director announced, "who will be competing in June at the MART. Let's call them out and give them a big round of applause for coming such a long way in such a short time. "First, Mister Frank Trowell, black belt, with Sensei Master Mike Cho."

The man ran out to the center arena and bowed.

"Next, Mister Terrence Millsap, black belt, with Sensei Master Dan Savatney."

Shelley glanced worriedly at Eric. “Do I look okay?” she smoothed her hair. “The others have already made their black belts. I feel stupid.” Sighing, Eric only shook his head.

“Last but definitely not least, Ms. Shelley Adams, red belt, with Sensei, Master Eric Kino.”

The whistles and cheers from the crowd helped Shelley’s weak ego and she smiled and waved. Eric had to help her refocus and get ready for the championship round.

When her bout was called she started toward the mat then turned and ran back to Eric. “This is for you, you gorgeous hunk.” She grabbed his face and kissed him fiercely.

Eric watched his little warrior thoughtfully, nodding his head in approval. She was calm and confident and fighting a perfect battle against a very strong, young opponent. Of course, she hadn’t fought anyone even close to her own age all year. And she wouldn’t. Eric told her that from the very beginning. Currently, thirty-four-year-old Shelley, almost twice the age of her opponent, was blocking almost every kick and punch and making almost every offensive move count.

This was not a little three-point tournament. This was full-contact, won by judges points for strikes or a KO. Her opponent had connected a few times, but Shelley had connected almost every time. She was quick and smart and powerful and remarkable and when the battle was over the winner was declared, Shelley Adams.

Ricky, Justin and Jason grabbed her and threw her up in the air before Eric could get to her. Once he arrived, they set her down and he slowly wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, ignoring any pain it caused.

“Oh, this feels so good,” she purred.

“To finally win a championship?”

“To be close to you again.” She raised her head and smiled. “But winning a championship doesn’t suck.”

He chuckled.

Her family made their way down to her with all the hugs and kisses she could handle. Even Robert was impressed.

“Wow, Mom, you were so awesome, you kicked butt,” Mark and Joey exclaimed over and over.

“It’s not me,” she reminded them. “What you just saw was the skill of my teacher.”

“Mom,” Bree said. “I am so proud of you. It’s you who had to learn and put into action what Eric taught you.” She hugged her mother.

Eric agreed with Bree.

Shelley mussed the boys’ hair. “Are y’all as hungry as I am?”

“Starved,” they answered.

“Well, let’s go celebrate then,” she chirped happily.

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The next few weeks for Shelley were like a beautiful dream. Evenings and weekends were spent in celebration. They celebrated Shelley's win. They celebrated spring. They celebrated life. Eric's body healed quickly and they celebrated that.

There were long walks and picnics in the sun. The dogwoods were in full bloom lining almost every street. The late afternoon sun shining across fresh pink azaleas and freshly cut lawns gave a delicious feeling of peace, and once again– the dandelions were smiling.

People were out and about, washing cars, firing up their barbecue grills, taking walks and life seemed beautiful. Eric and Shelley enjoyed sitting out on the front lawn watching Mark and Joey play Kung Fu. Sometimes Eric and Joey would team up against Mark and Shelley and they would have a great battle. This usually drew a crowd from the neighborhood children who, of course, were invited to play.

It was one of these spring days that Shelley received a phone call.

She hung up, her eyes were full of wonder.

"Is there a problem?" Eric asked.

"Meg and Brian just had their baby. An eight-pounder!"

Eric grinned. "Wow, big boy! That's wonderful."

"Yes it is," Shelley agreed softly, remembering the birth of her own children. "It's such an amazing feeling," she said, "to be the first to see a new life. You can feel its spirit. It's so precious, you know— life."

"I know," Eric whispered, thinking of Ricky's birth and also of the days just after his first wife passed away.

"It's been so much fun to watch Brian and Meg be so excited about their baby." She sighed. "Ya know, some parents don't really appreciate the blessings of having a child."

Eric glanced at her. "Are you speaking of someone in particular?"

Shelley nodded. "Actually, yes. So, when Bree was in middle school, she was on the dance team, and there was this sweet little girl who came in from the high school to help them learn some dances. She was kind of shy, but she knew her stuff. Her name was Caro. I think it was short for Caroline. She was just a high school freshman, but she was so talented. She was such a pretty girl, but real quiet and she seemed a little anxious.

"Some of us parents helped to make the costumes and she was gonna perform one of the numbers with the girls at a pre-competition show, so she came over to try hers on, and I was helping her, checking the seams."

Shelley stopped and shook her head as tears gathered in her eyes. "The poor girl had bruises on her back and stupid me, I asked her about them. She pulled away, almost in a panic, and said she had to get home. She dressed so fast. I realized what was happening to her and tried to tell her it was okay, she could talk to me, but she was having none of that. She ran out like a frightened little puppy."

"And so you think her parents were abusing her?"

"I later found out her mother was an alcoholic and had been arrested at one time for child endangerment. I never knew what happened to that poor girl. I never saw her again and neither did Bree. She left that school and it seemed like she disappeared off the face of the planet."

"And of course, you feel guilty."

"I guess. I mean I've always wondered what happened to her. I hope she's okay. But it made me appreciate my own children more and realize that people waste so much time."

"What do you mean?"

"We spend time fighting with each other instead of loving each other. We spend time wishing and never doing. And then sometimes we work so hard we forget simple stuff like taking a walk together or eating an ice cream cone. Time with our children is so precious."

"Well, sometimes the business of life gets in the way," Eric agreed. "But don't judge others for working hard at what they want to accomplish. Look at yourself. There are times we can take that walk and times we have to spar for two hours."

Shelley smiled. "You're right, but still, we do take time to stop and smell the roses."

He smiled at her and pulled her close. "I'm proud of you, Shelley. You're getting much stronger."

She took a fighting stance. "Let me show you just how strong I am. Bet I can take you to the floor."

"Well now, this is a great situation for me," Eric laughed. "If I win, I win and if I lose, I win."

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They focused on Shelley's black belt training for the last few weeks before spring break. Once the boys left to visit their father for spring break, Eric used the time to push Shelley even harder. In stretching he insisted she go one more inch. In running it was one more mile. In the weight room it was two more reps and in the classroom everything was "And again– once more– you think you got it? Okay, ten more times."

One afternoon, after a particularly intense workout they stretched out on the floor of the dojang. Eric closed his eyes. Shelley turned over on her stomach and watched him. Curiously, she raised his T-shirt and rubbed her hand over his chest. There were still a few markings from the beating he'd taken.

"Does it bother you to be here at all?" she asked.

"Be where?" he replied, his eyes still closed.

"Here, I mean, here where they hurt you. There's still some blood on the carpet over there." She pointed to a nearby spatter. "It kinda gives me the creeps."

Eric sat up and looked around a moment. "I remember thinking that day that this room was the last thing I'd ever see. At least with my human eyes."

He shrugged. “But in answer to your question, no, it doesn’t bother me. It’s just a room. I’m glad I’m alive to be here in this room. I’m grateful actually.”

It was time for a lesson. He stood and went to the punching bag. “I’m grateful that I have the strength to do this.” He jumped up and swung from the steel plate where he’d been hung weeks earlier.

“Stop it. That’s not funny.”

Eric laughed and came back to her. “Oh, Shelley, my sweet, when are you gonna learn? Things are just things. Bodies are just bodies. What happened to my body doesn’t matter. It’s the spirit, the life force, the mind, that matters.”

Shelley sighed, brow furrowed.

He pulled her to him and walked her over to the mirror. It was time to put the rape into perspective. “I’m gonna teach you about bodies.” Turning her to face the mirror, he straightened her head and smoothed back her hair.

“This is a body,” he said academically. “This particular one just happens to be a female body. It also just happens to be very beautiful to look upon.”

She turned away, grinning and blushing, but he turned her back around. He struck a pose in the mirror.

“This is a male body.” He took his shirt off. “It is also a beautiful body. Let’s look at the differences,” he said.

He had to coax her into turning around to face the mirror again. Standing behind her he gently placed his hands on her shoulders.

“Notice the female body, even when in excellent shape as this one is, is much softer than the male.”

Softly touching her neck, he ran his fingertips slowly over her shoulder and down to her wrist. “Notice the way the female body responds instantly to touch. Females are definitely sensitive creatures,” he said as he kissed her neck, making her shiver.

She tried to turn to face him but he made her look into the mirror.

He put his hands on her waist. “A female’s hips are wider and softer because of the reproductive organs protected within. When I touch you here,” he stroked her cheek, “or here,” he slid his arm around her waist, “or, more intimate places, it wouldn’t be pleasurable at all if not for the messages being sent to your brain. So what that means is, your mind is what matters.”

Shelley swayed back against him.

Eric smiled. “We love each other, and our bodies respond to each other, but still, they’re just bodies.”

He walked across the room. “I love you just as much from over here. My heart and my brain tell me that.”

He came back to her, took her in his arms and kissed her deeply. He had only meant to make a point about how a kiss feels, but they sunk to the floor, Eric pressing against her.

Shelley sighed. “I hope Brian doesn’t come back here for anything,” she murmured as she snuggled against him.

Her words reminded him to go on with the lesson. “It doesn’t matter,”

Eric corrected her, continuing the lesson. “You’ve missed the point. Bodies are just bodies. He could come in and see us stark naked, but it wouldn’t matter.”

Shelley frowned. “But aren’t bodies important? I mean look how hard we’ve trained our bodies.”

“Yes, they’re important. They’re a temple for our spirits. They work to take care of us. They procreate. They serve others. But our minds, our minds are part of the spiritual, and our bodies are mortal, until we are resurrected. Our mortal bodies will die. Or be changed,” he added with a smile. “But that’s another whole subject. Our spirits live on regardless.” He touched her arm, “This is just a body. When a man and woman are intimate, it’s your brain that tells you that the muscular contractions of your body are a pleasurable, sexual experience. The body was merely a tool of the brain. If anyone else accidentally, or on purpose, sees your body, touches your body, even harms your body, it doesn’t matter. As long as you don’t let them inside your mind, then you’re okay. Those men who attacked me didn’t change my mind about anything. They only got away with causing me some pain. And yeah, it hurt—physically. But they couldn’t touch my mind, because with Jesus, I can endure anything.”

Shelley pondered the information for a time. “So, what you said a long time ago about the man who raped me– that I’m only a victim if I let myself be a victim, you meant if I let him into my mind?”

“You’re beginning to see,” Eric said with a smile. “That rape hurt you mostly because you weren’t able to keep him out of your mind. That wasn’t because your mind was weak, sweetheart. It was because you hadn’t been given a life base of love and support and mostly, God, and your defenses were weak. But Shelley, you’ve come a very long way. Your mind is so much stronger now. Ya know, there was a time when you couldn’t bring yourself to even speak that word.”

“What word?”

“Rape.”

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The day before Shelley’s black-belt test, Eric and Ricky pushed her to the limit. Shelley lay on the rough blue mat, her clothes drenched in perspiration, her heart pounding. “Eric, I swear if you or Ricky knock me down again, I”ll scream.”

“So scream, little warrior. No one will care,” he said as he gently kicked her thigh.

Ricky kicked the other one. “Get up and fight, woman,” he coaxed.

She rolled over onto her stomach and pulled her tired body up to a fighting stance.

“Don’t underestimate your enemy,” Eric spoke sharply. “Think like him, be one with him.”

She used a crescent kick to block his punch and an outside block to defend against Ricky’s kick, holding her own for a few seconds, but she moved

too slowly and took Eric's foot in her ribs. That was it. She curled into a ball as she hit the mat and lay still. Concerned, Eric knelt beside the fallen woman.

"Are you okay?"

"No," she panted.

"Let me see where you're hurt."

Shelley rolled onto her back and paused, waiting for Eric and Ricky to get close enough. Timing it perfectly, her legs kicked out and caught both men off guard and in the face. They rolled over and came back up.

Shelley's laughter made her unable to get up and run and they pounced on her easily.

"The shower?" Ricky asked.

"The shower," Eric agreed as they carried her kicking and screaming to the dressing room.

The cold water took her breath away several times until finally, they had mercy and pulled her out.

"That's what you get for cheating," Ricky laughed.

"Oh, and you call two against one fair? Besides, you told me to think like the enemy. So I did," she smirked.

Eric smiled and nodded. "Well done, Shelley girl."

Ricky spoke briefly to his father in Mandarin before he turned to Shelley. "Well, beautiful lady, I have an appointment, so kiss me goodbye and I'll be out of here."

Shelley blew him a kiss.

Eric glanced at his watch. "Better get changed, babe. It's almost time to pick the kids up from school."

They picked up the children and arrived home. Shelley was surprised to find Ricky there along with an elderly Chinese man.

"Grandmaster Wong, may I present a most promising student, Shelley Adams," Eric said.

Shelley bowed first and then offered her hand. "It's an honor to meet you," she said softly.

He patted her hand and winked at Eric. "Promising, indeed."

"I had no idea you'd be here today," Shelley said, giving a pointed look at Eric.

The old man smiled at her. "I like to catch my students off guard, see how they handle themselves."

Grandmaster Wong sat with them and drank with them and kept an eye on Shelley. By the end of the evening, he seemed quite impressed with her. Grandmaster Wong excused himself and Eric walked him out.

"Interesting young lady," he began. "And very pretty. She doesn't speak much though. Is she shy?"

Eric chuckled at his teacher's question. "No sir, she's not shy. She's only on good behavior."

"Then she's obedient. Good."

Eric kept his opinion on that to himself.

"And the two of you are in love?"

"Yes," Eric admitted. The question didn't take him by surprise. He knew his teacher would know.

"Then you intend to marry her?"

"I don't think she'll have me as a husband."

The Master patted Eric on the shoulder and slowly shook his head. "And I do not think– that you think."

Eric shrugged. "Well, she's let me know several times over this past year how important her freedom is to her. She actually described marriage as 'being consumed'. She said, 'if you love someone enough then you would let them be free.' Well, I love her enough."

Master Wong shook his head again. "Your mind is not clear, son. You must meditate and pray and seek guidance on this. Call your father. Speak to him. Both earthly and heavenly."

Eric started to argue with him but stopped when he saw the stern look on his Master's face. He bowed. "Thank you, Grandmaster Wong, I'll do as you ask."

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Saturday, test day, arrived and Shelley's nerves were on edge. Shelley worked on the breakfast dishes and when the second glass fell to the floor, this one shattering, Eric decided she needed some help.

"Come here, babe," he beckoned, then called over his shoulder. "C'mon, boys, your Mom needs a trampoline session."

"No, Eric, I don't feel like it."

"Too bad," he laughed as he hefted her over his shoulder and carried her out back.

He tossed her onto the trampoline as if she were nothing more than a sack of flour. She moaned and turned onto her back. Mark and Joey jumped on and hopped around her making her bounce haphazardly over the trampoline. A slight smile crossed her lips. Eric jumped on and she realized she'd better stand or die.

"Hey, Mom," Mark called as they all tried to jump in sync. "What's this one? 'Seriously, Warchild'?"

Shelley rolled her eyes. "*Point Break*"

"Life is like a box of chocolates."

"*Forrest Gump*," she answered.

"I'm your Huckleberry," Joey mimicked in a southern drawl.

"*Tombstone*."

"Don't touch me. Or what? Or I'll touch you back " Mark said.

Shelley began to smile. "*Dragon, The Bruce Lee Story*."

"Yay, Mom's smiling," Joey cheered.

"Yay, Joey's about to get launched," Shelley mocked, laughing as she bounced hard right next to him, sending him high into the air. He came down

in Eric's arms.

Shelley sat down. "Thanks guys. I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd be this nervous. What time is it?"

Eric glanced at his watch. "It's time to go."

She drew in a deep breath.

Eric pulled her close. "Babe, forget you're going for your black belt. Pretend you're simply in class. You know everything you need to know. I've been testing you continuously all week. Your skills are excellent. Clear your mind and take care of the task at hand."

They arrived at the studio and Eric watched Shelley as she headed for the dressing room. She wore blue jean shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt, yet, even in those less-than-feminine clothes, she was able to stir him. He shook his head. Never had a woman affected him like she did. Not even his late wife.

Grandmaster Wong sat on the floor at the far end of the room behind the small ceremonial table Eric had provided. Eric made himself comfortable in the corner on the floor. He watched as his star student got control of her emotions and swung into action, completing whatever task Grandmaster Wong bid.

Her forms were perfect. The sparring moves were close. Grandmaster Wong had already seen video of Shelley sparring against Brian, Ricky and himself. Her kicks and flexibility were excellent, powerful, precise. When it came time to break boards, Eric couldn't help but hold his breath.

She easily broke the single boards, and doubles, struggled a bit with the triples but when she tried four, she failed. She turned her back for a moment and Eric knew exactly what she was thinking, knew the exact words she spoke to herself. *I will wipe the idea of failure from my mind*. She drew in a breath and turned back. Delivering a powerful keoyeop with much emotion she brought her hand down. Success. She turned to Eric, looking for his approval, for his smile, but he wouldn't give it to her. Not yet.

It was a very thorough test, that included sparring against her teacher. Finally, Grandmaster Wong motioned for her to sit in front of his table and asked Eric to leave the room. He continued writing for a few minutes before he put his pen down and spoke to Shelley.

"Miss Adams, you've performed very well. I can see you have worked hard. Eric is an excellent instructor." He paused. "But, I am afraid I cannot award you your black belt at this time."

At first, Shelley wasn't sure what he was saying. The words she heard couldn't be right. She must have misunderstood. Yet the older man was looking at her with compassion.

"There will be another time."

She failed. She let everyone down. How could she face Eric? She opened her mouth to ask what she had done that had caused her failing marks, but she stopped herself. This man was a Grandmaster. She had no right to question his decision. Looking up at him through misty eyes, she spoke with trembling lips.

"I appreciate you traveling so far and, um, thank you for your time. I apologize your effort has been in vain."

He smiled at her and took her hand in his gnarled fingers. "Be not dismayed. We'll meet again soon."

Shelley bowed to him and turned to find Eric, but he was nowhere in sight. Glad to not have to face him immediately, she went to the dressing room and changed. Brushing her hair out, she stared at her reflection. *I knew this was a possibility. This is why I was so nervous. I messed up. Now I have to live with it.* She drew a deep breath. It's not the end of the world. Be strong. Don't fall apart. Be a warrior.

She really thought she'd pass. She thought she'd done well. And she'd fought so well at the last tournament. Eric had taught her that when something negative or unpleasant happened, rather than lying to oneself and putting on a false front, it's better to acknowledge the pain, experience it fully and then let it go. So she sat limply on the green leather couch and let the grief of failure consume her.

When she finally emerged from the dressing room, Eric was running his hand through his hair as he spoke to his old teacher. He glanced over at her, the disappointment in his eyes devastating her. Politely, she leaned against the door and waited until they finished their conversation. Ricky arrived, glanced at Shelley, looked away and escorted Grandmaster Wong out the door. She supposed he was taking him to his hotel or to the airport.

Eric came to her. "You all right, sweetie?" he asked softly.

She wanted to speak but found she couldn't without crying, so she merely nodded.

"C'mon, we'll go home and everything will be okay. I promise." He felt his heart might break for her and he started to speak words to comfort her, but stopped himself. Empty words wouldn't help her.

She walked silently beside her teacher whom she'd let down. In the car, she turned her head away to look out the window as a tear found its way down her cheek. Without her black belt she couldn't compete in the MART. Turning to Eric, she forced the question out, biting her lip between words to stop the tears.

"Is there still– time before the MART– to try again?"

Eric looked at her with such love. His iron fingers touched her cheek and brushed away an escaped tear. "There it is. That's what I was looking for."

"What?"

"That question shows you don't accept defeat. You haven't given up. You haven't thrown yourself into a river of despair. You've definitely come a very long way from the woman I met eleven months ago. Yes, there's plenty of time," he finally answered.

"The boys are gonna be so disappointed in me."

"No, they won't. They love you."

Arriving at the house, he helped her out of the car and she found she

needed his arms around her. Leaning against him, she murmured. “I’m sorry, Eric.”

Pulling her tight against him, he comforted her. “Everything is gonna be fine. You’ll see. C’mon now. Chin up.”

They walked slowly to the door. He unlocked it and pushed Shelley through. What she saw took her breath away. Candles everywhere and incense and a house full of people.

Ricky and the boys wore traditional Chinese dress and were sitting cross-legged against one wall. Justin, Jason and Mr. Bearden sat reverently on the couch. It was the other person in the room that left Shelley wondering. Grandmaster Wong sat on the floor in the center of the room, the table in front of him. He was smiling at her.

Eric’s arm found her waist and pulled her close. “You didn’t really think one of *my* students would actually fail, did you?”

A beautiful smile crossed her lips and she jumped onto his back and kissed his cheek as she realized what was happening. He carried her piggyback upstairs and told her to dress quickly. Her white silk jacket and pants lay on her bed beside his. She quickly grabbed up the silk uniform and hurried into the bathroom to dress, leaving Eric to dress in the bedroom.

When she came out she was frowning.

“What?” Eric asked.

“You let me go through all that. How could you?”

He smiled. “I almost couldn’t. You were so pitiful. I started to tell you a hundred times, but how you handled defeat was part of the test, and you passed that part with flying colors.” He took her face in his bronzed hands. “I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“Yes, you will,” she warned.

He smiled, put his finger to his lips, becoming reverent before they returned to the awaiting ceremony. They walked quietly downstairs.

Shelley sat down across from Grandmaster Wong and Eric sat by her side. He watched her as she went through a ceremony Grandmaster Wong had designed especially for her. Her aura seemed to glow, and Eric suddenly felt a pull so strong it surprised him. It was as if he’d been given a powerful love potion. Energy vibrated through his body and coiled in his gut. Every move she made was like the stroke of a violin moving through him. Shelley merely shook back her hair and the violin grew louder.

Glossy brown curls fell down her straight back. She was the picture of innocence with her eyes opened wide and golden lashes fluttering slowly as she blinked. Cheeks rosy from excitement accentuated her turned up mouth of the same color. Eric couldn’t keep his eyes off her.

Master Wong handed a delicate cup to Shelley. “I ask blessings on you, child, in Jesus’ name, with each sip from this cup.” He motioned for her to drink.

Eric was fascinated as she pressed the warm cup to her lips.

"May you have the strength to overcome strife," the Master said.

Shelley sipped again.

"May you have swiftness of hands and feet."

As Shelley continued to sip slowly, Grandmaster Wong called out more blessings. Power and strength. Balance and mobility. Rhythm and timing. Alert and clear mind. It was the last one though, that everyone felt so strongly.

"The power of God will come to your aid when called upon in surrender and sincerity."

The words rang like distant thunder and Eric's head bowed as he sensed the Holy Spirit move through him. Grandmaster Wong retrieved the cup from Shelley and handed it to Eric to consume the last swallow.

"All that is hers is also yours," he said. "You've been a diligent teacher and it's been a difficult road." He paused and drew a deep breath. "And the difficulties are not over. I'm proud of you as my student and my friend. However, remember you're not ever finished teaching. Once a student is yours, she's yours forever."

That sounded pretty good to Eric. He set the cup on the table.

The teacher smiled and placed on the table a box tied with many colorful ribbons. "I didn't lie to you, Miss Shelley. I said I couldn't award you your belt at that time. I could not award it to you there, because your belt was here." He smiled. "And I would derive great pleasure in awarding this to you now but I still cannot."

Shelley was confused– again. Master Wong handed the box to Eric who in turn placed it in Shelley's hand. Eric's voice was sweeter than Shelley had ever remembered.

"I'm honored to be the one to award you this token of your skills. You've earned it."

Shelley opened the box and held up the belt.

"Tell me something you've learned," Eric urged.

She thought for only a split second. "I've learned this belt is only a piece of material, a symbol, and the real black belt is the warrior inside my mind."

She looked at Eric a moment and then softly added. "I've also learned dreams *can* come true." She winked at Mark and Joey. "And that there's no place like home."

Both the boys and Ricky laughed. "That's the *Wizard of Oz*," they chanted in unison.

Eric pulled Shelley to her feet, wrapped the belt around her waist and kissed her gently as Mark and Joey giggled.

The party adjourned to the kitchen where Ricky and the boys had laid a feast. An envelope leaned against the centerpiece of sunflowers. As everyone filled their plates and cups, Mr. Bearden brought them back to attention once more. He held up the envelope.

"I have here, a small gift for the teacher and his student." He handed it to Shelley.

Leaning against the wall, Shelley glanced up at Eric. His eyes shone, his body seemed tense. He was ultimate masculinity and power and his gaze made Shelley blush. She didn't know if he was thinking what she was thinking, but she hoped so. *I need you, I want you, and I don't know how much longer I can wait.* It was an energy, a strong vibration moving through her body as if Eric was plucking her strings. Her hands actually trembling, she tried to focus on the envelope as she opened it. There were several photographs and a letter. She quietly read the contents.

"Well?" everybody said. "What is it?"

Shelley's eyebrows rose. "We have been provided a remote cabin in Tyler Springs in the North Georgia mountains for training purposes for the last four weeks before the MART."

"May I see?" Eric said, reaching for the photos.

"Let's go," Joey said excitedly.

Shelley frowned. "Well, it sounds wonderful but we can't go. You guys have four more weeks of school."

"I'll stay with them," Ricky volunteered immediately. "And Bree will be home in two weeks."

Shelley shook her head. "In four weeks my favorite boys in the whole world will leave to spend the summer with their dad. If I go up there, I won't get to see them for three months. No way."

"Aw, c'mon, Mom, we won't mind," Mark said. "Ricky will take good care of us."

"Thanks a lot you guys. You may not miss me, but I'll miss you."

"I know!" Ricky offered. "They can miss one day of school each week. On Thursday afternoon we'll drive up and be with you guys until Sunday afternoon. That'll give you three out of seven days with the boys. That's not bad. It's almost half."

The argument continued for several minutes until someone asked Eric's opinion.

He looked at Mr. Bearden. "This is your cabin?"

"Actually it belongs to my brother-in-law. I visited him there before and was taken with the beauty and serenity of the place. The cabin itself is rustic. It's a hunting cabin, not luxurious at all, but I think it's the simplicity of the place surrounded by the beauty of the countryside that really touched me. It's very remote. I thought it would make an excellent training ground."

Eric nodded and turned to Shelley. "I'm sure it's beautiful. It would be a wonderful place to clear your mind and get ready for the MART and I think the boys would have a good learning experience too. Besides that, let me remind you that the MART will only happen once for you, and you've stated many times over the past year that it's your most sincere desire." He turned his attention to his teacher. "What do you think, Grandmaster Wong?"

Everyone quieted while they awaited his words.

"I think you should go. You and your student must become grounded and

one with the world around you."

All eyes reverted back to Shelley.

"Okay, okay, I guess I'm outnumbered, but I think you guys love Ricky more than me," she whined.

Ricky hugged her. "Awww, don't worry, Mom, I won't let them forget you."

"Very funny, Ricky." She looked back at Eric. "Well then, I guess we're going."

Eric gazed into Shelley's eyes. He didn't know what was happening to him, but all he could think about was getting Shelley alone, taking her in his arms.

"Hey guys," Ricky started, "how about a night out and we'll make plans. Bowling, dinner and maybe a movie?"

"Not bowling, trampolines," Joey cried.

"No, laser tag," Mark said.

"You've got it."

"That sounds fun to me," Grandmaster Wong suddenly said.

Everyone stopped to stare at him. He shrugged innocently. "Oh, am I not invited?"

"Of course you are," Justin said quickly. "We'll all go. This should be a riot."

"Are you coming, Mom?" Joey asked.

"I don't know. It's been a hard day."

Mark hugged her. "I know you're tired and you're so old and all, maybe you should go to bed."

Shelley laughed. "Yeah, I think you're right, since I'm so old."

Eric smiled.

"Okay," Ricky said. "It's 6:00 PM now. We probably won't be back before 10:00." He spoke a little too loudly.

"You're a good son, Rick," Eric laughed.

The little party soon ended and Eric saw the crowd out while Shelley worked on cleaning up. Standing at the sink she heard Eric come in and turn on the security alarm. She turned to see him standing in the kitchen. They moved toward each other, coming together in the center of the kitchen.

"I need you," he said breathlessly.

He seemed desperate, totally out of control, and Shelley realized she liked the powerful feeling of being able to take the 'Master' off his tether, so to speak.

"You can have me," she whispered.

His lips found hers. She moaned softly.

Eric pulled away, his heart beating like a drum. He searched for a way to break the spell. He wanted her, could take her right here and now, but that wasn't who he was or how he wanted to pursue the relationship. But Lord, he was no saint. Still, he'd come this far, he had to find his strength. Drawing a

deep breath, he blew it out slowly, and licked his lips. He was distracted by the taste. “You taste salty.”

She shrugged. “I was so upset after the test I didn’t shower.”

He nodded. “Come sit with me,” he said leading her to the sofa.

They sat silently while Eric worked on getting himself under control. While he did, Shelley realized the moment had passed and came to terms with the fact that Eric had claimed back his power.

It was Shelley who broke the silence and changed the subject that had been on her mind. “So, Eric, why couldn’t you test me yourself?”

“I could have, but you wouldn’t have worked nearly as hard for me because of our relationship.”

“Well, that was a mean stunt you pulled,” she complained.

“It was, wasn’t it? Do you still love me or is it a deal breaker?”

“I love you, but that doesn’t mean I won’t think of some kind of revenge,” she teased.

He chuckled. “Hmm, we’ll just see about that.”

“I do love you, Eric,” she said softly.

“And I love you.”

“Do you really? Then why won’t you make love to me?”

He sighed. “Because I love you and I love the Lord. Please believe me, I want to, but it’s not the right time yet.”

“So when will it be the right time?”

“I promise, you’ll know it when it’s right.”

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Matthew 26:41

“Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

Shelley kissed her boys goodbye, and Eric prayed over them before they sent them off to school Monday morning. For the next four weeks Ricky or Bree would carry out the duty of getting the boys off to school and praying over them. This morning, once the kids were off, Eric and Shelley loaded the car and headed out. In only a few hours, they sped along a narrow winding road high in the north Georgia mountains.

The leaves of the trees made patterns of shadow across the road. Wild flowers bloomed in every treeless space. The air, cooler than in Atlanta, smelled sweet and of the earth. As they came slowly around a curve two deer sprinted up the side of the mountain.

"Oh, oh, look! Did you see?" Shelley asked excitedly.

Eric smiled at her. She looked like an angel in her white skirt and blouse, the sleeves billowing in the wind. It was the same outfit she'd worn after the second day of training when he'd taken her to dinner. "I saw they have your eyes," he answered.

They came upon a clearing covered with yellow daisies where a small, wood cabin sat nestled between the trees. It was a simple box with a porch, but from the look of wonder on Shelley's face, you would think it was a castle.

The moment Eric stopped the car she jumped out, ran to the porch and tried the door. It opened into something out of a Norman Rockwell painting. White lacy curtains blew in the breeze. A wooden table, slightly grayed, sat to the right, a mason jar filled with dried flowers in the center. Along the wall on the right was an old-fashioned refrigerator, the kind with the rounded corners, a single sink and a small and very old gas stove.

To the left of the front door was a large room with a fireplace, fronted by a tattered, old, braided rug. The rug was flanked by two rocking chairs and a giant overstuffed sofa. On the far wall directly across from the front entrance a door beckoned. Shelley opened it and was reminded of a scene from *Alice in Wonderland* as she found herself standing in a small hallway with three doors.

The door on the right contained a bedroom with twin beds, a dresser and a lamp. The center door opened into a bathroom from another century. A rusted porcelain sink was skirted by yellow gingham. The bathtub looked promising, a huge free-standing clawfooted deal sitting under the window. Outside that window the entire clearing was covered in dandelions. Shelley sighed a contented sigh and left the bathroom to explore the door on the left.

It was another bedroom, dominated by a giant four-poster bed covered

with a thin patchwork quilt. Heavenly. A night table with an antique lamp, and a monstrous eight-drawer dresser with a mirror that was in desperate need of silvering, were the only other furnishings. Looking up, she saw a thick wooden beam running along the ceiling. The entire cabin was rustic and serene.

Delighted, she ran back out onto the porch which Eric had piled high with their stock and luggage. She jumped onto his back and kissed his neck.

"Thank you, Eric. Thank you so much for talking me into coming. It's wonderful. I just love it."

He pulled her down and frowned at her. "You're welcome, but, remember, this isn't a vacation. "I'm gonna work your butt off beginning right now."

"Now?" she said with a pout.

"Now," he replied firmly. "Help unload the boxes of supplies and unpack the luggage. Then get the kitchen set up."

"Oh, Eric, can't we..." she stopped.

Eric stood with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face.

"Okay, okay— Master," she added dryly.

She worked rigorously for two hours, cleaning shelves and putting up supplies, sweeping floors, airing beds, scrubbing the bathroom, and unpacking suitcases and trunks. At one point Shelley stopped at the window to watch Eric where he worked in the yard, suspending a kicking bag from a branch of a large willow. Wearing only shorts, his golden skin shining in the sun, his hair blowing out across his back and a sweatband around his forehead he looked like a native warrior. He truly was a beautiful man.

He pulled a deadly looking hunting knife from a sheath at his hip and began sharpening it. She noticed he wore a leather strap that crossed one shoulder and met a belt at his hip with several tools and weapons attached. He replaced the knife on his hip. Shelley turned away for a second and when she looked out again, he was gone.

Sighing, she went to the kitchen and made thick meat sandwiches and lemonade. She set the table with the ironstone dishes that had been in the cabinet and went out to find Eric, but he was nowhere in sight. She circled the cabin until she came in view of the front porch again, but still didn't see him. She did see however, a lovely dirt path curving off through the woods and her curiosity overcame her.

Shelley wandered slowly down the path, smiling at squirrels as they scurried out of her way and picking wildflowers for the table. In the distance, she could hear the babbling of a mountain stream calling to her. Moving faster, she followed the path until it dead ended at the bank of the stream.

Immediately Shelley slid her sandals off and stepped into the icy water. The cold water made her feet numb but it didn't deter her. Gathering her skirt so she could see where to place her feet on the rocky bottom, she slowly crossed the shallow stream.

On the opposite bank, she gazed up into the woods that seemed to go on

forever. The sun shining through the trees offered a breathtaking view and the strong aroma of pine had her breathing deep and smiling. She closed her eyes and sighed, experiencing the pure pleasure of being one with the earth.

Hot metal touched her throat and a strong arm wrapped around her waist. "Don't scream and don't move," a gruff voice ordered.

Quickly though, the knife was gone, replaced by warm lips.

"I knew it was you," she proclaimed.

"Oh really? Is that why your legs are wet?"

She turned to him. "Very funny. You left me alone."

"Not hardly, sweetheart."

"Oh." She frowned.

He smiled. "You're getting much stronger, Shelley," he offered.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because I can tell you truly weren't frightened just now. You didn't fall apart, you didn't even startle. I believe your inner strength is beginning to expand."

She frowned, because she didn't feel strong. "Maybe that's how you see it. I see it completely different. I just stood there. I didn't react, I didn't fight." She sighed. "Then again, I really did know it was you. Where were you?"

"I was being a good Ninja and becoming familiar with my environment. You, on the other hand, were being a bad little girl by wandering off on your own."

She turned and wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm sorry, Master Kino, I was only looking for you."

"Then you weren't doing it very well. I was practically standing beside you the entire time. You know, Shell, your skills are not just for a tournament. They're for everything. Being a martial artist is a way of life. You need to work on letting your senses take over."

Shelley shrugged. "Maybe my senses had taken over and knew you were nearby. Maybe that's why I felt so safe."

Eric smiled. "You argue well, anyway."

Together, they walked back to the cabin and ate lunch. Once settled Eric took her on a four-mile run through the woods. In a clearing they stretched, improved her technique and practiced sparring moves. They ran the four miles back and Shelley did four hundred abdominals and two hundred pushups while Eric prepared an evening meal. After dinner Eric allowed Shelley to phone home to check on the boys before he resumed instruction.

They worked hard into the evening, performing their Tai Chi and stretch with the setting sun.

"Bath and bed," Eric commanded. "Because tomorrow is going to be much harder."

Shelley could barely lift her tired aching legs into the high tub. She eased down into the hot water and slowly rubbed her body with the sweet smelling soap. Once clean she slid down farther and allowed her eyes to close.

"Shelley?" Eric called as he knocked on the bathroom door. When she didn't answer, he opened the door a crack. "Shelley," he said louder this time.

She gasped and sat straight up, the now cool water splashing over the side of the tub.

"You okay?"

"Yes, I must've fallen asleep."

"Ya think?"

She pulled on her robe and stepped out of the bathroom.

"That's a good way to drown," he teased.

"I was using my mind power to make you come and take me to bed," she answered sleepily.

He chuckled. "Well spoken, little warrior." He led her to the bed, prayed with her and tucked her in.

She laid a hand on his arm as he turned to leave. "We can share the bed. I promise no hanky-panky."

Smiling, he shook his head. "I'm not that strong. Stay focused on the MART, I'll stay on the couch. Goodnight, sweetheart."

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The rest of the days were the same. Hard work and dreamlike living occupied them. There were hundreds of paths through the woods which were explored at running speed.

They roamed over the mountainside, teaching and learning and getting to know all the wonders and beauty of the Earth God created. Taking advantage of their privacy, they held hands, kissed and cuddled often. In the woods, on a path, in a field of flowers, under the stars, on the porch. It was spring and they were completely and totally in love.

Ricky arrived with the boys on Thursday evening and their little family couldn't be happier. While Eric worked with Shelley over the weekend, Ricky taught survival skills to the boys and while Shelley and Ricky sparred, Eric taught Ninja skills to them.

There were nature hikes, explorations and picnics. They enjoyed themselves so much that come Sunday, it was hard for the boys to leave. It had also been hard on Shelley, but Eric worked her fiercely over the next four days so she wouldn't have time to think about it.

The following Thursday night Ricky and the boys arrived again, this time with Bree in tow. Eric allowed Shelley a small break from her rigid discipline. He helped her prepare a delicious meal of baked chicken, brown rice and steamed vegetables. Shelley felt adventurous enough to make homemade biscuits as a special treat for her family, but they turned out flat and hard and, of course, a little overdone. She threw the pan down on the counter.

"Damn. I give up. I just give up."

Eric turned at her cursing in front of the kids and knew it wasn't because she'd burned the biscuits. He went to her and tilted her face up to the light.

"You're tired Shelley. You need to rest. Come sit down and don't worry

about the biscuits."

She hesitated, but he pulled on her arm and they sat down to eat.

Ricky, however, made his way over to the pan and picked up a hard round saucer.

"Oh, hey, look guys! Mom made us Ninja weapons to use in our battle tomorrow!"

Shelley couldn't help but giggle. Eric was also pleased with his son's ability to lighten up any situation. Ricky was always happy, always cheerful and always making those around him smile.

Bree watched Ricky's antics with admiration too, her eyes following his every move. He was almost a carbon copy of his father, except Ricky was a bundle of laughs. She'd also seen the serious side of him. She wondered if he was anything like any of the movie characters he'd portrayed; deadly when provoked. He was responsible enough to take excellent care of Mark and Joey, and a true professional when it came to his career. She was in awe of the gorgeous young man. She'd offered herself to him once and he'd turned her down. She wondered if he still took that stance. Intending to find out, she looked forward to spending time with him on the picnic the family had planned for the next day.

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In the morning, after workouts and chores, everyone helped put together a picnic lunch, packed into backpacks. Mark and Joey armed themselves with Shelley's biscuits and the group started off on a hike.

Eric and Shelley walked side by side watching the children wonder along the path in front of them, finding points of interest, throwing rocks and stopping to wrestle with Ricky whenever the inclination struck. Bree watched them, totally charmed by the way Ricky interacted with her brothers. Eric felt Shelley's hand slip into his and he lifted her fingers to his lips with a smile.

Exploring a new area of the mountain, they came to a small path that forked off to the right. Mark and Joey ran ahead, around the curve and out of sight while the adults stood and discussed which path they should take. Deciding to head a little farther up the mountain, Shelley called Mark and Joey to come back, but they didn't respond.

She could hear them laughing and throwing rocks into the stream. Handing Eric her pack she disappeared around the curve in search of the little Ninjas. A few seconds later a bloodcurdling scream erupted from Shelley's lungs striking fear in Eric's heart and draining all color from Ricky's face.

It seemed to take them forever to travel the short distance around the bend to find the source of Shelley's trouble. Ricky, Bree, and Eric came to a halt where the path ended and stared in horror.

A rope foot bridge dangled precariously a good thirty feet above the water. Mark and Joey clung desperately to the wooden slats that had once formed the walking surface of the bridge. One of the top ropes of the bridge had torn free from one side, probably because of Shelley's added weight.

Shelley now dangled from the rope that had previously formed one side of the bridge. Swinging helplessly below what was left of the bridge, she tried desperately to pull herself up in order to help Mark and Joey, who could slide off the boards at any time, but it seemed it was all she could do to hold on.

Eric and Ricky swung into action, calling encouragement to Shelley and the boys as they worked. They pulled ropes from their packs and tied them together to make one long rope. Ricky grabbed one end and flew down the steep hill to the water's edge, crossed the stream and ran up the other side.

In the meantime, Shelley had inched her way up the rope, hand over hand and reached for a wooden slat, but it was still too far.

"Joey," she yelled from where she hung. "Baby, pretend the boards are part of a ladder and climb right up the ladder to the far side."

Joey shook his head.

"C'mon Joey, do this for Mommy, please," Shelley called as she struggled to hold on, the muscles in her arms growing weaker.

Joey looked up toward the side that was his destination and began moving slowly upward. A minute later he was stepping onto the path on the far side.

"Thank you," Shelley whispered. "Thank you."

Ricky had also reached the far side and found a tree to secure his end of the rope. Eric had already accomplished the same.

Joey turned and called to Mark. "C'mon Mark, it's easy."

Mark started moving, but stopped when he was beside his mother and reached for her hand.

"No," she screamed. "You go first, Mark. Go."

"I don't want to leave you Mom," he cried.

"Please, Mark," Shelley said weakly, her arms trembling with the strain. "Please, baby, climb up."

Eric's voice came calmly to them. "Mark, I can't help your mom until you're safe on the other side. Move. Now. And don't stop," he commanded firmly.

It seemed to do the trick. Mark started up toward the top. Ricky was almost to Shelley, coming hand over hand toward her on the rope he and his father had rigged. It appeared the rescue would work, until they noticed the boulder.

It was resting on the edge of the far side. One end of the bridge seemed to run right up under the huge rock and the rock was teetering as if it had a mind of its own.

The bridge lurched with the boulder's weight. Mark and Shelley screamed as Mark lost his footing. Ricky lowered his legs down toward them but the boulder shifted again and Mark fell toward Shelley.

Instinctively she reached out and grabbed Mark's arm. With the added weight, she couldn't hold on. The next few seconds seemed to happen in slow motion. Mark and Shelley falling through the air and the boulder toppling over taking the bridge with it. Bree and Joey screamed. Eric and Ricky watched in

horror, realizing the large rock could crush them.

Screams echoed through the peaceful forest as Shelley and Mark hit the shallow water below. The huge rock rolled toward Shelley where she struggled to right herself but she refused to let go of Mark. She couldn't get out of the way fast enough and the huge rock settled right on top of her.

Eric flew down the hill toward mother and son while Ricky made his way back to land.

Shelley still held Mark's arm as he bobbed unconscious in the water. She called out to Eric.

"I'm okay, help Mark. Oh, God, please help Mark," she cried.

Eric didn't know how she could be okay but showing his trust in her, he did as she bid, gently pulling Mark from the water. He carried him to the bank as Ricky joined him, Joey in tow. Eric knelt beside Mark to check him out. He looked up at Ricky. "He's not breathing, but we have a pulse."

He began mouth to mouth resuscitation. Within only a few seconds, Mark coughed and drew in a gulp of air. Now that he was conscious, the pain caught up to him and he cried out.

"His arm is broken," Eric said. "Bree, don't move him, but keep him warm. I have to get your mom out of the water."

Eric told Joey to find the tablecloth in one of the packs and use it to cover Mark. He and Ricky turned their attentions to Shelley as Bree and Joey looked after Mark.

At first glance it appeared Shelley had been crushed by the boulder, yet miraculously, Shelley's torso lay on the stream's rocky bottom surrounded by several smaller rocks that were supporting the weight of the boulder. Only her midsection was held captive.

She was able to keep her head above water fairly easily even though Eric knew her neck and stomach muscles would tire soon enough. He placed his hand under her head to ease the strain on her neck.

"Is Mark okay?" she sobbed.

"He's fine. His arm is broken but he'll be okay. Don't worry Shelley, we'll have you out in a minute."

The two men placed their shoulders against the offending monster and applied every ounce of strength they could muster. It shifted, causing Shelley to cry out. They stopped pushing. Eric frowned. They'd put all their strength into it and barely made it move. No way are they gonna be able to simply lift it up off Shelley. They're gonna need help.

Earlier, when they'd first arrived and realized their cell phones didn't work up in the remote area, Eric had thought it was a good thing, but it wasn't a good thing today. He motioned to Bree and spoke, trying to keep any hint of alarm from his voice.

"Bree, can you find your way back to the cabin?"

She nodded through her tears.

"Run as fast as you can go, Bree, and use the landline to call for an

emergency rescue. Then bring a car back with you. Hurry now."

Bree took off. While Ricky comforted the boys, Eric spoke calmly to Shelley. "Hang in there sweetie," Eric comforted as he held her head up and wiped water from her face.

The icy cold water had her shivering violently but she forced a smile.

"Ricky, see if you can find a sturdy branch to use as a lever."

Ricky obeyed his father immediately.

"Shelley, I'll be right back," he assured her.

Eric left Shelley and climbed up the far bank to retrieve the rope. He came back down and climbed the other side to untie his end of the rope. He checked again on Mark who was sitting up now and then went back to Shelley's side. Squeezing her hand, he tried to offer her his warmth. She closed her eyes and tried to absorb it. A few minutes later, Bree came back with the car and a blanket which she placed gently around Mark's shoulders.

Ricky came down the bank bearing a large branch. He and Eric tried to place it somewhere under the boulder. Shelley cried out each time they tried to wedge it between her and the rock. Finally, despite the pain it caused Shelley, they had it placed and they tried again to move the boulder. It budged ever so slightly just before the branch snapped with a resounding crack.

Ricky went to find a stronger branch while Eric began tying the rope to the bumper of the car. He turned when Shelley cried out his name. He ran to her side.

"Eric, I'm sinking. The rock, it's– it's settling and it's pushing me farther down."

The fear in her eyes tore at Eric's heart. He went under the cold water again to assess the situation. The situation was both miraculous and terrifying. The miracle was that somehow the boulder had not crushed Shelley, but instead rested on a circle of smaller rocks. The terrifying part was those smaller rocks were sinking gradually into the bottom. There was almost no space between the river bottom, Shelley, and the rock that was the ceiling to her jail. He came up.

"Don't worry, baby. It won't be long now," he said, realizing he was trying to convince himself as well. He started back to finish securing the rope.

"Eric," she called again.

He turned back to her.

Her eyes burned into his so he'd understand that what she was about to say was extremely important.

"Remember I once told you, I'm very claustrophobic. Not just a little, Eric— very. You have to get me out. I'm about to freak out. I can't go under. Don't let me go under. It's taking everything I have right now just to keep from screaming."

He held her face and kissed her forehead. He had no time to help her work through the claustrophobia. "I want you to try to focus on breathing and stay calm. You know how to do that. You can do it."

He hurried away, instructing Bree to help her mom hold her head up. Eric finished up at the car, eased the rope around a smooth tree then down to the rock. He attached the rope to an emptied backpack that would serve as a makeshift cradle for the rock.

Shelley gasped as the rock shifted again and Bree cried, “She’s sinking!”

“Please Eric, don’t let me go under, please ” Shelley screamed.

Eric spoke calmly and quietly to Bree. “Find me something to use as a tube, something in our lunch supply, something plastic, so that if she goes down any farther, she’ll still be able to breathe.”

Mark and Joey began to cry. Ricky came back with two sturdy branches. Eric spoke to him in Mandarin and Ricky looked over at Shelley, worry in his eyes.

They worked quickly, attaching the cradle to the boulder and running the rope back up and over a tree branch for leverage, then back to the car. It took several minutes to find a space to place the tree branches Ricky had found under the boulder so that as the car pulled the rock off of Shelley, they could guide it and keep it from crushing her.

Bree came back with a plastic two-liter soft drink bottle which she’d emptied. Ricky took his gold knife and cut off the bottom. Eric took the makeshift snorkel to Shelley and knelt down beside her.

“Shelley, now I need you to stay calm and listen to me. If you go under you can still breathe with this.”

She shook her head madly. “No,” she pleaded. “Don’t let me go under, please, I can’t.”

He looked into her eyes and smiled. “You can. I know you can. You always come through. Just keep this end in your mouth and breathe calmly, slowly, in and out.”

Tears were flowing down her face. “Eric, I’m afraid.”

“I know, sweetie, but it won’t be much longer.”

She was shivering violently and Eric worried now about hypothermia. Where is the rescue team, he wondered. How long would it take them to find this remote place?

“Bree, when you called did they give you an ETA?”

“Yes. They said they would have to send a chopper and it could be thirty minutes or more.”

His jaw clenched. “Get in the car and on my signal I want you to pull off very slowly.”

Eric looked over the contraption they’d rigged. It resembled a huge slingshot loaded with a solitary giant rock. Ricky manned the branch that would keep the boulder from crushing her as it moved.

“Shelley,” Eric said as he smoothed some hair from her face. It was something he did habitually. Something not hardly important enough to worry about at the moment, yet it seemed vitally important to remove the wet strands of hair from her cheeks. “Shelley, the rock will probably scrape across your

stomach as we move it and it may hurt a little, but don't let that scare you."

He took a breath and signaled Bree. Slowly, she accelerated the car as he pushed his own weight against the giant rock. Gradually it began to move. Shelley whimpered as the rock raked skin from her abdomen.

The rock moved slightly and Ricky quickly pushed the branch farther under to help brace it. He and Eric used their strength to guide the boulder.

Mark and Joey's crying came to a halt as they watched and became hopeful that any minute their mother would be free, but in a split second their hopes shattered. The rope snapped under the strain, the branch broke again and the monstrous rock settled back onto Shelley. Shelley cried out in pain as it came to rest on her chest.

Joey jumped up screaming, "Please, please, Mom. Please come out now." He cried as if she'd been playing a game with him that was no longer fun and he had no wish to play any longer.

Shelley closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to hear him cry.

Bree came running back down the bank as Eric was checking Shelley out. Ricky had been quick enough to wedge the broken stub of the branch under the rock to keep it from crushing her, but it now pressed tightly against her chest. She'd moved down a little father into the water to the point that the rushing current splashed over her face every few seconds making breathing difficult. Eric lifted her head as she coughed and sputtered. He placed the impromptu breathing apparatus in her mouth and stroked her cheek trying to calm her.

"Breathe Shelley. Look honey. You're not even under the water. I'm holding you up. I just want you to practice. Breathe through your mouth. Breathe. That a girl."

Bree and Ricky tried to comfort the hysterical boys, yet Bree herself was beginning to panic. "Oh, Ricky, what are we gonna do?" she asked.

Ricky kept his facial features neutral showing no emotion, giving no hint of his own apprehension. He turned to Eric and spoke Mandarin. Eric answered him.

Ricky gave Bree her answer calmly. "Dad says that he's afraid of trying anything else without the proper equipment. The rock is already solidly against her chest and she can't breathe very well. We'll have to wait for the rescue team. Hopefully, they'll be here any minute." Bree looked at her mom and back at Ricky. "You're trying to protect me. You're worried aren't you?"

He couldn't lie to her. He nodded his head, his eyes solemn. "Yes,

I'm worried."

Bree raised her chin, squared her shoulders and went to her mother's side. Kneeling in the water, she pressed her forehead against Shelley's. "Don't worry Mom. The rescue team is on the way." Shelley's floating hand reached for her. "Stay with Mark and Joey. Try to help them not be afraid. Bree, I love you, baby girl. Tell the boys how much I love them."

Eyes brimming with tears, Bree squeezed her hand. I love you too, Mom. We love you. It won't be much longer." She forced a smile and rose to go

comfort her little brothers.

Shelley looked up into Eric's strong face. "I love you."

His face darkened. "Don't you dare say goodbye to me."

At that moment the boulder settled again as one of the smaller rocks that braced it toppled. Shelley's head went under, her hands and feet reaching out in startled reflex.

Joey and Mark both screamed again and Bree put her arms around them as Eric quickly placed the end of the bottle back into Shelley's mouth and stroked her cheek like before.

"Come on now, sweetie," he said loudly so that she could hear him over the rushing of the water. You're gonna be fine. Just don't panic. Stay calm. Breathe slowly, in and out."

She stared up at him through a few inches of water, eyes wide as saucers. Her hands reached up and gripped the beast that held her down.

Bree huddled together with the boys as they sobbed.

And now, the hypothermia was causing other issues. Shelley's teeth were chattering so hard she couldn't keep the makeshift tube in her mouth. Eric tried to hold her lips tight around it, but the water kept trickling in. She sputtered, splaying the water in her mouth back up into the breathing chamber. Laying on her back she had no way to clear her lungs and she strangled on the small amounts of water that seeped in. Ricky finally broke. "Dammit, where is the rescue team?"

Joey ran to Ricky. "Ricky, please don't let Mom die. Please get her out. Please, Ricky."

Ricky held him and looked over at his father helplessly. Eric could think of no comforting words. Shelley was struggling. Struggling to breathe. Struggling to stay calm. Struggling to live. Ricky lifted Joey and held him close.

Shelley sank another inch and let go of the bottle. Eric grabbed it before the swift current took it away. He went under, did his best to suck the water out of her mouth and replaced the bottle. Some air was getting through, but her breathing had slowed and become shallow. Between the rock pressed against her chest and the water she'd already taken in there wasn't much lung capacity left.

Eric peered down at her into her eyes. There was so much fear. He looked over at Ricky, Bree and the boys holding each other and praying for a miracle. He closed his eyes. Jesus, please don't let this happen, he screamed silently. Then caught himself, realizing the error in his thinking. A wise soul had once reminded him that Alexander Graham Bell did not contemplate non-communication, nor did the Wright brothers contemplate staying on the ground. He changed his thinking. How can we get her out of this, Lord? She will live. He began to pray and immediately had a vision of the boulder lifting off of her. He kept that vision in his mind. It made the boulder look small.

Shelley could no longer hold the tube with her mouth and she let it go. It

floated silently away. The children became hysterical again. Eric took a breath, went under and forced air into Shelley's mouth.

Ricky scrambled to the opposite side of the rock and began digging, hoping he could cause the rock to roll toward him. If the rock had been flat it wouldn't be possible, but it was fat and round and he should be able to make it roll. It moved slightly toward him, but also settled harder onto Shelley.

Shelley had been opening and closing her eyes, alternating between looking at Eric and stopping the sting of the water. Eric looked into the beautiful brown eyes he loved. The fear was gone but it was replaced with something worse. Resolution. He went under to breathe into her mouth but she didn't take it, wouldn't take it.

Eyes wide she flailed her hands at the boulder. Punching it, pounding it. Trying to move it herself and then, as if suddenly accepting her fate, she looked up at Eric once more before her body went limp.

Her arms and legs moved gently with the current. Her eyes stopped closing against the sting of the water.

"Noooo, pleeease," Mark and Joey screamed.

"This cannot be happening," Ricky murmured, his face white with shock. "Dear Father, please..."

Eric stood, unable to control his frustration. "No," he screamed. "Please, dear God, do not let this happen," he yelled, his voice echoing through the trees. And he heard an immediate answer. *Don't give up*.

✝✝✝

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 Twenty-Five

Filled with emotion, Eric nodded, a silent acknowledgment that he'd heard God's voice. "Help me, Rick," he pleaded. "We have to try again. We can't give up. God just whispered to me to not give up, so, we will clear our minds, and draw strength from Him. We can do this."

Ricky nodded, clinging to his father's hopeful words. The men both drew a deep breath and closed their eyes. Crouching low to place their backs against the rock, they pushed, but the rock didn't budge. Eric looked up into the heavens and uttered a plea. "Help me, Father, please. I don't know what to do."

It came to him, the still small voice. "See the rock as it really is."

Eric's mind scrambled. As it is? What is it? It's a rock. No, it's– matter. The rock is matter. No, no, it's— particles of energy coming together to form matter. See the rock as it really is. He told Ricky what God was telling him and together they saw the rock as millions of particles of energy, particles, as if it were in the transporter of the *Starship Enterprise.*

"Bree, come and pull on her as we lift," he ordered.

Bree obeyed. She watched as their bodies tensed and muscles strained. Eyes closed, they breathed and pushed, their shoulders and chests bulging, veins and arteries looking as though they would explode, sweat running in streams down their bodies. Shelley's body moved slightly toward Bree. "She moved," Bree cried. "Don't stop!"

The rock shifted. Bree tugged hard on her mother's cold hands. Shelley moved again. "She moved a tiny bit. I'm sure of it. She's coming out. Please don't stop," Bree encouraged.

"The rock is energy. I can do anything through Christ who strengthens me," he asserted. "I am one with the rock. Move rock. Please, Father," Eric pleaded his voice breaking. "Give me strength," he cried. And the rock moved.

They only needed a few inches, a small space. The rock moved again and suddenly, Shelley was free.

The boys stopped crying. Bree tried to pull Shelley toward the bank. Eric swung her up as if she were an infant, carried her to the bank and laid her on the ground.

"Zero pulse. Zero respiration," Eric said quietly to Ricky as he glanced at his watch.

They turned her, cleared the water from her lungs and turned her back. Her brown eyes stared blankly at Eric. He breathed two breaths into her mouth.

Ricky straddled her waist, his hands firmly on her chest and started

pumping. When he stopped, Eric forced a breath. Ricky pumped. Eric breathed. Pump. Breathe.

After a minute Eric took her pulse. “Nothing.”

The kids sat behind them begging their mom to wake up. The men continued CPR. Another whole minute went by and Eric checked her pulse again.

“Nothing. Don’t stop, Rick. God didn’t move that rock only to have her die now.”

Ricky started to pump again.

“Wait,” Eric’s eyes lit up. “I think— ” he stilled. His eyes filled and he sniffed back the emotion. “We have a pulse. Come on baby. Come back to us,” he beckoned as he continued breathing for her.

The children gathered closer, their tear-stained faces full of hope. Shelley suddenly gasped, coughed. Eric rolled her on her side a moment to clear her lungs again. Her chest heaved as she regurgitated water. She was breathing. Her heart was beating. She was alive.

Bree and the boys wrapped their arms around each other. They actually began laughing as hysterically as they had cried earlier. Their laughter was an expression of pure joy and relief. Eric gathered her body in his arms and held her close as his emotions overflowed. Ricky fell back onto the ground and wept openly. She’d come back to them. God had sent her back to them.

However, Eric knew she wasn’t out of danger yet. Her body temperature was low and she hadn’t regained consciousness. Somehow though, he knew she’d be fine. He knew because it had been as his Master said. The blessing had come true. The power of God had come to his aid. There was no other way they could’ve moved that rock.

A sound filled the air and Joey cried out. “The helicopter!”

Ricky and Bree ran up the bank waving their arms.

Eric kept a close eye on Shelley’s face as Mark came slowly to her and covered her with his blanket. Eric gently put his arm around Mark.

“You were very brave today Mark. I’m proud of you.”

Mark wearily leaned his head on Eric’s chest. “You saved my life, and Mom’s too.”

Eric shook his head. “I had nothing to do with this. This is God’s work. He’s shown you that He is real. Remember this. Don’t ever forget it, Mark.” He put his hand gently on Mark’s head. “How’s your arm?”

“It hurts, but I don’t care. Mom’s alive.”

The rescue team made their way down to the bank of the stream. Eric filled them in as they checked vitals and started inhalation rewarming on Shelley. The first responders were astonished at what had taken place. Within moments mother and son were soaring overhead.

As the others stood silently, watching the helicopter disappear behind the trees they were overcome by a sense of peace. Eric sank down to his knees. The others followed. Hands linked. Eyes closed.

"Thank you," Eric said simply. "Dear Lord, thank you."

✝✝✝

In dry clothes, Bree, Ricky and Joey sat stunned and exhausted on the overstuffed sofa in the cabin. Eric had left for the hospital and thought it best for them to wait at the cabin.

Their conversation recapped the occurrences of the day, each telling their own point of view. Ricky finally broke the spell, directing his attention toward Joey.

"I bet you're tired and hungry, little man," Ricky said and started to get up.

Bree stood. "Sit down, Ricky. I'll make you guys something to eat. I need to occupy my hands."

Fifteen minutes later they sat together on the sofa again, munching on sandwiches. Joey yawned and leaned against his sister. "Bree, do you think Mom has opened her eyes yet?"

"Probably," Bree answered, wistfully.

She leaned her sleepy head against Ricky's shoulder. He put his arm around her, offering the support he was sure she needed. Joey sat up and crawled across Bree and into Ricky's lap where he fell fast asleep. Gently, Ricky carried Joey to bed and came back to join Bree.

She snuggled close to him.

"You were wonderful today," Bree said softly. "I realized today, just how fast life can change. Life is so precious, ya know? I think people tend to take it for granted."

Ricky rubbed his hand across her shoulder. "I don't think I've taken life for granted for a very long time."

Bree looked up at his face. "Oh, you're thinking of your own mother, aren't you?"

He sighed. "Yes. I wasn't as lucky as you." He gazed at her youthful face. He'd always thought Shelley to be beautiful and Bree took after her mother in that way. Yet Bree was so very different from her mom. Shelley was simplicity. Bree was exotic.

Long, straight, shiny, chestnut brown hair fell just past her shoulders. Her lips were dark pink and full, her gray eyes hypnotic. She was taller and much more feminine than Shelley.

One of the largest differences showed in their personalities. Shelley seemed innocent and vulnerable. Even though now a black belt, she seemed to be the one in need of protection. Bree, though, was all self-assured and confident, cool under pressure and a true sexual being. She was beautiful and she knew it.

It seemed ironic to Ricky that Bree was the virgin. As if reading his thoughts, she turned to him, put her hands softly on Ricky's shoulders and moved close. He swallowed hard, drew in a breath.

"All that happened today, you know what it makes me want to do?" she

asked with a sweet smile.

Ricky smiled back. “No. What?”

“This,” she whispered as she pressed her lips to his.

Too tired to resist after what they’d just been through, he accepted the offering. Her warm sweetness felt too good. Emotion from the day mixed with raw desire almost overcame him. She wrapped her arms around his head and pulled him to her. He kissed her heatedly, fervently, and a picture of what he wanted to do flashed through his mind. Breathing heavily, he pulled back and looked into her eager eyes, then closed his own in defense against them. He thought of Joey in the other room and sat up, making space between them. “Bree, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get carried away.”

“No, Ricky, don’t stop. Not this time. It’s okay,” she pleaded.

He shook his head. Some hidden strength stopped him. Joey slept in the next room and Bree’s mom lay clinging to life in a hospital. Even if he decided to do what he vowed he wouldn’t, he couldn’t do it in this situation. He rose quickly.

“Ricky,” she whined.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

She rose and put her arms around his neck.

He removed her arms and stepped away. “Bree, I’m not kidding.”

She smiled. She heard the same authority in his voice as she’d heard so often in Eric’s. “You know you want me.”

Ricky rolled his eyes. “That has no bearing on my decision.”

She frowned. He smiled.

He sat down and tugged her arm to sit her next to him. “Let’s talk about this, okay?” Ricky said gently. “Bree, you know how I feel about you, right? You know that I’m in love with you and I have been for a long time; that makes this even harder for me. There’s nothing I’d like better than to make love to you, but I also know you’re not in love with me and somehow I feel like I’d be taking advantage of you.”

Bree laughed. “Ricky, I’d be the one taking advantage of you. Don’t you understand? I want you. I want you to have sex with me.”

Ricky sighed. “You’ve never had sex. You’re in love with the idea. You don’t know what you want.”

Bree frowned. “Okay, Ricky, you’re right. I don’t really know what I want. I’m so young I don’t know how I feel. What I do know is life can be cut short. Before that happens to me, I want to know what it’s all about. I want someone to make me a woman and there’s no one in the world I trust more than you. I mean, Ricky, I believe you love me. Maybe someday I’ll fall in love with you, and maybe not, but still, someone has to be my first and I want it to be you.”

Ricky gazed at the cat-like creature. She’d touched him. He ran the back of his hand across her cheek. “You bestow upon me a great honor,” he said softly.

"Then you will?" she asked eagerly.

"I will not," he said. "Please understand. It's not you. It's that I don't believe in having sex outside of marriage."

"Marriage? I'm only eighteen. I'm too young to get married."

"Exactly. And if you're too young for marriage, then you're too young to be having sex."

"You're kidding? Girls much younger than me are having sex."

"Yeah, well, that doesn't make it right, and that's part of what's wrong with the world."

Ricky's phone rang which gave him a reprieve. He rushed to answer it. "Hi Dad, how are they?"

Eric's voice was quiet and slow. "Mark is doing okay. His arm was broken and he's already in a cast. They want to keep him overnight for observation since he was knocked unconscious by the fall. I've been with him since I arrived but he's sleeping soundly. They just said I can go in to see Shelley as soon as they get her to a room. Her body temperature is back to normal, they think she's okay neurologically, but we will follow up with a specialist. I'll get back to you after I see her."

"You sound tired, Dad. Are you okay?"

"I am tired, Rick, but Shelley being alive makes everything okay. The main thing right now is seeing her." Eric paused a moment. "So, Ricky, thanks for your help today." The simple words didn't need any further embellishment.

"You're welcome, Dad. So glad I was there to help."

Eric hung up the phone as he watched them wheel Shelley to her room, looking small and frail. Finally a nurse came to get him.

"She's awake and asking for you, Mr. Kino."

Eric rushed in to see her eyes closed, golden lashes against pale cheeks. A monitor fed by electrodes attached to her chest sounded her heart rate, a beautiful sound. Standing beside her bed, he gently touched her hand and the big brown eyes opened and blinked up at him, making his heart leap. He smiled at her. "Hello there," he said softly.

"Hi," she whispered.

"How do you feel?"

"Like someone's been pounding on my chest."

Eric smiled. "That was Ricky, not me."

She regarded him for a long time. "I thought I'd never see you again," she finally said.

Tears welled in Eric's eyes. "I thought the same thing."

Shelley was surprised. "You? The great Master, sheds tears?"

"Tears of joy and gratitude," he said as he kissed her hand.

"How are Mark and Joey?" she asked anxiously.

"Mark is in a room downstairs on the children's wing sound asleep. He broke his arm, but he's fine. Joey is at the cabin. He's also fine."

"I want to see them," she said weakly.

"I know. Maybe tomorrow. Okay?"

She frowned and tried to sit up. Her stomach muscles were sore.

Eric gently restrained her. "Behave Shelley. You are not getting up. You can see the boys tomorrow."

"I want to go see Mark now," she demanded, not very convincingly.

Eric smiled. "I love it when you're mean and demanding."

"Then you'll take me to Mark?" she asked.

"No."

She closed her eyes. "I'm too tired to argue with you although doing so gives me great pleasure," she said, her eyes still closed.

"Sleep, baby. I'll be right here."

"Eric?" she whispered.

"Yes?"

"Instead, will you go be with Mark? I don't want him to be alone."

"If that's what you want. I'll go stay with him and come back and check on you every so often. How's that? Will that keep you from worrying?"

She smiled. "That would be great. Thank you."

"There's no need for thanks, Shelley. I'd do anything for you. And the love and care you have for your son is admirable."

"Eric?"

"Yes?"

"I am really hungry."

He laughed. "Me too. I'll go tell the nurse and see if it's possible that you can have a little something to eat, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed, falling instantly asleep.

Watching her sleep, seeing her chest move up and down with her breathing, Eric took a moment to give thanks once more. He went over the events in his mind again and again, making notes on how easy it had been to slip into fear and how listening to the still small voice had helped him. Finally he did as he'd promised and went to see Mark, but after spending the evening going back and forth between rooms, he asked to speak with the hospital administrator.

✝✝✝

Shelley didn't wake until morning. When she did, she found a beautiful little boy in a bed beside her.

"Hi, Mom," Mark smiled.

"Hi, baby. How did you get in here?"

"Master Kino asked them to move me."

Shelley smiled at the thoughtfulness. "Where is he?"

"He went back to the cabin. He's gonna bring Joey to see us."

✝✝✝

Near dawn, Eric arrived back at the cabin to find three young people intertwined on the sofa, sleeping soundly. They stirred at the sound of him tossing the keys on the table. Ricky jumped to his feet.

"Dad! Hey. How's Shelley and Mark?"

"Shelley is gonna be just fine, thank God, and Mark's feeling much better too, but right now, I'm too tired to talk."

He stumbled into the bedroom and fell across the bed. Ricky poked his head in. "Would you like me to make you something to eat?"

"Later," he grunted as he kicked off his shoes. "You could have Joey ready to go back with me by noon."

Ricky came over and dug his fingers into his father's back and shoulders, kneading, soothing and relaxing him.

"Umm, thanks. I know I've said this before, but, you're a good son, Ricky," he murmured.

"You're a good man, Dad. I hope I grow up to be just like you."

Eric reached back and patted Ricky's hand. That was the last thing he remembered until noon, when Joey jumped on the bed and then onto his stomach. Eric grunted.

"I am the Master " Joey yelled triumphantly.

"Master of what," Eric asked, still groggy from sleep.

"Master of the bed," Joey announced loudly.

"Really? Then what does that make me?" Eric asked, raising up on his elbows.

"You are the servant," Joey said sternly.

"I should've known," Eric laughed. "And what does my Lord and Master ask of me?" Eric said humbly.

"Take me to the Queen," Joey commanded.

Eric brought his hands together. "As you wish," he quoted. "Would my Master mind if I eat first?"

"Of course not. Your stomach can't be growling in front of the Queen," Joey said regally.

"And may I also bathe?"

"Yeah, cuz we can't have you bein' all stinky either," Joey giggled, holding his nose.

Eric pushed him over. "Oops. Sorry Master, a little accident."

"Yeah, right," Joey answered sarcastically.

"Do me a favor, JoJo, and ask Ricky to make me some lunch."

"He already did."

Eric smiled.

"He's a pretty good kid, huh?" Joey stated with a nod of his head.

Eric laughed. "Yeah, he is and so are you."

"*I* am not a kid."

"Really? Then what are you?"

Joey rolled his eyes. "I already told you, I am the Master!"

Eric grinned. "Oh, yeah, I forgot."

Once bathed, dressed and fed, Eric's energy returned and he prepared to head back to the hospital with Joey.

Eric put his hand on Ricky's shoulder. "We won't be back until morning, so take good care of Bree."

Ricky nodded.

"Oh, and by the way," Eric remembered. "I used your name at the hospital to pull some strings so that Mark could be in Shelley's room. I promised a demonstration for the kids."

"No problem, Dad. Glad I could help and I'll take care of it."

Eric gathered Joey, a case of personal items for Shelley and Mark, a tin can filled with wild flowers and left for the hospital.

✞✞✞

Bree snuggled on the couch next to Ricky tracing her finger over the muscles of his chest. They'd been alone at the cabin all night and talked at length about morality, being in control of one's base instincts, and even a little about God. They'd given way to kissing a few times, but Ricky stayed strong.

"You've been with a lot of girls, haven't you?" she asked curiously.

He shook his head. "We are not gonna have this conversation."

"Oh, come on Ricky, tell me."

"No ma'am."

"Then there must be something to tell."

"Whatever mistakes I've made in the past are between me and God."

Bree gave a small hmph. "Okay fine. So then, has your Dad been with a lot of women?"

He looked down at her incredulously. "My father's personal life is just that– personal."

"Fair enough, I guess, but really, tell me a little something. I mean, he's dating my mom."

"I'm not kidding, Bree, this conversation will not happen." Ricky shook his head. "I don't believe this. A few minutes ago, I was kissing you and now we're having an argument."

Bree laughed. "An argument? I'm not arguing. This is just me. My personality. Mom calls me a 'she-dog', if ya know what I mean."

Ricky chuckled. "Your mom has a way with words." He sighed, thinking how hard it is to love this girl. He didn't even understand how he came to love her so quickly. Sure, she's a looker, but he had his choice of beautiful women. And it certainly wasn't because she was anything like her mother. Shelley is a sweetheart, he thought. Bree isn't even close to sweet. So why did he love her? Is it her confidence that attracts him? Her strength? And is it attraction or does he truly love her? Trying to imagine himself without her the rest of his life was impossible.

He was a guy who knew his own mind, usually, yet he also knew he was young enough to err in judgment, especially in matters of the heart. She'd wanted him to make love to her, yet do it only for her educational benefit. She wanted him to stay emotionally uninvolved. She didn't realize what a difficult thing she asked of him. She was so young and so full of life. He wasn't that

much older than her but her wild and free spirit made him feel ancient.

She moved away so she could look up into his face. “Tell me now, Ricky, how do I rate compared to other girlfriends?”

“Girlfriend? Are you my girlfriend?”

She frowned. “No, that’s not how I meant it.”

He sighed. “Then how did you mean it?”

“I mean, how do I compare with other girls that you’ve dated, or other girls you’ve kissed?”

“Nope. I already told you, this conversation is not gonna happen.”

“Oh, come on, Ricky, please. There must be something about me that stands out.”

Yeah he thought, there is. She’s the only one he ever told that he loved, but he couldn’t say that because when he does, it makes her mad. He sighed. “Okay, well, you’re the prettiest.”

“The prettiest? Oh, please, that is lame and that’s a player line. Tell me something else,” she demanded.

“Okay, okay,” he paused to think. “You’re the youngest.”

She frowned. “Try again.”

Ricky’s brow furrowed. “You’re the meanest.”

She laughed.

Ricky marveled that hearing that didn’t seem to bother her a bit.

“There has to be something juicier than that,” Bree continued.

“Okay.” He thought. “Well, you’re the only virgin,” he confessed.

“Really? Oh wow, now that’s interesting. Out of all the girls you’ve dated, not one virgin? That’s crazy!”

“Ya think?”

She giggled. “Okay, so then, am I a good kisser compared to all the experienced girls you’ve dated?”

“You are terrific,” he said softly.

“Tell me something specific,” she demanded.

Ricky frowned. “I am not gonna pick it apart and analyze it.”

“Oh, Ricky, really,” she declared, as she pushed away and sat straight up. “I need to know if there are things that I should do differently. You know, things I don’t do that I should, or things that I do do that I shouldn’t, so that when I’m, like, with someone else, I won’t seem like a little girl.”

Ricky got to his feet, wincing at the stab of pain in his heart. He put his hands on his hips and briefly closed his eyes with the anguish that comes from loving someone and not being loved in return. “I am *not* gonna give you advice on how to have a relationship with another guy, and it’s cold for you to ask me to do that.”

She sighed. “You’re right. Sorry. I was just trying to figure out if there’s something I need to change up about myself.”

“No, Bree,” he said quietly. “Don’t change a thing. You are perfect.”

“Thanks,” she said dreamily.

†††

Shelley woke early Sunday morning to find two handsome Korean faces peering down at her. She smiled. “Did anyone ever tell you guys you could pass for brothers?” she joked.

They laughed. “Actually, you did once, but I don’t think you would remember it,” Justin answered.

“Huh?”

“Never mind,” Jason replied. “I understand we almost lost our favorite sparring partner.”

Shelley smiled. “You’re not that lucky.”

Justin brushed her hair back out of her face. “If you had died, I would’ve been next.”

“Nonsense. So what are you guys doing here?”

“We’re back for the duration, champ.”

Shelley smiled. “That’s great. Where’s Eric?”

“He and the boys are trying to arrange your release.”

“It’s done,” Eric beamed from the door. “As soon as the Doc checks you out one more time, we’re outta here.”

“Before breakfast?” Shelley frowned.

“She’s getting to be as bad as you and Ricky,” Justin laughed. “Always hungry.”

“Where are the boys?” Shelley asked.

Eric motioned over his shoulder. “Flirting with the nurses.”

“I wish I had someone to flirt with me,” she pouted.

“Come on now, Shell, you’ve got Justin and Jason there. Aren’t they good enough?” Eric teased.

“If I don’t get my morning kiss, I’m gonna be hard to live with,” Shelley warned Eric.

Grinning, Jason and Justin looked at each other and shrugged. Jason bent over and kissed her mouth. She pushed him away with a gasp. “Not you,” she snarled.

Justin shrugged and performed the same task.

“Well, looks like you’ve had more than your share of good morning kisses. I’ll check on the boys.” Eric turned and left the room.

Shelley pretended to pout. “Well thanks a lot guys. Now because of you, I don’t get my kiss.”

“Oh, believe me,” Jason laughed. “It was our pleasure.”

She tried to hit him, but he jumped back. Mark and Joey came running in and jumped up on the bed, hugging and kissing her. “Mom, Mark says we still gotta go to school tomorrow.”

“And Mark would be right,” Shelley answered.

“Ahhh, we don’t want to go home,” Joey cried.

“Just two more weeks of school,” Shelley reminded them. “And just think about it, tomorrow you guys are gonna have an amazing adventure to tell your

friends all about."

Their eyes lit up at the idea of telling their classmates about the bridge and the rock and the helicopter ride.

"And you'll be right back here on Thursday," she added.

Eric came back into the room. "We need to have a little powwow."

"About what?" Shelley asked. "And please don't try to talk me out of the MART again."

"What makes you think I'm gonna do that?"

"You do it every time I end up in the hospital."

"Do I? I don't think I like being so predictable. Nevertheless, there are some things to consider. You've had a setback. A major setback. If you were to drop out now, no one would blame you."

"Are you kidding me?" Shelley asked. "After all we've been through, do you honestly think I'd drop out."

Eric ran a hand over his hair. "You realize we have only two weeks left to train here and one week in L.A. before the tournament. We're not sure how this little episode may affect you. Things from here on out are not gonna be easy."

Shelley laughed. "You say that like it's been a breeze so far."

He smiled. "Shelley, I'm not kidding around now. You can bow out gracefully and everyone would understand."

"But I feel fine. I'm a little sore and maybe a little tired, but fine."

"No pain?"

"Ribs are sore, but the worst thing is the sore spot on my back where a rock was pressing up into my kidney. If that's the worst, then I think we have nothing to worry about."

Shelley looked from face to face. She'd never accomplished anything hard in her life. There had always been a good reason to bow out. She didn't want to quit.

"What do you guys think?" she asked Mark and Joey.

"Go for it, Mom," Joey answered without hesitation.

Mark put his hand on hers. "I really want you to fight, Mom. I think you're gonna win."

"Yeah, and then you'll be famous," Joey added.

"Oh, that's real important," Shelley teased, pinching his nose.

She looked back up at Eric. "I'm going to the MART," she maintained firmly.

"All right," the boys cheered.

Eric nodded. "Okay, then, we have a lot to do. Justin's brought more films of your opponents. We can go over some of them tonight. I don't think you're ready for any physical work yet."

"Sure I am. I feel great. I need to get right back at it."

"Okay, well, we'll see when we get back to the cabin."

The doc checked her over, gave her a clean bill of health and sent them

on their way. They stopped for breakfast and Eric called Ricky to let him know they were on their way home. As they walked out to their cars after breakfast, Shelley smiled up at the sun.

"I'm walking on my own two feet. I'm alive. I'm breathing." She laughed. "I'm warm and dry and I'll never take that for granted again." Eric looked over at Justin and Jason. "I was just about to give her an after-breakfast kiss, unless you guys wanted to."

They smiled. "No, no you go ahead, Master Kino. We don't want to appear to be selfish," Justin said with a grin.

"Thanks." He took her in his arms and kissed her soundly.

They arrived at a spotless, shining cabin.

"Wow, it's obvious you two have been hard at work," Shelley exclaimed as she was hugged rigorously by her daughter.

"Yes, we have," Bree giggled, winking at Ricky.

Ricky's eyes told Bree to shut up. He hugged Shelley. "It's great to see you standing on your feet. Welcome back."

"Thanks," she said with a yawn, and headed for the couch.

"How are you feeling, Mom?" Bree asked.

"Hmm, I'm not sure. I was fine a few hours ago, but suddenly I'm so sleepy." She sank down into the soft cushion.

"Your body has been through such a trauma, of course you're worn out," Bree answered.

Ricky swooped up Mark and had him describe all the people who'd signed his cast.

"Would you like to lie down a while, Shelley?" Eric asked.

"No. I need to get to work. Let's go over some of the films."

Eric pulled video up on the laptop. Shelley watched as her teachers pointed things out to her and then asked her to point things out to them.

She tried to concentrate, but just focusing her eyes on the screen seemed completely overwhelming. Sweat ran from her forehead, her breath became labored. Abruptly, she stood.

"I'll be right back."

She rushed to the kitchen and splashed cold water on her face. She didn't bother drying her face and the air hitting her wet skin felt cool and comforting. She muddled her way back to the couch, stopping to open a window on the way.

"What is it, hon?" Eric asked.

"Nothing I guess, it's just a little warm, don't you think?" Shelley sat, squinting her eyes and forcing herself to look at the screen, but everything seemed confusing. It seemed she was watching through a thick fog, barely able to make out what was happening. She put her fingers to her temples.

Eric took her hands down and looked into her eyes. "Tell me how you feel," he prodded gently.

"I feel hot, tired, closed in." She stood suddenly. "It's just a rock."

Understanding filled his eyes. “That’s right. It’s just a big rock that got in the way.”

“And it’s just water.”

“It’s just water,” he repeated, watching her fight the panic down.

“Cold water,” she corrected.

“Very cold,” he agreed, taking her in his arms.

But the words didn’t give her the comfort she sought. Shelley jerked away. “What is wrong with me?”

Eric sighed. “I told you, this trauma may have been too much. You’ve been through a lot, babe. No one would blame you if you dropped out.”

“I would,” she said softly.

Eric took her by the hand. “Come on.”

He led her back to the scene of the accident and stood beside her as she placed her hands on the large rock.

“It doesn’t seem so big now, standing next to it. It only comes to the middle of my thighs.”

“I know,” Eric said, feeling the frustration he’d felt. “It seems I should’ve been able to move it.” He shook his head.

“You did move it,” she reminded him. She rubbed her hands over its surface, feeling its hardness. It was warm on top, the sun doing its job. The cold water rushed over her feet though, making her shiver. She climbed up onto the boulder and let the sun warm her.

“It’s just a rock,” she said.

Eric smiled and nodded.

“I think I’m okay now. Let’s do it,” she said with renewed energy.

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Isaiah 55:8-9

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

By the time Eric and Shelley got back to the cabin Ricky and Bree were helping the boys pack. It had been decided that Ricky would drive them home, stay the night, and in the morning head right back up to the cabin. Bree would stay and take care of the boys this time, because Eric felt that he may need Ricky's help sparring against Shelley. It wasn't that Jason and Justin weren't helpful in that area, but Ricky seemed to instinctively go after Shelley's weaknesses.

Soon they were kissing Shelley goodbye. Shelley stood at the passenger side of the car and hugged Bree.

Bree smiled sweetly at her mother. "It's so good to see you standing there, Mom. I sort of hate to leave."

"I understand sweetie, really I do. But I promise to be here when you get back," Shelley assured, smiling as she stroked her daughter's lovely face. "Take good care of the boys."

"I will." Bree bit her lip and looked into her mother's eyes. She desperately wanted to share the things she and Ricky had discussed.

"What is it?" Shelley asked.

"I, uh, I want to talk to you about something." She glanced at Ricky. "We'll be right back," she said as she walked her mom down the drive.

Ricky frowned, knowing full well that she was gonna discuss their relationship with her mother. He sighed. Well of course she would. They are mother and daughter.

Bree linked her arm in Shelley's. "I didn't want to upset you, Mom, after all you've been through, but I thought you'd want me to talk to you about this. We've always been so close and all. Ricky and me, well, we had a long talk."

Shelley nodded. "And you've decided you're in love?"

"What? No, Mom," Bree said impatiently. "I mean, he's great and really sweet, but I'm not ready to be in love with just one guy."

"Then what?" Shelley asked.

"Mom, ugh," Bree whined.

"What? Did you guys have sex?"

Bree laughed. "No! But really, I wanted to. We like, made out and, well, I mean, he is just such a hottie."

"Okay then, what did you want to discuss?"

"It's about sex."

"I thought you just said..."

"We didn't and that's the problem. He doesn't want to have sex with me. I mean, what is wrong with me?"

Shelley hugged her. "Not a thing. And I'm sure it's not that he doesn't want to. It's probably more like he has respect for you. He cares for you, and, if he's anything like his dad, he doesn't have casual sex."

"Are you saying you and Eric haven't..."

Shelley nodded. "Right."

"That's so weird."

"I think it's kinda cool," Shelley said with a shrug. She reached out and stroked her daughter's cheek. "We didn't go to church when I was bringing you up. If we had, we may have learned that promiscuity causes a lot of trouble. I should've known that from getting pregnant with you, but I guess I'm a slow learner. Now, I've developed a real respect for people who've learned to be in control of their passions and don't just go out and do whatever they want whenever the urge strikes."

"Good grief, Mom, that is so, I don't know– boomer."

Shelley smiled sweetly at her daughter. "Just think about it, okay? Because instant gratification ain't all it's cracked up to be." She looked back at the men. "So what about Ricky now?"

"What about him?"

"Well, I mean, are you mad at him or will you continue to see him?"

Bree shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe sometimes, but it's not like we're dating or anything."

Shelley frowned. "How does Ricky feel about that?"

Again Bree shrugged. "I guess he's cool with it. Look, I'd better get going." She hugged her mom, ran back to the car and slid into the passenger side.

Shelley gave Ricky a goodbye hug and waved as they drove away.

"Inside," Eric commanded. "I want you to rest for a while."

"Eric. Let's try the films again. There isn't one minute to waste."

He agreed and Shelley tried hard to concentrate. She kept asking them to rewind and repeat their questions but they were patient with her.

Finally, though, she leaned her head on the arm of the couch.

"Look at her side kick," Justin pointed out. "She's off balance. What defense would you use?"

"I'd, uh, I'd probably use a roundhouse?"

"Try again," Eric said, placing a hand on her back. "Shelley?" He peered over her shoulder. She was sound asleep.

"What do you think?" Justin asked, as he eyed Shelley.

Eric shook his head and sighed. "To be honest, I'm pretty worried," Eric answered truthfully. "She's not herself. I think it's been too much. She was already emotionally unstable from other traumas when I first met her. After everything that's happened this year, it may just be too much. I'm not sure she can pull out of this, at least not in time."

"So, what are you gonna do?" Jason asked.

"What I want to do is take her away with me to share my home and live happily ever after. However, she wants her freedom and she's stubborn. She says she wants the MART more than anything. She says stagnation kills. She says she must be able to continue to grow and progress. I'm just not sure, after all that's happened, if I'm still capable of giving her what she wants."

Justin nodded. "I have a feeling you'll find a way."

Jason stood. "Well, I have a feeling of extreme hunger. I guess I'm cooking tonight."

Later that evening, Eric took a plate of food into Shelley. The fare was simple, rice, veggies and tiny bits of beef. She was hard to wake, but finally sat up groggily.

He spread a towel on her lap and placed the plate on it. "Try to eat something, hon. Your body needs nourishment." He placed a fork in her hand, turned to leave, then turned back. "As much as you can."

She nodded.

He returned with a glass of papaya juice, but frowned when he saw she hadn't eaten any food. "Don't you like it?"

"What?"

"The food. You know, the food, on the plate, in front of you?"

She looked down at it. "I feel strange."

He offered her the glass of juice. "Maybe this will give you a lift."

But before she could take a sip, the glass slipped from her hands, spilling its contents over the food, the bed and herself.

She looked up at him with sad eyes. "There's something wrong with me, isn't there?"

He sat down beside her. "I'm not sure. Tell me how you feel."

"I feel as though I'm in a fog, or like I'm drunk."

He nodded. "I'm really hoping it's just because you're tired. You've been through a lot and your body needs time to rest."

He helped her change into dry clothes and carried the plate and glass to the kitchen.

"Little accident?" Jason asked, eyeing the mess.

"Big accident," Eric replied. "She's lost her coordination. She's incoherent. Jason, will you do me a favor and make her some kind of health shake?"

"No problem."

"Anything I can do?" Justin asked.

"Yes. You can see if those sheets on the line are dry and if so, bring them to me and help me change the sheets on the bed."

Eric and Justin changed the bedding and Jason brought a strawberry protein shake. Shelley was able to get it down before she fell back into a deep sleep.

"I'm calling a specialist first thing in the morning," Eric declared to Justin

and Jason. “A neurologist. I want to know now if we’re not gonna be able to pull this off.”

When morning came, though, Shelley seemed her old self. Smiling and happy, she helped with breakfast and went through a light morning workout with no problems. It was when Eric called the doctor that Shelley got mad. “You’re obsessed with doctors,” she hissed.

“The only thing I’m obsessed with, is you,” he argued.

For the next few hours Eric worked with her free sparring, but he wasn’t happy with her performance. Ricky returned and Eric asked for his assessment.

Ricky took her out in the yard while Eric stood on the porch and watched. She spent more time on her back than standing. Eric could tell she was frustrated. Finally, Ricky came back to the porch while Shelley worked with the kicking bag that hung from a tree branch.

Ricky shook his head. “She’s bad Dad. I mean, really bad. She hasn’t done this poorly since the first time I ever worked with her. Her timing’s off, or more like, gone.”

They watched her kick at the bag. She actually missed it—twice. A black belt does not miss a stationary kicking bag. They could see her frustration, heard her kiyai becoming emotional and desperate. She turned toward Eric. “What is wrong? What am I doing wrong? Fix it,” she demanded.

Eric grimaced, trying to think of something to help her concentrate.

Maybe some simple skill tests, to help realign her brain. As he thought, she paced back and forth, like a caged tiger. Before they realized what she was doing, she ran full speed past the bag, out the drive and up the gravel road. They looked at each other in surprise.

Ricky sprang over the railing and Eric flew down the steps.

By the time they came around the curve in the road, Shelley was nowhere in sight. “The rock,” Eric said. “Stay here.”

Covering the mile quickly, he came out on the hill overlooking the bank. Shelley stood by the large rock, fists punching and pounding at it, cursing it with each blow.

“Why did you have to interfere?” she screamed. “You messed up everything. Look what you’ve done to me!”

Eric went to her, tried to calm her, but she screamed and pulled away hysterically. Worried she might hurt herself, he grabbed her under her arms and wrestled her away from the boulder. She bucked and fought, screaming obscenities, but Eric held fast. She struggled for another minute before she began to quiet, due mostly to exhaustion. The tears came then. “I don’t work anymore,” she cried. “My body won’t do what I tell it. I’ve worked so hard all year, so hard, only to end up where I started. It’s not fair.”

She looked up at Eric, tears streaking her sweaty face. “I can’t do it. I want to desperately, but I can’t. I can’t and I hate myself for it.”

Eric gathered her up into his arms as she wept quietly. When there were no more tears to cry he took Shelley back to the cabin to rest.

Justin, Jason and Ricky followed them into the bedroom.

"What happened?" Justin asked.

"She's just a little frustrated," Eric answered before he slumped down on the bed beside her.

All four men sat down on the bed around her. Shelley gazed up at them. Four beautiful men. Men who had given her so much. Their time, their friendship, their love. She knew they were concerned. They smiled at her with such kindness in their eyes.

Eric brushed her hair back from her sweaty forehead and kissed her there. Shelley closed her eyes and spoke quietly.

"The day I met you, Eric, you took me out to dinner and asked me to be your student for the MART. You said you knew I could do it." She paused, shook her head. "Now, I've let you down. That day I didn't think

I could be happier. Now, I don't think I could feel worse."

Justin patted her leg. "Cheer up, Shelley girl."

Ricky took her hand. "Things will get better."

"Look at you guys, always here for me, through everything. You'd think I was someone special."

"You are special. Do you remember the day I met you and we went to the zoo?" Ricky asked.

She sniffed. "How could I forget?"

"I fell in love with you that day."

She shook her head. "Everything keeps running through my mind; that fight on the beach in Daytona, Eric and me yelling at each other, getting all my belts, staying at your apartment when I was hurt."

Justin chuckled. "And don't forget New Orleans and the hideous night we spent looking for you."

She smiled.

"Remember when you attacked the refrigerator and tried to break my nose?" Jason asked.

They laughed.

"That was a hard time, Shelley," Eric said, "but you came through. You always do. Remember how swollen and bruised your face was and you wouldn't believe me when I told you it wouldn't last forever? Well, I'm telling you now, your sudden lack of coordination will not last

forever. Each minute you get a little better."

"We only have three weeks," she reminded him. "You were right. This time I can't do it." She shook her head madly. "I keep thinking about this whole wonderful year, even the bad times, and I wouldn't change it for anything. I've grown to love you all so much. I've worked so hard. I've really, really tried hard to be a good student and now it seems like it's all been for nothing. I don't understand what's happening to me. Why can't I concentrate? Why can't I seem to do anything?"

"Well," Ricky said with a smile, "you were dead."

Shelley closed her eyes and laughed through her tears at Ricky's quote from *The Princess Bride*.

Eric took her hand. "When I thought you'd left us, I wanted to die, too. You'll never know the joy in my heart when you took that first breath." He stopped and shook his head as he remembered that exact moment.

He sighed. "Shelley, yesterday, I encouraged you to pull out of the MART, but ya know what? I was being selfish and lazy. You've wanted this for so long, so now I'm telling you– do this, baby. Be strong and don't give up. I'll help you. I know you can overcome this setback and not only go to the MART, but win the whole darn thing."

"We'll all help you, Shelley," Justin added.

She looked from face to face, each one smiling and encouraging her. Finally, she nodded.

The next day Eric drove Shelley into Atlanta to see a neurologist just to make sure there was no damage to her brain. Eric was relieved when the doctor told them she was in perfect health.

But Shelley wasn't. "Then why can't I do anything?" she demanded. The doc told them he thought it was mostly due to emotional trauma. So the next stop was to see Dr. Goldstein. She'd responded to him so well before, Eric was hoping for another miracle.

Dr. Goldstein worked them in for a lengthy office visit. He and Eric worked together to set up a special plan. Eric felt confident. Shelley hoped it would work. There were a lot of people with a lot of money invested, depending on her outcome at the MART.

The plan was based on high vibrational waves. Anything happy, joyful and positive was focused upon. Nothing negative or sad. No anger or frustration. It was a "power of positive input" plan. When Shelley worked out they were by her side, offering praise and a lot of "good jobs and high-fives." If she messed up, it was not mentioned. Only the good stuff was highlighted. They spoke as if she'd already won. No one argued in front of her or mentioned anything that would have any negative connotations. Prayer circles, meditations and envisioning Shelley as healthy and as a champion were practiced daily.

It seemed to be working when on Thursday, while sparring with Ricky he caught her off guard and connected with her face, knocking out her mouth guard and sending her to the ground. She came up quickly, going at him instinctively and made hard contact with a spinning back kick. Eric perked up. That was more like the Shelley from a week ago. It was working. He encouraged everyone to keep it up and reminded them that no one was allowed to hold on to a negative thought.

Bree and the children arrived that evening, but Shelley barely had time to see them until her bedtime when they participated in a family prayer circle.

After Shelley was asleep Ricky took Bree for a walk in the moonlight to explain all that had taken place concerning her mother.

Then he turned his attention to her.

"So, how was your week?" he asked.

"Boring but fine. I guess I'm used to a lot more excitement than babysitting." She leaned against a tree. "We could make some excitement of our own," she offered.

Ricky smiled. "We could." He knew he was walking on thin ice, but the opportunity to be close again to the girl he loved was too tempting.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. He hadn't meant to get so carried away, but when they sank to the ground he continued kissing her. He stopped though when his brain started thinking about breaking his covenants with God. He pulled away, stood and pulled her up. "Well then, that's enough of that."

She giggled and didn't argue, and for that he was grateful. They brushed leaves and pine straw from their backs and meandered back to the cabin to see what the sleeping arrangements would be. Mark and Joey were asleep in one twin bed. The other was saved for Bree. Eric occupied the sofa and Jason and Justin each had a sleeping bag on the floor. Ricky unrolled his own bag and joined them.

By Saturday the sparkle came back into Shelley's eyes as she became pleased with her own performance. She was having talk therapy sessions every day with Eric, prayers, meditations, massages, acupressure and the plan seemed to be working.

Bree and the boys left Sunday night as usual. The distractions gone, Monday morning followed the strict routine again, giving Shelley no time to be lonely. They were becoming excited about her progress. She was almost back to normal, still moving a little bit slow, but very close to excellence.

She studied films of her opponents and was able to answer all the questions. Eric asked everyone to keep up with the positive input plan. Tuesday and Wednesday Shelley actually sparred well against all four men. So well in fact that on Wednesday afternoon, Eric gave her a few hours off to have some leisure time.

It was a spectacular day. The air was drier than usual, the sun bright and Shelley longed to soak it up. Deciding just how she wanted to go about doing that, she went outside in search of Eric, but neither Eric, Jason nor Justin were anywhere in sight. She did find Ricky however, her current sentry, and asked him to escort her to the rock. First, she went back inside to write a note:

Dear Eric,

I'm at the rock, becoming one with it. You're invited to come down. Love, Shelley p.s. Everyone else stay away.

Ricky accompanied her down to the rock and left her there. Once she was sure he was gone, she began stripping down to her bathing suit and slathering the lotion over her body. She took the braid out of her hair, letting it blow free in the breeze. The top of the rock was warm from the sun's rays so that it felt

like a sauna the earth had created just for her. Feeling very content, she curled up into a lotus position, closed her eyes and saw herself winning the MART.

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Eric, and the Lee brothers came to the clearing from the far bank. Eric caught Ricky's hand signal and dismissed him. He gazed down, marveling at the beautiful creature who inhabited the rock. She looked like a mermaid sunning herself, her light skin glowing in the sun, her well-muscled body so very perfect in its form.

"Eric, you are one lucky man," Justin breathed.

Eric came out of his trance, remembering he wasn't alone. "Yeah, well, I'm so glad you guys have an appreciation for beauty, but scram." Jason bowed. "We're outta here, Master."

Silently, Eric made his way down the bank, reached out his hand and touched Shelley's stomach. "You wandered off," he chided, half teasing, since he knew Ricky had accompanied her.

"I know," she smiled. "But I left a note."

"A note, huh? A note would tell *anyone* where you are. Not just me."

"Oh, yeah, didn't think about that. So, what are you gonna do about it?"

He swallowed hard as his eyes followed the line of her body. He thought quickly. "I really ought to make you do the dishes for the rest of the week."

She sighed and turned. "Instead, would you consider rubbing this on my back?" she asked flippantly, handing him the lotion.

"Oh," he chuckled as he eyed her backside. "You're making this almost too easy."

"Well, Eric, if you strike me, you'll mess up this delicious feeling of peace I've accomplished," she cooed. "And, if you don't mind, please don't use those particular words."

"Well, I wouldn't want to mess up your tranquility," he replied sarcastically. "And sorry about my choice of phrases." Obediently, he smoothed the lotion over her skin.

She sighed in pleasure. "You're always so good to me. I love you so much, Eric. I don't deserve you."

He kissed the top of her head. "You deserve all of my love."

Shelley turned and tilted her face up to the hot sun. The rock wasn't big enough for both her and Eric, so he merely leaned over her, bracing his head on his hands.

"I'm starving," she whined.

He chuckled. "You're always hungry," he teased.

"Feed me, Seymour" she quoted.

"*Little Shop of Horrors*," he answered.

She looked up at him in surprise. "Wow, I'm so proud. Very good, you finally knew one."

"I know a lot of things."

"Like what?"

"Like it's almost four p.m. judging from the sun. Like Ricky's gonna be leaving soon to go to Atlanta and take care of some errands. Like we're having Mongolian beef for dinner compliments of Jason and like there are two deer watching us over there and if you sit up very slowly you'll get to see them."

Shelley eased up and peered through the woods. "Oh, I see them," she whispered excitedly, spotting a doe and her fawn.

Shelley began sliding off the rock.

"Don't move, Shelley, or you'll scare them."

She ignored him. She stared into their eyes and tried to communicate telepathically like she did with the zoo animals. The doe froze and stared back at Shelley. Eric watched in amazement as Shelley moved slowly and silently across the bank and into the woods.

"Shelley," he whispered. "Babe, a doe protecting her fawn can be dangerous."

Shelley put her hand up in the air and then put her finger to her lips.

The world became hushed, as if the earth and its inhabitants had stopped to watch a lovely, wood nymph move through her domain. She moved until she was only ten feet away from the doe. The doe remained frozen. The fawn seemed to ignore her completely. Moving around its mother, nibbling at leaves, it felt safe and secure.

It came toward Shelley and her heart began to pound with excitement. Closer and closer it inched, almost as if it thought Shelley was a tree, but then Shelley made the mistake of reaching her hand out toward it. Immediately the spell was broken. Mother and baby startled and darted off through the trees.

"Darn," she muttered as she turned and headed back to Eric.

He was smiling at her from the rock.

"I almost touched him " she said happily.

He shook his head. "I've never seen anything like that." He stroked her cheek. "I've always known you were special, but, that– that was magical." He took her hand and they made their way back to the cabin, stopping to pick flowers or throw rocks or kiss.

"Just think," she said, "in only four days I'll get to see your home on the beach. I can't wait."

"Neither can I," he said softly.

She looked at him, suddenly realizing how selfish she'd been.

"You're homesick, aren't you?"

"Maybe a little. I miss the ocean."

She stopped walking and he turned back to look at her. "What is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "You've given up so much for me."

He laughed. "Lighten up, babe. I haven't given up anything. My home is still there waiting for me. I haven't done anything that I didn't want to do and spending this year with you is something I definitely wanted to do."

They arrived back at the cabin just in time to say goodbye to Ricky who

was leaving to take care of some errands in Atlanta. Then Eric pushed her right back into the routine. She grumbled the obligatory grumble, but only half-heartedly. She was much too happy to be alive and her body in good working condition.

✝✝✝

Ricky finished up his errands in Atlanta and decided to drop by Shelley's house and spend the night. He would help Bree put the boys to bed and spend some quality time with her. He couldn't help it. He yearned to be close to her. Then, the next afternoon he'd escort Bree and the boys up to the cabin himself. He tested the door. It was unlocked so he let himself in— and stopped short.

Bree and the guy she was with sat up quickly on the couch, startled.

"Oh, uh, excuse me," Ricky stammered. "I didn't think, I mean, I guess I should've knocked."

The guy stood, turning a questioning eye on Bree. He was tall, about six-foot-three and well-built. His dark hair was cut short and his eyes had a confident look in them.

"Ricky!" Bree jumped up nervously. "What are you doing here?"

"I was, uh, so, I was in town running some errands and thought I'd stop to see you."

"Who is this?" the boy asked angrily.

"Oh, this is a friend of mine, well, not really a friend. I mean, he's more like– my brother."

She caught Ricky's hurt expression before his face went blank. It was that quick moment of pain that made her even more nervous. "Um, you see, his father is dating my mother. Anyway, uh, this is Ricky Kino.

Ricky, meet Jared Owen."

They shook hands.

"Ricky Kino, the movie dude?" Jared asked, his anger dissolving.

"Yeah, that's me." Ricky answered flippantly.

"Totally cool. Dude, I should've recognized you. Bree, you never told me you had such famous friends," Jared chided, then turned back to Ricky. "Man it is really nice to meet ya."

Rick only nodded. "So, what do you do, Jared?"

"I'm in school. UGA. I'm there on a football scholarship. Wide receiver. Ever play any football?"

Ricky smiled. "Some. High school. Cornerback." He clapped his hands together and turned to Bree. "So– Sis," he said sarcastically, "as long as I'm here, do you mind if I grab a sandwich?"

Bree looked quickly over at Jared. "Uh, sure Ricky, go ahead."

With Ricky in the other room, Jared grilled Bree about the famous Ricky Kino, but their conversation was being disturbed by all the loud banging coming from the other room.

In the kitchen, Ricky slammed cabinets and plates as he became less and less hurt and more and more angry.

Jared leaned close to kiss Bree but she pushed him back. “Stop, Jared,” she whispered. “Wait ‘til he’s gone.”

Ricky finally came back into the living room, sandwich in hand. He took a bite. “Where are the boys?”

Bree stood, not missing his accusatory tone. “They’re fine. They’re with a friend.”

“What friend?” he asked.

“A friend down the street, Ricky. They went to the movies. They’ll be home at 10:30, okay?”

“That’s awfully late for them to be out,” he answered.

“Yo, Ricky,” Jared jumped in. “She said they’re okay. No offense, buddy, but you’re kinda ruining my action here, ya know what I mean?”

Bree’s face went red as Ricky looked coolly at Jared and then back to Bree. “Yep, I know exactly what you mean. She’s pretty hot, don’t you think?”

Bree glared at Ricky.

“I thought she said you were like her brother,” Jared reminded him.

“Yeah, I guess, but I’m not really her brother and you can’t help but look, right?” he said with a grin.

“I know that’s right,” Jared agreed.

Bree interrupted, speaking slowly. “Ricky, don’t you have somewhere you have to be?”

He took another bite of his sandwich. “Oh, yeah, well, guess I gotta go. Don’t forget to bring the boys up to the cabin tomorrow after school, if they even make it to school since they’re gonna be out so late.”

Bree’s eyes narrowed.

Ricky gave the same look back to her, then turned and shook Jared’s hand. “Nice to meet ya, Jared. Go dawgs,” he mocked. He was gone.

“Finally,” Jared said and pulled a pouting Bree down to the couch. Their lips met, but when Jared tried to push her down and move on top of her she squirmed away.

“What’s your problem?” he asked.

“He just makes me so mad,” she complained.

Jared shrugged. “He seems like a nice guy to me. Does he really do all that Karate stuff?”

Bree rolled her eyes. “Yes, he really does.” She stood. “I’m not feeling well Jared. Do you mind doing this another time?”

He stood and pulled her to him. “Uh, yeah, I do mind. Don’t let what he said about the boys bother you. They’re fine. Now come here.” He lowered his mouth to her neck.

“Ow, Jared, stop,” she whined.

“Come on, Bree, don’t be a tease.” He kissed her.

“Jared stop,” she said disgustedly as she writhed away from him.

“What’s your deal?” he said angrily.

“The deal is, I’m suddenly not feeling it and I need you to leave,” she

commanded.

"Leave? I'd rather finish what we came here to do," he countered.

She suddenly missed Ricky. "We— didn't come here to do anything in particular except spend some time together. We have. And now it's over. Goodbye," she declared.

"I don't think so. You can't do that."

"Do what?"

"Get me all goin' and stuff and then just drop it."

"Uh, if you got all 'going and stuff', it's your problem. Now, I mean it, Jared. Leave."

"And what if I don't?"

She picked up her phone and began pushing buttons.

He laughed. "You're calling the police?"

"I'm calling Ricky."

"Ya don't really think that dude could do anything to me do you? Don't you know most of that movie stuff is fake anyway?"

She gritted her teeth. "There's nothing fake about Ricky, and I guess you're about to find that out."

He shook his head. "You're crazy and not worth my time." He grabbed his keys and walked out.

Bree slid down on the sofa and thought about Ricky's behavior. She burned with anger. How dare he barge in here and act like he owned the place. Did he think he owned her? Oh, he wasn't gonna get away with this, she thought. Just wait 'til I see him tomorrow. He's gonna get more than just a piece of my mind. True enough, she had just used his reputation to get out of a tight spot, but she was in that tight spot because of him. He ruined the whole night, and she had no intention of letting him get away with it.

✝✝✝

Psalm 118:24

"This is the day that the Lord has made;
let us rejoice and be glad in it."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bree kept the anger alive all the way through the next day until she arrived at the cabin Thursday evening.

Happy to see her children, Shelley ran out to greet Bree and the boys. The men remained on the porch, watching the charming family scene with pleasure. Only, it didn't remain charming for long.

Bree briefly hugged her mom and with fierce eyes strode straight up to Ricky where he stood on the porch. She stared at him for just a moment and then drew back and slapped him across the face.

Everyone turned at the sound of flesh hitting flesh. Ricky didn't flinch. "Come on Bree," he urged quietly, "you can do better than that."

She pulled back and slapped him again with all her strength. Shelley looked on with horror. Mark and Joey giggled.

Eric's quietly fierce voice broke the silence. "What— is going on?"

Bree turned and scowled at Eric. "Why don't you ask him?" she yelled right back, nodding toward Ricky.

Eric's eyebrows rose for just an instant, but he certainly was not intimidated by this slip of a girl. Eric held his hand up. "No. Never mind. I don't need to know. However, you and Ricky take your fight somewhere else, not in front of the kids and not in front of your mom."

Bree stood glaring at Eric defiantly. Eric's calm and firm gaze met hers. Bree opened her mouth to speak, then closed it again. She turned and stormed away. Eric directed a questioning gaze at his humiliated son.

Ricky looked down. "I, uh, I pissed her off."

"Well, that much is obvious," Eric said, his tone not very sympathetic.

Shelley, noticeably upset, ushered the boys in to get settled.

Eric shook his head, before turning to confront his son. "I don't know what's happened between the two of you but whatever it is, work it out." Eric's voice was angry and harsh. "This goes against everything we've been working for and you'd better hope that little scene hasn't caused a setback for Shelley. Get your act together or get out of camp." Eric turned to join Shelley inside, then looked back. "Now."

"Yes, sir," Ricky said sullenly. He went to find Bree.

Shelley stayed in Mark and Joey's room, catching up on their week at school, trying to ignore the drama happening on the porch. Eric opened the door to the boys' room. "Hi," he said cheerfully. "You guys get dressed and you can help me work out your mom."

They worked for a while until dinner. The group politely chatted as they ate, trying not to mention Bree's and Ricky's absence. Eric watched Shelley. She'd barely eaten anything and kept staring out the window.

Finally, she excused herself and went to her room.

"It's all because Bree is mad at Ricky," Joey said simply.

"Yeah," Mark agreed. "She's mad 'cause she doesn't want Ricky to like her so much. It's pretty dumb."

"All girls are dumb," Joey giggled.

Eric smiled at them. Children see things so simply. He thought of Ricky's smiling face when he was a little boy. Grimacing, he thought of how hard he'd been on him earlier. Eric's attention went back to Mark and Joey. "Well guys, just because we don't understand how girls think, doesn't make them dumb."

"Dad says all women are idiots," Joey argued.

Eric frowned. He was in a corner. He certainly couldn't tell little Joey what he thought of his father's attitude toward women, so, he played it safe. He smiled at Joey. "I'm sure your father was only joking. You don't think of your mother as an idiot, do you?"

Joey's brows drew together. "No, sir."

Eric smiled. "It's best to never generalize."

"What's generalize?"

Eric patiently took time to explain the term to Joey.

✞✞✞

Ricky found Bree sitting under the same tree where they'd played and cuddled a week earlier.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked meekly.

She didn't answer. Sitting next to her he picked up some pine straw and flicked it around. "Sooo, I don't blame you for being mad," he began. "I deserve anything you want to dish out."

He paused but there was no reaction from Bree. "Okay, I get it. So I screwed up. I know that. It's just that, when I saw you with that guy, something came over me."

She fired a look in his direction. "Yeah, it's called jealousy."

"Okay, I was jealous," he admitted. "The thought of him kissing you and touching you when I knew he didn't care about you, it made me crazy. It made me mad at him and at you. But, I'm sorry. Truly sorry, Bree."

She glared at him. "Just because we've made out a few times doesn't mean you own me."

He buried his face in his hands. "I know that. I know. It's just that I've never felt this way about anyone before. He was kissing the same girl, the same lips, I was kissing a few days earlier. And yeah, I let my feelings get in the way. Can't you understand, Bree? Look, I give you my word right now, I won't let it happen again."

She sat quietly contemplating his words.

"Bree, you're killing me. Yell at me. Hit me. Do anything. But do

something, cuz, I can't take the silence."

She sighed. "Okay Ricky, you've always been honest with me, so I'm gonna level with you, just don't go getting any big ideas." Ricky sat up listening closely.

"When you left last night, I admit, I missed you, because I told Jared to leave but he refused. He said I was being a tease."

Alert now, Ricky asked, "A tease? Bree, did he hurt you?"

"No, he finally left, but I'm not gonna lie, I was scared there for a minute." She sighed. "In a way, I understand where he was coming from. I mean, what did I expect? I invite a guy over to the house where we're all alone, I let him kiss me, I guess he thought, well, I don't know..."

"He thought he was gonna get lucky," Ricky finished for her. "That's just the way most guys think these days, unless they have morals and integrity. That doesn't make it right to hurt you or take advantage of you. However, Bree, girls *do* contribute to the problem."

Bree sighed and nodded. "I get it. I'm learning."

"Well, just so you know, Bree, there are a lot of good guys out there too, and we're not all just tryin' to score."

"I believe you, and I know you're one of the good guys."

He smiled, but wisely stayed silent.

Bree went on. "Ricky, I do feel close to you, but I'm only eighteen. I don't have much experience and I want to date and do new things before I settle down to just one guy. Maybe I am in love with you. I don't know. I mean, I miss you when you're not around and I can't think of anyone I'd rather be with, but I'm young and I'm just not sure. So until I am, I want to date around and have some fun, some excitement."

Ricky interrupted. "I'm not opposed to having fun. I'm a wild man in most people's book. What kind of excitement are you looking for?"

"I don't know. Be crazy, do something on the edge."

Ricky grimaced. "On the edge sounds dangerous."

Bree shrugged. "Don't go getting all fatherly and protective. I'm just telling you how I feel."

"Okay, but, could *I* show you some of those wild times or does it absolutely have to be someone else?"

Bree smiled wickedly. "Of course you can. Just be sure to call for an appointment."

"Great," Ricky answered sarcastically.

Bree breathed a sigh. "I'm sorry I hit you and did it right there in front of everyone. I know I upset Mom, and I think your Dad is really mad at me."

Ricky shrugged. "Not nearly as much as he is at me, but don't worry, he'll get over it. He's just worried about your mom because her emotional state is precarious at best after all she's been through."

She nodded in understanding. "I guess I need to talk to her and let her know everything's okay," Bree said. She stared down at her hands a moment.

"There's something else I need to say so that you don't think I'm always so irresponsible."

Ricky waited.

"I know I shouldn't have let the boys go off so late to the movies on a school night. I was thinking only of havin' some fun for myself and that was wrong. Do Eric and Mom know?"

"No," Ricky sighed. "At least, I know I didn't say anything. I can't guarantee what the boys have said. And Bree, it takes courage to admit a mistake and I agree with you; it was wrong." He'd had his say and there was no use in making any more of the situation. He'd learned from his father to not grind everything into the ground.

He put his arm around her and they sat silently, reflecting on each other's words. She leaned her head against his chest and ran her hand over the expanse then lower to his waist. "What's this," she asked, fingering an intricately carved golden handle.

"Oh that? That is a very special knife."

"Special? How?"

"Well, it's made by 'White Knight' brand. The handle is gold-plated and my father gave it to me when I received my first black belt."

"Your first? How many black belts are you?"

He laughed at the way the question was worded. "I'm a fifth degree black belt in Taekwondo. Only a second degree in Karate. I've progressed in many styles. Kung Fu. Hapkido. I'm considered a Master in weaponry through my study of Ninjutsu." He shrugged. "Weaponry seems to come naturally to me which is why my father encouraged me to pursue that avenue with the gift of the knife when I was a kid. He has the same talent, especially with the knife."

"I've never seen either of you do anything with a knife."

"Well, it's not really something we play with, but we do work with weapons on a regular basis, like, when we're at home."

She fingered the hilt. "It's really beautiful." She remembered he used it the other day to cut the bottom off the soda bottle to make a breathing tube for her mom. She'd been amazed at how it slipped through the plastic like butter.

He drew the knife for her and turned it over in his hand for her to see. "It's dangerous. It's very sharp. It's real, and it means a lot to me." He raised up and unstrapped the leather sheath from his belt, inserted the knife back into the sheath, turned to her suddenly, took her hand and placed the sheathed knife firmly on her palm.

"I want you to have it."

Her eyes opened wide with surprise. Her first inclination was to refuse immediately, but that was too automatic. It would be making light of the tremendous gift he wanted to give. She gazed into his eyes, letting him know she understood the preciousness of the gift. "I'll treasure it always."

He helped her to her feet. "We'd better get back and see what we can do to make things right."

Hand in hand they walked slowly back toward the light of the little cabin in the meadow.

✝✝✝

Shelley awoke early Friday morning to the feel of Eric's lips brushing over her cheek.

He stopped to watch her. She lay on her back, perfectly still and content, her eyes closed, breathing softly. Lovely.

He kissed her lips, rose and turned to look out at the day, peering over the headboard, out the window to the side yard. Flowers bloomed, squirrels chattered and rabbits hopped along merrily. Surprisingly, Shelley's doe and fawn were standing at the edge of the clearing. Whimsically, he thought it resembled a scene from *Bambi*.

"It looks like your friends are back," Eric whispered quietly.

"Friends?" she murmured softly.

"Your deer friends."

Shelley sprang up quickly and peeked out, holding onto the headboard. She caught her breath at the sight. "Oh my goodness, they're so beautiful," she whispered on a sigh.

It was Shelley who was beautiful, Eric thought. He couldn't resist and turned her head to kiss her softly. When he pulled away, she immediately looked back out the window.

"Oh, no, they've gone," she cried.

"Who? The deer?"

"Yes, the deer, of course."

His head bowed. "I must be losing my touch. I thought my kiss would make you forget everything else," he teased. He kissed her cheek and turned to leave. "So, time to get up. We have a busy day."

"When do we not have a busy day?" she scowled.

"Get dressed."

"Yessir," she returned along with a salute.

He left her, then reopened the door. "You know I love you?"

"Yes," she answered sweetly.

"Good," he said matter-of-factly, and closed the door.

That afternoon, Ricky, Bree and the boys went to the hospital where Shelley had been treated to give the promised demonstration. Mark and Joey had been ecstatic about helping Ricky perform.

That evening Shelley was ready for a hard workout after dinner. As everyone watched from the porch, she sparred one after another. It appeared she'd completely regained her timing and power and Eric was extremely pleased with her performance.

Ricky was excited. "She's getting to be much more competitive for us. One of these days she just might put me down."

Eric smiled. "Well, Rick, speaking as *your* teacher, you need to make sure that doesn't happen."

"Yes Master," Ricky said as he bowed.

✝✝✝

The last full day at the cabin Eric decided it was time for Shelley's body to rest and had her take a nap. He wanted to make sure she wasn't fatigued in any way. Besides, it was the only way to plan the party.

"Surprise," they all cried when she emerged from the cabin after her nap to find the yard covered in people and food.

She found Eric immediately. "You're amazing. Oh, Eric, this is just too much," she laughed.

"This was just for everyone else. You go inside and work on your forms," he teased.

"When monkeys fly," she retorted.

He grinned. "Isn't that *Wizard of Oz?"*

Shelley laughed. "Ooo, You're gettin' good at that."

Brian and Meg came to greet her and hug her. Meg let Shelley hold little Aaron. Eric's heart overflowed as he watched her cuddle and coo at the baby.

Many people from the nearby town of Tyler Springs where Eric had replenished supplies had been invited. They'd been happy to come and rub shoulders with people they considered celebrities. They all introduced themselves and shook their hands and wished Eric and Shelley luck at the tournament. There were police officers, EMTs, a few doctors and nurses from the hospital, the mayor of Tyler Springs and several local businessmen and their wives.

"I'm sure you don't remember us," two young men approached, offering their hands. "But we were on the rescue chopper when you fell off the bridge."

"I'm so happy to meet you," Shelley said. "And thank you."

"No need for thanks," they assured her.

Shelley's response was interrupted by a sweet southern voice.

"My goodness girl, every time I see you, you look hotter and hotter."

"Angel," Shelley cried as she hugged her. "Where have you been? Every time I ask Jason about you he says you're very busy."

"I've been extremely busy, thanks to you."

"Thanks to me? What are you talking about?"

"When you told me about the ladies in the jail in New Orleans, it really got to me. I know what it's like to be alone in the world, to have no one in my corner. I became obsessed with helping them. I moved out of my apartment and relocated in New Orleans where Jason's been helping me set up a self-defense training school and home for women. The ladies would love you to come and visit them after the MART."

"Oh, Angel," Shelley uttered softly. "That is amazing! What you're doing is so wonderful. I'm so proud of you."

"You're not the only one," Jason said. "And by the way, what she didn't tell you is she is also working on obtaining her black belt." He took Angel's hand, raised it slowly to his lips and kissed it.

Shelley smiled. “You two are so cute together. Oh, I just love this! I guess you’ve missed Jason while he’s been here beating me up.”

“Well, it’s all for a good cause,” Angel laughed.

Next to greet Shelley was Mr. Fontaine and Mr. Johnson with their wives. They made apologies for Mr. Bearden whose wife was ill. They made jokes about Shelley falling off a bridge, being drowned by a giant rock, and how it seemed she liked to keep them worrying.

Ricky called everyone to attention and proposed a toast. “To my father and his champion, Shelley Adams, may you have all the love and laughter that life can offer. And Shelley, may you compete with all the heart you’ve shown.”

After cups were raised, the Mayor called attention and made a request that they couldn’t refuse.

“I’m sure I speak for everyone else from here in Tyler Springs when I say, we would like to see you in action. Can you do something for us now? Please, just a small demonstration?”

Shelley was shaking her head madly at Eric, but he was smiling at her. “Do your forms, Shelley. That would be easy.”

She looked around at the eager faces, then back to Eric. She sighed. “Okay, but only if you do them with me.”

He conceded and they moved out into the yard.

They stood side by side as they had so often during the past year. Master and student. Their muscular bodies began to move. Shelley let her mind clear and put all she had into the perfection of each movement. Shoulders, hip rotation, everything exactly the same as Eric.

The crowd was spellbound. They could feel the emotion and power of the forms. When Eric and Shelley finished, all were silent for a moment before they broke into wild cheers and applause.

A few hours later the party beginning to break, Shelley stood on the porch waving goodbye to people as she nibbled from the cake.

“You’re gonna get fat,” Eric whispered.

Rebelliously, she grabbed another piece of cake and stuffed it in her mouth. He laughed and helped wipe some frosting off her cheek.

After everyone had come to hug and kiss the champion goodbye, they were joined on the porch by Justin. “Both boys are sound asleep on the sofa,” he reported.

“Thanks, Justin,” Shelley smiled.

The trio watched as Jason and Angel walked off in one direction and Ricky and Bree walked off in another. The foursome had set up a little camp in the woods for themselves, but apparently wanted to spend some couple time alone first.

Justin watched Bree as she walked away with Ricky. “Shelley, your daughter is truly beautiful,” he said.

“I heard that,” Ricky called back. “Hey Jason, we’ve got to find your brother a woman before he starts moving in on ours.”

"Yours?" Bree asked, eyebrows raised.

Ricky put his arm around her with a sigh. "It's just a figure of speech. Don't go getting all huffy on me."

Jason laughed. "We'll start right on it tomorrow."

Shelley looked over at Justin. He was slimmer than Eric, with short black hair and beautiful almond-shaped eyes. His demeanor was more serious than his brother, and more sensitive.

She thought of the time when Eric had been hurt and Justin had been angry with her for leaving the house because he'd been so worried about her. He was a good man. She touched his shoulder.

"I guess I really messed things up between you and Sing Lei."

He shrugged. "No, not at all. Some things are just not meant to be. Besides, Jason was right; she was mean and spiteful, and I guess she really did have a reason to be jealous."

"What do you mean?"

"She figured out that I compared her to you, though I tried not to. It's become a real problem. Every woman I meet, I compare to you. There's just no one in the world like you, Shelley."

"This is true," Eric put in. "And it's a good thing for the world."

Shelley hugged Justin's arm. "There's someone out there for you, Justin. I just know it."

In the cabin, the men lowered the boys gently into their beds. Shelley tucked them in and kissed them goodnight, then joined Eric on the sofa.

"It was a wonderful evening, Eric. Thank you so much. I just want you to know that I really appreciate all the trouble you must have gone to. I'm always amazed at how thoughtful you are." She hugged him.

He held her close for a moment. "It was my pleasure." Rising, he held his out and pulled her up, then escorted her to her room and pointed to the bed. "You need some good sleep."

"So, where are *you* going?" she asked.

"I have some phone calls to make, some business to take care of."

"It's almost 1:00 AM," she argued.

He shrugged. "Not in California."

"Good grief, Eric, what in the world could be so important that it can't wait until morning?"

He sighed. "Do you think that all this year the airline tickets, and rental cars, and hotels, and uniforms, and all the supplies, do you think that they just magically appear whenever we need them?"

She was immediately contrite. Maybe she had taken him for granted. Feeling ashamed, her eyes lowered.

"Go to sleep, Shelley. I won't be long," he said, gentling his voice. He left and closed the door.

When Eric checked in on her later it was after three in the morning. She awoke, so he spoke.

"Babe, I was cruel earlier," he whispered. "I'm sorry. I was tired, even though that's no excuse."

She opened her eyes sleepily. "You mean you're not perfect?"

"Not by a long shot."

"Then I want nothing to do with you," she teased.

Eric sighed. He really was tired and tomorrow promised to be a long day. "Goodnight, Shelley. I love you," he said softly.

She called to him. "I was only teasing."

"I know," he whispered. "Sleep. We'll talk in the morning."

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The morning came much too soon. Uncharacteristically, Eric was the last one to wake. Shelley had already bathed and dressed and helped Angel and Jason start breakfast.

Ricky and Bree were packing up the little campsite that Ricky and Jason had set up for the foursome, and Mark and Joey talked Justin into one last trip down to the stream before breakfast.

Shelley leaned over the back of the sofa to check on Eric. He was still sleeping. She pulled the covers off. "Eric?" She touched his face.

He opened his eyes, then closed them again.

"Eric, are you gonna sleep all day?"

He yawned and stretched achy muscles. "What time is it?"

"It's eight-thirty."

He breathed in deeply. "You smell good."

"Well you don't," she retorted. "Now get up and bathe and dress. Breakfast is ready."

When Eric finally appeared, everyone was gathered at the table.

"Well, well, well," Ricky started. "Look who decided to join us."

Eric smiled. "Sorry everyone. I guess yesterday wore me out."

Ricky frowned, but remained silent.

As they ate, Eric looked over the assembly of people. Justin was discussing a book he'd read with Ricky and Bree. Jason kissed Angel's hand. Shelley was teasing Joey over the last piece of toast, as Mark laughed. Ricky looked up to meet his father's gaze.

"You okay, Dad?"

"I'm fine. Just reflecting on how much I care for all of you."

"You gonna get all mushy on us?" Ricky joked.

"Only if you consider the handing out of gifts to be 'mushy'." He held up several envelopes.

That got everyone's attention and they quieted to hear what their leader had to say.

"This year has flown by. It's been an amazing year. A hard one in many aspects, yet we're all still here, alive and well, and I wouldn't trade this past year for anything. Each of you has contributed so much to what we've tried to accomplish and I'd like to show my gratitude. Also, if it's okay with Shelley

that I speak for her, I'd like to begin by telling you all how grateful she is for your help. She's expressed how she feels to me continuously over the year and voiced how she wishes she could do something nice for each of you. I've asked her permission to let me step in and help in that area.

"I suppose I'll begin here at my right and work my way around the table." He pulled out the first envelope. "This one is for Jason Lee. Jason, I know how hard you've worked. Tirelessly day and night you've arranged security, performed special favors, cooked and cleaned, flown back and forth across the country at a moment's notice, babysat, and even nursed. Your expertise in sparring with Shelley has been especially beneficial. I'm sure you're aware of my gratefulness and I know that's enough for you, however, I wanted to compensate you for the money you've had to spend, without saying a word to me, and also for your time lost at work. As a bonus, there are tickets for a trip back home to Korea for two, all accommodations included." He handed the packet to Jason who knew better than to try to refuse it. Jason stood and bowed and then hugged his friend and teacher.

Eric sifted through looking for the next envelope. "Angel Pritchard. Oh, Angel," he shook his head. "At the beginning of this year, I thought you were gonna be trouble for sure. As it turned out, Shelley was the trouble." He paused while everyone laughed. "I want you to know that I'm impressed with the work you're doing in New Orleans for the women and I'd like to offer my donation." He handed her the envelope. "Also, let me know what I can do to help in the future."

She thanked him graciously.

"Justin Lee, my dearest friend, you're always here for Shelley and me. Your proficiency in obtaining films and teaching Shelley about her opponents has been priceless. I've called upon you as an attorney many times and you always come through. I know your law practice has suffered. I know you also have cooked, cleaned, babysat and worried. You worry too much."

Justin smiled. "It's my calling in life."

Eric handed the envelope to him. "This is compensation for your time in attorney fees, and you also have two tickets to Korea. Of course, we'll have to find you a girlfriend to accompany you."

"Maybe not," Shelley jumped in. "The boys tell me that he had a 'mushy' conversation with one of the nurses from the hospital."

Justin eyed the boys. "Man, you just can't trust anybody these days." Mark made kissing noises and Joey giggled. Eric moved on to the next person.

"Breanna Adams. You're a very special and beautiful young lady. You also have been there to babysit and clean and support your mom when you could've been out partying and having fun. Your mom truly loves and appreciates all you've done to help. Now it's time for you to have some fun. I have for you, tickets to a series of Broadway shows with two backstage passes included and, just in case you need some glamorous new dresses to wear to all the shows, there's a gift card for you to use for anything you need."

She rose and kissed him on the cheek as he handed her the envelope.

Eric paused to gaze at his son. He held up a small box and read the name. "Eric Kino, Jr. That would be for you, Rick. You're truly all that a father could desire his son to be. Don't think I've overlooked your support. Your sparring with Shelley, lessons for the boys, helping with security, babysitting, chauffeuring, and just your positive disposition, have all been a tremendous help. I'm sure there are a lot of things that have gone unheralded. Your support of me in this endeavor has been phenomenal. I have you to thank for finding Shelley and that's a treasure that can't be paid for. It is priceless."

Shelley blushed as Ricky winked at her.

Eric smiled. "Ricky, you already have everything that's mine. You know you only have to state your need and I'll do whatever is necessary to meet it. So, I have no envelope for you." He held out a small box. "Only this. It's merely a token of the love that your mother and I have for you, the love that brought you into this world."

Ricky opened the box to find a pendant. Shelley recognized it. It was the one inside the leather box that held the pictures of Ann. Ricky's eyes misted as he opened it. The two embraced.

Shelley sighed at how beautiful their relationship was and secretly wished she'd been the one to bear this man's son.

Eric turned to the boys. "Mark Adams and Joseph Adams. The two of you have been a joy to me over this year. You're fine young men and fine martial artists. I've kept your mom very busy and you haven't complained. You seem to have wisdom beyond your years, a lot like your mother. I have for you, free lessons over the summer with a good friend of mine who lives close to your dad. So next time I see you, you should be close to moving up a belt ranking."

Mark and Joey stood and bowed to Eric. "Thank you, Master Kino," they said in unison.

"That was from your teacher," Eric continued. "From me though, are the two new bikes waiting for you at your mom's house." Their eyes lit up as they jumped up and hugged Eric's neck. He squeezed them tight.

"I love you guys," Eric added.

"We love you too," they chimed.

Eric finally turned to Shelley and held up his empty hands.

She frowned. "I guess there's nothing in your black bag for me?"

"The only thing I can do, I guess, is take you home myself," he added to her *Wizard of Oz* quote.

She forced a smile.

"Okay," Eric took a breath. "Time to clean up, pack up and head out. Ricky, Justin, and Jason have graciously volunteered to head to my apartment and Brian's studio to pack it up and turn in keys and ship things home."

"Bree, Shelley, the boys and I will go to Shelley's house to organize and pack and then Shelley and I will meet you guys in LA. Bree, Mark and Joey are heading to their Dad's in the morning, but they'll be at the MART this coming

weekend. So, let's do this, but before we head out, as usual, let's have a family prayer."

They joined hands and Eric prayed over the group before they got to work. With so many hands and so much excitement the work went quickly. By 2:00 p.m. Eric was pulling into Shelley's driveway.

Her tiny house suddenly seemed large next to the cabin. It felt good to be home around familiar surroundings. Shelley was surprised to find the house clean and all the laundry done.

"There was nothing else to do," Bree explained.

Shelley started on a couple loads of laundry, the clothing that needed to be packed for herself and the kids. She then unpacked and re-packed their suitcases. By 6:00 p.m. she had herself and the children ready to go.

Eric took the boys out on their bikes. Shelley's and Eric's flight didn't leave until after ten that evening, so she made sandwiches for dinner for her little family, and then went back upstairs and waited for them to return. She thought about the wonderful gifts Eric presented to everyone that morning, everyone but her.

Of course, she thought, every day with him is a gift. He constantly surprised her and did nice things for her, and the gifts this morning were to show gratitude to those who'd helped so much. Still, she admitted to herself, she'd fantasized about him giving her a token of his love and asking her to marry him in front of everyone. He hadn't though. She was sure he loved her, though she was nothing like his late wife, Ann. He probably didn't see her as wife material.

She'd been with him for a year and never once had he mentioned marriage. She figured that he'd never been able to get over Ann and she supposed he never would. Actually, she just realized, he'd barely ever mentioned his home in California. For the first time, Shelley began to wonder about life after the MART. What would it bring? He loves her, so, of course they would stay together, wouldn't they?

She began to pace as she thought. If he never asks me to marry him, or at the very least, live with him, then I'll have no choice but to return to Atlanta alone. Would he stay in California and she return to Atlanta and they would write and phone and see each other every once in a while? Would they have a long distance relationship?

She hadn't been away from him even one day since last June and she realized, the thought terrified her. Her eyes welled with tears. She'd become emotionally dependent on him. So absorbed was she in her thoughts, that she didn't hear Eric come in.

"What is it Shelley?" he asked, concerned.

She turned slowly, looking up at him. Realization struck. She's terrified of living without him, and that went against everything she'd worked for since her divorce. How could she have allowed herself to become so attached? She'd wanted to stand on her own, strong and independent, and yet she felt like she

couldn't live without this man. She didn't even know who she was without him. She hated herself for this weakness. She needed him, but obviously, he didn't need her. If he did, he would've said something about their living arrangements after the MART.

"Shelley?"

"Oh, hi," she said feebly. "I didn't hear you guys come in."

Eric put his arms around her. "What's wrong, hon?"

She laughed. "Oh, nothing really. Just being silly."

"Don't lie to me," he said frowning. "Don't you think I know you better than that?"

Her face hardened. "Okay." She stepped back. "How come you've never talked about..." She stopped. No. Asking why he hadn't talked about marriage would be too much like begging and she refused to beg. What she would do is make herself not need him. She'd stand on her own.

"What Shelley? Never talked about what?"

"Never mind." She pulled away, hurrying down to the kitchen where the boys and Bree were already munching on sandwiches.

Alone, Eric sat on her bed. *What now? What is going through that fascinating head of hers?* He stretched out on his back as memories of the past year floated through his mind. He sighed. Whatever her problem is now, he hoped he could help her through it before the MART on Saturday. Closing his eyes a moment, he read his body. He wasn't just tired. He was definitely becoming ill and that means he'd better take precautions to make sure his champion doesn't get sick.

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John 14:27

"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Shelley sat with the boys and Bree on the sofa after they ate, telling stories and playing their game. Eric watched from where he sat on the stairs, keeping a low profile to allow her time to say goodbye.

She glanced up at him a few times. There was a coldness in her eyes and he wondered what he'd done to cause it. He searched his mind to find where he'd been cruel or inconsiderate. He'd been short with her at the cabin last night. He'd apologized. Maybe that wasn't good enough. He sighed. Eventually, she'd let him know.

"Well, my babies," Shelley began. "Looks like it's about time for me to go. Now don't forget, you have to be at the airport early in the morning, so you boys don't give Bree any trouble. Your Dad will be waiting for you at the airport. Send me a text when you get in, and I want you to call me later tomorrow to let me know how your day went, okay?"

Bree smiled. "Don't worry, Mom. We'll be fine."

She hugged the boys to her. "I love you guys so much. Do you know that I love you?" she asked, her voice filled with emotion.

"Ah, c'mon, Mom, don't cry. We're gonna see you in six days," young Mark comforted.

"Yeah, and the summer's real short," Joey added. "You'll be okay."

Eric smiled at them. Shelley had done a great job raising them. They were well adjusted and well loved. They'd matured a lot in one year.

Shelley looked at them in wonder. Compared to her, even her kids were more independent and emotionally stronger. She kissed her children and backed away.

Eric moved forward and hugged them. Shelley lifted her suitcases to go. Eric tried to take them for her but she insisted she carry them herself. He was surprised by the refusal. Hint number one, he thought. Still, he insisted he be allowed to take the largest one.

Shelley was abnormally quiet in the car. Eric too was silent, mostly because he wasn't feeling well.

At the airport, he made a few calls while they waited to board. As he spoke on his phone, he watched as two men sitting nearby struck up a conversation with Shelley. She was friendlier than usual, laughing and tossing her hair. Was she actually flirting? Hint number two. Once on the plane he turned to her. "So, are you excited?"

"About what?" she asked coolly.

He spoke slowly. “About— coming to California— about seeing my home— about fighting in the MART? Pick anything,” he answered.

She smiled stiffly. “Of course I’m excited,” she said blandly.

Eric sighed. It hurt. Only Shelley had the power to do that. “You sound like a robot, Shelley.” When she didn’t answer, he became irritated. He’d looked forward to showing her his home and suddenly she was aloof. He had no idea what he’d done to upset her so thoroughly. Or, maybe she was just worried about the MART. Whatever it was, he couldn’t let his own feelings get in the way. He closed his eyes. His body had begun to ache and he knew his temperature was rising. They didn’t speak again before he fell asleep.

Shelley watched him while he slept. She’d seen the hurt in his eyes and she was sorry about that. She wanted to touch him, cuddle close to him, kiss him, feel his arms around her. Her need for him consumed her. She was so weak. Leaning her chair back, she closed her eyes and slept.

A few hours into the flight Eric touched her hand. “Shelley,” he whispered. “Why were you upset earlier?”

She answered without opening her eyes. “Because, I am so dumb, and silly and weak.”

He squeezed her hand, relieved to know at least that it wasn’t something he’d done. “Well, don’t be so hard on yourself. You are none of those things. What brought this on?”

She shook her head and turned away without answering. Eric decided to give her the space she seemed to be needing. She didn’t speak again until the plane was landing and that was only to ask how far to his home. Eric didn’t mind when she slept through the taxi ride since his energy levels were so low.

Shelley woke when Eric lowered his window and leaned out to punch numbers into a security system. Her mouth fell open as a large black iron gate swung wide and they followed a winding drive toward the house.

The place was huge. It was hard to see it in its entirety at night, although it was well lit. They carried suitcases up to a huge, red, double door with some sort of oriental writing painted in gold. Eric opened the door and they stepped in. Standing in a large open foyer, she silently stared at her surroundings. Overhead a crystal chandelier sparkled in front of a three-sided balcony. A curving staircase on her right led up to that balcony. In front of her and to her left was a huge room much larger than her entire house. It looked more like a hotel lobby than a home.

The baby grand piano caught her eye. It was accompanied by beautifully carved, richly polished tables, three large sofas, crystal lamps, plants and flowers, carvings, paintings, and in the front left corner, a huge cherry wood cabinet. One of the doors to the cabinet was open and she could see it housed a large screen TV and other electronic equipment.

At the far right-hand side of the room were three steps, maybe fifteen feet wide, that led to a massive platform dining area. A giant, highly glossed dining table that seated at least twenty, or maybe thirty, held two gigantic pillar

candles. Barely visible beyond the table, she could see French doors.

Eric watched her reaction. She said nothing. Only took large gasps of air as she looked around.

"Do you like it?" he finally asked.

"It's beautiful," she said softly. "You actually live here?"

"Not lately," he laughed.

Shelley looked at him as if seeing him for the first time. "You are really rich, aren't you?"

He sighed. "Yes, I am. I have a beautiful woman that loves me, a wonderful son, extraordinary family and friends. Very rich."

"You know good and well I'm speaking of money," she snapped.

He sighed. "I have enough. Does that bother you?"

"No," she said unconvincingly. She walked a few steps into the room. "I'm afraid to touch anything."

"Shelley, don't be silly," he said, taking her hand. "Come on, I'll show you around."

They went up the wide steps toward the dining table. Shelley walked around the massive table and glanced out the French doors. She could see a jumbo three-tiered deck, a pool with a pool house off to the left of it, and much farther down, the ocean.

They turned toward the kitchen, to the right of the dining area. It was large, like everything else, and boasted of every convenience, including double-sized stainless steel appliances, beautiful granite countertops, rich cabinetry. At the far end of the kitchen was a breakfast room that opened up onto the same huge deck. A hallway large enough to be a room unto itself ran past the kitchen toward the right side of the house.

Down that way she found a library, jammed full of books, a very masculine study, a large utility room and laundry area, a gigantic bathroom that looked like something out of a movie theater, a large den, and a separate suite of rooms that appeared lived in.

"Does someone else live here?"

"Rosa used to stay here when Ricky was younger. She comes in once or twice a week now. To hear her tell it, we don't know how to take care of ourselves. She's like family."

They continued on the tour. On a lower level, a large room housed shelves of trophies she presumed to be Ricky's. Weapons covered an entire wall. Another room held weight machines, treadmills and bikes and another room on the opposite side, held a pool table, video game machines, leather furnishings, a bar that looked more like a small kitchen and a giant screen TV.

Back on the main level, they climbed the curving stairway near the front door. Four large bedrooms were off the balcony area, four more were down a hall to the right and to the left were the final four. Each room had its own bathroom and was beautifully decorated.

Eric pointed off to the right. "Ricky's room is down there, the next to the

last on the left." He changed and pointed to the left of the staircase. "The last two bedrooms," Eric explained, "are mine on the right, and on the left, yours."

"Mine?"

He smiled, led her down and opened the door. "Of course. Did you think I'd have you sleep on the couch while you're here?"

It was the last three words that tugged at her heart. "While I'm here– of course," she replied. "Thank you for your thoughtfulness."

His brow furrowed at her words.

Shelley peeked into the room. It was beautiful. A lovely antique bed sat on the left side of two bay windows. Other furnishings included a large dresser, a nightstand, a desk and chair. In front of the bay windows were two armchairs that had to be seventeenth century, with a table probably from the same era. Shelley smiled at the vase of flowers on the table. The lavender theme was fresh and feminine. Bree's bedroom at her home was done in shades of purple and lavender.

A door led to a bathroom out of a dream catalogue, with marble sinks and beautiful fixtures. Another door led to a large closet. After inspecting the room she turned to Eric.

"It's very nice, Eric. Thank you."

"Shelley, you sound like a robot again. Come on now, tell me, have I done something to upset you?"

"No, of course not Eric. You're perfect, as usual."

He leaned his weary head against the door. "Perfect? Okay, I realize that was meant as an insult, I just don't know why."

"I didn't mean to be insulting," she said politely.

"I doubt that." He ran a hand over his face. "Shelley, you're not yourself. What is the problem?"

"I'm not myself? Maybe that's because I don't know who I am."

"Don't regress on me now."

She shrugged. "I can't even conceive living this way." She looked up into his face, again seeing him with fresh eyes. "You poor thing, I mean, having to make do in that tiny apartment or even worse, at my dilapidated little house. I feel so ashamed."

Feeling weak, Eric sat on the bed. "Please don't be intimidated by the money. It means nothing."

"Oh, it means something all right. It tells me I don't fit in. I don't belong here. It tells me why you've never..." She stopped herself again, before she said the words.

"What Shelley? Never what?" he said in exasperation.

She gave him the same cold look she'd been aiming at him all day. "You don't have to yell at me."

He stood. "Ya know what? You're right. I don't have to. I apologize. I'm really tired. Goodnight."

"Goodnight," she mumbled as she watched him leave.

A few minutes later he opened the door and set her suitcases on the floor. "I hope you don't mind that I brought up your suitcases."

"Thanks."

He left her.

She took a long, hot shower and went straight to bed. She woke at one point during the night, thinking she heard voices, but she was too tired to look into who it was.

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"Come in," Shelley called at the knock on her door.

The door opened slightly. "Hi," Ricky said cheerfully.

"Hi," she answered sullenly. "When did you get in?"

"Early this morning. Dad left a long list, so get going."

"A list? Eric's not here?"

"He, uh, had to leave for a few days," Ricky answered uncomfortably.

"Leave? Just before the MART? He didn't say anything to me."

"It was unexpected. Now c'mon. There's no time to talk. Dress, unpack, eat, we have to get going." He left her alone.

She climbed out of bed and slowly moved toward the window, worrying over Eric's absence. Her worry had a brief reprieve as she glanced out the window. The view took her breath away. She gazed out over the front lawn, taking in fountains and flowers and a thick lush carpet of green as far as she could see. The iron gate they'd driven through was barely visible. She had to resist a sudden strong desire to go outside and run around in the grass. Instead, she dressed and unpacked quickly, made her bed and straightened the room.

Where was Eric? She'd been pretty hard on him. Had she made him so angry that he'd had to get away? She really couldn't blame him. She'd been absolutely reprehensible.

Opening the door, she peered across the hall toward the room Eric had indicated was his. Unable to resist, she peeked in. The room was, of course, spotless, and very masculine. It hit suddenly; oh how she missed him. His suitcases sitting on the floor, still packed, caught her eye.

"Come on Shelley, we have to get to work. What are you doing?" Ricky asked, irritation in his voice.

She turned, scowling. "Where's Eric?"

"I've already told you. He had to leave."

"Leave where? He didn't take his suitcases."

"Can't tell you."

"Ricky, you have to tell me."

"Can't."

"Was he angry at me? Is that why he left?"

"He didn't mention being angry with you and believe me, that isn't why he's gone."

"Then why is he? Tell me Ricky. Please."

"He told me not to tell you. He doesn't want you to worry."

She stomped her foot in anger. “Doesn’t want me to worry? Well, I wasn’t worried until you said that.” She turned and stormed back to her room and slammed the door.

Ricky did not feel equipped to handle her. He cautiously peeked in. “Shelley, I uh, I can’t tell you where he is but,” he took a breath. “I guess I can tell you why he’s gone.”

She waited, arms crossed, foot tapping.

“He’s sick. Doc says it’s just the flu. He left so you won’t be exposed to it before the MART.”

Shelley sat on the bed, mollified but filled with guilt over her treatment of him. She’d simply been trying to separate herself from him, stand on her own, but it came out all wrong. And now he was ill. “Ricky, I have to go to him. I have to go right now.”

“No way. We follow his list.”

“But you don’t understand. I was terrible to him. I was trying— look Ricky, I know I upset him. I have to see him.”

“Sorry little Mom, no can do.”

“Why?” she shrieked. “Why can’t you just do as I ask for once?”

He smiled. “Because, I’m more afraid of him than I am of you,” he joked.

She didn’t think it was very funny.

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On Tuesday Shelley jumped for her phone when it rang.

“Hello, sweetie.”

“Oh, Eric, it’s so good to hear you. Your voice sounds weak. Are you feeling any better? What’s your temperature? Eric, I am so sorry for how I was Sunday night. I love you so much.”

Eric laughed softly. “Okay, hold it, what was the first question?”

“How are you feeling?” she repeated.

“I’m getting better.”

“Is your fever down?”

“Not all the way.”

“When are you coming home?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at a friend’s house.”

“Where?” she asked again.

“Can’t tell you, babe. I know you too well.”

“Eric, I’m sorry about Sunday night. I was confused, like, mixed up. I love you too much.”

“Don’t worry about it, Shelley girl. We’ll talk it out and you won’t be confused anymore. How are your workouts going?”

“Horrible without you.”

“That’s not how I hear it from Rick and Jason. I want you to keep working hard. Do it for me.”

"I'll do anything for you, just please get well and come home."

"Soon baby. I'm gonna hang up now. I love you, Shelley. Goodnight."

Two days later on Thursday morning, Shelley opened her eyes to see a beautiful face smiling down at her. "Eric," she cried, throwing her arms around his neck, pulling him down to her and hugging him hard. "Oh, Eric," was all she could say as the tears spilled over her cheeks. She buried her face in his neck. He held her head still and peered down at her.

"No more tears little warrior," he said sweetly and kissed her mouth softly. He gently wiped her face with his thumbs and kissed each cheek. Slowly he lowered his mouth to hers again and kissed her with all the love he felt in his heart. "It was so hard to be away from you," he whispered.

She hugged him to her again. "Eric, I was wrong about the things I said to you Sunday."

"Well, did I do something to upset you?"

She shook her head. "No. It wasn't you at all. It was me. I was mad at myself really, for becoming too dependent on you."

"Talk to me. Tell me what's goin' on in your head."

She drew a deep breath. "One of the reasons I divorced my husband, other than the fact he didn't love me, was because I had to be someone. I married him so young, I never really knew who I was, what kind of person I was. He pretty much controlled me, made me who he wanted me to be. I went from being a kid to a married woman in the space of a few weeks and then seven months later, I had a baby.

"Finally, I was free from being totally dominated by my husband, and the first thing I do when I meet someone new is turn around and lose myself to you. I suddenly realized when we were at the end of our year together, that I totally depend on you for everything, and without you I'm nothing. Nothing, just as I'd been before. I hated myself for being so emotionally weak, so I tried to be strong and independent and distance myself from you, but it only turned out to be cold and unfeeling.

"Then we get here, and I realized why you've never talked about us being together after the MART. It's because, I don't fit into your lifestyle. I realized the way you've been living with me in Atlanta, well, to put it straight, you've just been slumming it. I don't fit into your way of life. I'm no fancy Nancy, I'm just simple Shelley. Simple. I only have a high school GED. I'm so beneath you. But the moment Ricky told me you were sick, Eric, suddenly none of that mattered. I had to admit I love you with every fiber of my being and I don't care how weak it makes me. I need you."

He smiled at her with such love, she thought her heart would burst.

"My turn, now," he whispered. "First of all, you're not nothing. I was impressed with you from the first time we met. You were sweet and fierce, all in the same body. That was you. Not something I made you into. And you were the first person I've ever known to put me down, like that day on the beach. That was your strength. Not mine.

"As far as losing yourself by loving someone, I don't think that happens. I think loving someone only makes you stronger. We complement each other. We're good together. You say you need me and I'm glad about that, because I need you, Shelley. Didn't I just say how hard it was for me to be away from you? I don't think that makes me weak. Ya see, your love helps me to be strong, because you are strong. So, maybe I've taken care of you a little extra, but babe, you've been through a whole lot this year, because of me, and the choices I made a long time ago."

He touched her nose. "Now about the part where you said you don't fit in. I thought we'd overcome all that. Having money or not having money doesn't make the person. It's what's inside. You fit in anywhere, and so do I. And, by the way, Ricky and I were just as comfortable in your home as we are here. Yes, material possessions make us comfortable, yet, I can go to the desert and live off the land and be just as happy. Listen, baby, I know it took you a long time to figure out who you are. I promise, I wouldn't take that away from you."

"I didn't think you'd take it. But I'm so weak, I'd give it up."

"But you're not weak. You just don't realize how strong you are, but I think you will, once Saturday comes around."

"I'm not talking about physical strength."

"Neither am I."

He rubbed the back of his hand over her cheek. "Now, speaking about the MART, how would you like to go shopping for a dress to wear to the Banquet and Ball on Sunday?"

"Aren't we gonna work out today?"

"The MART starts tomorrow. There's nothing more I can teach you. Your job now, is to rest and get centered. We're not gonna force it. From here on out, whatever will be, will be. Let go and let God."

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Even though Shelley wouldn't be participating until Saturday, she and Eric were expected to make an appearance on Friday for the children's exhibitions. Eric wanted to go early in the day so they could have their traditional dinner and make sure Shelley had plenty of time to rest and prepare mentally for Saturday.

Eric was surprised though, when he opened Shelley's door to find her gone from her bed. "Shelley?" He peeked into her bathroom but she wasn't there. A tiny finger of tension crept up his spine, but disappeared quickly when movement outside the window caught his eye.

A woman in a thin white robe moved slowly across the lawn, her long golden brown curls blowing softly in the wind as she leaned her head back and smiled up at the sun. As he watched, she untied her belt, slipped the robe off and spun around, her pink gown flowing out around her. Holding the robe up with both hands, she let it fly behind her as she ran down the hill and out of sight. She returned a moment later and jumped up onto the edge of the fountain. Eric watched her irresistible dance. Absolutely uninhibited. Complete

innocence. Unsurpassed beauty. Grace personified. A woman in love. He smiled, knowing it was him she loved. Then he went out to join her.

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Shelley fell happily back onto the thick lush lawn and rolled herself up in her robe. She knew it was silly for a grown woman to run around and play in the grass, but the lawn was too lush and green and too irresistible to an 'earth-girl' like herself. And if she was being one with herself and the beautiful world God created, then playing in the grass and dancing with the flowers was exactly what she wanted to do.

"What's this?" Eric asked, startling her. "A butterfly cocoon?"

She giggled and unrolled herself.

"Ah, yes," he exclaimed. "And here is the butterfly." He knelt down beside her. "You are beautiful," he said breathlessly.

"Good morning," she beamed, her cheeks pink with the exercise.

"Good morning," he answered as he lowered himself to kiss her. He stopped only to give her time to catch her breath, then kissed her again. "I think you may be the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," he said. "I don't want to ever stop kissing you."

"Then don't."

He sighed. "I wouldn't, but we have company."

They stood up hastily, like children whose hands had been caught in the cookie jar. Eric whipped up Shelley's robe and wrapped it snugly around her. They walked back to the house, meeting Jason at the front door.

"Hi, you two," Jason greeted with a grin, making them wonder how much he'd seen.

"Morning, Eric, it seems you're feeling much better." He turned to the woman beside him, smiling. "Shelley, lovely, as always."

Shelley blushed and turned to go dress. "Hi, Jason," she called back. "Hope you enjoyed the show."

"Sorry, Eric," Jason laughed.

"Did anyone ever tell you that you have bad timing?"

Jason only shrugged with a smile.

"Is security set?" Eric asked as they went in to have breakfast.

Jason nodded. "The men I've hired are high quality. I've trained them well. I believe we have it covered. So, do you think he'll show?"

"Oh, he'll show."

The dining table could've been something out of a four-star restaurant. Ricky had prepared whole wheat English muffins, topped with feta cheese, tomatoes and thick slices of bacon. There were cantaloupe slices with bananas and grapes and bowls of steaming brown rice pudding.

Shelley showered and dressed and joined them at the table, her hair still wet and smoothed back. "Umm, smells good. Ricky, I didn't know you could cook like this!"

Eric smiled. "He doesn't cook often, but he is quite a foodie."

Shelley tasted her pudding. “This is so good. Goodness Ricky, you’re a much better cook than I am.”

“Isn’t everyone?” he smirked.

“Oh, yeah?” She pulled back on her spoon and let go, sending a blob of pudding onto his cheek. He jumped up and lunged at her. She shrieked, sprang from her chair, racing to the opposite side of the table.

“Aha, you underestimate me,” Ricky laughed. In a flash he jumped cleanly over the table and had her.

Eric and Jason smiled their approval at the smooth move, as they continued eating.

Then Ricky went a little too far when he grabbed his bowl of pudding and emptied it onto Shelley’s head.

“My hair!” she screamed. “Oh boy, are you gonna get it.”

She grabbed her own bowl and tossed its contents at him, but only a little caught his arm and the rest landed with a plop on the table. He grinned at her as he raised his arm and licked it off. “Nice try.”

“That’s not fair,” she cried.

“Ricky,” Eric said with much authority. “Play fair.”

“What am I supposed to do? Stand still and let her get me?”

Eric looked to Shelley for the answer. She nodded.

“I guess the answer is ‘yes’,” he shrugged.

“Women,” Ricky complained, as he sat in his chair and held himself still for his antagonist.

Grinning, Shelley picked up her English muffin and slowly rubbed it all over his entire face.

“Tell me when it’s my turn again,” he said in a warning tone.

She put the muffin down and backed away laughing. Ricky sprang into action. Fruit pieces flew through the air, bombarding her. She screamed and laughed so hard she couldn’t run.

“I give, I give,” she cried, holding her hands up to block the fruit grenades from her face.

Eric finally stood. “Alright, you two, it’s almost time to go. The food fight was extremely entertaining, but I suggest you eat a little something, if there’s anything left, clean up and get yourselves ready.” He checked his watch. “You have thirty minutes.”

They obeyed, and thirty minutes later Shelley came down the back stairs that led directly to the dining room. She was freshly scrubbed for the second time that day, her hair hanging loose in wet ringlets down her back.

They left in separate cars.

Eric and Shelley stepped into the garage and approached a dark silver sports car with a prancing horse logo.

“Is that a Ferrari?” she gasped.

“It’s a Ferrari SUV called a Purosangue.”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. A Ferrari? Isn’t that like a $200,000 car?”

Eric sighed. “More like $400,000, but I didn’t pay for it. I was asked to drive it as an endorsement. I’ve been blessed. So far, it’s a great car. Are we gonna do the money discussion again?”

She caught herself. “No, no, I, uh, I guess a Ferrari will just have to do,” she said with a smile, making Eric chuckle.

They arrived at the *Rosewood Sports Arena*. Excitement filled the air. Children and their parents rushed around. Weapons masters were giving demonstrations. Eric was greeted by several tournament directors and he introduced Shelley.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Adams,” one said. “I’ve heard about some of your adventures during your year of training. I must say I’m impressed that you’ve stuck it out.”

“Thank you,” Shelley smiled politely. “I was lucky to be chosen by Master Kino, so wild elephants couldn’t keep me away.”

They worked their way around, meeting important people, whose names she’d never remember, smiling, chatting. Ricky was swamped by children. Shelley reluctantly spoke with the media. Nervously, she answered their questions, looking to Eric for help whenever possible.

They moved on through the crowd. Eric introduced her to some of the other competing instructors and their students, some of whom would be Shelley’s opponents the next day. They eyed each other mercilessly and Shelley was glad when they finally were able to take their seats to watch the event for a while.

The children were impressive. The forms were beautiful as always and the weapons were awesome. Shelley leaned toward Eric.

“I’m hungry.”

“Well, I’m not, but then, I *ate* my breakfast.”

She pouted and he smiled at her. “I must say, I’m glad to see the inhibitions you’ve been demonstrating lately. That means tomorrow you’ll go no holds barred.”

Eric appeared anxious when he tapped the earpiece that allowed him communication with Jason. “Just look sharp. He will.”

“He will what?” Shelley asked.

“Show.”

“Who?”

He took her hand before he spoke. “James Crane.”

“Well, I hope he *doesn’t* show,” she said.

Eric squeezed her hand. “It’s always good to know where your enemies are. Jason has security here tight. See all the men and women in red shirts and black arm bands? I promise you, they’ve been heavily screened and are highly skilled security officers. We’ve been searching for this man for months, Shelley. This is our big chance.”

“What makes you so sure he’ll show?”

“Oh, he won’t be able to resist seeing you compete and he’ll feel

comfortable in a crowd."

"But you said you couldn't link him to what he did to me, so it's not like you're gonna have him arrested, right?"

"Right."

"So, what are you gonna do?"

"Follow him. Find out where he's staying. Twenty-four hour surveillance. We will eventually have what we need to take him down. We'll run our own investigation and find the evidence we need and in the meantime, we'll know what he's up to."

She looked at him nervously. He smiled a comforting smile and kissed her hand. It was late afternoon when he finally said the words she wanted to hear.

"Let's go. I need to smell the ocean."

Back at the house they strolled along the beach, wading thigh deep into the water and jumping over the waves. Eric closed his eyes and breathed deeply, directing his thoughts heavenward, whispering a soft prayer of gratitude, breathing in light and exhaling anything negative.

Shelley felt the need to release energy and jogged down the beach.

She was half a mile away before Eric caught up to her.

"I'll race you," he offered.

His illness hadn't hurt his speed any, and she never stood a chance, but suddenly, he grabbed his chest and fell over onto the sand.

She rolled him over, giggling, thinking he was teasing her. "Eric," she said shaking him. "Come on Eric, you're scaring me." She listened to him. He wasn't breathing. "Oh, no," she cried.

She found a pulse and started mouth to mouth, her own heart racing. He allowed her to try three times before he kissed her. She promptly slapped him and strode away, heading toward the house.

Justin was there, chopping vegetables. She stormed through the doors, Eric behind her holding his jaw. He grinned at Justin. "Man, she killed me."

Shelley whirled around. "Tell him why. Tell him."

When he didn't, she snatched Justin's knife away, turned and advanced toward Eric. Laughing, he backed away slowly. Her eyes narrowed, making him laugh harder. He stumbled back onto the dining room floor and Shelley straddled him holding the knife to his throat.

"Help," he cried, barely able to get the word out.

Justin leaned over her, grabbed her wrist and took the knife. "We mustn't play with knives," he chided.

Immediately, Eric rolled her over and pinned her down. "I love it when you're mean. Be mean tomorrow, okay?"

She struggled against him. "No problem," she grunted. "Now get off me you big ox."

He let her go and she went upstairs to shower and dress for their traditional pre-tournament dinner.

Ricky and Jason arrived and they joined Eric and Justin in the kitchen to

prepare a special evening. The house filled with delicious aromas. Lobster in cream sauce, shrimp creole, chicken and brown rice, linguini with white clam sauce, brown yeast rolls, steamed asparagus and honey glazed bananas.

The men changed their clothes, lit candles and waited for Shelley. When she didn't come down, Eric went up to hurry her along.

She sat on the edge of the bed, dressed in her white silks. She was slowly brushing her hair. Grimacing, Eric immediately recognized a silver music box sitting on the bed next to Shelley.

He sat on the bed and gently lifted the box.

"It was in the top closet," Shelley explained.

"I know, it..." He wasn't sure if he should go on but decided honesty was best. "It was Ann's. I couldn't pack away everything that was hers. I left this out. Just this one thing."

"Was this her room?"

"It was *our* room."

"Oh. I've been in the bed you shared with her?"

"No, Shelley. It's all new."

Eric watched her. She didn't seem upset. Her voice was calm. She only seemed curious and Eric was grateful for that.

"So, why did you put me in here, I mean, of all the rooms you could've given me?"

"Well, I wanted you close to me, and I thought you'd like it. It's the only one with a bay window that overlooks the fountain. I wanted to please you."

"Ricky was conceived in this room?"

"No, we moved here when Ricky was a baby," he answered, his voice thick with emotion. He closed his eyes against his feelings.

"And the music box?" she asked.

"It was a gift to Ann, from me. She took comfort in its music right up to the day she died."

Shelley's eyes grew wide. "Did she die here?"

He stood and looked out the window. "Yes."

"In this room?"

"Yes."

"What was the date?"

"June first. Almost exactly eleven years ago."

Shelley continued brushing her hair for a few moments, then went to him and touched his broad back.

"Does it hurt you to have me in her room?"

He turned quickly. "No! No. What have I taught you? It's only a room. It was meant to be lived in, loved in, enjoyed."

"I'm really different from Ann, aren't I?"

He stroked her hair. "Like night and day. She was timid, quiet, gentle. You are, well— you. You're courageous. You seem to thrive when challenged and though you're not loud, I'd never describe you as quiet." He smiled at her.

"I love you, Shelley."

"I believe you love me. I don't feel insecure about that. Yet, I do feel like a stranger invading another woman's space."

"Listen carefully to my words, Shelley. This is my home and I want you here. I love you with all my heart. You're no stranger and besides, Ann has moved on. This isn't her home anymore and I truly feel that if she could speak to me now she'd tell me that she's happy you and I found each other. Besides all of that, I know beyond any doubt that God brought us together. You and I were meant to be." He took her by the shoulders. "Tell me you believe me."

"I do believe you, Eric. I just wanted to know. I think you're right. Your love for me has made me stronger."

Eric led her downstairs to join Ricky and the Lee brothers. They approached Shelley as she entered the room and kissed the top of her head, then led her to sit in a circle with them on the floor. A cup of tea was positioned in front of each person, which Eric directed them to lift. He spoke in Japanese then they each took a sip from their cups, then passed the cup to the person on their right. Ricky then spoke in Chinese and they followed the same procedure. Jason took his turn, then Justin, both speaking Korean.

Finally, all eyes turned to Shelley. It was her turn to speak yet she had no idea what had been said or what the ceremony meant. Eric hadn't filled her in purposely, she was sure, because he liked her to feel instinctively and discern things for herself. She sighed. "You haven't instructed me on what to say for this little ceremony and I'm gonna guess that's because I'm supposed to quiet my mind chatter, listen, and let my instincts speak for me, and say whatever comes into my heart."

Eric nodded with a smile. "Very good."

"And I know you well enough that whatever you guys just said was probably kind of like a prayer, inviting the Holy Spirit into our hearts."

He smiled and nodded.

She closed her eyes for several seconds. When she opened them they glistened. "I can feel love. Your love. Maybe even God's love." She glanced around. "All of you. I can feel that you want only my well-being. I want you to know that I love you all so very much and that I'm really and truly grateful for all you've done for me, all the time and energy you've expended, and I'm gonna try my very best to make you proud tomorrow."

They raised their cups in salute, and finished their tea. Eric uttered a prayer of thanksgiving and Shelley was served a huge plate.

She looked around as they ate. To her, these four men were like saints. They were always striving to be noble, to fill the world with peace and love, to be perfect. The perfect father, the perfect son, the perfect friends, the perfect brother. She wanted to make them proud of her and she wondered what they actually expected.

"Tell me the truth, guys, do you think I'll win?" she asked.

"Well, you have a good chance," Jason answered honestly.

"It doesn't matter, win or lose," Eric said.

"Well, Eric, it matters to me," she said softly. "And honestly— I'm trying to not be afraid, but I can't seem to help it."

"Everyone there will be fearful in one way or another. It's how you handle your fear that makes you courageous."

Ricky smiled. "I've heard that about a hundred thousand times."

"Just don't give up," Eric added. "That's the most courageous thing you can do. No matter how hopeless it seems, or how tired you are, give it your all. Center and focus and your body will perform at maximum."

Later, Shelley and Eric knelt together, facing each other, him holding her hands in his as they prayed. Afterward, he tucked her in and sat on the bed beside her until Shelley finally drifted off to sleep, Eric kissed her forehead. "Sleep little warrior. Tomorrow, it will all be over."

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1 Corinthians 9:24

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Shelley smiled as drops of water splattered on her face.

"Time to get up, sleepyhead," Eric said softly.

She moaned. "Let's just stay here," she suggested.

Eric frowned. "Those are not the words of a great competitor."

"Who says I'm a great competitor?" she retorted.

"I say, and I am the Master," Eric said dramatically, making Shelley giggle. "So, how do you feel?" he asked as he always did the morning of a tournament.

Shelley closed and opened her eyes. "Actually, I'm really nervous."

Eric frowned. "You've never once been nervous before a tournament, my love. What's up?"

"Those were all different. They were all practice for this. Now, here I am at the real thing and I– I feel sick."

He sat next to her where she lay on her back and gently patted her stomach. "What are you afraid of?" he asked.

She thought a moment, trying to sort her feelings. "I'm not afraid of getting hurt." She paused. "I think I'm afraid of failure."

"Okay," he said, taking her fear seriously. "Go shower and come back and we'll work on this."

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Eric sat with his back against the headboard and Shelley sat in front of him on the bed. He rubbed her shoulders and back.

"Close your eyes," he said calmly. "We're gonna do a little prayer session, beginning with meditation to help calm your mind so you can hear what God is trying to say to you. Breathe in, now out. Again. Lean your head forward. Breathe in. Now out. Again. Lean your head to the right. Breathe in. Now out. Again. To the left. Breathe in. Now out. Again. Now start at your feet and ankles. Relax them. We call upon the light and power of Jesus Christ. Shelley, see His light as a ball of warm light, coming from His hand to the top of your head and moving slowly down your body. His light, His Spirit, is relaxing you, healing you, comforting you, filling you with the peace that comes only from Him, filling you with His love."

He continued talking her through the spoken meditation and prayer until she was completely relaxed. "Shelley, God is telling me that you are a mighty warrior, though you may not know it. He says you are stronger than you think. Your body *will* do what it's been trained to do. He wants you to get rid of fear

of failure because win or lose you have not failed. You've won a mighty battle and all those that love you are proud of your accomplishments. Breathe in strength, peace, power. Breathe out nervousness, negativity, weakness. Again."

The session went on for some time. Finally he had her go back and wake and energize each part of her body. When he was finished, he wrapped his arms around her.

"I wish that I could fight this battle for you, but like you've been telling me all year, this is something that *you* must do. So, I send you my power and love and protection this way." He squeezed her hard and then couldn't resist playing her game. "May the force be with you."

She smiled and sighed.

"Okay, dress now and come down to breakfast, sweetheart." He kissed her softly. "I could try to make you feel mean the way I have before, but I don't think you'd fall for it."

She laughed. "Not this time. I'll be okay. Thanks."

She came down dressed, her hair braided back, carrying her sports bag and her brow furrowed. They ate a light breakfast of fruit and toast and left for the arena.

Upon arriving at the *Rosewood Sports Arena*, they were swamped by the press again. Shelley walked right past with no comment. Thankfully, they seemed to respect her need to concentrate and moved on. Eric walked her around, getting her oriented, finally leaving her at the door of the women's locker room. There was plenty of security inside the locker room and Shelley felt safe. Besides, Jason had it covered. No one was getting into this place with a gun hidden in their bag.

She changed into the simple white uniform Eric had provided for her. Others had more elaborate uniforms, one black silk with a gold dragon imprinted on the left side, one bright yellow with black piping. Shelley's was plain white, because Eric wanted her to concentrate on the warrior within.

It was relatively quiet inside the locker room even though there were several other competitors there. There was definitely an air of anxiety.

She looked around at some of the other women. Most of them were taller than her, and all were younger. She leaned back against the locker and breathed deeply. Eric's prayer earlier had relaxed her, for a minute, but suddenly, the anxiety came back full force. Hands shaking, she tried to put on her prized black belt. Three times she started to wrap it around her waist and three times she dropped it. Giving up, she held the belt in her hands and went to find her teacher.

Approaching Eric, she held the belt out to him. Calm, strong, compassionate, he took the belt and wrapped it around her waist, tying it snugly. He took her trembling hands in his. "You're still nervous?"

"I was okay, I thought, but in the locker room, there's such a heaviness, the nerves came back. I hate this feeling," she complained.

"Sweetheart, it's just a tournament, like any other tournament."

She shook her head, eyes wide. “No, it’s *the* tournament. It’s what we’ve all been working so hard for all year. If I screw up, I let everyone down.” She breathed in and blew out sharply several times trying to calm down. “Ugh,” she grunted and turned away shaking her hands up and down as if she could shake away the nerves.

Eric watched her walk away. Ricky and Justin joined him.

“So, Dad, how’s she doin’? Is she ready?” Ricky asked.

Eric sighed. “Nope. She has a pretty bad case of the jitters and nothing I say seems to help.”

“Have you tried being stern?” Justin asked. “You know, like telling her to buck up and get over it.”

“You know Shelley better than that,” Eric replied. “You know how sensitive she is. If I act the least bit disappointed in her it will only prove her point: if she messes up, she lets us all down.”

“So what are you gonna do?” Ricky asked.

Eric shook his head. “I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s gonna have to be drastic and fast.” He sighed. “Father, give me the right words to help her,” he prayed as he walked toward her.

He went to her and swung her around to face him. “Baby, this tournament is so unimportant to life in general. If you’ll just put it in perspective then you’ll see there’s no reason to be nervous.”

She looked up into his face with pitiful eyes. “I’m trying,” she breathed. “But right now, I feel like I’m gonna throw up.”

“Okay,” he began. “Okay, let’s look at this logically. What’s the worst thing that could happen?”

She thought a moment. “I guess the worst thing would be that I get put out in the very first round.”

“Okay, then, let’s say that happens. Let’s say you lose your first bout. What then?” he asked. “What I mean is, does the world stop revolving? Do you die? Does life end?”

“No,” she said sharply. “But I’ll wish it did. I’ll probably throw myself off a bridge.”

He sighed, feeling frustrated. “Shelley, what can I do to convince you there’s more to life than the MART?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. There’s nothing you can do. I mean, it’s the opportunity of a lifetime and we’ve worked so hard for it. People would give anything for this kind of chance,” she explained.

“But sweetie, when it’s over, it’s over. Life does not depend on a tournament. We are competitive, yes, and we put a lot into preparation for a competition, but this tournament is no more important than those kids playing t-ball that we passed on the way here. After this event, there will still be things to do. Things to look forward to.”

“Like what?” she snapped. “Name one thing.”

“Like...” he hesitated.

"See, even you can't think of anything."

He grabbed her and pulled her close. The words came into his mind. The voice of God, urging him to be honest. "Yes I can. Things to look forward to like—planning our wedding." He shocked himself as well as her. She stood there blinking at him in amazement. He'd dived in, as Ricky would say, might as well swim around. Only difference was, this was forever.

"Shelley," he began, "I know you want to be independent and I promise I would try hard to never dominate or overshadow you, but I want you to be my wife and share my home with me. I want you to make it our home. You can get rid of everything and redo the house any way you like. Or we can go back to Atlanta. Whatever you want. Just say you'll marry me, because I love you, Shelley girl, with all my heart and I can't even imagine life without you."

She didn't speak for what seemed like an eternity and when she did, what she said took him by surprise. "How could you?" she asked madly.

"How could I what?" he asked innocently.

"How could you ask me to marry you, here, now, right before I'm supposed to fight in the biggest tournament of my life?"

Eric had to bite his lip to keep from smiling as he watched the familiar fire return to her eyes. It worked. He'd heard his Father's voice and instead of ignoring it like he had been all year, he acted on it. And it worked. The impromptu, carelessly worded proposal had helped her put the MART in perspective and made her fighting mad without hurting her feelings.

She shoved him. "Men," she snarled. "I have waited all year— ALL YEAR, for you to propose to me and you do it now? Now? Ugh," she grunted and pushed him again.

"Waited a year? But I thought..."

She turned away sharply and headed toward Ricky. "Ricky," she commanded, "help me stretch."

"Uh, yes ma'am," he grinned.

She walked past him to a mat. Ricky and Justin smiled at Eric as he approached slowly.

"Good job, Dad, you're a genius."

"Yeah, well I had some help," he said as he pointed heavenward.

"What did you do?" they asked.

Eric smiled. "I proposed."

"Proposed what?" Ricky asked.

"I asked her to marry me," he said softly.

They both grinned and slapped him on the back.

"Are you coming?" Shelley snapped.

Ricky saluted and hurried over to stretch her out. All three men looked up however, as the message from one of Jason's men came over their headsets.

"J.C. plus five entering on aisle eighteen."

Jason responded. "Put Jerry and Wang on his butt and don't let him out of your sight."

Eric smiled. He had him. It wouldn't be long now before he'd eliminate that problem completely.

Jason leaned closer to the monitor screen. He had an odd feeling. Something wasn't quite right. His sharp eyes surveyed the action. James Crane stood, poised and relaxed, gazing out over the arena as he spoke on his cell phone. Five men surrounded him. Why would he spend so long in hiding and now show himself so boldly? It's as if he wants Eric to see him now. He must realize, Jason thought, that Eric had plans to bring him to some kind of justice, one way or another. Did he spend his time getting all his ducks in a row and now he thinks he can't be touched?

We expected him to show today, Jason thought, but covertly. He wants us to see him. Why? What is he thinking? He's a smart man. Brilliant business man. Shrewd. Cold-hearted. No. There's something else here. Jason sighed and kept a close eye on the situation. He keyed his mic. "No one makes a move toward these guys without my say." He thought twice before he said his next words, but went with his instincts. "That includes you, Master Kino." He received no response from his friend. He expected none.

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"What do you think, Tommy?" James asked impatiently, speaking quietly into his phone.

"I think, you, bro, are brilliant to think of this. You get to sit, relax, and watch Ms. Adams get her butt kicked, and I get to play you and lead everyone on a wild goose chase. I haven't had this much fun in a long time. So, you need to chill and let me handle things. So far, I think they've bought the whole thing. Sit back, my very *old* brother, watch the festivities and let me walk in your shoes."

James smiled. "I bet you'd like to do just that. Who would've known that with just a few changes you could look so much like me?"

"Yeah, it's amazing what some facial implants and gaining twenty pounds can do. Didn't know I could ever be as ugly as you."

James chuckled. "Just remember, after today, you go back to being number two." James leaned his tired looking old bones back in his chair and waited for the fun to begin.

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Eric silently watched the beautiful warrior who stood side by side with his son. They moved through their Chi like the waves of the ocean; continuously moving, flowing, drawing back and surging forward, their power intense.

He'd trained both of them. They'd been difficult, yet wonderful students. Just as a child would learn to speak, they'd first mimicked his actions, then imitated and slowly learned to understand and find meaning in each movement.

Eventually, they began putting "sentences" together, but quickly went way past being able to merely "speak." They were gifted students. There was something inside them, forcing them far beyond the ordinary.

Eric smiled with admiration. Shelley's eyes were closed, yet her balance

was perfect. She guided herself from within. Her movements were powerful and intense, yet fluid and beautiful. She radiated with a golden light. Her movements slowed and ended just as the announcer began to speak.

One by one he called the instructors and their students to a line at mid-floor, giving their stats as they came forward. Television cameras panned and network personnel chatted merrily for their unseen audience.

Eric glanced at Shelley. She seemed undisturbed. They called his name and he left her side.

She watched him go. She watched the crowd's response to him. She was proud to be his student.

"Shelley Adams, from Atlanta, Georgia, five feet five inches, one hundred thirty pounds, age thirty-five." A murmur from the crowd. She arrived at Eric's side. The announcer moved on.

Eric smiled at her. Maybe she wouldn't be so calm if she knew what the TV personalities were more than likely talking about right now: her age, and the fact that she'd only won one tournament throughout the year. They would also be talking about the assault before Christmas, and about her fall from the bridge less than a month ago. A bookie listening to their report would probably give her odds at fifty to one. Whoever had the guts or wisdom to bet on Shelley was gonna make big money today.

Eric scanned her opponents. Some were stretching, hopping, moving impatiently side to side, even shadow boxing as they waited for the announcer to finish speaking. Shelley used to pace, he thought. But no more. She was completely still. Her arms hung loosely by her side, her breath coming even and slow, a look of peace on her face. He was proud to be her teacher. Shelley Adams had learned well. He placed her odds significantly better.

The students were ordered to the side and the instructors came forward to draw a number printed on poker chips. Eric drew and returned to their camp.

"And here we go," Eric smiled.

Justin nodded in anticipation. "I think the waiting for her turn to fight is the worst part for Shelley," he said.

"Well, that won't be a problem this time," Eric answered as he handed Justin the chip he'd drawn. "We're first."

Shelley looked up, surprised. "Well, I guess this is my lucky day."

"Blessed," Eric corrected. He then gave her a quick "win one for the Gipper" talk. Justin quickly recognized her opponent and reminded Shelley what they'd observed on the films. Ricky smacked her butt and she left the safety of their circle.

There were thirty-six women competitors and fifty-three male competitors. The instructor and one other were allowed on the sideline. Eric and Justin took their place there while Ricky paced nervously in front of the seats. He looked up to find Shelley's family. They appeared to be on the brink of heart failure. It was somewhat comical and made him smile. It's just a tournament, he reminded himself.

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Jason watched as James and his passel of puppies found seats and leaned forward with interest as Shelley began to fight. Jerry was two seats away and Wang walked up the aisle, selling popcorn, keeping a very close eye on the large blonde man.

†††

The real James moved forward in his seat. He was actually surprised at how calm and in control the woman seemed to be. Her opponent was one of several he'd sponsored.

His blood pressure rose though, as the smaller, older woman landed kick after kick with ease. She moved quickly, blocked well, and there was no question in anyone's mind who had won the match in the end.

James slammed his cane onto the floor, cursed several times and spoke on his phone. "I told that idiot of an instructor to make sure Sheree made her black belt, but I neglected to tell him to remember to teach her how to freakin' fight," James mumbled.

"Patience old man," Tommy answered. 'Besides, who cares if she wins? You know, and I know, she'll lose soon enough."

"No. Kino is the one who will lose," James grumbled. "But I really wanted his little love queen humiliated in the ring too."

†††

Shelley, Eric and Justin approached Ricky, who picked Shelley up and swung her around.

"Man, oh man, did you kick butt," he laughed.

"You seem awfully relieved," she smiled. "What? Were you a little unsure of the outcome?"

"Let's not get cocky," Eric interrupted. "That's match number one of a possible six." He nodded at his student. "I'm very pleased with your concentration. Keep it up."

Shelley only nodded.

As the MART progressed, she did keep up her concentration. She seemed to have found some sort of confidence that even surprised Eric.

The inner strength she'd developed over the past year was being manifested outwardly. Her next few opponents were surprised, unpleasantly surprised, by the power of her punches and the absolute fury of her kicks, sometimes delivered so blindingly fast that there was no time to react, and that was their demise.

†††

As each bout ended James became increasingly agitated. "She's been through four battles and each time she comes out without a scratch. Is there not one competent instructor out there who can train an athlete to defeat a little old lady?" He was furious. Especially watching Eric as she fought. Sometimes he wouldn't even move. He'd simply stand with his arms folded across his chest and nod his approval for whatever his little puppet was doing at the time. I'm

gonna put that self-righteous chink down if it's the last thing I do, he promised.

✝✝✝

Tommy rose and made his way to the men's room. He smiled as the men who watched him so closely spoke into their mics and security officers scrambled. He knew they would only watch him for now. Later, as he left, they just might make a move to take him, and he'd welcome the opportunity. Maybe watching the fighting take place in the arenas was serving to fire his appetite for violence, because suddenly, he was looking forward to smashing somebody's face. He smiled in anticipation.

✝✝✝

The next several bouts were being fought by male competitors only so they could catch up and bring both males and females to their semifinal rounds. Shelley finished her mid-tournament interviews with the media, careful not to make any predictions of the outcome of today's event. She breathed a sigh of relief as she finally left the cameras and rejoined her camp.

Her family was there and she found that comforting. Shelley sipped an energy drink and listened half-heartedly to the banter around her. This was wonderful, she thought. All the people she loved best in the world, were right here, under one roof.

She smiled as she listened to her ex-husband actually converse with Eric, who was so friendly and easy-going. Ricky talked to Bree about her love of theater. Meg was showing off her baby to Angel. Brian asked Mark and Joey about how their training was coming along and Justin teased them about what a mean teacher Eric can be. She sighed with pleasure and contentment.

She'd achieved so much in one year. One hellish year at times, but it had all been worth it. She had a tremendous feeling of accomplishment, of satisfaction. She'd made her black belt, and made it to the MART. Now, not only was she at the MART, but she was actually doing well. So well in fact, that were she to be defeated right now, it wouldn't really bother her. After all, she had nothing to lose. Eric was right. This was just a tournament.

Eric tugged on her braid. "You ready?"

She smiled up at her teacher. "Let's get this over with."

Eric frowned. He wasn't sure he liked that response. What was going through that pretty head of hers now? She was keeping him on his toes. His answer came almost as soon as the semifinal round began.

Shelley was being absolutely battered by her opponent. She seemed to have lost all fight. A spinning back kick caught her in the abdomen and she was down again.

Justin leaned toward Eric in a panic. "What happened? Is she tired? You have to do something, Eric."

When the round ended and she stumbled toward the corner, he did do something. He grabbed her by the shoulders and gave a small shake.

She looked up into his face, surprised by the anger she saw.

"What are you doing, Shelley?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry. I'm trying."

"Are you?"

She shook her head. "What do you mean? Why are you so mad? You once said you'd never be angry at me for losing a fight."

"Losing the fight? You're not losing the fight. What you're doing is much worse. You're throwing the fight."

"How can you say that? I'd never do that."

Eric knew there was no time for a long discussion. He put his thoughts and words together quickly for the greatest impact.

"I don't think you realize it, but that's what you're doing, Shelley. It's like you've given up. It's like—you're satisfied with your performance and therefore, don't care about the outcome." He shook his head. "Listen to me carefully. I'm telling you that you *will* care. From the moment this bout is over you'll begin to regret not giving it your all. You won't be able to say to your kids and grandkids, 'I won the MART.' What you'll tell them is how you could've won, you came close, but didn't win, and they'll ask you why and all you'll be able to say is the truth."

"And that is?"

"The truth is you were tired, and content with going halfway. It was much easier to give up and you took the easy way out." He paused and looked away a moment. Time was running out. "Shelley, I don't want you to live the rest of your life with the regret and remorse that you'll feel for letting this opportunity slip through your hands. I've never said this to you the whole time you've been training, not once, because winning is not always the important thing, but, sweetheart, you *can* win this thing. You really are capable of winning the whole darn thing."

"And what if I don't?" she whispered.

"Do you remember what I told you in Daytona before your very first tournament? I said that as long as you do your best, I'd never be disappointed. Don't disappoint me today, baby. And don't disappoint your family and friends who have supported you in this endeavor all year because they love you and want you to be happy. Go out there and give it all you've got and *THEN* even if you lose, you still win."

He searched her face for an answer but there was no time. She stood and went to center ring.

✝✝✝

James sat erect. Finally, the tournament was becoming interesting. For a moment he thought Eric's little hellion wasn't gonna answer the bell. He chuckled. *I'd bow out now too if I were you*. But then, she did return. Good. It was time to see her get what she deserved.

The moment the bell rang Shelley's opponent came at her. Front kick, roundhouse kick, jumping side kick. Shelley was barely able to block them as she was backed up and ended up against the ropes. James' eyes lit up. She's going down.

†††

Eric shook his head. He must not have gotten through, he thought. But the very next moment, he knew he had. As the woman spun around to deliver a crescent kick to Shelley's head, Shelley simply ducked and came up with a powerful punch to her ribs. The woman staggered backward, obviously surprised by the force of the blow.

A roar emerged from one section of the crowd. James looked up to see Shelley's family, who had earlier become quiet with worry, now jumping up and down with renewed excitement and screaming encouragements. His frustration mounted.

†††

Shelley moved quickly to take advantage of her surprise attack. Punch, easy block, counter punch, side kick. The opponent was in pain.

Things couldn't have worked out better had Eric and Shelley planned the strategy for this bout. The woman staggered. Instead of going for the head, Shelley kicked with all her might to the midsection, hoping she'd knock the breath out of her opponent and keep her from rising. Eric stressed midsection over and over for a reason. Shelley danced about, waiting for the ref to check out her opponent. She wasn't getting up. At least not without help.

Once Shelley's hand was raised in the air, she spun around to face Master Kino and jumped into his arms.

†††

For the umpteenth time that day, James slammed his cane on the floor. He grew tired of the nonsense. "Let's do it," he spoke to his little brother. "No talk, let's get her now, before she wins. If we can just get her alone."

"Are you crazy? We'll never get away with something now. Remember, you only wanted to talk to her. It was you who said you wanted to toy with your prey. You can't get to her yet. It's not time, bro. Would you please be patient? We stick to our plan. We wait until after the championship round, I draw her protectors away and you have your little conversation with her. Look, if it were up to me I would've straight up ended her a long time ago, but not here. This was your plan, so we stick to it. Besides, I have to admit, I'm enjoying myself."

James grumbled something back in response and drew a deep breath. He'd wanted so badly to see Kino lose the MART this time. He seethed with hatred. Yet Tommy was right. He needed to stick to the plan. Soon, he'd confront Shelley Adams and set her up for a night she'd never forget. He hadn't killed her yet because he wanted to have his way with Eric's woman. He wanted Eric to know how that feels. He wanted to describe, in vivid detail, everything he will do to her. How she responded, how she fought. It was gonna be so good.

†††

Shelley and a few of her fellow competitors chatted excitedly. There had been a delay after the men's semifinal match. Shelley kept her eye on Eric and the other instructors, who were talking over whatever the problem was with

officials and television personnel.

Shelley wondered what was happening and how it would affect her. Maybe her opponent was being disqualified. Yeah, right. Anyway, she knew Eric wouldn't want that. He wouldn't want to win by default. Whatever was going down, Eric didn't appear upset.

Each instructor made their way back to their students and called their people together.

"There's been a change in plans." All eyes waited patiently. "The men's championship is gonna go first."

"Why?" Shelley and Ricky asked simultaneously.

Eric smiled. "They didn't say, but I'm gonna venture it's because you've become very popular, even more popular than they expected."

Justin nodded thoughtfully. "I'm sure it also has something to do with your instructor," he added.

Eric shrugged. "The man who trained Ricky Kino, let's see what his newest student can do? I'm sure that's part of it."

Ricky nodded. "So, the TV suits are saving what everyone wants to see the most, for last."

"It seems so. Anyway," Eric said, "it's an honor, but it means you have to wait which has its ups and downs. So– stay loose, stay warm, and most of all– stay focused."

✝✝✝

Tommy laughed out loud at his brother when he realized they would have to sit through the men's championship. Not only would they have to wait longer to make their move, but James had to withstand the honor bestowed on Eric and Shelley to fight last. It took some fast talking to calm him down. It wasn't that much longer and finally, it was Shelley's turn to fight. Tommy leaned forward, a scowl on his face, just as James would've done, and cursed with every gain Shelley made against her opponent.

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At the end of round one, Shelley impatiently stood still as Eric wiped the blood from her face. It had only been a glancing blow, that had connected with her nose just right.

He offered her some words of encouragement, some words of wisdom, patted her on the butt and sent her back to the scuffle but she fared even worse in the second round.

Back at his side she was breathing hard. "Eric, do you think there is any chance?" she asked timidly.

"Well, there's always a chance," he said matter-of-factly.

Shelley frowned. She didn't care for his response.

He smiled at her sour face. "Okay, I'll be completely honest with you. If they were to call the fight right now, not one of the judges would place you first. Fortunately, they won't call the fight. It doesn't work like that. So, babe, there's not enough time left for you to catch up in points. In order to win,

you're gonna have to put her down."

"Down? As in a knockout?"

He nodded. "It's the only way."

"How? How can I do that? I mean, she's good. I can't even get close to her. What am I doing wrong?"

He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I wish I could tell you that you were doing something wrong, but you're not. You're fighting well. Making good decisions. The two of you seem equally skilled. It seems to have come down to who spent the most time in the weight room. Who's in better shape aerobically. Who's the strongest, the quickest. Whose instincts are better." He paused and thought.

"Shelley, it's past being a competition of the instructors. We've both done our jobs. It's now completely between you and her. Which one will buckle when kicked in the abs? Which one of you moves quicker, punches harder? I'd have to say it's a tossup."

"Can't you say *anything* that will help me?"

"Sorry babe, it's all up to you now. My only advice is to think back over this year and decide how much you want this. Now go." He shoved her back out into the ring.

She couldn't believe it. She'd come all this way only to have him desert her in the end. She was on her own. Well of course I am, she thought. How many times had he said he wished he could fight this battle for me? It's not as if she hadn't had to handle things on her own before. She wasn't gonna go through the hell she'd gone through this entire year for nothing. She moved toward her opponent, barely seeing her. Everything came flooding back. The torturous training. She spun and kicked. Her opponent buckled at the force.

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"They're on the move." Jerry was speaking softly into his mic. His eyes followed his subject as the man stood and began making his way slowly toward one of the exits, surrounded by his thugs.

Jason watched closely from the observation booth. This man thought he'd simply appear briefly and disappear again without any consequences. They would allow him to think just that. For now, they would only follow and keep track of him. Eric deserved the opportunity to deal personally with him and they intended to give him the opportunity. "Jerry, don't let him out of your sight. Wang, report."

"I'm on aisle twenty. They're passing me now. I'll ditch the vendor garb and catch up with Jerry."

"Don't lose him," Jason warned. "I have all security personnel on standby alert keeping an eye on things but I'll feel better when you're there with Jerry."

"Are you saying you don't trust me?" Jerry laughed into his mic.

Jason smiled. Trust? He trusted Jerry implicitly. Jerry was sharp, strong, incredibly brave, nonetheless, he was young and sometimes saw the world through rose-colored glasses. Wang, on the other hand, was well-seasoned,

intelligent to a fault and like a brother to Jason. He loved both these men and would trust them with his own life in a second.

"Trust you?" Jason answered. "Sure, I trust you. I trust you to get carried away and take James out somewhere, never to be seen again."

"Would I do that?" Jerry asked innocently.

"Yo, Jason," Justin's voice interrupted. "Shelley here is about to win the whole freakin' thing and I really wish you and your little toy soldiers would shut up and let us concentrate."

"Yes sir," Jason answered.

Ricky looked up toward the booth Jason occupied, and smiled.

†††

Shelley saw a man in black standing in her doorway. Her kiyai reverberated as she punched her opponent. She could see men in black all around her, laughing at her as she blocked and countered with an uppercut that sent her opponent flying.

†††

James tried to not pay attention to the crowd's cheers for his enemy as he made his way feebly upstairs. He'd ducked into one of the closed concession kitchens to repair the beard that had loosened during one of his outbursts. Soon, he'd stand face to face with Eric's little playmate, but no one would suspect him, because as far as they knew, Eric's men were following James Crane out of the dome.

†††

Eric watched with pride as Shelley's inner strength emerged and made itself evident to her opponent. She fought with the fierceness of a tiger, the skill of a true black belt and the quickness of– he smiled, she'd like this– the quickness of Bruce Lee.

Shelley, however, wasn't thinking about what Eric thought of her. She was fighting a great battle; an inner battle that was manifesting itself outwardly, much to the dismay of the young woman she fought.

Each punch she threw, each kick delivered, was payback for the atrocities she'd witnessed this year. She could see Eric bound and beaten, hanging in Brian's dojang. She saw Angel's eyes close as she hit the floor, and felt the pain as KC threw her into the mirror in New Orleans. With each memory, she delivered a devastating offensive that sent her opponent down again and again.

The spectators were on their feet. It was as if everyone could feel the passion with which Shelley fought. They all knew that the "underdog" was about to take a great victory and they loved it. The oldest person to ever compete in the MART was gonna win.

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Wang made his way to one of the concession areas that had already closed and slipped quietly inside. Quickly, he unstrapped the tray of drinks and popcorn and set it down on the floor in the dark. That was when he noticed the shoes. His eyes moved up to find two steely blue eyes glaring at him.

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Tommy sighed with disappointment. Several of Eric's men had followed him out of the dome, but not one had made a move to take him or question him in any way. He had to be content to lead them away from his brother without a confrontation.

†††

It took a moment for Wang's eyes to adjust to the dimly lit room. A tall man, half a beard dangling from his chin smiled at him, though it wasn't a friendly smile. The smile sent a chill down Wang's spine.

Calmly, the man removed the hat from his head, revealing the startling blond hair. Wang knew this man. This was James Crane, yet, hadn't James just left the dome? Damn. He'd pulled off one of the oldest tricks in the book.

†††

Shelley's opponent staggered. Shelley really didn't see her though. She saw her home destroyed, she saw Micky coming at her with scissors and— she saw the boulder— the boulder crashing down on top of her as she held fast to her son's arm.

Time seemed to slow. She drew a deep breath, her head turned first, followed by her torso and finally her leg. She whipped herself around and connected with the woman's head.

†††

Wang never had a chance to react. James had no intention of allowing this peon to ruin all his plans. He motioned to his man who stood just behind.

Wang started to speak, to tell Jason what he was seeing, but never got the opportunity. He could only grunt as an arm closed around his throat and he felt the prick of the knife at his back as it began its inward journey. Searing pain shot through him but it wasn't as bad as the pain he felt for failing in his duty and letting down his friends and especially the pain of never seeing his beautiful wife and daughter again. Slowly, he sank to his knees.

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The woman fell to the mat, rolled over and tried to rise, but she couldn't tell which way was up. She withstood the count before she allowed herself the peace of unconsciousness.

†††

Wang reached out toward James in a last effort. He sank to the floor and drew in a ragged breath.

†††

Shelley, her family, her teacher, his son, their friends and the rest of the crowd seemed to fly in the air as Shelley was declared the winner.

She won! Could it possibly be true? Eric brushed the hair from her face and held her tight.

"Yes, it's true Shelley. You've won the MART. So tell me, is it all you thought it would be?"

"Oh, much more," she laughed.

"Well, babe, I am so proud of you. You did it. You fought so hard. So listen, you have to give some quick interviews, but as soon as you can pull away from the reporters, get to the locker room and get dressed quickly. I have a surprise for you."

✝✝✝

Hebrews 12:1-2

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God."

Chapter Thirty

Sunshine burst from the ladies' locker room as the new women's MART Champion emerged. Shelley hugged several more fellow competitors before she turned her attention to finding Eric and her family. She finally spotted them. They were completely surrounded by press and media.

Sighing, she wondered if somehow she could slip away without having to speak to the press anymore today. They currently held her family captive. Even Mark and Joey were being interviewed.

She looked to her left to see if maybe there was an avenue of escape but frowned as a smiling group of men came toward her. A large, bearded, elderly man dressed in a business suit and hat, held out his hand.

"Ms. Adams," he began in an overly friendly tone. "Congratulations on your win. You were remarkable. I enjoyed watching you."

Shelley smiled politely. "Thank you."

Looking him over quickly she tried to decide what it was about him that made her dislike him without even knowing him. He had a gray beard and walked with a cane. He seemed polite and friendly. Disappointed in herself for judging someone so quickly, she tried to dismiss the negative thoughts.

"Ms. Adams, let me introduce myself. My name is Edward Banks."

"I'm sorry," Shelley said, wrinkling her nose. "Should I know you? You seem familiar."

He laughed. "Well, I am a big man in the martial arts industry. I have a lot of pull. I backed several of your opponents."

"Oh! Oh, I'm sorry," she offered.

"No, no, it's quite all right. Like I said, I was impressed. Actually, I'd like to talk business with you. There's a lot I can do for you and of course both of us could stand to make a great deal of money if we were to team up together."

Shelley's eyes lit up at the thought of making her own money and not being dependent on anyone. It was intriguing. But she already had sponsors and backers who'd been behind her from the beginning.

The man continued. "I can take you to great heights, and so, if you'd do me the honor of accompanying me to tomorrow night's banquet and ball, we could start the ball rolling so to speak."

Shelley frowned. "Well, Mr. Banks, I really do appreciate the invitation but I already have an escort."

James peered in Eric's direction. "Your escort couldn't by any chance be your teacher, Master Kino?" he asked slyly.

"Yes, it is," Shelley replied. "Do you know him?"

"We've met. Miss Adams, I mean no disrespect to your instructor, but now that you're a champion, there is really nothing more he can do for you. I think maybe you should take a moment and reconsider. I'm offering you the opportunity of a lifetime."

Shelley was beginning to feel uncomfortable. She didn't appreciate the pressure this Mr. Banks guy was applying. "I'm sorry, but I really can't go with you. I wouldn't go with anyone but Eric."

She watched as his face turned red, then returned to normal.

"I see. Ms. Adams, well, maybe you don't understand. Now that you're the women's champion, it would be important for you to be seen with a man like myself, if you know what I mean, a real American, instead of, well, instead of a man of Asian descent. I think the American public will accept you in a much better light."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Not at all."

Now it was Shelley's turn to be angry. "Well, let me tell you something, Mr. Banks. I don't appreciate your racist remarks. The American public has accepted me thus far, with Eric by my side. If suddenly they stopped, that would just be too bad."

James' eyes narrowed to slits as one of his entourage spoke. "She's a feisty little thing, huh, Ja, uh, Eddie?"

James stiffened and drew a deep breath. "I don't think you realize, Ms. Adams, who you're dealing with. I'm not used to being turned down. I always get what I want."

She cocked a brow. "Well— not this time."

She watched again as anger reddened the man's face and again, he seemed to recover quickly.

James sighed, realizing he had erred. He spoke slowly and sweetly. "I am sorry, Ms. Adams and I accept my defeat. Please accept my apology. I meant no disrespect to you or your teacher. Please tell me you forgive an old man."

Shelley let out a slow breath and then nodded. "Of course. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Before you go, may I beg one small favor of you?"

When she hesitated, he went on.

"Please, may I have just one dance at the ball, as consolation to my wounded ego?"

Shelley nodded. "One dance." Turning, she trotted off toward Eric, leaving James fuming.

"I'm gonna wipe that smile off her face," he muttered.

Shelley joined her family and once again, they covered her with hugs, kisses and congratulations.

Bree put an arm around her mother's shoulders. "So, tell me, how do you feel, champ?"

"I feel like I'm starving to death."

"I knew you would be," Eric said. He motioned to the others. "We're having a celebration dinner out at the house. Please, everyone come, eat, play on the beach and enjoy yourselves."

Happily, they piled into cars and headed toward Eric's home. Eric's hand covered Shelley's where it rested on her knee in the car. Her eyes twinkled as she smiled at him.

"We did it," she said softly.

Squeezing her hand, he disagreed. "You did it, Shelley and I am so very proud of you."

He glanced over at her, taking in and admiring her natural beauty. How could she look so small and vulnerable now and yet cause the damage she did today in the ring? Somehow she was able to be a dynamic athlete and still preserve her femininity at the same time. Lifting her fingers to his lips, he kissed them softly.

Shelley, feeling romantic, smiled at him sweetly, and then leaned over to kiss his cheek and then his neck.

"Oh, woman," he mumbled. "Stop, now, Shelley. You're gonna make me drive over a cliff, and since everyone is following me, you'll be responsible for the death of dozens of people."

She giggled. "Okay, I'll stop. I don't want to go back to jail for involuntary manslaughter."

He squeezed her hand as they drove a few minutes in silence. Finally, he wiggled her hand to get her attention. "So, sweet Shelley, you know, you never did give me the answer to my poorly done proposal."

She looked up at him. "Oh, you were serious about that?"

His eyes opened wide with surprise and then she giggled.

He smiled. "It wasn't much of a proposal. Let me try again. Shelley, I love you with my whole heart. I love everything about you. I believe God brought us together. Will you marry me and spend the rest of our days together? I promise to love you and cherish you and treat you well, and protect you and shield you and help you in any way I can. I promise I won't dominate you. I will lead by being a Godly man and a strong provider. Will you marry me, Shelley girl?"

Shelley blinked the tears from her eyes. "I love you too, Eric. With my whole self. And I trust you. But I can't promise you all of those things just yet. You know my shortcomings. I'm headstrong, I'm impulsive. I don't even really know God that much yet. But I'll try to be a Godly woman. I am fierce though. And that's how I'll love you. Fiercely. Yes, Eric, I'll marry you."

He smiled as they pulled into the drive and up to the house. He helped her out of the car and immediately took her in his arms and kissed her. There wasn't time for anything else. They went inside and Eric became the perfect host. Caterers were already hard at work out back filling tables with barbecue ribs, wings, salads of all kinds, fruits and desserts, cold cuts and breads.

"You had this planned all along?" Shelley asked. "What would you have done if I'd lost?"

"Then this would be a don't worry about it, you did a great job celebration," came his quick reply.

The party quickly grew as more friends of Eric's and Ricky's poured in. Shelley was toasted dozens of times over the course of the evening and she raised her glass with every one. Tonight she didn't care how the alcohol affected her. She was gonna celebrate. By the time everyone had gone their merry way she was quite intoxicated.

Jason had been noticeably absent from the festivities and just before Eric escorted Shelley off to bed, he pulled his friend aside. "Justin, have you heard from Jason?"

Justin nodded with a frown. "Yeah, I just got off the phone with him."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, there's a problem. Jason lost contact with one of his men. They tracked him down and found him at the arena, knifed in the back. Jason is with his family at the hospital right now."

"Is he alive?"

"Barely."

Eric shook his head. "I don't believe this was random."

"No, neither does Jason. He says something's not right about this whole thing with James but he can't put his finger on it. Not yet, anyway. At any rate, we now know Crane's location. He tried to give us the slip, but Jason's guys picked up on it. We have men outside his house and Jason has some of his little special forces type friends moving in tomorrow to place surveillance equipment, so that means, we will eventually have the information we'll need to take him down."

Eric watched Justin's face. "There's something bothering you?"

"He acts as if he wants a confrontation. It makes me nervous."

"Everything makes you nervous."

"Yeah, but listen, James knows he can't best you in a fight. If he's suddenly not afraid of a confrontation with you, then I'm thinking he knows something you don't know.

"Which is what's bothering Jason," Eric said with a nod.

"Exactly. Eric, I want to do this by the book."

"I understand, and I've agreed because that would be the correct choice," he paused, "unless another choice is presented."

Justin sighed and scrubbed his hand over his face. "If you decide you have no other choice and must take matters into your own hands, it absolutely will not be alone. Give me your word on that."

When Eric didn't answer, Justin grabbed him by the shoulder. "Your word, Eric."

"Can't do it."

"What do you intend? Murder? Didn't you just ask Shelley to marry you?

Why? So she can visit you in prison? If you care about her or about Rick, you'll give me your word that you won't go after him alone– nor outside the law. You told me yourself your need for revenge was a dark road you must not walk down."

It took Eric several seconds before he spoke. "You have my word."

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Sunday morning, Eric set up a special tray for Shelley, including a tomato juice concoction, an herbal tea for pain and some toast. When he peeked in she lay staring at the ceiling. "Don't feel so hot?"

She only moaned.

"This will help. Promise." He had her drink the juice and the tea, massaged her neck and back, applied acupressure, and fifteen minutes later she slept soundly.

The next time Shelley opened her eyes, it was late afternoon. The house was quiet. The only sound she could hear was the pounding of the surf. Soon she'd have to get ready for the banquet. Sighing, she slowly eased her way out of bed, pleasantly surprised that the hangover was gone and she actually felt pretty good.

Thinking that Eric may be sleeping, she peeked into his room. Eric wasn't there, but the balcony door was open and the waves crashing on the sand called to her. She ventured through his room and out onto the balcony. Down below, in the hazy afternoon sun, two bronzed hard bodies stood side by side.

Father and son, each dressed only in black shorts, executed a beautiful, intricate weapons' form. Each held two broadswords. Their movements were perfectly synchronized as they spun both the swords and their bodies. The swooshing sound of the swords was interrupted intermittently by a kiyai. Perspiration ran from their well-muscled forms. Their thick long hair blew back from their faces in the brisk ocean breeze.

They were breathtaking and beautiful and Shelley shook her head in amazement. So mesmerized by their performance, she was unable to move until the routine came to an end. The moment they bowed they both looked up to her as if they'd known she'd been there all along.

"Are you feeling better?" Eric called up.

"Much better, thanks," she answered.

"I'm going swimming in the ocean," Ricky called. "Wanna come?"

Shelley smiled and waved. "No thanks, but have a nice swim and bring me back a shell."

Eric disappeared into the house as Shelley watched Ricky run down a flight of stairs, past a volleyball court, then another long flight of stairs, out across the beach, into the water and dive under a wave.

She laughed. Seconds later, lips nibbled her neck.

"How's the champ?"

"At the moment, feeling a little weak in the knees."

He grinned. "Hmm, I have the power to take down the champ."

She sighed and leaned her head back against him. “Thanks for whatever you gave me that made me feel better.”

“You are most certainly welcome.” He kissed her cheek. “I guess you’d better go ahead and start getting ready for tonight.”

Shelley nodded. Thirty minutes later she was still cooing as she luxuriated in a long, hot bath. When she finally emerged from the bathroom, she had to smile when she spotted the huge pearly pink sea shell on her dresser.

She took her time getting dressed for the banquet. She pulled the floor length white knit dress they’d purchased over her head. It was tightfitting, showing off her athletic body. It was simple, but had some jewels at the top to give it some bling, since it was a special occasion.

She let her shiny long hair fall loosely down her back in thick curls. Taking one last look she put a smile on her face and went downstairs.

Ricky and Eric, dressed in tuxedos, stopped talking as she came down.

They both drew in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Wow,” Eric muttered.

“Yeah,” Ricky agreed. “What he said.”

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Jason and Justin stood along with several other men, just outside the doors of the conference center where the banquet and ball would be held up on the rooftop.

Simultaneously, they paused and gaped at Shelley as she approached. “What? Is my dress too tight?” she asked nervously.

Justin chuckled. “You are adorable. No, your dress is not too tight. It’s perfect and so are you.” He kissed her cheek.

Jason handed small earpieces to each man.

Noticing the strained look on Jason’s face, Eric took him aside and asked about the injured man.

“Wang remains in a coma,” Jason said. “He may walk again with extensive physical therapy and lots of prayers.” Jason’s voice trembled. “He has a wife and daughter to provide for.”

Eric sighed. “He’s hurt because he tried to protect Shelley and I. How can I forgive myself?”

Jason’s face darkened with anger. “I have enough to worry about, Eric. I can’t deal with you feeling guilty too. You’ve always taught me that guilt is a waste. So stop. Long before Wang was employed by me he put his life on the line every single day for the LAPD. When he signed on for this job he knew the danger was real.”

Eric remained silent. Jason looked up at Eric’s raised eyebrows and calm expression, and realized he’d been coerced into saying that. He smiled. “I see what you did there.”

Eric shrugged. “I just helped you to see what you already knew, just in case you were letting yourself wallow in guilt. It’s very easy to do. I know firsthand, brother.”

"You're still the Master," Jason conceded, with a smile.

Eric put his arm around Jason. "Let me know what I can do for Wang and his family."

Jason agreed. They moved back to join Shelley and the others.

"Are we expecting trouble?" Shelley asked, worry in her eyes.

Eric kissed her cheek. "Just being prepared. If James tries to show up here tonight, I intend to have a little conversation with him."

Ricky laughed. "Yeah, a conversation. Right."

"What will you do?" Shelley asked, alarmed.

Eric shrugged. "It's time to confront him."

"Why now?"

"I'd rather it not be now, but you have to understand that I can't just let him waltz in here and get close to you. There has to be a limit set. I have to draw a line."

"You understand, don't you, Shelley?" Jason asked. "We have to show strength. We can't cower in a corner somewhere while Crane boldly parades himself in front of us."

Shelley nodded. "I suppose I do understand. I just worry."

When Angel and Bree finally arrived, the group rode the elevator to the top floor and took their places at their reserved table.

The women chatted about their dresses and shoes as they waited for the banquet to begin while the men listened politely. Finally, Justin had enough and tried to change the subject. "Shelley, have you come up with some amazing things to say when you receive your award?"

Shelley's eyes went wide. "Say?"

"Yeah, you know, a short speech," Angel added.

Shelley turned toward Eric, her eyes wide in panic. "Why didn't you prepare me for this?"

He shrugged nonchalantly. "I prepared you to fight. You must be prepared to win. Besides, Shelley girl, you've never been at a loss for words before. I'm sure you'll do fine."

"Excuse me," she said to everyone as she stood and walked away.

Eric watched her. When she bypassed the restroom and headed out the door he went after her. He caught up to her as she wound through a deserted corridor. "Don't go off by yourself," he warned.

"Oh, yeah, sorry, Eric, I wasn't thinking. Actually, I was thinking– about what to say."

"Just speak your heart. You'll be fine." He led her back.

Shelley was glad when the banquet got underway. When it came time for the awards, she listened carefully to the acceptance speeches given by others. Even the children spoke eloquently. That made her more anxious. When they announced her name, Eric practically had to push her out of her chair.

She walked to the podium amid cheers and applause. The presenter was a former MART champion. He kissed her cheek as he offered her the smaller

version of the ten-foot trophy her instructor would possess.

Nervously, Shelley thanked him and approached the microphone. "Thank you so much," she began, then stopped.

Silence. The entire room was captivated by her even though she hadn't spoken another word.

"Uh oh," Bree muttered nervously. "C'mon, Mom, you can do it."

Eric held his breath.

Shelley inhaled sharply. With emotion in her voice she continued. "It's hard to tell you what this means to me. The trophy represents so much and I'm sure I can speak for the other competitors. It represents early mornings, late evenings, aching muscles, and diets." She made a face. "It represents bruises, fatigue, exhilaration, a lot of self-discipline, stamina, bloody, swollen lips, protein drinks, katas, katas, katas, battling inner enemies, and a teacher who keeps insisting on 'one more.'

"It also represents the joy of achieving goals, the happiness that comes from self-mastery and the love for the art. I'm grateful for the opportunity to participate in the MART. I'm grateful Eric, uh, Master Kino saw something in me and chose me to be his student. I know everyone has said that their trophy belongs to their teacher and at the risk of being cliché, I must say the same because truth is truth. Master Kino trained me against great odds. His expertise, knowledge, skill and wisdom are what made me the champion." She paused as if unsure whether she should continue.

"So, you can't work so closely with someone all year long without learning to respect and admire and love them. Let me say that Master Kino has my utmost respect, my greatest admiration and all my love. Thanks again." Eyes glittering with tears, she made her way back to her seat as table by table, her peers stood and applauded.

Bree and Angel rushed to hug her.

"You were great, Mom," Bree said. "I'm so proud of you. But you had me worried there for a minute."

Shelley laughed. "I had me worried too."

The banquet finally ended after the male champion was awarded his trophy. Large wooden doors opened onto a huge mirrored ballroom as an orchestra commenced playing.

Ricky and Jason asked Bree and Angel to dance leaving Shelley alone with Eric, but only for a few seconds.

"Hello, Ms. Adams. I'm Eddie Williams. I won the men's championship."

"I know," Shelley replied. "Congratulations."

"Same to you," he responded. "I was told to ask you for the first dance, for picture purposes, so, might I have this dance?"

"Of course, Eddie, and please, call me Shelley." Tossing her hair over her shoulder, she excused herself from Eric and entered the dance floor on the arm of Eddie Williams.

Cameras went crazy, the flashing lights blinding. Eric couldn't help but

feel a twinge of jealousy as he watched Eddie's hand slide snugly around Shelley's waist. Eric didn't have too much time to worry though. His attention was drawn by a familiar face off in a corner.

Immediately he spoke into his mic, and the next moment, Angel lost her dancing partner.

Over the next hour, as Shelley continued to dance with a whole line of men, Eric, one by one fingered those who'd attacked him at Brian's dojang. At the end of the hour, Jason had names of six of the eight.

Eric was only slightly concerned that they had no fear of showing their faces. More than likely, it was due to lack of brain power rather than lack of fear. They probably thought they were taunting him, or maybe James sent them to spy on him and Shelley. He would take care of them later. Still, to be found were the red-head and the blond leader. Eric's eyes narrowed at the memory of that man. He had a lot of the characteristics of James himself. Even though he'd never seen him, Eric knew James had a younger brother. Could the blond guy have been James' little brother?

His musings were interrupted when Shelley returned from the latest dance. She moved close to him and laid her head on his tuxedoed chest.

"Tired?" he asked.

"Yes. I wish you'd rescue me."

Pulling her snug against him, he finally danced with her.

They'd come almost to a standstill as Eric leaned down to kiss her.

She put her arms around his neck. "Master Kino, can you take me home now, please."

He started to agree, but his head jerked up and he put a finger on the ear piece he wore. Listening carefully, his eyes scanned the room.

"Is something wrong?" Shelley asked nervously.

"Wrong? No," he answered quietly. "Shelley, stay here, there's something I have to do."

"Wait Eric. Let me come. Let me help."

He pushed her back and looked at her sternly. "No way. Now stay," he said to her, listening again.

It was Jason speaking to him. "Take the east elevator and leave out the east door, you'll just be able to cut him off. He thought he could show briefly and take off without being seen. Say the word and I'll take him. I wouldn't mind a bit having a little conversation with him. Which is it, mine or yours?"

"He's mine. I'm on my way," Eric answered. He kissed Shelley. "Stay. I mean it. Do not leave this ballroom."

Shelley watched him leave. All alone, she looked around. Angel and Bree were dancing, yet not with Ricky or Jason. She glanced around in time to see Ricky just slipping out of the room. Shelley shook her head and sighed.

"Your dance partner desert you?"

She turned to see Mr. Edward Banks smiling at her.

"Oh, hello," Shelley smiled, doing her best to be patient.

"Hello. I've come to collect on that dance you promised me."

"I didn't realize you were here. I haven't seen you all night."

He shrugged. "It's a large crowd. Then again, you aren't very aware for a martial artist. It must be all the excitement over your win."

Lips pressed together at the thinly veiled insult, she offered her hand. "Let's get this over with." It pleased her to see her snide remark also landed on fertile ground.

They moved out onto the dance floor where he held her much closer than she would've liked. Dirty old man.

As they danced, Shelley didn't even try to hold back her weary sigh.

"How thoughtless of me," James cooed at her. "You've been dancing nonstop all night. Let's step out on the balcony where it's cool."

Grateful, Shelley followed his lead out the huge glass doors to a large balcony that overlooked the lights of the city. She stood breathing deeply, her mind on Eric and what he was up to.

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Eric meanwhile had given chase, when a young man called to him.

"Mr. Kino, wait."

It was the urgency in the voice that halted Eric.

"Mr. Kino, you may not remember me. I met you in New Or..."

"Yes, Micky, I remember you but I'm a little busy right now," he started off again.

"It's a decoy." Micky called.

Eric stopped again as Micky continued. "They think I'm still working for them. I told you I'd make it up to you."

"Go on."

"The one you thought was James Crane yesterday at the MART and tonight too, that's his kid brother. He had plastic surgery to make himself look like his brother. The real James is in the ballroom right now. He's disguised as an old man and he has plans for Shelley."

Eric eyed Micky, making sure he spoke the truth.

"I told you I'd make up for what I did in New Orleans. I am not lying. James is with Shelley."

Satisfied, Eric spoke into his mic. "Ricky, where are you?"

"I'm on my way. Elevator's running slow."

"We've been chasing a decoy. Go back, find Shelley. If you see an old man, it's James."

Ricky spun on his heel and headed back, as did they all, except for Jason who intended to detain the decoy.

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James smiled at Shelley out on the balcony. He maneuvered her around the corner of the building, coming to a halt between two potted Cedar trees. "It's lovely out here, don't you think?"

"The city lights are pretty," Shelley offered.

"You know what I think about you, Ms. Adams and about dancing with you and about being out here on the balcony with you?"

"No, what?" Shelley replied impatiently.

He moved closer to her. "I think it was just— too easy."

It took a moment for reality to dawn on Shelley. This was him. This was the man who'd attacked her, the man that hated Eric. Her eyes grew wide as he stood up to his full height and jerked off the beard and skullcap. In the same split second it took to absorb the information, she shrank back from him, drew in a sharp breath but was never able to release her scream.

One large hand clapped over her mouth and the other twisted her arm behind her back, pulling her up against him.

"Calm down girl," he ordered.

She didn't calm down. She struggled madly, but was helpless against his strength. No one heard her muffled cries. She tried to bite his hand.

"Be still or you go over the railing now instead of later," he hissed.

She stilled, obviously believing his words. He made the mistake of easing his hold for a second. She fought immediately. He grabbed her again and shook her fiercely until she was dizzy and compliant.

"What are you gonna do?" she asked, dreading the answer.

"Well," he smiled wickedly. "First, I'm gonna take you over there, past that wall behind those planters and show you what a real man can do. And when I'm through, you go up and over, Shelley. You'll have lots of time to think before you hit the ground."

"Eric's inside. He'll be out here any minute."

"Eric went chasing shadows. He thinks he has me cornered downstairs. As you can see, he couldn't be more wrong."

He gave her no time to respond before he began dragging her toward his destination. She fought and struggled with all her might doing nothing to him except fueling his revenge.

Abruptly though, he came to a halt, focusing on something behind her. She continued to struggle as he suddenly released his grip. She went sprawling backwards, landing hard on the cement of the balcony floor. She looked up to see Ricky step in front of her.

"Get out of here, Shelley," Ricky ordered as he whipped off his jacket. "Go on now. Go inside."

"No, I won't leave you," she cried.

Ricky faced James fiercely as James laughed. "So, the little pup wants to try on his daddy's shoes."

"Ricky, please be careful," Shelley cried.

James blew out a breath. "You know, I really don't want to do you any harm. I loved your mother."

"You know nothing of love," Ricky stated flatly.

James' face hardened. "I was gonna let you go, but I see there is nothing of your mother left in you."

"I am my father in every way as far as you're concerned."

It took Ricky only a second to size up his enemy. A lot bigger, probably stronger, much slower. Ricky took the offensive. Moving quickly, he delivered kick after kick to James' head and chest. Spinning, jumping, and reversing, Shelley could barely keep up with what was occurring. She wanted desperately to jump in and help but was afraid of causing more harm than good. She scrambled to her feet, looking for something to use as a weapon.

It appeared Ricky would beat the man to death. A normal man would've been down by now but James, though he was staggering, was still on his feet. Ricky spun and connected with the back of James' knee and he went down hard. While he was down, Ricky connected with James' head. The large man rolled but somehow got back up. Ricky kept up the assault on James, never letting up.

The glint of the knife didn't surprise Ricky as James swung at him. Ricky grabbed James' wrist and bashed his hand against the railing, sending the knife sliding across the balcony. Ricky caught a glimpse of the second knife and jumped back, trying to dodge it. A thin line of blood, the width of his chest, spread across Ricky's white shirt. Ricky stumbled backward for just a second, but that was all James needed. With a giant yell, James placed a side kick into Ricky's chest as Shelley screamed and lunged for Ricky.

Flying backward with the force of the blow, Ricky's back hit the railing, his feet flew up over his head and he flipped off the balcony grabbing at Shelley's arm as he did. His steely fingers locked onto her arm. She struggled to hold him.

"Ricky, I can't hold you. Don't let go!" she cried, unable to control the panic in her voice.

Yet Ricky chuckled calmly. "The thought never occurred to me."

"This isn't funny," she chided.

He tightened his hold. "No, it's not, so stop making me laugh. Just be still and don't try to pull me up. Brace your fist with your other hand."

There was shouting and scuffling going on behind Shelley. She started to turn to see what was happening, but Ricky's voice was commanding. "No. Don't turn around. Stay still. Widen your stance."

A moment later a hand pressed on Shelley's back. Her body jerked in startled reflex, but then another hand came down past hers and grabbed Ricky's arm.

"I've got you, son," Eric's calm voice sounded.

Dear Lord God, how Shelley loved that voice. Together, they pulled Ricky up and over the railing to safety.

Shelley threw her arms around Ricky's neck and hugged him tight.

Turning they watched as security and police officers cuffed James and read him his rights. He was badly beaten about the face and was bleeding profusely from his nose. Still, he sneered at Eric.

"I'll be out tomorrow."

"You'd better hope they don't ever let you out. At least in there, you're safe from me," Eric replied, then turned back to Ricky to examine him, ignoring the rest of James' tirade.

"Rick, the cut doesn't look deep. I don't think you'll need stitches but we'll take you to the hospital anyway and let them clean it up."

Bree came flying out onto the balcony. "Ricky, what happened?"

Ricky went off on a big story on what a hero he was as Eric pulled Shelley aside. "Were you hurt?"

"No, but thank goodness, Ricky showed up when he did. James was going to... " She stopped to draw a deep breath. "He was gonna rape me and then throw me over the railing. At least that's what he said he was gonna do."

Eric pulled her close to stop her from trembling and spoke over her head to Angel. "Angel, would you mind getting Bree to the airport? She has an audition tomorrow."

Bree shook her head. "That's okay, I'll miss the audition. Ricky's more important."

Ricky smiled. "You don't know how good that makes me feel but I'm not really hurt and I want you to go to your audition."

Begrudgingly, Bree gave in.

"Justin, would you mind seeing Shelley home?" Eric asked.

"What? No, I'm going with you."

"Shelley, we could be hours at the hospital. You've been through another trauma, sweetie and you need rest. Remember, you were so tired earlier you said you could hardly stand? Besides, I know you don't want to be seen all over LA in that bloody dress."

Shelley looked down to find her new white dress covered with Ricky's blood. She gasped.

"You're awfully hard on clothes," he teased and then wished he hadn't as he watched her frown.

"Remember," he began.

"I know, I know, it's just a dress," Shelley muttered.

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1 Peter 5:8

"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour."

Chapter Thirty-One

Monday morning, Shelley came downstairs to find Eric sitting in the dining room scanning the headlines, the actual real newspaper spread across the giant table.

"No matter how late you go to bed, you always seem to beat me downstairs in the morning. Is Ricky okay?"

Eric folded the paper and placed it aside and turned sideways in his chair. "He's fine, thanks to you. You saved my son's life."

"And he saved mine, so we're even."

"Thank God for both of you," he said softly and motioned her forward to stand in front of him.

She moved close and placed her hands on his shoulders. "What time did you guys get in?"

He didn't answer.

"Eric?"

His eyes moved over her. He seemed to be looking at her clothes. She made a face and stepped back to model. "Oh, it's the outfit the publicity people had delivered. They want me to wear it at the photo shoot today. I think it's stupid. I know they want me to look younger, but this is ridiculous."

She wore the brand name blue jean skirt and the brand name knit shirt. The skirt was short, the shirt tight. The brand shoes completed the ensemble.

"I guess next they'll want me to put a big bow in my hair," she complained. She waited for a response, but there was none. "Will you please say something?"

He only sighed. "Babe, wearing that outfit or not is your choice. You don't have to if you don't want to."

"But, what if I show up to the shoot without the outfit they wanted me to wear?"

"Well, a couple things could come of that. They can find you something more appropriate to wear that would represent both parties better, or they can decide to cancel the shoot."

"Cancel?" She grimaced.

"The question is, how important is it to you?"

"What? The shoot or not wanting to wear this outfit?"

"Both." He waited patiently.

"I mean, I really wanted to do this shoot."

"Why?"

"Well, it pays a lot of money for one."

"Is your soul for sale?"

"No, of course not, but..." She stopped and sighed. "No 'buts'."

"Is there any other reason for doing the shoot?"

She shrugged, "Um, I think I'm under contract to do it."

"You are, but you know Alan Bearden, you know he cares for you. A quick call to him and I'm sure he could remedy the situation."

She nodded slowly. "Okay. I'll do that. So, what if I didn't have a Mr. Bearden to call?"

He shrugged. "Then you'd have to make a choice."

She frowned.

He laughed to lighten the mood. "Sweetheart, I know that you're new to all this fame and celebrity stuff. What I'm really trying to tell you is that being famous, making money, none of that is as important as staying true to yourself and to God. Let me make it easier. If they wanted you to do the shoot nude, would you?"

Her answer came fast. "Absolutely not."

"You see, that choice is black and white. It's easy to see. But Satan doesn't work like that. He makes everything gray so that it's harder to see clearly what your path should be. He makes walking down his path look fine, no worries, no problems. He deceives you, because the devil is a liar, and he's very good at deception."

"Then how do we know what God's path is for us?"

Eric smiled. "You know, that is a beautiful question, sweetheart. We do two things. We develop a relationship with Him through prayer and fasting and listening so that we can recognize His voice. We read His Word, and we do our best to follow His rules, keep His commandments, live as holy as we possibly can because that puts us in tune and keeps us in tune with His voice."

"You've certainly set a good example of that," she said.

He sighed heavily. "I'm trying. I'm human, but we have His grace."

Shelley glanced at the large clock on the dining room wall. "Oh, well, guess I'd better make that phone call. By the way, where is Ricky?"

"Out for the day, hot date."

Shelley frowned. "Hot date? Bree just left last night. He certainly worked fast," she complained.

Eric smiled. "A nurse from the hospital last night asked him to join a surfing party. I'm sure he'd rather be with Bree."

He pulled her close and kissed her. "I have no words to describe how much I love you," he groaned. "What time do you have to be down at the studio for the photo shoot?"

"I'm supposed to be there at 9:00."

"Oh, well, it's 8:00 now. You might be a little late. Go get dressed. I'll call Bearden for you, and I'll drive fast. Listen, hon, I won't be able to pick you up. I have some business meetings thanks to your newfound fame, but I'll

send a car for you. The studio is secure. No one will be allowed entrance. They have security and they understand the situation."

"Are you worried that something else is gonna happen?"

"No, not really. James is in jail, but I don't want to take any chances. Like I said, the studio is secure and they're aware of the situation. Don't step outside until they tell you the car is there. Did they give you a time they think you'll be finished?"

"They said I'd be done by three."

"Three it is, then. If you finish early, text me. But I'll have the driver there a little early anyway."

She wrinkled her nose. "When will you be back?"

"I'm not sure."

She frowned. "Well, if I'm not awake when you get home will you wake me?" she asked.

He slid his arms around her. "With pleasure."

She ran upstairs to redress. While he waited, Eric called Bearden first and then Justin to find out where things stood with James.

"As we speak, he sits in jail. The judge was delayed. The court clerk will call me the minute James gets out."

"Good," Eric said. "So, I've arranged to have one of Jason's men here at the house by 3:30, just in case James is out by then, since you and I will be at the meeting."

"Yes, I know. Jason told me he assigned a couple of guys to stay with Shelley. He said he would do it himself, except he's working with police on Wang's attempted murder. We know James is involved in Wang's assault and we're hoping to keep James in jail by linking him to it as quickly as possible. Along with last night's attempt on Ricky and Shelley, there should be enough. However, James has friends in high places, so we need to be ready, because James will probably get out sometime today, just like he told you. If Wang would just open his eyes and speak to us there would be no way they'd grant bail. Unfortunately, I don't see that happening."

Eric looked up as Shelley came back downstairs. She'd replaced the short skirt with a knee-length, khaki-colored skirt, but kept the shirt and the shoes. It was a perfect compromise. He ended his call with Justin, satisfied that Shelley was safe for the time being.

They left for the studio. Once there, he walked her in and kissed her goodbye. "Smile pretty," he teased.

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Shelley discovered that a day of hair and makeup and being primped and photographed was not glamorous. It was tedious, long and tiring, so she was extremely glad when it was over. She decided she wasn't too keen on this celebrity thing. Sighing, she glanced out the window in the lobby of the studio and smiled up at the blazing afternoon sun. The warmth felt good on her face. "Ms. Adams? Your limo is here."

Shelley smiled. “Thank you.” She picked up her purse and headed out toward the black limo that was parked out front.

The driver quickly jumped out to open her door for her. “Ms. Adams?” he questioned.

She smiled kindly at him. “Yes.”

He held the door as she climbed in and closed it solidly behind her. She was startled to see a man sitting on the far side. When he turned to face her, she went ghostly white. James.

Immediately she reached for the door handle but it wasn’t there. He laughed as he lunged at her and grabbed her flailing arms. She struggled against him, but a knowing sense of loss told her there was no way out of her situation. He had her.

“Where’s Eric’s driver?” she demanded bravely.

“Why Shelley? Are you worried about him? Well, don’t be. It may take a day or two for him to be found, but he’ll survive. When he wakes up he’ll be a little woozy, maybe have a headache, but he’ll be just fine. On the other hand, you should be very worried about your own predicament, because you are in for quite a ride.”

The vehicle lurched as the driver took off. James immediately grabbed Shelley by the hair, pushed her face down into her lap and pulled both her arms behind her. At the familiar sound of duct tape ripping, she couldn’t help it, her tears started. Once her wrists were taped securely together, he jerked her back up. She glared at him, consciously trying to keep the fear at bay. He yanked on her hair again, this time tilting her face up to him.

“No one’s here to help you this time and I will get what I want.”

She whimpered.

He bent over her, intending to kiss her mouth but she bucked fiercely and tried to head-butt him.

“You little hellcat,” he snarled, grabbing her face with both hands, he held her head still and kissed her brutally.

She tried to bite his tongue, his lip, anything that may cause him pain but she could only nip the edge of his lip because she couldn’t get the right angle. Still, she bit as hard as she could.

He jerked his mouth from hers, his eyes narrowed to slits. “I ought to beat you to a pulp for that.”

“So beat me you stupid, giant, arrogant coward,” she sobbed. “It won’t be the first time.”

He smiled. “I have different plans today.” His large fingers grabbed the edge of her shirt.

“No!” she screamed, leaning forward to block him. She was surprised when he let her go.

“Look woman, do you see this?”

There was something in his voice that made her stop struggling, sit up and look. He held a shiny knife. It resembled a scalpel only it folded and it looked

like the one he'd used to cut her shirt open back before Christmas. Shelley began to tremble as he ran the knife slowly over her cheek to her throat, then back to her face. A tear ran down one cheek. "Please don't do this," she begged.

"Not so uppity anymore, huh?"

"Eric," she whimpered.

"Eric," he mocked. The knife came to her throat. "I'm so sick of hearing his name." Barely able to control his rage, he pressed his mouth to her cheek as he growled at her. "Maybe I should just slit your throat right now."

Shelley sat very still. She could feel his anger pulsing through his body and knew he was on the very edge. She swallowed hard, praying he would get control of himself, though she couldn't control the tears that ran down her face.

"No, Eric can't help you now, sweet Shelley. Listen to what I'm about to tell you. From this point on you're not allowed to speak because I don't want to hear his name. Do you feel the knife on your throat?"

She blinked her eyes in response.

"I won't hurt you as long as you're still. Do you understand?"

She gave a slight nod.

He tugged at her shirt. Sobs welled up in her chest. Though outwardly her screams were controlled as he commanded, inside her head they were deafening. She'd promised herself she would never let this happen again. She'd promised herself she'd fight, and yet, there she sat, doing nothing. She couldn't control the crying. She felt his hands on her, trying to move her around, but in the close quarters he wasn't able to get her into the position he wanted. She could tell he wanted to get her shirt off, but her hands taped behind her back made it impossible, so he settled for just pushing it up.

His hand moved to her leg. She squeezed her thighs together with all of her strength. Instinctively, she bent over to block him but straightened immediately as the knife blade bit into her neck. She sat up quickly. Hot tears ran down her face while James tried to assault her, but in the cumbrous space and him still trying to hold the knife against her throat, he was unable to accomplish his goal.

Frustrated he grabbed her by the front of the shirt and shook her and she winced, worrying about the knife cutting her throat. He pulled her toward him. "What's the matter with you?" he mocked her. "Don't you want to play?"

She shook her head slightly.

"What? I can't hear you." He pointed up to a small camera. "Go ahead. I give you permission to speak. What do you want to say, Shelley? Speak up and smile for the camera. I've got it all recording. Now tell me, are you saying you're not having fun? That's really strange. Ann never complained. All those times she and I took those rides together, she never once complained. I guess she was a lot braver than you."

Shelley closed her eyes. She didn't want to hear this.

"You know, Ann never told Eric about our little excursions. She worried

about her precious husband's temper, were he to find out. She thought he might come after me, worried he'd get hurt. At least that's what she said. Deep down inside though, she just wanted to come back to me. I know she did. That's why he killed her. And soon, I'm gonna kill him, but first, I'm gonna take care of you."

"You're sick," Shelley cried, her anger giving her courage. "Ann would never have come back to you. You don't think that she knew what kind of person you are? That you're a bully and a thug and filled with hate? That's why she left you. You don't think that she knew that you're nothing compared to Eric?" She hadn't meant to say the words that she knew would rile him, but it just popped out.

Anger flushed his face. He jerked her over, face down across his lap. She never found out what he was about to do because the knife was now gone from her throat and she decided to take charge of her own destiny. She buried her teeth in his thigh, shuddering as she felt her teeth go deep into his flesh. She ground down harder, tasting his blood. He yelped and threw her across the entire length of the limousine. She slammed against the window of the door and slumped down onto the seat.

James lost all thought of what he'd originally intended. He jumped onto her, straddling her waist and grabbing her around the throat in a fit of rage, his face bright red, his fingers squeezing.

Her arms still taped behind her, she had only her legs to fight with but they were ineffective since they were behind him. Desperately, she kicked and struggled. His thick hands squeezed her throat, cutting off blood and air. It seemed the seat where she lay became soft, like a giant marshmallow, and he was pushing her down, down, down through the material into the soft center of the marshmallow. It was swallowing her, keeping her from breathing. She desperately tried to suck air into her lungs. It was impossible and she knew she was dying. Unable to feel her legs anymore, they fell limply. She thought of her children and how hard it would be for them to lose her at such a young age. She thought of Eric.

Darkness closed around her. Suddenly, she remembered to do what Eric taught her. She remembered to do what she did in New Orleans. Pray. "Dear God, will you help me?"

Seconds later, she heard a knocking sound, like someone knocking on the window, then suddenly, just as she thought she'd succumb, there was a coolness around her neck as he released his grip. She sucked the life-giving air into her lungs. He jerked her up to sit and pushed her face down as he cut the tape from her arms.

She gasped for air, trying to regain the use of her limbs, terrified of what was coming next, but he surprised her.

Throwing her purse at her, he spoke gruffly. "Fix yourself."

She tried to clear her mind, looked up at him, questioning.

"Wipe your tears, fix your hair," he commanded.

Apprehensively, she obeyed him. She straightened her clothing, took a compact out of her purse. *He's gonna let me live.* She wiped away the tears and smoothed her hair back with trembling hands. *He's gonna let me go. Thank you God. Thank you.*

The car stopped. "Get out," he ordered. "Get out and run and tell your little boyfriend what happened. I'll be waiting for him."

As the car sped away, James slammed his fist against the door. She'd diverted him from his original goal. He hadn't intended to end her life today. He'd only wanted to have her and he didn't even accomplish that. That's okay, he told himself. There will be another time. And then, he's gonna make that mouthy female pay.

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Shelley stumbled out of the car, stood up straight and watched as the car sped away. Eric's house loomed in front of her. "Thank you, God," she whispered aloud this time. Shakily, she took a jagged breath, pulled her purse over her shoulder and approached the security gate. She buzzed. One of Jason's men answered.

"Ms. Adams? Why didn't you have the driver bring you up to the house?"

"I uh, I was looking forward to the walk, it's so lovely out," she lied.

He buzzed her through and watched her on camera as she walked slowly up the long drive to the house.

She thought as she walked, trying to work things out in her mind. She wouldn't run and tell Eric. She was fine. She was alive. If Ann could keep the secret then so could she. She wouldn't do anything to put Eric in danger. She arrived at the door just as Ricky was coming out.

"Ricky, I thought you were gone for the day."

"I was," he grinned. "I just came home to change clothes."

She didn't respond, only smiled slightly.

Ricky frowned. "You don't look so good."

Shelley shrugged. "I'm okay. I'm feeling a little sick. Maybe it's the heat. I'll be fine after a nap."

"Are you sure you're all right?"

She forced a bright smile. "I'm positive. Now go have fun."

She walked slowly upstairs to her room and peered into the mirror over the dresser. The incident came flooding back. Gripping her stomach, she rushed to the bathroom and was violently ill.

Ricky had decided to check on her one more time before he left and made his way back up to Shelley's room. He found her kneeling in the bathroom. He pulled her hair back out of the way for her.

"You are sick, aren't you?" He helped her up.

"I thought you had a date," she stated, swooning slightly.

"I do, but you looked so bad I thought I'd check on you and it's a good thing I did. Let me help you."

Ricky left the room while she dressed for bed. When he came back, he

had a cup of hot tea with him. “Drink this. It won’t put you to sleep, but it’s good for nausea,” he explained.

She sipped it and got into bed. Ricky tucked her in.

“Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked.

“I’m fine. Really. Please go on your date.”

He kissed her cheek and left her. She watched out the window and waited until his car swung out of the gate and then flew back into the bathroom, stripped off her gown and stood under the hot shower.

Trembling violently and crying, she scrubbed her body until she felt cleaner and calmer, then exhausted, she fell back into bed.

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Later that evening, Ricky peeked in at her. She was curled up in a ball, sleeping. He crept over and placed a hand on her forehead.

She startled. “No,” she cried.

“Shelley, it’s just me. It’s Ricky.”

She blinked several times.

“How are you feeling?”

“I’m okay I guess. What time is it?”

“It’s almost seven.”

“You’re home early.”

“I was worried about you. I tried to call but there was no answer.”

“I was asleep.”

“Yeah, that’s what Jerry said when I called the security line, but I had to come home and see for myself. Do you need anything? Some toast, some tea?”

“No, I’m fine.”

Ricky was relieved when Eric came home an hour later. “Dad. Good. You’re home.”

“What is it?” Eric asked.

“Shelley’s sick. I came in late this afternoon to change clothes and she was pukin’ her guts out. I made her some tea and helped her to bed before I went back out.”

“And you’re already back?’

“I couldn’t stop worrying about Shelley all alone here and sick, so I cut it short and came home.”

“You should’ve called me.”

“That’s just what I was thinking right before you came in.”

“Thanks for taking care of her,” Eric said as he ran up the stairs.

He opened the door to find her curled up in the window box in one of the bay windows. She stared into the night.

“Hi, Shelley,” he said softly. “I hear you’re not feeling well.”

She turned to look at him. A wave of emotion overcame her and she fought to get herself under control. She wanted to run to him and cry on his shoulder and let him comfort her. Instead, she turned back to gaze out the window. “I think it’s just a virus.”

He moved forward and placed his hands on her shoulders. “If it’s what I had last week, you need to be in bed.”

“No, really, I’m much better already,” she insisted.

He leaned down and kissed her cheek. She felt tears wet her eyes so she dare not turn to him. Reaching back, she patted his hand.

Eric’s instincts told him all was not well. “There’s something else wrong. What is it, Shelley? Let me help.”

She took a deep breath. “Like I said, I think it’s just a virus. I promise to sleep soon.”

Eric squeezed her shoulder. “Okay, sweetie, I get the hint, but I’ll be in my room if you need me for anything.”

She didn’t answer. Slowly, he left the room, stopping in the doorway to look at her. She was ethereal with her knees drawn up to her chest and her sweet face shining in the moonlight. Her long curls down her back and across her arm shimmered like a golden curtain. He felt uneasy. His senses told him something was wrong. The moonlight shining on her face reminded him of a night eleven years ago. The night Ann died. He stepped out, shut the door and leaned against it, suppressing a shudder.

His phone buzzed. “Justin? What’s up?”

Justin’s voice was urgent. “James got out today around one p.m. while we were in the meeting. The original clerk went home sick and in the mix-up we were overlooked.”

“Well, thank God Shelley made it home okay. So, what do you think? Are we gonna be able to handle him within the confines of the law, or do I need to take matters into my own hands?”

“Be patient, Eric. I do think we’ll be able to put him away. If not forever, then for a very long time. Little brother, Tommy, on the other hand, will not be getting out for at least five to seven. As it turns out, he broke parole. He was in previously for grand theft, aggravated assault, breaking and entering and a few other minor charges. There was actually an APB out on him because a few days ago he roughed up an ex-girlfriend in a bar. Nice kid, huh?”

“Yeah, great.” Eric sighed. “So, now we’re back to trying to find James before he finds Shelley. I grow weary of this game, Justin. I should’ve taken him out when I had the chance.”

“There will be other chances,” Justin comforted.

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Revelation 21:8

“But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

The morning sun shone brightly through one of the large picture windows of the front room. Eric lounged on one of the couches with Justin, contracts scattered across the coffee table in front of them. Ricky and Jason, occupied the adjacent sofa, noisily arguing over which baseball team would make it to the World Series this year. Jason's phone buzzed.

"This is Jason." He listened intently, confused by the information. "Yes. Has his wife been contacted? Okay. Yes, stay with him until she gets there."

"What's going on?" Justin asked.

Jason held up a finger and made a call. "Jerry, you were at the Kino's house yesterday when Ms. Adams got home? Okay. And did you notice anything strange about the driver?" Jason frowned.

Ricky looked down at his phone as it buzzed. He got up to look out the front window as he answered.

Jason finished his call and looked up. "The driver I sent to pick up Shelley yesterday was attacked, drugged and stuffed in his trunk. He made it out a little while ago. He's at the hospital."

"Then who picked up Shelley and brought her home?"

"Good question. One we need to ask Shelley. Jerry says the driver didn't bring her up to the house. He says Shelley asked him to let her out at the gate so she could enjoy the walk."

The doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Ricky announced. "It's a courier. I just buzzed him through the gate."

Ricky signed for the package and handed it to his father.

Eric opened the envelope. "That's strange. It's a DVD." He turned it over in his hands. "There's no label." A feeling of dread crept into his heart. He reached in carefully and pulled out a typewritten page which he read aloud.

"I'm sure the little woman didn't tell you about the second photo shoot she attended yesterday, so I've sent you a copy. I hope you enjoy watching it as much as I enjoyed making it."

Drawing a deep breath, Eric opened the large wooden cabinet and placed the disc in a DVD access drive.

"Eric, old friend. I trust you're having a lovely day. As I speak I am on my way to pick up your girl from her photo shoot. She and I have a date." He laughed. "I'm sure you'll find this interesting even though it will never make up for the way you took Ann from me."

†††

Shelley rose late. She hadn't slept well. She decided, however, she wouldn't feel sorry for herself a moment longer. She pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a shirt with an oxford collar she thought would hide the bruises and the small cut on her throat. Taking one last glance in the mirror, she practiced a smile, inhaled deeply, and left her room.

She came down the back stairs into the dining room. Glancing at the polished wood of the dining room table with breakfast sitting there waiting for her, a smile came to her lips, regardless of her mood. Even so, the quick lightness was overshadowed immediately by the darker memory. She shook her head to clear her mind, and turned with a smile toward the men in the living room, but their behavior was odd.

Eric and the others were there, locked in a frozen stare. They didn't blink. They didn't move. They were watching the television. It only took about fifteen seconds before Shelley recognized the sounds and realized what it was they were watching.

Trembling, she backed up and leaned against the wall for support. As she listened to James' voice, her stomach began to churn. She looked up the steps, thinking she'd just head back to her room and lock herself in the bathroom. She heard herself beg James to stop and felt ashamed. She couldn't resist peeking in at Eric. He showed no emotion, which, she'd come to realize, was a bad sign.

At the mention of Ann's name, all four of the men's bodies shifted slightly, as if they'd each experienced the same shooting pain, a direct hit through their hearts. It seemed surreal to hear the scuffle after she'd bitten James and listen to what could've been her own murder.

Finally, it was over. The room was utterly silent except for Shelley as she drew a deep breath to try to calm herself. Only then did they realize she'd come downstairs. Eric stood and went to her and took her hands. Softly, compassionately, he touched her cheek and then slowly moved to unbutton her top button. She tried to stop him. Gently, he removed her hand from his and opened her shirt collar. It was as if he couldn't believe it was really her on the video, yet there were the bruises and a thin cut on her throat, clearly visible.

She stood trembling, waiting for someone to say something. There was a loud roar right before Jason's fist came down on the coffee table in front of him, cracking it down the center. Shelley literally leapt off the floor.

Eric looked deep into her eyes, opened his mouth to speak and found he couldn't. For the first time, he couldn't find the right words to say. Once again he'd failed to protect her. An apology wouldn't get it. He knew she needed comfort. He wanted to comfort her, but the intense rage he felt was strangling him. He needed to get it under control. He needed time to neatly organize his emotions and put them in the proper place.

Ann. Ann had suffered at this man's hands. How many times? Why hadn't she told him? Why? So many emotions shot through his mind. Shelley, my

sweet Shelley. Since she'd met him, she'd experienced one atrocity after another. He'd brought everything on her. Hatred. Rage. Blinding fury. He had to get it under control. Ann. Why had she not confided in him? He'd been her husband for God's sake. And Shelley. She'd intended to hide the truth as well. Why? The answer came quickly. Because James played on their love for him.

Finally, he broke the deafening silence with a few ridiculously mumbled words. "Shelley, I'm sorry baby. Are you okay?" *Are you okay?* Of course she's not okay, Eric thought.

But she made it okay. She wrapped her arms around him. "Just hold me Eric and I'll be fine."

Eric nodded at Justin and Jason.

"We're on it," Jason stated. Justin retrieved the disc and the package it came in. He and Jason headed toward the door. James had blacked out his own face, but the voice should be enough.

His wits beginning to return to him, Eric turned back to Shelley. "I am so sorry this happened." He paused. "Soo, this is why you were sick last night?"

She nodded. He tilted her face up. "The memory will fade, Shelley. I promise. Soon, you'll never have to think or worry about James again."

"Are you angry with me?"

"With you? No, of course not. Why would you ask such a thing?"

"Because I didn't tell you."

"You didn't tell me because he toyed with your mind, Shelley. He made you afraid to come to me."

She buried her face against his chest. "I'm sorry, Eric. I should've told you. I should've trusted you to do the right thing."

"It's okay. Shh," he comforted. "It's okay. I keep saying that, don't I? Like, if I say it enough, that will make it true." He stood back, shook his head. "I haven't been there for you. It's like, I don't know, like I've had blinders on. Why couldn't I see what he's capable of?"

"No, don't say that, Eric. It's hard to comprehend that kind of darkness and know what he's thinking, and you can't stay by my side twenty-four hours a day." She looked up at him, smiling timorously through her tears. "And it really is okay, isn't it?"

He shook his head. "How can you say that?"

"Because it is. So, he hurt me, physically, ya know? But he didn't control me, did he? I'm not saying he didn't scare me. He did. But, I didn't freeze up this time, did I? I acted. I did what I could to take control of the situation. I know that sounds dumb, because what I did really made him mad and almost caused my death."

Taking her lead, Eric joined the positive thinking. "But it didn't cause your death, did it? What you did changed the course of what was to come. Yes, baby, you acted. You took matters into your own hands and changed the outcome. And you didn't die. For whatever reason, he stopped himself. His meeting with you didn't turn out like he'd planned and that was because of

your intervention."

"And I prayed."

He smiled. "You did?"

"Yes, and God helped me." She sighed. "Eric, I don't feel like such a victim anymore. I know it's kind of strange, and I should be falling apart right now, but I'm not. Last night I admit, I did fall apart for a minute. But now, I feel sort of, brave, or maybe even strong. I'm not really sure if those are the right words."

"You are strong, Shelley. And I'm so very proud of you."

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Over the next few weeks the memories faded. Eric and Shelley decided to not waste any more time and get married quickly. When Eric suggested he fly everyone to Hawaii and marry in his parents' hometown at the church he'd attended as a kid, Shelley was ecstatic. Bree and the boys were also pretty psyched. For the next week Shelley kept busy with business meetings concerning her career, making wedding plans with Bree and wandering through the house, deciding where she'd make changes once they came back.

They'd decided to live in Eric's home in California of course, but they would hold onto Shelley's little house to use whenever they traveled to Georgia. Shelley met Rosa, the Kino's occasional housekeeper, and they became fast friends. With Rosa and Angel and Bree all helping, the wedding arrangements were quickly made. Eric and Shelley would be husband and wife before the end of June.

The night before their flight to Kauai the family gathered around the giant dining room table. Eric and Shelley, Ricky and Bree, Mark and Joey and Justin and Jason. They'd just finished a delicious dinner that Rosa had insisted on preparing. The candles flickered, as they sat talking, delighting in each other's company. They told stories by candlelight, relived memories and spoke of their hopes and dreams.

Shelley sat listening to her children, her friends, and the man she loved. They each had interests and aspirations for which they reached. She'd just accomplished a huge goal, and felt like she couldn't be happier.

Eric caught her eye and winked. Realizing they'd been leaving Shelley out, he asked her, "Tell me Shelley girl, what are your goals or what sort of things do you hope for yourself?"

She shook her head. "I've been given all I need."

"Aww, come on, Mom," Mark said. "You can think of something."

She shrugged. "No really, I mean it. If all of your wishes come true then that will be enough."

"Come on Shelley, there must be something else," Ricky prodded.

Justin tugged on her hair. "Yeah, Shelley, what do you hope for?"

She only shrugged.

"Mom, you're gonna have to think of something," Bree said.

"Yeah, Mom," Mark, Joey, Jason and Ricky all chimed in.

"Okay, okay, let's see. Hmm, I hope all four of my children..." she said, winking at Ricky, and then stopped. "Four children! Good grief, I suddenly feel so old."

Eric squeezed her hand. "Age is relative. Now tell us, babe, what do you hope for the children?"

She sighed. "I hope they grow up healthy and happy of course."

"What else?" Ricky prodded. "Something for you."

"Um, I hope I do well at the promotional appearances next week."

Justin laughed. "I know three other men in particular who hope the very same thing."

"You'll be great," Ricky added. "I'll help you."

"There must be something more than that," Jason said.

She thought a moment. "Well, I hope Eric's parents like me, and the rest of his family too."

"I guarantee," Eric said with a smile, "that they'll either really love you as I do or hate you with the same passion. It doesn't matter which one because I'm gonna marry you no matter what."

"Oh, gee, that's really comforting, Eric, and maybe on the way to Hawaii our plane won't crash and if it does, maybe the sharks won't eat us, but hey, if they do, at least there won't have to be a funeral."

"That's the way to think positive," Eric laughed.

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As it turned out, Shelley had no reason to be nervous about meeting Eric's family. His parents loved her as he knew they would. His cousins were also very welcoming.

The wedding was simple yet beautiful. Shelley's dress was white and flowy. There was no veil, but she wore flowers in her hair. Eric wore white slacks and a traditional flowered Hawaiian shirt. They spoke their vows before the family and God and felt His presence in all they did that day.

There was a giant reception back at the Kino plantation, filled with much revelry, decadent foods, robust music and love. The giant barn had been the venue of many island events over the years. It was decorated beautifully with every kind of flower possible. Food was abundant. Drink was flowing. Music was blasting. Eric's female cousins and their daughters and a few others performed a beautiful hula. Eric's male cousins and their sons thrilled everyone with their hula kane.

Shelley was having so much fun and loving their culture. Even with all of that though, she couldn't wait to get to their cabin and celebrate their love. Fortunately Eric was feeling the same way.

He approached her and pulled her away from her current dance partner, one of his uncles. Wrapping his arms around her waist, he leaned close and whispered. "Shelley Kino, my love, would you like to accompany me to the wedding cabin?"

She smiled prettily. "I would love to."

Eric said his goodbyes to his father and mother, uncles, aunts and cousins, nodded at Ricky who had Bree in his arms at the moment, and shook hands with his friends. He waited at the door while Shelley hugged her boys and made sure Bree knew she had current custody of them. Eric held his hand out to Shelley as she approached, clasped it tightly, and pulled her out the door.

They'd made it, Eric thought. He'd wanted her all year, wanted to make love to her so badly, but he also wanted God's blessing on their union. It'd been difficult. The road had not only been peppered with obstacles, but strewn with temptations. Yet they'd made it. And now, he was able to take his new bride back to the cabin and make love to her the way God had intended, under the covenant of marriage. This waiting made everything more beautiful, and his heart was filled with love and gratitude, for his bride, for his Savior and for the wisdom of God.

Now he would share himself, his secrets, with the woman he vowed to love forever. Secrets he'd shared with only one other woman. The union between a man and a woman, the beautiful give and take, the sharing of love and closeness and trust and intimacy and pleasure. It was a beautiful thing. "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife; and they shall become one flesh."

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A week later they had returned from the island and begun a new life of wedded bliss. Shelley was given free rein to decorate, renovate, rearrange anything she wanted to suit her fancy. She began on the boys' room, helped Bree with her room, though she wouldn't be there often because of school, and started on her and Eric's bedroom. Unfortunately, there seemed to be a problem that started shortly after their return.

Shelley was struggling, Eric thought, with the memories of the violence she'd suffered over the past year. Physically it appeared she was doing fine, yet Eric knew inside her mind was a different story. Every time a memory surfaced, she was overwhelmed with nausea.

She was losing weight. She got to the point where she couldn't keep anything down. She'd eat a huge breakfast and see the tiny scar on her neck and immediately run to the bathroom. Or cut into an apple, look at the knife in her hand and throw up in the sink. Eric could only hope that once James was found, she'd be able to put things behind her.

He asked her to see Dr. Chin, Eric's teacher and friend. She refused at first, but finally conceded. The problem there was Dr. Chin's findings were less than comforting.

"She's emotionally healthy, Eric. She's strong. I think you've helped her become extremely well adjusted. She's handling her feelings normally. Have you stopped to think maybe her problem is physical?"

"Nonsense," Shelley snapped. "I'm healthy as a horse."

Eric heaved a sigh. She hated doctors. He wouldn't push it yet, but if she didn't improve soon that would be the next step. That little edgy feeling in his

brain began to churn. Was she ill with something more serious, and would God take his wife again?

It wasn't long after her meeting with Dr. Chin that Jason brought them good news. James had been found and arrested, not without a fight, much to Jason's pleasure. Shelley seemed pleased. Eric and Ricky definitely were. Still, the news didn't have much effect on her illness and less than a week later, Shelley collapsed as she came out of the bathroom from one of her bouts.

At the medical center, Eric stood impatiently in a corner of the large emergency waiting room, breathing a sigh of relief that the wait was over when the nurse approached him.

"Mr. Kino." The young woman smiled at him. "The Doctor would like to see you."

He followed her to a small office where he shook hands with a short rotund man.

"How is she?" he asked.

"We're giving her fluids through an IV right now. Considering she hasn't been able to eat for several days, she's doing remarkably well. Her collapse was caused from lack of food and dehydration. The nausea is usual for her condition. Some women have a harder time than others."

"Excuse me?" Eric said. "What condition?"

The doctor frowned. "She's expecting."

"Expecting? Expecting what?"

"A baby of course. She's pregnant."

Eric shook his head. "No, she can't be. That means she must be sick with something else. Please, run some tests. She can't be pregnant. She had her tubes tied years ago."

"Yes. I saw that. Nevertheless, she is pregnant." He shrugged. "It's been known to happen. There's about a 1.5 percent chance of women who become pregnant after a tubal ligation, if you're interested in the statistics. I'd like to schedule her for an ultrasound to make sure it's not an ectopic pregnancy."

Eric shook his head in amazement. "A baby. She carries my child."

The doctor nodded and smiled. "I'd like to keep her overnight, make sure she's completely hydrated. I'm sure you'll want to get your own doctor and speak with him about all the possibilities but I can probably get her ultrasound out of the way in the morning."

"Does she know?"

"Yes, she does."

"What was her reaction?"

"She accused me of being a quack."

"That's my Shelley."

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Eric sighed heavily as he stood in the doorway of Shelley's hospital room watching the early morning light play across her face. In the expanse of one year Shelley had been in the hospital so many times he'd actually lost count.

His eyes closed. A baby. He'd never even thought something so wonderful to be possible. It had been one rough year, a year that was meant to be. God meant Eric to find Shelley. He brought them together. And now, there is a miracle of a baby. Hopefully everything will settle down now. He longed for the peace and calm of a normal family. Was that even possible? A normal family? There was definitely nothing normal about living with Shelley.

Eric took her hand and watched her eyes flutter open.

"Hello there."

"Hi."

"How do you feel?"

She closed her eyes. "Like I could sleep forever."

He kissed her fingers. "You can sleep as long as you like. I'm taking you home very soon."

It wasn't long before they came to get her for the ultrasound, confirming she did have an intrauterine pregnancy.

They rode quietly home, each with their own thoughts. Shelley hadn't said anything about the baby. Eric wondered if she wasn't happy about it. Well, they certainly had to discuss it. "So," he began, "you're pregnant."

Her hand touched her stomach protectively. "It seems I am. Why haven't you said anything about the baby?"

"I was giving you space."

"Are you upset that I'm pregnant?"

"Upset? I'm euphoric."

Shelley breathed a sigh of relief. "Well that's good because the only alternative would be to end the pregnancy and I would never do that. Life is a beautiful miracle. A child is a beautiful miracle. I would never kill a baby and since we've never discussed this topic, I was worried the marriage would end before it ever got started."

"Shelley, you know my beliefs. You know I try to follow God's laws. I realize that you haven't read the Bible through yet, but I can tell you, the Lord despises the killing of innocent children. And so do I. I'm very happy to hear that you want this child. Well, you didn't actually say that. You DO want the child?" he asked.

"Oh, Eric, with all my heart," she replied. "How can you even ask that? I carry your child. Yours. A little golden skinned child that will look like you. Just the fact that I'm pregnant is a miracle. It feels like it was meant to be. That's what I think anyway. I mean, it must be a very special baby. There's nothing that would make me happier than to give you a child. Another child. I love you so much Eric."

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Emotionally and physically, Shelley began to recover. With Eric's knowledge of herbs, she began to keep food down. Eric doted on her, taking care of her every need. Shelley was already getting ideas about how she would decorate the nursery, using the room she'd occupied when she'd first arrived

in Cali.

They spoke to Mark and Joey about the baby over the phone since the boys were with their father. The two youngsters had already been uprooted from the only home they'd known and from their friends and school, but as usual, they seemed to take it all in stride.

Next they told Bree who was about to leave for New York. She too was happy for them yet a little concerned about her mother carrying a baby. As expected, Ricky was only too happy to share the home in which he'd grown up, with Shelley, Bree, the boys and especially the baby. Actually, he totally freaked when he was told about the baby.

Shelley's eyes had filled with tears as she listened to his loud and contagious enthusiasm.

"Oh, Lord, thank you Jesus, Shelley, you're pregnant? I can't believe it. I am so happy. You're gonna have my father's child! This is wonderful. Oh, man. A baby?"

Shelley laughed as Ricky dropped down onto his knees in front of her and hugged her. He laid his head on her knees and touched her stomach. "A baby," he whispered. "My brother— or sister," he put in quickly. "Shelley, listen, anything you need or want is yours, you just say the word," Ricky promised.

It was only a few weeks later as Eric and Shelley stretched for their morning run that Shelley announced she was going to Atlanta.

"Atlanta?" Eric asked.

"Yes, my love. I need to pack things for storage, and finish packing mine and the children's things to move here, except for Bree. She hasn't decided where to make her base yet. Then, there are a lot of little details, like, I need to arrange for lawn maintenance and prepay utilities."

"It sounds like a lot of work babe, and there is no way I can come with you now. Why don't you wait? Or better yet, we could hire someone."

"Hire someone? Maybe for the yard, but no one is going through my home but me. It's okay, Eric. I can handle it. You've made me feel so strong, like I can do anything. Besides, now that James is back in jail, I feel perfectly safe." She smiled. "Come on, I'll race ya."

"Wait," Eric said. "As long as you're feeling strong there's something I need to talk to you about."

She came back, frowning. The look on his face told her whatever it was, it wasn't a pleasant subject.

Pushing a loose strand of her hair back he cleared his throat. "I spoke to Justin this morning. When the time comes, we'll have to go to court to testify against James. He's been charged with kidnapping, attempted rape, two counts of attempted murder and two counts of assault with a deadly weapon. You're gonna have to testify because he pleaded innocent."

"Innocent? How can he plead innocent? We have the DVD."

"Well, he can plead anything he wants to plead. And yeah, we have the DVD, but the DVD can't be the only testimony. They're gonna need to hear

your version of things. And mine too and Ricky too."

Shelley shook her head in disbelief. "No," she stated firmly. "No." She stomped her foot. "There's no way he can win and he knows it. He just wants to put me through the ordeal."

Calmly, Eric took her hand. "You can handle it, Shelley. We're all gonna have to testify. Did you just say you feel stronger?"

"No. I mean, yes, but no. He'll sit in the courtroom and grin at me and make me feel dirty and he'll love every minute of it." She shuddered.

"You're letting him into your mind."

She sighed. "I can't help it. I feel sick just thinking about it. I can still feel his hands on me," she said quietly, as she stared out toward the ocean. "I can see the hate in his eyes." She looked sadly back at Eric. "He didn't have the right to do what he did."

"That's right Shelley," Eric jumped in. "He didn't have the right. Now if you'll just go to court and tell the jury what happened, they'll let him know he didn't have the right. Remember, in the courtroom he won't be in control. You will. You can say what you like and he can't hurt you."

"But what if I mess up. What if I fall apart?"

"Don't be silly. You're the strongest woman I know."

Shelley closed her eyes in thought, then looked up suddenly, dreading the answer to the next question. "Will they show the video?"

"Not publicly," Eric answered. "But the jury will have to see it and of course James' lawyers."

Shelley shook her head. "It's so embarrassing. Always have to submit myself. Ugh! I gotta go run." She jumped up and ran out the door.

Eric watched her run down the beach as Ricky joined him.

"Think she'll be okay?" Ricky asked.

"Yes, I do," Eric smiled. "She's come a long way."

Ricky frowned. "Yeah, but you didn't tell her they were trying to appeal the no bail decision."

Eric sighed. "Yeah, trying to hold off on that. Why worry her about something that won't happen? They let him out on bail once and he went right back to it. They won't let him out again."

Ricky shrugged. "Sometimes, Dad, you sound as innocent as Shelley. He has good lawyers. Top attorneys. And just as many people on his side with influence. I know, because you taught me, that there are dark forces at work in this world. They have long arms and I don't think James getting out on bail is as farfetched as you think."

"Maybe not, but Justin will be keeping a close eye on things. There'll be no clerical screw ups this time."

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2 Corinthians 11:13-15

"For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen,
disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder,

for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light.
So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves
as servants of righteousness.
Their end will correspond to their deeds."

Chapter Thirty-Three

Shelley took her trip home to Atlanta. Eric had warned her that she was now a celebrity, but when the first person, an agent at the airport, asked for her autograph it freaked her out. By the time she got to Atlanta and had several people recognize her, she'd begun to believe.

Pushing that out of her mind she focused and wasted no time once she got to her little house. Next-door neighbors, Bill and Louise, were paid generously to look after her home. She visited Brian and Meg and baby Aaron. Nostalgia prodded her to visit Brian's dojang once more where she and Eric had spent countless hours training. While there, she was surprised again to have to sign autographs for Brian's students, both children and adults. She'd learned that Brian's business had boomed because of publicity that Eric had trained the new MART champion at Brian's studio and that Brian himself was a former star student of Eric's.

It took her nearly two weeks, but in the end, her house was deep cleaned and scrubbed spotless and completely organized. Many things were sent to charity or simply gotten rid of, and furniture covered. She'd packed her and the boys' belongings and shipped them off to LA, arranged for a lawn service to keep up her yard, and spent an entire morning bidding farewell to her dandelions.

Lastly, she sold her little old car to a teenage boy who intended to soup it up, then picked up a rental to use until her flight back to Los Angeles. Sitting wearily on the bed Thursday evening she phoned Eric as she had twice a day for the last two weeks. His cell went straight to message, which meant he was in a meeting or teaching or working out, so she dialed the house phone and this time she only got the machine.

"Hi. It's me. I'm finished, finally, and boy am I tired. My flight arrives in LA Sunday evening so, I guess I'll see you then. I wish you were available right now for me to talk to because I miss you desperately, but I understand. Even better, I wish you were here. Well, anyway, I love you. You too, Ricky. See you guys Sunday. Bye."

She hung up and laid back, sighing heavily. It was Thursday afternoon and her flight wasn't until Sunday. She had almost three days to kill and was already bored. She sat up again and phoned the children. First talking to Bree about Broadway plays and boyfriends, then to the boys about martial arts and art school, and girlfriends and Hawaii.

It was Joey who gave her the idea, when he'd said there was a footbridge

across a stream at a park near his Dad's house and it reminded him of the one at the cabin. When she hung up, a smile crossed her lips. Picking up the receiver again, she dialed Mr. Bearden's number.

"Of course you can stay there for a few days, Shelley," he said generously. "But there won't be any phone or electricity. If I'd known earlier, I could've arranged to have it turned on for you."

"That's okay. I could use the peace and solitude. I like the idea of roughing it. Light by candles and cooking on a campfire."

"Well, you won't have to cook on a campfire because the stove is gas and there is gas in the tank out back, so, you'll be able to cook if you want."

"Oh, well okay then. Thank you so much."

"It's my pleasure to accommodate the champ. Now, don't go getting bit by a snake or stung by a bee or— falling off any bridges."

Shelley laughed. "Or squished by giant rocks. I promise."

"Good, because we have you lined up for several personal appearances."

"I'll be careful. I just need to relax and enjoy nature for a while."

Super early Friday morning, Shelley loaded her rental car with what she'd take with her on the plane so she wouldn't have to come back to the house. She stopped at a grocery store for supplies and drove happily up to her little cabin, singing all the way.

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When Eric arrived at Shelley's house that same morning just a few hours later, his intention was to surprise her. It was he who was surprised. He asked Bill next door if he knew where she was.

"Sorry, Eric, I don't, but I do know she said she wasn't leaving until Sunday, so she's probably just out visiting friends. You don't think that guy is after her again, do you?"

"No," Eric smiled. "He's in jail, awaiting trial. I'm sure she's fine."

"She doesn't have a cell phone?" Bill asked.

"She has one, but she's not answering, which actually is something she does quite often."

Next he called Brian.

"She came over Tuesday for dinner and came to my class Wednesday, but we haven't heard from her today. What can I do, Eric? Is she in trouble?"

Eric laughed. "Strange how that's everyone's first thought where Shelley's concerned. No. I'm sure she's fine. I just came down to surprise her and she's not here. Thanks anyway."

He tried Ricky next. "Have you heard from Shelley?"

"Yep. She left a message yesterday, about 5:00 PM our time. All she said though, was that she'd see us Sunday and that she missed you and loved you. Is there a problem? Do I need to come out there?"

"No. She's probably just visiting someone. I'm sure she'll be back by this evening. It's just that her suitcases aren't here and it appears she's already left. She'll probably be irritated that I worried about her at all, but you know she

has a knack for getting into trouble."

"I'm taking the next flight out, Dad. Now, you've got me worried."

"That's not necessary, Rick. I'm sure she's fine."

Eric hung up and wandered through the house. It was obvious she'd worked hard. He made a few more calls, but had the same luck. Then it hit him. She must be at the zoo.

A few hours later he sat wearily in his car having searched every inch of the zoo before heading back to the house alone. It was four in the afternoon. More than likely, wherever she was, she'd be home no later than eleven. Eric ran out to grab a bite and hurried back.

He hadn't slept for nearly twenty-four hours, so he stretched out on the sofa and turned on the TV to distract himself. He coached his mind to think positive thoughts, whispered a prayer, and within a few minutes, exhaustion overtook him.

The sound of a car pulling into the driveway woke him. He glanced up at the clock, expecting it to read nine or ten. He blinked. It was 2:00 AM. Running to the door, he opened it to his son's worried face.

"I told you not to come."

"Is she back?"

Eric shook his head. "I thought she'd be home by eleven at the latest. I must've fallen asleep."

"I knew I needed to come. Something's wrong. I can feel it."

Eric sighed. "I've been trying to push negative thoughts away, but if I truly listen to God's voice, I feel like something's not quite right," Eric admitted. He saw movement and glanced past Ricky to see Jason and Justin coming up the walk.

Ricky shrugged. "I let them know where I was going and I didn't mean to worry them and have them come all the way out here, but they insisted on coming with me," Ricky explained.

"I couldn't stay so far away and just wait," Justin said. "And Jason said he needed to swing by New Orleans to visit Angel, so here we are."

"You're nowhere near New Orleans," Eric pointed out.

Jason shrugged. "A minor detour."

They all plopped down in the living room.

"Maybe she's gone to spend the night with a friend," Jason suggested.

"You're probably right," Eric said, hoping that was true.

They sat silently trying to figure out where Shelley might be.

Finally Eric broke the silence. "If she's not home by morning I guess I'll call Robert and see if he knows anything. Until then, let's get some sleep," Eric suggested. "And guys– thanks."

As if rehearsed, Eric went into Shelley's room, Ricky into Bree's room and the brothers into Mark and Joey's room. There was no bedding on Shelley's or the boys' beds, so Ricky got the best deal. The men were used to roughing it, so the lack of bedding didn't keep them from sleeping. Ricky

didn't go immediately to sleep, though, because he was having too much fun rummaging through the feminine fittings of the girl who'd captured his heart. Her room hadn't been packed up like the others. He smelled her clothing, looked over the trinkets on her dresser, tried on some hats and finally sat on her bed. It was covered in purple pansies and smelled of her.

The bedside table held a frothy lamp, a landline phone, an address book with a pen sprouting purple feathers. The drawer's contents stopped him. There was a journal and beside it, his knife, the one he'd given her as an impromptu gift. He lifted it. It felt so right in his hand. Was it possible to develop a relationship with an inanimate object? Everything had a certain energy about it, a certain vibration, one of its own or one placed there by a powerful source. He contemplated that for a time, deciding the powerful source would've been his father.

Finally he put the knife back in the drawer and without ever thinking that he was invading the privacy of another, he carefully removed the journal. He flipped through a few pages, admiring her handwriting and thought he'd read just a few entries. There were several pages written about shows she'd done, co-stars she'd worked with, her hopes and dreams for her profession. There was one, about the day she'd met him. She'd thought he was cute. He rolled his eyes. When he started reading about her devising a plan to lose her virginity, he quickly tucked the book safely back into the drawer.

The next morning each man woke with the sinking feeling that came from knowing Shelley hadn't come home.

Justin slammed his hand on the kitchen table. "I hate this, man. It's making me crazy. It reminds me of the night we looked for her in New Orleans and thought she was dead."

"Huh," Ricky jumped in. "You should've been there when she was dead when that boulder fell on her up at the cabin."

Eric looked up to meet the gaze of the others. "Why didn't I think of that?" The four sprang into action.

A phone call told them the landline at the cabin was not in service. Another to Mr. Bearden immediately eased their fears. Two hours later they pulled up in the gravel driveway behind a rental car. Seeing that car made their hearts soar. They burst in. Her suitcases were there, opened on the bed, and her personal items were in the bathroom, but she was nowhere in sight.

Without even asking each other where to search next, they started down the path that led to the rock. They moved silently, listening to their surroundings. Finally, the boulder came into view but still, no Shelley.

Eric picked up a blanket and a bag with some sandwiches from the top of the rock. He turned quickly at a sound in the woods.

Stealthily, they moved through the woods toward the sound. A young deer stood beside a large tree. As they moved within thirty feet of the beautiful animal, it became alerted to their presence and darted away.

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Shelley stood with her back against the tree, a branch of leaves in her hand. The hairs stood up on the back of her neck. She sensed she wasn't alone. Something had startled away her deer and she knew it wasn't her. She stiffened at the sound of a twig breaking.

She decided quickly, that she'd be the one to surprise the intruder rather than let him sneak up on her. It sounded brave, nevertheless, her hand shook and her breathing increased. Waiting until she thought he was just behind her tree– she sprang into action.

Shelley was the one surprised however. In seconds she was forced softly onto her back on the forest floor.

Eric stood smiling over her, his eyebrows raised. "We're gonna have to work on that," he teased.

"Eric?" Shelley cried happily. "Eric!" She reached up to him and he lifted her into his arms. "I've missed you so much," she said as she buried her face against his neck.

"I missed you too, baby."

"What are you doing out here?" she asked.

"We waited at your house to surprise you and when you didn't come home, we got worried, so we came up here to look for you."

"We?" Shelley asked.

Eric motioned to his right. Three men leaned casually against a nearby tree grinning from ear to ear.

"Hey guys," she said with a smile. She turned to Eric. "I've missed you so much." Taking his hand, they started up to the cabin.

"What were you doing out in the woods, anyway?" Eric asked.

"I was feeding a deer."

"You're kidding. You had that deer eating out of your hand?"

"Well, it was eating leaves off a branch that I was holding, until you guys scared him away." She jumped on Eric's back. "But that's okay. You're much better company than a deer," she whispered in his ear as she snuggled up close and let him carry her piggyback the rest of the way.

They burst through the door and headed straight to the kitchen. Eric eased Shelley down onto the counter and turned to face her. She could see the desire in his eyes and it made her heart race.

"What's to eat?" Ricky called.

"I'm afraid there's nothing much. I wasn't expecting company and there's no power for the refrigerator," Shelley answered without taking her eyes off Eric. "There's some bottled water in that cooler over there, and some cheese and fruit."

"I'll tell you what," Jason began. "Justin and I will run into Tyler Springs and pick up some things and I'll cook a special meal and we can eat by candlelight and tell scary stories."

"Sounds like fun to me," Shelley replied.

Eric slid his hands up to rest on Shelley's thigh. "You go with 'em Rick,"

he half-asked, half-commanded.

"But," Ricky started and then stopped as he saw his father lean forward to kiss Shelley.

"Sure. No problem. But I get to push the cart," he yelled as they headed out the door.

"Your son is a lunatic," Shelley laughed.

Eric didn't answer. He had other things on his mind.

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His hand rested on her abdomen. "Hello little one," he whispered.

"Hello Daddy," Shelley answered for the baby. "I can't wait to come out and see you and have you hold me and love me and teach me."

Eric was quiet but Shelley could feel his tears wet on her shoulder.

Gently, she smoothed his hair.

"I love you Eric," she whispered just before she drifted off.

When she woke, Eric was gone. She could hear the men chatting and laughing as they prepared dinner.

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Bright and early the next morning, Shelley stood at the door and watched with a smile as her beloved drove her rental car down the gravel drive. He'd only be away a few hours and she wanted to clean the cabin and prepare herself for the very romantic escapade they'd planned.

She went about her duties cheerfully, humming and talking to herself, completely content with life.

Ricky, Justin and Jason had already headed back to Atlanta in Eric's rental, under strict instructions to restore Shelley's house to its previous order before flying out.

Eric drove into Tyler Springs to make the purchases he and Shelley would need for the next two days. Food, some non-alcoholic wine, and perhaps a special gift for his new bride.

The cabin clean, she attended to her own appearance. Freshly scrubbed and dressed Shelley smiled at her reflection. She definitely looked the part of country girl living in the north Georgia mountains. She wore cut-off shorts and a button shirt that she'd tied to show off her midriff. After all, she wouldn't be able to do that much longer. She turned sideways, arched her back and smiled at the very slight swell she could already see, but her smile faded and was replaced by terror as a large dark figure appeared in the mirror just behind her.

Her scream began from deep inside, welling up from her abdomen into her chest where she sucked in the breath that would expel it but the shrill sound was heard by no one beyond the surrounding wildlife.

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Eric found his trip into town becoming a celebration of sorts for the people of the small community. Many of them had been out to the party up at the cabin. After all, when celebrities come to town and invite you to a party, you don't refuse. They'd been glued to their television sets during the MART

and were excited about the chance to see 'their' celebrities again. They asked Eric about Shelley and about the rumors that they had married. When the information was confirmed, they insisted on buying Eric a drink, which he accepted graciously.

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Shelley fought valiantly. This time she did land punches and even a few kicks. James laughed, impressed with her quickness and the immense improvement of her skills, yet the battle lasted only a few seconds longer than the preceding ones with this same opponent, and it ended as did all the others, his victim defeated.

She struggled against him in vain as he effortlessly carried her to the bed and threw her down. She rebounded immediately only to be knocked down again. He grabbed one hand and began securing it to the bedpost. She fought and kicked violently with her free limbs, but his backhand coaxed her into stillness.

When he had both her hands taped to the respective bedposts, rendering her relatively immobile, James sat down next to her on the bed and smiled at her sweetly. A chill ran up her spine. There was more than evil in his grin. This man was totally insane.

"You know you're in big trouble, don't you?"

He actually spoke softly, as if he cared. She stared at him silently, unsure of what to do or say to help herself. Any question could be a trick. Any answer could be the one to send him over the edge. As it turned out, her lack of response was also the wrong choice.

He slapped her hard across the face. She began to cry.

"When I ask you a question, you answer it," he screamed. His demeanor changed again. He smiled, compassionately. "Okay now. It's okay," he soothed. "We'll just try again, that's all. No harm done. Shh, now, it's okay. The question was; do you realize the trouble you're in?"

She nodded her head fearfully.

"Good. Very good. See now, that wasn't so hard, was it?"

"No," she whimpered.

He gently wiped a tear from her cheek. "You know Shelley, it's not you that I want to hurt. I actually like you. You've got spunk. Besides, what man could resist a good-lookin' woman like yourself?"

He rubbed the back of his hand softly up and down her outstretched arm. She shuddered.

He stood suddenly. "No, Shelley, it's Eric I want and soon he'll come walking through that door and meet his death. A slow death. A death like the one I've suffered these past eleven years. A painful death."

He walked toward the door of the bedroom and leaned against it, his mind wandering back through his past until his eyes met Shelley's. He snapped out of his reverie.

"Do you understand what I'm saying, Shelley? I'm gonna take Eric down

when he comes through the door."

Something boiled up inside of her. How dare he suggest that he could win a battle against Eric. Even taken by surprise, Eric would defeat James easily. His cockiness was ridiculous in Shelley's mind. James was no match for...

The next strike of James' fist brought her thoughts to an abrupt halt and shook her brain.

"I asked you a question," he barked.

She turned her head back to face him, eyes wide. She couldn't remember what the question was. He raised his hand to hit her again.

"What– what was the question?" she stammered, weakly.

He lowered his hand. "Did your mind wander a bit? That's okay. Mine does that too sometimes. What I asked was; do you understand what I intend to do to Eric?"

Shelley didn't know what made her do it. The words were out before she could stop them. "I understand what you think you intend to do, but it won't happen the way you've planned. There's no way you could win against Eric." She closed her eyes and braced for the pain.

When it didn't come, she opened them again. James stood calmly smiling at her. "That's my girl," he said with true admiration.

He turned and went back to his place against the door. "So, you don't think I can beat Eric? Well, sweet Shelley, time will tell, won't it?"

"Yes it will," she answered defiantly.

"Tell me Shelley, what if I did win? What if I win and then held Eric captive to do with as I please? What would you think, or, what would you be willing to do to save him?"

Shelley didn't want to answer this question. To do so would be like admitting Eric's defeat was possible. It wasn't possible.

James's voice bellowed curses at her. "Answer the question!" He charged across the room at her, full speed and she shrank back and down into the bed, looking for protection.

"Anything!" she screamed. "I'd do anything to save him."

Her tears began anew. More from shame than from pain. She was ashamed of her cowardice. Ashamed of her fear of this man. She felt as if she were betraying Eric somehow, by answering James's questions, yet she continued to answer rather than suffer at his hands.

James sat down next to her. "I knew you would, Shelley. I'd bet you'd even give your own life for him, wouldn't you?"

"Yes," she said softly.

He touched her nose as if she were a little girl. "I tell you what. I'm gonna give you a chance to save him."

"Eric will *not* need saving," she hissed at him. Again, the expected slap did not come.

"Well," James shrugged. "If he defeats me, then you have nothing to worry about, right?"

She nodded. He was so completely sure of himself and she found that fact extremely unsettling.

"But, if I win, then you'll be glad I gave you this opportunity."

"What do I have to do?" she asked timidly, hating herself for her weakness and lack of faith in Eric.

He smiled. "It's really very simple. All you have to do is play a little game. If you win the game, Eric lives."

"What kind of game?" she asked warily.

"It's a game of silence. I got the idea from the last time we were together. Remember when I told you to not speak while I held the knife against your throat? I really enjoyed that. So, I invented a game of silence. Well, actually, not silence. Just— no words. When I have Eric, and I assure you, I will, all you have to do is not speak. Utter no words. No matter what happens, you may not speak to him or to me."

Completely bewildered, she asked, "What else?"

James grinned. "Sounds, too easy, huh?"

She didn't give him the satisfaction of acknowledging those words. Luckily, he let the un-answering of his question pass.

"Actually, there is a little more to it. You may not speak, but you *can* make noise. You can cry, yell, scream, and believe me, you're gonna want to scream. You're gonna want to beg me to stop, to beg Eric to help you, because you're gonna be in a great deal of pain."

Fear welled up in her chest. She quickly swallowed it back, but James could see it and he smiled with pleasure.

"Come on now, Shelley. It'll be like running the gauntlet to prove your bravery, or walking over hot coals to show your concentration, or fasting to show your faith and dedication. You wear a black belt. Prove you truly deserve it. No matter what I do, speak no words and you win. It's that simple."

She swallowed hard, thinking she'd try to reason with him. "They let you out of jail on bail, didn't they? If you do this, they will catch you and they'll never let you out again."

"Oh, Shelley, what am I gonna do with you? Use your brain. Do my actions speak of a man who cares about returning to jail? No, Shelley, my life is over. My trip to Georgia was a one-way deal and I knew that from the start. This little trip will end in my death, or Eric's." He shrugged. "Maybe both. Probably both." The little trial for attempted murder will either never happen or will be *for* murder. I'll tell you what, sweet Shelley," he said with a false kindness. "You think about it for a while, okay? I have some things to take care of." He turned and left her.

Yet Shelley knew there was nothing to think about. If Eric won the battle, she had nothing to worry about, just as James said. However, if by some slight chance, James came out on top, she'd do whatever she had to do to help Eric. Even if it meant playing James' sadistic game.

It wasn't long before James reentered the room, carrying a plate of food.

He straightened the bedclothes, pulled Shelley's hair out from under her and smoothed it out. He lifted her head and placed a pillow underneath.

"There, all comfy?" he asked.

She gazed up at him incredulously. He slapped her.

"Yes," she whimpered.

"So, little girl, looks like you're having a very hard day. Here, I've brought you something to eat."

He held a plate of leftovers from last night's dinner. He laughed. "Don't worry. It's not poisoned." He ate a bite of pasta. "See? Really, it's okay. I'm saving you for our little game."

"I'm not hungry," she said.

"Of course you are," he answered cheerfully. "I insist," he said as he pressed the fork to her lips.

She turned away. "I can't."

He grabbed her by the hair and turned her head back to face him. "I absolutely insist," he threatened. His hand squeezed her cheeks until her mouth opened and he shoved the food inside. "Chew," he commanded.

Through her tears, she chewed and swallowed, choking it down the best she could. He lifted her head and gave her wine to drink. The process continued, Shelley gagging and choking, until she'd consumed the contents of the plate. She had a vague sensation of a "last meal" ritual but forced the thought from her mind.

He cleaned her face of tears and sauce with a napkin and smiled at her. "Well, Eric will be home soon, and I need you to be very, very quiet. Will you do that for me?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes."

"Yeah right," he laughed cheerfully. "Good try, Shelley."

He held up a hypodermic needle and smiled. Her eyes wide, she had no time to protest. He quickly plunged the needle into the muscle of her arm, keeping his eyes on her eyes until she lost consciousness.

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Proverbs 26:27

"Whoever digs a pit will fall into it, and a stone
will come back on him who starts it rolling."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Jason drove on the way back to Shelley's house, while Justin sat shotgun and Ricky, restless and pensive, stretched out in the back seat and tried to rest. All was not well with the universe. He could feel it.

Once Jason swung the car into Shelley's driveway, it took only a few minutes to restore her house to its former cleanliness.

Justin pulled out his cell phone. "I'll see when the next flight out leaves and get us booked." He frowned at the phone. Eighteen missed calls. He punched a button.

"Where have you been?" a panicked voice asked. "I've been trying to contact you since last night. You know better than running off without letting me know something. Why didn't you answer your cell?"

Justin smiled at the dedication of his assistant. "Calm down. Everything's all right. I thought there was an emergency and I had to leave suddenly but it was a false alarm. My phone doesn't work up at the cabin, which is where I've been, so I turned it off to save the battery."

"Well, this is no false alarm," she shot back. "They granted James' special appeal for bail yesterday. When I couldn't reach you or your brother, I contacted some of Jason's friends. They think James may have taken a flight out. I'm sure I don't need to tell you what that means."

Justin made it evident that he grasped the seriousness of the situation. Shelley would be safe with Eric, but they should be told about this new development immediately. He turned to Jason and Ricky.

"James is out. Try your Dad on his cell."

Ricky shook his head. "You know it won't work out there," Ricky complained as he called his father.

"We have to go back," Justin began explaining. "James is free and probably headed this direction. We need to go back and warn your dad."

Ricky didn't question it. Quickly, they collected their things and started to head out.

"Wait." Ricky said suddenly.

He ran back into the house and straight to Bree's room to the bedside table. He pulled the drawer open and in an instant, the gold-handled knife was at his side. He jumped in the car. "Let's go."

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Eric's jovial mood at the local pub began to deteriorate once he glanced down at his watch. Uh oh, Shelley's gonna be hard to deal with on this one.

As he stood, making apologies about having to leave, he realized he was a little tipsy. Actually, a lot tipsy. Definitely in no condition to drive. He sighed. He was disappointed in himself. This wasn't like him at all. Oh well, sometimes you just have to lighten up, have some fun and take some chances. Dear Lord, he thought, I'm beginning to think like Ricky.

His newest best buddy, Sheriff Carter, drove Eric out to the cabin as he formulated what he'd say to Shelley. He smiled. She is absolutely adorable when she's mad. "I bet I can have her eating out of my hand in fifteen minutes," he said with a chuckle. He reconsidered. Well, maybe thirty minutes, he thought.

The Sheriff laid odds with Shelley as he brought the car to a sharp halt on the gravel drive in front of the tiny cabin.

"Good luck," he called as Eric gathered his purchases. "We'll have your car delivered." He sped away.

Eric stood in front of the cabin and breathed a sigh, picturing Shelley standing in the center of the room, fuming, with her hands on her hips. He weaved his way toward the porch, up the steps and paused before he opened the door, forcing a pleasant look on his face and drawing a deep breath. He opened the door and stepped inside.

Something hard and blunt hit him in the back of the head. Eric fell to his knees, packages scattering across the floor.

Boy, she is really mad, was his first thought, but a more sobering realization cleared his dulled brain. Before a second blow could be made, he instinctively turned and raised his arm to block it. He stared into James' hate enraged eyes. The board glanced off Eric's forearm and crashed to the floor.

The whack to the back of Eric's head was causing severe vertigo. James' hard boot blasted Eric in the abdomen. Eric rolled and struggled to stand, but the vertigo combined with the alcohol was making it difficult to discern up from down. He stumbled forward into James' spinning back kick. It caught him in the temple.

The battle was over before it began. A Master defeated; not by his enemy as much as by his own deeds, innocent though they were. Eric had preached many times that only one mistake, one instant of carelessness can cause defeat or possibly fatality. He'd made the mistake.

James dragged Eric's unconscious body into the bedroom.

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Shelley slowly opened her eyes. Her heart soared with relief. Eric stood over her, gazing down at her. He'd won! She'd known he would.

Yet, as she blinked several times to clear her blurred vision, she realized she was wrong. Dead wrong. It was Eric she was looking at, but he was not standing over her. He wouldn't be standing at all if he hadn't been supported by ropes that hung from the ceiling beam.

His wrists were not taped with duct tape like hers. Instead James had used handcuffs on Eric's hands and feet to secure him. Eric's hands were stretched

over his head where the cuffs were looped over a thick rope that was wound around the beam that ran the length of the cabin. His feet were also cuffed and anchored to the wooden floor with large nails that bent over to hold the chains.

Shelley raised her head for a better view. His eyes were closed, his head bowed. His shirt was gone. A small trickle of blood ran from somewhere behind his head to the front of his neck and down his chest.

"Eric," she whispered, but he didn't respond.

She laid her throbbing head back down. "How?" she asked aloud.

"The fact that he was drunk may have had something to do with it," James answered, his tone jovial. "Although, I'm sure I could've won without the help of the alcohol."

Shelley turned, startled by the closeness of James' voice. He was right beside her. Her eyes burned into his. "That's a lie!"

James only smiled. "Maybe. Maybe not. The truth has no bearing on the situation, does it? The fact remains, Eric is at my mercy. So, now we play the game, right?"

Shelley closed her eyes. It wasn't supposed to happen like this. "Please don't do this," she begged, her fear getting the best of her momentarily.

"That's fine with me," James said flatly. "We don't have to play the game. I'd just as soon take Eric out and watch him die a slow painful death. Is that what you've decided?"

"No," she answered quickly.

"Then you'll play the game?"

"How do I know you'll keep your word? If I win, if I do what you ask, how do I know you won't hurt Eric anyway?"

James sat down next to her. "Contrary to what you believe, or what Eric has told you, I have my own set of ethics, my own code of honor."

Shelley tugged at her bindings. "Oh, yeah, this is truly honorable."

Anger flashed across his face, but he regained control quickly.

"I'll give you an example to prove my honor. Several times during this past year, I could've taken any one of your children from you."

She began to tremble.

He continued."I didn't, because children are good and innocent and not responsible for the sins of their parents."

"And what are my sins?" she snapped.

He stroked her cheek gently. "Your sin, albeit innocently committed, was to become involved with Master Kino. So, now, you must pay along with him. But I swear on the lives of your children, I'll keep my part of the bargain. You win the game, Eric goes free. Deal?"

With tears in her eyes and terror in her heart, she agreed.

She looked up at the man she loved more than life itself. She wondered how badly he was hurt and how long she had before 'the game' was to begin.

James went to Eric, took his pulse and lifted his eyelids. "He's out cold. Let's wake him, shall we?" He circled behind, drawing his knife.

"Wh– what are you gonna do? Don't hurt him. You said if I played you wouldn't hurt him."

"Well, you can't very well play if he's not awake. I won't hurt him bad. Just enough to wake him. You see, just here, next to the shoulder blade is a bundle of nerve endings. Slipping a blade in just so, can cause a great deal of pain." He pushed the knife into Eric's back.

Eric moaned, his head lifted.

"See?" James said. "Nothing to it."

Eric's eyes opened and he immediately took in the situation.

"Shelley," he said, ignoring James' presence and the burning pain in his back. "Are you okay, baby?"

Shelley turned her gaze to James, unsure if she should answer. James bent to whisper in her ear. "The game has begun."

"Get away from her," Eric ordered.

James stood to face his enemy, rubbed the blood from his knife, licked his fingers, folded the knife and shoved it in his pocket as he spoke. "You're hardly in a position to be giving orders."

Eric couldn't argue with the statement but he immediately tried to reason with him. "Listen James, this has nothing to do with Shelley. Let her go. You don't want her. It's me you want and you have me. Please, let her go. If you need to see me beg, you got it. I'm begging you. Please, James, let her go."

James was almost touched by Eric's humility. Almost. "I would Eric. Honest to God, I would," he said brightly. "I like her. But she doesn't want to go. She wants to stay. Don't you Shelley?"

She looked sadly up at Eric and gazed into his eyes, trying to communicate her immense love to him. Trying to make him understand. James' knuckles splitting her lip brought her out of her trance.

"Leave her alone," Eric screamed as he struggled against his bonds.

"It's okay, it's okay," James said, trying to calm him. "It's just punishment for not answering a question. She knows she's supposed to be polite enough to answer my questions. Isn't that right, Shelley?"

Wide-eyed, she nodded.

Eric's teeth clenched as he began to understand what Shelley had already been through.

"Now, answer the question," James continued, refusing to let a question go unanswered. "You don't want to leave because there's something you need to do, right?"

She nodded as tears ran down her face.

James sat next to her and picked up the edge of the sheet. "There now," he said as he wiped her tears and cleaned the blood from her mouth.

His eyes lingered on her.

"You sure are a pretty thing," he said with a smile.

He took her face in his hands. She immediately began to struggle, but he held her fast while he kissed her.

"There's no use in struggling, Shelley. There is no way out for you."

He stood to face Eric with a smile. "I swear Eric, you are one lucky man, because she tastes about as sweet as anyone could. But today, my friend, your luck has run out, and mine has just come in," he grinned, raising his eyebrows.

Eric tried again to gain control of the situation. "She's never done anything to hurt you. Please James, leave–her– alone."

James ignored him. He knelt over Shelley, pulling out the knife and raising his favorite toy as he again stroked its blade with his fingertip. Shelley's breaths became labored as her fear mounted. He slid the knife under the material of her shirt and began removing her clothing. It sliced through the cloth easily. Once he'd removed every stitch, he neatly put the knife away. Shelley felt a relief of sorts, that he'd only wanted to use the knife to undress her. But what was coming?

The room began to spin. There was a loud roar in her ears.

She looked over at Eric. He was straining against his bonds and yelling something, but she couldn't hear what he was saying. She looked back at James who was grinning and, and then– he was on her. He was so heavy. There was nothing she could do to stop what was happening to her. Nothing but pray, she thought. She did immediately. *Oh please, help me dear Jesus*, she whispered inside her head.

And something strange happened. An immediate feeling of calmness and peace came over her. And a question popped into her head. What had she learned? She realized she'd learned a great deal. It was just a body. He could and would do as he pleased with it. Just as Eric had once said, there is always gonna be someone who is bigger and stronger. Yet he couldn't touch her mind. Her mind and spirit were free.

Eric too had been praying. He stopped struggling, resigning himself to the fact that he couldn't help her physically.

"Shelley, listen to me. Remember, it's just a body. You can leave it. You can go to another place. A place inside your mind. Somewhere safe.

Shelley, are you listening? Shelley?"

But Shelley couldn't hear him. She'd already clicked her ruby slippers, spoken the special words and ended up in her own backyard.

She lay on the trampoline as Mark and Joey jumped all around her, laughing and teasing.

"How about this one, Mom. Do you understand the words that are coming out of my mouth?"

Mark clapped a hand over Joey's mouth before he could answer and they fell to the tramp, laughing.

"That was *Rush Hour,*" she answered.

James raped her. He violated her, causing as much pain as possible. He was brutal, like an animal, but it didn't matter. She wasn't there. "I've got one," Mark laughed. "We're gonna need a bigger boat."

"*Jaws*," Shelley answered easily.

"Here come the sharks," Joey yelled as he and Mark jumped on her and tried to gobble her up.

"Ouch, come on guys, don't really bite. Ow, you guys get off, you're hurting Mommy. Ouch, Mark, your head just hit me in the mouth. Okay boys, off. Get off now. Get off."

She came reluctantly back to reality. James had gotten off. It had been his teeth that bit. It had been his fist that hit her mouth.

"Answer me," he screamed.

She had no idea what the question was, but she nodded anyway. It seemed to appease him.

James stood in front of Eric, gloating. He said something to Eric which Shelley couldn't hear, but whatever it was, Eric became enraged and lurched toward him. There was so much pain on Eric's face and Shelley closed her eyes against it, causing her to focus on her own feelings.

The thought of James' seed now mingling with her own flesh was repulsive, sickening. She fought down a wave of nausea as she wondered how much longer this would go on and what else James had planned. The fear of what was to come was much worse than what had just happened. Shelley realized, she didn't feel the way she had once before. When she'd been raped before, it had seemed like it was the end of the world. It wasn't, though. Now she knew, she understood that her body was just a body, a house for her life force, yes, but a mere mortal body. She hadn't let him touch her mind. She wasn't responsible for his actions. She was not a victim. He'd done his worst, yet she didn't feel like a victim. He was bigger and stronger and that was too bad for her, but he didn't get to her no matter how hard he'd tried.

"Well, that was a nice beginning," James said approaching the bed. He climbed on again and knelt across her abdomen. "But now that the pleasure is over, it's time to get down to business."

The knife appeared in his hand again. Shelley's respiration doubled, tripled. Maybe he hadn't done his worst. Maybe what lay ahead of her was helping her to put the rape into perspective, because now, she definitely wished the rape was all that would happen.

"Did you know that the flesh on the inside of your arms from your elbow to your underarm is some of the most sensitive?"

She obediently shook her head.

"No? Well, it is. But you don't have to take my word for it, because you're about to find out first hand."

"No, no," Eric said, panic in his voice. "Don't do this. James, please. Please don't do this."

James smiled at him, and Eric suddenly realized he'd been saying just exactly what James wanted to hear, giving him exactly what he wanted. Eric even trying to reason with James was ridiculous and he knew it. Yet, if he stopped pleading, would he do worse to Shelley to make him start again? And he could do worse. Much worse.

James turned back to Shelley, leaning over her. He touched the point of the knife to the soft skin of Shelley's underarm, just above the elbow.

Her eyes pleaded with him.

He pushed the blade into her skin.

She gasped in pain and fear as blood ran over the curve of her bicep and onto the white sheet.

James turned to watch Eric's expression. Rage and horror were emanating from him. Slowly, James inched the knife downward, through her skin as she screamed her pain.

When he finished, there was a neat incision, a sixteenth of an inch deep and six inches long, ending just above her armpit.

She lay sobbing uncontrollably.

Eric twisted and turned his wrists until they were bloody and he thought his hands would break off. Helpless. He was helpless to rescue the woman he loved. Just like he'd been with Ann. He'd wanted to fight the cancer for her, but he'd been helpless. At least the cancer hadn't been his fault. This time it was his fault this innocent woman suffered. It was his fault and there was nothing he could do.

Eric watched as his high school enemy ran his big hand over the wound, smearing the blood evenly over her arm.

"Okay, okay, it's over," he said, trying to soothe her. "Come on now, stop crying. Shh, it's over. Oh, come on now, Shelley, how bad can it be?"

He sat waiting for her tears to subside. When they finally did, he spoke again. "Better now?" he asked.

She nodded pitifully.

He smiled. "Good, because it's time to do the other arm."

James couldn't hear the words Eric was yelling over Shelley's screams as he sliced through the skin of her other arm. Even when he finished, she continued to cry hysterically. "Calm down now," he coaxed kindly.

She ignored him.

He decided to distract her. He dipped his fingers in the blood along one of the wounds and began using it to write words on her belly.

"Hey, Shelley," he said cheerfully, trying to get her attention. "Tell me you remember this."

She lifted her head to see the words, even though she already knew what it said. *TOO EASY*.

"Ah yeah, those were the good ole' days, weren't they Shell?"

She turned her head and wretched violently. The food James had forced her to eat earlier came back up. He was extremely annoyed.

"Now look what you've done. What a mess," he said with disgust.

He began jerking off the bedclothes until she lay on the bare mattress. He left the room.

Eric immediately tried to communicate with her but she wouldn't listen to him. She was afraid the temptation to tell him how much she loved him or

to answer his questions or to try to comfort him would be too great.

James returned carrying clean sheets. He made the bed underneath her. "Now behave," he ordered. "There are no more sheets. If you mess these up I'll have to punish you."

Punish her? Eric realized the man had completely lost it. Everything he did was illogical. He'd crossed over into insanity.

Shelley nodded her acceptance, as if she completely understood his logic. Somehow, James didn't seem so crazy anymore. Maybe it was because she'd joined him in his realm of insanity.

James continued the game. He made parallel incisions to the first ones on her arms and then moved down to do the same to the inside of her thighs. She tried to kick, but he merely locked her knee under his arm and went to it.

With each scream, Eric died a little more inside. Dear Jesus, how much more can she take? Please help her. He tried to use the cuffs to saw through the rope above his head, but the rope was much too thick. Using every bit of his power to jerk his legs upward, he tried to pull the cuffs free from where they were nailed to the floor. His ankles bloody, he still wouldn't give up.

After each cut, James consoled Shelley until she was quiet and ready to experience the next one. It was strange, but she found herself looking forward to the times when he comforted her. It was, at the least, a respite from the pain.

He began working on her hands, making tiny slices through each fingertip and then a larger one across her palm. She found she had no more tears to cry. She simply moaned or grunted with each cut. She gave in to it. She opened her mind and allowed herself to completely experience the utter agony, misery and pain of her situation. She wallowed in her own blood, wet and sticky. She was cold, dizzy and nauseated. She looked over at Eric.

Tears streaked his cheeks and she thought from the look of agony on his face, that his pain was much worse than hers. After all, she knew were the situation reversed, she wouldn't be able to handle watching his torture. He still struggled against his bonds, but she knew it was futile.

James finished with her hands and was consoling her again. He stood. He was gazing down at her, shaking his head slowly.

"I have to say, sweet Shelley, that I never thought you'd make it this far. You're a very brave woman. You have my respect."

She smiled a faint smile.

"I want you to know, you've saved Eric's life."

A bigger smile.

Alerted by that statement, Eric stopped trying to pull his feet free and raised his head. So, this wasn't just torture for the pure enjoyment of it. James was putting Shelley through some sort of test? A test of bravery, perhaps? And maybe, if she passed, then James would spare Eric's life? But what about Shelley's life? That question was answered within the next few moments.

"Are you happy now that you've won the game?" James asked, brushing some of her blood-soaked hair from her face.

She nodded.

"The game isn't quite finished though, Shelley."

The relief she'd been experiencing disappeared, her lips trembling.

"Are you in a lot of pain?" he asked her.

She nodded.

"I bet you want this all to be over, don't you?"

She nodded.

"And you know Eric will live, right?"

She nodded, then smiled up at Eric.

"And I suppose you're smart enough to also know that you're not gonna have the same privilege?"

Her smile faded. Somewhere in the back of her mind she'd known all along James meant for her to give her life for Eric, and she was willing to do just that, yet hearing him speak the dreaded words struck fear in her heart. He slapped her again.

"You do know you're gonna die, right?"

She nodded slowly.

"I'll tell you what, I'll make you another deal. You don't have to die. All you have to do is say the words. Just say, I want to live, and I swear to you that I'll let you go."

"Say it!" Eric screamed at her.

She closed her eyes. It was a trick. He hadn't said the game was over.

"Please, baby, say the words," Eric pleaded.

She shook her head.

James smiled. "Damn, you're a good woman. I really hate to do this. Please understand, it's nothing personal. Eric is safe, but one of you has to die, for my Ann, and so that means you have to go, Shelley." James touched Shelley's chest. "Do you want me to get it over with quickly? I mean, it's the least I can do for such a brave woman."

She nodded, forcing herself to avoid Eric's eyes and trying desperately to block out his words.

James' hand stopped moving and came to rest over Shelley's heart. "Your heart is here. I'll push the knife in hard and it will hurt like hell for just a few moments, but then, it will all be over. Okay?"

She glanced once more at Eric who continued to struggle with his bonds. Looking back to James, she nodded bravely.

James raised the knife high. Shelley's breaths came in great gasps. She couldn't control her fear. She wasn't brave. She was a coward. She held her breath and waited.

James looked over at Eric, who had gone completely berserk, struggling with all his might and power to release himself from his bindings. James smiled. Eric's agony was the absolute pure pleasure James had looked forward to for years. Eric was truly suffering. Too bad Tommy couldn't be around to share in the entertainment.

Then suddenly, James realized something. Once Shelley's life had been extinguished, and what had to be done was done, there would be no more pleasure watching Eric Kino suffer. So, he decided to prolong the fun a little longer. He lowered the knife.

Shelley began to cry again, for this was the cruelest game of all. Just do it, she thought. Just get it over with. I can't take anymore.

"Shelley, have you ever heard of harakiri? Some people call it hari kari."

She sniffed and nodded.

"Wouldn't you really prefer to do this yourself? Think about it now. If you do it yourself, you deprive me of the pleasure and you commit the final act of supreme bravery. Don't you agree?"

Slowly, she nodded.

"No Shelley," Eric bellowed at her.

She ignored him.

James cut the tape holding Shelley's wrists to the bedposts. He helped her lower her arms and move them around until the feeling returned and she was able to move them on her own. Eric knew the motive for this new twist was only to add to his grief. Would she really do it? Her hands were free. Could he get her to take advantage of that? And if so, how? She was so weak from loss of blood. What could she do against someone as large as James?

James placed the knife in her hands as he straddled her abdomen. He closed her bloody palms around the hilt.

"Okay now, Shelley, it's all up to you. Anytime you're ready."

She held the knife poised for a long time. Breath coming faster and faster, she tried to decide which one would be the last. Several times, she started to lower the knife, but something stopped her. James was becoming impatient.

"Shelley, I have a plane to catch. Get a move on." He looked up at Eric with a sneer. "Women," he said with a smile and a wink.

Shelley tried again. She brought the knife down to the spot on her chest that James had showed her. She touched the tip to her skin. A tiny drop of blood appeared at the point.

"No, Shelley, you have to do it hard. I mean, like, get up speed and plunge it in. You can do it."

However Eric was also giving her directions. "Never give up, Shelley. Killing yourself would be giving up. There is no sense in it. Baby, please, you have to listen to me."

There would be no use for him to suggest she turn the knife around and use it on James. He'd be able to block her, and then he might go crazy and kill her accidentally. No, if she'd just listen to him. Just stall. The nails holding the cuffs to the floor moved slightly. Another few minutes and he'd have it.

She closed her eyes again.

"Shelley—I am your teacher and you're being disrespectful."

That got her attention and James frowned.

"Please baby," Eric pleaded. "It wasn't meant to end like this. I know it

wasn't. How could it? There have been too many miracles."

His words struck a chord in Shelley's heart and mind. How could everything she'd been through, everything she'd accomplished, be meant to lead to this? Why would she find Eric and happiness only to have it taken from her– and the baby– the miracle of their child? Eric was right. It wasn't meant to end like this. It just couldn't be.

James took the knife from Shelley. "Sorry. You had your chance. I'm running out of time. Gotta get this over with." He raised the knife.

It wasn't supposed to end like this, but it looked like it was going to. She blinked a farewell to Eric.

"Don't give up," he said calmly, quietly.

So quietly, in fact, she looked again to see if his mouth truly moved. Had he spoken at all? *"Don't give up."* The words came again, but not from Eric. They seemed to come from inside her own head.

She glanced around. But how could she escape? She was weak and stiff and no match for James even at her best. It was over. There was no way out. She'd be dead soon and along with her, Eric's child.

James had said he wouldn't hurt the children. They were innocent and yet he was about to take the life of a tiny baby he didn't even know existed. Her eyes lit up. He didn't know! She looked up at him quickly.

The knife was coming down. She drew a painful breath. "You said you wouldn't hurt the children."

He stopped. "And so?"

"And so– I'm pregnant."

The words stunned him. The knife stopped. Compassion overcame him. It was only a brief moment but it was long enough. With a final jerk Eric sent nails flying and threw his cuffed legs up and over James' head.

At the same time, Shelley placed her hands over James' and thrust the knife forward. It slid deep into his abdomen. She hadn't expected the sick feeling that came from the slicing of human flesh and muscle. She almost felt sorry for him as his look of compassion for her unborn child turned to total surprise and confusion.

Eric had no such qualms. He yanked his legs back, pulling James off Shelley with every intention of snapping his neck. Shelley rolled to the floor, and rose to stand in front of Eric. She reached for his hands, not knowing how to unlock the cuffs.

"No, don't bother with that now. Run, baby. Run," Eric pleaded, struggling to hold James' in a head lock using his feet and the chain of the cuffs. "Run and hide."

For once she did as she was told without hesitation.

There were several hundred miles between the bedroom and the front door of the cabin. She covered them in only a few hours. When she finally opened the cabin door and burst through to the porch it was like she'd been madly swimming to the surface of the ocean and finally sprang forth. She

sucked in clean, fresh air.

James' confusion turned quickly to fury. Eric jerked his legs, causing James' head to snap back. The chink was trying to kill him! It's not gonna be that easy. Pulling the blood soaked knife from his own stomach he reached up and plunged it into Eric's thigh.

Grimacing through the pain, Eric tensed the muscles in his legs, trying desperately to keep hold of his captive. When James stabbed Eric's thigh again he lost some of his strength and James was able to scramble free. He rose and started for the door.

"Come back here and face me, you coward," Eric demanded.

"You think you can trick me into staying here and fighting with you and all the while she's getting away? You think you can keep me from finishing what I started? I could kill you right now. I should– but I want her to see it." He turned to run. "Don't you worry, we'll be back, and when we get here, you'll be the one to die. You wanna know why?" He grinned. "Because she spoke. She lost the game. She chose to save herself over you."

"She chose to save the baby," Eric reminded him, hoping he will keep true to his distorted version of honor and not hurt the children. James turned and staggered out of the room.

✝✝✝

Shelley ran. Ran blindly. Her bare feet, numb to pain, covered familiar ground. The path she chose was home to her. Joy sprang from every step. She was free.

She'd thought she'd never again be able to use her legs and arms and yet she was running. She thought never again to feel the wind on her face and yet her hair blew back like the tail of a kite. Freedom. Its taste was like the most exquisite delicacy—indescribable.

She could hear James' crashing steps. She had no idea, no plan as to how to avoid recapture. She should hide somewhere, but if he couldn't find her, he'd probably go back and kill Eric. Her body was weak and no match for the smallest of enemies, yet since she'd tasted freedom once more she felt inspired to fight. She had to save Eric. She had to try. Better to die as a warrior. Soon, she would have to stop running and turn and fight.

✝✝✝

Eric struggled helplessly. "Run and hide, baby," he whispered. Shelley was free, yet the torture continued. Not knowing what was happening was almost as painful as being witness to it.

A sound. One of them was returning. Too quiet to be James. It must be Shelley. The door burst open. Not Shelley. Three strong men rushed in. They had him free in moments.

"We have to find Shelley," Eric stated as he got his bearings and moved for the door. Without even one second of hesitation, the four flew out of the cabin, Ricky's speed putting him in the lead.

✝✝✝

She couldn't run any farther. Had to stop. Couldn't breathe. She veered off the path desperately looking for something to use as a weapon. She spotted a branch, the size of a large baseball bat. Stumbling forward, she picked it up quickly and slipped behind a nearby tree.

Calming herself, she tried to get her breathing under control, tried to clear her brain. She was dizzy and weak from loss of blood and knew she was moving slowly. It seemed like only a few moments had passed before she heard the sound of heavy footsteps stumbling toward her. Her pulse quickened. She closed her eyes. *Aim for the head.*

She stepped out and swung. She timed it better this time than with Eric earlier, but her aim was off. The branch caught him across the chest.

He stumbled backward but grabbed at the branch. Before she could draw it back and swing again, he'd jerked it from her grasp.

She turned to run, but he lurched for her and they tumbled to the ground together. He moved quickly, considering the gash in his stomach. He tried to pin her down, but she found she had a small advantage. Completely naked and covered with perspiration and blood, she easily slipped from his grasp and sprinted away while he struggled to stand.

Shelley knew she needed a place of advantage from which to fight, but her mind, dulled from her painful torture, wouldn't let her think. Yet it seemed a voice called out to her. *The rock. The rock. Go to the rock.*

Her logic fought against it. There is no way to defend yourself there. Go deeper into the woods.

Yet the giant boulder called out to her again and again and her body moved toward it instinctively. She stumbled breathlessly into the clearing where the large rock loomed in front of her. It sat alone and barren the rushing stream splashing up against it.

✝✝✝

Ricky literally flew down the path he knew Shelley would take. The other's were barely able to keep up. Feet hardly touching the earth, Ricky's mind flashed with the scene he'd just witnessed.

The bed had been covered with blood. Blood he assumed to be Shelley's. She'd gotten away somehow, but what kind of condition would she be in? There had been too much blood.

The others had been falling farther and farther behind, Justin having to help Eric at times. Then Ricky came to an abrupt halt.

"What is it?" Jason asked breathlessly as they reached him.

Ricky didn't answer. He looked off to the right and pointed. "I think Shelley left the path."

Of course, Jason could see the clues, now that Ricky pointed them out. Shelley had left the path. There'd been a scuffle. Blood spattered leaves and pine straw. The trail led back toward the path at an angle through the woods. Drawing on all his reserves, Eric took the lead. They skimmed bushes and fallen trees as they continued their pursuit.

Then they heard a scream. They would've picked up their pace were it possible to go any faster.

✝✝✝

Shelley stood on the bank staring at the rock. She couldn't see how it could offer her any protection and she looked off to the right to decide which way to run, only James had caught up to her and his hand grasped her shoulder.

She screamed and pulled away, dashing toward her precious rock, with James at her heels. She jumped the few feet of water and scrambled up the side of the boulder.

James grabbed an ankle, but she kicked him and tried to back away, readying to kick again when he reached for her.

He laughed and eased his large frame onto the side of the rock.

"Gotcha now, girl."

There was no time for a defensive answer. The boulder shifted under James' weight. It rolled toward him. He should've been able to simply jump aside, but he was weak from his abdominal wound and as he tried, he lost footing on the slippery moss.

James fell backward into the icy water and the sleeping giant rolled over onto him, crushing his legs.

Shelley leapt away as the rock rolled, adding to its momentum. She landed in the water and scrambled to her feet. She stood horrified, watching what had once been her fate, become his, only he was in no danger of drowning.

He reached out for her. "Help me," he ordered harshly.

She stood paralyzed. This man had tried to kill her, had tortured her, raped her and he asks for help? She took a step back.

James' face changed suddenly, though. It softened. His blue eyes blinked slowly as he looked up into Shelley's face. There was pain and sorrow and she began to wonder what could've happened to this man in his life to cause him to become so hate-filled and violent? Had he been abused as a child? What could've fed his hatred for so many years? What circumstances turn what must have once been a sweet-faced, blue-eyed little boy into a monster? His words broke her abstraction.

"Please Shelley, help me. I'm– I'm– sorry."

Their eyes met. Sorry. Sorry? How could he think that 'sorry' would be able to compensate for all he'd done. Yet, he did look sorry. Sorry and sad and utterly miserable. Could she forgive him? How could she not? Who was she to forgive or not to forgive? What should she do? What had she learned during the course of the year? She'd learned to be strong in the face of adversity— to not give up when all seems lost— that things are not always black and white— there is good and evil in everyone—. Eric taught her that Jesus said to forgive your enemy, those who do evil against you. James had definitely done that.

She'd also learned from her extraordinary teacher, to have honor and courage and that honor and courage meant to do what one thinks is the right thing to do even when one is scared to death to do it.

"Please Shelley, take my hand and pull me out."

She stepped shakily forward, then stopped. What was she doing? Was she falling for a trick? And even if she could get him out from under the rock, and she seriously doubted she could, would he be capable of harming her again? Not probable. His legs were crushed so he couldn't run after her.

He had to be weak from loss of blood, she thought, glancing down at his abdominal wound, the blood mixing with the water. He reminded her of a wounded animal. Scared. Confused. Accepting help from the "enemy." Would it be honorable to allow him to suffer and die without even trying to help?

Even though she herself was weak, she moved forward and braced herself against the rock. She pushed with all the strength she had left, straining, breathing hard, but it didn't budge.

She stepped back and shook her head at him. "I can't. I'm sorry. I tried but I can't move it." She thought she saw anger flash across his features, but, no, he was smiling.

"I know it's too heavy for you to move, Shelley, but if you'll come take my hands, I know together we can get me out."

Silently, she moved to his side and gingerly took his outstretched hand in hers. She shuddered. His hands were so large. They gripped her tightly around the wrists. She began to pull but he only laughed. "Shelley, you didn't really think you could pull me out, did you?" Her eyes filled with turmoil.

"No, Shelley. I'm gonna die here." He laughed again. "And so are you. It's not how I wanted it to end. You weren't supposed to speak, but you did, didn't you? That meant Eric dies. I wanted to go back and let you witness Eric's death."

She tried to pull away, but his grip was like a vise. He jerked on her arms and she came face down into the water.

She struggled to get her knees up under her and lift her head. She gasped for breath. He released his grip on one of her wrists and twisted his fingers through the back of her hair until her head was secured snugly in his grip. He held her face close to his.

"You messed up the game, Shelley. You weren't supposed to speak."

He plunged her face down into the stream. She struggled to find footing, pushing her hands against him. Any second her lungs would explode. Miraculously he raised her head. She inhaled deeply.

Reaching back, she groped for his hand at the back of her head, trying to loosen his fingers from her hair. He shook her until she was still. Their eyes met. He was crying.

"You messed everything up, Shelley," he blubbered again.

Then there was rage. His free hand balled into a fist and began hammering at her head. Each blow enunciated his words.

"You— " Bam "Weren't— " Bam "Supposed to— " Bam "Speak."

He said the words over and over. Each blow echoed through her brain. She stopped struggling. Her hands fell loosely by her side. James' grip now

was the only thing holding her up out of the water. He shook her until, in a daze, she looked into his face. “Goodbye, Shelley,” he said softly.

The knife she’d earlier buried in his abdomen now appeared in his free hand. As if fascinated by what was happening, she watched him as he held her head fast and placed the tip of the knife against her throat.

A few minutes ago she’d been at a safe distance watching his demise. She was stupid. So stupid.

“You made me do it,” he said. “You made me have to hurt your baby.”

✝✝✝

As Ricky emerged from the woods into the clearing, instinct took over completely. There was a knife at Shelley’s throat. She’d lost all fight. He pulled his knife from his side. His eyes met his father’s. Still running, Ricky tossed the golden knife to the only man he knew who was better than him with the weapon.

The movement was fluid, beautiful, in a way. The man at full speed, hair blowing in the wind, catches the knife in mid-stride, draws back, and sends it, airborne. The weapon hurtles toward its target. The shiny gold and steel flashes in the sun as the blade tumbles end over end nearing its destination. Eric hadn’t thought. He merely acted on pure instinct and adrenalin.

✝✝✝

Shelley waited for the final sting when something strange happened. Another knife appeared directly in front of her face. It seemed to appear out of nowhere. As if by magic, a golden, intricately carved hilt of a knife seemed to be protruding from James’ chest.

Slowly her eyes moved from the golden knife handle to James’ face. It was blank. No emotion. Nothing. Dead.

The knife that had been at her throat simply fell away. The hand that held her head up fell limply by James’ side, bringing her down with it.

She floundered in the water, struggling to free her hair from his fingers. She tried to free herself, but there was another pair of hands.

Gasping, she gained her freedom and stumbled backwards away from the stranger’s hands. She scrambled to her feet and stood shaking, confused, trying desperately to comprehend what had taken place. There was someone there. Someone speaking. She glanced around. A man approached. She backed away, gazing at him blankly. He was stepping toward her. She turned to her left, looking for an avenue of escape, but there stood another man. Was it another trick, she thought?

“Shelley. It’s me, baby. Let me help you,” Eric said softly.

She tried to focus. James had pounded on her brain. Everything seemed blurry, distorted.

Eric slowly reached out to Shelley. A pale, ghostly figure of a woman stood naked and shivering before him. A long, tangled, bloodied, wet mat of curls covered her face. The open wounds on her arms and legs were long, angry, red streaks. He looked into her face. It was as if she didn’t recognize

him—her eyes darted back and forth in distrust. Finally, they settled on him. He knew the moment she finally recognized him.

Shelley's eyes widened as she realized who stood before her. Eric. He moved toward her, speaking softly, a voice like distant rolling thunder. He stopped a few feet from her. Blood ran down his leg. He's hurt, was her first thought. He's alive and free was her second. She stepped toward him and quickly he covered the remaining inches.

They stood face to face, staring into one another's souls, reveling in the sheer realization that they'd both survived, but shock and fatigue kept Shelley from expressing her joy. She merely leaned forward and rested her forehead against his chest. As always, the power and warmth that was his became hers as it flowed into and around her body. Her trembling ceased and she began to relax. She looked up as Eric carefully brushed her hair back from her face.

"You're alive." The words were said simultaneously.

They smiled at each other. "It's over," Eric added. "Let's go home."

Eric scooped her up into his arms and turned to carry her to safety, but stumbled, weak from the stab wounds to his back and thigh. Immediately, they were surrounded by three of the most powerful, loyal people the world had ever known. Those three saw Eric and Shelley and their tiny unborn child safely home.

✞✞✞

"But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies,
do good to those who hate you,
Luke 6:27

Epilogue

It took a few days for Eric and Shelley to emerge from their stupor. The first half of that time was spent in a hospital recovering physically. Emotionally, mentally, spiritually, Shelley was a changed person. She'd had to reach down deep inside herself in order to survive and found a strength she'd never known. She'd had to learn to trust God. In doing so, she'd blended with a divine light of peace and love and it no longer mattered what had been done to her body, for her life source, her spirit and soul remained unaffected. She discovered Eric had been right all those months ago when he'd suggested a person is only a victim if they allow themselves to be. Shelley had found a spirituality and a peace she never knew existed. It was as if in her deepest agony she'd discovered another entire dimension. That dimension was the realm of heaven. God's realm. And He had filled her soul with love and peace and harmony. That was where she dwelled.

Eric had reached inside himself many years before he'd ever met Shelley and yet watching her suffer, terrified he would lose another loved one, he'd had to let go and find peace once more. As far as James Crane was concerned, Eric had done what he'd had to do and even though he felt sorrow over the waste of a human life, he felt no guilt. He hadn't acted in vengeance. He protected his wife and child. His heart was filled only with love and light.

The next six months were spent decorating the nursery, adjusting to the new home, the kids adjusting to a new school and each member of the family adjusting to each other. They prayed together often, attended church together, several different ones. They worked on being centered and overcoming trauma.

However, by the time Shelley was eight months along in her pregnancy she'd begun to feel stifled and trapped inside her cumbersome body. Against Eric's better judgment, she talked him into a family camping trip into the canyon. She'd been so miserable Eric would've done anything for her. So, as he'd done once before, he packed up the boys and Ricky and Bree and headed out to become one with nature.

Surrounded by large trees, Shelley felt wonderful being able to commune with nature again as they had at the cabin in the north Georgia mountains. Nevertheless it didn't surprise Eric when she slipped on some rocks in the creek and put herself into an early labor. Not panicked, it was a simple matter to pack up camp and head back. Or it should have been. They left in the middle of a downpour and found the bridge out. Taking cover in a ranger station, it seemed fate would bring the baby to them in true "Shelley" fashion. With the

entire family around and cheering her on, a tiny baby girl was pushed into a cold, wet world.

Shelley wanted to name her daughter after the dandelions, but the kids begged her not to do that to the poor child, so a compromise was made and June Flower Kino was welcomed into the family with open arms.

✝✝✝

God had a plan all along. Eric Kino was led to find a woman in need of healing from several things; a rough childhood, an emotionally abusive marriage, and the trauma of rape. He had no idea things would turn out as they did, but being in service to God, he faithfully took each step. At times it had been difficult to understand why God sent them down a path strewn with so many obstacles, why He allowed the trials and tribulations they'd had to face.

Yet, God, in His infinite wisdom, knows just how to hone His warriors. But why do His warriors have to be so very strong? Our Father knows what's coming. Trust Him. Find out His will for YOUR life and work very hard on what He's showing you. You may not see the whole path. Only the first few feet. Walk there in faith.

A year earlier, Eric had told Shelley to consider the idea that "you're only a victim if you allow yourself to be." At the time, the words had angered her, but over the months she had come to understand what he meant. A person could be victimized through no choice or fault of their own, but they did not have to allow what had been done to them to define who they were forever. They could choose to heal, to move forward, and refuse to live the rest of their life beneath the identity their abuser had tried to force upon them.

When Shelley was raped, she was unable to get past it, until God put it into perspective for her. There are some scars, yet she is strong now. Strong. Calm. At peace. Filled with joy. That is the healing blessing pronounced upon all who read this book. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

✝✝✝

Mark 5:34

"And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease."

✝✝✝

A Note from McCartney Green...

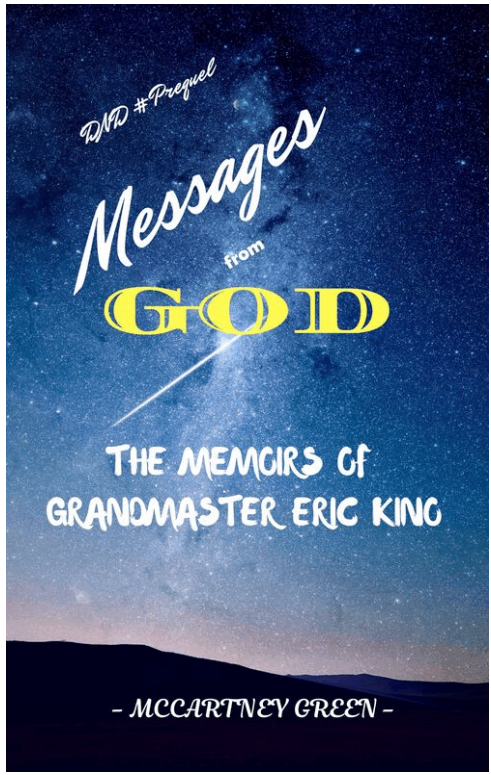
I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

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

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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, fourteen-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.

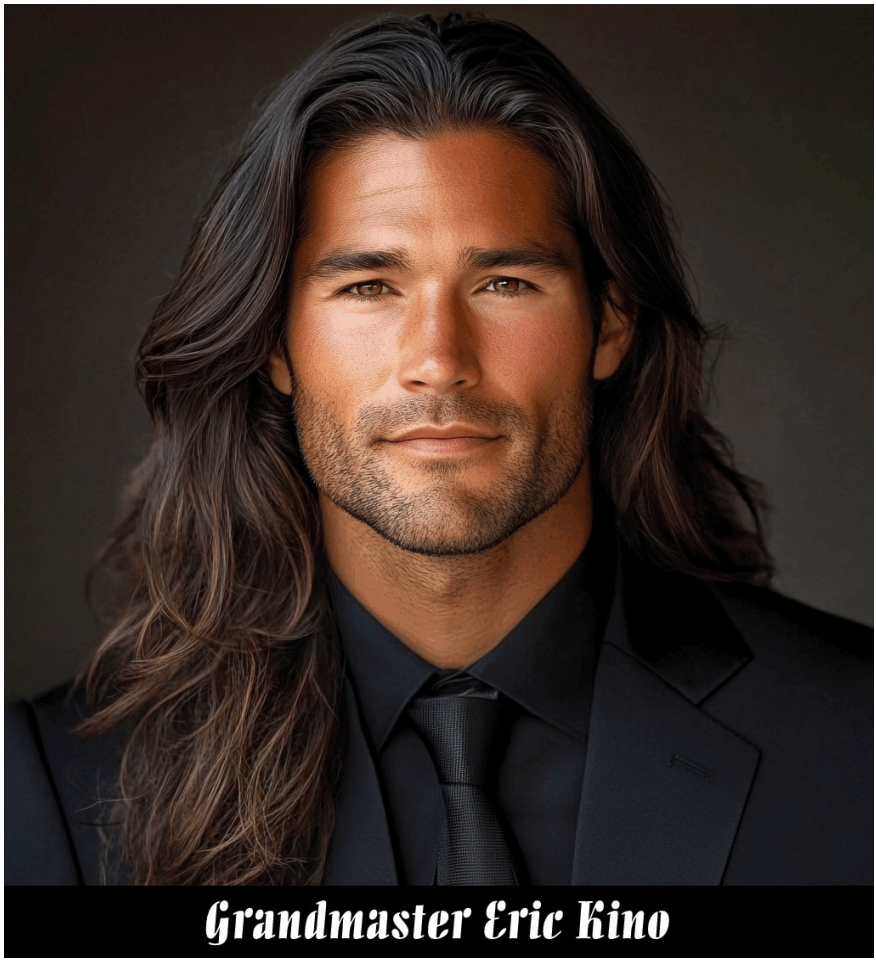
~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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

See more pics at mccartneygreen.org/photo-album

[Different pics of Shelley and Eric and there are some different renditions of Shelley's home, and of Eric's home. Couldn't get them quite right but it was fun to try! Also, a rendition of the cabin in the north Georgia mountains].



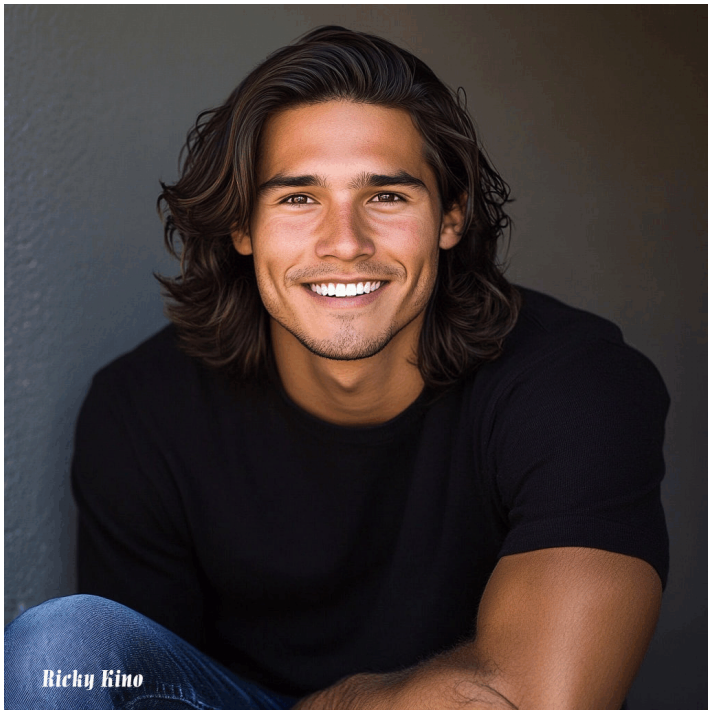
Shelley Adams Kino



Mark and Joey Adams






Ricky Kino


Breanna Adams

Continue with DND #2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

"But when Jesus saw it, he was much displeased, and said unto them, Suffer the little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God. Verily I say unto you, Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child, he shall not enter therein. And he took them up in his arms, put his hands upon them, and blessed them."
Mark 10:14-16

"Caroline! Get down here and find my glasses."

Virginia Jones stumbled around the kitchen, knocking over dishes and mumbling obscenities, the pungent odor of alcohol and sweat wafting around her as she moved. "Caroline, get your skinny butt down here, now!"

Suppressing a shudder, little Caroline Jones closed the book she'd been assigned to read over the Christmas holidays by her seventh grade teacher. Setting the book carefully aside, she rose, reluctantly leaving the relative safety of her little room. Using a practiced stealth, she moved down the stairs of the small townhouse and peeked around the corner to peer at her mother. Disheveled and filthy in her over-sized orange and yellow floral house dress, her mother shoved dirty cups and plates across the kitchen counter, apparently in an effort to find the missing eyeglasses.

When Caroline crept into the room, her mother looked up sharply. "Well, what are you staring at? Find my glasses!"

Caroline swallowed hard. "Mama," she whispered, "your glasses are on your head." When her mother looked at her as if she'd grown horns, she realized she would have to retrieve the glasses herself. Approaching cautiously, she reached a shaky hand up, plucked the glasses off her mother's head and held them out to her.

Virginia snatched them away, but before Caroline could move safely out of reach, her mother grabbed her cheeks in one iron hand. "Are you being smart?"

"No, ma'am." Balling her hands into fists to keep them from trembling, she tried to hide her fear.

Her mother held her there several moments as if she were trying to decide whether Caroline's actions warranted some sort of punishment. When she finally released her, Caroline quietly sighed

with relief. As she watched her mother weave her way toward the front room, she wondered if she could sneak back up the stairs.

It had been a horrible week. Her mother had been worse than ever, drinking herself into a stupor every night. Usually, Caroline was able to help her up to bed before she passed out, but two days ago, on Christmas day, she didn't make it. Half way up the steps her mother simply dropped. They both ended up at the bottom of the steps. Caroline had tried to drag her over to the couch, but her mother was too heavy for Caroline's ninety-five pound body. She ended up covering her with a quilt and tucking a pillow under her head.

The next morning there had been hell to pay, though Caroline was used to it. Since her father had left them several years earlier, the two weeks of Christmas vacation had been torture. There was less than a week to go before school started again, and unlike the other kids, Caroline looked forward to going back to school and the reprieve it would offer. However, this next week wasn't gonna be all bad, for Caroline was about to go on an adventure.

Tomorrow, she would get to leave the dingy little townhouse apartment for four glorious days. The couple for whom she regularly babysat was taking her with them on a trip to Tennessee. She was to help take care of their children over the New Year's weekend. Caroline's mom had resisted the idea until Caroline reminded her it would mean extra money.

The family, Jim and Sylvia Stillwater, shared the same townhouse apartment building along with Caroline and her mom and a few other families. Their front doors all opened onto a tiny common front yard. The day the Stillwaters had moved in, Caroline had watched them, first from her bedroom window and later from the small porch. When the Stillwater's two-year-old had started for the street without anyone seeing, Caroline had seen and dashed after her and scooped her up. The Stillwaters were grateful and the children took to Caroline immediately. It wasn't long after, that she found herself employed to be their everyday babysitter.

Caroline thought the Stillwaters were the best people she had ever known, and their two children, Paul and little sister Lynn, seemed more like Caroline's own brother and sister. Paul was now four and Lynn, three. Though Caroline herself was only twelve, the Stillwaters trusted her and that meant the world to Caroline. She wasn't alone with the children for very long each day. Mr. Stillwater worked during the day and was home by five. Mrs. Stillwater had to leave for her job

just after three in the afternoon, so Caroline was in charge of the children for less than two hours each day.

The moment she arrived home from school, she would dump her books and head over to the Stillwater's. She loved watching Mrs. Stillwater get ready for work, putting on her makeup, ironing her skirt, curling her hair. She was beautiful, Caroline thought, and when she left each day, she would kiss her children so sweetly. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Caroline remembered her own mother doing that when she'd been little. That, however, had been before her father had left them.

Her memory of him grew a little dimmer every day. Had there even been a man who laughed with her and tossed Caroline into the air, promising never to let her fall when she'd screamed in both fear and delight? No more dark memories now, Caroline thought, drawing a deep breath. Tomorrow, she and the Stillwaters would be driving from Atlanta to the Tennessee mountains and no matter what she ended up doing, she was sure it would be better than what lay in store for her here at home.

"Caroline!"

Rousing herself from her reverie, she hurried into the living room. "Yes, Mama?"

"Where are my car keys?"

The question put dread in Caroline's heart, for even if it meant another beating, there was no way she could let her mother drive in her current condition. She might kill herself, or even worse, kill someone else. And even though there had been times Caroline had wished her mother dead, she didn't really mean it.

"Well girl? Are you gonna just stand there like some idiot? Where are they?"

"I– I don't know," she lied.

✝✝✝

“My, my, how I love pi!”

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510
58209749445923078164062862089986280348253421170679821 48
08651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745 02
84102701938521105559644622948954930381964428810975665 93
34461284756482337867831652712019091456485669234603486 10
4543266482133

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.”