
DVD #5
Angels
In Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

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Angels–In Jesus' Name

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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!

Model Cover Picture - Thanks to granddaughter Melaynah Clements!

Special Dedication

When the men and women in our armed forces, police departments and Special Agencies have integrity, when they are upright, honorable and honest, (and know the Constitution as the law of the land,) they can do immeasurable good in this dark world. When they are not those things, they can do immeasurable harm. For those of you who strive to be virtuous, who choose the light of Christ over the darkness, who don't have their egos involved, we remember that you do the "hard jobs," the ones no one else wants to do, even that no one else *can* do. You are true grit, highly skilled and you and your families have our gratitude.

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"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go."

Joshua 1:9

Keeping Tabs

Not in the Prologue but in *Chapter One* of Angels, it is late August and....

Kino Sr Family
Eric Kino turned 51 June 14th.
Shelley Kino will be 47 in Oct.
Mark Adams will be 21 in Oct.
Little Joseph Adams turned 2 June 30th
Joey Adams just turned 19 Aug 22nd.
June Flower (Jeffy Kino) was 10 March 15th

Kino Jr Family
Ricky Kino turned 33 in May.
Breanna Adams Kino just turned 30 August 27th.
Eric Kino, III is 1 ½ .

Lee Families
Justin Lee is 48
Lori Lee is 34

Jason Lee is 39.
Angel Pritchard Lee is 37.
Kimmie Lee was 8 in March.

Agent Jeff Davis is 25.

Smith Family
Toby Nash (Smith) is 36.
Caroline Jones Smith is 34.
Grace Smith is 6.
Brody Smith is 3.

Stewart Family
Chaz Stewart is 31.
Lisa Lewis Stewart turned 28 May 15th.
Laynah Stewart is 1 and will be 2 Nov 22nd

Appel Family
John Appel is 32.
Jodi Appel is 30.
Jacob Appel turned 2 on Feb 28th

Dear Reader,

The book you're about to read contains the full spectrum, from the beautiful warm fuzzies of life to the ugliest and darkest of evil.

"Yea, they sacrificed their sons and their daughters unto devils,
And shed innocent blood, even the blood of their sons and of their daughters, whom they sacrificed unto the idols of Canaan: and the land was polluted with blood." Psalm 106:37-38

But God has a plan to counter all of the evil around us. Though it seems lately that evil has infiltrated everything, taking away things that we once thought good and pleasing, we can rest assured that it will not always be so.

In the meantime, what can we do? We can become God's warriors, fighting against the evils of this world in our own small ways.

We can be the best we can be. We can spread goodness, kindness, love and compassion wherever we go. We can pray, a big deal, for prayer warriors are extremely powerful! Hopefully God will be able to pat us on the back one day and say, "Well done, my good and faithful servants."

I pray all who read this book be filled with God's bright and holy light, to be healed in any way you are in need of healing, that your faith and testimony will grow by leaps and bounds and that God's powerful love will bloom in your hearts and minds. In Jesus' mighty and powerful name. Amen.

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injesusnamemanuals.org

As always, I look forward to hearing from you.

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“When angels visit us, we do not hear the rustle of wings, nor feel
the feathery touch of the breast of a dove;
but we know their presence by the love they create in our hearts.”

~Mary Baker Eddy~

Prologue

Nearly four years earlier...

"Hey, man, did you get any more pictures with this week's letter?" the soldier asked as Bradley Anderson examined his mail.

Blond, blue-eyed, Anderson held an envelope up with a smile. "Yeah, she sent me individual pictures of each baby and wants me to guess which one it is before I turn it over and read the back. Lizzy's worried that I'm not gonna be able to tell the twins apart by the next time I see them."

"He ain't talkin' 'bout the babies, Anderson, he's talkin' 'bout that fine wife of yours," another soldier quipped.

Bradley held up the last picture with a sly grin. "Oohh, you mean this one of her in the bathtub?"

There was a frenzy as the men hurried to see the picture. It was jerked from his hand. As each man saw it, he groaned, passed it to the next and went back to his own bunk. Finally, Anderson had the picture back in his possession. Adoringly, he stared at the picture of his wife, fully clothed in shorts and a t-shirt, standing in the bathtub with bubbles all around her as she bathed the twins and their older daughter all together. Her swollen belly huge, he could imagine the strain on her back. He wished he could be there to ease her burden.

Anderson glanced around at his buddies. It was his first tour of duty in Syria, and he was one of the youngest in his unit, yet, he already had a beautiful wife and gorgeous kids and he was a happy man. The military had been his deliverer. The kids had come along before he and Lizzy had been ready, but the military offered him the chance to support them and eventually get his education. Once he does that, life is gonna be so good.

"So, how'd you rate such a looker?" one of the men asked. "How'd you meet her?"

He smiled. "I met her— in kindergarten."

"You're kidding?"

"Nope. Met her when I was five. We grew up together."

"So, you never had anyone else?"

"Look at her, man," another piped in. "Well, I mean, look at his old pictures before he went home and knocked her up again. Would a man need to have anyone else?"

"Yeah, she's hot," his buddy declared, sighing. "If ya put them together, they look kinda like Barbie and Ken dolls, don't they? Both blondes, both blue-eyed, the all-American couple. I bet she was the homecoming queen and he was captain of the football team."

When Bradley didn't respond, they all laughed.

"He's right, huh, Anderson?"

Smiling, Bradley shrugged good-naturedly. "Yep. I guess you got me pegged."

"So who took the picture?" another asked. "You sure she ain't taking up with some guy?"

Bradley grinned. There was nothing they could say to taint the perfect love that he and his wife shared. "Naw, she's staying with her mom while I'm gone. It's actually a real blessing, her having someone to help her. I'm just glad..."

He never got the sentence out. The explosion jarred them to their bones. Soldiers scrambled from their quarters, headed toward the sound. Bradley Anderson was right in front, the horrific sound of men screaming echoing in his ears. What was left of the car bomb burned harmlessly a few feet from their gate.

Anderson arrived on scene and without thought for himself, scooped up the soldier sprawled at his feet. Only after he had the man on his shoulder did he realize shots were being fired, peppering the ground around him. He ran, noting as he did, the others, wounded from the bomb that would surely die if someone didn't get them out of the line of fire.

He made it to cover, dumped the soldier and headed back. His fellow soldiers were returning fire, providing cover as he and one other ran for the wounded. Anderson scooped up the biggest guy, since Anderson himself was big and could take the weight. Even with his strength though, Bradley struggled to make it back to cover. He'd been almost there when the sudden fiery pain slammed into his back. He pitched forward.

Looking down, he was reminded of the movie where the alien

jumps out of the guy's chest. Only this was no alien. It was his own heart. *Lizzy. My girls. God, please help them.* His last thought was that Lizzy may never get over this. He should've been more careful.

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Matthew 10:28

"And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell."

Chapter One

Lizzy Anderson was definitely the most beautiful woman in the small town of Tyler Springs, some folks thought probably in the entire state of Georgia. And sweet, Lord, Lizzy was sweet. She had both the heart and the face of an angel. She was young, only twenty-four, and there was no reason in the world that Lizzy should not have a companion in her life. However, Lizzy knew, as did the entire town, that she would never marry, never have another relationship, probably never even date another man. Not because men didn't find her attractive. Men wanted her. Teenage boys fantasized about her. However, everyone knew that Lizzy was a package deal and that package included five miniature 'Lizzys.' Five. Five tiny angels, all with the same white blond hair, bright blue eyes, and cherub faces of their mother. Two three-year-olds, two four-year-olds and one five-year-old. Six gorgeous females living together in Lizzy's parents' old home out on Two Trees Drive in the thriving little town of Tyler Springs, sixty miles north of Atlanta as the crow flies.

Lizzy didn't complain about her lack of male companionship. It was everyone else in town who speculated about her future. Most only shook their heads when they thought of her, which wasn't too often. It was usually on Sundays when she marched the little ones into church, that they thought of her and then murmured. "She made her bed and now she had to lie in it," was the common phrase muttered as she passed. That and, "Oh, what she did to that poor boy's future. Why, if not for her, he probably would've ended up being governor of the great state of Georgia."

It'd been over three years now since Lizzy's husband had died a hero's death in Syria. Add to that the death of her father the next year and then just recently, Lizzy's mother's death of a stroke and it would make a lesser person take the jump. And yet, Lizzy kept that beautiful smile on her face, held her chin high and kept on keeping on. She had no choice. Five lives depended solely on her. There was no one else. Except God. In God she put all her trust.

"Mommy," Heather, the eldest child, cried. "Rose won't get her

head out of the refrigerator."

Lizzy blew out a patient breath. "I'm coming," she called sweetly. She turned back to Mrs. Hurley, one of her mother's oldest and dearest friends, as she finished gathering the basket of toys. "So, Heather's homework is done, they've all been fed and all that's needed is bath and bed."

Mrs. Hurley waved Lizzy away. "I know what has to be done. You just need to stop worrying. I got everything under control."

Lizzy smiled sweetly. "Thanks so much. I don't know what I'd do without you. Now, I haven't had time to get to the dinner dishes, but don't you worry about them. I'll get them when I get home."

Mrs. Hurley frowned. Like she would even think to leave dishes in the sink overnight.

Before the older woman could chastise her, Lizzy turned and rushed into the kitchen to pull her daughter out of the refrigerator. "Rose, what are you doing?"

"I want my sucker," Rose cried.

"I told you, no putting half-eaten suckers in the refrigerator. It's been thrown away."

Rose burst into tears.

Lizzy scooped her up. "Oh, now, baby, tomorrow you'll get to have another one. Shh, now. Mommy has to get to the hospital and Mrs. Hurley is waiting to give you all a bath and read to you."

"I don't want you to leave," Violet began to cry.

Lizzy knelt down to hug her other four-year-old. Rose and Violet were the most vocal about their objections to their mommy going to work at the hospital way down in Atlanta. She only went four nights a week, but they were long nights considering the commute. There was a small yet decent hospital right here in Tyler Springs but it was fully staffed. It seemed it was always fully staffed.

Then there was the convalescent home up off the highway, although the pay there was so low Lizzy might as well be working at the local McDonald's, which, she'd actually considered. She hoped somehow to change her situation soon. Her friend and mentor, Dr. Duncan, whom she'd met at the hospital in Atlanta where she worked, and his very kind wife of twenty years, had taken her under their wing and informed her they were putting their heads together to help Lizzy find a better situation. They were looking at maybe having her take in a boarder, or develop some sort of home-based business. For now though, nursing was all Lizzy knew, and as Dr. Duncan said, she was

a darn good one.

"Come on, now, Violet," Lizzy comforted. "Mommy will be home before you even wake up in the morning."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I do. Now give me a kiss and be good for Mrs. Hurley."

Gathering Rose and Violet in her arms she kissed them goodbye. Next, she stood and kissed three-year-olds Daisy and Lily, who were still in their booster seats at the dinner table delightfully smacking their spoons in their applesauce and watching it splatter. "Oh, girls, stop making a mess," Lizzy muttered.

"Don't worry, Lizzy, I'll take care of it," Mrs. Hurley said with a chuckle.

"Mrs. Hurley, you are such a comfort to me."

"I'm happy to hear that. Your momma was my dearest friend, and I'm glad I can step in and help her daughter."

Sighing deeply, Lizzy finally turned to Heather, her eldest at five, who'd become pensive and quiet since the death of her grandmother.

"Mommy, you'll drive real careful, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, baby. Nothing's gonna happen to me."

"But sometimes bad things happen and people go away to be with God and we just have to accept it, isn't that what you said? Just like Nana and Granddaddy, and Daddy."

Lizzy blinked back the tears that threatened. "Yes, baby, I did, but I promise, sweetheart, I will be oh-so-careful and come back to you. Okay?"

Heather nodded her head, but Lizzy could see the fear still there, in her eyes. Living in fear is gonna destroy her child, Lizzy thought. She had to do something. She had to make something work. Her monthly survivor benefits weren't enough, so she had to work. She'd written to Bradley's parents again, hoping they'd have a change of heart, and want to help their granddaughters, but she'd received no answer. She hadn't really expected one, because from the moment Lizzy had announced her first pregnancy, they'd turned their backs on her and Bradley.

They were angry with her. In their minds she'd seduced their son away from doing all the things he'd dreamed of doing. Because of her he put off going to college, because of her he'd joined the military and because of her he was dead. She couldn't really blame them. It was true. If Bradley hadn't known her, loved her, if she'd been more mature and less innocent in the ways of sex, maybe even if she hadn't told him

she was pregnant and just let him leave for college, he'd be alive. No, she couldn't blame them at all.

Thanking Mrs. Hurley again, she jumped in the minivan, one of the things she'd bought with her one-time "Death Gratuity." As she pulled away, she glanced in the rearview mirror. Little Heather stood at the screen door, staring after her.

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"I've been made," Special Agent Keegan Tanner said, his tone fierce as he flew around the next curve.

"What did you do?" his SAC, Special Agent in Charge, Nigel Kort, demanded.

"I didn't do anything. It doesn't make any sense. There's no way, man. No way they could've known."

"What are you saying, Keegan?"

"You know exactly what I'm saying; someone tipped them off and it came from the inside."

There were several seconds of silence on the other end. Then finally, "Any ideas who?"

There was no safe answer. No way was Keegan gonna start throwing out names. He'd been betrayed before, by his own commanding officer, but he kept that thought to himself. "No."

"Where are you, Special Agent Tanner?"

"Headed south, an hour and a half from Atlanta."

"Get to the field office. You have the evidence?"

Alarms went off in Keegan's head. Something was not right. He did have the evidence. An amazing amount of evidence. But something told him to hold off letting anyone know. He didn't know if it was instinct or paranoia. And he didn't care.

"Tanner, do you or do you not have the evidence?"

"Not on me," he lied. "But I will have it soon."

"What do you mean, not on you? Where is it?"

"It's safe. I have to get to it. I took some precautions in case anything happened to me."

Keegan could hear Nigel's impatient breath. Was his superior officer merely being assiduous or was the note of anxiousness in his words due to another whole scenario, one that had to do with him working with the enemy?

"When you do recover the evidence, Special Agent Tanner, what do we have?" Nigel said firmly and slowly.

Telling the extent of what he had could prove to keep him safe, so

he went for it. "I have everything. I've got bank records of all accounts, payoffs, and amounts. I have phone conversations including hit orders. I've got names and addresses of hundreds of the placed kids, and mostly, I've got Senator Hartman linked to it all."

Nigel was silent for a moment then finally, "Good man, Tanner."

"But that doesn't include the most important information."

"Which is?"

"Rather not say over the phone. I'll get to you soon enough. We have time. We'll have to move very carefully. Believe me when I say, this is a really big deal."

"I suppose I'll have to trust you on that."

"That's right, sir. You will."

"So, where's the evidence, Tanner?"

Keegan frowned. Someone had blown his cover. He didn't really think it was his superior officer, but there was something in Kort's tone that warned Keegan off. Not that they'd ever been best buddies. Their working relationship had always been strained and Keegan wondered now if that was because his sixth sense had been trying to warn him.

"Tanner? Where is the evidence?"

"It's safe," he finally said.

"Safe where, Tanner?"

He patted his breast pocket. "Safe, Nigel. I'll get to it. I'm on my way to it right now." He checked his rearview mirror again. He'd stayed off the interstate, taking state highways instead. He'd gotten out the moment he realized he'd been compromised and didn't think he had a tail, but he wouldn't fall into complacency.

Nigel cursed. "Keegan, I am your superior officer and I need to know where the evidence is that's gonna break this case wide open. Need I remind you how long and hard we've worked on this?"

Keegan's eyes narrowed. "No, you don't have to remind me since I'm the one who's been standing in a veritable fish bowl surrounded by a bunch of sharks. Those same sharks have gone from swimming quietly around to a feeding frenzy and my name is at the top of their menu, so no, you don't have to remind me of a damn thing."

"Then tell me, what did you do with the evidence?"

"It's safe. Chill, Nigel. You'll get your evidence." And it will be in front of witnesses, he thought. He patted his breast pocket, again. Everything depended on him getting the computer chips and tapes to the Atlanta field office in one piece. Everything. And many innocent lives. Children's lives. He couldn't fail.

Nigel sighed heavily into the phone. "Tanner, just get the evidence and get to the office. They're expecting you. Be careful."

"As careful as I always am," Keegan said, pressing down on the accelerator. "Just be pati..."

The buck appeared out of thin air. In the split second before he hit it, Keegan took in the huge rack, the arrogant tilt of its snout. He jerked the wheel too late. The impact resembled that of a crash test as the hood of the brand new Ford Mustang crumpled. Only, in a crash test, the car doesn't go airborne and the brick wall doesn't spring away without a care in the world. One last big difference; he was no unbreakable, bloodless dummy.

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"Find him," Senator Hartman said calmly as he patted the fine linen napkin to his lips and placed it neatly by his plate.

"We'll find him. He'll head to Atlanta."

"Let me remind you that we're speaking of five million dollars per child. Five million. That's twenty-five million dollars that had better not slip through my fingers. We can't take the chance that he knows about that rendezvous."

"I said we'll get him. As far as the five kids, I doubt he knows. Only a handful are working on that operation. I don't see a way he could've found any information on those kids. There's no record of anything having to do with this exchange."

"We can't take a chance. There's too much at stake and once the exchange is made, you and I will be the only ones to know. Any others will be terminated."

"Yeah, so you've said many times, Senator. I get it. It's not like I'm sentimental."

Senator Hartman nodded. "So then, what do you think this guy has?" the Senator asked wearily.

"I don't know that he has anything. He had, however, been invited into my home. It's possible he snooped through my records. I know he bugged my phone which is how he knew he'd been tagged, which is exactly why he was able to get away before we were able to take him out."

"He bugged your phones? You idiot. Then it *is* possible he heard a discussion or two about our plans. This guy shouldn't have been able to get away."

"He got away by killing two of the men residing at the Hillside property, apparently without a sound, as the three others who were

there swore. He hid the bodies and took off. He was gone before the others had any idea what was going down."

"Sloppy work, Tony. Take care of that."

"It's already done. Listen, Senator, don't worry. Agent Tanner is not more than a few hours ahead of us."

The Senator sighed. "You idiot. A few hours may as well be a week. And if the guy had your phone tapped then it's extremely possible he's overheard something about the big exchange, so you just find him. Make sure he didn't get anything that links me to the operation, find out who he's been in contact with, then kill him and kill them. No exceptions."

"That would be my pleasure."

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Pain. It clouded his brain, surrounded him like a thick fog. He'd never imagined he could feel so much pain. Moisture ran from the corners of his eyes, down the sides of his face and into his ears and he realized he was crying. For the first time in his life he felt like praying. If he could just get out from under the car, maybe the pain would ease up. He raised his head, trying to see just what kind of predicament he was in, but just that tiny movement caused waves of nausea to roil through him and shot pain through his body so intense it was enough to make him cry out.

Easing his head back down, he peered up at the beautiful, bright, blue sky, heard the birds singing and thought somehow it was all wrong. Don't they know how he feels? They should be silent out of respect or at least sound a little less cheerful. Okay, calm down, he ordered himself. Just calm down.

He knew better than to panic. Someone will find me soon, he thought. And they'll call an ambulance, and they'll give me something for the pain and for that I will be eternally grateful. It may take them a little while to get the car off me, he thought, hoping he wasn't permanently injured. Right now though, all he was concerned about was easing the pain. Relief is coming, he told himself. Relief. Oh dear God, the pain.

He could hear cars going by on the road. Not a lot of traffic, but a car every few minutes. Turning his head slightly, he tried to judge just how far off the road he was. Twenty, maybe thirty feet, down an embankment, maybe more. He couldn't even see the road from his vantage point. His heart sped up, because if he couldn't see the road, then no one on the road could see him. Stretching out his neck, he tried

to prove himself wrong, causing unbearable pain to shoot through his back, his legs, his head. He stilled again as panic began to build. What if no one comes? I could lie here for days before I finally die. How much could he take, he wondered, before he'd actually start praying for his own death?

Slowly his panic subsided and his logical, rational brain came back to him. He was an FBI agent. He'd been heading to Atlanta with a pocket full of evidence that would put ruthless criminals, including a United States Senator, behind bars. Even more important, he had information of an exchange to take place that was one of the sickest and convoluted plans he'd ever heard and he'd thought he'd heard it all. Without him, the bad guys would complete their plans. He'd been on the phone to his SAC, who was desperate to get his hands on the evidence. Kort would come searching for him.

The thing to do right now is to put his mind to staying alive. He had to live in order to complete his mission. Pinned down the way he was, all he could do was hope he'd be found by the right people. Otherwise, he was dead meat for sure.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to focus on the mission. He had to protect the evidence. Yet, how? What could he do to protect what he'd worked so hard the past two years to get? The evidence he held would put an end to a vile organization that dealt in child trafficking. Glancing down at his hand, he realized he still clutched his cell phone. Slowly, he moved his hand up in front of his face to look at the phone, his heart sinking as he determined he only held part of a broken phone. His eyes closed with the pain that moving his arm had caused. He thought of the evidence so vulnerable in his breast pocket.

If the bad guys arrived before anyone else, they would be able to retrieve it and destroy it, not to mention destroy him. Still, he didn't really think that would happen. They had no idea which direction he'd headed. They'll assume it was toward Atlanta, and they'd be right, only they won't think he'd take an out of the way state highway.

No, he wasn't too worried about the bad guys finding him. It's the good guys he worried about right now. Because there is a traitor among them, and a wolf in sheep's clothing is the most dangerous. What could he do? He struggled to pull himself out from under the car again, grunting with the effort and the pain stabbing through him; sharp, throbbing, waves pulsing through his body. Eyes rolling back in his head, he saw the stars that precede passing out and stilled, knowing he couldn't allow himself to lose consciousness.

His hands fell to his sides in defeat. His fingers dug into the soft ground in frustration, and then— he came up with the solution. The ground was soft and moist from the most recent rain shower. It was definitely soft enough to make a small hole. Gripping the broken cell phone, he dug it into the ground by his side, scooping out the dirt the best he could. His breath became labored almost immediately as the pain shot through his body with his movement. His eyes watered, a body's natural response to pain. Cry, he thought. Cry all you want, but get the stuff buried.

Working until he could reach his entire hand and half of his forearm down into the hole he sucked in a breath and blew it out softly. Sweat ran into his eyes, stinging them. Without thinking, he raised his shoulder to wipe the sweat but stopped when the searing pain knifed through him again. His head fell back in anguish as he breathed, waiting for the pain to subside, willing it to subside. Slowly, he moved his hand inside the breast pocket of his jacket, groaning with the agony. Straining, the tips of his fingers touched the plastic bag and he drew it into his grasp.

Breathing heavily, he held the bag up in front of his face, checked the seal, making sure it was closed against all moisture. "I got you," he muttered. Without further ado he pushed the bag into the hole and covered it with the dirt. Then for several minutes he patted the ground until no one could tell it was freshly turned earth. Now, he thought, "I just have to find out where the heck I am so I can find this place again." Twisting his head as much as he could, he took note of every tree, bush, plant and telephone pole. Everything he could see, he arranged on a mental map, until exhaustion finally overcame him and he closed his eyes and slept.

When Keegan opened his eyes again, he was staring into the night sky and the pain that engulfed him was coming in waves. It felt as if someone was rocking the car, then he realized it wasn't the car moving, it was him. His muscles in his legs and back were cramping, spasming, sending thunderbolts of pain and anguish riveting through him. He cried out.

In a desperate panic to stop the torture, he placed his hands against the car and pushed but his effort produced nothing except more pain. Moaning, his head fell back in defeat. It was then he noticed lights flashing against the night sky. Someone yelled.

"Hey, I think I've found him."

Keegan tensed, hoping it wasn't someone on the way to put a

bullet between his eyes. A flashlight skimmed over his face. Then someone was hurrying down the hill, dirt and rocks being dislocated in his wake. A guy about Keegan's age knelt down beside him. He wore a dark blue shirt that bore a fireman's insignia on the pocket. Keegan breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hey, buddy, good to see ya. Hold on now." The man smiled and placed his hand on Keegan's shoulder. "I'm Jim and we're gonna get you out of here real soon."

"Jim," Keegan breathed. "It's really good to meet you."

The paramedic turned, studying the car and how it bore down on his patient. The car was on its side, the man pinned securely under the driver's-side door. He shook his head, then rose to speak to the others who were ambling down the hill. "Can't move the car until we have him stabilized, otherwise it could kill him."

Keegan couldn't hear what they were saying but he could read their facial expressions. It didn't look good. Finally his new best buddy turned back and knelt down beside him, offering a comforting smile. He began asking questions about what Keegan could or could not feel. Keegan supposed he should be thankful that he could feel every single excruciating inch of his body. Once they'd assessed his condition, he waited patiently for the relief he'd counted on. They started an IV, monitored his heart and blood pressure which he heard them say was extremely low. Men were rigging the car, getting ready to lift it off him. Jim knelt beside him again.

"Guess you're in some pretty good pain?"

Keegan drew a steadying breath. "Yeah," he grunted, "pretty good, man."

"Okay, we're gonna get you something, hold on."

He waited the few more minutes it took for another paramedic to come down the hill with the good stuff. Gratefully, Keegan watched as his new best friend administered the medicine through the IV. Okay, he thought, anytime now. Just a few seconds to relief. And then he felt his body relax as the narcotic hit his system.

Jim smiled at him and patted his shoulder. "Better?"

"Drugs are not disappointing in any way."

Jim chuckled. "So I've been told. Okay, now hold on. We're getting ready to get you outta here."

Keegan nodded. He heard the revving of a motor, the moving of chains, saw the men scuffling around for position to protect him. Felt a slight relief of pressure. And then they moved the car. He screamed

just before the world went black.

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He moved through the dark corridors, the gray, swirling, mist curling around him as he progressed. Tired, sluggish, his body needed to rest, but he was forced to move toward the door. Part of him dreaded what lay beyond, and part of him craved it. The door opened without him having to touch it, then as always, he was made to lie down on the bed. He never remembered actually moving toward the bed and setting his weary body down upon it. Suddenly, he was just there, prone, vulnerable.

That's when she came to him. The angel. He could sense her nearby. Smell her. She came to him each day, or, was it night? He wasn't allowed to know which it was. He couldn't open his eyes so it was always dark. He existed in a limbo of sorts. That was part of his sentence. She had power over his will. She would not allow him to speak. He'd tried, but her power kept the words from coming out. He was not allowed to move. Again, by only her will she kept him still, though he struggled with all his might.

He was unsure if she came to offer relief, or possibly to punish, for she did both. Her soft, gentle hands moved over his body each night. He preferred to think of it as night when she came to him. He preferred to think of her as a gentle seductress who snuck into his room as he slept.

Each time she came to him she began the same way, moving her warm hands over his head and face. Stroking him, caressing him. Running her fingers through his hair. Her touch was so caring, so gentle that sometimes it brought tears to his eyes. He could feel her love, her kindness, her goodness. Truly, she was an angel.

Slowly, her hands moved over his shoulders and chest, comforting, soothing. He could feel his heart accelerate and hear his breath become labored as she gently seduced him. The sound of his own breath, inhaling and exhaling, echoed in his brain. Surely she could see what she did to him. Surely she knew the torture of her touch, but she didn't stop. And she didn't hurry. She never hurried.

Her arms locked around him and she pulled him to her, cradling his head against her. She held him there, her hands caressing his neck and back. It seemed her mission was to touch each part of his body and she never failed. She knew him intimately.

He assumed he'd died in the accident and floating in this dark world was his eternal punishment. He'd lied. He'd seduced women.

He'd killed. And he'd failed his last mission. Of course he should be punished. And now, he must endure this exquisite torture. A cruel joke God played on him, to send him an angel who brought him so close, then left him to suffer, his body pulsing in agony.

Gently, she eased his head back down, but her hands never stopped. Moving lower now, they stroked the muscles of his stomach, making them quiver. His heart pounded. He wanted to raise his head and watch as she moved her hands over him, but her will was iron and he was not allowed this boon.

Long, even strokes moved over his thighs and legs, his feet. She was so warm, so smooth, so paced. She never hurried, though, he'd just noticed, there was a small difference this night. She was singing. Yes, he could hear her sing. Her voice was as angelic as he'd imagined. Sweet, dream-like, ethereal.

Another difference, she seemed to be taking longer this night. Going extra slow, taking extra care and extra time. Prolonging the punishment. Oh, she was a cruel angel. Cruel and thorough. His heart slammed against his ribs. Such sweet torture. Please, sweet angel, don't leave me tonight, he begged silently. Just another moment or two. He held his breath, but his breathing returned to normal as he tumbled down into a deep, peaceful sleep.

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"All I know is that is one gorgeous man," Pam said. "I wouldn't mind having a little alone time with him."

"Good grief," Lizzy declared. "The things you say, Pam."

"What are y'all talking about?" Rhonda asked as she came back from taking pain meds to one of her patients.

Pam giggled. "The new guy."

Rhonda grinned. "The stud in 302."

"That's the one. Michael Moreland."

"Oh, give me a break," Lizzy said.

"You don't think he's good looking?" Rhonda asked. "I mean, my goodness, he's like six and a half feet of solid muscle. He could be in one of those calendars. Tell me you see it, Liz."

"Of course I do. Mr. Moreland is nice looking, in a dark, dangerous sort of way. But..." She stopped.

Pam turned to look at her. "What? But he's not your type?" she finished for her. "Why? Because he's not blonde and blue-eyed like Bradley was? Liz, I love you like a sis, but you know what I'm gonna say. You have to move on."

"It's not that he's not my type. I was just gonna say that I'm not interested in him other than to cure him. It doesn't matter how good looking he is. You certainly don't expect me to hit on a patient. The poor man has enough to deal with."

Dr. Duncan approached the nurse's station. "Hello, ladies."

"Doctor," Pam said as she grabbed a chart and began writing.

"Dr. Duncan," Lizzy said with a smile. "You're here awfully late."

He nodded. "Sometimes it can't be helped. I realize you're just coming on, Liz, but, I need to see you a moment."

"Oh, yes, of course."

She walked with the older man down the corridor toward a sitting area. He'd served in Vietnam and he'd been her mentor, taken her under his wing, while Bradley had been away in the service. He looked like an older version of Denzel Washington. His wife, Ermiel, was one of the kindest people Lizzy had ever known. When Bradley had been killed and later when Lizzy's mother died, the Duncans had been her survival. They'd led her through the maze as she'd taken care of arrangements for funerals and filled out endless paperwork for veteran's benefits.

After her mother's death, Lizzy had cried on Ermiel's shoulder literally for days. Ermiel had stayed at the house with her. It was two weeks before Ermiel finally felt Lizzy was strong enough to function. When Ermiel left she knew the difficulties Lizzy faced and promised that somehow they would come up with solutions. Lizzy was grateful for her care and kindness, for she admitted, if only to herself, that she felt all alone and a little bit afraid.

"Well, Lizzy, I believe I have a temporary solution for you."

Her eyes darted up to Dr. Duncan's face. "You do?"

"Since your goal, and mine, and Ermiel's, I might add, is for you to stay at home with all those babies, and since what you get from the VA isn't enough, you'll remember we discussed you possibly taking in a boarder."

"Yes, sir, I remember."

"Okay, good. So, it just so happens I know of a patient who needs a nurse *and* a place to stay while he recovers."

Her eyes glowed with excitement. "You do? Oh, that's wonderful! What do you know about him? Is he elderly? What sort of special needs does he have because you know I'm not really equipped for anything right now."

"Okay, calm down. It's all gonna be taken care of. Actually, the

patient is someone right here on this floor. He needs a place to stay while he recuperates and he needs someone to take care of him until he's able to take care of himself."

"He's a patient here?"

"It's Mr. Moreland."

"Michael Moreland?"

"Yes. He's out of danger now. As you know, we've kept him sedated since he tried to jerk out his IV, but we're done with that since we may be transporting him as early as tomorrow or next day tops. Keep a close eye on him tonight. Anyway, his brother has asked to have him moved someplace private and he's willing to pay quite well for his care."

Lizzy nodded. "So, how well is quite well?"

Her eyes opened wide when Dr. Duncan named the amount. "However, there is a stipulation," Dr. Duncan continued.

"Okay. What is it?"

"Mr. Moreland is a celebrity of sorts. A writer. Apparently his publisher will drop him if they hear of his accident."

"But why? That doesn't make any sense."

"They'll drop him if they believe he won't be able to produce by his deadline and so his brother has asked that no one know about the accident and no one know where he's being taken, which is the reason for the need of a private facility."

She shrugged. "I don't think that would be a problem. I can keep a secret."

"He was pretty adamant about it. He asked that you not tell anyone, not even your friends here at the hospital. All paperwork is gonna be sealed."

"Wow. I guess money is power, huh?"

"It's the way of the world, I'm afraid. Listen, Lizzy, if you're not comfortable with this, we can wait for another opportunity. I just thought this would be a perfect way for you to make the jump to running your own facility. With what they're willing to pay, and to provide all special needs equipment, it will set you up perfectly for future patients."

"No! I'm not uncomfortable at all," she said quickly.

"So, this is completely confidential?"

She nodded. "Absolutely. So, how long will his recovery take, in your opinion?"

"Eight to ten weeks, but you'll be paid in advance for three

months."

"That long?"

"I'm sure you realize he'll be up and about after a few weeks. First in a wheelchair and then on crutches. He lives alone in Denver. His brother says they could transport him there and hire someone to come and stay with him to take care of him in Denver, but his brother lives here in Georgia and he wants to make sure Mr. Moreland is well taken care of. Once he's out of the cast and has a few weeks of physical therapy behind him, he will be assessed. He could go home after that even though he'll need to keep up with his physical therapy. Even then he may still walk with a limp and be in need of a cane."

Lizzy nodded. "And when this is all over, what then?"

"Well, you know you're always welcome to come back here anytime. You know that. Still, if this goes well, I'm thinking we can send you patients on a continuing basis. There are always new stroke patients, and elderly patients who would love a setup in someone's home rather than an institution. With your certification and we rush a state license, I think you just may be in business."

She smiled up at him, tears in her eyes. "What can I say to you, Dr. Duncan? This is almost too good to be true."

He smiled at her. "You are usually the one who has something to say about stuff like this. Don't disappoint me now."

Her eyes twinkled. "Yes, you're right. So, I say, God is so good, so amazing. He has gone far beyond answering my prayers and I am so grateful. His timing is always perfect. I will be on my knees thanking Him tonight. But I also need to thank you and Ermiel, for your prayers and for your willingness to help God bring about His plan. You two are like angels among us."

He laughed. "I wouldn't go that far, well, for Ermiel, yes. For me, not so much."

She glanced at her watch. "Well, speaking of Mr. Moreland, I'd better make my rounds."

Dr. Duncan nodded. "One more thing, he doesn't know yet that he's being moved. His brother wants to be the one to tell him."

She nodded. "Got it."

"Okay, well, I'll speak to you soon, Liz. We have to make arrangements for a bed and other equipment to be shipped to your home, but don't worry, the family will pay for all expenses. Now, don't forget, not a word, not even to the other nurses or doctors."

She reached for Dr. Duncan's hand. "Thank you, Marion," she said

softly. "You don't know what this means to me."

He smiled and patted her hand. "Oh, I think I do, and I for sure know what it means to my wife."

Lizzy hurried away, a smile spreading over her face. This is perfect, she thought. Finally, I won't have to spend half my paycheck paying for childcare, and more importantly, I won't have to leave Heather in tears every night.

She went about checking on her patients, anxious to see the one she'd soon have in her home. When she arrived at Michael Moreland's room, she quietly pushed open the door. He appeared to be sleeping. Smiling, she went about her duties, checking the IV and then the blood pressure readout. She made notes on a computer and turned to take his temp. His eyes were open.

"Oh, well, hello," she said softly.

He swallowed. "You're real," he answered, his voice low and gravelly and barely above a whisper.

Quickly, she poured a small amount of water and held a straw to his lips. "Here, take a sip, and yes, of course I'm real," she said. "Here, just a little. We don't want to have you sick."

It'd been a stupid thing to say, he realized. He nodded and sipped the water. It was cool and soothing. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Keegan watched her as she set the cup down and turned back to him. Long, straight, blond hair swept up in a ponytail, blue eyes that sparkled with kindness, a heart-shaped face and sweet smile. His eyes roamed downward over her body. It was hard to tell with her scrubs on, but she appeared taut and athletic. She cleared her throat and his eyes snapped back to hers.

"How are you feeling? Can I get you anything?"

He licked his lips. Her voice was soft and sweet. Was this his dream girl? Was this his angel? He shook his head, realizing he needed to get his bearings. He forced his mind to attend to business. "How about some information?" he asked.

"Okay."

"Do you know my condition?"

She smiled. "Well, luckily, you're alive and in one piece," she said cheerfully. When he didn't smile she went on. "That was some accident. Actually, that area on Highway 54 has seen several bad ones. You know that your car flipped and you were pinned underneath for several hours?"

He nodded. "I remember the accident. I hit a deer, a giant devil deer with big antlers and evil red eyes."

He watched her as she laughed, her eyes dancing. She was an angel. He brought himself back to the conversation and shrugged boyishly. "That's how it seemed to me, anyway. The deer from hell." He smiled, quite pleased with himself. "Did you say Highway 54?"

"That's what I was told."

He was silent a minute while he digested the information, because he'd been on Highway 78.

"And my official condition?"

"You've moved from critical to serious to stable to good in the space of about a week. You broke your leg in two places. It was a pretty bad break. You were in surgery for several hours. You also pulled some muscles in your back but thankfully, your spine was not damaged. You bruised your liver and cracked three ribs. It's the bump on your head that we've been watching closely." Reaching up, she touched the side of his head softly.

He closed his eyes. Sniffed the air. It was her. He opened them again. Cleared his mind. "How long did you say I've been here?"

"Let's see, Mr. Moreland," she said as she lifted the tablet to peer at his chart. "You were in ICU the first twenty-four hours, and you've been on this floor going on six days now."

"What did you call me?"

"Mr. Moreland? Michael Moreland. Is there a problem?" she asked, wondering if there was some amnesia.

His heart sped up. "Problem? Uh, no. Tell me, has anyone been here to see me?"

"I've been told that your brother was here."

"My brother?" he asked, because he didn't have a brother.

"Yes. I work the night shift so I haven't ever seen him, but Dr. Duncan told me tonight that your brother was here and has arranged for your care."

His jaw clenched. Obviously, his identity has been changed. Either that or he's in the twilight zone. He was suddenly struck with an acute case of claustrophobia. He had to get out of here. "Is my wallet here?"

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," she said, opening the drawer. "Here it is."

She went to hand it to him but realized his arms were in restraints. It appeared he realized it at the same time and he jerked violently at his arms.

"What the hell?" He looked up. "What's going on?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Moreland. That first day when you woke, you went a little crazy and they had to restrain you. They decided it would be a good thing to let you remain that way until they were sure you were in your right mind."

He jerked his arms again, becoming agitated.

"Calm down, I'll undo them," she said softly, moving her fingers over the straps and releasing him. "There now, it's okay."

She spoke soothingly and the sound of her voice steadied him. Drawing a deep breath, Keegan forced himself to calm. "My wallet," he said brusquely.

She handed it to him. He opened it, found his driver's license and stared at his own picture, then read the name and address. Michael Moreland, 350 Bolder Drive, Denver, Colorado. His thumb skimmed over various credit cards with the same name. He pulled out a few business cards and found one that read 'Nigel Kort, bad credit, no credit, everyone rides.' His S.O. had a sense of humor. A small one. Pushing the card back into place he made note of a few hundred dollars in twenties then handed the wallet back to her.

"Everything still there?" she asked, seemingly amused.

"Yes," he answered grumpily.

Raising a thermal sensor, she pointed it at his forehead. "Let me just take your temp and I'll leave you to get some rest."

As she pulled away he grabbed her wrist. "Have you been here every night?"

She looked down at his hand, surprisingly strong for a man who'd been hovering on the brink of death just a few days ago. "No, I was here for the first three nights. Then I was off the last two."

"And you're back tonight."

"Obviously." She glanced down at his hand then raised her eyebrows expectantly.

He let her go. "Sorry. I'm just a little disoriented."

She smiled at him. "It's okay. I understand. Who wouldn't be a little discombobulated after what you've been through?"

Blowing out a big breath, he ran his hands through his hair. "I've gotta get out of here."

She frowned. "Well now, that's what you were saying when they had to restrain you."

Envisioning the situation, he looked up with a slight smile. "I guess I gave them a fit, huh?" he asked, humor playing in his eyes.

Lizzy was mesmerized. The slight turn of his mouth at the corners. The dimple in his left cheek. The lock of dark hair that fell over one side of his forehead. Geez Louise. She returned the smile with a nod of her head. "I wasn't here but they told me you went a little crazy. You tried to pull out your IV and tried to lower your leg from traction and kept saying you had to leave."

"I must have been delirious from pain."

She smiled again and he felt he might float to the ceiling.

"So, Mr. Moreland, are you in pain now?"

"Not too much. Actually, I'm hungry."

"That's a good sign. I'll get you some juice and crackers." She turned to leave.

"Wait. Don't go yet."

Moving back toward the bed, she took his hand and squeezed it. "It's gonna be okay, Mr. Moreland. I'll be back soon, but I do have other patients I need to attend to, so you be good and don't try to get up or pull out your IV, okay?"

He nodded. She smiled and left. How could he be so stupid? He sounded like a little kid. *Wait, don't leave?* But man, she was great to look at. He needed to stop thinking about the good looking nurse though and figure out how he was gonna get out of here and get the evidence into the hands that needed to hold it. Then he needed to stop the bad guys from going through with their horrific plans. Glancing at the useless leg, dangling in front of him, suspended in the air like some marionette's appendage, he cursed, because he was nothing but a sitting duck for anyone gunning for him.

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It was late the next afternoon and he'd been dozing. The abrupt knock on the door jerked him awake and had his body tensing. The door swung open and Nigel Kort strode into the room. Keegan's eyes narrowed. "Nigel."

"Mike."

They were silent as each took the other's measure.

"I guess it's you I have to thank for finding me," Keegan said.

Nigel shrugged. "No need for thanks, Tanner. I couldn't lose a seasoned agent. Just doing my job. I simply traced your phone to pinpoint your location."

"Which was?"

"Highway 78, an hour or so north of Atlanta."

"And I'm now Michael Moreland whose accident occurred on

Highway 54?"

"That's correct."

"And you're my brother?"

Nigel Kort shrugged. "Yeah, different fathers."

Keegan sighed. "Okay, and my license says Denver. I don't know anything about Denver."

"Guess you'd better get online and do your damn homework."

Keegan's brow furrowed. Nigel was usually extremely composed, businesslike, a machine. It wasn't like him to curse which meant he was unusually stressed and that was probably because he wanted to get his hands on the evidence. All kinds of scenarios ran through Keegan's mind involving Nigel and the bad guys working together. He shook his head to clear it. "Yeah, I'd like to do my homework. One more reason why I have to get out of here."

"Everything's been arranged. We're transporting you tonight."

"To a safe house?"

"To somewhere safe."

Keegan blew out a breath.

"So, where's the evidence, Agent Tanner?"

"It's safe. As soon as I'm able to be up and about I'll recover it. I'll follow procedure and turn it in to the field office."

"Tell me where it is and we'll take care of it for you. You can just worry about getting well."

Keegan swallowed hard. "Wish I could, but it's not that easy. I'm the only one that can recover it because I'm the only one that can find it. There's no way I can even tell you."

Nigel paced the room, his temper on edge. "It wasn't on you and it wasn't at the scene of the accident."

"No it wasn't. As I already told you, I didn't have it on me, but I also told you it's safe."

"We need to move on it."

"I realize that, but we have time."

Nigel blew out a frustrated breath. "Listen, Tanner, I got people breathing down my neck too, but I'm gonna give you some leeway since it appears paranoia has you in its grasp. Let me just tell you this; you'd better figure out real fast who you can and can't trust. I've worked too hard and too long on this investigation to let it go now. You mess this up and you'll go down."

Keegan nodded. "I understand. You'll have your evidence."

Nigel stepped back, looked out the door, turned back. "I'd better

take off."

"Hold it."

Eyebrows raised, Nigel gestured impatiently.

"Sooo, what happened to Keegan Tanner?"

Nigel's lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes hardened. "Special Agent Keegan Tanner died in a car accident. His body was burned beyond recognition." He felt inside his jacket for the news page he'd printed off and folded and placed there. Bringing out the paper, he tossed it onto Keegan's chest. "His memorial service was held yesterday in Knoxville, Tennessee. He's survived by his mother, father and two sisters."

"Dear Jesus," Keegan muttered.

"Jesus ain't got nothin' to do with it, Tanner. It had to be done. Not just to protect you and this investigation, but also to protect your entire family."

"My father has a heart condition."

"Well, he's still alive, so he survived the news and the service."

"You son of a... "

"Look, Tanner, I didn't mean any disrespect. You know they would've gone after them. They would've killed your parents or raped and murdered your sisters, if they thought in any way that you were alive. They would've used them anyway they could to get to you or to make them talk. And even if your family had talked and told all they knew, they probably still would've died. This way, they're safe. It had to be done."

Keegan nodded reluctantly. His head lifted. "So, did you have some of our men at my funeral?"

"Of course I did. Your fellow agents would've come to mourn your death."

"And did any of Hartman's people attend?" Keegan asked.

"We think so."

Keegan shook his head. "Well, they're not gonna be satisfied without seeing a body."

"Oh, there's a body. It's just not yours."

"You're kidding."

Nigel nodded. "Hopefully, it will take them some time to figure out it's not you."

Keegan's brow furrowed as he thought. "So, I'm dead. They should be expecting a raid based on the evidence I was able to provide. That raid won't occur, at least not for a while which should make them

think that I didn't make it back with the evidence or that I didn't get away from there with any. That should lull them into a little bit of complacency. In the meantime..."

"In the meantime we move Michael Moreland someplace safe and give him time to recuperate, and soon, we get the evidence and make our move."

Keegan nodded. "Well on that much we can agree. These monsters are going down."

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Isaiah 42:13

"The Lord goes out like a mighty man, like a man of war he
stirs up his zeal; he cries out, he shouts aloud,
he shows himself mighty against his foes."

Chapter Two

Keegan opened his eyes. It took a great deal of effort, but he accomplished it and blinked against the early morning light. He vaguely remembered the nurse coming into the hospital room about two in the morning and shooting something into his IV. Peering down at his hand, he realized the IV was gone now. He also realized he desperately needed to relieve himself.

Unable to do anything about that at present, he decided to take in his new surroundings, beginning with his own body. The bed he occupied was softer than the previous one. They'd left his head slightly elevated. His injured leg rested high on several cushions which he determined felt much better than having it swinging high above his body. Glancing down he noted he still wore a hospital gown and nothing else.

Next, his gaze swept the room. He seemed to be in a private home. An older home, he thought, as he noted the high ceilings and the old-fashioned ceiling fan. To his right, about ten feet from the side of his bed loomed two large windows that started about three feet from the floor and were at least eight feet high. He could see through the white lace curtains to the porch beyond which held a suspended porch swing and was surrounded by a white, simple railing. Beyond the large accommodating porch was an expanse of green, then the blacktop of a road.

Directly in front of him was an antique dresser and mirror. Shaking his head, he realized he barely recognized the man that stared back at him. He'd lost weight and needed a shave. He moved on. Just past the dresser was a door that, he assumed, led to the rest of the home. On the left wall another door slightly ajar made him think it was a bathroom. Along that same wall was a small desk with a giant print of *Monet's Garden* hanging over it. To the left of his bed sat a brown wooden rocking chair with a pink cushion in the seat.

More awake now, he realized he'd been moved during the night and they must have sedated him to do it. Drawing a deep breath, he went to run a hand through his hair and realized he couldn't. He'd been restrained again. Closing his eyes to get control of his temper, his

hands balled into fists.

The door opened gently and he was surprised to see his angel come into the room, her white blond hair clipped back at the nape of her neck, her sweet smile in place. Why was *she* here? Why was she at the safe house?

"Good morning, Mr. Moreland," she chirped lightly. "How are you feeling this morning?"

He scowled. "They sedated me last night."

"Yes, they did. The doctor and your brother talked and decided it would be for the best in case the trip here caused any pain."

He tugged on the restraints. "And these?"

She shook her head. "I told them it wasn't necessary, but Mr. Kort insisted. He was so worried you might have one of your spells with only me here to hold you down. I told him I could handle you just fine, but he was very insistent."

His temper burned. "You can handle me?"

She smiled. "Oh my goodness, you know what I mean. I certainly meant no offense."

"Take them off."

Sighing, she shook her head. "Oh dear, I promised your brother I wouldn't take them off until he arrived sometime this morning. He seemed to think that you would try to leave, not that you could."

Oh, but he could, he thought.

"But you know what?" she added. "I'm gonna have to take at least one off so you can handle this." She held up a urinal. "Unless you'd like me to help you with it."

Keegan rolled his eyes, his patience thinning. "I'll do it myself."

Smiling, she laid the urinal on his abdomen. "Are you right-handed?"

"Yes," he replied through gritted teeth.

She unbuckled the restraint. "There now, I'll just leave you to it. I'll be right back."

"Wait."

She stopped. "I have a very tight schedule to run and others to see to."

His brow furrowed. "How many more patients are here?"

"Just you."

"Then why is your schedule so tight? What is this place?"

"It's my home."

"Your home? What the f..." He caught himself before he let out a

string of curses.

"Excuse me?"

"Sorry, uh– look, what's your name?"

"Folks around here call me Lizzy. At the hospital they call me Liz. If you're not comfortable with either of those you can call me Mrs. Anderson."

"Mrs. Anderson. Fine. Tell me, Mrs. Anderson, why am I in your home?" Keegan asked, barely able to keep his temper in check. How dare Nigel Kort put him in someone's home– a civilian's home. Did his SO not realize what kind of danger he was putting her in? Had Keegan not used the word 'ruthless' every time he'd mentioned the organization?

Her chin rose slightly, almost defiantly, forcing him to look at the soft underside of her jaw. Delectable.

"Your brother and Dr. Duncan decided you needed a place to recuperate where you could have privacy and a nurse. Shipping you home to Denver seemed out of the question. I've been thinking about taking in a boarder to help with expenses and so I accepted the offer. Not too complicated. Now, I have a million things to do and I don't want my first day to prove that I can't handle this, so, if you'll excuse me, I'll be back in a few minutes." She pointed at the urinal. "If you don't want my help, I suggest you use that before I get back." She walked briskly from the room.

"I'm gonna kill him. I swear, I'm gonna kill him," Keegan thought. What am I supposed to do? If they find me, how am I supposed to protect this woman? She said, Mrs. Anderson, which means she must have a husband. That should make him feel a little more secure, so why did that detail suddenly give him a sense of disappointment? Probably because it was just one more person in danger, he thought, dismissing it quickly. He jerked the covers from his body and used the urinal, barely finishing before she came back into the room.

She was smiling again. "There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?" She took the urinal and headed to the bathroom then emerged a few moments later with a small plastic basin filled with water, a washcloth and some liquid soap.

"What do you think you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm gonna bathe you."

"No, I don't think so."

"Come on, now, Mr. Moreland, you'll feel so much better. Don't be embarrassed. I'm a nurse."

Reaching behind his neck, she pulled the tie behind his neck, lowered his gown, pulled it off his free arm, then unsnapped the sleeve of his restrained arm. With one quick motion, she pulled the bottom of the gown out from under the blanket and whisked it away, tossing it in the rocker, leaving him naked. She dipped the cloth in the warm water and squeezed out the excess.

He knew where she was going first. His face. She moved close to him, running the cloth over his forehead, cheeks, chin. Her face was close to his. He could feel her breath on his lips. If he moved forward an inch he could taste her. The thought consumed him. She pulled back and smiled.

"Maybe tomorrow you'd like to shave."

He had to clear his throat before he spoke. "Yes, I would, if you wouldn't mind arranging that."

"Of course. And we'll wash your hair tomorrow too."

He watched as she poured some soap over the cloth, then rubbed the cloth over his shoulders and chest and arms, paying close attention to his armpits. He'd be embarrassed if he wasn't enjoying her touch so much. Then, he realized, she's gonna want to go lower and he truly is gonna be embarrassed. She rinsed the cloth and went back over his skin, ensuring no soap remained.

She raised the head of the bed. "Can you sit forward a bit so I can get your back?"

Grunting in slight pain, he moved forward for her, resting his forehead against her shoulder. He breathed deeply. She smelled good. Like shampoo and something light and sweet. Citrus maybe. She finished his back and took hold of the blanket. He grabbed it. She pulled. He pulled it back.

"Okay now, Mr. Moreland, I told you, I'm a nurse."

He realized he was acting ridiculous, but the entire procedure seemed extremely emasculating. She finally won the tug of war. He closed his eyes and concentrated on staying relaxed. She was efficient and finished her work quickly and he was at least grateful for that.

She took the bath water to the bathroom and came back with a towel and lotion. The towel was to make sure all parts of his body were completely dry so that no fungus could grow, she explained. He endured the towel. It was the lotion he wasn't sure he could take. Luckily, he discovered she only wanted to apply it to his chest, back, arms and legs.

Sweat ran from his forehead by the time she was finished.

"Are you hot, Mr. Moreland?"

"It's warm," he said, his voice low.

She went to the window. "I turned the air conditioner off to keep the power bill from being so high, but I can turn it on for you. It's usually pretty cool up here in the foothills by this time of year. Maybe we can try just opening a window and I'll turn on the ceiling fan."

He nodded. "That would be fine. You said the foothills?"

She smiled. "Um hm. You're in Tyler Springs. It's a town in north Georgia a few hours from Atlanta. A short drive to the east and you'd be in the mountains."

He watched her move quickly to open the window. She wore jeans. Snug jeans. And a simple sleeveless tank top. Her waist was tiny and he ached to span it with his hands. What was it about her that unsettled him so? Just her touch, her smile, caused an instantaneous physical reaction.

She went back into the bathroom and came out with the plastic basin, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and a glass of water. Setting the items on a small table next to the bed, she turned to leave.

"I'll just set these here for you to use and I'll be back with breakfast soon. I need to wake Heather for school."

"You have a kid?"

"Oh, yes," she said with what he thought was a slight giggle.

What can Nigel be thinking, Keegan wondered. He scrubbed his free hand over his face. Hopefully, Mr. Anderson will turn out to be a help. Keegan looked up. "What does your husband do for a living?"

Her eyes met his solemnly. "My husband was killed in Syria almost four years ago." She turned and left before he could think to offer his sympathy or apology.

Staring at the closed door, he shook his head. Another casualty of war. He'd made it through his stint in the military, but he had many friends who hadn't. Friends with wives and children, and now, here is this beautiful woman, with a kid trying to eke out a living by herself. He'd been proud to serve his country. Been proud to fight the bullies to give human beings their inalienable rights, but he also knew the consequences. He sighed. Lizzy Anderson had her work cut out for her. And now, she and her kid were in danger because of him. He had to get out of here.

His ears picked up the staccato sound of what he believed some would term the pitter patter of little feet. Then he heard soft voices and giggling, then Lizzy's voice. Even though he couldn't make out what

she was saying, he could hear that same soft sound, that same sweetness that he heard whenever she spoke to him.

It was the sense of smell that assaulted him next. His stomach growled. Something smelled delicious. Minutes later his angel returned bearing a tray and wearing that same sweet smile. Setting the tray on the end of the bed she gathered his dental things and removed them to the bathroom. Next she knelt down and pulled a u-shaped platform out from under the bed. It fit perfectly over his thighs.

"Let me sit you up just a little higher," she said as she pushed the button. "There now, is that okay?"

He nodded.

"Any pain?"

He shook his head. She nodded and moved to the dresser, opened the top drawer, removed a white t-shirt and brought it to him. "Your brother thought you would probably prefer wearing t-shirts instead of those terrible hospital gowns, even though a t-shirt doesn't come down over your lap like the gowns do. But I guess you'll have the sheet over that part of you anyway. He also provided some underwear, but that won't be useful until you're up and about." Leaning over, she pulled the t-shirt over his head.

"You'll have to unstrap my other hand," he said gruffly.

She frowned. "My goodness, you're absolutely right. Oh, well. Promise me you won't try to escape," she said with a grin.

He raised his eyebrows at the light that shone from her face. "I promise," he said.

She unstrapped his arm and he finished pulling on the t-shirt. Lizzy turned, lifted the tray and set it on the platform in front of him. His eyes couldn't help but take in her shape, her beauty, as she bent. Her soft, gentle hands unfolded a paper napkin and went to lay it across his lap.

"Dammit, I can do that myself," he grumbled.

She placed her hands on her hips. "There is no need to curse at me. I do not allow that kind of language in this house. And you needn't be so grumpy. I'm just trying to make you comfortable."

He let out a sigh. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings, but her touch did things to him that he didn't want done. Her smell caused his blood to sizzle. The sight of her sped up his heart. He didn't want to be here. One, for her own safety and two, he would have to battle his heart for however many weeks his recovery would take.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "Really, I'm sorry. I wasn't actually cursing

at *you*, just at the situation. I guess I'm a little antsy."

Her luscious lips pressed together as she nodded her head. "Well, I can certainly understand that."

Duly chastised by her immediate forgiveness, Keegan noted the contents of the tray. "Wow, this looks great," he said, eyeing the coffee, juice, buttered English muffins, scrambled eggs topped with cheese and a small bowl of strawberries and blueberries.

"I hope you like it. Later, we'll talk about foods you'd prefer. Right, now, as I've said, I'm on a time budget. I'll be back for the tray in a little while. Take your time." She sighed. "I've ordered satellite internet and a TV for this room but it won't be here until tomorrow. I have some books or magazines if you think that would help occupy your mind."

"You wouldn't happen to have a newspaper or something similar? I don't have my cell phone yet."

"Yes, actually, I do. My mother always got the newspaper and I haven't cancelled it yet. I'll get it right away."

"No hurry. Really." She was so eager to please, it made him feel guilty for how he'd snapped at her. He watched her backside as she left the room. Lord have mercy, what was wrong with him? It's like the accident changed his personality. He was usually not a slave to his passions. He had an iron will, and he could certainly block out a pretty female when he had his job on his mind, yet that was on hold right now. At least until he could reach someone he could trust. And Mrs. Anderson was a great distraction while he recovered.

Breakfast was delicious. Well, at least putting weight back on will be easy with meals like this, he thought. He looked up at the soft knock on the door.

"Come in," he called.

The door opened slowly and a small, tow-headed little girl poked her head inside the room. Big, blue eyes peered up at him, half fearful, half curious. He smiled at her, doing his best not to scare her. She was a duplicate of her mother.

"Hello there," he said.

"Hi."

She came all the way into the room and closed the door behind her then moved quietly to the bed. "I brought you this," she said, holding out a folded newspaper. "Mommy was busy and I told her I could help because I got ready for school really fast."

He took the paper from her. "Well, thank you."

"You're welcome. Mommy says you had a car accident and you broke your leg. Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes," he admitted.

"Mommy says you're lucky to be alive."

"She's right."

"My daddy died."

Geez, he hadn't expected that. "Um, I'm sorry to hear that. How old are you?" he asked, hoping to distract her from that subject.

"I'm five. My name is Heather."

"What a pretty name."

"Thank you. It's a flower. We're all flowers."

"All?"

The door opened and Lizzy stuck her head in. "Come on, sweetie, bus will be here any minute."

Heather looked up at the man. "Well, bye. Hope you feel better real soon."

"Thanks."

They left the room and he felt suddenly very alone. When he heard the front door open, he glanced out the window to the porch. What he saw next took his breath away. Lizzy walked out, then Heather, wearing her backpack. Heather moved down to stand at the bottom of the steps and Lizzy turned.

"Okay, babies, everybody have a seat and you can watch the school bus and wave to Heather."

To his amazement, four tiny blond heads moved into view. Obediently, each little girl sat down on the top step.

"Here it comes," one yelled, even though you could hardly call the tiny voice a yell.

"Yep, here it comes," Lizzy confirmed. "What color is the bus, Daisy?"

"I know, I know," one said.

"I asked Daisy," Lizzy answered softly.

"It's ye-wo," a soft voice said, making Keegan smile.

"That's right, Daisy."

"What number is on the side of the bus, Lily?"

"One-oh- fwee," she answered gleefully. "Fwee like me."

"That's right," Lizzy purred, causing Keegan's insides to turn.

Lizzy took Heather's hand, then turned back to the four sitting on the steps. "Remember, no one moves off their step."

Keegan watched as Lizzy and Heather moved up the drive and to

the street. Lizzy bent down and kissed Heather, let go of her hand and watched her move up the steps of the bus. Lizzy said something to the bus driver, smiled and waved as the bus pulled away.

"Everybody wave," Lizzy called to the four on the steps.

He could see four little arms and hands waving madly.

"Bye Heather, bye," they called all at once.

"Okay, everyone, inside," Lizzy said as she got to the porch steps. "I want everyone dressed while I do the breakfast dishes then we'll all go in to meet our new guest, but you have to promise me to be very good."

He heard the slamming of a door, probably a screen door, as they came inside, then heard that same pattering of feet as they ran, he supposed, to go dress as their mother had ordered. Well, more like cajoled. The door to his room opened and she came in, her face somewhat flushed, her eyes sparkling.

"Did you enjoy your breakfast, Mr. Moreland?"

The corners of his mouth turned down slightly. "Please stop calling me that," he said, realizing at the last minute his tone was too brusque. He sighed. "And yes, I enjoyed my breakfast immensely. Thank you."

Frowning, she lifted the tray from the base, set it on the end of the bed, and returned the base to its position under the bed. Her hands went to her hips. "What would you have me call you then? Michael?"

"How about Mike? Can you do that?"

"Of course, if that's what you'd like. We're gonna be together closely for several weeks so we might as well dispense with all formality. So why don't you call me Liz or Lizzy."

"What's your real name— Elizabeth?"

"Yes."

"I think I'll call you that."

She shrugged. "Suit yourself." Lifting the breakfast tray she headed for the door.

"Elizabeth," he said softly.

She stopped and turned to him, her heart in her throat. His deep voice stroking over her name caused her stomach to flutter in response. "Yes?" she answered.

"I'm sorry about your husband."

She nodded. "Thank you."

"What branch of the service was he in?"

"Army. Did you serve?"

"Marines."

"Well then," she said and hesitated a moment. "Again, thank you." She left the room.

Lizzy hurried around the kitchen, doing up dishes, taking out some ground beef to thaw, cleaning up a sticky spot on the floor, the whole time thinking about Michael Moreland. Not used to being close to a man other than her husband, she couldn't place the feelings that crept up her spine and had the hairs at the nape of her neck standing on end. He looked at her in that very male, very primitive kind of way, heating her blood and doubling her respiration.

She wasn't stupid. Of course what she was feeling was lust. It was a new thing to her, though. The love that she'd shared with Bradley was sweet and wholesome and heavenly. Now, there was a man in her home who was nothing like Bradley, not in any way, and he was causing feelings she'd never experienced. She wasn't afraid of him. She was excited by him. She was a nurse. She understood a body's needs. It had been a very long time, so that would explain her reaction to him, besides the fact that he was extremely good looking.

His dark hair, and darker eyes gave him a dangerous look, but when he smiled, which he hardly ever did, not that she could blame him right now, it showed a boyish character *and* that one adorable dimple. His body was banded with lean muscle. Who couldn't resist that broad muscular chest and six pack abs? His one thigh was thick and strong. They'd have to work on regaining muscle in the other leg when it became weight bearing.

Pushing her thoughts to what had to be done, she went to check on the children. Rose and Violet were almost dressed but needed help with their shoes. Daisy and Lily were still rummaging through their drawers. There wasn't much to choose from. Just about all their clothes were hand-me-downs. Lizzy knelt down and helped them decide between pink or lime green pants and shirts with flowers or shirts with butterflies. The green pants and butterfly shirts won out. Once they were dressed, teeth cleaned, faces washed and hair brushed, she led them to Mr. Moreland's room.

She knocked softly and pushed the door open. He'd fallen back to sleep, the newspaper spread out across his chest. Quietly, she moved toward the bed and reached for the paper. The moment she touched it, his hand snapped out, trapping her wrist in an iron grasp.

She gasped. His eyes opened and bore deep into hers, violence and rage barely contained.

"I, uh, was just moving the newspaper," she tried to explain.

A look of confusion crossed his features, then his eyes widened. He glanced down at his hand holding her wrist and let go immediately. "I'm sorry, I must've dozed off. You startled me."

She swallowed, rubbing her wrist.

"Do me a favor and don't sneak up on me. Ever."

"Okay," she agreed quickly and meekly.

He felt instantly sorry. Darn it, he hadn't meant to frighten her. He watched her as she straightened her shoulders, took a deep breath and put on a brave front.

"I thought you might like to meet the girls," she explained. "But I can come back another time if you prefer."

"No. No, please, introduce me to the girls. I'm sorry I snapped at you. It's a post war kinda thing."

She drew a breath and blew it out. "Okay. Well, this is Rose and this is Violet. They're twins as you can see."

"Hello Rose, and Violet," he said softly, noting their blue eyes were large with apprehension.

"How old are you?" he asked, trying to put them at ease.

"We're four," they answered in unison.

He chuckled.

Lizzy immediately looked up at the pleasant sound. Her eyes met his. He actually smiled.

"And who are these two?" he asked, snapping her out of her shock as he pointed to the little ones.

"Um, this is Lily and this is Daisy. They're three."

"Well hi there, Lily and Daisy," he said, his eyes twinkling.

Lizzy was captivated by the sight.

"Lily's shy," Daisy said. "She won't talk, but I will. I'm not shy."

He watched Lily, her little mouth pouting, her eyes cast downward. "It's okay to be shy. I used to be shy when I was little, but I'm not anymore."

Lily's head lifted. She smiled up at him, then at her mother who was looking at him.

"Well," she said, smiling at Mike. "Let's leave Mr. Moreland alone to get some rest."

She glanced at him. He actually seemed to be disappointed.

"Okay, bye Mr. Moreland," the girls all called gaily. "Get better."

"How could I not with so many pretty girls around," he said quietly, glancing pointedly at Lizzy.

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"Hello Mike."

Keegan's eyes snapped open. He had to stop falling asleep. "Nigel." He glanced around to make sure Lizzy wasn't in the room. "Close the door."

Nigel fulfilled the request. As soon as he turned back to Keegan he was blasted.

"What do you think you're doing placing me in a civilian's home? Do you know she has five children?"

"Yes, I realize that."

"They're in danger. You have to know that. You know what kind of people we're dealing with, Nigel, how can you even think about putting these people in danger?"

"Give it a rest, Tanner. You wouldn't be here if I didn't feel that you were perfectly safe."

"It's not me, it's *them* I'm worried about. What in the hell is wrong with you?"

Nigel's eyes narrowed. "Let me remind you of something. I'm your superior officer and I know what I'm doing. I won't compromise civilians. You needed a nurse while you recover. I could put men at your door at the hospital, or move you to another medical facility and still have to put guards at the door. Here, you're out in the middle of nowhere, much more difficult to find if and when Celados figures out you're alive. There was no paper trail. You can't be traced here. Keegan Tanner is dead. Michael Moreland went home to Denver. You're safe. They're safe. We have agents periodically watching the house. If we need to move you, we will. I don't know what's gotten into you, but you'd better get hold of yourself."

Keegan gave a bitter laugh. "Or what? Whattya gonna do? You wanna take me off the case? You gonna send someone else in there when we don't even know who blew my cover? When we already have the evidence we need?"

"Do we? I haven't seen anything."

"I have it, or, I'll have it soon. When I do, I'll deliver it straight to the field office."

"I'll be waiting," Nigel said firmly.

"Yeah, and in the meantime, I'm a sitting duck here. You gotta get me outta here."

"You're not going anywhere. We're keeping a close eye on Celados. If they discover you're still alive we'll get you out. Agents are

in the area if you need them." He held up a leather duffel. "Your guns, cell phone, laptop and other assorted goodies. You can use the credit cards if you need to make purchases. Keep a gun close."

"Yeah, you can count on that."

"That's it. I'll check in periodically. You know how to reach me."

"You can't leave me here like this."

"You know how to reach me," Nigel repeated.

Shaking his head, Keegan blew out a resigned breath.

Lizzy knocked softly before she opened the door.

"Hey," she said softly. "Mr. Kort, I came to ask if I can get you something to drink?"

"No, actually, I'm leaving."

"But you just got here."

"I know." He glanced at Keegan. "And I hate to leave my little brother here in his condition, but I've got a business to run. I know he's in good hands, though."

She smiled. "I'll take very good care of him."

Keegan's head fell back against the pillows.

Nigel glanced at him. "Get well, Mikey."

"Whatever."

Nigel turned his eyes on the great looking blonde standing next to him. "He's a grump, but don't let that get to you. He's not so bad once you get to know him."

"I'm not worried," she answered, smiling her sweet smile.

"I'll see myself out," Nigel said as he left the room.

"Can I get you anything, Mike?" Lizzy asked.

"No," he replied shortly. "Not a da– not a thing."

She shook her head and softly closed the door.

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She came to him. He watched the door open slowly. He must've done something good for she allowed him to see her. At first all he could see was the white gossamer gown, backlit by the light coming from the room beyond. Her sleek legs moved slowly as she crossed the floor, not making a sound.

His eyes wandered over her, coming to rest finally on her face. "Mrs. Anderson," he said softly. "Elizabeth, it *is* you."

She leaned over him. "Yes, Michael. It's me. It's always been me. Every time it's been me."

He wanted to touch her. "Will you please, release me so I can move?" he begged.

She nodded, smiling at him. Immediately his hand reached out to touch her. He marveled at the softness of her skin. She shivered. He pressed his hand against her back, bringing her closer to him.

"I don't know about these things, Michael," she said softly.

"Of course you don't," he answered. "You're an angel. But don't worry, I'll teach you."

She nodded.

"Let me touch you. Come closer," he whispered. "Up here." He patted the bed. "You are so very beautiful," he whispered reverently.

He took her face in his hands and brought her to him for a kiss. She learned quickly. She made a low purring sound as he kissed her slowly and thoroughly. Watching her face hypnotized him.

The door burst open. The intruders never hesitated. They moved toward the bed, pointed the gun at Elizabeth and fired. She slumped down on top of him. He dove off the bed, bringing her with him. They shot him in the leg. The familiar pain consumed him. Struggling, he reached under the bed for the bag Nigel had brought him and grabbed his gun, but the intruders ran.

He took a moment to catch his breath and then finally stashed the gun back into his bag. Turning his attention to Elizabeth, he placed his hands on either side of her face. She opened her eyes.

"You're alive," he said, his voice full of wonder. Tears in his eyes, he brought her mouth to his and kissed her soundly.

"Let— me— go," she said, fiercely. She pushed against his chest, finally breaking his hold.

His eyes opened. He blinked several times and then cursed.

"Indeed," Elizabeth gasped, on her knees on the floor beside him.

Peering around he realized he lay on the floor next to the bed, in the room in Elizabeth Anderson's home. His leg was throbbing in excruciating pain. "What happened?" he asked.

Lizzy took several seconds to catch her breath. "I heard you yell and then I heard a thump. I came running in to find you lying on the floor. I knelt beside you and you grabbed me and..."

He waited, but when she didn't continue he prodded. "I what? What did I do?"

"You kissed me. I couldn't stop you. I couldn't get away."

"Oh Jesus. Jesus, I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I must've been dreaming. I wouldn't hurt you. I swear."

"Do not take my Lord's name in vain, please," she said.

Blowing out a breath, Lizzy pushed her hair back from her face

and he couldn't help but notice her hands were shaking. Reaching over, he took them in his own and pressed them.

"I'm sorry. It's a bad habit. I will try to watch what I say. But I promise, Elizabeth, I'd never hurt you. It's the stupid pain medication. It puts me too far under."

She looked down at his hands holding hers.

He squeezed them, causing her to look up at him. "Please, don't be afraid."

Her smile appeared, bravely, timorously. "Of course I'm not afraid of you. You're not a bad man. I know that. You're just– grumpy. You frightened me for a moment that's all." Her lips pursed as she blew out a long breath. "The question is, are you hurt?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

She frowned and shook her head. "I don't know how I'm gonna get you up and back into bed."

He looked around. "Did they provide any crutches for me?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts. Just get them."

She left to do his bidding. He looked down at himself. He wore a t-shirt and nothing else. His right leg was throbbing inside the cast, his toes were turning blue. When she returned with the crutches he glanced up at her. She had on a long nightshirt that came to just above her knees. Her feet were bare. Her long, blond hair was mussed and fell over one shoulder.

"How are we gonna do this?" she asked pensively.

He grasped the bottom of the bed rail. "Okay, so, let's see, I'm gonna pull myself up as far as I can. The moment you can get a crutch under my arm, do it."

She nodded.

Grunting in pain, he pulled himself up, moving his hand from the bed rail to just under the edge of the mattress and finally to the top of the mattress. His back burned as he used the not quite mended muscles. His head pounded. As soon as he was upright enough, Elizabeth shoved the crutch up under his arm. He took a second to catch his breath, then finally made it to a standing position.

His eyes closed in pain as the blood rushed through his leg. For the first time he actually felt the pain in his cracked ribs. Nausea overtook him. Breathing hard, he got himself under control. She handed him the second crutch and he used it to get his balance and to turn himself around. Slowly, he eased himself onto the bed. As he leaned back,

Lizzy lifted the injured leg and set it gently down, arranging the cushions to prop it up higher than usual.

He sighed in relief as the pain immediately eased, and then he chuckled. "Well now, that was an adventure." Glancing up at Lizzy he was startled by the tears in her eyes. "Elizabeth?"

Her chin quivered. She blinked several times, pressing her lips together in an obvious attempt at keeping those tears from falling. "You could've been hurt. Hurt badly. I should've made sure the bed rails were up. Then you fall out of bed and I have to depend on my own patient to figure out how to get off the floor and back in bed. Oh, I'm doing just a fine job of taking care of you, aren't I? You'd probably be better off if we'd dropped you in an alley somewhere. And now what am I gonna do? I receive this amazing opportunity to make money while I stay home with my children and I let this happen. I've probably blown any chance I had to get my license."

"Oh, come on now, it's not so bad. How could you have known? Please, don't be upset. You're taking great care of me."

She shook her head. "You're just being kind. What's more, now I'll have to take you in and have your leg x-rayed, maybe your ribs, check to make sure there are no new internal injuries."

"You can't take me anywhere."

"I have a wheelchair for you. I can..."

"Listen, I simply fell out of bed. I'm okay."

"What if you've re-injured yourself in some way? What if the fall moved the bones in your leg in any way?"

"I think I would be in a lot more pain. Elizabeth, listen to me. I absolutely refuse to be transported anywhere. I'm fine. You'll just have to trust me on that."

"You don't know if you're fine. I'd better call Mr. Kort."

"Please, Elizabeth, please don't call– my brother. He'll be very upset. Not with you, but with me."

"Why would he be upset with you?"

Keegan thought quickly. "Well, because, I'm always causing him trouble. Time and money, he always says. Please, don't call him. Let's just play it by ear. If I don't feel much pain then I'm probably okay."

"You are in pain."

"I was. Not now. I'm feeling much better already."

Her lips twisted into an adorable little pout. She sighed. "Okay, well, I guess we'll see," she said, not promising anything. She made a fuss out of covering him, tucking him in, raising the bed rails. Finally,

she looked back up at him.

"Thank you," he said softly. He gazed at her lovely face. "One more thing. Maybe we can dispense with the pain medication. It does weird things to me. Makes me dream crazy dreams."

She nodded. "If that's what you want, that's what we'll do."

"Good. And Mrs. Anderson, about that kiss. I hope it didn't upset you too much."

Her fingers self-consciously touched her lips, causing his gut to twist. Her face colored a soft pink. "Of course not. Just forget it."

Like he could forget it, he thought as he watched her leave the room. He shook his head. He'd totally messed up. This had been the perfect opportunity to get the heck out of here, but the sight of the young widow's tears, of her worry that she wouldn't be able to stay home with her children had him jumping to her rescue. Her little emotional outburst told him that this setup working out was extremely important to her.

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He'd made it all week, almost. Five days of letting Elizabeth Anderson wake him with her cheery smile, and then proceed to take care of his bodily needs. It was over. He was finished. No more. He braced for the showdown as the doorknob turned and her pretty smile lit up the room.

"Good morning, Mike," she sang cheerfully, holding the urinal in her hand.

He scowled at her. He couldn't take the chance of conversing politely with her at first or she would win. If he frightened her, or hurt her feelings, well, so be it. Today he was breaking free. A man could only take so much.

"I'm not using that."

"Of course you are," she said, still smiling.

"No, I'm not."

Her smile faded. "What are you talking about? What's the alternative?"

"I'm getting up to use the bathroom on my own."

"But you can't get out of bed. You're not supposed to be up for at least two weeks."

"Tough. I'm getting up today."

"But it's not just your leg, Mike. It's the cracked ribs too. You can't walk on crutches and the wheelchair won't fit in the bathroom."

"I can and will walk on the damn crutches," he growled.

Her eyebrows raised.

"Sorry. I mean, I can walk with the crutches. No more urinals, no more sponge baths, no more bedpans. No more. I mean it. I can take care of myself."

"You can, can you?" she said, her hands on her hips. "And who is gonna prepare your meals, wash your clothes, change your bed?"

He swallowed. "Well, maybe I do need a little help, but Elizabeth, I can certainly wash my own body and take care of the more personal things by myself."

"This is ridiculous. I am a nurse."

His eyes flashed. "And I– am a man," he barked.

Her mouth opened to say more, but his words finally struck home. Her blue eyes met his dark ones.

"Please, Elizabeth," Keegan pleaded. "You're killin' me."

Her chin quivered. Oh, come on. Please don't cry, he thought. He wasn't used to being gentle. He was used to saying what he meant to say and getting it over with.

Her chin jutted out defiantly. "Well fine, then." She stormed over to where the crutches leaned in the corner, grabbed them and brought them to him.

"Thank you," he said softly, sitting up.

"Mind if I stay next to you until I know you can stand?" she asked somewhat sarcastically. Thinking better of her tone, she softened. "I mean, because you might feel a little dizzy at first."

"Thank you," he said again. "I'd appreciate that." He looked down at the casted leg, sighed. "I guess I do need you to take care of me. Could you help me get my leg off the bed?"

"Of course," she said, moving forward.

He pulled the blankets back, remembering too late he was naked from the waist down. Eyeing him, Lizzy went to the dresser and pulled out a pair of boxers. Once she'd helped him swing his leg down, he drew in a breath as she knelt down in front of him to help guide the shorts over his cast. He stood, grabbed the waist and finished pulling them up. Man, but it felt good to have on pants again, even if they were only underwear.

"No dizziness?" Lizzy asked.

"I think I'm okay."

He placed the crutches under his arm, took a breath and took his first step, schooling his face. He was not gonna let her see just how painful it was to carry his own weight. His leg, used to being elevated,

was throbbing. His ribs burned with pain. His entire body screamed. He didn't care. He'd tough it out.

"Well, then, I'll leave you to it," Lizzy said quietly. "Don't be afraid to call me if you need me."

"I'll be fine," he said gruffly as he ambled into the bathroom and closed the door behind him.

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Lizzy turned over and kicked the covers off her heated body. Heated, not because of the temperature of the house, but rather from the man who'd been living in her home for two weeks now. She'd been unable to get that kiss out of her mind. He'd been dreaming, she realized. He hadn't really kissed her. Yet that didn't keep her from feeling it all the way to her toes. He'd taken her mouth so hard, so rough. He'd completely possessed her for those few brief seconds. How could she help but wonder what it would be like if he'd kissed her for real? Kissed *her*. Not some dream fantasy woman. Never had she been kissed like that.

"This is ridiculous," she thought. "He is my patient. He is my responsibility. Why can I not get these images out of my mind?" Tossing the covers completely aside she rose and went to the window, staring out at the darkness.

Admittedly, she was lonely. Logically, she knew she needed a companion, someone to talk to and share her feelings with. In her heart, though, she felt guilty for wanting one, even though she knew Bradley wouldn't want her to be alone the rest of her life. Bradley and she were like soulmates. They knew each other's minds. He would want her to find someone who would take care of her and the children. However, this man, this man could not be that man.

He was nothing like Bradley. He was not kind. Not gentle. So why couldn't she put him out of her mind? Why did she want him to touch her? Why did she long to feel his kiss for real? She left her room and wandered through the one story house, stepping across the hall to peek in at her daughters before she headed for the den in the back of the house and curled up on the sofa. She had just laid her head on an accent pillow when someone cleared their throat.

Gasping, she jumped to her feet.

"It's okay, it's just me," Keegan said.

Her hand pressed against her heart, as she turned toward the shadow in the chair in the corner. "You scared me."

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

"What are you doing up?" she asked.

"I was restless. Not enough exercise."

Lizzy eased back down onto the sofa. "So, you came to sit in here in the dark?"

He shrugged. "The dark doesn't bother me. And I admit I didn't just come in here. I've been wandering through your house."

He didn't bother to tell her he was getting the setup so he could protect her and her children, counting doors and windows, looking for possible escape routes. Rising from the chair, he grabbed his crutches and moved toward the sofa, stopping to switch on a lamp first. "May I?" he asked, motioning toward the seat next to her.

"Of course," she answered, letting her eyes take in the sight of him. He wore a black t-shirt and black sweats with one leg cut up the seam. He'd asked her to make the purchases for him. His brother had provided white t-shirts and boxer shorts, but Mike decided he needed a lot more than that.

Leaning the crutches against the end of the sofa, he lowered himself down, giving a small grunt as he fell the last few inches. He sat far enough away from her so that he could turn slightly toward her and watch her face as he spoke to her.

"You really need to keep that elevated," she couldn't resist saying. "Though I guess you don't want to hear that from me."

His gaze swept her face and body, noting the pink jersey night shirt with a picture of a giant bunny. He wondered if she had on anything else. Her legs were tucked up under her. He could tell from the words she'd just spoken that her feelings were still hurt from his demand to take care of himself. "Look, Elizabeth, I want you to know how much I appreciate your taking care of me. You're a great nurse. Very, uh..." he searched his brain for the right words. "Very conscientious and efficient. I didn't mean to seem ungrateful the other day. If I hurt your feelings, I didn't mean to."

She sniffed. "It's just that I wanted to do a good job. If you knew how hard it's been, what I mean is, I wanted to, I needed to..."

She stopped and he began to panic because he didn't want her to cry again. "Elizabeth."

When she didn't answer he scooted closer and reached out to touch her shoulder. "Elizabeth, you *did* do a good job. You *are* doing a good job."

She shook her head and sniffed again, using her fingers to wipe at the moisture that had gathered in her eyes. "Sorry, I don't know what's

come over me. I must be tired."

He smiled. "Well, it *is* the middle of the night."

She laughed then looked up at him. "I guess it's just that this job is so important to me. If I do a good job with you, Dr. Duncan will send me more patients and I need more patients because I just can't leave my girls with a babysitter anymore. I just can't."

Instinctively he pulled on her arm. "Elizabeth, come here."

He scooted over closer to her, frustrated that he couldn't move freely. "Come here, please."

She looked up, puzzled.

He smiled. "Trust me. Come here."

Sighing, she scooted closer as he'd ordered. Next thing she knew he'd pulled her into his arms and up against his chest. His hand gripped the back of her head, smoothing her hair.

"There now," he said softly. "You can cry all you want."

She tried, really tried to cry, but suddenly she didn't feel like crying anymore. She felt silly. She giggled, looking up at him, his mouth just inches from hers. He was looking at her again, in that way that made her feel all hot and tingly. She licked her lips. He closed his eyes briefly and she was grateful because it helped to break the spell. "I'm not a cry baby. Not usually anyway. It's just that you've caught me at a vulnerable time."

"Well, Elizabeth, I'm glad I did. It's nice to see a different side of you other than my tormentor."

She glanced up at his eyes, noting the twinkle, then gave a small laugh. Dabbing at her eyes, she pulled out of his embrace and settled herself back in the corner of the sofa.

He hadn't wanted to let her go. He'd been antsy and restless up until the moment he'd held her in his arms and suddenly all was right with the world and that was not a good thing, since the longer he was in her home, the more danger she was in. She was smiling at him again. His eyes drifted down toward the bunny on the front of her nightshirt, then quickly moved back up as he realized she was watching his eyes. Lord have mercy, he ached to touch her.

"So you think I torment you, do you?" she asked.

"Only as often as you can. No, really, Elizabeth, I want you to know that I think you're a great nurse. It's just that I'm not a great patient. That's the problem. I'm stubborn and pig-headed."

"I can be just as pig-headed."

"So I've noticed."

She laughed. "So, I peeked in the other day and you were hard at work on your laptop. Are you writing another story?"

"A what? Oh, yes, a story. I'm, uh, pushing around some ideas."

"Dr. Duncan said your publisher would threaten to drop you if they knew you'd been incapacitated."

"Yeah."

She watched him. "I get it, Mike. It's okay if you don't want to talk about it. I understand."

"Ya know, I really *don't* want to talk about it. What I'd like to do is ask *you* some questions."

She nodded. "Me? Um, sure, okay. Ask away."

"How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-four."

"Twenty-four? I thought you were a lot older than that."

She frowned and he immediately realized his mistake.

"Not that you look old, I mean, you look about sixteen, but I just meant to already have five children, I thought you'd be a lot older."

She shrugged. "Yeah. I got pregnant with Heather when I was only seventeen. Bradley and I found out we were gonna have a baby just before my eighteenth birthday which is in April. Thank goodness I was a senior and just a few months later we graduated from high school." She rolled her eyes. "But I'm sure you don't want to hear about Bradley and me."

"Sure I do. Tell me."

"Are you sure?"

"Tell me. I'm a writer. I'm interested in everything."

Her eyebrows rose. "Okay, you asked for it. So, when we found out we were pregnant, Bradley was excited and I was scared. I mean, we knew being together was wrong when you're not married. We were told that often enough at church, but we were so in love and it happened." She shrugged. "He put his plans of going to college on hold and we got married and moved in here with my parents. We decided we would save some money, and then after the baby was born we would move closer to Atlanta where Bradley could work part-time and go to school. We knew it would be hard, but we believed we could do it. Heather was born in January. We were so happy.

"We'd saved a lot of money and were just getting ready to make our move to Atlanta just before my nineteenth birthday when we found out I was pregnant again."

"Yikes."

She chuckled. "To say the least. The first time around my mom and dad were pretty supportive. They really loved Bradley. After all, he and I had been boyfriend and girlfriend since kindergarten."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. At school we were inseparable."

"Did your parents arrange play dates?"

Lizzy laughed. "Hah, not so much. Different pay grades, if you know what I mean. Anyway, the second time around, my parents became pretty concerned. They couldn't see how we were gonna support two children and still get our education. Then we found out it was twins and Bradley began to agree with my parents and he set out to do something about our situation."

"That's when he joined the Army?"

"Yes. We didn't mean to get pregnant again. It just happened. I admit I was a little scared, but I started nursing school and Bradley joined the military. He told me that everything was gonna be okay. After doing his four years he'd get his education and we'd be fine."

"Buut..."

"But, of course it didn't turn out like that. The twins were born on Christmas. Rose and Violet. Bradley didn't make it home in time to see the birth, but he made it home by March. I was so happy to see him. I'd missed him so much. He took one look at the twins and melted into a big puddle. And Heather, he couldn't get enough of her. He was so in love with those little girls. And me." She sighed, smiled.

"Having him home after being away from him for so long, it was just so good, you know? I could barely stand the thought that he had to leave again so soon. I was devastated, but he was always so positive. So up. So sure of everything. I guess that's why everyone loved him so much. He told me how wonderful everything was gonna be. He told me to keep my chin up. He left on the first day of May. A few weeks later I had to write him and let him know I was pregnant again. It seemed I probably got pregnant sometime in mid-April, right near my birthday."

"I'm beginning to see a pattern here. It seems your birthday is a dangerous time, at least as far as conception goes."

"Yeah, Bradley and I laughed about that."

"You didn't think about birth control?"

Shame flashed in her eyes. He hadn't meant to make her feel bad. "I, uh, I'm sorry. Besides I guess that's none of my business."

She shrugged. "No, that's okay. I think everyone in Tyler Springs has asked that same question and some of them weren't nearly as

polite. We believed in doing things naturally. I didn't want to take the pill. We really tried hard to do things right and I thought we had. We were very surprised we were pregnant again. I couldn't even think of a time we didn't use protection. Somehow, I still got pregnant."

Keegan smiled kindly. "Well then, I guess sometimes things are just meant to be," he said softly, understanding in his eyes.

She held his gaze for several moments. "You, Mike, are the only one who's ever said that, other than Bradley." She blew out a breath and went on. "The day we found out it was twins again I came home and cried. I thought I was gonna die. Not Bradley though. He wrote to me and kept me calm. He filled his letters with stories about how good our life was gonna be."

Her voice became quiet. "He never got to see Lily and Daisy. He was killed by enemy fire while trying to rescue a wounded soldier. The fourth anniversary of his death is coming up soon."

Keegan closed his eyes a moment, feeling the fear of such a young mother with her husband gone, along with feeling the pain of the loss of such a good man. "So, he died a hero."

"Yes."

"And what happened to your parents?"

"My father died of a heart attack less than a year after Bradley was killed. My mother died three months ago from a major stroke."

He shook his head. She was all alone. A very young mother all alone and responsible for five tiny lives.

"What about Bradley's parents?" he asked.

"They don't acknowledge me or the girls. They were so angry with Bradley from the moment he told them about Heather and the plans we'd made. They immediately disowned him. I think they thought he would cave and do what they wanted him to do, which was to give the baby up for adoption and go on with his life, but he called their bluff and they had to live with it. I've tried to reach out to them, but they say if it wasn't for me, Bradley would never have joined the service and would still be alive." She wiped at her eyes. "And they're right of course."

He touched her shoulder. "You can't believe that."

"I can, because it's absolutely true."

"Elizabeth, bad things happen. If your pregnancy didn't bring it on then something else would. There are a million paths we take in this life, who is to say they don't all lead toward the same outcome. One thing I know for sure; Bradley must have loved you a great deal. You

didn't force him to make the choices he made. Just from what you've told me, he strikes me as a strong man who made his own choices. You can't blame yourself for anything he did."

She sat quietly thinking about his words and finally, she looked up at him and nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." When she didn't say anything else he figured he'd better head back to his room. Besides, his mind was wandering to places it shouldn't be. "Well, I'd better try to get some sleep. My tormentor is due in my room at six-thirty in the AM."

She smiled. "Maybe I'll let you sleep late."

"That would be great," he said as he struggled to stand and get the crutches up under him.

Lizzy stood beside him. Her mouth dropped open as she looked up at him.

"What?" he asked.

"I've only seen you on your feet a few times and I guess I wasn't paying attention. I didn't realize you were so– big. You're at least as big as Bradley. Maybe even taller."

His eyes darkened. She looked so very petite standing next to him. And young. And vulnerable. So he really shouldn't do what he'd been thinking about doing the whole time they'd been talking, which was figuring out a way to kiss her again.

"Come on," she said. "I'll walk you to your room."

He accepted that he was a weak man. "How about I walk you to yours?" he replied.

Sighing, she gave in. "Fine," she said, accepting the fact that he just wouldn't let her take care of him.

They walked the few feet to her bedroom door and she turned. "Well, this is it."

He couldn't take his eyes off her mouth. He swallowed. "Elizabeth," he said, his voice low and husky.

"Yes?"

"The other night, when I had that dream, and I kissed you, did it frighten you?"

Embarrassed, she looked down. "No. Surprised me maybe, but it didn't frighten me." She raised her head. "Why?"

"Because, I'd like to do it again, now that I'm awake, but not if it would frighten you."

"You want to kiss me?"

"Very much."

"I'm not sure that it would be appropriate."

"Why? Because the children are nearby?"

"Because you're my patient."

He smiled. "Your patient is the least of what I am. I'm also a man, and you are a beautiful woman. I can't stop thinking about it. All I'm asking for is just one kiss. Just one. Just to get it off my mind."

"It's been on your mind?"

"Yes. Too damn much. Uh, sorry. I mean, too much."

Her face colored. "Actually, I guess it's been on my mind too."

He shook his head. She was just too sweet. Too open and honest– and he was about to take advantage of that. "Then what do you say? Say 'no', and I'll back off, no hard feelings. But, sweet Elizabeth, I'm really hoping you'll say 'yes'."

He watched her while she tried to decide. Her breathing had increased. Her chest was rising and falling as if she were running. A row of white teeth bit down on her lower lip. The sight made his blood rush. She glanced at his mouth and finally she looked into his eyes.

"Yes."

Relief washed over him. Before she could change her mind, he moved fast, angling closer, then tucking the crutches firmly under his arms so he could use both his hands. Cradling her face in his palms like he did in the dream, he raised her face and lowered his head. First he only gently touched his lips to hers, then, as she responded, he kissed her firmly. He let a soft groan slip out.

Lizzy felt hot. The heat started in her chest and moved lower, spreading across her abdomen. The sheer male power of him was overwhelming. One of his hands moved to cradle her head and the other moved down to her waist and pulled her in tighter against him. He groaned and the thought that she could cause that kind of a reaction from a man who was so obviously in control of everything, made her feel very powerful.

Her hands spread across his chest as he deepened the kiss. He broke the kiss and stepped back breathlessly. Their eyes met. The minute ticked on. He couldn't figure out if she'd known what she was doing or not, but she came close to making him forget there were children sleeping nearby. Finally, he smiled. "Well, damn."

She smiled back. She'd heard him curse many times now, but this time the curse sounded much more like an exclamation.

He touched her nose. "Good night, Elizabeth." Leaning forward he stole another quick kiss, then turned and headed for his room.

"Good night, Michael Moreland," she said softly.

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Keegan sat staring at the delicious dinner his angel had brought to him. Chicken breasts in some sort of cream sauce, new potatoes, asparagus, roll and butter and strawberry shortcake. The meal looked and smelled amazing, but he didn't want to sit in his room and eat all alone. He could hear the soft voices and tiny giggles of the females at the opposite end of the house. It'd been four weeks since the accident. Three spent in this house with the angel of his dreams.

The kiss Elizabeth had offered him so easily a week ago hadn't done what it was supposed to do, which was get her off his mind. He wanted her. Wanted her more than he'd ever wanted anyone or anything. He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

He also wanted to ease her burden. To comfort her. To do something positive for her during the time he was here. He wanted to make her laugh. He wanted to get to know her and her little girls too. He was usually a man who went after what he wanted, so there would be no exception now.

Setting the tray to the side, he rose, grabbed his crutches and made his way toward the back of the house. The moment he entered the kitchen the voices stopped. Six pairs of eyes peered up at him. Lizzy rose immediately.

"Mike, are you okay? Do you need anything? Was something wrong with your dinner?"

Smiling, he nodded at the group. "My dinner is great. I was hoping you would let me eat in here with you and the girls. I needed some company. I mean, if you don't mind."

Lizzy's mouth dropped open. "Oh! Oh, well, of course we don't mind." She rose to grab an extra chair sitting by the window and placed it at the end of the table.

"Mommy, you're giving him the timeout chair," Heather said, a big smile taking over her tiny features.

"Uh oh, the timeout chair?" Keegan said with a smile. "I guess I've been bad."

He sat while Lizzy retrieved his dinner from his room. She placed the contents of the tray onto the table in front of him then resumed her place at the other side of the table.

"We were just about to say the blessing," Lizzy said.

He watched as they reached out to hold each other's hands and Heather extended her small hand to him. Smiling, he took her hand in

his and then extended his other hand to the one on the other side, but he couldn't remember which flower she was. They bowed their heads and he followed suit.

"It's your turn, Violet," Lizzy said softly.

"I don't wanna," the child holding Keegan's hand answered.

Lizzy looked at her, realizing she suddenly felt shy. "That's okay, I'll say it tonight, but you have to say it tomorrow, okay?"

"Okay, Mommy," the child whispered.

They bowed their heads again.

"Father," Lizzy began. "We thank you for our food and ask your blessing upon it that it may nourish us and strengthen us. In Jesus' name, amen."

"You didn't say it all," Rose complained loudly.

"What do you mean?" Lizzy asked.

"Every night we been askin' God to please bless Mr. Mike and help him to get better. How come you didn't say it this time?"

Lizzy glanced over at Mike, her face pink.

He smiled at her. "Well now, that sure is nice that you have been praying for me. I need all the prayers I can get."

"How come?" Heather asked.

He chuckled. "I guess because sometimes I'm a bad boy."

"Mommy, finish the prayer," Rose insisted.

They all bowed their heads again while Lizzy quickly asked God to heal Mike.

Keegan raised his head and glanced around at the girls who hadn't taken their eyes off him.

"Well then, hello ladies," he said, smiling at them.

"Hi," they all answered shyly. Everyone except Lily.

He took a bite of his chicken and looked back up, glancing at Lizzy and winking at her. She smiled at him. He watched as she scooped up a forkful of macaroni and cheese and placed it in her mouth. His eyes narrowed as he realized something. "How come I have a different menu than the rest of you?" he asked.

"Girls, eat your dinner," Lizzy ordered before she answered him. "We're pinching pennies. I can't afford to cook fancy meals every night for me and the girls."

"Yet you cook them for me?"

"Your brother is paying me a lot of money to make sure you're properly being taken care of."

He placed his fork beside his plate. "So, you're telling me that you

cook me expensive meals while you and the girls eat boxed macaroni and cheese and hot dogs?"

She shrugged. "We don't mind. We're used to it."

"Well *I* mind." His tone was quiet, but he could feel the anger simmering and he was pretty sure she was picking up on it.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"You will not spend extra money on my meals."

Her chin lifted, her eyebrows arched. "Well, Mike, you really have no control over what I prepare you to eat."

He smiled. How could he not? "Do you know you have a rebellious streak?"

"I most certainly do not."

He grinned, and then schooled his features. "Nevertheless, I'm telling you right now, Elizabeth, don't buy me special food. Feed me the same thing you feed your family."

"But..."

"But nothing. End of discussion."

"Fine."

He smiled. "Fine."

He began cutting his chicken into small pieces and distributing it to each plate. When he offered some to her, she refused. Shrugging, he did the same with his potatoes. They each refused the asparagus, but he told them if they each ate one bite of asparagus then they would all get to share in the strawberry shortcake. After much deliberation, they agreed. Then he stole bites of macaroni and hotdogs off the girls' plates, making them giggle.

Lizzy watched Mike as he interacted with her girls. They took to him immediately, she thought. She couldn't believe he'd gotten them to try a bite of asparagus, and now he was engaging them in conversation. The thought suddenly dawned on her.

"Do you have children, Mike?"

He glanced up at her, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "No, but I do have nieces and nephews. My sister's kids."

"Oh. You never mentioned a sister."

"I have two," he said, hoping Nigel hadn't said differently. "They're a blast."

"Your sisters?"

"My nieces and nephews."

When she didn't ask any more questions, they resumed eating.

"Is you getting better?" a tiny voice asked.

Surprised, Lizzy glanced up at Lily, then over to Mike. He was smiling down at her little girl with such tenderness, it took Lizzy's breath away.

"I'm getting a lot better," he said softly. "I think it's because I have so many angels all around me."

"You have angels around you?" Violet asked, her eyes wide.

He laughed. "I was talking about all of you."

"We're not angels, we're little imps," Rose said with a giggle.

Lizzy laughed. Her eyes met Mike's and she couldn't look away.

"I hope you don't get better."

Keegan's eyebrows rose as he glanced at the one who'd made the comment, Heather, the eldest. "Is that so?" he asked, smiling at her.

Her chin raised defiantly, so much like her mother it made his smile widen.

"Yes," she said firmly, "and I'm glad you got hurt and had to go to the hospital."

He nodded. "I see."

"Young lady, that is not a very nice thing to say," Lizzy scolded.

"But it's the truth. And you said always tell the truth."

Lizzy drew in a breath, but Keegan caught her eye and shook his head, letting her know he'd handle it.

"Your mommy's right, Heather. You should always tell the truth," he said, the guilt of the giant lie he was weaving all around them edging into his brain. "So, tell me, why are you glad I was hurt?"

"Because, when you got hurt Mommy got to come home from work and stay with us, and if you get better then Mommy will have to leave us again and go back to work at the hospital and I don't want Mommy to work at the hospital," she said adamantly, tears forming in her big, blue eyes.

"Why don't you want your mom to work at the hospital? She helps people, and she's the very best nurse I've ever seen." He made a point to avoid looking at Lizzy.

"I know she's a good nurse," Heather said, her chin starting to quiver. "But, Daddy went away to the Army, and he said he was coming back and he didn't come. I don't remember him too much, but that's why I don't have a daddy and all the other kids at school do. And he got killed but he didn't mean to. And Grandpa got sick and went away, and he didn't mean to. And then Nana got sick and went to the hospital so they could fix her but they couldn't and she went away too, to the same place as Grandpa and Daddy. She didn't mean to, but

sometimes when people get hurt or sick they have to go away even if they don't want to leave us."

Keegan watched as the child poured out her heart. Tears now ran down both her cheeks. He couldn't stand it. "Come here, sweetie," he said softly.

Lizzy was reminded of those same words he'd said to her the other night when he'd caught her at a vulnerable time. To her surprise, Heather scooted her chair back and ran to him. He scooped her up and held her in his lap as she buried her face against his chest and cried. He held her tight, stroking her back. "There now," he said.

Looking at Lizzy for guidance, he realized she would be no help. She looked close to tears herself. He understood the child's need to talk about her feelings and so decided to pursue it further.

"So, your daddy, and grandparents all went away, huh, sweetie?"

She looked up, sniffling. "Yes," Heather whispered. "And when Mommy goes to the hospital I get scared that she won't be able to come back. Maybe something will happen to her and then who will take care of us?" She threw herself against his chest again.

He looked up at the sound of several more sniffles. Suddenly the whole table was sobbing over the projected loss of their mother.

"Babies," Lizzy said softly. "Mommy isn't going anywhere. I won't leave you. I promise."

When the crying continued Keegan knew he had to do something.

"Okay, everybody stop," he said loudly and firmly enough to get their attention. "Now, everyone listen up. Here's the way it is. Your mom is not leaving you because as long as I'm here she won't have to go back to the hospital to work. Right now, she gets to stay home and take care of you and me. Lucky her."

"But what about when you get well?"

"It's gonna be a long time before I'm well enough to leave here and when I am, your mom is gonna have someone else from the hospital come here for her to take care of."

"I don't want her to have someone else. I want her to have you."

His glance at Lizzy had him realizing she was actually enjoying his attempts at having a logical, rational conversation with her girls.

"Well, she's gonna have me for a long time so let's just think about that for now." He jiggled the little girl in his lap. "So, right now, if you want me to stick around, you have to do something for me."

Her big blue eyes blinked up at him. "What?" she asked, giving a big sniff.

"Um, first things first," he said as he picked up his napkin and wiped her face then held the napkin to her nose. "Blow," he commanded. Once she did, he folded the napkin and smiled down at her. "Now, here's what you have to do; you have to smile."

She wrinkled up her nose. "What if I don't feel like smiling?"

"You have to do it anyway, even if you don't feel like it. Besides, you probably don't know that if you smile even when you don't feel like it, it makes you feel happier."

Heather frowned. "I don't believe that."

"Try it."

"No."

He tickled her. "Come on, I know you've got a smile in there somewhere. Oh, I see it coming, here it comes."

She burst into laughter.

"Heather, come sit down now and let Mr. Moreland eat."

The tiny girl frowned, turned and kissed his cheek, then jumped down off his lap.

Keegan sat stunned, unable to make a sound. He used the time to finish eating his food.

Once dinner time ended he watched as Lizzy swung into action, getting the children to clear their dishes, then getting them to stay put while she cleared the rest of the table and put the dishes in to soak in hot, soapy water. Next she took the girls into the den which was divided from the kitchen only by a large, curved archway, and settled them down to play "nice" while she went in to finish the dishes.

He watched her move, working at breakneck speed, glancing over her shoulder often to make sure the girls weren't getting into anything that could hurt them. Sitting there at the table, watching her, he realized she didn't think her plight was so bad. She accepted what life offered her and made the very best of it. She worked her butt off. She was up at the break of day, cooking, cleaning, doing laundry, teaching, shopping, paying bills, but doing nothing for her. The children were her life. The problem was as he sat there watching her, he realized he wanted to change all that.

He'd thought maybe he'd just been taken with her beauty and sweetness, or maybe had a 'nurse fixation' kind of thing going. He'd thought maybe he could just talk her into having a few healthy rounds of hot, steamy sex and he'd be able to walk out of her life when the time came. Yet now, after spending a little time with her, he was thinking it's not gonna be like that. He didn't want it to be like that.

She deserved much more than that and the thought of anyone else thinking about her in that way made him angry.

His attention was grabbed by one of the girls. He had no idea which one.

"Will you come tell us a story?" Rose asked, tugging on his hand.

"A story? I'm not very..." He caught himself. He was supposed to be a writer so he couldn't very well say that he wasn't good at telling stories. Frantically searching his mind for some tale he could use, he grabbed his crutches and made his way slowly into the den.

"Yaaay," the girls cried when Rose announced that he was there to tell a story.

Resolved to his plight, he sat in the center of the sofa as the girls gathered around.

Swallowing hard, he drew a breath and began. "Um, so, once upon a time, there were– five little angels." His lips pressed together as he searched for the next words. His eyes lit up as a storyline popped into his head. "Now, these angels weren't just your normal, run-of-the-mill angels. They were the most beautiful angels that ever existed. They had beautiful blond hair and bright, blue eyes and each had the name of a flower because they were as beautiful as any flower could ever hope to be."

The girls giggled.

"He's talking about us," Heather whispered.

"I know that," Rose said indignantly.

"Shh," he said. "Now, one day the little angels decided they were gonna do something very nice for someone, because that's what angels do, you know, they do nice things for people. They decided they would do something nice for their very own mother."

Lizzy stood in the doorway, watching Mike tell the absurd story. He said the angels couldn't decide what they could do for their mother and he started going through a bunch of silly things, like painting her door purple, or filling her tub with flowers. The girls were mesmerized and Lizzy couldn't blame them because she was too.

He was a handsome man, with his dark hair that curled onto his forehead, his strong jaw and that darn dimple. Even though he came across as bossy and grumpy which she attributed to the Marine, she could see now that he was kind, and gentle. Her mind strayed to the kiss. The one that wasn't a dream. He'd been gentle, yet he'd left her without a will of her own. She knew she shouldn't compare, but she couldn't help it. The kisses with Bradley had been warm and sweet and

full of love, but they had never made her feel like she was losing control, like she was sinking into oblivion.

He looked up at her as the story came to an end. She heard him say the angels all lived happily ever after. Smiling, she mouthed a thank you. He mouthed 'you're welcome' back to her.

"Okay, babies," Lizzy said sweetly as she entered the room. "It's bath time. Everyone tell Mr. Moreland good night."

"Aww," came the expected protest.

"Will you tell us a story tomorrow too?" one asked.

"Sure, if your mom doesn't mind."

"Can he, Mommy?" she asked.

"Of course, as long as he doesn't feel too tired."

"Okay, then it's a date. Tomorrow night. Good night, ladies."

He rose and started out of the room, then stopped when he stood next to Lizzy. He looked down at her mouth, then into her eyes. For once, she wasn't smiling. Chewing on her lips, she looked deep into his eyes. "Yeah," he whispered. "I feel the same way."

Her eyes opened wide in surprise that he'd read her thoughts so easily. Her face turned pink.

He grinned. "Good night, Elizabeth."

Keegan retired to his room, stripped down to his boxers, snatched up his laptop and sat down in the rocker, deciding that sending in a status report would take his mind off of Elizabeth Anderson. Thirty minutes later, just as he finished, there was frantic screaming and Heather burst through his door.

"What's wrong, Heather?" he asked already standing and reaching for his gun in the bag under the bed.

"Hurry, hurry," she cried. "Mommy fell and she's not moving."

Cursing his inability to move quickly, he grabbed his crutches.

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Philippians 4:8

"Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things."

Chapter Three

Keegan raced after Heather, his crutches clicking furiously as he followed Heather to the bathroom that was situated two rooms down from his bedroom, between the two rooms that belonged to the girls. He came to a halt at the door, taking in the situation with a glance.

The two littlest were still in the bathtub covered with bubbles, the water drained. The two four-year-olds were standing next to their mother, crying. The floor was under water. Lizzy lay on her back on the floor in front of the toilet and next to the bathtub, moaning. Her eyes were closed and the water near her head was dyed red with her blood. "Well, dear God," he muttered.

Tossing the crutches aside, he dropped down beside her, shoving his casted leg out straight in the space between the toilet and the tub. He grabbed Lizzy and pulled her across his lap. She was breathing. Sighing in relief, he started issuing orders. Reaching behind him, he grabbed a girl out of the bath and handed her toward Heather. "Sit her down over there in that room," he said, pointing to the open door that led to Heather's room.

Heather did as ordered. He handed her the second girl and she complied again. He then ordered the older twins to sit with their sisters. Convinced the girls were safe for a minute, he put his attention on Lizzy, examining her head. He surmised she slipped on the wet floor and hit her head on the toilet. He reached up, grabbed a towel and held it to her head, stanching the flow of blood.

"Come on, talk to me," he muttered, pushing her head to the side and spreading her hair to get a look at the wound. Finding the cut itself to be relatively small, he ran his fingers over the bump. It was a good one, as bumps go. He laid her head on his thigh and opened her eyelids, checking to see if her pupils were dilated. Thankfully, she stirred. "Come on, come on back, sweetheart," he said, gently caressing her cheek.

Lizzy moaned again and opened her eyes. "What happened?" she asked, raising her hand to her head.

Keegan looked up toward Heather. "I'm guessing you slipped on the wet floor and hit your head?"

Heather nodded. Lizzy tried to rise up but Keegan had her held tight. He squeezed her against him and lowered his forehead to her head. "Are you okay? How do you feel?"

"I don't know, you're smothering me."

He let her go. "Sorry. You scared the crap out of us."

All the girls' hands flew to their mouths, in shock at his language.

"I think I'm fine," Lizzy said, pushing to her feet.

"Not dizzy?" Keegan asked, looking up at her.

Glancing in the mirror, she tried to see the bump on her head before she shook her head. "No, I think I'm fine."

"I don't know about that. You were out cold. You really need to get that head checked out, Elizabeth."

She drew a deep breath. "Well, I seem to be okay now. How did you know to come help?"

"Heather came to get me, poor little girl. She was terrified. I got in here and you were lying on the floor. The little ones were still in the tub. This could've been very bad."

She nodded. "Thank you for helping." She looked down at the floor between his legs. "Is that my blood?"

"Yes. It's a small cut, but you may need a stitch or two."

She frowned. "I'm not taking all these babies out to sit in an emergency room all night for a stitch or two. Let me get the girls to bed and maybe, if you don't mind, you could disinfect it and get a butterfly bandage on it."

"Of course I don't mind, but I don't know if you should be doing anything. Sit down and I'll get the girls to bed."

"Mr. Moreland. Mike, I'm fine. Really. I feel fine." She looked him over. "Let me help you up."

He shook his head. "It'd be easier if you let me do it by myself. I just need you to get out of the way."

She stepped back into the room where four girls were sitting side by side. They watched him scoot himself up like an inchworm until he was finally standing.

"Oh, dear," Lizzy complained. "I'm sure there's water all down inside your cast."

Keegan looked himself over, grimaced a little. This did not bode well. He sighed, hopped out of the bathroom and scooped up his crutches. "We'll look at it in the morning. Right now, let me help you get the girls settled down. They were pretty upset. Heather was such a trooper."

"Where is Heather?" Lizzy asked.

Rose pointed behind her. Lizzy and Keegan looked in the room to find Heather curled up in the corner of her bed, her back against the headboard, her forehead leaning against her drawn up knees.

"Baby," Lizzy said as she approached her. "Are you okay?"

Heather didn't answer. Turning her head away, she moved lower in the bed.

Keegan sighed. It was gonna be a long night. "Elizabeth, why don't you go ahead and get the little ones into bed and I'll keep Heather company until you can speak with her?"

Lizzy gently reached out and ran a hand over Heather's hair. "Would that be okay, sweetie?"

Heather shrank from her mother's touch.

Lizzy drew her hand back as if she'd been stung. Her eyes filled with tears. "Okay, honey. I'll be right back," she said, her voice choked with emotion.

She turned to leave. Keegan placed a hand on her shoulder as she passed him. "It'll be okay. She's just frightened."

Unconvinced, Lizzy nodded and left to dress the little ones.

Heather peered up at Keegan as he came to sit on her bed.

He was silent at first, waiting to see if he had her attention. Glancing around the room, he let out a heavy sigh. "Whew, that was scary," he said as if he were talking to himself. "I was so scared I thought for a minute there I was gonna throw up."

"You were?" a tiny voice asked.

He looked down at her. "Oh, sure. Seeing someone I care about get hurt, man, that's really scary, don't you think?"

Heather nodded.

"You know what's kinda weird?" Keegan said.

"What?"

"It's like, even though I care about them, if they get hurt, it kinda makes me mad at them too. That's really weird, huh?"

Heather scooted closer to him. "Yeah– but why do you get mad at them?"

"Well, it doesn't make any sense, but it's like I wanna say, 'why did you let yourself get hurt so that now I have to worry?' I mean, I know your mom didn't mean to slip on the wet floor, but darn it, she should've been more careful, ya know?"

"She couldn't help it. Rose and Violet were being bad and splashed all the water out of the tub and threw out all the toys and the

soap. Mommy said enough was enough and set them out of the tub and told them to dry off. They were running all around her and she said she was gonna spank some bare bottoms and started after them and then her foot slipped on the soap."

"Oh, I see. So it really wasn't your mom's fault at all, was it?"

Heather shook her head.

Keegan looked thoughtful. "It was Rose and Violet's fault. I should be mad at them."

Heather scrunched up her nose and mouth. "You can't be mad at them cuz they're just little kids. Kids just do stuff like that sometimes. They can't help it."

"Hmm," he said, rubbing his chin. "Then who can I blame?"

Heather thought hard. Finally she looked up. "I guess you can't blame anyone."

"Oh, so I guess that means that sometimes things happen and it's no one's fault, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"You know what?" Keegan asked.

"What?"

"I guess it's a good thing when this happened that you were so smart to come and get me."

Heather nodded.

"If I hadn't been here, what would you have done?"

"Um, I would call nine-one-one, I guess."

"That's right, and then what? What would you do while you're waiting for the ambulance to get here?"

She sighed and shrugged. "I guess I would help the girls get outta the tub so they don't drown."

"Good thinking. Your mom sure is lucky to have such a grown-up little girl like you to help her."

"Yeah, but I'm glad you're here," she said, and then crawled over to get closer to him.

He lifted her onto his lap. "I'm glad to be here," he said softly and was surprised to realize he truly meant it.

"Please don't ever leave," Heather said softly.

Oh, man, now what could he say? He sighed. "Well, sweetie, let's not worry about that right now," he finally said. "I'm not going anywhere any time soon. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, laying her head against his bare chest.

Lizzy came back into the room. Heather looked up and reached for

her. Lizzy flew to the bed and took her daughter in her arms. "There now, baby. Everything is gonna be okay."

Keegan stood. "I'll be out here if you need me," he said and quickly left the room.

He used the time to grab towels to mop up the water and blood in the bathroom. He then picked up the soap and toys. He rinsed the tub of soap bubbles, wiped down the counters and made a neat pile of the wet towels. He thought about tossing the towels in the washer, but thought Lizzy would probably have others to go along with them so he merely scooped them up, tucked them between his side and his crutch, carried them into the kitchen and placed them on top of the washing machine lid.

He slumped down at the kitchen table as his mind went over what had happened. If he hadn't been here, well, who knows. When he'd first arrived here, he was adamant that he had to leave ASAP. Now, he had a strong urge to stay as long as possible. Lizzy needed him, well, she needed someone. He sat there thinking about Lizzy, about the girls, about his assignment, about Celados and Hartman. If Keegan were to leave now and Celados tracked him here, they wouldn't believe that Lizzy didn't know his whereabouts. They'd stop at nothing to get the information out of her. The thought of what they'd do to her sickened him. Shaking his head he tried to clear it of the terrible images.

He'd been sitting there almost a half hour and started to go check on Lizzy when she joined him, offering a weary smile.

"They're asleep."

He nodded. "Good."

She placed some peroxide, cotton balls and bandages on the table. "Thanks for cleaning up the mess, but you shouldn't have."

He lifted his hands. "Really, it was no problem. You scared me enough that I had adrenaline flowing through me pretty good. Had to release the energy somehow. You feeling okay? You took quite a hit."

She nodded, touching her sore head. "I have a little headache, but I'll be okay. You sure you don't mind playing nurse?"

He grinned. "Not at all. Let me just go find the bedpan."

"Very funny." Lizzy pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and sat. He stood and moved close, frowning. "Let me get you to sit up on the table. I'll be able to see the cut better that way," he said as he leaned the crutches against the counter.

Nodding, she scooted up to sit on the table.

He shuffled closer, straddling her right leg so he could get close to

the right side of her head. Why hadn't he bothered to go back to his room and pull on some clothes?

While he worked on her head, Lizzy stared at Mike's muscular chest, fascinated by the wiry dark hair and the washboard abs. It was so very tempting to rest her head against him, to breathe in his scent. She tried to push the thoughts from her mind.

Dabbing the cut with a cotton ball soaked with peroxide, Keegan tried to keep his thoughts on making sure the cut was clean. He pushed Lizzy's head down to get a better view.

"You've got quite a bump. It's a pretty big goose egg, though the cut itself is pretty small." He used more cotton to dry the wound then took a butterfly bandage and placed it on the cut. "Well, the bandage is sticking to your hair," he said, frowning.

She shrugged. "That's okay. I might lose a few strands, but it will be better than having to shave off an entire patch."

"So," he said, pulling strands of her hair back down over the cut. "I think we're done." He smiled into her eyes.

She smiled back. "Thank you."

Sighing, he ran his hand over her cheek. "You're welcome. You scared me."

"I'm sorry. I should've been more careful. I mean, what if you hadn't been here?"

He smiled. "Heather and I have already had this discussion. She told me she would've called 911 and gotten the girls out of the tub. She's a smart kid."

"She is. She's my worrier. You're so good with her, Mike. How can I ever thank you enough for being so kind and gentle with her?"

How can she thank him? He knew exactly how, and he didn't feel like fighting the urge or doing the honorable thing. "Like this," he muttered as he pressed his lips to hers.

His hand lifted her face, his thumb pressed on her chin. She gave a soft moan, sending heat straight to his gut.

Lizzy almost swooned with the incredible fire Mike was always able to create within her. The feel of his calloused hands on her face, the scrape of his day-old beard across her skin, the taste of him, the power of his body as he leaned over her. He possessed her. Consumed her. His mouth on hers was gentle yet persistent. He would take what he wanted and she would give.

Lifting away from her slightly, he took her face in both his hands and looked into her eyes. "I should stop, I know that, but I don't want

to." He kissed her again. Soft moans floated up between them. The kiss deepened. She was so beautiful, so young, so innocent. Well, darn. Why did he have to go thinking along those lines? Yet it was too late. The thought of her youth and innocence brought him to his senses. Groaning, he pulled away, his chest heaving. "Forgive me."

When she winced, he looked into her eyes. He wanted her. He needed her. He was almost seven years her senior, which wasn't that much, yet in experience, it was more like twenty years. She seemed so very innocent and he suddenly felt like a fiend for taking advantage of her. He could have her. He knew that. Right here, right now.

She was tired and vulnerable and lonely. How he wanted her, yet he knew it wasn't right. Besides, the way she gets pregnant so easily, that would be a fine mess, wouldn't it? Sighing, he kissed her softly one more time, rose and stepped away.

Lizzy felt him mentally separate himself before he ever lifted his body away from hers. Immediately she felt cold and alone. "No," she said softly, reaching for him. "Don't stop."

"Lord knows I don't want to, but I have to, sweetheart, or you'll end up pregnant. Besides, if I ever do make love to you, this isn't how I want it to be. Not here, on your kitchen table. I want lots of time to do all the things with you I've ever imagined."

She looked into his dark eyes. "You've imagined being with me?"

"Hell, yes," he said gruffly. "Sorry. I mean, yes, I've imagined being with you."

"Me too," she admitted.

He smiled. "Oh, Elizabeth, you're not supposed to tell me that."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes it too easy for me."

"Sorry. You're right, I shouldn't be thinking that way. In Matthew it says, 'That whosoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.' I think that goes for a woman looking at a man too."

He shook his head. "You are destroying me. I, uh, guess I'd better get some sleep," he said, all the while thinking that probably wasn't gonna happen any time soon.

Smiling at him, she nodded. "Good night, Michael."

He leaned forward and kissed her mouth lightly. "Good night, sweet Elizabeth."

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He'd been able to put off going back to the doctor for almost

another week; however, today was the day. They'd dropped the girls at Mrs. Hurley's house and spent the morning at one doctor checking out the internal injuries, and all afternoon at the orthopedist's office checking out the leg.

X-rays showed the bones were healing well. The cast had started to deteriorate due to the water damage and so was removed and replaced. Keegan reasoned with the doctor, and talked her into putting him in a removable walking boot cast even though he hadn't quite made it to the six week mark yet. He had to promise he would continue to use his crutches and wouldn't actually put any weight on it for at least another week.

The doctor was reluctant, but she was also female. Keegan poured on the charm, smiling, cajoling. Bemused, Lizzy couldn't take her eyes off him as his eyes twinkled up at the doctor and his dimple deepened. She wasn't a bit surprised when the doctor acquiesced. She understood fully the power he had over women and was only a little put off by the fact that he knew he had that power and today was using it shamelessly. The doctor barely looked at Lizzy when she was given instructions to call the physical therapist and make an appointment to begin therapy in two weeks.

As they drove away from the orthopedist's office, Keegan was extremely pleased, with both himself and his prognosis. He was on the mend and certainly well enough to take care of business. Now that he would be more mobile, albeit a bit slow in a boot cast, it was time to move, he thought, his promise to the doctor completely forgotten.

His mind flashed to what needed to be done. He needed to retrieve the evidence and in order to do that he had to have help. Help he could trust. Keegan asked Elizabeth to stop at a drugstore and pick up a couple of cheap cell phones. He was ready to make an important call and since he'd immediately found the bug in the phone Nigel had provided, so, he used that one only to check in with his boss. Lizzy questioned why he needed the new phones since she'd seen him on his cell phone talking with Nigel. She'd offer him use of her house phone if he'd like. He gave her some story about calling his publisher in a way he couldn't be traced. She bought it.

They gathered the girls from Mrs. Hurley and stopped to pick up some fast food, which he insisted on paying for since it was his idea in the first place. He'd said it was to celebrate graduating from the big cast to a smaller, removable cast.

They sat in the den together munching on cheeseburgers and fries

and chicken nuggets with the girls. Afterward, he told his usual outlandish story and then the girls were given markers to draw on his new boot as they had done previously to his cast. Lizzy finally called it a night and went to drag the little rugrats into bed. Keegan retired to his room, looking forward to the call he was about to make.

The call would be to a good friend and fellow Marine who'd been in special ops with Keegan. John Appel had relocated from California to Georgia with his wife a few years ago. They lived in and ran a country inn down past Macon in the small country town of Pine Forest. John, the spiritual one, as all his Marine buddies thought of him, helped run the inn and taught martial arts at the inn and had opened several martial arts studios in the middle Georgia area. He was a former student of the renowned martial arts grandmaster, Eric Kino. John trained with him as a teenager before he'd ever joined the Marines. Smiling, Keegan dialed the number. John answered on the first ring.

"This is John," he said quietly, apprehension in his voice. Keegan knew that would be because of the unknown number. He would suspect trouble right away. And he'd be right.

"John, this is Keegan."

There were several seconds of silence.

"I heard you were dead," John said slowly.

"Yeah, well, you know what Mark Twain said."

John thought. "You mean, 'the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated?'"

"Yep, that's the one."

"Well, Keeg, I'm happy to know you're alive, but that's quite a mix-up, wouldn't you say? I mean, I went to your funeral."

Keegan swallowed. "Mom and Dad take it pretty hard?"

"Very hard," he paused only briefly. "Sooo— You're in trouble, aren't you Keeg?"

"Yeah, I am. Big trouble."

"Well, you're not alone."

"Appreciate it. That's why I called you, besides the fact that you're here in Georgia."

"You're in Georgia?"

"Yes. Tyler Springs, Georgia."

"Where is that?"

"An hour or so north of Atlanta, in the foothills."

"Tell me your troubles, man," John said.

"Don't want to go into detail on the phone, but I'll tell you the

basics. You know I was working deep cover. I get made. It's okay, 'cause I'm getting ready to blow the joint anyway, but I have to fight my way out. Killed two bad guys. I got the stuff though. Everything I need to put everyone away."

"Drugs?"

"Oh how I wish. That would be so much easier. It's babies. They're selling freakin' babies. Some of the first kids sold by these people, the ones that were selected to live, are now adults. Can you imagine, John, grown adults, and they don't even know who they really are? And those are the lucky ones who weren't tortured or trafficked. And we now know where they are and we can try to make it right. But lately, though, these sickos are into a certain type of kid and I'll leave the rest of that story until you get here."

"I never said I was coming."

"Okay. Are you coming?"

John chuckled. "Of course. So, who made you?"

"Well, that's part of the problem, John. I don't know. I can't seem to pinpoint it."

"Could it be one of your own?"

"Hate to say it, but that's what it seems."

"That's a totally bad scene," John muttered.

"Yeah totally, and I'm running a little paranoid, if you know what I mean."

"It would be stupid to be otherwise."

"Okay, so listen, I know you got a wife and kid and all, so I just need you to do something small for me. Small, but important. Then I need a name of someone you trust, that I can trust who can help me. Someone not married with kids."

"This really is a big deal, huh?"

"Yeah, big enough that Keegan Tanner had to die to protect my family. Nevertheless, they're not gonna buy that forever."

John nodded. "There were agents at your funeral and some others, I'm gonna venture now and say the others were the bad guys?"

"I'd venture to say you're right."

"Did you really have an accident?"

"That part is real enough. It was a close call, but I made it."

"Okay, tell me what you need, but first here's who you need to contact. Jason Lee with Ameritech Security."

"Ah yes, the FBI's competition."

John chuckled. "He's the best. Grandmaster Kino trained him and

then he got into the consulting business. Next thing you know he has his own security company. Then suddenly it's more than that. I don't have to tell you the reputation of his company. They're worldwide now. I'll contact him and tell him to expect your call. He'll send you what you need. When do you want me to arrive?"

"ASAP," Keegan replied. "We'll talk over the plan once you're here. These people, John, they're ruthless, and they're terrorists and they're very, very dangerous."

"Is CIA involved?"

"If they are, they haven't made themselves known yet. If I thought I could trust someone in the CIA I'd bring them in. These people are big time, John. You might want to think twice about helping me."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?"

"Okay, I thought twice. I'm still coming. We'll get 'em, Keeg. Hang tight."

"I'll be in touch with what to bring. You can reach me at this number. By the way, my name is Michael Moreland, and you my friend, you, are my cousin."

Keegan pressed the button to end the call and drew a deep breath. It was the first one he'd been able to take in five weeks. Finally, he would be able to find the buried evidence, get it safely to a field office, and catch the snitch, but even more important, he had to stop what would be going down in about five weeks or die trying. If all goes well, he intended to head right back here and spend some real time with Lizzy and her girls. If all goes well.

The house was quiet except for the sound of the washer and dryer. Keegan walked around checking doors and windows, pulling shades, but pulled up short when he entered the den to find Lizzy asleep on the sofa, an afghan pulled over her. He moved forward and touched her shoulder. She didn't even flinch.

"Elizabeth," he said softly.

She looked up, disoriented. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong is you're tired and you need to go to bed."

She shook her head. "I have to change out the washer and dryer one more time, and fold the last load, then I'll go to bed."

"You work too hard," he said quietly.

"It has to be done," she said as she stretched her arms over her head, then rubbed a sore spot on her neck.

"Move over," he said, easing in behind her. "At least let me

massage your neck."

He sat behind her, his boot leg stretched out along the back of the couch and his other leg on the floor. She sat in between his thighs. The moment he placed his strong hands on her shoulders and began to rub, she began to purr.

"Lord, that feels so good," she murmured.

"Yes it does," he said softly.

She giggled.

"Why are you laughing? It does feel good."

"I'm the one getting the massage."

"I'm the one getting to touch you."

"Oh, please."

"Don't you realize how alluring you are? How silky your skin is? I bet every man you pass wants to throw himself at you."

"Oh, yeah, right. Like some man is gonna want me. Old, tired, with five kids hanging at my knees."

He sighed. "Well, trust me, Elizabeth. Men want you."

"Whatever. Tell me, Mike, what are you gonna do now?" She gasped as he hit a particular tender knot.

"Now?" he asked.

"Look, I know you're well enough to leave. Dr. Duncan said three months, but it's only been half that time and you're about to be off your crutches by next week. You've healed fast. It's actually amazing considering what you looked like when they first brought you up to the floor. God hears and answers prayers. He is amazing."

Keegan considered that for a few minutes.

"So, what now?" Lizzy asked. "Are you going home to Denver?"

"Well, would you mind if I stuck around until I feel comfortable on two feet?"

The words were out before he could stop them. What was he saying? He's been saying all along that he needed to get out, but he'd realized it was already too late. If they track him here and he's already gone would they still hurt her? And the girls? What would they do to her girls? Would the Anderson women simply disappear? These people are the epitome of evil. If they laid eyes on the gorgeous creatures that inhabit this house, would they turn and walk away from them? He doubted it. No, there was no way he could leave them now. He'd have to stick around and see this thing to the end. There was no way out. And that, he just realized, was Nigel Kort's reason for placing him where he was. Nigel wanted to ensure Keegan's cooperation to the end.

Apparently, his boss had his own doubts as to the loyalty of one Special Agent Tanner.

"Of course I don't mind. It's just that, your brother is paying me an incredible amount of money."

"Believe me, he can afford it."

"Mmm," she purred as his strong hands moved over her shoulders and down her arms. She gave in to the need to lean back against him.

Keegan gave in to the need to wrap his arms around her. He held her, linking his arms around her waist. Her arms rested lightly on his. Leaning forward, he dropped a soft kiss on the top of her head. "This feels good too. Just holding you."

When she didn't answer, he moved his head to the side so that they were cheek to cheek. "Elizabeth?"

She sniffled.

He pulled her up into his lap and turned her sideways so he could look into her face. A tear ran down her cheek. "What's wrong, sweetie? Did I say something that upset you?"

She shook her head. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I'm so emotional lately. Really, I never cry. Almost never."

"So why now?"

"It's just that, well, it's been so long, you know? So long since someone held me. So long since I felt secure and safe. That's how you make me feel when you're around. Secure and safe. It's not fair I know, to tell you that. I'm not gonna cling to you or anything, I promise. I just didn't realize how much I've missed, I mean, how much I've needed, oh, I don't know how to explain what I'm feeling."

"It's okay. I get it." His arms tightened. "Funny thing is, I feel the need to hold you, to be here for you, to protect you, to have you lean on me. I don't usually feel that way about women."

"Really? How do you usually feel about women?"

"You know, it's like, hi, I'm into you, are you into me, good, let's have s– uh, some fun, and then, thanks, that was great and I move on."

"Hmm. And with me it's different? You don't want to have some 'fun'?" she said placing that last word in air quotes.

"No, surprisingly, I don't." He smiled at the frown that suddenly appeared on her sweet face.

"Elizabeth, you know I want you, but I want to make *love* to you, not just have sex. I want to take care with you. I want to talk to you, and get to know you, and hold you just like I'm doing right now."

She sighed as he cuddled her in his arms, brushing a stray hair

from her face, placing a chaste kiss on her forehead.

"Mike?"

"Hmm?"

"I want you to tell me a story, like you do my girls."

"A story, huh?" He wasn't so panicked this time as he was when little Rose had first asked him. Over the past few weeks he'd gotten pretty darn good at it. Especially when he stuck to his angel theme. "Okay," he said, turning her a bit more on his lap so he could see her whole face.

"Once upon a time there was a little angel."

She smiled.

"She had hair so blond and soft it seemed a cloud drifted around her head instead of real hair. Her eyes were as blue as the bluest sky. Her lips were soft and pink like the petals of a rose and her face was shaped like a heart. This little angel was so sweet and good, she worked hard to please others and to make them happy. As she grew into a woman angel, she continued doing all her good works for that's what angels do." He paused and drew a deep breath. She seemed so lost. Like she'd lost what it meant to be not just a mother, but a woman. He wanted to change that.

After a few seconds, Lizzy's eyes left his mouth, where they'd settled and glanced up into his eyes. "Why did you stop?"

He'd stopped as he mulled over the idea that had come to him of just where to take this story. He smiled at her. "Just getting my story straight in my head. Anyway, one day, the angel came upon a horrible, ugly toad. The toad was hurt and the angel couldn't stand to see any creature in pain, so she gently lifted the toad and kissed him. Now, usually a toad changes into a handsome prince, but that's when he's kissed by a princess. This toad was kissed by an angel and suddenly he became a man. Just a plain ordinary man. Still, he was no longer in pain and for that he was extremely grateful.

"The man watched the angel and saw how she did good things for everyone around her. Sometimes she did so much and she got so tired that she could barely hold her head up. The man decided he wanted to do something for the angel because, well, that's how it works. When an angel does something good for someone, then that someone wants to do something good too. That's how angels change the world."

Elizabeth sighed. "You're very good at this."

He chuckled.

"I like that sound."

"What sound?"

"You laughing."

"Okay, well, cool." He didn't know what to say to that. He went on quickly, telling the rest of the story about how the angel changed the man's life and they fell in love and she asked God to make her a real woman so that she could be with the man. He knew it was a naughty story.

When he finished Lizzy smiled. "That was interesting."

"That was about you," he confessed.

She looked up quickly, then gave a soft laugh. "I'm afraid I'm nothing like the woman you just described."

He leaned down to her. "You are the most beautiful, sexy woman I've ever known," he said softly. Not giving her the time to respond, he gathered her close against his chest, his arms coming around her. Holding her there, he pulled the afghan up around her shoulders and rocked her. In seconds she was sound asleep.

✞✞✞

1 Corinthians 7:1

"Now in response to the matters you wrote about: "It is good for a man not to use a woman for sex."

Chapter Four

He wore only a pair of sweats, one leg seam opened to the knee. Sweat poured from his body, his arms and chest muscles burned, but he didn't stop. He had to get back in tune with his body in order to be at his best to protect 'his girls,' as he'd come to think of the Anderson family. Pushups, crunches, stretches. That's all he had to work with right now. He stopped when his phone went off.

"Yeah," Keegan said, breathing hard.

"Keeg, I still get a thrill out of hearing your voice," John said.

"So glad to make that happen for ya."

"You know, it wasn't just your family grieving. I grieved for a friend too. So did Kaleb, and Brayden, and Tristan."

Keegan sighed thinking of his war buddies. All special ops with him, working covert missions— dangerous missions. They were a team. They had each other's backs in Afghanistan and Iraq and they still did. "I suppose I need to get in touch with them."

"Hope I'm not about to piss you off, but I already did. They're available if we need them."

"I should've known you would do that."

"So," John said, effectively changing the subject. "What did my good friend Jason Lee have to say?"

"I talked to him yesterday. I'll tell ya, I understand why he comes so highly recommended. I have to say, though, speaking to him was kinda weird."

"Weird?"

"Yeah, he was like, so friendly it was almost surreal."

John chuckled. "That's that God is love metaphysical thing he's got going. It's like a thing all the Kino students get into."

"I never got that vibe from *you*."

"I was in Iraq when I met you. I was trying to suppress my innate goodness so I could fit in with the rest of you tough guys," John joked. "Anyway, so, what did he have to say?"

"First, I was reluctant to discuss things over the phone, but he rattled off all this technical jargon and assured me he would know if we were being tapped into. Then, he was so quiet while I explained the

situation to him I had to check the phone to make sure I hadn't lost the signal. Once he understood the situation, he drilled me for details. He offered to investigate who blew my cover. Said if I let him take care of that I could concentrate on what I needed to do to complete the mission. He understood completely why I feel I can't leave the Anderson home now, and even agreed that once I'd been here a week there was no leaving them. He had solutions and ideas at the ready. This guy is sharp."

"Yep, I'm telling you, Keegan, his operation is top notch, high tech stuff. He's the best," John said. "He's also expensive as hell, but ya get what ya pay for."

"I'll spend the money. The lives of this family are at stake. Anyway, like I said, I'm amazed at the services he offered, at the lengths he would go. He's gonna listen in on conversations of the organization and is sure he'll have some pertinent information for me soon. I asked him if he needed an inside man in order to set that up and he said it wasn't necessary, so that means he's got the stuff, man. He's also sending a top agent to help me retrieve the evidence."

"That part I know," John said. "His name is Jeff Davis. He's good. He's a sharpshooter. Reminds me a lot of you in that way. He's been with Ameritech five or six years I think. I'm picking him up at the airport tomorrow night and then we're headed to your place."

"I told you I didn't want you involved except for one small relatively nonlethal mission I need you for."

"Do you really think you can make that decision for me?"

"What about Jodi?"

"Jodi would want me to do what I think is right, no matter what, and she and I both believe that a friend in need should be top priority."

"I won't let you put yourself in danger."

"Okay. Whatever. Anyway, I've got everything you asked for. Can't wait to hear the rest of the story. If you need anything else before I arrive tomorrow, you know how to reach me."

"Fine then. I'll see you tomorrow."

"You can count on it."

Keegan tossed his phone on the bed. It wouldn't be long now. Things were coming to a head. The evidence would be turned in. Senator Hartman would be called before a grand jury along with Anthony Celados and Victor Washington for the murders of twenty-nine men, women and children, and for the abductions of more than two hundred babies. Hartman would go down for treason. At least

Keegan hoped he would.

On a lesser note, he'd know who the leak was in his own department and what seemed to have become the most important—Elizabeth and her girls would be safe. He smiled at the thought of her. As he'd come to know her over the last few weeks he'd realized she's much more than just a pretty face. To be so young and have so much responsibility and to handle it so well says much about her character. She doesn't complain about what has to be done. She just does it, and with a smile on her face. She accepts life as it's thrown at her and gives of herself to others without reservation.

She truly is an angel. She's steadfast in her Christian beliefs. She gets the girls all dressed up and leads them to church every Sunday, like a mother goose leading her young. She prays all the time. He knows because there had been several times he's accidentally come upon her on her knees in the den, after everyone is in bed. She quotes scripture. She's even taught him about God. She teaches by example and makes him want to be a better man. She makes him feel like God is real. But how could He be? If He's real then how can He let such bad things happen in this world?

But she doesn't feel that way. She says to trust Him, keep an open mind, God has a different perspective. Keegan thought about the way he thinks about Elizabeth and wondered what God thinks about that. The way she makes him feel, makes him want to make her happy.

What's more, her reaction to his advances blows him away. She's so honest about her feelings, so open to new experiences, even though he recently had a glimpse of some shyness or maybe she was just a little frightened in unfamiliar territory. He shook his head. One day she's telling him she wants him, the next she's shy and timid. Sighing, he tried to clear his mind of her and went back to his workout.

The doorknob turning slowly had Keegan looking up. Elizabeth eased into the room, her eyes big, her smile in place.

"One minute," he said as he finished his count. When he got to fifty he stopped and pushed himself up into a standing position. "Hi," he said.

"Hey."

He waited for her to tell him why she came to his room. When she didn't, he sat down in the rocker and drank from a bottle of water. "Is everything okay, Elizabeth?"

She nodded and moved toward him.

He watched her, noted how she bit on her lower lip. How her

hands twisted together. How her eyes remained on his.

"Girls go to bed without any problems?" he asked.

Again, she nodded. She came to a halt right in front of him.

Keegan swallowed. What was she up to now?

She leaned down and placed a soft kiss on his lips.

"To what do I owe this honor?" he asked softly.

She gave a slight shrug. "I guess I was feeling a little lonely."

Accepting the veiled invitation, he stood, took her face in his hands and kissed her.

She ran her hands over his chest and down to his waist. Immediately he placed his hands over hers to stop her.

"What are you doing, sweetheart?"

She smiled at him. "I would think that would be obvious."

Not that he wasn't fascinated by what could be going through her head, but he really couldn't let her go any further with whatever it was she had planned.

He brought her hands up to his lips and kissed them. "What are you up to, Elizabeth?"

She frowned. "I'm not sure. I just felt like I needed to see you. Needed to touch you."

"Well, that's not a good idea."

She frowned. "I thought you would want me to."

"Oh, I would. I do. But the answer is still 'no'."

"You don't want me to touch you?"

"It's not that."

"Then what?" She playfully ran her hands over his chest again.

"Stop."

Brow furrowed, she looked up at him, confused. "Why? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, nothing wrong in my book. But plenty wrong in *your* book, if ya know what I mean. Besides, I don't have any protection for you right now."

"Well, I wasn't planning on taking things *that* far, so we won't need any protection."

"Yes, we will."

"No, you don't understand."

"It's you who doesn't understand. We will need protection."

"But I won't let it get to that point," she said earnestly.

He laughed. "You won't have a choice."

"Are you saying you'd force me?"

"I won't have to force you."

She shook her head. "I don't understand."

"Baby, when you put your hands on me it makes me want you, and then I will make you unable to say anything but 'yes.'"

"Well then, you're awfully sure of yourself, aren't you?"

"No. Yes." He sighed. "It's just that you're very innocent and I will seduce you. I seem to have no control when it comes to you."

"Then fine, seduce me. I don't care."

He leaned forward. "And that, my sweet, sweet, Elizabeth, is why– you have– five children."

Her face colored. Standing, she turned and headed for the door.

He jumped up and grabbed her, pulling her to him. Her hands pressed against his chest in resistance.

"Wait, hold on. I didn't mean that as an insult. I promise I didn't. I've never been good at holding back my words. I say what I think. I say what I feel, but you have to understand; I want protection for you because I care about you. I've never cared before. Not ever. I don't want to hurt you. I care about you, Elizabeth." When she continued trying to push him away he gripped her tighter, giving her a little shake. "Do you hear what I'm saying? I care about you. I want you. I want to make love to you, but I care about you."

She calmed, her eyes blinking up at him, seemingly in slow motion. "You care about me?"

"I do. Very much."

She leaned her forehead against him. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come to you. I know better. I'm so embarrassed. I feel so silly."

"I don't think it was silly at all. If you feel for me anywhere near what I feel for you, then that makes me happy. So, it wasn't silly. It was loving." He smiled. "And maybe a little bit naughty."

She smiled back at him, grateful for the way he lightened up the moment. "It was a little naughty, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was, and one day, I'm coming after you, but it will be when it's right."

"I'll be waiting," she said firmly as she turned and left the room.

The moment the door closed Keegan sank heavily down in the chair. He'd changed. Lizzy has changed him. A beautiful woman practically threw herself at him and he turned her down. The angel was making a choirboy out of him.

<3 <3 <3

Saturday morning brought a smile to Keegan's lips. He'd risen

early, worked out, showered, dressed and was headed toward the kitchen for breakfast without his crutches to eat with six of his favorite people. He could hear the girls giggling. He could hear Elizabeth's soft voice teasing them. Stopping in the hall just outside the kitchen he listened, a smile on his face.

"And you're gonna drink so much milk," Lizzy said. "You're finally gonna just fall on the floor, holding your tummy and moaning, 'Ohhhh, miiillllk.' And then the paramedics are gonna come and say little girl, 'what's the matter with you?' And you're gonna say, 'miiilllkk.' And they're gonna say, 'Oh, you want some milk?' And they'll give you some more milk and you'll just keep right on moaning. And then they'll take you to the hospital and the doctor will ask 'what's wrong with you little girl.' And you'll say, 'mmiillk.' And the doctor will say, 'Oh, you want some milk?' And then he'll give you some more milk and you know what will happen then?"

"What?" Violet said, giggling.

"You're gonna ex—plode! And then– there will be milk all over the hospital. It will be on the floors and on the walls. People will slip and fall in the puddles of milk and break their legs and arms, all because one little girl drank too much milk."

All five girls were laughing and Keegan thought he'd died and gone to heaven. It was such a beautiful sound. He stepped around the corner and entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, ladies," he said cheerfully.

"Good morning, Mr. Mike," the girls all said.

"Good morning," Lizzy said softly, her eyes shining.

The girls all became quiet as they waited for him to play the game they'd played every day for the past week.

He sighed dramatically. "Ummm, let me see." He pointed at Rose. "You're Lily."

Rose giggled. "Uh uh."

"Oh, yeah, that's right." He swung his finger toward Heather. "You're Lily."

Heather put her hands on her hips. "No."

He went on, pointing at each girl, until finally, he landed on the real Lily.

"Then you must be Lily," he said. "I should have known that. You look just like a Lily."

She smiled up at him.

"I bet you don't know who the rest of us are," Heather said, urging

him on.

"Oh, yeah? I bet I do."

"I bet you don't," she said, grinning.

"Bet I do, and if I get all your names right then you have to do something for me."

"Okay. What?"

"Ummm, you have to sing me that song I heard you singing the other day when you got home from school. The one about the scary pumpkin."

"Okay."

"Okay, then. Here goes. Now, this is a warning. I'm gonna go fast so pay attention." He began with Heather and went quickly around the table. "You're Heather, you're Rose, you're Violet, you're Daisy and you're Lily." He folded his arms across his chest. "Haha, I win."

Lizzy beamed at him, amazed that he really did know all their names. "How do you tell the twins apart?" she asked.

He shrugged. "I'm very attuned to detail. Rose's eyes are a tad lighter than Violet's and Violet's hair has some wave to it while Rose's is straight, and Lily, aside from her quieter demeanor, is slightly smaller and thinner than Daisy."

"That's very good. I'm impressed."

"Really? Then maybe I can win even more points by telling you, that I know you've already washed two loads of clothes this morning, that you're going to the grocery store today, that some little girl has already been naughty this morning, I'm gonna guess Rose, and that I know you haven't had a chance to shower yet."

Smiling, she looked into his eyes, wondering who this man really is. "Okay, I'm a sucker. So how did you know all those things?"

"The washer is running and so is the dryer, so that one was easy. There's a partial grocery list lying on the counter. The timeout chair is turned facing the wall, that it was Rose was only an educated guess, and you have blue marker on your chest from when Rose wrote on you last night."

"Are you magic?" Heather asked.

"Yes. Yes, I am," he said with a wink.

Lizzy glanced down at the mark, just above her left breast, then back up at Mike. She rose. "Let me get your breakfast."

"Sit. I'll get it myself," he said, moving quickly. He hobbled around the kitchen in his walking cast and reappeared at her side with the coffee pot to freshen her cup.

She looked up, surprised.

"What?" he asked.

"I'm just not used to being waited on."

"I know," he said quietly as he turned back to the counter and filled his own cup. Quickly, he piled eggs, biscuits and grits onto his plate and placed it on the table, then grabbed the timeout chair and sat down heavily.

He smiled at the girls who always seemed to be watching him. Mouth full of eggs, he sighed. "Has anyone ever told you that you're a great cook?" he asked.

"Not really, but thanks," she said. "I enjoy cooking."

"It shows." He turned to Heather. "Well? I don't hear my song."

Heather giggled and started singing. Keegan closed his eyes, listening as he waved his fork in the air, keeping time to the music. When she was done he opened his eyes.

"That was beautiful," he said. His eyes wandered to Lizzy as they usually did. She was smiling at him. "Um, Elizabeth, I hope you don't mind, but I have some people who want to come and visit me this evening. They should be here about five."

"No, why would I mind?"

"Well, it is *your* house."

"It's fine for you to have company, Mike, and, it's really not any of my business, but who is it that's coming to see you?"

"Well, it's my cousin and he's bringing a friend of his. We have some business to discuss."

"Maybe they'd like to stay for dinner."

He smiled. "I'm sure they would love that, if it's not an inconvenience for you."

"I'd love to have them," she said, her eyes dancing. "And I promise I will not interfere with your business. I was going to the grocery store anyway, as you've already pointed out, so I'll just pick up something special."

"That would be great, but you have to let me pay."

She frowned. "That's not necessary."

"Please, Elizabeth. Otherwise I'll feel all guilty and I won't be able to enjoy myself."

She sighed. "Since you put it that way, I guess I can't refuse, but I'm warning you, I think I'll do it up big."

"Do whatever you want. I'm still paying."

"Fine." Her brow furrowed as she thought. "I think I'll do lasagna.

Yes, lasagna. And maybe I'll bake a pie. Well, two pies, with this crowd. Oh, this is gonna be fun." She rose from the table and clapped her hands together. "Okay, girls, finish up your breakfast please. We have a lot to do today. Rooms need to be cleaned. Laundry finished." She turned around staring at the kitchen. "I need to mop the kitchen floor. And the house needs to be dusted. And I need to scrub the bathrooms."

"Elizabeth, you don't need to do all that just because these guys are coming. They won't care or even notice stuff like that."

"I care and I'll notice." Her eyes darkened with worry. "I need to find something to wear that's not so old and worn looking. Oh, and what can I do with my hair? And..." She motioned toward the children. "Girls, you're not eating. Come on, let's get a move on."

Keegan stood and took hold of Lizzy's hand. "Hey. Slow down a minute."

Face flushed, Lizzy looked up into Keegan's face. "I can't slow down. I have a lot to do."

"Well, I'm beginning to think I shouldn't have told you they were coming. I've never seen you so flustered."

"First of all, if you hadn't told me they were coming I'd probably end up very mad at you and second– I'm not flustered," she said indignantly. "I'm excited. I haven't had company here in this house since my mother's funeral and before that it was Bradley's funeral. This is much more pleasant. I'm looking forward to it."

He brushed his hand over her cheek then bent down and kissed it. The girls giggled. Keegan turned to them with a smile. "What? You think it's funny that I kissed your mom on her cheek. Well, then I guess I'll just have to get all of you." He dashed around the table kissing each fat cheek, making big smooching sounds. The girls shrieked with laughter.

Lizzy watched. First with delight, but then she realized this was actually a very bad thing. Her girls were getting way too attached to Michael Moreland and so was she. They all were being set up for a huge heartbreak. Yet, what could she do? It was already too late. She had to steel herself for the time when he would literally walk out of their lives. Sighing, she put her mind to matters at hand.

"Okay, giggle boxes. Clear your places and get dressed, we have to get to the store."

"Why don't you let the girls stay home with me?" Keegan offered. "It would make it so much easier for you to do the shopping, and then,

if you wanted to, you could swing by the mall and pick up something new to wear, my treat."

When she went to turn him down, he stopped her, putting a finger to her lips. "Please, Elizabeth. I mean, really, you've done so much for me and now you're entertaining my friends. Please, just let me do this for you. Please."

"I don't know what to say."

"Just say, 'okay'."

Wringing her hands, she looked over at the girls who were clearing their dishes the best they could. She turned back to him, worry in her eyes.

"I can take care of the girls just fine," he reassured her. "We'll get started doing the cleaning. It'll be okay."

Her lips pressed together. "Well, I guess it'll be all right. The girls can stay with you."

"Yay!" the girls cheered.

"Okay now, promise me you'll be good and listen to Mr. Mike," Lizzy cautioned.

"We promise," Heather answered for all.

Lizzy noticed Heather didn't seem to be afraid this time that her mother wouldn't come home. "Okay, Mike," Lizzy said. "It's all you. Good luck."

He grinned. "Thanks. I'll be fine. You be careful."

"I will." She smiled excitedly. "I almost don't know what to do first. Thank you, Mike. Really, thank you so much." She threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

He so didn't want to let her go, he thought as he squeezed her tight. Finally he set her away. "Go."

Grinning, she turned and rushed from the room. Keegan turned to face the troops. "Okay, flowers, let's get moving. We're gonna surprise your mom and get everything done before she gets home."

Five pairs of bright blue eyes blinked up at him. He smiled. These tiny little replicas of Lizzy were casting a spell on him and there was nothing he could do to get out of it. He could only succumb. Clearing his mind, he started giving orders.

<3 <3 <3

Freshly showered and shaved, Keegan stood in front of the mirror combing his hair. He wore a black t-shirt and a pair of jeans with one leg slit open. There wasn't much else to choose from. The house smelled wonderful. Elizabeth was cooking lasagna. He'd tried to help,

but she would have none of that. Smiling, he thought of how pleased she'd been when she returned from her shopping trip to find the house shining to her satisfaction. She'd been impressed that a mere man could accomplish that and take care of the girls too. He'd been pretty proud of himself. She'd been happy and animated all day so it was a surprise when Heather knocked on his door, saying she was worried about her mom because she seemed upset.

Keegan was pushed out of his room and toward Elizabeth's bedroom door. "Okay, okay, I'm going," he whispered to Heather. "Go take care of your sisters and don't let them mess anything up."

Heather nodded and scooted away with a smile on her face.

"Come in," Lizzy called when Keegan knocked on her door.

He entered the room and came to an abrupt halt. Elizabeth stood in front of her dresser, her hands behind her neck, trying to fasten the catch of a necklace. She wore a soft pink and white, floral print skirt that flared out, ending a few inches above her knee, paired with a soft pink sweater that crisscrossed under her breasts as if it were simply wrapped around her. His eyes traveled down to the little bit of thigh that showed, then to the backs of her knees, then down her well-muscled calves. He didn't know what you call the kind of shoes she wore other than they were pink and had high heels and they made his mouth go dry.

He commanded his feet to move forward. Coming up behind her he brushed her hands away. "Let me do that," he whispered.

Easily closing the tiny clasp, he leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the nape of her neck. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." She smiled at him in the mirror. Freshly shaven, he smelled of soap and spice. Her eyes moved over his thickly muscled chest and arms. The black t-shirt hugged his broad shoulders and tucked into jeans that hung low on his hips. Her eyes strayed over him, but she caught herself and went back to his face. He'd been watching her. She could feel her face turn red with embarrassment.

Choosing to ignore her scrutiny of him, he smiled. "Heather said you were upset."

Her brow wrinkling, she shook her head. "No, I'm not upset. Heather is such a little worrier. If I'm anything, I guess I may be a little bit anxious."

Keegan didn't voice his opinion that Heather may have been subconsciously playing a little bit of a matchmaker.

Still looking at her in the mirror, he placed his hands on her

shoulders. "Don't be anxious. These guys are not hard to please and if dinner tastes anything like it smells, they won't ever want to leave."

Lizzy turned to face him. "Thanks for the encouragement. I guess I'd better go see what the girls are up to."

"First, let me just do this," he said, taking her hands and placing them behind his neck. Lowering his head, his finger tilted her chin up and he brushed his lips over hers. The sound of a car pulling into the drive had him backing away. "That must be them."

Keegan clunked toward the front door in his boot and quickly opened it. John Appel rushed up the porch steps, grabbed Keegan and crushed him in a bear hug.

"Man, I can't tell you how good it is to see you alive."

"Thanks, John." He turned to Lizzy who was standing in the hall behind him. "John, this is Elizabeth Anderson, my salvation. Elizabeth, my cousin John."

She extended her hand, a genuine smile on her face. "It's so very nice to meet you. Please, call me Lizzy. Everyone else does."

"Lizzy it is then." John turned to Jeff. "Mike, this is a good friend of mine, Jeff Davis. Jeff, my cousin, Mike Moreland, and apparently, his salvation, Lizzy."

Keegan shook Jeff's hand, nodding. "Any friend of John's is a friend of mine."

Lizzy held her hand out to Jeff. If a man could be called beautiful, that would be this man, Lizzy thought. He looked like some kind of golden god. Tall, built, blond hair that looked to be streaked by the sun, large green eyes, and a killer smile. She smiled at him, a bit hypnotized by his looks.

Jeff took her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Lizzy. Dare I be so bold as to say, something smells delicious."

She grinned. "Why, thank you. Please you two, come in. I'm hoping you'll stay for dinner. I have lasagna and salad and my special apple pie."

"We'd be crazy not to," Jeff said. He stepped through the door. "What a great old house, Lizzy," he said. "After dinner, I hope you'll show me around. I've always been into old architecture, especially homes built around the turn of the century."

"I'd love to," Lizzy beamed.

Keegan's eyes narrowed as he and John brought up the rear. John watched his friend and was fascinated by the look on Keegan's face, which could only be construed as jealousy. Deciding to test his theory,

John leaned close. "That, is one amazing looking woman."

Keegan glanced over at him. "Yes, she is. There's a lot more to her than her looks, though."

John nodded. "You've got it bad, don't you?" he said quietly.

Keegan sighed and nodded. "She's the one, John. I just need to get out of the fix I'm in so I can level with her."

"Getting you out of the fix is gonna be rough, but we'll do it. Leveling with her I think you may discover, is gonna be a lot harder."

"You might be right." Keegan agreed. He nodded toward Jeff. "What's with this Romeo? Are you sure we can trust him?"

John grinned. "The green monster. Never thought I'd see the day. Don't let his sweet talking act fool you. Jeff is completely professional. He's here to do a job and believe me, he has nothing on his mind but that. He's asking to be shown the house so he can ascertain the setup. If you weren't so smitten you'd realize that. Trust him, K—uh, Mike. Jason wouldn't let you down."

Keegan nodded. "I don't really have a choice, do I?"

"Nope." John grinned as he put his arm around him. "Man, it's good to see you alive. Let's try and keep it that way."

Making their way back to the kitchen, five little girls came running to see Keegan, but stopped short when they saw the two large men standing next to him.

John immediately got down on their level. "Well, hello there."

"Hi," Heather said. "I'm Heather and I'm the oldest. These are my sisters. Do you want me to tell you their names?"

"Sure."

"You don't have to tell my name," Rose said sharply. "I can say my own name." She looked up at John. "I'm Rose."

John smiled. "Hello, Rose."

"And I'm Violet."

John greeted Violet.

"And this is Daisy, she's three and this is Lily. She's three too," Heather said.

"Wow. I don't think I'll ever remember everyone," John teased.

"Mr. Mike remembers us. He's magic."

John eyed his friend. "Yes, I believe he is."

"Mike, would you mind putting the extension in the table? It's in the hall closet," Lizzy asked sweetly.

"Sure," he said, turning to fetch the piece.

"Let me help, crip," John said.

Everyone pitched in to set the table even though Lizzy kept trying to shoo the men away. Finally she was able to usher the men into the family room where she served them wine and bruschetta. While they enjoyed the appetizer, she headed back to the kitchen to finish the salad and get the bread out of the oven.

"Look, guys," Keegan said. "I know we need to get down to business, but she was so excited about having some company, I couldn't discourage her."

"No problem," Jeff said. "It's a sticky situation. You know the best way to handle things. I'm here for *you*. *You* set the agenda."

Keegan nodded. "Thanks for that. As soon as we can break away, we'll go in my room. You're not gonna believe what I'm gonna tell you. I'm frustrated as hell that I haven't been able to unload it on anyone yet. I just didn't know who to trust."

"Understandable."

"A lot of innocent lives are at stake."

John and Jeff nodded.

"Mommy says to come to the table," Heather said as she ran into the room.

"We're on our way," Keegan answered.

They entered the kitchen and Jeff beat Keegan to hold Lizzy's chair as she sat. "This looks amazing," he said.

Keegan frowned at him. John grinned at Keegan.

"So, tell me about this house, Lizzy," Jeff said. "When did you buy it?"

"Oh, I didn't buy it. I grew up in it."

"So, it belongs to your parents?"

"It did, when they were alive. My father died three years ago. My mother died this past June."

"I am so sorry for your loss, Lizzy."

"Thank you. They left me the house and I'm extremely grateful for that, even though it is very old and needs a whole lot of work."

"Well, I can tell it's old from the design," Jeff went on. "I'd say over a hundred years old. You won't find this particular design anywhere nowadays, with the entrance hall wider than a room and running the length of the house, with doors to all the rooms opening up onto the hall."

Lizzy nodded. "Yeah, it's kind of like a big circle." She smiled. "Before my father took out all the connecting doors you could go into the front room that's there on the right just as you come in the front

door and without ever going back into the hall you could go all the way down one side, across and up the other side and come out through the door that's now Mike's room. I used to skip through the house, rambling from room to room to see how many rounds I could make before my father would tell me I was driving him crazy."

Keegan smiled at the quaint picture she painted.

"You were an only child?" John asked.

"I was a twin, but my sister died at birth."

Keegan's brows rose at the news, making him realize he didn't know nearly enough about her.

"My father turned the old dining room into a master bedroom, which is now my bedroom. He thought a formal dining room was a waste of space since the kitchen is so open and has such a large dining area. My parents used that first room on the right as a formal living room, but I hardly ever go in there. We spend most of our time in the back of the house in the kitchen and family room. Obviously, there have been bathrooms added. One in my bedroom and one in the front bedroom Mike is in. The other three doors on that side are the girls' bedrooms and a connecting bathroom which was actually the only original bathroom."

Keegan glanced down at the little angel faces who were being abnormally quiet. Then it struck him. They weren't used to having men around. Both their father and grandfather died before they could even remember them. They had only been taken care of by their mother and grandmother. Men, to these little girls were a phenomenon, yet even though he and John and Jeff were all big, brawny guys, the girls didn't seem a bit frightened. A little awed, maybe, but not scared. He smiled at Lily as he caught her eye.

"How ya doin', little munchkin?" he asked softly. "Do you like your lasagna?"

Lily nodded her head and took another bite.

Tenderly, he stroked his hand over her blond curls.

"She's not a munchkin," Rose said, her mouth pouting.

"Oh, yeah?" Keegan teased.

"I'm not a munchkin either."

He smiled. "I know that. You're a pill."

"I am NOT a pill," she argued.

"Really? Well then, you're a..." He looked around the table trying to think of something silly. "You're a tomato."

"Oh, yeah?" Rose countered. "Well, you're a..." She looked

around trying to imitate him. "You're a fork."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're a noodle."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're a salad," Rose giggled. The other girls giggled along with her.

"Oh, yeah?" Keegan said. "Well, you're a, you're a, you're a..." he said, pretending to be flustered. "You're a glass of milk."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're a carrot."

"A carrot?" Keegan asked, his eyes big. "Oh, yeah? Well you're a garlic bread."

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're a, you're a, um," her little mouth pouted while she thought. Suddenly, her eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah? Well you're a whoooooole dinner."

The table at large erupted with laughter. Rose looked around and grinned, very pleased with herself.

"I guess you win," Keegan said, touching her nose. "Now, eat your whole dinner."

The girls giggled.

John watched his friend. Oh, yeah, he had it bad.

Once the pie had been served and Lizzy had been complimented over and over for the delicious meal, the men insisted on doing the dishes while Lizzy got the girls ready for bed. Keegan was implored to deliver a story which John and Jeff found extremely entertaining. Not the story itself, but the storyteller.

"If you had known him," John whispered to Jeff, "back in Afghanistan, never in a million years would you believe he'd be telling fairy tales to a bunch of little girls. Never. Kee, uh, Mike, is a trained killer. We all were, I know, but he was always so dead serious. It's really good to see him like this."

Jeff nodded. He hadn't been a soldier, but he had been trained by Jason Lee, the same man who'd helped to set up training programs for the elite military programs and though Jeff was still young, at only twenty-five, he was extremely lethal. He'd been involved in several sting operations and at his tender years had already killed. Some with his bare hands, some with weapons. All with lethal intent. It'd taken him some time to get over the first one. Taking a life, even when the guy had been a lowlife scumbag who'd just finished slicing up his hostage, was not something to get over easily, if ever, and it never got any easier. Not ever.

At one time Jeff had thought about joining the military or the FBI's ranks, but Ameritech was even better. It was a privately owned

company, comparable to the FBI, only no government interference or red tape to worry about. Jeff wanted to be a force for good in the world and he was happy at Ameritech.

When the story ended, Lizzy told the girls to say 'goodnight,' and ushered them off to bed. Keegan, John and Jeff made their way to his room, grabbing a couple of chairs from the kitchen as they did. Once in Keegan's room, all light-heartedness disappeared.

Jeff quickly retrieved a black leather bag from the car, dropped it on the bed and took a seat, ready to hear Keegan's story.

Keegan drew a deep breath. "I've been working undercover two years with an organization based in Tennessee who steals children and sells them. Babies actually, almost all under the age of one. They made big profits, between twenty thousand to almost four-hundred thousand per kid. Usually white. Usually males. This has been going on for almost twenty years. I've had to walk a very thin line and it took me a long time to gain enough trust to allow me entrance into the big guy's home, the big guy being, Anthony Celados. The first time I was there was this past Christmas during a party." Keegan shook his head. "It was like something out of *The Godfather*."

"How do you mean?" Jeff asked.

"These guys who've ruthlessly murdered, stolen children from their homes, destroyed families, are all dressed up, standing around toasting each other, their wives or girlfriends hanging on their arms, their kids running around." He shuddered. "Anyway, once I got in I was able to find and document the sale of hundreds of kids. I found records of hits made on anyone who tried to stop them, and even hits on those who innocently stumbled across the truth.

"One of the most recent, a mother who'd searched for years for her lost son, finally came across the nurse who'd taken care of her kidnapped baby during the sale and delivery of the child to the buyer. The nurse, an older woman, was willing to come clean, but she never got the chance. She died in a suspicious car accident on her way to the meeting with the mother. The mother herself, was found raped and murdered in the bottom of a ravine."

John sighed and Jeff sat so still that Keegan wondered if he'd even been listening.

"These bad guys, their arms are long," Keegan went on. "The homicide detective that investigated the mother's death must have gotten too close to the truth. He supposedly committed suicide four months later. I found documentation that these were ordered hits and

dozens more. After I tapped the phone lines I discovered some of those orders came directly from Senator Jack Hartman of Massachusetts."

John, again, muttered a soft curse.

"I knew he was a close, personal friend of Celados. I had no idea he was that involved. I have all their files on a computer chip, I have pictures of stolen kids, I have phone conversations. I have enough solid evidence to bring them all down."

"Do they know what you have?" Jeff asked.

"They're smart enough to know I have something. I don't think they know the extent. One thing I do know, they won't accept a crispy, unidentifiable corpse as my dead body. They won't let that go if they have to dig it up and verify it themselves. They won't stop until they find me."

"How did you discover your cover had been blown?" John asked.

"A phone conversation I picked up. Hartman was speaking to Celados. Told him someone on the inside had given him some information about Todd Worthington, which was me. Gave my real name, the fact I was FBI and told him to bury me. While I was trying to get my stuff together and get out of there, Celados placed a call to the men who were at the house where I was staying."

"I take it they're dead?" John asked.

"It was them or me. I chose them."

"Where's the evidence?" Jeff asked.

"I buried it."

"You're kidding?"

He shook his head. "I felt it was the only choice. I was on Highway 78, high-tailin' my butt back to Atlanta when I hit a damn deer. The thing was just suddenly there. Giant. Crumpled my car, and I went airborne down into a ravine. I lay under that car for twelve hours before someone found me. Maybe I was being paranoid. I was in so much pain I couldn't think straight, but the only way I could think to stay alive was to hide that bag of evidence. I didn't know if I could trust my superior officer. Still don't. He seemed too anxious to get his hands on the evidence. I had no idea who blew my cover, though I assumed it came from within the bureau. What else does 'on the inside' mean?"

Jeff nodded. "When did you have a chance to bury it if you were pinned under your car?"

"I did it while I was under the car. Used my broken cell phone to dig a hole by my side."

Jeff nodded in approval and admiration. "You can find the spot

again?" Jeff asked, his mind already putting together a plan.

"I memorized my surroundings. I asked a paramedic what mile marker I was near because I couldn't see one from where I was. He told me mile marker 101. If you can get me there, I can find it. We need to retrieve the evidence, make copies, and get it to the field office in Atlanta. It has to be turned in with at least three people present. That way if someone is in with the bad guys there will be no way for them to suppress the evidence."

John nodded. "Who knows you're here?"

"Nigel Kort, my SO at the bureau and the agents he's assigned to watch the house and the doctor at the hospital who arranged for me to be placed with Elizabeth."

John sighed. "Well, the doctor is at risk."

"Tell me about it."

Jeff nodded. "Okay, we'll have to fix that. So when we leave here to grab the evidence, we can assume the agents watching the house will tail us. If Kort is as anxious as you say to get his hands on it, whether he's clean or dirty, he'll have you followed," Jeff said.

"No doubt," Keegan agreed.

"We can handle that easily enough," Jeff affirmed.

Keegan nodded and ran a hand through his hair. "Yep, easy enough. We'll all be able to rest easier once the evidence is turned in and the bad guys are arrested. Still, that won't be the end of it. There's another problem."

"Can it get any worse?"

"Much. There's a big deal going down sometime in October near Halloween. Tomorrow's the last day of September, so we have a month to put something together. Plenty of time."

"What's the big deal?"

"Hartman, Celados and a weasel named Victor Washington have worked out a deal with members of ISIS to deliver five white male babies, all blond, all blue-eyed."

"What do they want with babies?" Jeff asked.

"I believe the words were, 'to insult Americans, tear them apart and cut them deep.' How much more deep than to take our own children and turn them against us. They want to raise these kids as ultra-terrorists. Elite assassins, whose number one goal will be to destroy America."

"Why blonde, blue-eyed babies? We're Americans, not Swedes," Jeff asked. "We have every race here."

"They don't want there to be any doubt where they come from. A child with brown eyes or brown or black hair could be one of *them*, but not a blonde, blue-eyed child. From what I overheard, they've already done this. When a child's hair started turning darker as he got older they sent him on a suicide mission, or sold him for parts, neatly disposing of him."

John shook his head, sadly. "So, these five are not the first, and more than likely won't be the last."

"They'll be the last for this particular group," Keegan replied. "They're scheduled to leave by cargo ship in Savannah the week before Halloween. Needless to say, we have to intercept. If I'd been able to stick around longer, I may have been able to find out which families were about to be destroyed by having their babies stolen and prevent it, but it just didn't happen that way. It's possible that they already have the kids."

"Well, it'll be easier to stop them all together rather than individually anyway," John said.

"How much?" Jeff asked. "What are they payin' for the kids?"

Keegan's lips pressed together. "Five million per kid."

Jeff whistled. "Twenty-five million dollars. Most of which, I assume will go to Hartman."

"Yeah, probably for his presidential campaign," Keegan added. "Think of it. If he were elected, America would essentially be ruled by Muslim terrorists."

Jeff's jaw clenched. "Who's to say they aren't already."

Keegan nodded and smiled. "Well it's gonna be difficult to be elected president using prison as your campaign headquarters."

John rose and emptied the duffel on the bed. Guns, magazines, knives, holsters, wires, ammo, rope, gloves, night vision goggles, cell phones, maps were the most notable items. Keegan examined one of the guns, chambered it, tucked it back in the bag. He had his FBI issue in his duffel under the bed, but this one would be for moving day. His issue would be strapped to his leg. Next, he examined one of two knives, sheathed it, tugged on the strap and placed it in the bag. He examined each item, placing it in the bag, finally, closing the bag and tossing it onto the top shelf in the closet and covering it with a thick quilt. Then they sat together and devised a plan.

"So," Keegan repeated. "To retrieve the evidence, Jeff, you arrive in a TV delivery van and back up to the door. John, you arrive shortly thereafter. I'll walk out with you, John, see you to your car, hand you

an envelope they'll think is the evidence and you go lead the agents who are watching on a nice scenic drive. Meanwhile, I go back into the house, then ease back out and get in the van. Jeff delivers the new TV, gets in the van and drives away. Jeff and I will retrieve the bag of evidence then drop me off in a grocery store parking lot where a car has been placed for me to use."

"Can you drive with your broken leg?"

"The boot is removable. I can drive."

"I'll get the evidence into the field office," Jeff said.

"I don't know that I'm comfortable with you going alone," Keegan admitted.

"I won't be alone. Trust me. The evidence will get there."

Keegan looked into the eyes of the younger man. Finally, he nodded and then turned to John. "So then, I have a personal favor to ask of you, brother."

"Name it."

"Please, John, go to Knoxville, see my parents and put their hearts at ease."

"Risky," John said. "But doable. I'll work out the details."

"Thanks, man. That's it."

"Okay. Let's get out of here then," John said. "Jeff flew in from California. He's been going for about eighteen hours."

"Where are you staying?"

"*Days Inn* out on the Interstate."

Keegan nodded. "Stay alive, guys," he said.

"You do the same," John said. They clasped hands.

"Jeff," Keegan extended his hand. "Thanks. You have a lot riding on your young shoulders."

"I can handle it."

"I have a feeling you can."

John and Jeff grabbed their chairs and took them back to the kitchen while Keegan stood in his bedroom doorway. Donning their jackets, they came back toward the front door.

Keegan nodded, shook hands. "Thanks, guys."

John smiled. "You da man."

Elizabeth came out of her room. "Are y'all leaving already?"

"Yeah, we've got some plans," Jeff said with a smile. "Thanks so much for a fantastic meal and even better company."

Lizzy beamed. "You're welcome. Come back anytime."

She offered her hand to both men then stood beside Keegan and

watched them to their car. Finally they closed the door. Keegan turned to her, brushing a finger over her cheek. "Are you tired?"

"No. Not really. You did all the hard work."

"Not hardly. Hey listen, Elizabeth, thanks for everything. It was really a great evening."

She smiled her sweet smile that sent him through the ceiling. "You're so welcome. Thank you too, Mike. For everything."

"My pleasure," he said. "Well, good night."

She smiled. "Good night." She took the initiative and rose up on her toes and kissed him.

When she tried to step away, his hands came to rest on her waist, holding her there, looking deeply into her eyes as temptations ran through his brain. He got control and let her go. "Good night." He turned and entered his room, closing the door softly.

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"We have a tail," Jeff said.

"Yeah," John answered. "Whaddya say we lose 'em?"

"It would be advisable."

"Hold on," John ordered as he floored it.

Fifteen minutes later, they were free and clear. Deciding to not take any chances and go low, they ditched the *Days Inn* plans, opting for a mom and pop roach motel. Tomorrow they were going car shopping for Keegan's plant car.

✞✞✞

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12

"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up his fellow. But woe to him who is alone when he falls and has not another to lift him up! Again, if two lie together, they keep warm, but how can one keep warm alone? And though a man might prevail against one who is alone, two will withstand him—a threefold cord is not quickly broken."

Chapter Five

Lizzy thought, as she paced back and forth in front of her dresser mirror. She was struggling with this attraction to Mike. She thought about him all the time. Her heart leapt in her chest whenever she saw him, or when he spoke. It was making her crazy. Was she actually falling in love with him? If she were to be honest with herself, she imagined sharing her life with him. She yearned to lie next to him and listen to his heart beating. She hadn't been intimate with a man for more than four years. Bradley was the only one. Her only love. Yet, she didn't feel like she was being disloyal to Bradley. She knew his heart and he would want her to find someone.

She smiled at the thought of her husband. He'd been such a good man. Tomorrow was the anniversary of his death. How could she love Bradley so much, and still have feelings develop for Mike? Did her feelings really matter anyway? She had no silly notions that Mike would want to stay with her and the girls and make a life with them. What man would? No one wanted a washed up, financially destitute woman with five kids. So, would it be so bad to have just one night? Could she make him want her for just one night? Would God forgive her? What was she thinking? She couldn't willfully sin.

Oh, but it had been such a wonderful day. Watching Mike with her girls, seeing him play host to his cousin and friend, pouring her a cup of coffee this morning, every little thing he did made her feelings grow stronger. What was she to do about it? All she wanted to do was talk to him, be near him, spend time with him. So, she should. She should just go do that right now. Maybe she should tell him how she feels. Even if he doesn't feel the same way, she should at least put it out there. Decision made, she went to her bedroom door, turned the knob, opened the door and jumped back, drawing a startled breath.

Mike was there, his hand raised to knock. "Oh, Lord, you scared me," she said, breathlessly.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to," he replied, his voice low.

"I was just coming to see you," she admitted.

"Really? Why?"

Her lips pressed together. "I, uh, wanted to tell you something."

She stepped back, her hands twisting together.

When she didn't speak, he smiled. "Did you want to tell me something now, or were you talking about sometime later?"

"I'm, um, I'm not sure."

"May I come in?"

"Oh! Oh, yes, of course." She backed up, motioned him in. There was no chair so they sat on the bed.

He turned toward her. "So, you wanted to talk to me about something and you were on your way to my room to tell me, but now, you're not sure?"

She nodded, biting down on her bottom lip.

Keegan smiled. She had a habit of doing that.

"So," he began, "have you changed your mind about telling me something because you're afraid that I'll be upset?"

"Afraid?"

"Yes, are you afraid?"

"Maybe."

"Elizabeth, it's okay. Whatever you have to say, I'll understand. I don't ever want you to be afraid of me."

"I'm not afraid of you. I'm just a little nervous."

"Whatever you have to say, just say it. I won't..."

Lizzy butted in. "I think, I mean, maybe, there's a possibility that, I'm falling in love with you."

His eyebrows shot up.

"Oh, no," she moaned. "I'm so sorry. What am I doing? I thought I needed to tell you. Oh, Lord have mercy on my soul, I feel like such an idiot. Don't worry, you don't have to say anything. I am so sorry."

"You don't want to know how I feel?"

"No. I mean. Oh, gosh, I mean, yes. Oh, I don't know. Okay, yes, how do you feel?"

He smiled warmly. "Like I'm the luckiest man in the world."

She blinked up at him, obviously surprised by his response.

He sighed, reached out, took her hands in his. "Elizabeth, you're shaking like a leaf."

"Then hold me, please," she said as she scooted close to him. She leaned her head against his chest. The steady sound of his heart beating reminded her that she craved that sound.

He pressed her close, rubbing his hand over her shoulder, down her arm. He held her until her body calmed. "Better?" he asked.

"Yes, I think so. I don't know why I felt like I should tell you that.

I guess it seems pretty silly."

"Doesn't seem silly to me." He wanted to tell her that he felt the same way. But the timing wasn't right. He first needed her to know who and what he truly is. He didn't want her to be in love with Michael Moreland. He wanted her to be in love with Keegan Tanner. And the difference between the two is gigantic. One is a writer, the other, if he were to be completely honest, is a killer. He can't tell her all this right now, but maybe just show her. Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her, softly, slowly.

Lizzy's body went weak and she started to lie back on the bed, but his grip tightened around her. "Hold on there now," he murmured.

The need to lay her back and make love to her was powerful, but even more powerful was his need to protect her, to honor her, to do right by her. So, he was surprised when she out-maneuvered him by wrapping her arms around his head, lying back and pulling him down with her.

He mumbled a soft curse before he kissed her again.

She ran her hands over his shoulders, and down his arms, which she knew were flexed to keep his weight off her. She was lost in his kiss. Dizzy. Delirious. She whimpered. Purred. Moaned.

He pulled away. "That, is a beautiful thing," he said, softly.

"What?" she asked, breathlessly.

He looked down, into the depths of her blue eyes. They'd gone darker with passion. Her face was flushed. Her lips red and swollen. "The sounds you just made. You are so beautiful," he said.

"You make me feel beautiful." She smiled, closed her eyes. Until Mike had come into her life she hadn't realized how much she missed being wanted– being made to feel beautiful. He made her remember what it felt like to be a female, a woman, to be desired, and she'd never realized what a wonderful feeling that is.

"What are you grinning at?" he asked.

"I'm just feeling good," she said with a sigh.

He eased off her, lay straight on the bed to get his leg off the floor, and then pulled her over to lie on his chest. They lay together for several minutes, quietly, each in their own thoughts.

Lizzy was in the moment. Relaxed now that she'd shared her feelings with him, she simply was enjoying being close to him, listening to his heartbeat, smelling the spicy scent of his aftershave.

Keegan's mind went over all he felt about the amazing woman in his arms. She was kind to a fault, loving, patient, yet in actuality, he

didn't know her very well. He remembered that he didn't even know she was a twin until Jeff had asked her about it.

He wondered what she thought about Van Gogh and Mozart, and politics. He knew she was a Christian, a very strong Christian, and he knew she probably shouldn't be lying here in her bed with him. For her sake, he had to be strong and make sure nothing happened. He wondered what was her opinion of Heather's teacher at school and what was her favorite sport? Who did she like to read and what would make her happy? All things he wanted to know. "Elizabeth," he said. "Who's your favorite painter?"

She rose up, eyed him, her brow furrowing. "You're not talking about the guy from the Home Depot, are you?"

He laughed. "No."

She shrugged. "I don't know about many artists. I suppose I really like Monet because of his affinity with nature because, as you probably figured out, I love flowers. Actually, I love anything that grows. Flowers, trees, grass, food— children. I really don't know much about art styles and techniques and such. I do know if I like something and so, that would be the only reason I would buy it and not because it's all the rage." She shrugged with a soft giggle. "As if I will ever be in the position to buy art."

He nodded. "A very down to earth view. Do you like to read?"

"When would I have time?"

"If you did have time, what would you read?"

"It would be heaven to curl up with a book, probably a mystery, or even better, a fantasy. I used to love to read when I was a girl, but there's no time now, so why sit and wish for something I can't have?"

He took her hand and brought it to his lips.

She smiled up at him. "What would *you* read?"

"A murder mystery sounds good to me too. Something I can try to figure out."

"What type of books do you write?"

Oh man, he'd made a mistake. Why did he have to ask about reading? He blew out a breath, thought quickly. "Fiction. Detective stories mostly," he lied. "But I don't want to talk about my stuff."

"What do you want to talk about?"

"You. You are far more interesting."

"Oh, sure I am, if you want to talk about coloring books, or the alphabet, or what color is a butterfly."

"We can talk about the girls if you want, but I'm asking about their

mom. What makes *her* tick? Elizabeth, what are your dreams?"

She glanced up at him, surprise on her face.

"What?" he asked.

"I thought guys don't ask those kinds of questions. Ya know, nothing about the future."

"What do you know about guys?" he teased.

"Good question," she answered. "Nothing firsthand, I guess. I've only had one boyfriend, and one husband, and one sweetheart and they were all the same person. I only know what I've heard the girls at the hospital say, which is that guys just want to get you in bed. They don't really care about anything else. Are they wrong?"

"Lord, you are so innocent." He sighed. "Yeah, I mean, some guys are like what your friends describe and some, actually care about the women in their lives."

"And you care?"

"About you, yeah. I care. So, tell me. What are your dreams?"

She sighed as she thought. "To be honest, Mike, I don't think I have any. I struggle so much to get by, I dream about small things, like finding room in the budget to give the girls presents at Christmas. Or getting the car serviced. Or fixing the roof."

"But what about you, sweet Elizabeth? I mean, do you have any dreams for yourself?"

Drawing a deep breath, she considered his question. She couldn't very well tell him she dreamed he wouldn't ever leave. She dreamed he would stay and love her and be a father to her children. Or that it wasn't probably, it was for sure, that she loved him. It was ridiculous, the way she felt. Falling for the first man who looks at her with interest, or one who fills her coffee cup and treats her children like they are real people.

"Earth to Lizzy."

She smiled. "No," she said finally. "Nothing for me."

Touching her face, he kissed her softly. "That's sad, Elizabeth. You need to have dreams."

She shrugged. "Why? So I can be disappointed every day when I wake up? Life is what it is, Mike. I've learned not to expect anything. That way I don't get hurt. I wake up grateful to God every day and that keeps me in a good place. I ask for nothing, other than my babies be safe and healthy. Please, let's not talk about this."

"Okay," he said, sighing, but thinking instead how much he wanted to make life good for her and her girls. His girls. Elizabeth was

an amazing woman. Sweet, intelligent, strong, loving, beautiful. And he is in love with her. How it all happened was too crazy to imagine. Here he is, dangling by a thread in the jaws of death and all he can think about is setting up house with a gorgeous nurse and her five small daughters. Jesus help us, he thought, taking a page from Elizabeth's book.

"Did I upset you?" she asked, rubbing her hand over his chest.

"No, of course not, but we're not finished talking about it." He pulled her close, kissed her soundly, and held her tight.

An hour later, Lizzy lay sound asleep. Keegan stared restlessly at the ceiling. Never had he thought he would find the perfect woman for him. Now he does, when he's in the middle of a dangerous assignment, one he may not make it out of alive. That was the nature of his job. He had no right envisioning himself living beside this innocent creature. He shook his head. He needed to get her out of his head so he could think straight. To do that, it would probably help to get out of her bed. Sighing, he eased quietly off the bed, bent down and kissed her cheek.

Her eyes opened. "Where are you going?"

"I'm going back to my room. I don't want the little ones to catch me in bed with their mother."

"I suppose that would be for the best," she whispered.

"Get some sleep," he said. "It's been a great night."

Smiling, she closed her eyes. "Yes, it has. Thank you."

He chuckled. "Oh, sure. Anytime," he said, rolling his eyes. "Goodnight, Elizabeth."

"Goodnight, Michael Moreland," she answered, making him wince. He truly hated the lie that he was living.

Closing her bedroom door softly behind him, he roamed through the house, checking doors and windows and peeking in at the sleeping angels. Next, he raided the kitchen, downing the rest of the apple pie Lizzy had baked earlier and washing it down with a cold glass of milk. Finally, he went to his room and looked over his arsenal, going over plans and different scenarios in his head. Unlike Elizabeth, he stretched out on his bed and imagined his heart's desire, eventually falling into a deep sleep.

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The house was quiet. Too quiet for mid-morning. Cursing himself for sleeping so late, Keegan rose quietly, pulled his gun from the bag under his bed, and eased out of his room, hearing not a sound except for the ceiling fans. Adrenaline kicked in as he tried to figure out where

the girls were. Quickly, he checked each room. Elizabeth's bed was made, her room straight. The girls' rooms were the same. Upon entering the kitchen, he found a note. He tucked the gun in the waistband of his sweats, picked up the note and read:

Good morning, Mike. Feel free to cook whatever you want for breakfast. Sorry I couldn't be here to do that for you this morning. It's the anniversary of Bradley's death. I'm taking the girls to visit their father's gravesite, then I'm taking them to Mrs. Hurley's so I can have some time for myself. I don't know if I'll be home in time for lunch but I will definitely be home in time for dinner. I'll see you then. Elizabeth. P.S. Thanks for taking time to talk last night. I woke up this morning with a smile on my face.

Sighing, Keegan ran a hand through his hair. He didn't like them being out of his sight. And he didn't even have a cell phone number to reach Elizabeth. When she got home he would remedy that situation. He threw some breakfast together and ate quickly, cleaning up the kitchen after himself.

Well, he needed to take care of business anyway. It would be easier to do it without questions. Back in his room, he grabbed the television and tossed it to the floor. Next, he carried it outside and placed it on top of the trash can, in plain sight and headed back inside.

When his cell phone went off he jerked it to his ear. "Yeah."

"Spoke with Jason this morning, Keeg," John said. "Jeff filled him in on the details of your predicament and he's not happy with the situation. He says we're talking about an international incident with huge implications."

"I know that."

"He wants to send in more help. No charge."

"Why does he want to do that?"

"Well, Keeg, I asked him the same question. He said because America is his country too, and he feels this operation is more crucial than we realize."

"Tell him any help will be appreciated, but I have to know what's going on. I have to be able call the shots. I know these people, John. They'd kill their own mothers."

"Got it. We had a tail last night. We lost them fairly easily, but just thought I'd let you know."

"I expected that."

"Right. Anyway, Jeff and I went shopping and you are the new owner of a silver Chrysler Sebring."

"Cool. Supe it up for me, if you can."

"You know I can."

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The sun weakened in the sky as the time moved closer to five. Even though there were a few more hours of daylight, Keegan was getting nervous. She'd said she'd be home by dinner. By now the house was usually filled with delicious aromas, but there was no sign of Lizzy and the girls. He didn't know what to think. Running a hand through his hair he envisioned the worst.

He had no way to reach them. No transportation. Maybe he could find Mrs. Hurley's phone number in a drawer or something. He sighed. Lizzy probably went back to pick up the girls and maybe Mrs. Hurley invited her in for tea and cookies or whatever women had for snacks and the time just got away from her. Surely though, she would realize it was late and give him a call to keep him from worrying. He was probably being paranoid, but being paranoid has kept him alive many times.

Feeling antsy, he hobbled back out to the end of the drive as he had several times already and peered down the street. Today was the first time he'd seen the neighborhood in the daylight. All his reconnaissance trips had been made at night. In the rural setting, the homes were situated fairly far apart from each other, but he could see at least three homes from where he stood by the mailbox. The agents assigned to watch the house were nowhere in sight. Just great. Did that mean something? Hopefully it only meant they were craving some junk food.

Pacing back and forth across the drive he tried to decide what to do. Finally limping back toward the porch, he sat on the steps and called John Appel.

"She's not back yet?" John asked, clearly concerned.

"No. John, this is making me crazy. If I'd just known she was going, I could have gotten her cell phone number. I don't understand why I can't find any listing for her."

"I've tried too. Every name you gave me. Her late husband's, her mother. Other than the land line there at the house, there's nothing listed. Are you sure she has a cell phone?"

"Everyone has a cell phone, don't they?" Keegan sighed heavily. "Okay, John, I've waited long enough. It's time to act. How far away are you?"

"We're at a mom and pop about ten minutes away."

"Come and get me. We'll hunt down this Mrs. Hurley and go from there."

"I'm on my way."

Keegan glanced up at the sound of a car approaching. It wasn't Elizabeth, though.

"Uh oh, I got company," Keegan said.

"Who?"

He blew out a breath. "Tyler Springs P.D."

"Maybe she's been in an accident."

"From the look on this guy's face I don't think that's why he's here. He's out of his car and he just unsnapped his gun."

"Okay, Keegan, don't kill anyone."

"You insult my intelligence."

"If this gets bad and he wants to arrest you, just let him do it, okay? Kort will get you out."

"Gotta go, you're on speaker." Keegan placed the phone down on the step, leaving the call connected. He eyed the police officer. Younger than Keegan, shaved head to disguise a prematurely receding hairline, five-ten, heavyset. "Officer," Keegan said, standing as the man approached.

The officer nodded. "Sir, I'm gonna have to ask you to step out here by the car."

"May I ask why?"

"I suggest you do as I say until we get to the bottom of this."

"The bottom of what?" Keegan asked, realizing immediately he would make no headway because the guy was a jerk cop. He knew, because it takes one to know one.

"Sir, don't make me have to tell you again."

"I'll walk out to your car," Keegan said reasonably. "But I'd like to know what's going on."

The officer keyed a mic on his lapel. "This is Hornsby. Send me some backup. Looks like I got a live one."

"Oh, come on, now, you don't need backup. I just want to know what's going on."

The officer moved slowly, closing the distance between them. He reached out toward Keegan as if he were a wild animal that needed taming, carefully clamping his hand on Keegan's upper arm. Keegan allowed him to pull him forward, but when his limp held him up and the cop gave a hard tug, he was barely able to stay on his feet.

"Okay, okay, give me a break please. I have a broken leg."

"Looks like you're walking just fine to me." He came to a halt by the car, turned Keegan toward the trunk of the car. "Just place your hands on the car."

"Are you arresting me?"

"You're being detained."

"For what crime?"

"We got a call about someone suspicious in the area."

"Articulate a crime, officer. Suspicious is not a crime."

"Right now the crime is resisting."

Keegan rolled his eyes. "You mean obstructing. I'm obstructing your investigation. I'm not resisting because I'm not under arrest and I'm being compliant." He didn't want to bring a lot of attention to himself and decided he'd better just go with the flow and let him do his thing. "Go ahead, Officer, do your thing, but why do you think you need to cuff me?"

"Just securing you until we can figure this out."

"What's to figure out? You haven't even asked me my name."

"I'll be gettin' to that. Now place your hands on the car."

Sighing, Keegan did as he was told.

The officer grabbed Keegan's wrists and cuffed him.

"Spread your legs," the officer commanded, tapping Keegan's right ankle with his shoe.

Keegan grunted in pain. His temper flared. "Leave the freaking leg alone."

"Watch your mouth," the officer snapped. He searched him, making Keegan glad he'd put his gun away earlier. His wallet was removed. "Now," the officer said as he turned Keegan around. "I'm Officer Hornsby from the Tyler Springs PD. We had a neighbor call to tell us a suspicious man was hanging around Lizzy's house and I'm thinkin' that would be you."

"What constitutes suspicious, Officer Hornsby?" Keegan retorted.

In response, Hornsby drew his baton and smacked it in his hand.

Keegan sighed. Most cops don't carry them anymore, but he guessed Tyler Springs was probably a little behind the times, and this guy was a complete stereotype.

"I'm asking the questions here. All you have to do is give me the right answers and everything will be fine. You lie to me and we're gonna have problems. Believe me, you don't want to get me mad."

Keegan couldn't help it. He laughed. "I'm shakin' in my boots."

"You will be, now, what's your name?"

"Michael Moreland."

"And your address?" the officer asked, holding Keegan's license in front of his pudgy face. He nodded as Keegan recited it. "Now, tell me, Mr. Moreland, what you're doing hanging around Lizzy's house?"

"I live here."

Keegan staggered as the baton thudded against his thigh. He looked up, his face red with anger.

The officer smiled slyly. "As I said, if you lie, I'll know it. Now, once more, tell me what you're doin' here."

Keegan puffed out a breath. "I am telling the truth, officer. I am staying here at Elizabeth's house. I'm boarding in her extra room," he said, hoping his statement sounded sincere enough.

Hornsby pulled back his stick.

Keegan had had enough. "Don't do it," he warned quietly.

Officer Hornsby stopped mid-swing. Maybe it was something in Keegan's voice that made the officer realize that he was stirring a hornet's nest and it would be best for him to not proceed. The man lowered the stick, but kept his bravado.

"Listen, sir, I'm only gonna tell you one more time, you'd better start telling the truth or I will be taking you in."

Keegan shook his head. "Why won't you believe me?"

"You see, Mr. Moreland, I know things. This is a small town, and what you probably don't realize is that Lizzy and me are, uh, well, let's just say, we're close. We go back a long way. A very long way. So if she had a boarder livin' in her home, I'd know, because she would've told me. What do you have to say about that?"

"I'd say you're delusional."

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Acts 16:37

But Paul said to the officers: "They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we are Roman citizens, and threw us into prison. And now do they want to get rid of us quietly? No! Let them come themselves and escort us out."

Chapter Six

Officer Hornsby grabbed Keegan, spun him around and shoved his face down against the trunk of the cruiser. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Keegan answered between clenched teeth. "If you and Elizabeth are close, why haven't you been to see her one time during the past month? Because I've been here the entire month of September and I haven't seen anyone come to visit her. So if you have some strange belief that you and Elizabeth have something going on, I believe it's all in your head."

The officer slammed his weight against Keegan's back.

"Tell me this, smart boy. Where is Lizzy now?"

"I don't know," Keegan ground out.

Officer Hornsby walked to the front seat of his car and pulled out a second pair of cuffs. He grabbed Keegan's arms and led him toward the passenger side door. Next thing Keegan knew he was attached to the door handle.

"I'm gonna check out the house."

Keegan held his breath, hoping the jerk wouldn't go through his things. Since he returned just a minute later, he figured he was checking only for signs of Elizabeth. He thought of calling the officer's attention to the fact that it was obvious Mike Moreland occupied a bedroom inside, but he didn't want him to find his guns and badge, so he kept his mouth shut.

"Where is she, Moreland?"

"I don't know."

"You'd better figure it out quick, cuz if I don't find her very soon we're taking you in."

"For what? You have no grounds."

"Right now I got reasonable suspicion. That could change depending on what condition Lizzy's in when we find her."

"What are you trying to say? You think I've done something to her? Go f—"

Hornsby backhanded him, grabbed him by the front of his shirt and shook him. "Where is she?" the officer demanded.

Keegan spat blood from his mouth. It was obvious the guy cared for Lizzy and was truly worried about her. He realized the idiot could probably help find her. "Look, man, I'll tell you what I know. She went to visit her husband's grave site. She was supposed to be back by now. I don't know where she is. I was just on the phone to a buddy trying to get a ride to go look for her."

"And you don't know anything about her vehicle being abandoned on the side of the road about three miles from here?"

Keegan's face paled. "It is?"

"Yeah, her van, pulled off on the side of the road. No sign of her."

"Hell." Keegan jerked at his cuffs. He needed help now. "Get on it," Keegan said out loud, hoping John was still on the line.

Hornsby grabbed him. "Get on it? Who do you think you are?" When Keegan didn't answer, Hornsby shook him. "You know something, don't you? What did you do to Lizzy?"

"And the girls," Keegan added for him.

"What?"

"And the girls. We care about them too, right?"

"What did you do to them?"

"I didn't do anything to them. You need to stop worrying about me and start looking for them."

Hornsby's large fist slammed into Keegan's gut. He drew back again but Keegan had had enough. If he didn't stop Hornsby, the internal injuries could incapacitate him.

"Before you go too far, you might want to find out who you're roughing up. I have friends in high places."

The softly uttered words gave Keegan a reprieve. Officer Hornsby stood back, his eyes traveling over the stranger, wondering if he'd made a big mistake. It was at that moment, the screen door slammed and Elizabeth stepped out onto the porch.

"What in the world is going on?" Lizzy demanded.

"Where have you been?" Keegan growled.

"The van broke down. I had to walk with the girls."

"I came right past your van, Lizzy," Hornsby said. "I didn't see you walking. You know I would've picked you up."

"I took the shortcut through the woods that comes out at the back of the house. Mike, what happened to your lip?"

Keegan eyed Hornsby. "You want to tell her or should I?"

"Darrell Hornsby, what in the world has come over you. How dare you come onto my property and beat up my patient."

"Your patient?"

"Yes, my patient. I'm acting as a private nurse while he recovers from his car accident."

"Aww, Lizzy, why didn't you tell me?"

"Tell you? Why should I tell you? I wasn't aware I had to inform the local police of my every move."

"Of course, you don't. I just thought maybe because you and I, well, you know."

Lizzy glanced at Mike. His eyebrows were raised in question. Her eyes narrowed. She came down the steps to stand between the men. "No, Darrell, I don't know. Now, why are you here?"

"Mrs. Griswell called the station, said there was a suspicious man hanging around your house. Said lately there's been a car she didn't recognize driving down the street several times a day. I came to investigate and found this guy. I was getting ready to take him down to the station to question him."

"Mrs. Griswell is blind as a bat and an old busybody." She motioned toward Keegan. "Is he under arrest for anything?"

"No."

"Then I suggest you unlock those cuffs immediately and take yourself on outta here."

Darrell removed the cuffs. Keegan glared at him. Hornsby glared back, then looked back and forth between Lizzy and her patient. Suddenly, the officer stepped toward her, wrapped his beefy hand around Lizzy's arm. "Before I leave I think you and me need to have a little talk."

"Take your hand off her."

The command came quietly, but sent chills up Lizzy's spine.

"He's not hurting me," she said quickly.

Nevertheless, Darrell let go.

"Lizzy, don't you think you need to be careful about who you have living in your house?"

"Well, I didn't just pick him up off the street, Darrell. Now, I'm tired, I've had a bad day, so just go on now." She looked toward Keegan and sighed. "Please, come in Mike and let me see to your lip. You're bleeding."

Darrell watched as Mike moved toward the porch, his hand moving to the small of Lizzy's back as he ushered her up the steps. "You two got something going on?" he blurted out.

Lizzy whirled, her face colored. "That is none of your business."

"I should've known."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"You were a tease in high school and you still are."

Lizzy gasped.

Keegan started back down the steps, but she grabbed his arm to halt his progress. "Darrell Hornsby, good grief, you know good and well that Bradley and I were a couple back when we were in school and I have never, not ever led you on in any way, not back then and not since his death. Good Lord, Darrell, you and Bradley were supposed to have been friends. What would he think of you saying something like that to me?"

"What would he think about you taking some guy in off the street like some cheap hooker and..."

Keegan started back down toward Hornsby. At that moment the backup Hornsby had called for arrived. The second officer was out of his car in a second, his gun drawn. Keegan raised his hands in the air immediately. He wanted no mistakes that would lead to his accidental death or to Lizzy getting hurt.

Hornsby turned and shook his head at the officer. "It's okay, Frank. It was just a misunderstanding."

"Now you just go on and leave here, Darrell," Lizzy said. She motioned to the other squad car. "And take your little friend with you," she ordered.

The man stood there, staring at Lizzy for several moments. "Okay," he finally said. "But you and me, we got a lot to talk about."

"I have nothing more to say to you," she declared.

"Like I said, Hornsby," Keegan added. "You're delusional."

She stood there as the officers spoke to each other a moment and then took their leave. She turned to Keegan.

"Mike, I'm so sorry. Are you okay?"

"Oh, I'm just hunky dory," he said sarcastically. "And you and me also have a lot to talk about."

He took her by the arm and ushered her inside the house, grabbing up his cell phone as he passed it. "Still there?"

"Well now," John said. "That was entertaining to say the least. I'm on your street. You need me?"

"Nope. I'll call you later." He shoved his phone in his pocket and turned to Lizzy. "Oh, yeah, we gotta talk."

"Okay, okay, we'll talk, but please let me just see to your face first. You're bleeding."

"Damn it, Elizabeth, I'm okay."

"Don't you curse at me."

"Sorry."

"You're forgiven. Now, I'll get you a wet cloth." She strode toward the kitchen.

Keegan glanced at the girls who were all curled up on the sofa in the den, watching TV. He wanted to have a few cross words with their mother, but darn if she wasn't doing her thing where she has to take care of everyone else first.

He sat at the table. "Elizabeth, I hope you don't put any credence into what he says. He's got issues."

"No, of course not," she said sadly. "I admit, it hurt a little, but I really don't care what he thinks."

"He says your van is about three miles away?"

"Yes, it is," she said, bringing the cloth to him. She tried to dab at his lip, but he grabbed the cloth from her and simply wiped his face. "It just stopped. I have no idea what's wrong with it."

"How far was the shortcut you took?"

"About two miles."

He shook his head as he imagined her having to drag all the kids out of the van and then trudge with them for two long miles through the woods.

"Daisy and Lily struggled?"

"A little. I took turns carrying them. It was hard on all of them. They're exhausted."

"And how about their mother?"

She shrugged as the telltale tears came to her eyes. "It's been a hard day all the way around. The van breaking down was just the perfect ending."

"Okay," he said softly. He sighed. "Listen, I want you to tell me all about it, but first, go to your room, soak in a tub, get comfortable, while I make dinner for you and the girls."

"No, I couldn't..."

"Elizabeth, will you stop fighting me every time I try to do something nice for you?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes welled with tears and spilled over. He reached for her but she shrugged him away. Lifting her chin, she strode out of the kitchen.

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She hadn't meant to fall asleep, but the bath water was so warm

and comforting and felt too good on her aching muscles. When she woke, the water had cooled and her fingers and toes were prunes. Rising, she rubbed her skin briskly with a thick towel, combed out her wet hair and rubbed some lavender cream on her arms and legs.

Donning a nightshirt and her robe, she headed for the kitchen and the disaster she expected to find, yet glancing around the kitchen told her Mike had things very much in hand. The kitchen was clean, dishes drying in the drainer and a plate of leftovers, covered with plastic wrap, sat on the counter. Peeking at the food, she found some sort of rice and chicken concoction, green beans and cheese bread. Not bad, she thought.

She headed for the den to grab the girls and get them ready for bed, but Mike beat her to it. They were all in their pajamas and they were all sound asleep, lying all over the sofa and all over Mike. Lily slept on his chest. Daisy was up under one arm. Violet under the other. Rose's head lay on one thigh, and Heather's on the other. Oh, how she wished for a camera.

The floor creaked as she stepped into the room and Mike immediately opened his eyes.

"Hey," she whispered.

He smiled.

"Let's get them to bed," she said.

One by one they carried the babies to their beds and tucked them in. Heather woke briefly, but Elizabeth spoke softly to her until she drifted back to sleep.

They went back into the den. "Did you eat?" Keegan asked.

"Not yet."

"Come on," he said, guiding her into the kitchen. He put the plate into the microwave while she sat.

A minute later he set the plate of food in front of her. "What would you like to drink?"

"Oh, I'll get..."

"What would you like to drink, Elizabeth?" he said firmly.

She sighed. "Just water."

He iced down some water and set it next to her plate.

Keegan lowered himself into the chair next to her. "So, sweetheart, tell me about your horrible day, and then, I'll tell you about mine."

Sighing, she took a bite, chewed slowly. Her face registered surprise at the tasty dish.

"This is good."

"Thanks. My mother insisted on teaching me to cook a few easy dishes before I went away to college. Now, tell me about your day," he repeated.

"I took the girls to see their father's grave site. I take them each year. I want them to know about him. I want them to know he was a good man. I want them to appreciate him. When we got there, though, Bradley's parents were there. That's never happened before. Mrs. Anderson was visibly upset. I didn't approach the grave while they were there, but she was still very angry. She stormed over to me and the girls and told me she couldn't believe I would have the nerve to come there."

Lizzy stopped while she got herself under control. Keegan touched her hand.

"That's ridiculous. You were Bradley Anderson's wife. Doesn't she realize that you have as much right, maybe even more of a right, to be there as she does?"

"No, she doesn't think that at all. I tried to explain to her that I meant no disrespect. That I loved Bradley too, but she wouldn't listen. She yelled at me. Called me a horrible name in front of the girls. Said I'd killed her son. The girls started crying and I hurried them off to the van. We stayed there until the Andersons left. I tried to explain to the girls why Mrs. Anderson was so upset, but I don't think I got through.

"After that, the girls were frightened and didn't want to see the grave, so I took them to Mrs. Hurley's house. Then I went back. I tried to talk to Bradley. I know that sounds silly, but speaking to him there sometimes it feels as if he can really hear me."

"It doesn't sound silly. I understand."

She shook her head, waved her hands in the air. "Anyway, the words just wouldn't come this time. Finally, I went back to get the girls. I was so upset, Mrs. Hurley insisted I stay and eat something. The time got away from me. Still, I would've been home by four if the van hadn't broken down. It took forever to walk the two miles with five little girls."

"Elizabeth, why didn't you call?"

She looked up. "Call?"

"Yes, you know. On a phone?"

Her chin lifted at his sarcastic tone. "Well then Mr. Smartypants, how was I supposed to call?"

"On your cell phone?"

"Oh, well, I don't have a cell phone."

"Elizabeth," he said, forcing himself to be calm. "Why don't you have a cell phone?"

She frowned. "I can't afford one."

"Elizabeth, you can't afford not to have one. Not when you have five children."

She stopped eating and slammed her fork down. "You can't get blood from a turnip, okay? I just don't have the money for a cell phone right now. You have no idea what it's like trying to make ends meet, worried if you'll have enough to feed the children next week. There are some things I just have to do without."

His heart lurched as he watched the fire in her eyes. Her silky blond hair bounced around her shoulders as she jerked her head, emphasizing her words, her pale skin showed spots of red on her cheeks. "Okay, okay, calm down. I'm just a little upset myself. I was terrified that something happened to you and the girls. I couldn't reach you. I kept picturing these terrible scenes in my head."

"I'm sorry, Mike. I didn't mean to worry you needlessly."

"It's what I get I suppose, for caring so much."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. And all day, while I waited and worried, I decided, this will not happen again."

"What do you mean?"

"First, I am gonna get you a cell phone. Second, I'm buying myself a car. And third, I'm gonna ask you to not go off without talking to me first."

"Now, just wait a minute."

"Look, I know that sounds pretty archaic, but I can't go through another day like I did today. If I'd known you were going off, I would've asked how I could reach you and you would've told me you had no cell phone and I would've given you one of mine. Elizabeth, I care about you. You and the girls. I want to protect you."

"Protect me from what?"

He drew a deep breath and blew it out. "From any harm."

Lizzy rose, cleared her place. "The only danger I was in was getting snagged on a briar or stepping in a hole. No big deal."

Not wanting to argue about it, he shoved the subject aside. "I bet you're sore from carrying the girls, aren't you?"

"Sore and tired," she admitted.

"Come on," he said, pulling her along. "You're about to get the royal treatment."

He led her to her room. "Take your robe off," he commanded.

Sighing, she obeyed and untied the belt. His large hands came to her shoulders and removed the garment.

"Lie down on your stomach."

Again, she obeyed.

He carefully leaned over her and began to slowly massage her neck and shoulders.

Lizzy purred as he moved his strong hands over her, letting the tenseness and stress leave her body.

Keegan moved down her arms and between her shoulder blades. "I meant to tell you, I accidentally broke the television that you bought for my room."

"You did? How?"

"I was exercising and clumsy me, I knocked it off the dresser, but don't worry, I promise it won't cost you a thing. I've already called Jeff and he's bringing out a new one tomorrow."

"Jeff?"

"Yeah, he sells electronics. He's giving me a great deal."

"Oh, well, good then."

"I hope you're not upset by me breaking the TV."

"No, Mike, of course not."

"Then why do you seem upset?"

"Really, I'm not. I was just thinking about what it may cost me to get the van fixed."

"Oh, well, I've already had it towed here and I'm gonna look at it for you tomorrow."

She tried to rise up, and he pushed her back down.

"Oh, Mike, you shouldn't have."

"Why not?"

"Because, Mike, you shouldn't be spending your money on things to do with this family."

"Again, why not?"

Supporting herself on her forearms, she looked back over her shoulder. "Mike, look, just because you've, well, I mean, just because, oh, I don't know how to put this."

"Just because we've become close doesn't mean that I have the right to help you?"

"Sort of. What I mean is, it doesn't mean that you're obligated to help me."

"I don't feel obligated. I wanted to help and I did."

"Well, I don't want you to help."

"Why not?"

"Will you stop saying that?"

"No. Now lie down and let me finish this."

Letting out an exaggerated sigh, she settled back down. Keegan began to work on her thighs and calves. Next, he slowly rubbed each foot as she moaned and groaned her approval.

Lizzy tried to rise, but he placed his other hand on her back and pressed her down.

"Just relax," he said.

"Relax with me," she invited.

Sighing, he took her up on her offer and lay down beside her.

"Your hands are so strong," she whispered. "You make a great personal masseuse."

His deep chuckle against her ear made her smile. Her eyes closed in contentment as he ran his hand up and down her arm then brought both arms around her and squeezed her tight. She turned her face up to him and he kissed her deeply, lingering over her lips. What a beautiful man, she thought. Inside and out. The few times he seemed grumpy or bossy were far surpassed by the times she'd watched him playing with the girls, tending to their needs and those of their mother. If only he could be interested in her for the long run. Yet, she couldn't blame him if he wanted to get back to his old life. Her brow wrinkled though, as she realized he hadn't really mentioned leaving. As a matter of fact, he seemed as if he didn't want to leave. He certainly was well enough now to take care of himself. Dare she hope it's because he had real feelings for her?

Her heart began to race. He'd said he cared. Maybe it was even more than that. His actions spoke volumes. He was protective of her, he did things for her, and the girls certainly didn't seem to scare him. Is it possible? Could she be so lucky as to find someone to share her life with?

Lizzy was falling in love with him. She admitted that. At least to herself. Maybe if he knew how she felt he would open up and share his feelings. Then again, what if she was wrong? What if he was just a very nice man who intended nothing other than a pleasant time with her before returning to his life? If that were so, then blurting out her feelings could chase him away. And she wasn't ready for him to be gone. Not yet.

Keegan sighed. "Elizabeth, what is going through that beautiful

head of yours this time?" he asked softly as he took her hand.

"I was thinking about how good it feels to be close to a man again. It's been so long. And not just any man. It feels good to be close to you. The way you make me feel, it's incredible."

"How do I make you feel?"

"Like a woman. Like I'm beautiful. Like I'm desired."

"Well, you are all those things, Elizabeth. You are incredibly beautiful. As for you being desired, I want you so much I can barely function when you're not around, and as far as you being a woman? You are a sweet, wonderful, strong woman that I have grown to admire and respect."

Biting her lip, she reached up and touched his face. "Thank you, Mike, for those kind words."

"I'm not being kind. I'm stating the truth."

She grinned. "I love it when you get all testy."

"I'm not being testy."

Sliding off the bed, she stood in front of him. "Yes you are." She bent over and kissed his mouth.

Lizzy smiled sweetly at him as she pulled away slightly, placing her hands on his thighs. He gave a soft grunt of pain.

"What? What's wrong? Are you in pain?" she asked, running her hand over his thigh.

"Just a bruise I'm sure."

"A bruise from what? Let me see?"

He knew she wouldn't let it go so he stood and lowered his sweats, stood there in his boxers as they both examined his thigh. A long slender bruise covered his thigh.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Your cop boyfriend happened," Keegan answered.

"Hmph, he is NOT my boyfriend and I could just kill him for doing this to you."

Keegan grinned. "I think I like having you defend me. You offering to kill someone for my sake, it's kinda sexy."

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Startled, Lizzy shot up straight out of bed. The morning light shone through the lace curtains of her window. Glancing at the clock on her dresser, she hit the floor running. She never overslept. Never. Heather would miss the bus and Lizzy had no way of getting her to school. Pulling on her robe, she threw open her door and flew out into the hall. The girls' rooms were empty. The entire house was empty.

Panic enveloped her. She dashed across the hall toward Mike's room. That's when she heard the voices coming from the other side of the front door.

Lizzy jerked the door open. Four tow-headed little girls sat on the top step of the porch, watching Mike, whose head was under the hood of her van. He looked up smiling.

"Hi sleepyhead," he said softly.

Her hand settled on her chest, lamely trying to still her speeding heart. "Where's Heather?"

"Hi, Mommy," the girls called, all rising to give her morning hugs. "Heather went to school on the bus."

Keegan approached, wiping his greasy hands on a rag. "I hope you don't mind that I got her off to school. You were so tired, you didn't even move when I tried to wake you."

She frowned. "I don't like her going off to school without getting to give her a hug. Was she upset about not getting to see me?"

"She didn't seem to be. She seemed to think it was great fun surprising you about what a big girl she was, getting dressed and ready all by herself. I'm sorry, though, Elizabeth. I guess I overstepped my bounds a little bit."

Sighing, she shook her head. "No, it's okay, I guess. It just feels weird." She bent down and scooped up Daisy who was pulling on her robe. "Are you hungry?"

"We already had breakfast," Rose answered for her.

"You did?"

"We made oatmeal. Mr. Mike helped us."

She looked over at him. "Well now, Mike, you're just a jack of all trades, aren't you?"

"Maybe," he replied, not sure if she thought that was a good thing or bad. He came forward and kissed her tenderly.

The girls giggled.

"Good morning," he said softly. He looked down at the girls who seemed to be all ears. "I hope it's okay that we made breakfast. The kids were very helpful."

Lizzy smiled. "No, again, it's okay. It just seems weird, this guy cooking breakfast for a house full of females. I usually don't let the kids in the kitchen without an adult."

"Well, I'm not a kid."

"No, you're definitely not a kid. You're definitely all man. And speaking of all man, did you find out what's wrong with the van?"

He grinned. "Elizabeth Anderson, I believe you just made a sexist remark. Very cool. And to answer your question, it appears to be the timing belt."

She frowned. "How much is that to fix?"

"Several hundred dollars, assuming it didn't damage the engine when it broke."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Don't worry, I can fix it for practically nothing."

"What is practically nothing?" Lizzy asked.

"Let me seee, hmmm, maybe I could talk you into baking another one of those apple pies."

She smiled. "It's a deal. You really are a jack of all trades, huh?"

He shrugged. "Always been good with my hands," he answered. He glanced down at his watch. "Um, Jeff is coming by soon to deliver a new TV and then we're going car shopping. So, I'll pick up a new timing belt while we're out. Will you and the girls be okay for a while? I could be gone a few hours."

"We'll be fine."

He nodded and smiled. "Okay, well, here's a concept. I'll have my *cell* phone and you can *call* me if you need me. You could even practice with the new cell phone I gave you!"

✝✝✝

1 Peter 3:7

"Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered."

Proverbs 31:10-31

"A wife of noble character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies. Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value. She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. She selects wool and flax and works with eager hands. She is like the merchant ships, bringing her food from afar. She gets up while it is still night; she provides food for her family and portions for her female servants. She considers a field and buys it; out of her earnings she plants a vineyard. She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks. She sees that her trading is profitable, and her lamp does not go out at night. In her hand she holds the distaff and grasps the spindle with her fingers. She opens her arms to the poor and

extends her hands to the needy. When it snows, she has no fear for her household; for all of them are clothed in scarlet. She makes coverings for her bed; she is clothed in fine linen and purple. Her husband is respected at the city gate, where he takes his seat among the elders of the land. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and dignity; she can laugh at the days to come. She speaks with wisdom, and faithful instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the affairs of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children arise and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praises her: "Many women do noble things, but you surpass them all." Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the Lord is to be praised. Honor her for all that her hands have done, and let her works bring her praise at the city gate."

Chapter Seven

When Jeff pulled up in the big white van with 'Davis Electronics' logos all over the sides, Keegan drew a sigh of relief. Soon, they would have the evidence back in his possession and turned into the proper authorities. Shortly thereafter, arrests would be made, including one traitorous U.S. Senator, and finally, Keegan's family, and Elizabeth and her girls would all be safe.

Shortly after Jeff's arrival, John pulled into the driveway. Keegan walked out to speak with him and made a big show about handing him an envelope and giving him directions. Keegan stepped back, patted the fender of John's car and told him to be careful. John pulled away.

Jeff also made a big show about unloading the television. He took it into Keegan's room. Meanwhile, Keegan told Lizzy and the girls goodbye. He quickly jumped into the rear of the van which had been backed up to the porch, making sure no one could see him do it. Jeff came back out, got into the driver's seat and drove away.

"What will someone get if they call the number on the side of the van?" Keegan asked.

"A sales clerk who will inform them that Mr. Davis is out making a delivery. She will ask if they are interested in the sales we have going and they will hang up satisfied."

Keegan nodded. "Good job."

The van swung out onto the state road and headed toward Highway 78, mile marker, 101. Keegan dialed John. "Any tails yet?"

"Oh, yes, I have a tail. I hope they have plenty of gas. We're going after wild geese."

Keegan made his way into the front passenger seat. They drove in silence. There was no small talk. Keegan and Jeff knew the serious consequences of their mission and neither were inclined to take it lightly. Once they were out of town, Jeff pulled the van over on a dirt road, making sure they were hidden from the highway.

He quickly climbed out, grabbed the magnetized signs off the side and back of the van and replaced them with new signs that declared them part of the county road maintenance crew.

Details taken care of, they proceeded toward the destination.

Keegan watched as pine trees and telephone poles sped past, looking for anything familiar. He perked up when he passed a pasture with a giant, plastic cow standing at the fence. The landmark was unforgettable, even if he had been on the phone at the time.

"We're close," Keegan said quietly. Of course, he didn't have to say that. Jeff was keeping close watch on the mile markers.

When they reached 101 Jeff pulled the van over onto the shoulder. Off to the right was nothing but dense woods. Keegan surveyed the area. He had the details engraved in his brain. He pointed to where the shoulder of the road disappeared down a steep incline.

"Down there," he said.

Jeff moved the van farther down the road so Keegan's window was just above the place he indicated. There was no way Keegan could climb down and back up, even with a walking cast, so he would remain in the van and give directions through his headset.

Jeff made his way down. When he turned to look over the area it was actually easy to see where the car had torn through bushes and undergrowth to where it landed.

Keegan spoke. "Very close to where you are, you should see two small trees, about ten feet high, growing close together."

"I think I see them," Jeff said.

"Okay, approximately twenty feet to the left of those trees you should see a small mound. It won't be freshly turned because I pounded the ground until there was no sign of any digging."

Jeff rummaged around, moving slowly over the area. He looked up at the same time as Keegan when they heard the rumble of approaching motorcycles.

The bikers slowed and then came to a halt, one just in front of the van and one just behind.

"Uh oh, looks like we got trouble," Keegan said.

"Naw," Jeff said with a grin. "Looks like we got help. Keegan, meet agents Dan McGraw and Matt Lane."

They each nodded at Keegan, but neither left their bikes.

"You could have told me they were coming," Keegan chided.

"What fun would that be?" Jeff laughed as he continued looking.

Keegan looked back down the hill just as Jeff knelt down beside a small mound. "Think I found it," he said.

Removing a knife from a strap on his ankle, he began to dig, careful to not inadvertently damage the contents of the bag. Within only a few minutes he held the small plastic bag up for inspection.

Keegan's heart sped up at the sight of the coveted contents. That day had almost seemed like a dream. Now, Jeff holding the bag in his hand proved it'd been real enough. In only a few seconds, Jeff was in the back of the van, accessing the computer he needed to make copies of both the computer chip and the separate audio files.

Keegan nodded his approval. This bunch didn't mess around. They were on top of what needed to be done and they spared no expense. As if thoughts of Mr. Lee and his security company conjured it, Keegan's phone rang.

"Tanner," Keegan answered.

"Agent Tanner, this is Jason Lee."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm assuming you and Agent Davis are in possession of the evidence needed to put the bad guys away?"

"Yes, sir, as of just a few minutes ago."

"Good. I've just received information as to who blew your cover up in Tennessee. First, let me assure you, I've checked out your superior officer, Nigel Kort, very thoroughly, including audio surveillance and he is dedicated and loyal. I understand you have a problem with him placing you in a civilian's home, and I must say I also have a problem with that, nevertheless, his first and foremost thought is making sure this mission ends with the bad guys in jail and he was willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen."

"Well, Mr. Lee, I have to say in retrospect, I believe Nigel put me here knowing it would ensure my cooperation to the end, so it seems we both had trust issues," Keegan said.

"I understand," Jason replied. An understatement. Without trust, no operation will succeed. "Now tell me, Special Agent Tanner, does the name Brian Cantrell mean anything to you?"

"Brian Cantrell?" Keegan said, surprised by the name from his past. "He was at Quantico with me. It's been several years. He dropped out. Actually, he was kicked out. He got in over his head with a girl."

"Over a girl? How does one get kicked out of Quantico over a girl?" Jason asked.

"He got carried away on a date and tried to rape the daughter of one of our officers."

"Smart. And why does he have a vendetta for you?"

"I didn't know that he did. I suppose it could be that she, the girl, came running to me that night. Believe me, if I'd had a choice I would've stayed completely out of it. I didn't accuse him of anything.

I just took care of the girl and got her home. That was it."

"Apparently, that was enough."

"I don't understand. How did Brian even know I was in with Celados and Hartman? I was in deep cover. There's no way he could've known since he wasn't with the Bureau anymore."

"Unless he was working for Senator Hartman as a bodyguard and saw you or your picture."

"Seriously? He was Hartman's bodyguard?"

"He *is* Hartman's bodyguard. One of them. And apparently, he derived a good deal of personal satisfaction in calling you out."

"Well, geez, I mean, we were friends once. I'm having a hard time believing he actually wants me dead."

"You were acquaintances. He's a bad seed, Agent Tanner. Don't be naive."

"Yes, sir. You're absolutely right."

"Okay, more business. Hartman does not believe you're dead. He doesn't buy it. On a more positive note, none of them think your family knows that you're still alive. They say your parents and sisters couldn't have faked that kind of grief."

"So they're safe," Keegan stated.

"For the time being. To be sure, I've taken the liberty of providing a little reinforcement in keeping them safe."

"Thank you."

"I've put an agent at the hospital to keep an eye on Dr. Duncan, who may be in danger if they track you there and start sniffing around. I'm working with Nigel to cover all the bases and..."

"You're working with the FBI?"

"Yes, and I actually do that on a regular basis. It keeps relations good. It's always better to work together. That's another reason I checked out Kort. I have to trust who I do business with. You don't think I should be working with the FBI?"

"Oh, it's not that, sir. I'm just surprised the bureau is willing to work with outsiders."

"Well, I can be very persuasive, besides the fact that I've worked with them many times. I consulted for them for years. I've trained their trainers. As I was saying, Jeff will be close to help you keep those women safe and when John gets back from seeing your parents he'll stick around to help."

"So, you knew I'd sent John to see my parents?"

"I try to know everything. If you insist on contacting them, John

is the one to do it. He's a good man. He trained under Grandmaster Kino and I'd trust him with my life. I know the two of you served together and I know you feel the same way about him. He and I have spoken and strategized his approach to your family."

"Thank you, Mr. Lee. I'm indebted. Before I hang up, may I get your opinion on something?"

"Shoot."

"Now that we have the evidence, do you think, once the arrests are made, Elizabeth and her girls would be safer if I leave?"

"Tough call. It's possible the organization will come to an abrupt halt once the main players are arrested. Notwithstanding, they'll be mad as hell and they'll realize you're still alive and, as you stated, these guys have long arms. Their men will eventually trace you to Lizzy Anderson, even if you're gone. What will they do to Mrs. Anderson when she tells them she has no idea where you are? I have a feeling they won't just turn and walk away. No, I think the Andersons are in this to the end. It's unsettling, maddening to be honest, but that's how I see it. Kort was wrong to think you would just be able to leave with no consequences for the Andersons, and I've told him my opinion on that. He accepts that he may have called that one wrong. However, from what I gather, you're in no hurry to leave anyway."

Keegan grimaced. "Is there anything you don't know?"

"Oh sure, just ask my wife."

Jeff climbed back into the driver's seat and pulled away from the side of the road. The bikers stayed a short distance back. Jeff handed a bag to Keegan. "One for you, one for me," he said, then nodded at the bikers. "And they have one. Let's get you dropped off at your car. I'm anxious to take care of business."

Keegan nodded, turned his attention back to Mr. Lee. "We're on the road."

"Good. One last thing. You may eventually have to get the Andersons out of their home. I can arrange for a safe house, when you're ready."

"I appreciate your help, but I don't want to move them unless I absolutely have to."

"I understand. So, Kort and I will keep you in the loop. Just remember that if we play it that way, you may have to move fast if and when the time comes."

"Got it."

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Lizzy sighed with pleasure. It was almost perfect, this beautiful fall Tuesday evening. The aroma of chicken baking in the oven drifted out to where Keegan and Lizzy sat side by side on the front porch swing. The remainder of the meal had already been prepared and sat waiting on the stove. Lizzy had cooked up a pot of fresh snap beans. Keegan had mashed the potatoes for her, Lizzy thought with a smile. She'd watched his powerful forearm as he'd worked the masher through the pot of boiled potatoes. When she'd tried to tell him to next add some milk and butter he'd raised his chin indignantly, telling her he didn't need any guidance. She'd grinned at him but offered no more advice as he added the milk and butter, turned on the electric mixer and added salt and pepper until he'd nodded in satisfaction.

The evening was early enough that the sun was still high and the day, pleasantly warm. Keegan's arm draped loosely across the back of the swing behind Lizzy and she leaned her head softly against his shoulder. The girls, engrossed in the chalk pictures they were creating on the front walk, giggled softly amongst themselves.

"After dinner, would you like to go for a walk?" Keegan asked.

Smiling, she turned her face up to him. "I'd love to."

She was wearing the sweet smile that was her normal expression, Keegan observed. It was a definite lure for him even though he was sure she didn't realize that. He bent his head and brushed his lips softly across hers. He'd meant it only to be a chaste kiss, but he couldn't resist going further. Her eyes closed as she gave a soft moan in the back of her throat. Keegan looked up at the small pat he felt on his thigh. Heather stood at his knee.

"It's okay if you kiss my mom," she said precociously.

"Oooh, is that right?" Keegan asked.

"Yes. You're like, her boyfriend, right?"

He looked to Lizzy for help. He wasn't quite sure what she wanted to tell her children about him.

"Yes," Lizzy said softly. "Does that upset you?"

"Uh uh. I like Mr. Mike. He's funny and I want him to be my daddy, 'cause our daddy went away, and all the kids at school have a daddy, but I don't. Would you like to be my daddy, Mr. Mike?"

"Oh, sweetheart," Lizzy jumped in. "Let's don't ask that of Mr. Mike right now, okay? Let's just help him to get well. After dinner we're gonna go for a walk. Doesn't that sound nice?"

"Where are we gonna walk?"

Keegan leaned forward. "I was hoping you girls would show me

that little shortcut you took through the woods." He didn't tell them he intended to show John and Jeff and that they may make use of it if it became necessary.

"Oh, sure, we can show you, but you're probably gonna have to help Daisy and Lily."

He smiled. "I think I can handle that."

Lizzy rose. "Come on, girls," she called. "Let's go inside and eat."

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Lizzy watched the muscles in Mike's arms and chest ripple as he moved around, wiping off the table, pushing in chairs. Everything he did seemed to be ultra-masculine. He glanced over at her. She gazed deep into his eyes. She was in love with him. Hopelessly. It hurt so much to want him so badly and to know there was no way he would want to stay with her and her five kids.

He'd frozen earlier this evening when Heather had put him on the spot. Lizzy had the feeling she'd rescued him. Well, what had she expected? She hadn't very well thought he would say, "Sure, Heather, I'd love to be your daddy which means I'll have to marry your mom." Still, she could dream couldn't she? Mike had encouraged her to do so, and so now, she pretended he was hers to keep. That was her dream. She pretended that he loved her and lived with her here in this old house, or maybe in his home in Denver. He probably had a fine house in the mountains. He would make love to her every night in front of a crackling fire. He'll tell her he loves her and that he'll always love her.

And she would tell him how much she loves him, and what a miracle it is that they found each other. The reality of the situation asserted itself again. He didn't love her. However, she did love him. And she wanted to tell him so. Not to put pressure on him. She just wanted him to know. It would be okay to tell him, wouldn't it? She'd already told him it was a probability. She could tell him how she feels and let him know that she expected nothing in return.

She looked at him again. He had a lovely pained look on his face. She smiled.

"What are you smiling at?" he asked.

"I love that look on your face."

His brow furrowed. He was usually pretty good at schooling his features. He shook his head. "What look do I have?"

"It looked like you were struggling to decide if the chairs were in just the right place and was there any sticky spots left on the table."

He chuckled, a sound she loved.

"Well, Mrs. Anderson, I don't want to mess up the chore or you might not let me help you anymore."

She left the sink and came to him, wrapped her arms around his neck. "I'm not that much of a taskmaster, am I?"

"Not sure I'd call you a taskmaster, but still, if you're even noticing my facial expressions, then I think you have an eye for detail. Did I miss a spot?" He leaned down close to the table, eyed the surface and wiped again.

She giggled. "I'm just thoroughly enjoying every little nuance of this experience."

"What experience is that?"

She motioned around her. "This beautiful domestic experience. Me doing dishes. You cleaning the table. The girls playing quietly in the other room. It seems so peaceful. So lovely."

"I agree, Elizabeth." He bent his head and kissed her.

"Oh, Mike," she purred softly.

"Oh, Elizabeth," he mocked.

Sighing, she leaned close and spoke softly. "Mike, I have something I want to tell you."

He eyed her curiously. "Are you gonna tell me that you just can't live without eating pickled pig's feet once a month?"

She giggled. "No."

"Are you gonna tell me that you have a secret obsession with Tom Cruise movies?"

"No," she said again, running her hands over his chest. "I mean, I do, but that's not what I was gonna tell you."

He raised his head. "Really? Me too!"

She laughed. He touched her nose.

"Okay, I'm listening. What do you have to tell me?"

Lizzy looked down, drew a quick breath and looked back up. "I love you."

His sharply indrawn breath forced her to go on quickly. "It's okay, Mike. You don't have to love me back. I didn't tell you so you'd feel like you have to say it back to me. I'm just so full of this feeling, I thought I would burst if I didn't tell you."

"Elizabeth, I..."

She placed her hand over his mouth. "Please, Mike, you don't have to say anything. I mean it. Please, just let me have my say. I love you. I've never felt for anyone what I feel for you. Since Bradley, no man has ever spoken to me like my opinion matters. No one has cared if I'm

tired, or sad. And certainly no man has given two figs about the children. I've never met a man who makes me feel what you make me feel, not even Bradley, and I just wanted to say that I love you and I'm grateful for the chance to get to know you and I guess I agree with Heather, as wicked as it sounds– I'm glad you had that accident and came to the hospital. That's it. I'm finished. Now don't say anything else to spoil it. I just wanted to get it all out."

Keegan's jaw clenched. He looked into the eyes of an angel. He wanted to tell her how he felt. He wanted to let her know that he loved her too. How could he not? However, he wanted to tell her when she knew his real name. He wanted Keegan Tanner to tell her he loved her with all his heart and he wanted to make a life with her and the girls. First though, he had to get all this behind him. Any day now, he'd be given clearance. Any day now, he'd be able to fill her in on the whole ugly deal. Sighing, he reached out and took her face in his hands. He gazed deeply into her eyes. He couldn't tell her yet, but he could show her, he thought, as he laid his lips on hers.

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Keegan snapped up his phone as he glanced at the clock. Six in the morning. "Tanner," he said, his heart racing. Early morning phone calls were usually not favorable.

"Turn on the TV," John said.

Keegan grabbed the remote, tuned in the headline news. He watched as newscasters spent fifteen minutes telling about the arrest of one Anthony Celados, the head of a black market baby organization. They mentioned others arrested, including Victor Washington. Finally, they got to the meat of the issue. Senator Jack Hartman of Massachusetts is being called to answer questions about certain accusations and his involvement with the organization.

"Yes," Keegan said softly. He returned his attention to John. "Where are you?"

"I'm in Knoxville. I'll be meeting with your parents shortly. I'll be back in Atlanta by this afternoon."

"Fan-freaking-tastic."

"Yep, Keeg, this is all about to be over. You know though, you can't lift your cover yet. We've got to round them all up. As of right now, Celados and Hartman are figuring out you made it back with evidence that will put them away."

"Yes, John. I know all too well." Keegan drew a deep breath. "Listen, John, be careful today. They could be watching my family. I

don't want them going after my family and I don't want them going after you."

"Amazon is making a delivery, Keeg. Some books that were ordered on how to cope after the loss of a loved one. The information we wish to deliver is included in the box with orders to destroy immediately once it's read. There is also a cell phone. They'll have one contact on the phone. Me. I don't want to risk putting them in touch with you yet."

"I'm grateful to you, John."

"You don't have to tell me that. Keep your eyes open, man. I better not have to go back to them with a different message."

"Will do."

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Lizzy finished putting away the girl's clothing and changing the sheets on all the beds. Her mood was high, happy and lighthearted. It'd been a lovely week. Everything was going so well. Mike was healing well. He'd fixed her van and now had a car of his own in which he'd given them all a ride the other evening to get ice cream cones at the Dairy Queen. The evenings were spent like a real family. Mike would watch the girls and help Heather with her homework while Lizzy made dinner, then they would eat dinner together. Afterward, Mike did dishes side by side with her. After that, baths, and then the famous storytelling sessions. Once the girls were in bed she and Mike would chat about this and that until they were sure the girls were sound asleep and then they would cuddle and snuggle and kiss. She wanted more, but he was such a gentleman.

She closed her eyes as she thought of the times they would cuddle in her bed. He would hold her tight. She would fall asleep in his arms. Please, dear Father, she'd prayed. If it's your will, let him love me. Let him stay with me. Please. She knew it was a fairytale she asked for, as well as a fairytale she was living. Much like Mike's stories, she knew it would one day come to an end, so she cherished each and every second. Any day now he would tell her it was time for him to get back to his former life.

Today, Mike had been kind enough to keep the girls occupied out in the backyard while she finished with her chores. Heather had come home from school, thrown down her backpack and headed straight out to join Mike and her sisters.

Lizzy could hear shrieks and laughter. Stealthily, she moved to the back door and peeked out to see what they were up to. Mike had a rake

and had made a huge pile of leaves and the girls were running and jumping into the pile. When Rose almost jumped right on top of Daisy, Mike stopped the game and gathered the girls around him. A minute later they came running toward the house.

"Mommy, mommy, we need some of your old clothes," they said all at once.

Lizzy opened the back door. "Whatever for?"she asked.

"Mr. Mike is gonna show us how to make a scarecrow with the leaves and some old clothes."

She smiled over their heads at Mike, who was easing himself down to sit by the leaf pile. "Okay, let's go see what we can find." Old clothes were easy, she thought. That's about all she had. She found an old pair of jeans and a torn long-sleeved shirt, then went a step further and added a hat and scarf to the pile. Next she found some of the girls' old clothes so they could make little scarecrows too. Once they were each loaded down with what they needed, they scrambled back out to join Mike who was lying in the grass, relaxing with his hands tucked under his head.

Lizzy watched as the girls ran out and jumped right onto his stomach. She started to open the door and fuss at them, but he'd turned tables quick enough and in only a few seconds had them scrambling away from the 'tickle monster.'

She turned away, chuckling as an idea formed in her mind. She would run into town and grab some pumpkins to carve and buy some hotdogs to grill and some marshmallows to roast and they would have a grand old time tonight. Grabbing a piece of paper, she wrote a note, in case Mike came inside looking for her, telling him she'd be right back with a surprise. Lizzy couldn't stop smiling. She would take complete advantage of this wonderful time together because she imagined any day now Mike would let her know that it was time for him to leave. She slipped quietly out the door.

Keegan showed the girls how to stuff the clothing with leaves, stopping to help Daisy and Lily whose little hands were only able to put two or three leaves at a time into the jeans. While Keegan and the four youngest worked on the large scarecrow, Heather started on the one to be made out of her own clothing. He smiled at her when she raised her head to seek his approval on what she'd done so far.

"You're doing a great job, Heather," he said with a grin.

"My teacher at school says I'm very good at crafts. I told her that's because my mom does lots of crafts with us."

"She does?"

"Uh, huh. We make stuff all the time. We do finger painting and we made tambourines out of paper plates and we made flower things out of tissue paper and we cut stuff out of 'struction' paper and glue it on stuff. Mommy is lots of fun."

"Yes, she is," he said softly.

The conversation was cut short when one of his cell phones went off. He pulled the one that could only be Nigel and pressed it to his ear. "This is Tanner."

"We got trouble, Agent Tanner. I need you to get Mrs. Anderson and the girls out of the house."

He could feel the blood drain from his face. "Whatta we got?"

"Both Dr. Duncan and one of Ameritech's men have called me within the last fifteen minutes. Dr. Duncan called to let me know that a couple of men came into the hospital asking about a man who'd been in a car accident several weeks ago. They described you. Duncan told them he remembered you, but then he recalled he wasn't supposed to give out any information about your whereabouts and told them he had no idea where you went once you were released."

"Okay, so I've got some time."

"No, I don't think so, Tanner. Ameritech's man said he overheard some of the nurses talking about you. Apparently a couple of men questioned them too. I'm assuming the same guys. The nurses told the same story and they mentioned you by name."

"Michael Moreland, right? So then, what's the problem?"

"Thinking the men were friends of yours the nurses commented on your looks and wasn't it a shame nurse Liz couldn't have hit it off with you. The men seemed very interested in this nurse and asked how they could contact her. When they were told she left off working at the hospital about the same time you were discharged, the agent believes they put two and two together. It's only a matter of time before they are able to track down her address."

"Damn. When did this conversation take place? How long do you think I have?"

"Conversation happened about three hours ago."

"Three hours? And I'm just now finding out?"

"The moment the agent heard the nurses talking about the conversation they'd had with the men he called it in."

"So where was he when the men were actually there?"

"He was tailing Dr. Duncan while he went to lunch since his

primary job was to protect the man."

Keegan gave a frustrated sigh. "So it could take them days to put it all together or they could be here any minute."

"That's right, so get them out. Now. There are agents there outside the house. They'll stand by until you're out."

"The same agents that followed my friend around while I retrieved the evidence? Great."

"Just get them out, Tanner, and all will be fine."

Keegan hung up. "Girls, we're gonna go on a big adventure."

"Yay!" the little ones cried.

"I wanna finish my scarecrow," Heather said adamantly.

"Sorry, we have to go now." He picked up Daisy and Lily and started toward the house.

"But..."

"Now," Keegan barked.

Heather started to cry. He drew a breath, turned. "I'm sorry, Heather. I didn't mean to yell at you, but, sweetie, this is very important. We have to go get some clothes packed and then we're gonna go on a trip."

"Where are we going?"

"Down to a ranch that has horses and cows."

She sniffed. "I love horses. Mommy says one day I might get to learn to ride one."

"Well, the place we're going has lots of horses," he said. "Come on, let's hurry."

"Okay."

Keegan burst through the kitchen door. "Elizabeth!" He didn't know how much time he had, but he did know a short 'trust me,' type of explanation would be best for now. "Elizabeth!" he called again, bending down to place the girls on the floor. "Go get your clothes," he ordered.

Keegan rushed to Lizzy's room. When he didn't find her he looked out the front door. The van was gone. He felt like his heart might explode. He limped back to the kitchen and finally found the note Lizzy left on the counter.

'Mike, I ran out to get a surprise for you and the girls. I won't be too long. I love you. Elizabeth.'

Okay, calm down, he said to himself. He'd never been one to panic. Maybe because he'd never had to look into the startled blue eyes of five tiny girls and know their lives and that of their mother depended

on him. He pulled out his cell and called Lizzy's new cell number, but his eyes closed with the sickness that descended over him when he heard the cell phone ringing in Lizzy's room. Opening her door, he confirmed that she'd left it lying on her dresser.

He dialed John next.

"Yo," John said cheerfully.

"Where are you?"

John sat up quickly. "Very close. I was just on the way over to see you. What's up?"

"Gotta get the girls out of here now. Don't know how much time I have. Elizabeth's not home and I can't reach her."

John cursed softly.

"I need you to come get the girls. I'll stay behind and grab Elizabeth the moment she comes home."

"Maybe she'll be home before I get there. Either way, meet me at the other end of the shortcut through the woods," John said.

Keegan closed his phone and rushed to his room. He pulled the leather bag from the closet and dumped its contents on his bed. He strapped on his holster and gun and attached a knife and gun inside his boot cast. Next, he emptied the entire contents of the duffel he had under his bed into the leather bag except for his badge which went into his back pocket. He breathed. Now, he was Special Agent Keegan Tanner. Moving as quickly as his bad leg would allow him, he carried both bags out of his room, tossed the leather bag on the kitchen counter and went to the girls' rooms with the empty duffel.

"Everyone dump your stuff in here," he commanded. "We're gonna play a game. Let's see who can get their clothes and toothbrushes and pajamas in this bag by the time I count to twenty."

He began counting while the tiny girls giggled and ran back and forth to him with armfuls of little girl stuff. Once he reached twenty he commended them on their effort and took a few seconds to add whatever he could stuff in the bag. "Okay, get your jackets," he said. "And everyone grab your pillows."

He dreaded the next thing he had to say. "All right girls, everyone gather around and listen. We're gonna go for a little walk through the woods to meet my friend John. Remember John?"

"I do," Heather said. "He's the man who came and ate dinner with us the other day."

"That's right. Very good, sweetie. Mr. John is gonna give us a ride down to where the horses are."

"Where's Mommy?" Lily suddenly asked, her lips trembling.

"Your mom went to the store to get some extra stuff for our trip. You get to ride in John's big car with him and me and your mom are gonna ride together in the van. Does that sound okay?"

He realized the minute he asked the question that it was a mistake. He should never ask a child if something is okay with them— because it usually isn't.

"I don't want to ride with John. I want my mommy," Lily cried.

He didn't try to reason with her. "I know, sweetie," he said as he lifted her. "But sometimes we have to do what we're told. And today, you and your sisters have to ride with Mr. John. He's a very nice man and he has a little boy that's just two years old."

"Two is just a baby," Rose said. "Can I hold the baby?"

"Yes, when you get to John's house. Okay, everybody has their pillow?" Keegan asked.

"Yes," Heather answered, seeming to sense the importance of the event that was unfolding.

"Then let's go. John's gonna meet us at the end of the shortcut through the woods."

Accepting her fate, Lily leaned her head down on Keegan's shoulder and wrapped her tiny arms around his neck. She trusted him, he thought. He hoped he was worthy of that trust.

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Getting the girls off had been no fun, but it had also been a huge relief. There were tears and little girls clutching at his neck. John had stepped in and promised new toys, and new clothes on a trip to Wally World to get car seats. He'd added in a ride on a merry-go-round and happy meals to get their cooperation. It had worked.

Keegan returned to the house fully expecting Elizabeth to be home. She wasn't. Noticing the unmarked car parked about twenty feet down the street he approached and spoke with the agents, asking if they'd been there when Lizzy left out. He sighed at their negative response and explained why he was still on the premises. The agents promised to stand by until Keegan and Lizzy were able to get away.

Keegan walked back through the house. He'd found a suitcase in Elizabeth's closet and loaded everything of hers he could get into it, having no idea what she absolutely needed. He'd grabbed her cell phone, shoved it in the side pouch of her bag. Limping heavily from all the walking he'd been doing, he carried his bag and Lizzy's suitcase out to his car and drove the car around to park it at the entrance to the

shortcut, pulling in behind a large bush.

He left the keys in the car and walked back through the woods toward the house, praying she would be there. She wasn't. He didn't dare leave to find her. If he went searching for her and missed her and she came home to find a house full of bad guys she'd be dead. Where is she? Is it possible that she'd encountered bad guys in town? Do they already have her? Maybe he needed to go search for her after all. The agents out front could watch for her in case she returned.

His cell went off. "Tanner."

"Jason Lee. Jeff is on his way. Hang tight. I had him taking care of some details, but he's on his way now. We'll have you and Mrs. Anderson out of there."

"The girls are..."

"With John. I know. I'm sorry I'm just now getting to you. I have some men up in Tennessee who may have some critical information about the big shipment and I couldn't break contact with them."

"You're talking about the five blonde, blue-eyed babies?"

"Yes. First, we've identified each of them. All five have been reported missing within the last four months. We were hoping to find the place they're being held, but we've found nothing."

"They're paying five million per blond head. It'll be impossible to find where they're being held."

"You're right. We stick with the shipment. Rumor has it though, that the shipment date may be changed. It may be moved up, due to the arrest of major players."

"Okay then, but I need to know the shipment date the moment you know. I will be there."

"You got it."

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Something wasn't right, Lizzy thought. Something was very, very wrong. The back door was open and Mike stood on the back porch, a phone to his ear. The girls were nowhere in sight. Mike was wearing a holster over his shoulder and it housed a very lethal looking gun. However, it was the one-sided conversation she could hear that caused her heart to leap in terror.

"The five blond, blue-eyed babies? They're paying five million per kid? I need to know the shipment date? I'll be there?" At first she couldn't remember how to breathe. Now she gasped in a breath. Mike spun around to face her, tucking the phone back into his pocket.

"Elizabeth. There you are."

She didn't move. "Where are my children?" she asked.

He swallowed hard. "Elizabeth, I had to send them away."

This couldn't be happening. It just couldn't be. Her eyes bore into his. "Where are they?" she screamed. She moved toward him, grabbed the front of his shirt. "Where are they?"

"Calm down, Elizabeth. They're fine. I sent them with a friend. With John. Remember him?"

"Oh, no, no, he's in on this too? How could you? How could you, Mike? They trusted you. I trusted you."

He had no idea what she was talking about. He had no time to find out. "Elizabeth, you have to come with me now."

"I'm not going anywhere with you."

He didn't have time to argue or reason with her. "You have no choice." He wrapped his steely fingers around her wrist. "Come on, now. We have to go. Listen to me, I'm an F..."

Sheer panic and terror gave her the strength to jerk away from him. "No! How could you do this? Please God, no," she cried taking off at a run toward the girls' rooms.

He chased her down and caught up to her in Heather's room. She stood in the center of the room, her hands up to her cheeks, her eyes wide. "Elizabeth, we have to go. Now."

He grabbed her arm and she hauled back and swung at him. He ducked. She scrambled away. He caught her in the hall and wrestled her down as she screamed and cried and bucked against him.

"How could you?" she screamed. Suddenly she stilled as she sobbed uncontrollably. Rolling over she looked up into his face. "Please, Mike. Please don't hurt my babies. Please, don't hurt them."

"No one is gonna hurt them," he said, glancing up at the small window next to the front door. He'd thought he'd seen movement, but at a second glance there was nothing. Impatiently, he wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her off the floor. "We have to get out of here now."

She kicked. She bucked. She screamed obscenities. She grabbed onto anything she could as he tried to get her through the kitchen and out the back door. He tugged hard to get her to let go of the kitchen counter, then the refrigerator. "Dammit, Elizabeth, let go. I have to get you out of here."

He swung her violently toward the door, then shoved her weight over to balance on his hip so he could maneuver out the door. He kicked open the screen and drew up short, coming to a complete halt.

Funny how a pistol with a silencer pushed against one's forehead seemed to always accomplish that. Elizabeth had also become still. He didn't dare turn his head to see why, but he could assume it was because she was looking at a similar scenario.

He took a few seconds to catch his breath as he waited for the opening he needed. He could dispose of two bad guys easily enough. He just needed the right opening.

The man with the gun pointed at his forehead spoke first. "Hello there, Special Agent Tanner. Put the lady down and step back into the kitchen. Slowly now. No sudden movements."

Keegan loosened his hold on Elizabeth who hadn't made one sound. He wondered if she'd fainted. Without turning his head to look at her, he set her carefully down. She didn't slump to the floor so he figured she was conscious.

"Rocky," a man behind Keegan called. "Come in here and take this sweet thing into the other room."

There were three, Keegan thought. Okay, there were three, and three guys would be a bit more difficult, but still doable. He turned his head slightly to get a better view of the situation. The Rocky character was a giant. The huge man approached Elizabeth and ran a frying-pan-sized hand over her face.

"Well, hello there, gorgeous," Rocky said.

"Get your hands off me you big, ugly freak!" she screeched.

Keegan winced as he saw the fury behind the big guy's eyes. The backhand came swiftly and knocked Lizzy to the floor. Keegan started forward but the gun pressed harder against his head.

"Just calm down there, Agent Tanner."

Keegan stilled. He would be no good to her dead.

Lizzy rolled over, moaning. Blood ran from her nose and lip. Rocky grabbed her by one arm, dragged her into the family room and slammed her down into the wingback chair that was in the far corner.

"Move, Agent Tanner."

Keegan turned and followed Lizzy. They hadn't killed them yet, which meant one of two things. Either they were told to make them suffer. Or they needed information. Either way, he knew he was facing a very bad time. Sweet, innocent, Elizabeth however, had no idea what lay in store for her and his heart broke for what she was about to face.

Eyeing his captors, he tried to calculate their strengths and weaknesses. Rocky's strength was obvious. He was big. Probably not too smart though. And he had a temper, but didn't appear to have a

gun. Keegan glanced at the one who'd been behind him in the kitchen. He did have a gun. It too was equipped with a silencer. And his name was Roberto. Keegan recognized him from his stint with the organization. He was small and wiry, with black hair, black eyes, and an arrogant manner. The third man, the one who'd stopped him at the door, was about Keegan's size and appeared to be the leader. Buzz-cut, brown eyes, calm, cool, collected and deadly. Just then a fourth man entered the room. Frank. Another one that Keegan knew.

"Frank," Buzz-cut said. "You got the rope?"

He held up a length of yellow, nylon rope. Keegan noted the small gun tucked in the waist of his pants. Frank shoved Keegan against a wall and began disarming him. Keegan's gun was pulled from the shoulder holster and tossed onto the sofa. From Keegan's pockets, Frank pulled a wallet, two cell phones and finally his badge. Frank held the latter up for all to see. It seemed to be a source of great amusement to them.

When Frank reached inside the boot cast and pulled out his second gun and the knife, Keegan sighed. He hadn't really thought Frank would miss them, but he'd hoped.

"Good job, Frank," Buzz-cut said.

"What's going on?" Lizzy cried.

Buzz-cut didn't acknowledge the fact that she'd spoken other than a raised eyebrow and taking aim again at Keegan's head.

Keegan understood the warning well enough. "Elizabeth," Keegan snapped harshly. "Keep your mouth shut. Don't say a word."

She gasped, but said no more.

"Frank, let's get him secure," Roberto said as he moved forward and pressed the end of his gun against the side of Keegan's head. "Okay, Agent Tanner, put your hands together like you was gonna pray, not that it would help you any."

Keegan elected to do exactly what he was told so they wouldn't get any ideas to use Elizabeth to make him obedient. Besides, if they wanted to make the mistake of tying his hands in front of his body, who was he to question their stupidity? Still, four at a time would be hard to take. He'd have to get them to split up somehow.

His eyes shifted to Elizabeth. Her hands were together. Her eyes closed. He realized that she actually WAS praying. Suddenly her eyes opened and bore into his, obviously trying to convey the hatred she felt toward him. Her blouse was spattered with her blood. Her body shivered uncontrollably. He couldn't think right now about the fact that

he loved her more than his own life. If he couldn't save her, Heather's worst fear would come true and the girls would become orphans. Wards of the state. The thought of John and his wife having to tell them that their mother was dead was too much. He wiped the thoughts from his mind. He would find a way to save Elizabeth.

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Psalm 23:4

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."

Chapter Eight

"On your knees, Tanner," Roberto ordered. He kicked Keegan's cast. His leg went out from under him and he sank to his knees, grunting in pain.

Elizabeth gasped. "His leg is broken, you idiots," she blurted out.

Keegan's eyes flew to her face. He tried to communicate to her with his eyes, to tell her that anything she said was the wrong thing. "I told you to be quiet," he said brusquely, speaking harshly to make them think he didn't care about her. Luckily, this time they ignored her.

Lizzy glared at him. Her response to them kicking Mike had been automatic. Why she defended him, she had no idea. She hated him. He could burn in hell for all she cared. He stole her children. Shipped them away for money. The evil it would take to do something like that she couldn't even comprehend. Oh please Father, where are they? Are they terrified? Are they crying hysterically for me?

The business Mike had had with John and Jeff the night they'd come over for dinner, was it to plan the kidnapping of her children? She'd fed them. She'd baked a pie for them. Mike had been so generous, offering to pay. Why not? He was about to receive five million dollars per child. And he'd told her to buy something for herself to wear. And my God, it must've been hilariously funny, knowing what he was about to do. The tears spilled over. My babies, where are my babies? It didn't make any sense. He couldn't have done what it sounded like. He just couldn't have. And who are these men?

"So, Agent Tanner, or should I say, Special Agent Tanner, let's talk, shall we?" Buzz-cut said.

Keegan shrugged. "Knock yourself out."

"Let's talk about the information you took from us."

"What about it?"

"We want to know everything you know."

"I would think that with the arrests that have been made it would be obvious by now," Keegan stated flatly.

The blow came hard and fast and he grunted as he hit the floor, Lizzy's shocked gasp echoing in his head. Frank and Roberto lifted him none too gently and forced him back on his knees. Blood ran down

his chin.

"Let's just try again," Buzz-cut said calmly.

Keegan blew out a breath. "Look, you've heard the charges. That's what I know. I know the organization has abducted children and sold them. I know they've ordered hits. I know the names of most of the kids abducted. And I know Senator Hartman is involved."

"What are you talking about?" Elizabeth cried. "And why do they keep calling you Agent Tanner? Who are you?"

Buzz-cut swung around to peer at the woman. Unfortunately, Roberto kept his gun solidly against Keegan's head.

"Who do you think he is?" Buzz-cut asked her, a grin on his face.

"His name is Michael Moreland. He's a writer."

Roberto and Frank laughed. "Good one, Tanner."

Keegan's jaw clenched, his lips pressed into a thin line. The muscles in the side of his face quivered.

Buzz-cut narrowed his eyes, turned to study Keegan. "She means something to you, doesn't she?"

Keegan swallowed. There was no good answer. If he denied it, they would assume he was trying to protect her and she was dead. If he confirmed it, she was dead. He chose not to answer ol' Buzz and speak to Elizabeth himself.

"Elizabeth, I'm an FBI agent. I've been working undercover to..."

Frank plowed his fist into Keegan's gut and then backhanded him, sending him sprawling again. As Frank and Roberto lifted him back to his knees he couldn't help but think about his blood that now stained the carpet and how hard Elizabeth would probably work at removing it—if she lives.

"Mr. Hunter asked you a question," Frank sneered.

"What is she to you, Tanner?"

He shrugged, raising his shoulder to blot the sweat from his eyes. He needed to be able to see. "I did her," he finally said. "I mean, who wouldn't, right?"

"I know that's right," Rocky muttered from his place beside Elizabeth, running his big hand over her hair.

"You horrible..." Elizabeth hissed, glaring at Keegan. She couldn't even think of a word bad enough to call him.

Hunter turned back to Keegan, no longer interested in the woman. "What else do you know?" Hunter demanded. "You were in Celados' home and you tapped his phones, so what did you hear? And who have you told?"

"Nothing else," Keegan stated, glad the attention had shifted back to him.

Hunter didn't believe him for a second. He nodded at Frank who swung at Keegan's face again. Keegan raised his tied hands and blocked the punch, which infuriated Frank.

"Move again and I'll blow your head off," Roberto said quietly.

Frank lit into Keegan. Even after Keegan slumped down on the floor, he continued kicking him. When Frank and Roberto set Keegan up onto his knees once more, he knew this was it. If he lost consciousness, he and Elizabeth would both die. He needed to divide them and there was only one way to do it. As sweat and blood dripped from his body, he gazed up at Elizabeth. She had tears running down her cheeks. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry I got you into this," he said.

Lizzy's eyes fixed on his. He'd said he was an FBI agent. He was working undercover. So maybe he didn't really take her girls. Maybe he was protecting them from these guys. She was suddenly grateful her sweet innocent girls weren't here to witness this. Her mind was filled with so much confusion. She had no idea what to say, what to think.

Hunter watched the exchange, then moved closer to Keegan. "Tell me what else you know, Tanner."

"I don't know anything else."

Hunter turned to the big man in the corner. "Rocky, you want a turn with the pretty nurse?"

"You know I do."

"Take her into the next room and show her what you like to do with pretty, young, nurses."

Elizabeth screamed as Rocky reached for her and wrapped his big hand around her arm. She kicked and struggled, much as she had when Keegan had tried to get her out of the house.

"Frank, maybe you'd better go with him. Hold her down for him. She's a little tiger."

Frank grinned at Keegan. "I'd be happy to help any way I can."

Keegan watched them leave the room, bile rising in his throat. He'd accomplished what he'd intended, though he'd done it at Elizabeth's expense. It had to be done. Now all he needed was for Roberto to look away, just for a second. A split freaking second.

Hunter tucked his gun into his slacks and made a show of rolling up the sleeves of his silk shirt. "Talk, Agent Tanner, and I'll call him off," Hunter said as he moved forward.

But Keegan wasn't listening to him. He'd been listening for

sounds from the other room. Sounds that Roberto would think were entertaining. When Elizabeth screamed obscenities and there was a loud crack of flesh hitting flesh, Keegan got the break he needed.

Roberto looked up toward the other room, a smile on his face. Keegan moved so rapidly, Roberto never knew what happened. Keegan rose, swung behind Roberto. His bound hands covered Roberto's gun hand. Mr. Hunter Buzz-cut went for his gun. Keegan's fingers contracted over Roberto's, squeezing off two shots. Hunter dropped.

Roberto fought Keegan for the gun, twisting until it pointed at Keegan. He pulled the trigger. Bullets hit the sofa behind Keegan.

Enough of that, Keegan thought and took the man down and slammed his hand against the floor. The gun bounced away. Roberto produced a knife and they rolled together, the knife taking small nicks from Keegan's face, arm, leg, before he was able to maneuver his body to Roberto's rear. Instinctively, Keegan's forearm worked its way around the man's neck, contracted, twisted, the neck snapped.

In seconds, Keegan scooped up Roberto's gun and crashed through the twins' bedroom door. Frank drew and fired immediately, hitting the doorjamb beside Keegan, but flew backward when a black hole appeared in his forehead. Rocky clambered his way off Lizzy, and advanced toward him. Keegan raised the gun.

"Okay big guy, you're unarmed so I'm gonna give you a chance to live. Get down on your knees."

Rocky smiled. "That ain't gonna happen." He started forward.

"Back off, you idiot."

Rocky grinned at him. "Can't nobody take me on and win."

"Listen bud, you may be big but you are no match for a bullet, now freakin' back off."

Rocky charged.

Keegan fired, hitting him in the gut. The man hesitated then came forward again. Keegan decided he couldn't take any more chances. His hands were still tied together so fighting the man would be certain death for him and Elizabeth. He fired again, this time aiming at the head. Keegan didn't miss often and this time was no exception. Rocky staggered backward. His large body landed next to Lizzy on the bed.

Lizzy squealed, unable to move away. Keegan stuffed the gun in his waistband and moved to the small youth bed where Elizabeth lay whimpering. Her blouse was gone. Ripped to shreds. Her bra straps were down around her arms.

Gently he pulled the bra into place and leaned over her. "Elizabeth,

I'm an FBI agent and you have to come with me now. I will protect you. I'll take you to the girls. Please. You have to trust me."

Even as he said it, he realized how ludicrous the statement was. With his hands still bound he helped her to sit up. She was obviously dazed and in shock. Her head turned slowly to look at him.

"You'll take me to my girls?"

"Yes, but we have to go, right now." He held his hands out to her. "Untie me."

She nodded. Hands trembling, she worked at the knot. A minute later Keegan was free.

"I need to get dressed," she said softly, the tears starting anew.

"There's no time." He pulled his black t-shirt over his head then turned it and pulled it over hers. "Here, wear this for now." Dragging her to her feet, he made sure she was steady.

"Come on." He led her quietly back to the den where he recovered his possessions. Along with his guns and knife, he took the gun from Hunter's hand.

Taking a second to run to the kitchen table and grab Lizzy's purse, he led her toward the French doors that opened on the backyard. Turning to her, he placed his finger over his lips. They slipped out the door. Keegan had her stand with her back flat against the back of the house. He peeked around the corner. Someone approached.

"Don't move," he whispered to Elizabeth.

The man stepped from the side of the house. Keegan stepped behind him and bashed his head with his gun. He grabbed Elizabeth's hand and pulled. "Let's go."

They dashed across the darkened backyard, headed toward the woods. They heard someone shout. Shots rang out. "Go!" Keegan yelled at Elizabeth, shoving her ahead of him. He turned, intending to return fire but instead took a hit in the shoulder. The force knocked him to the ground. Grunting as he transferred his gun to his left hand, he took aim. In the dimming light he saw two silhouettes in the yard and one on the porch, all firing in his direction. Then three quick rounds came from the woods behind Keegan and the three bad guys went down. A black figure appeared beside him. "It's me," Jeff said quickly. Leaning down, Jeff pulled Keegan to his feet.

"That's some pretty good shooting," Keegan said.

Jeff nodded. "Yeah. Video games."

They hurried down the path. When they got to the end, they found Elizabeth there, leaning on the bumper of the car, trying to catch her

breath. Keegan moved up beside her and placed a hand gently on her back. "You okay?"

Sniffing, she shook her head then leaned over and retched.

When she finished throwing up her guts, he tried to comfort her, but she jerked away from him. Quietly, she opened the passenger side door and got into the car.

"I gotta go back," Jeff said to Keegan. "There are agents down."

"They're FBI, I'll come with you."

"No way. First, you're injured and no good to me. Second, you need to get Liz outta here."

"I can't let you go back alone."

"I won't be alone. My Harley friends should be arriving any minute. I'm just gonna offer any help I can until the two agents are taken care of and then I have to boogie down to Savannah. Mr. Lee wants me to help watch the docks in case information on that shipment comes available. You get going."

Keegan nodded. "Hey, thanks back there."

"Just doing my job. Are you good to drive?" Jeff asked, nodding toward Keegan's shoulder.

"It's not bad, think I'll make it. I've got a good nurse."

"Yeah, only, I'm not sure she's interested in curing you right now. Good luck on that. Step back here with me a minute."

They walked to the back of Jeff's white van. Jeff pulled out a small towel and some duct tape. Wrapping the towel tightly around Keegan's shoulder, he taped it snugly in place.

"That should put enough pressure on it to get you by for a while."

"Again, thanks."

Jeff extended his hand. "See you in Savannah."

"Looking forward to it."

Keegan leaned in the driver's side of his car to pop the trunk. He glanced at Lizzy but she stared straight ahead. He walked back to the trunk, pulled a shirt out of his bag and slipped it on. Next he removed the boot cast and tossed it in the trunk, retrieved his shoe and pulled it on. Slamming the trunk, he limped around the car and got in. He glanced at Elizabeth, who hadn't moved, and started the engine.

The moment they were on the road he pulled out his cell. "Nigel. Tanner. I didn't get out in time with Elizabeth . . . no, she's alive, but you've got a mess to clean up . . . I had no help from the agents you sent so I'm assuming they're down. Jeff Davis went back for them . . . Yes, sir . . . Yes, sir . . . don't know how long it will take. I have to get

Mrs. Anderson down to her children and I'm hit . . . may not have to . . . the information I have is the exchange will take place the week before Halloween . . . oh, I'll be there . . . Yes, sir." He ended the call and tossed the phone into the console.

Keegan glanced at Lizzy. She stared straight ahead, her body shivering. Even though she made no sound, the tears continued to flow freely down her cheeks. Most of her hair in the front had torn loose from her ponytail and hung limply beside her face. She made no effort to push it back. There was a bruise on her cheek, just below her left eye. He reached over and flipped on the heat, hoping to warm her. It was the least he could do and probably the only thing she'd let him do.

They drove in silence. Lizzy glanced over at the man whom she'd thought she loved. Just a few hours ago, she'd been happily planning a fun family dinner. Family, huh. Darrell had been right. She really should be more careful about who she allows into her home.

She knew she should be grateful right now that her original fear had been a mistake. When she'd arrived home to find Mike, or whoever he is, on the phone, it'd sounded like he'd sold her children off. He'd said something about five blonde children being worth millions of dollars– and the girls *were* gone. Maybe those men had come to take her girls and Mike had sent them away to protect them. Then he'd tried to get her out of the house. She realized now that he'd probably been trying to protect her. It was because of her those men had caught him. He'd taken quite a beating. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye.

He stared straight ahead, wearing a grim, determined expression. His right hand lay on his thigh, his left hand gripped the wheel. His face was battered with bruises and cuts. She'd watched this man kill. He'd shot two men right in front of her. The same man who she dreamed about making love to her. The same man who'd held her so tenderly several nights. How could it be? How could she have fallen so hard and so quickly?

He's been lying to her this whole time. He's not Michael Moreland. Those men, they called him Agent Tanner. He's a federal agent and he just spoke on the phone to Nigel, his brother, whom, she supposed wasn't his brother at all. Forget all that, she told herself. The important thing is he's taking her to see her children who are probably frantic to see her.

Keegan glanced over at her, catching her watching him. She raised her chin defiantly. If he wasn't currently so miserable, the gesture

would've made him smile.

"Where are my children?" she asked, her voice firm and determined.

"They're on their way to Pine Forest. It's a small town in middle Georgia. They'll stay at the *Pine Forest Country Inn* with John and his wife, Jodi. They're part owners of the inn."

She was quiet a moment while she digested the information. "How long will it take to get there?"

"About four hours, but we're not going straight there."

"Where are we going?" she asked, starting to panic. "I want to see my girls."

His jaw clenched. "I know– but I can't make it. I have to stop."

"What do you mean you can't make it? Why do we have to stop?"

"I'm getting weak."

"Weak? Weak from what?"

He raised his right hand. His jeans were stained with a large, dark circle where his hand had been resting. "I was hit. I have to stop the bleeding. I'm pulling into a hospital in the next town."

Staring at the blood as it dripped from his wrist, she hardened her heart. "Fine. You go to a hospital, but drop me off at a bus station or something. I want my children." She regretted it the moment she'd said it, mostly because of the hurt that appeared in his eyes.

"If that's what you want," he said quietly.

She didn't respond. The blinker went on and she watched as he turned left, noting the sign that read, "Monroe, twenty-three miles." Reaching forward with his wounded arm, he took up his cell phone, pushed some buttons.

"Keegan, you okay?" John asked.

"A little woozy. Gotta stop."

"Jeff told me you were hit. He thought you'd be okay."

"Still bleeding. Listen, can you put Heather on the phone? Elizabeth is desperate to speak with the girls."

"Sure. She's pretty upset?"

"An understatement."

"Okay. I'm handing Heather the phone."

Keegan handed the phone to Lizzy. "Here ya go, Elizabeth, John is getting Heather to the phone."

She took the phone, pressed it to her ear, paying no attention to it being covered with blood. She looked into his eyes and her heart melted a tiny bit. "Thank you."

He nodded and lowered his hand back to his thigh.

Lizzy put the phone to her ear and waited to hear one of the voices she craved.

"Mommy?"

Her eyes welled with tears. "Hey, baby! What are you doing?"

"We're driving with Mr. John down to a hotel. There's horses there and cows too and Mr. John says Grams is gonna let us help her bake chocolate chip cookies."

"Grams? Who's Grams?"

"She's Miss Lisa's grandma. Miss Lisa has red hair and she owns half the hotel. I don't know which half, but it's on a big farm and they grow all their own food and stuff and Grams loves children and has beds all ready for all of us."

"That sounds wonderful. How are the twins?"

"They're good. Daisy and Lily are asleep right now, but Rose and Violet want to talk to you when I'm finished. Mr. John got new car seats for everybody. We had to pack our stuff real fast, but Mr. John says if we forgot anything he's gonna take us to the store and buy us anything we want, and he said we each get to pick out one special thing just for us."

"Well, it sounds like Mr. John has it all covered, doesn't it?" She glanced pointedly at the man driving.

Keegan cut his eyes to her briefly, letting her know he'd heard her and understood she was still upset.

"Yes. Mr. John is so nice and he's funny too, just like Mr. Mike. Where are you, Mommy?"

"I'm riding in the car with..." She stopped and turned her head to glare at him. "With Mr. Mike," she continued. "We're on our way down to the hotel too. Only I'm told it's not really a hotel, it's an inn."

"What's the difference?" Heather asked.

"Actually, there's not much difference. A hotel is probably a little fancier and has more rooms. I'll be there as soon as I can, baby."

"But if you come too soon we won't get to do all the things Mr. John said we could do."

Lizzy frowned. "I won't keep you from doing all the fun things."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

"Okay, well, here's Rose." She handed the phone to Rose.

"Well bye then," she muttered, shaking her head. It seemed her children didn't need her quite as much as she needed them. Because it

was her who'd been through hell. Luckily, they had no idea of the ugliness she'd encountered. They were off on a grand adventure.

Keegan listened as Elizabeth spoke to first Rose and then Violet. Her voice seemed to be getting further and further away. He couldn't really make out what she was saying and it finally dawned on him that he was going down.

"Bye, Mommy," Violet said, cheerfully. "Mr. John wants to talk to you."

"Liz?" John said.

"Yes," she answered coolly.

"Look, I know you're upset right now."

"Upset doesn't come close to describing what I feel right now," she said in clipped tones. She looked over at the man next to her as he pulled the car over onto the side of the road and turned on the interior light. Turning away, she gave her attention to John.

"Listen, Keegan didn't want to be placed in your home."

"Keegan? That's his name?"

"Yes. Keegan Tanner. Special Agent Keegan Tanner."

"And are you FBI also?"

"No. Keeg and I, we were in the military together. He needed my help and I came."

"And so you're trying to tell me he didn't want to come to my home to recuperate but as long as he was there he thought he may as well have a little fun, huh?"

"That's not how it was, Liz."

"He took advantage of me, John. You *all* lied to me, but he, he..."

John sighed. "Listen, I don't know his specific feelings, Liz, but he cares for you. I know he does. He didn't want to lie to you. He told me, he just wanted all this to be over."

"Oh, it's over all right."

Keegan reached out to touch her arm. "I need to talk to you."

She jerked her arm away. "John, I have to go now. I'm sure your buddy appreciates you trying to smooth things out for him. Please, just take care of my girls until I get there."

John sighed. "Of course. My wife and I will spoil them rotten."

She searched for the 'end' button, finally found it right in front of her face and ended the call, then looked over at, what was it, Keegan? "What?" she said haughtily.

"I've come up with a better plan. You drive. Drop me off at the hospital and you can drive my car down to the girls."

She didn't even blink. "Fine." Slamming her door open, she got out of the car and stormed around to the driver's side. Keegan slid over and reached out to pull his door shut.

"We're almost to Monroe," he mumbled.

"I hope there's a hospital there," she said.

"I saw a blue hospital sign back a ways."

She nodded, staring straight ahead.

"I have to tell you something, Elizabeth," he said, his breath labored. "Just in case."

Lizzy turned to him. He didn't look too good. His complexion was ashen, perspiration ran down his face. "What?"

"What I said about you back there, to those men– I said that to make them think I didn't care about you. They were there to kill me, Elizabeth. I was afraid of what they'd do to you if they knew you meant something to me."

Her eyes blinked slowly as she considered what he said.

He coughed and ran his good hand over his face. "Elizabeth, l love you. I want you to know that."

Startled by his declaration, her eyes filled. She watched in stunned fascination as his hand reached out to her. "You lied to me."

He dropped his hand, drew a ragged breath. "I had no choice, Lizbeth. I would've..." His body slumped over.

"Mike? Keegan? Oh, no." She took his pulse, made sure he was breathing then put the car in gear and took off. Grabbing the cell phone she kept pushing buttons until she'd called back the last number. She informed John of her destination.

Five minutes later she pulled up to the local hospital's emergency entrance. Jumping out of the car, she flew through the automatic doors and up to the counter. No one was there.

"Hello? Is anyone here? Hello?" she cried.

A woman came from around the corner. "Yes, may I help you?"

Lizzy pointed toward the door. "I need help. My– I mean, a man's been shot."

The woman swung into action, calling out to her coworkers. Lizzy ran back out to the car, an army of healthcare professionals behind her.

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Knees pulled up to her chest, forehead resting against her legs, Lizzy waited. She'd been ushered out to a waiting room. Security had been called and the man stood nearby just watching her. It seemed as if she'd been there a very long time. When she heard footsteps in the

room she raised her head. Two police officers approached. Lizzy straightened in her chair.

One officer sat down beside her. The other pulled one of the chairs around to face her.

"Ma'am, we understand you brought in the gunshot victim."

"Yes, sir," she said, becoming wary. She knew of course, any gunshot victim brought in, the police were notified, but she'd already told the hospital officials he was an FBI agent. She'd given them his badge and ID that he'd had on him. What more could they want?

One pulled out a small note pad. "Do you have any ID?"

"I think it's in the trunk of the car."

"We're gonna need it. For now what's your name?"

"Elizabeth Anderson."

"Ms. Anderson, can you tell us what happened?"

"I don't think so. You'll have to talk to his sergeant or captain or whatever they call it in the FBI."

"How did you come across him?"

She ran her hands over her face, trying to think clearly. If the dead men at her house were sent to kill him, then they could track him down. She wasn't sure what to say, for despite the anger she felt, she didn't want him dead. She was saved from the decision when Nigel Kort walked into the room, flashing his badge and taking over completely.

"Officers," he said. "You'll need to contact your chief. Until then, no one is to know about the man brought in here tonight and your question-answer session with Mrs. Anderson is over."

The officers left the room fairly fast, leaving Elizabeth alone with Nigel Kort.

He looked her over. "Mrs. Anderson."

She nodded. "How did you know where we were?"

"John Appel called me. Look, I know you've been through quite an ordeal in the past several hours. We're working on removing the bod, er, the mess that was left in your home. If you'd like I can have a man drive you down to pick up your children. By the time you get back, your home should be habitable."

Fury burned in her eyes. "Mr. Kort, I guess that's your real name?"

He nodded.

"I don't require your help in any way other than getting those people out of my house and cleaning up the blood. I will only be returning there to pack up and sell. If you think I can tuck my daughters into bed in the same room where I was assaulted and where Mike, I

mean, Keegan, killed two men, you're mistaken. Nor can I sit in the den with my family without seeing those bodies lying on the floor."

"Mrs. Anderson, I know you're upset. We had no choice. When we put Agent Tanner in your home we believed both he and you and your family would be safe."

"You believed? You believed?" She was incredulous. "You've met my daughters. How could you even take a chance with their lives?"

"We didn't think we were taking a chance. The danger was the same as when you take a drive in your car. Completely random."

Her eyes narrowed. "Well, Mr. Kort, I disagree with your assessment. Now, I'd like for you to leave me alone."

He shook his head. "Look, I may have been wrong, putting him in your home. He needed a place to recover that was private and out of the way. If I left him in a hospital or other facility, he would be dead. I was about to put him in a safe house, when Dr. Duncan mentioned you were looking for a patient to board in your home. It seemed like the perfect setup. A remote location. A private nurse. I took advantage of the opportunity. That's all there was to it."

When she didn't respond, he blew out a breath. "I'll leave you now, but if there's anything I can do, let me know."

He moved toward the door, then stopped. "I'm not a bad guy, Mrs. Anderson. I've been working on nabbing these guys a long time. I admit, I had a little tunnel vision. They've taken many lives. Men, women and children. They've kidnapped hundreds of children and a United States Senator is involved. I wanted them to go down. I wasn't sure if Agent Tanner was turning. He was acting strange, becoming paranoid. Even though I didn't think you were in any danger, I knew if he thought you were, or your family, in any way, he'd stick it out. I had to be sure he'd stick it out."

Elizabeth turned away until he left the room. Then she stood and fished the car keys, Keegan Tanner's car keys, out of her jeans pocket and headed out the door. She went to the trunk to grab his bag and found a suitcase with her clothes and toiletries in it. She realized he must have packed for her. Next to her suitcase was his bag. She grabbed it and slammed the trunk. Heading into the hospital, she asked the woman at the desk to make sure it was delivered to him when he got out of surgery. Without waiting for a response she left the hospital, got into the car and drove away.

"Goodbye, Mike," she whispered.

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Even though it was morning, Special Agent Keegan Tanner didn't feel like opening his eyes. He was weary. Heart sick. Celados' men had come after him, and hurt Elizabeth, as he'd feared. He took a little comfort in the fact he'd gotten the girls away in time. He supposed she was there by now, down in Pine Forest with the babies.

She'd been confused, hurt, and furious. She felt betrayed. He sighed heavily, his brow furrowing. She'd begged him not to hurt her daughters. What the hell? Where had that come from? How could she think he'd hurt the girls? What had been going through her head? He'd find out eventually. First, though, he had to get to Savannah and put a stop to the shipment. He needed to concentrate on matters at hand. He'd never had such a problem taking care of business. He guessed that was because he'd never been in love.

More than anything he wanted to drive down to Pine Forest and force Elizabeth to talk to him until they had it all straightened out, until she understood what he'd done and why, and until she knew he loved her. And yeah, he wanted to know that she still loved him, which he doubted heavily at the moment. Yet all that was impossible right now. First things first. He had to get going.

He forced his eyes open, letting them adjust to the light. The first thing he noted was he was back in a hospital gown. Next he noted the IV which was gonna have to be removed pronto. Then he'd have to have his possessions returned, namely his weapon and badge, which he assumed had been confiscated. Nigel would've been in touch with the hospital administration to clear his way. Hopefully, his clothes were nearby. He glanced around, looking for them and froze.

"Elizabeth?"

She started, stood. Came quickly to his bed. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. What are you doing here?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. I just know I couldn't leave you."

His heart soared.

"Elizabeth, we need to talk."

"Yes, we do. My heart hurts so much, and I'm hoping whatever you have to say is gonna make me feel a whole lot better, because I don't know how I can go on, living each day, taking care of my girls, feeling the way I do."

"I can't believe you're not with them right now."

"I've spoken with them twice. They sound as if they don't want me to come because then I'll ruin all the good fun they're having. I'm not sure how I feel about that."

He smiled. "What kid can resist all the things I heard John promise? Especially your sweet girls who've had to get by with the bare essentials."

"Exactly. Which is why I'm happy to let them have their fun, as long as they're not crying for me, and I was told this morning by John's wife, Jodi, that nary a tear has been shed."

Keegan started pulling at the tape on the back of his hand.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm removing the IV. Just speeding up the process of getting out of here." He held his hand out to her. "You wanna do it for me?"

Her lips pressed together. She sighed. "Why not."

Keegan watched her small, soft, hands as they gently removed the IV from the back of his hand. His eyes moved up to her mouth, where her teeth pressed into her luscious bottom lip and then moved up to her face, which at the moment was swollen and bruised on one side. He'd killed the men who'd dared to hurt her, but that wasn't good enough.

She looked up at his face. "What?"

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth," he said, his voice gruff. "For what they did to you. For what you had to see."

She looked down, concentrated on her task and on keeping her hands from shaking. "We'll talk about it, M, Keegan."

"Say it again."

"Say what again?"

"My name. I can't tell you how much I've wanted to hear you say my name. My real name. Every time you called me Mike, it was like being stabbed in the heart. Please, say it again."

Lizzy finished removing the IV, using a piece of the tape and part of the gauze to make a Band-Aid, then stepped back and extended her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Keegan Tanner."

He took her hand, pressed it between his, closed his eyes. "It's wonderful to meet you, Elizabeth Anderson."

They gazed into each other's eyes. It was Elizabeth who finally pulled away. "Okay, well, I'll, uh, I'll go ask for your release papers." She turned and left.

Keegan watched her go. He hadn't lost her yet. Maybe her love for him was strong enough to handle all this other muck and mire he'd dragged her through.

Two hours later Lizzy drove Keegan's car away from the hospital with Keegan sitting in the passenger seat. They were headed south, toward Atlanta, but didn't get very far when she turned into a motel.

"What are we doing here?" Keegan asked.

"I left you last night, fully intending to not look back. This is as far as I got. I went in, dropped to my knees and prayed. I thanked God that the girls were okay. I thanked Him that I was okay." She looked into his eyes. "And I thanked Him that you were okay. I asked Him what I should do, and I felt I should go back for you. So I did. We're staying here tonight, and you're gonna tell me everything you have to say."

He nodded. She popped the trunk and he retrieved his bag.

Lizzy dug out the room keycard and opened the door. Keegan tossed his bag on the queen-sized bed and sat down.

It was a standard room, with an orange and brown spread that matched the room-darkening draperies. One queen sized bed, a dresser with mirror, TV, and the dressing and bathroom areas on the far wall. Lizzy went to the thermostat and cranked up the AC. October in Georgia could mean highs anywhere from the sixties to eighties. Today had to be the latter.

"Are you hungry?" Keegan asked, watching her every move. She was walking with a slight limp. There were bruises on her arm and cheek. She wore jeans and a yellow t-shirt and she'd pulled her hair up in a ponytail.

She shook her head, sitting down on one of the two chairs at the tiny table by the window. "Are you? I guess it is lunch time."

"I can wait," he said softly.

"I spoke to Nigel Kort last night," Lizzy began.

"You did?"

"Yes. He came to the hospital, which was a good thing because he was able to call off the cops who were trying to interrogate me."

Keegan shook his head. "Lizbeth, I'm so sorry."

"Yeah. You keep saying that."

He ran his hands through his hair. "What did Nigel have to say?"

She shrugged and shook her head. "He apologized for putting you in my home and for putting my girls in danger. He said he was only thinking about getting the bad guys."

"When I woke up to find myself in your home, Elizabeth, I was livid. I didn't want to be there. I knew you were in danger."

"Uh huh, still, you could've warned me."

He shook his head. "The less you knew the better off you were."

"But you could've given me a choice. I would've asked you to leave. I wouldn't have put my girls in danger."

"To be completely honest, Elizabeth, once I'd been there a few

days, I was afraid of leaving. First, if they'd traced me there, even if I was already gone, they would've hurt you, and then I wouldn't be there to help you. Second..." He stopped, his hands falling loosely between his thighs. "Second, Elizabeth, I didn't want to leave you. I couldn't bear to leave you."

Standing, Lizzy walked slowly around the room, then stopped and peered at him. "What I'm waiting to hear Keegan Tanner, is that the entire thing wasn't a lie."

He stood, went to her and took her hands. "Elizabeth, I fell in love with you. I've never said that to another woman. I do love you. That night you told me how you felt about me, I started to tell you then, but I wanted you to hear it from Keegan Tanner, not from some name the bureau made up for me. All I could think about was getting this thing over and starting a life with you."

Her eyebrows shot up. She pulled away from him. "Maybe you'd better tell me everything. From the beginning."

He sat next to her. "Maybe you're right."

✝✝✝

Luke 8:17

"For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light."

Chapter Nine

Lizzy leaned her head back against the edge of the tub and let the hot water soothe her aching muscles. Her body hurt all over. She'd washed her hair, scrubbed her body and now felt too tired to move. Keegan had already showered and run to the Waffle House down the street to pick up some food.

She still had a hard time believing the incredible story he'd told her. It was crazy. Organized crime rings that stole babies. Grown adults who had no idea they'd been taken from their real families when they were babies. Now the heartache those families felt would come back again when they discover the truth, and they'll suffer all over again for the lost time. They'll never be able to recover what they lost. It was so sad. And that was just the ones who were still alive. Many were sold into slavery or for use by cults, satanists, or something even more nefarious. It was much more than sad.

Sighing, she stood and began toweling off. She finished dressing at the same time Keegan came back to the room. She was standing in front of the mirror, combing the tangles out of her hair. Turning, she watched him set the food down on the small round table.

It smelled wonderful and Lizzy realized she was famished. She hadn't eaten since lunch with her girls the day before.

"Umm, smells good."

Keegan only nodded his head. Cleared his throat. He wanted her right now. It was always like that. He and his buddies joked about it. When they'd been through some horrific episode on the front, the first thing they wanted to do was find a willing female. Using Elizabeth however, was not his intention. He needed to earn her trust again. He needed to be gentle. She'd listened to everything he'd had to say, but she hadn't said she still loved him, she'd only nodded her head in understanding. She'd asked how he truly felt about the girls and he'd told her he loved them as if they were his own. She'd cried then and when he'd tried to comfort her she'd pushed him away. That's when he'd jumped in the shower and offered to go get some food.

Now, she stood before the mirror, dressed in some jeans and the bright yellow t-shirt, combing her long wet hair and he couldn't help

but respond. Swallowing hard, he motioned toward the table. "I hope you like it. I tried to call you on your cell, but you didn't answer."

"My cell?"

He shook his head. "Yeah, you know, the one I gave you? The same one you left behind yesterday when you went to the store? I put it in your bag."

Her brow furrowed. "If I'd had it with me, we would've gotten out before those men came?"

"Probably."

"And you wouldn't have been beat to a pulp and then shot."

He shrugged. "That was inconsequential. You wouldn't have had to go through what you did."

She sighed. "Sorry. I'll try to do better."

He smiled. Her words told him there would be a future.

"So, why did you try to call me?"

"To ask you what kind of supplies I needed to buy to redo the bandage on my shoulder and to give you a choice on the food. I think I did okay with the medical supplies and as far as the food, if I recall, you're not very picky. I have patty melts and hash browns, scattered and covered. That okay?"

"Umm, yes. And orange soda. I'm in heaven."

She sat down. He sat across from her and they dug in. "Umm, this is just too perfect," Lizzy moaned. "Greasy and fattening. I mean, what could be better?"

He smiled at her. He adored her. "So, one thing we didn't cover earlier, Elizabeth. I'm just wondering, why did you fight me so hard when I tried to get you to come with me?"

She dabbed some oil from her lips. "I came home and the girls were nowhere in sight. Then I see you standing on the back porch wearing a gun. That right there made me wary. Next, I overhear your phone conversation. One side of it, anyway. You said something about blonde, blue-eyed babies being worth five million dollars per child and you'd be there to deliver or something like that. I asked you where my girls were and you said you had to send them away. I just totally freaked. I'm sorry."

"There's nothing for you to be sorry about. You acted like any mother would have. I'm the one who's sorry."

Drawing on the straw, he finished off his soda, making a loud sucking sound, then sat back to watch her eat. She looked up and smiled at him. He smiled back.

His smile was doing things to her insides. Especially that darn dimple. He looked a little worse for wear. Bruises on his face, a small cut on his cheek and another at the corner of his mouth. It was that rough, roguish quality that made her insides turn somersaults. No, there was no denying she loved him. Yet, at one point yesterday she'd hated him with her whole heart. Now, knowing the truth of things, it seemed easy enough to forgive, mostly because she wanted to forgive, because she wanted him, and because he loved her and her girls. Isn't that what she'd dreamed of and even more, what she'd prayed for?

Frowning, she thought about that dream. It would have to be without her present home. "Keegan, I'm gonna sell the house."

His eyebrows rose. It was her parents' home. The home she'd grown up in. The only home she and her girls had ever known. "Is there no way that you..."

"Absolutely no way," she interrupted.

Leaning forward, he reached out across the table, his palm turned upward. Slowly, she placed her hand in his. "Baby, I know I've said it over and over, how sorry I am. Still, if I could go back, I don't know what I could've done differently."

She shrugged nonchalantly. "It doesn't really matter." He looked at her like he didn't believe her so she went on. "The house was old and run down. I don't know why I didn't think about selling it earlier. It's not like I'm attached to the town. Most everyone there sort of looks down on me anyway. I think Bradley's parents have something to do with that. I don't care. I'll just start over someplace else."

His eyes met hers, his filled with admiration. She may look soft, fragile, sweet and angelic, but the woman was tough and resilient. "Do you have any idea where you might go?"

She shook her head.

His hand closed firmly around hers. "Do you think maybe we could figure it out together?"

Mouth pressed into a thin line, her eyes moved over his face as she tried to figure out what he meant by that. It almost sounded like a marriage proposal. Almost. If it was, he was gonna have to do a whole lot better than that. Sighing, she pulled her hand away. "I guess that's a possibility. You certainly know more about the world than I do. I'd appreciate your input."

He didn't correct her. He didn't speak up and say that he'd meant more than just a helping hand. Sighing, Lizzy stood and began clearing away the plastic plates. She threw everything into the carry out bag it'd

come in and placed it near the small trash can. Then she went back to the dressing area, brushed her teeth and washed her hands and face.

Keegan moved to the edge of the bed. He needed to get to Savannah, but a few extra days wouldn't hurt. He had just enough time to take her down to Pine Forest and drop her off. Or, maybe he should take her back to Tyler Springs first to get her van, now that the coast was clear. He'd still escort her down to the girls. Then he'd go to Savannah, take care of business and hightail it back to her. The thought of being away from her made his insides twist. In his current position, he'd have to leave her constantly when he went on assignment. He'd have to fix that.

He watched her put away her creams and hairbrush. He'd tried to grab everything off her bathroom counter just in case it was something she would need. Apparently, he did okay because she hadn't commented on her lack of supplies. She was organizing her suitcase, taking care of business and it was making him crazy. He was to the breaking point.

"Elizabeth."

She turned. "Yes?"

Standing, he came to her, took her face in his hands. "I need to know if you can still love me. I need to know if there's even a chance."

As he cupped her face in his rough hands, she reached up and gently ran her fingers along his jaw. "I love you, Keegan Tanner. I love you so much, so much it frightens me."

Her words brought a smile to his face. "Don't be afraid, Lizbet. We'll work everything out and if we do that, I believe life is about to get really good."

They stood there for several seconds, just holding each other's face, gazing into each other's eyes. Slowly, inch by inch, Keegan lowered his head and finally touched his lips to hers, kissing her softly. The relief was immediate. He'd never wanted a mere kiss so much in his entire life.

She tasted of salvation. Namely—his. That's what she'd been from the first moment she'd come into his life. She'd turned the hardened government agent he'd become into her Prince Charming, fairy stories and all. She was an angel. She was too good for him, he knew that, but he craved her body and soul. Groaning, he edged her toward the bed. When their legs bumped it, they sat, and Keegan finally pulled away.

She couldn't get enough of him. She never wanted him to stop kissing her, and definitely never wanted to feel the horror of the past

twenty-four hours again. Her heart and body were so overwhelmed, the tears gathered and overflowed. She couldn't help it. Maybe it was the shock of what she'd just been through, the violence she'd experienced. Maybe it was having to hate someone she loved, even for that small amount of time. Maybe it was knowing what she could've lost. Letting the tears flow freely, she sniffed.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth." He bent and kissed her softly. "For what you had to witness." Another soft kiss. "For what you had to go through." And another one. "For everything." He lay on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

Lizzy sighed with pleasure. "I don't want *us* to be over."

He smiled. "We're not finished. Not by a long shot."

With that reassurance, she closed her eyes, sleepy and content, but awoke moments later with a start. "What was that?"

"Shhh, it's okay. Sounds like an afternoon thunderstorm." He rose, walked to the window and pulled aside the curtain. Rain pelted the parking lot, turning everything a dreary gray. He let the curtain go. "Maybe we'll order in pizza later. Do you like pizza?"

"Sure. Who doesn't like pizza?"

"Pan crust, extra cheese and a six-pack of beer. Sounds good."

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"No!" Lizzy cried out, her arms and legs reaching out to fight against unseen assailants.

Strong arms came around her. "It's okay, I've got you. I've got you, baby. You were dreaming. Lizbeth? Shh, now."

Calming, she snuggled closer, letting her heart slow. "Oh, man, that was bad." She shuddered. "I'm sorry I woke you."

He chuckled. She was always so concerned for everyone else. "It's all right. You okay now?"

She smiled. "Uh hm. I dreamt those men were following us around and they finally caught us. There was more to it than that, but that's all I can remember."

"Maybe it was the pizza," he joked.

"Maybe." She jerked when the clap of thunder rattled the window. "It's still raining?"

"Apparently."

Lizzy ran her hands over her arms. "Is the air conditioner still on? It's awfully cold in here."

Keegan's brow creased. "Cold? No the AC isn't running." He pulled the blanket up over her shoulder and moved close to her. "There,

is that better?"

"Yes. You're so warm."

"That's because it's warm in the room."

She shivered and he held her closer. A few minutes later she was sound asleep.

Keegan watched her beautiful face as she slumbered, his need to protect fierce. Considering what she'd been through, she was handling it fairly well. A few nightmares could be expected. During the afternoon she'd changed the bandage on his shoulder which he'd gotten wet when he'd taken his shower. Allowing her to take care of him seemed to lift her spirits and she examined all his cuts and bruises. Then he'd called John on his cell and Lizzy got to speak with her daughters. She did her best to keep her chin up during the conversation. They were having the time of their lives. After Lizzy spoke to them, he'd taken the phone and told them a silly story. He was anxious to get her reunited with the girls and get them settled somewhere. Heather was missing school and the winter holidays were coming. Not a good time to be homeless.

Keegan sighed. He felt relaxed from napping and cuddling all afternoon and evening. That, coupled with the energy expended trying to survive and save Elizabeth, he was exhausted. Rolling to his back, he closed his eyes and fell immediately to sleep.

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Keegan was jarred from his peaceful slumber when one of his cell phones went off.

Cursing as he sprang out of bed, he grabbed the phone. Usually, a late night call wasn't good.

"Tanner."

"Jason Lee here."

"Yes, sir."

"Sorry to call you so early. I know it's four in the morning, but I have information that can't wait."

"No problem, Mr. Lee. You've been immensely helpful, as has Jeff. So, what's up?"

"Agent Tanner, where are you?"

A small tentacle of worry moved up his spine. "I'm in a motel with Elizabeth. We're headed down to Pine Forest tomorrow to join the girls before I go on to Savannah."

"You're gonna have to change course, I'm afraid."

"And that would be because..."

"There's a hit out on you."

Silence.

"Agent Tanner?"

"Thought I took care of that."

"The hit still stands. They're coming after you."

"It makes no sense. Why waste a hit on me? I've already told all I know to the authorities. What could they possibly gain? I've turned in so much evidence, they don't even need me as a witness."

"Well, Keegan, they don't care that you're not needed as a witness. This is personal."

"Personal? You mean like Hartman is so pissed he got caught he put a hit out on the guy that outsmarted him?"

"Yeah, like that, only it wasn't Hartman who ordered it."

"Celados? Washington?"

"It was Brian Cantrell, your old Quantico buddy. It seems he's more than Hartman's bodyguard. More like a right-hand man. He wasn't connected to any of the crimes so he was free and clear to conduct business. Of course, we will have him now on conspiracy to commit murder. The only problem is, Nigel sent some guys in to take him and he was gone."

"Which means," Keegan surmised, "it'll be hell finding him, but you can bet he'll surface when it's time to collect that twenty-five mill. There's no way they're gonna stop that deal."

"I think that's a fair assumption," Jason said. "Of course, we want the bad guys to think the deal is still on. Right at this moment though, I'm interested in seeing that you're safe."

"That shouldn't be your concern, sir. That should be my concern and Special Agent in Charge Nigel Kort's."

"Nigel *is* concerned, Keegan. We've been working hand in hand on this. You'll be hearing from him anytime now."

"Fine, only I'm not worried about me. My concern is for Elizabeth. I need to get her away from me and down with her children."

"I don't think that's gonna be possible."

"Why not?" Keegan snapped.

"You'll want the children's whereabouts to remain confidential and if Mrs. Anderson goes down there she'll only be putting the kids in danger and that would be because—the hit orders include her."

Another string of curses.

Jason went on. "The exact words from the transcript I'm reading are, 'I want Special Agent Tanner dead and that bitch too.' I'm

assuming he was referring to Mrs. Anderson."

Keegan shook his head. "That makes no sense. Why does Cantrell have the hots for me?"

"Hold on a minute."

Keegan waited while he heard Jason speaking to someone in the background.

Jason came back to the phone. "I have some new info that may clear up your confusion. There was a man at Mrs. Anderson's house called Hunter?"

"Yes. I don't know his first name. I didn't have a chance to ask him because I killed him before he killed me."

"His first name *is* Hunter. His last name is Cantrell. Apparently, he and your good friend Brian are brothers."

Keegan glanced at Elizabeth as he ran a hand through his hair. He merely hung his head and sighed deeply.

"Well put," Jason said glibly.

Keegan's mind snapped into survival mode. "Elizabeth paid for the room with her debit card. I paid for pizza with my credit card."

"You need to leave. Are you still in the car Jeff procured for you?"

"Yes."

"Good. Unless they've seen you in it, it's not traceable to you, so you're good for now. Don't head south. They'll expect that. Be careful Agent Tanner. Stay alive until Nigel picks you up and takes you and Elizabeth to a safe house."

"You mean takes *Elizabeth* to a safe house. I'm heading to the docks to help stop that shipment."

"You're no good to anyone dead."

"Nor am I any good hiding away because some dude has a score to settle with me, and judging from what I know of you, Mr. Lee, you'd do the same."

"You might be right. Whatever you need, Agent Tanner, call me."

"Thank you, sir."

Keegan tossed the phone on the dresser, grabbed up his jeans and started dressing. He'd let Elizabeth sleep as long as possible. Two seconds later his other cell phone buzzed. "Tanner."

"You've spoken with Mr. Lee?" Nigel Kort asked.

"Yes," Keegan said. He quickly filled him in on the conversation and on the fact they had to get out of the room now.

"Be careful, Tanner," Nigel said. "Once I spoke with Lee I called the hospital in Monroe. Someone has already been there asking

questions. Get a move on. Head northeast, to Athens, then straight to the Athens Police Department. I'll have a chopper there to pick up you and Mrs. Anderson."

"On my way."

Keegan finished dressing and quickly gathered their bags and belongings. Lastly, he went to Elizabeth. "Hey," he said softly, brushing her hair out of her face.

She turned over and looked up at him with glazed eyes.

"Elizabeth?"

She shivered, her breath coming in short gasps. "I don't feel too good," she whispered.

He laid a hand on her forehead. She was burning up. Could anything else go wrong? "Lizbeth, we have to leave, honey. We have to leave right now."

Her brow furrowed. Those words had been burned into her brain. "Why?" she asked, sitting up.

He sat down beside her. "I'm gonna ask you to trust me right now. I'll tell you everything later. Right now, we have to get out of here and on the road. Okay?"

She nodded and kicked the covers off. Her body immediately began shivering almost violently. Between the two of them they got her shoes on. He turned the lights off in the room and told her to stand still while he opened the door and peered out. There was no one in sight, not a car and not a person. Considering the downpour and the lack of visibility, now was as good a time as any. He dashed out, threw their bags into the trunk and unlocked the car doors. Running through the torrential rains he came back for Lizzy. He swiped a pillow and blanket from the bed, took her hand and ran with her to the car.

He didn't breathe again until they'd pulled away and made several turns with no tail. Glancing over at his passenger though, his heart sank. She was sick. Very sick. She stared out the windshield, her face pale, her body trembling.

He grabbed the ends of the blanket and pulled it up around her, then switched on the heater. "Try to rest, sweetie. When I feel it's safe I'll find a place to pull over and get some aspirin or something to bring down the fever."

"Get Ibuprofen," she said between clenched teeth. "It works better for me."

He nodded. "It won't be long."

She slid down low in her seat and closed her eyes.

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Keegan shook his head as he stared at the readout on the thermometer he'd just purchased. He ran his hand down her face. "Lizbeth, honey, can you sit up for me and swallow these pills?"

She moaned, barely lifted her head. He put the pills in her mouth and held her head up while she swallowed a few sips of water. "What's my temp?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"It's 104.2. Even I know that's bad."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Okay. We'll give the ibes time to work. I probably just have the flu or something. My whole body hurts and my head is pounding. My throat is sore too. It could be strep. Lord, I hope I didn't get you sick."

"I never get sick." He held up the bottle of water. "You need to drink more."

She shook her head. "I can't right now. I'll probably just throw it up. I'll try to sip a little more in a few minutes."

She was whispering, but he caught the gist of what she said. Pulling the blanket back over her body, he stroked her forehead. He'd moved her to the backseat so she could stretch out. Her skin was terribly hot and dry. "I have to keep going," he said softly.

"Are you gonna tell me why we had to leave so fast?"

He sighed. "There's been a hit put out on us. You and me. We had to get out of there quickly. Nigel's coming to take us to a safe house."

"A hit? You mean like someone's been paid to kill us? You have to be kidding."

"Unfortunately, I'm not kidding. One of the guys in the organization I've been investigating is mad and wants us dead."

"Why me? What have I done?"

"It's nothing you've done. It's me. They know I care for you and the best way to hurt me is to hurt you."

"But what about the girls? Are they safe?" she asked, her voice choking on the sobs welling up in her chest.

"John and Jodi are taking good care of them. I spoke to them a little while ago. The girls are fine. We don't see any way they could be traced down there. However, they won't be safe if you go down there now. So until we're sure you and the girls are safe, you have to let us protect you."

"I miss them so much. I've never been away from them."

"I told John I'd have you call them in the morning."

She sniffed. "Where are we going?"

"I don't know the answer to that." He wrapped his arms around her. "Elizabeth, this nightmare *is* eventually going to end, and you'll be with your girls and everything is gonna be okay."

"Keegan," she said softly, her hand reaching for his. "I'm afraid."

"Oh, baby, I don't blame you, but please don't be afraid. We'll get this guy. Right now, you just focus on getting well."

She nodded. "I'm sorry I got sick."

"Apology accepted," he said with a smile. "Now sleep. I'll wake you when we get to Athens. We're not that far away."

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"I'm telling you, we're not leaving until I've had her checked by a doctor. Her fever is back up to almost 104."

Nigel heaved a sigh. "All right. We'll take her over to St. Mary's here in Athens. Let emergency check her out. If they say she's okay to go, she's going to the safe house."

"That's all I ask. Her fever is too high. We can't save her life so she can die of some stupid sudden illness."

Nigel nodded. "Let's get her over there."

Thirty minutes later, Nigel Kort sat watching Keegan speaking with the doctor about Mrs. Elizabeth Anderson. Nigel shook his head. He was losing one of his best field agents to a woman. That was obvious, *and* it was a shame because he needed Tanner. Special Agent Keegan Tanner had all the savvy needed by an FBI agent. First, he was experienced. Next, he was calm, cool, collected and deadly. He would see if he could talk some sense into him.

Keegan joined him.

"What did the doc say?" Nigel asked.

"She tested positive on a 'rapid test' for strep, whatever that means. They've started her on antibiotics and her fever should be down within twenty-four hours."

"Can she be moved?"

Keegan nodded, his lips pressed into a thin line. "Yes. We can go."

"Good. Let's do it."

A few hours later, Keegan was tucking in the sheet around Lizzy in a comfortable bed in a small three-bedroom home in the little town of Claxton, Georgia, the home of the popular holiday fruitcakes. Keegan and Lizzy joked about feeling right at home, while he made sure she downed a bowl of soup. Satisfied she was comfortable, he left the room and joined Nigel and two other agents in the small, stark

living room.

"She good?" Nigel asked.

Keegan nodded. "She's already feeling better."

Nigel nodded at the other agents. "You guys wanna go get some take out?"

"Yes, sir," they said in unison, obviously realizing their superior wanted time alone with Agent Tanner. They left quickly.

Nigel looked Keegan over. "So, are you still planning on seeing this assignment through in Savannah?"

Keegan's eyes narrowed. "What kind of question is that? Of course I am. I'll leave here tomorrow."

Nigel nodded in satisfaction. "Good. You'll need transportation and a clean phone. I'll arrange it."

"Thanks. So, what's the problem?"

"The problem?"

"Yes, Nigel. What's bugging you?"

"Sit down, Keegan."

Sighing, he did as ordered.

Nigel cleared his throat. "I'm not speaking to you as anything other than a friend right now."

Keegan's eyebrows rose. This was a first. "Okay."

"Look, I know I'm usually all business. I'm all about the job, but I'd like to know, what are your intentions concerning Mrs. Anderson."

Keegan looked down. He figured Nigel had the right to know, especially since Keegan had come close to compromising Elizabeth Anderson while under cover. He looked back up. "I'm gonna marry her, if she'll have me."

Nigel thought, choosing his words carefully. "Tell me Agent, how long was your last assignment?"

"It's been two long years and I know you know that."

"And the one before that?"

"Six months."

"And before that?"

Keegan sighed. "Six weeks and the one before that four months. Get to the point."

"What kind of life will that be for your wife?"

"I'll change positions. I'll come in from the field."

"I have a lot of guys who can do that, lots who *want* to do that. I don't have that many who can handle what you're so good at, Keegan."

"You'd deny me a transfer?"

Nigel shook his head. "I'd make it hard for you, but I wouldn't deny it. Are you sure that's what you want? When you joined the bureau you stated you wanted to be in the field, doing the hard stuff that no one else wanted to do. You wanted to be in the thick of things."

"Yeah, well, circumstances have changed. I've changed. I was an adrenaline junkie. I've grown up. I've seen too much. My priorities have changed."

"And Elizabeth Anderson has changed them?"

"She's helped me to see what I want in life."

"And what is that?"

"A family."

"And you've had this amazing awakening in the few weeks you were at her home?"

"What are you trying to say, Nigel? Just spit it out."

"Okay." He paused dramatically. "You're a killer, Tanner. That's what you do and you do it well. You're a trained killer. What kind of husband would that make? What kind of father would you be to those little girls?"

Keegan swallowed, his face paled. "Good grief, you make me out to be some kind of monster."

"Isn't that what you'd be in their eyes? If they knew the things you've done, how do you think they'd react? If Elizabeth had seen you extract information from some lowlife when you were in Afghanistan, if she'd seen you slit someone's throat, or even if she'd seen the kind of training you've been through in the military, how do you think she would react? I mean, she strikes me as being sort of innocent, but I guess you'd know that better than I. She seems to me though, to be one of those kinds of women who would cry over the death of a mouse. How would she feel about the lives you've taken? When you touch her, do you think she'll see the loving hands of her husband, or hands covered with blood?"

Keegan remained silent for he had no answer to the question, or, he didn't want to face the answer.

"We can't help what we are, Agent Tanner," Nigel continued. "I'm not saying you're dishonorable or anything like that, but you've taken a certain road. You can't take back all those things. You even have a degree in criminology. You've been taught to think like the maniacs you help to capture."

"Well then, I also have a degree in criminal psychology, Nigel. Does that make me a manic bipolar, or a schizophrenic, or any other

kind of crazy?"

"No, of course not."

"Yet you think I'm a criminal because I can think like them?"

"No, and yet, you know it's a fine line. Your mind works differently than most civilians, Keegan, especially those innocents like Lizzy Anderson."

Keegan silently digested what Nigel was saying. Finally, he looked up. "And I am a killer because I have killed."

Nigel shrugged. "I'm not blaming you and you shouldn't blame yourself. It couldn't be helped. You've done what had to be done."

Keegan rose and went to the window.

Nigel went to him, placed a hand on his shoulder. "Look, maybe someday you'll find the perfect woman. Not one with five innocent little girls who hang on your every word. Maybe a woman with her own demanding career who doesn't care that you're gone for weeks or months at a time. Maybe even one who gets off on the kind of violence that surrounds you every day."

Nigel clapped Keegan on the back. "It's up to you of course, however, if I were you, I'd take a long look at the fairy story you're thinking about stepping into and make sure you're not the ogre living under the bridge." Deciding he'd said enough, Nigel turned and made his way to the door. "Just think about what I've said, Special Agent Tanner. Your car will be here in the morning."

Keegan didn't turn around as Nigel left the house. Still standing at the window, he watched him drive away. He wasn't stupid. Nigel Kort was all about the job as he'd said himself, and he was pulling out all the stops to keep from losing Keegan as one of his top agents. He was trying to work his own brand of psychology on Keegan. Still, Nigel had made some valid points.

If Elizabeth knew some of the things he'd done, she'd be repulsed. He, himself was repulsed. He was sickened over the men he'd had to kill. The bureau had assigned him a shrink many times after a kill. Nevertheless, he did what had to be done, as Nigel had pointed out, and in his own defense, he'd luckily never made a bad kill. He'd never accidentally shot a kid, or innocent bystander. He'd saved innocent lives. Would Elizabeth understand that? He'd killed two men right in front of her and she'd promptly lost her lunch. The violence he'd been involved with, the violence he was capable of, was it just too much for her to tolerate? Quietly, he went to her room and sat down in the chair opposite the bed. He had a lot of thinking to do.

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Romans 12:2

"Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Chapter Ten

"99.1, that's a big improvement," Keegan said.

Lizzy smiled. "I already feel so much better. Thanks for taking care of me."

"It was my pleasure," he said, but he didn't smile and his eyes didn't meet hers.

"Then, why do you look so sad?" she asked.

He rose, pushed his hands into the pockets of the slacks he wore. "I have to leave, Elizabeth."

"Where are you going?"

"To Savannah."

"But what about the guy trying to kill you?"

Keegan shrugged. "I'm an FBI agent, Elizabeth. Bad guys are always trying to kill me."

"I don't want to stay here without you."

He sighed. "I need you to be safe. We can't take the chance that the girls could end up orphans, can we?"

She looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. "No, of course not." Her eyes raised again. "How long do you think it will take?"

"The shipment was originally scheduled the week before Halloween, but with the arrest of Hartman and Washington, the shipment date may be moved up. I need to be there. If the children leave on a ship, it will be almost impossible to find them again."

"So we're talking a couple of weeks?" she asked.

"In Savannah, yes."

She pushed herself up to a sitting position. "In Savannah? Are you going somewhere else after that?"

Grimacing, he turned away, walked toward the window. "In my job, there's always somewhere else I have to be. Someone else I have to help. Some new slime bag that needs takin' down."

Her eyes followed him as he walked around the room like a tiger looking for the cage door. A deep fear began to build in her chest. "What are you saying, Keegan?"

Sitting down on the bed, he took her hands in his. "I love you, Elizabeth. Please always believe that. And the girls too."

Even though her gaze was directed at his hands holding hers, she couldn't see them due to the tears. When she moved her head to look up at his face, they fell over onto her cheeks. "Are you... are you telling me goodbye?"

He took her face in his hands. "Yes."

"Goodbye for now, or for good?"

"For good. It's for the best."

"Who's best?" she asked, the anguish in her tone tearing him apart. "Certainly not mine. And not the girls'."

"I'm only thinking about you and the girls. Look what I've brought to you, look at the violence and the destruction."

"What about the love? I thought I'd never feel this way again and now I do and you're gonna take that away from me for the second time in two days?"

"I've shown you that you're a wonderful, desirable woman. Someone will come along who will be much bett..."

"Don't you dare say that!"

She sprang from the bed, got two steps before she faltered. His arms came around her immediately. She turned in his arms unable to hold back the tears. "Please, there's no one better for me than you. No one. I love you Keegan. Please, don't do this. Please. Don't try to be noble for my sake."

"Elizabeth, I have to be noble, because you're the one, you're the one who taught me how."

"No."

"Yes, baby."

"Well you're not being noble. You're being a coward. I told you I can handle you being gone. Just give me the chance to show you. And, and what about you asking me if you can help me find a new home, get settled somewhere else?"

"When the time comes for that, I'll be there for you."

She shook her head, gripping his forearms. She was desperate. Panicked. She didn't know how to handle this. She had no experience with this. It seemed the room was spinning. It seemed dark, dangerous storm clouds covered the sun. It hurt. It hurt so much. She'd known this was possible from the beginning, but she'd thought he'd decided to stay with her. She felt numb. Her knees went weak. Next thing she knew he lifted her and placed her back in the bed.

Gently, he arranged the pillow behind her head, pulled the covers up over her.

"Yesterday you told me life was about to get better," she sobbed.

"I'm sorry, Elizabeth. I didn't want to hurt you again, but I've had time to think about it. It wouldn't work. You saw what I did back there. It sickened you. I've done much worse than that."

"You saved me. That's all I know."

Sighing, he shook his head. "I'm sorry, Elizabeth. It's no good."

She turned over, giving him her back, and buried her face in the pillow. His heart broke as he watched her. She was so very honest. She didn't try to hide her emotions. She didn't put on a brave front. She was devastated and she gave in to the pain. When he reached out to touch her once more, she jerked away.

"It's for the best," he whispered, trying to convince himself as well as her. Quietly, he left the room.

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Brian Cantrell stood in the funeral home by his brother's casket, his heart filled with rage. It took every ounce of restraint he had to nod politely as those who came to pay their respects addressed him and his mother. They were all so sorry for his loss. If there is anything they could do, please feel free to ask. Can you find Keegan Tanner, he wanted to ask, and the woman who helped him kill Hunter? Because that would be all he needed. All he wanted.

Their mother approached him, haggard and bent, tears streaming down her face. "Oh, Brian," she cried as she gripped his arm. "I don't think I can stand it. My baby. My baby is dead," she wailed.

He calmly patted her hand. "I know, Mom," he said, pulling a prescription bottle from his pocket. "Here, take your medicine and we'll get you home and put you to bed."

"Thank you, dear," she said softly. "I can't take any more. Promise me, Brian. Promise me you won't let this go unanswered."

"I promise." His cell phone began to vibrate. Reaching into his pocket he motioned at a heavy-set man in his forties. "Harry, take Mother home, see that she gets to bed."

"Yes, sir," Harry said. He took Mrs. Cantrell's arm. "Come on now, sweetie. You and me will go have a nice cup of tea."

"Thank you, Harry, that'll be nice," she said, dabbing at her eyes with her tissue.

"What," Brian said into the phone.

"Well, Mr. Cantrell, they'd already left the room, sir, but we did find something interesting."

"Well, what is it?"

"Two phone calls were made from the motel room to another Georgia number. We're having a little trouble getting the phone company to cooperate without a court order."

"I'll take care of it."

"I'll be waiting on your call."

He slipped his phone neatly into his pocket. He'd have to call in a favor to get phone records. He didn't have the clout of the Senator, but he'd get it done, and then he had to get to Savannah. The Senator was in jail along with Washington and Celados and no bond would be granted. Which was just fine with him. He could handle the twenty-five million without any help.

He would escort the shipment himself. He'd have to wait until the last minute to bring the brats and the three doomed nursemaids out of hiding. He'd stash them in the warehouse the night before the exchange. The kids would be exchanged the next morning. The American women's bodies would be dumped out at sea because the terrorist cell had their own females to handle the brats. It would take only a half a mil to pay for the execution of everyone else involved. First though, he wanted Keegan Tanner and Elizabeth Anderson dead.

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"And then, when it was Violet's turn, she got scared and started crying. And Ms. Jodi said it was okay to be scared because she was very scared the first time she ever rode a horse. And she hugged Violet and said she had a surprise for all of us."

"Really? What was the surprise?" Lizzy asked.

"Kittens. A whole bunch of them. They're too young to take from their mommy, but when they get old enough we each get to have one."

Lizzy sniffed. The phrase 'too young to take from their mommy' got to her. She'd taken time to speak to each of her girls each day but it wasn't enough. She needed to hold them. She needed to be with them. She needed to get home, but even more importantly, she needed to protect them and it was time to put her plan into action. "Heather, let me speak to Ms. Jodi."

"Hi, Lizzy," Jodi said. "How you holding up, sweetie?"

"Not too good, Jodi. I need to see my babies."

"I know, Liz. I can't even imagine going through what you're going through. Please know that we're all doing everything we can to make sure they're not suffering. Between me and John and Lisa and Chaz and Grams I think we're keeping them occupied enough. Everyone here is so in love with them. You've done a wonderful job.

They're so well behaved."

"Do I have the right number?" Lizzy asked, trying for humor but not quite making it.

"They are wonderful children, Liz. Have you heard anything?"

"No. I have no idea what's going on."

"How about from Keegan? Have you heard from him? Has he called you or is he still being an idiot?"

"I've heard nothing from him. Has John spoken to him?"

"Yes, a few times. John says Keegan always asks if you've called."

"Jodi, I love him so much. What am I gonna do?"

"I don't know girl, but if it were me, I wouldn't let him just walk out of my life. I'd go after him."

"Jodi, you're so strong. So courageous. I'm not like that."

"Are you kidding me? You go about your day raising five kids all by yourself with your chin up and a smile on your face. You came through a horrific situation with your sanity and the strength to keep on loving. I totally believe in your strength to fight for the man you love."

Lizzy sniffed. "I've never even met you in person and yet I feel like I've known you all my life."

"We must've been sisters in a former life," Jodi said with a laugh.

"Jodi, I need to ask something of you. It's an incredible thing to ask, especially considering the fact that we've never even met in person, but I have no choice."

"Whatever you need, Lizzy. I'm your girl."

"I'm all there is left for my girls. There are no grandparents, at least none that would admit to it, no aunts or uncles. Just me. If something happened to me right now, my girls would become wards of the state. They'd probably get split up. I can't even imagine the heartache that would cause. Jodi, I need to know that if I were to die, my girls could stay with you and John. I have a small inheritance, and there's the house, plus the girls get money from the VA. That should ease some of the financial burden."

"Liz, nothing is gonna happen to you."

"You don't know that. There's a good chance that I may die and you know it. Ask John, he'll tell you."

"Lizzy, of course John and I would take the girls, but let's don't talk negative."

"I have to face reality, Jodi. I even have to face that I may never see my girls again." Before Jodi could protest that remark, Lizzy went on. "Do you know a lawyer who could do up a quick will? One that

would hold up in court?"

"Yes. His name is Justin Lee. He's a good friend. I'll have John give him a call. He'll get papers ready that you'll have to sign. Tell the agents there you need a printer."

"Okay. Thanks, Jodi. I'll be waiting."

"Chin up, girl. It's all gonna work out."

"Yeah, Jodi, that's the same thing Keegan said, just before he dumped me."

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John sat straight up out of bed. Something wasn't right. Jodi sat up beside him.

"What woke you?" she asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Well, I'm sure something woke me and it wasn't you. Did you set the alarm?"

"Yes. I'd better go check it out." He went to the closet, took out two guns, loaded both and handed one to Jodi. "If there's an intruder and he gets through me, you're the last line of defense between all these children and him."

"I understand," she whispered. She watched him ease out the door before she turned and moved toward where the children slept. Their quarters occupied the entire third floor of the country inn. There was plenty of room for John and Jodi's bedroom, a gigantic bathroom, a bedroom for little Jacob, a couple of extra bedrooms and a large family room. Right now that family room was occupied by five, sleeping little girls. Three on the pull-out sofa and two on the small bed they'd moved in for them. Jodi scooped up her son and went into the family room.

Even though she was trained, Jodi was hoping it wouldn't come down to her having to use the gun. Whatever happened, though, she wouldn't let her husband down.

John glanced down the hall as he left the second floor. The inn was full as usual and it appeared everyone was tucked in tight. As he stepped from the stairs onto the foyer rug, he heard a sound behind him in the kitchen. Moving stealthily, he eased his way into the kitchen, but there was nothing.

Then he realized he heard a voice. A male voice. John moved down toward Ms. Maddie's room. What was now an Inn had been Miss Maddie's home for over fifty years and she still slept in the large bedroom near the kitchen that she'd shared with her husband. A quick glance in that room told John all he needed to know.

A man stood over Maddie's bed, his hand over her mouth. He asked her which room belonged to Elizabeth Anderson. When Maddie shook her head frantically, the man raised a gun toward her head. He never got any further than that. A second later he lay moaning on Maddie's bedroom floor.

John turned on the light. "Maddie, you okay?"

"I'm just fine, John. Just tell me what I need to do."

"Call Tyson please," he said as he grabbed the man and searched him. "Give Jodi the 'all clear'– and get me the duct tape."

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"So, leaving Lizzy, do you think you did the right thing?" Jeff asked Keegan as they sat in the local Savannah bar.

Not a class joint as the bars along the river tended to be. Seedy would be an appropriate description if they'd needed to put a word to it. The perfect place to get the dirt on any clandestine activity going down at the harbor. The place was dark and dingy even though it was the middle of the day. The smell of old grease prevailed along with a mix of tobacco and body odor.

Keegan sighed and focused on Jeff's question. "I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think it was the right thing to do."

"Okay, yeah, but now, in retrospect, you still think it was right?"

Keegan ran a hand over his hair. "I don't know. I didn't want to hurt her. I can't get her out of my head and that makes it hard to do my job, ya know?"

"I know. Women will mess you up. I learned that the hard way."

Keegan eyed the younger man. "Sounds like a story. This I gotta hear. Tell me. I need something to take my mind off my troubles."

Jeff threw back the shot and leaned back with a smile. "Ever heard of Breanna Adams?"

"You mean Breanna Adams the famous movie star? The 'married to Ricky Kino' Breanna Adams?"

"The one and only. So, three years ago, Agent Jeff Davis was assigned as her bodyguard."

"You lucky SOB. How'd you get that one?"

"Some crazy was after hurting the Kino family. Mr. Lee and the Kinos are tight and so Ameritech was hired to protect them. An agent was assigned to each member of the family and I got Bree."

"Ooh, *Bree*, is it?" Keegan asked with a laugh.

Jeff's face reddened as he shrugged. "We became friends."

"So is she the one who messed you up? Did you do Breanna

Adams and Ricky Kino kicked your butt?"

"That would've been easier to take, but no, I don't have a death wish. She drugged me. Slipped GHB into my drink, then slipped away from me while I slept out on the beach. She almost got herself killed and me fired."

Keegan burst out laughing. "You are kidding, right? She actually drugged you?"

Jeff smiled. "Yeah, it wasn't pretty. The bad guys caught up to her. Lucky for her, and me I suppose, Rick came home, tracked her down and got to her just in time to prevent her rape."

"Did he kill the guy?" Keegan asked.

"No. He wanted to though."

Keegan picked up his beer by the neck of the bottle and swirled the contents around, thinking he would've killed the man. That was the difference Nigel was talking about between him and other men. And that's why he'd had to leave Elizabeth. Realizing the conversation had dangled, he looked up. "I've been watching Ricky Kino on the Kino Challenges. He's good."

"He is amazing. Since my boss is such good friends with the family, I've been privy to a lot of stuff. I watched him train for that first challenge. Rick has my complete respect."

Keegan nodded his head.

Jeff eyed him. "Rick and Bree are coming to Atlanta in a few weeks for some honor Bree's receiving from her old high school. Wanna meet 'em?"

Keegan finished off his beer. "Sure. If I'm still around."

"You thinkin' of leavin' the state?"

"I'm thinkin' I could be dead by then." He shrugged. "I mean, ya never know, right?"

Jeff shook his head. "I need to take you to one of my positive thinking retreats."

"You sound like John."

"That's a compliment."

Keegan chuckled then sat up straight as a man who'd entered the bar a few minutes before, turned and approached their table where they sat in the back corner. This was the guy with the information. The man was small, dirty, plausibly smelly and an undercover cop. Likely vice. Keegan wasn't sure how he knew that, but he did, instinctively. Keegan nodded at the man.

The man nodded in return, glancing nervously around the room.

"Feel like buying a guy a drink?" he asked. "Ya know, I'm a little down on my luck."

Jeff kicked a chair out. "Have a seat."

"Thanks, man."

Keegan gestured to the bartender to bring three shots and three beers. They waited until he was gone before they spoke again.

"Got anything for me?" Jeff asked.

The man's eyes slid toward Keegan, then back to Jeff.

"He's cool," Jeff assured him.

Keegan watched the man's hands shake as he picked up the glass and tossed back the whiskey. It wasn't from fear. He was strung out.

"Somethin's goin' down. Somethin' big," the small man said. "These guys come in, clear all the locals out from one particular area."

"What area?" Jeff asked.

"The old Smith-Carriage warehouse down at the end of Harbor Street. I can't even get close now. One guy, talkin' big, said wasn't anyone gonna push him out of his home of the last ten years. Said, he was goin' back. Ain't seen him since and expect I never will."

Keegan eyed Jeff, then turned back. "Anything else?"

"Nothin'. That's all I got." The man downed his beer and stood. "Thanks, man. Really appreciate it." He extended his hand.

Keegan stood, reached out and took it, but when the man tried to pull away, Keegan held him firm. The man's eyes opened wide. Keegan leaned forward.

"Go in, get clean," Keegan said quietly. "This job isn't worth throwing your life away– officer."

The man's eyes shifted quickly toward Jeff who only nodded at him, then back to Keegan. The man swallowed hard, his head bobbed up and down. Keegan let go of the smaller hand and he was gone.

Jeff leaned back, eyeing Keegan. "Don't care what anyone says, Tanner, you're a good man," he said with a grin.

Keegan only rolled his eyes.

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When Lizzy heard the beeping of a backup signal, she glanced out the window. To her surprise, a tow truck was backing into the driveway. A bigger surprise was that her olive green van was on the truck. She watched as the driver set her van down in the driveway then headed toward the door.

Lizzy came out of the bedroom searching for Agent Donna Forester. A tall, attractive woman in her late twenties, the female agent

had been kind to Lizzy and along with Agent Larry Donald, had been her protector. She was grateful to them both.

Agent Donald was on the phone and Agent Forester was at the door, thanking the tow truck driver. She closed the front door and turned to face Lizzy with a bright smile.

"What's going on?" Lizzy asked.

The agent held Lizzy's keys out in front of her face. "Get ready Miss Lizzy, cuz we're taking you home!"

Lizzy's hands flew to her face. "Really? Don't tease me Donna."

"I wouldn't do that."

"What happened? Did they catch the guy who ordered us killed?"

"They caught the hit man," Agent Donald said as he ended the call.

"Where was he?" Lizzy asked.

"Sit down and I'll tell you what I know."

Lizzy moved quickly to the sofa. She sat, her eyes big, her heart pounding, wondering if Keegan had anything to do with the man's capture. She blinked up at Agent Donald.

"Now don't go getting all crazy on me," Larry began. "Everyone is just fine. The man was knocked unconscious by John Appel, last night in Pine Forest."

Lizzy gasped.

"Apparently, the guy broke into the *Pine Forest Country Inn* looking for you."

"Oh, no," Lizzy cried.

"He never got close to the kids, Liz. He roughed up some old lady. John heard noises and went to investigate. He took the guy out quickly enough. They say John was special forces with Tanner."

Lizzy nodded. "The older lady, that had to be Miss Maddie, Grams that the girls are always talking about. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. FBI questioned the guy all night and Nigel is satisfied that you're safe."

"But what if the guy who ordered the hit gets someone else? And how did they know about Pine Forest?"

"First question, the guy who ordered the hit, Brian Cantrell, is being watched. At first they couldn't find him, but when they found out it was Cantrell's brother that Tanner killed at your house and that was why he wants you dead, they went to the funeral and started tagging him from there."

"Why don't they just pick him up?"

"Because they want to find those five kids and they feel certain

Cantrell is headed down to Savannah to try to collect the money. So they'll follow him from a distance and let him lead them."

Lizzy nodded.

"Second question, how did the hit man know about Pine Forest? They traced the phone calls you made from your motel room. Two calls. Both to Pine Forest."

She shook her head. "Oh, no, I completely forgot about those. I didn't tell Keegan about them. I could've been responsible for, I mean, I don't even want to say it. They all could've been killed."

"No, you wouldn't have been responsible," Larry said gruffly. "When are people gonna learn to blame the ones really responsible."

"Don't mind him, he's a grump. So, you wanna go see your babies or what?" Donna asked.

Lizzy smiled excitedly. "Yes. When can we go?"

"Now. Go get your stuff together. I'll ride with you in the van and Larry will follow us down."

Lizzy dashed into the bedroom to gather her things. Being without her girls had been worse than missing a part of her own body and she could barely wait to see them. Still, a dark cloud hung over her happiness. Keegan. Would the pain ever go away? Jodi said she should fight for him, but she had no idea how to go about doing that. Maybe once she was down there, Jodi would give her some advice.

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The reunion was a tearful and happy one. She'd been away from her babies for eleven days, but it had seemed like forever. The girls excitedly told their mom everything they'd been doing. Lizzy couldn't stop hugging and kissing them. Once they'd settled down, Jodi took Lizzy on a tour of the inn and its grounds while John occupied the kids. They returned to the incredible aromas of Maddie's cooking.

"Dinner is served by six," Jodi informed her, "but if you're hungry Miss Maddie will be happy to put something together for you."

"No, no, I'm fine. I'm just so glad to be here, back with my daughters. I can't thank you enough for all you and John have done."

"Aww, it was nothing, really. The girls are a joy."

Lizzy looked around the front room where she and Jodi had curled up on one of the large couches, then turned her attention back to Jodi. She'd been surprised to find Jodi was of Asian descent. She had no accent. She was certainly beautiful, a tiny lady with long, silky, black hair that reached her waist. It was funny to think of her with John who towered over her. Lizzy's eyes moved past Jodi to the gorgeous stone

fireplace, the beautiful hardwood floors and the big, comfortable sofas and chairs that occupied the large room.

"This place is so beautiful. It's like something out of a storybook."

"I know. We love it too," Jodi said. "It feels special."

"It does," Lizzy said, nodding enthusiastically. "Almost like an enchanted forest."

Jodi laughed. "That's exactly why we named the children's play area outside 'The Enchanted Garden.'"

"It fits. The girls love this place. They don't want to leave."

"And how about you, Lizzy? Would you like to stay here?"

"I'd love to be able to live here."

"Then why don't you? Like you said, the girls love it here and you're gonna sell your house up in Tyler Springs anyway."

Lizzy gazed out the window thoughtfully. "It would be wonderful, wouldn't it? Still, we can't live here at the Inn. Are there any houses for sale in the area? And I wonder if I could find work."

"We'll have to look into the work thing. You're a nurse, right? Chaz's mom is a doctor, maybe she could help out in that area."

"Who's Chaz?"

"Chaz and his parents own the ranch next door. The Stewarts are awesome people. Chaz married Lisa, who is Maddie's granddaughter. You see, Lisa came home to visit her grandmother, took one look at the farmhouse and knew she had to turn it into the Inn. She and Chaz met and it was love at first sight. Anyway, Lisa and I met in California when she was the vice-president of *Golden Hotels*. She and I and John decided to go into business together, which we did. Of course, there's lots more to the story. You wouldn't believe some of the stuff that happened when we first got here."

"You'll have to tell me the rest of the story."

"Oh, I will. It's got lots of drama. Anyway, as I was saying, Chaz's mom, Dr. Stewart, is a cardiologist. She works out of Atlanta, but I'm sure she knows some of the local doctors and medical facilities. Maybe she could help you find some work. As far as the housing in Pine County, I know there's a good bit of real estate available, because the town is growing by leaps and bounds since we've come in and turned the entire place on its ear.

"But here's what I'm getting at," Jodi went on. "Chaz and Lisa bought the property next door. Remember the freestanding cottages I showed you? Those are actually built on the back of the property they purchased. We could add on to one of the cottages just for you, or build

one to your specifications. You could buy it or lease it. Either way you want. That way you'd be right here, nearby."

"It almost sounds too good to be true," Lizzy said softly.

Jodi reached out and took her hand. "I know things have been tough for you, Liz. You've lost your parents, your husband, and now your home. I understand how you can't go back there to live. I know you barely know me and you probably feel like a fish out of water. And I know..." Jodi gripped Lizzy's hand tighter. "And I know right now, your heart is broken, but I also know you're strong and you want to do what's best for your girls. If there's anything John and I can do for you, we will. We'll help you any way we can. So, if you want to move down here. We'll help you. We'll make it happen. I'm here for you, Liz. You can count on me."

Liz shook her head. "But why? I mean, I'm a stranger to you."

"Are you?" Jodi quipped. "It doesn't feel that way. I've hardly ever met a stranger."

Lizzy smiled at her. "Now that I believe, Jodi, because you are a very special person."

"Yeah, that's what Lisa keeps telling me. And John of course. And Maddie. So, I guess all y'all couldn't be wrong."

Lizzy giggled. "And you're so honest, too." She looked up and caught her breath as the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen walked through the front door. She was tall and slender, with a head full of fiery curls that were pulled back away from her face and fell down her back. Her face was perfect, her skin flawless. Her eyes were as green as emeralds and her smile, warm and kind.

Jodi stood. "Oh, good. We were just talking about you. Lizzy," Jodi said. "This is Lisa Stewart."

Lisa smiled and extended her hand. "It's so nice to meet you. I'll be darned if your girls aren't the exact replica of you. It's freakin' amazing."

Lizzy smiled. "It's very nice to meet you."

The front door opened and Chaz entered the room, carrying a red-headed toddler on his hip. Lizzy's mouth dropped open.

"And this is my husband, Chaz," Lisa said.

"I know, I know," Jodi laughed. "Chaz and John look a lot alike, don't they?"

"They're not related?" Lizzy asked.

"Nope," Chaz said with a grin. He eyed Lizzy. "Man oh, man. I thought with Lisa and Jodi we had the most beautiful women in the

world living right here in Pine Forest, but we were minus this one. John told me you looked like an angel. I'll be darned if he wasn't right."

Lizzy's face reddened. "I hardly compare," she mumbled.

"You looked in a mirror lately?" Jodi asked. "You're beautiful. I can't believe you don't know that."

She shrugged. "Apparently beauty isn't enough."

Chaz's lips pressed together. He didn't dare open his mouth and say something that may set the woman off gushing tears. He'd learned that much after a few years of marriage. What he wanted to tell her was that the man who broke her heart was an idiot.

"He'll come around," Jodi said quickly. "You just wait and see."

"And who is this cutie?" Lizzy asked, reaching out to touch the arm of the beautiful child.

"This doll is Melaynah. She's about to be two in November."

"Well, hello there, Melaynah," Lizzy cooed. "What a pretty name."

Melaynah reached out and Lizzy lifted her from her father and took her into her arms.

"Wow," Lisa said. "That like, never happens. She's very clingy. She never goes to anyone."

"She must sense Lizzy's sweet spirit," Jodi said.

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Keegan hung up with Nigel, and Jeff with Jason at approximately the same time. Their orders were to wait to take the warehouse until all their backup—and Nigel—will be there, and even then they would all wait for the buy to go down. They sat in silence in the motel room, each thinking his own thoughts. Finally Jeff stood.

"Don't feel good about waiting," he said.

"Me neither," Keegan agreed. "I want those kids safe."

"Me too. Mr. Lee though, is working with the FBI on this, and has to go with their plans or destroy his working relationship. Besides, he wants *us* safe too."

"I don't know that Nigel cares about my safety, but he cares about that twenty-five mill. He wants to make sure he gets his hands on it, which means he wants to wait for Cantrell to get here."

Keegan sat unmoving while Jeff paced. Suddenly Jeff stopped, pulled out his phone and pushed buttons. He put the phone on speaker and waited.

"Go ahead," Jason Lee said when he answered.

"Hello, sir. You're on speaker. So, I was thinkin', we don't even know if the kids are in there, so what if, while Keegan and I are waiting

for the troops to arrive, we do a little reconnaissance?"

When Jason didn't answer, Jeff went on. "We'll be very unintrusive, Jason. We won't move in, but I'm going crazy wondering if those kids are nearby. I would love to know ahead of time where they are when it all goes down tomorrow, or at least, where they're not."

Jason was silent for some time. Finally he spoke. "We're talking strictly information gathering, correct?"

"Yes, sir, strictly," Jeff promised, looking toward Keegan, who nodded in understanding. "I know we can put eyes on the warehouse, even get inside without being seen."

"Agent Tanner?"

"Sir," Keegan said.

"We're talking about reconnaissance only. You understand that?"

"I do, sir."

"You and Jeff stay in contact with each other at all times."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want an open channel so I can monitor."

"You got it." Keegan nodded at Jeff. "Let's suit up."

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What was left of the Pine Forest Inn dinner crowd held their breath in stunned silence. Most of the other guests had gone into the town of Pine Forest to take part in the town's 'Fall Festival Nights.' The few left lingered over the gourmet foods Maddie had so lovingly prepared. Lizzy and the girls were out on the veranda, cuddled up on a porch swing as Lizzy sang softly to them. It was Lizzy's voice floating in through the open doors that had brought all conversation to a halt.

"I think that is the sweetest voice I have ever heard," one of the patrons whispered.

John nodded with a smile. "Well, now, I should've known she'd have the voice of an angel too."

Lisa and Jodi nodded, eyeing each other. They listened as Lizzy finished singing '*Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star*' to her children and began another song. This one a lullaby that was hauntingly beautiful. When she finished, Lisa and Jodi excused themselves and went outside to join Lizzy.

"Hi," Lizzy said, smiling sweetly at the two amazing women who approached her.

"Hi," Jodi answered. "We couldn't help but overhear you singing to the girls."

"Oh! I hope I didn't disturb everyone. I thought I was singing very

softly. We were trying to be very quiet."

"Disturb us? No way," Lisa said. "Do you know that you have a beautiful voice?"

"Thank you. I used to sing in the chorus in high school. My teacher said I should do something with my talent, but at the time I didn't care about anything other than having fun and going out with my boyfriend." She shrugged. "I think it might be a little too late to do anything about it now."

"Why do you say that?" Jodi asked.

"Well, look at me. I'm old now, plus I have five children."

"Old? You're not old, silly. You're younger than we are, and besides, what does having five children have to do with you singing?"

"Well, it's not like I can just run off to Nashville or something and pursue a singing career."

"No," Lisa said, "but you could do things on a smaller scale. You could run off to, let's say, Pine Forest."

"What are you talking about?"

"What Lisa's trying to say, Lizzy, is you could sing here. For us. Have you ever sung in public?"

She made a face. "Not really. I mean, when I was little I sang in church a few times. It was fun. I remember everyone coming up to me and telling me I did well and it felt pretty good."

"How would you feel about singing in public now?"

"In church?"

Jodi giggled. "Not hardly. We have a new club in town. It's actually run by Lisa's half-sister, Megan. It's alternative entertainment from the country theme we have going here. Our patrons come here from high society to find the simple life here at the Inn, yet sometimes they still need a fix of ritz, so we opened a new club."

"It's called, 'The Ritz,' of course," Lisa said. "It's already become a hot spot. People come in from the surrounding counties and from Macon rather than having to go all the way to Atlanta for a fancy night out. They get all dressed up and have drinks and gourmet appetizers and we bring in first-class performing artists. The crowd would love you. Your voice is mesmerizing."

Lizzy grimaced. "Oh my goodness, I don't think I'm good enough to sing for fancy people."

"Why don't you let us be the judge of that? You could learn a few songs, rehearse at the club to get a feel for the place and just see how you feel. If singing appeals to you, we'll listen with an objective ear

and give some feedback. I promise, we'll be honest. Whaddya say?"

"I guess I could do that." She ruffled Violet's blond curls. "What do you think, ladies? Should mommy sing for the nice people?"

"Yes, Mommy," Heather stated firmly.

"You sing good, Mommy," Violet answered.

Lizzy pressed her lips together, her eyes open wide in anticipation. "Okay, then. I'll give it a try."

"Excellent," Lisa exclaimed. "So then, I'll get some music together and a pianist."

✞✞✞

1 Peter 4:10

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms."

Chapter Eleven

Keegan keyed his mic. "We good?"

"Loud and clear," Jason said.

"Roger that," Jeff answered.

Dressed completely in black, heads covered, faces blacked, Keegan and Jeff left the car and merged into the shadows of the night. Moving through the darkness, they headed toward the last warehouse along the harbor, which was well past where Harbor Street became a dirt road. There was nothing past the warehouse except trees and very dense undergrowth.

They circled the building twice, setting up mental perimeters. Since the structure was huge, this took some time and Keegan's leg had already begun to ache.

"Two sentries at the front doors," Keegan whispered.

"Two smaller doors on the harbor side," Jeff said quietly. "Breaking the wall into thirds."

"Ditto on the far side," Keegan said. "And a lone guard for the entire side."

"Same here," Jeff said.

"Copy that," Jason acknowledged.

The agents met in the woods at the back of the building.

"There is one small door on the south end," Keegan said. "No guard. We're checking it out."

"Agent Tanner," Jason began.

"I know, I know, recon only."

When their backs were to the building, Jeff pulled his gun and nodded at Keegan who immediately pulled a shim from his tool belt and in a few seconds had the padlock picked. Easing the door open, Jeff peered inside.

A dim light was caged on the wall next to the door. Jeff could see wooden crates at least fifteen feet high and an aisle that ran down the middle of them. To his right, there was a door, more than likely an office of some kind. It had a window, but the blinds were shut. There was no light on inside the room as far as Jeff could tell. To his left were shelves and a smattering of broken workshop-type tools scattered

across a rough, plywood table. A hammer, a rusty saw, a length of chain, nails, a gas can, cigarette butts and beer cans.

Jeff eased inside, followed by Keegan, who pulled the door closed. Keegan motioned for Jeff to go left. He'd go right, because he felt any bad guys would be down past the office and he'd rather he be the one to encounter them.

They moved silently through the structure, marking off contents with Jason as they went. When Jeff first heard the voices he halted, then eased himself onto his stomach between two crates. "I got audio," he whispered.

Keegan, who had no hiding place at the moment, slipped as far back in the shadows as possible. He hadn't heard anything, but they were on opposite sides of the building and it was a large place. He waited to hear what Jeff had found.

Four men were camped out around a makeshift table playing cards. Jeff observed them for several minutes. They spoke of nothing pertinent. "I got four guys, playing cards," he finally whispered.

"Can you pass?" Keegan said.

"No. I run out of crates here. But Keegan, from where I am, I see another office-looking room straight ahead of me, I'd say it's at the halfway mark on the west side of the building. I'm looking right at the door. There's a window in the door. The blinds are closed, but I can see a light on."

"Okay. Good, Jeff. Pull back," Keegan ordered. "I don't want you attracting any attention."

"Wait. Do you hear that?" Jeff said urgently.

"What? No. I don't hear anything."

"Shh," Jeff whispered.

Keegan waited, albeit impatiently, for Jeff to fill him in. He was relieved when Jeff finally spoke again.

"It's a baby crying. I can hear a kid crying. They're here, Keegan. Thank you, Jesus, the kids are here."

Keegan closed his eyes briefly. He was having to fight the urge to go in and get the kids now. He didn't wanna wait. Just a few more hours, he told himself.

"Agent Tanner, Agent Davis, pull back and guard your perimeters," Jason ordered.

Jason's calm voice brought Keegan back from the precipice. He drew a breath. "Okay, Jeff, let's pull back. We'll keep a visual on the place. They won't get those kids outta here."

"It's hard to leave them behind," Jeff muttered.

"We'll get 'em. Don't worry. We'll take this place in the morning. Those babies will be safely back in their mother's arms tomorrow."

"Okay. I'm pulling...b" Jeff gave a loud grunt as the butt of the rifle came down on his head.

"Jeff?" Keegan whispered.

The only sound Keegan heard was a second grunt in return. "Jeff, answer me, damn it."

It was Jason's voice that broke the silence. "Tanner, pull back."

"You know I can't do that, sir."

"Agent Tanner, I'm not asking, I'm ordering you to pull back. Two dead is not an option."

"I'm not leaving him. There's a chance he's still alive and I can't leave him and you know that."

Jason sighed. "Yes, Agent Tanner. I do." Rising, he began gathering what he'd need. He was going to Savannah.

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Lizzy couldn't sleep. She should be exhausted, with the excitement of reuniting with her children and meeting all the new people and being in a new place, but her mind was running a million miles an hour. She was amazed at how quickly she'd fallen in love with Pine Forest. Tomorrow, Jodi and Lisa would take her into town and show her around. They intended to visit the club where Lizzy would sing if she decides that's what she wants to do.

If all that worked out– if Lizzy could sing at the club, if she could find a home down here, and her girls felt happy and secure, which they already seemed to be, then Lizzy herself should be happy, yet how could she feel happy when she felt like part of her had been ripped away? She couldn't get Keegan Tanner out of her mind. The way he touched her, the way he kissed. How tender and loving he was back in the motel room when she'd forgiven him for all the lies and he'd held her all night long. Her stomach twisted at the thought.

She rose and walked to the window. She and the girls were sleeping in the den of the Appels' giant attic apartment above the inn. There was no room in the actual inn because it was fully occupied, and John didn't want her and the girls out at one of the cottages yet, at least not without him or someone watching over them.

Gazing out the window, past the lighted pool area and the gardens to the darkened woods at the back of the property, she let the images come of Keegan. They came in flashes, him reaching out to her, him

taking her face in his hands before he kissed her, him giving his small chuckle, his hand wiping the table, him standing close as he doctored her head, the look in his eyes when he finally whispered, 'I love you.' The sobs welled up in her chest as she slid down the wall, curled up in a ball and cried.

"There now, sweetie," Jodi said softly as she knelt by her, running her hand over her long, blond hair.

Lizzy sat up quickly and wiped at her eyes. "Oh, Jodi, I'm sorry. Did I wake you?"

"No, John got a phone call. He went downstairs so he wouldn't wake up the rest of us," Jodi said as she sat down next to Lizzy and put her arms around her. "It hurts doesn't it?"

"Hurts so much," Lizzy whispered. "I don't know what I'm gonna do. I love him so much, and he even says he loves me. So why, Jodi? Why won't he come back to me?"

"Who knows what he's thinking, sweetie. Probably something noble or heroic."

"Yes, it is something like that. Because he started to say I'd find someone better for me. I cut him off and wouldn't let him finish. I told him there was no one better for me than him."

"Sometimes, men are so dense," Jodi said.

Lizzy looked up at the look on Jodi's face and had to giggle. She sniffed and then used her nightshirt to wipe at her tears. "Yeah, they are, aren't they?"

Jodi nodded with a smile. "Come on, let's go down and raid Maddie's fridge."

The two made their way slowly downstairs. They could hear John's voice as he spoke urgently on the phone.

"I'm coming. I'm only a few hours away. Don't worry, Jason. We'll find them." He ended the call and looked up at the women as they came into the kitchen.

"John?" Jodi said. "What is it?"

John's eyes shifted toward Lizzy, then back to Jodi. He sighed. "Jeff is MIA."

Lizzy gasped. "No!"

"That's the agent Jason sent to help Keegan?" Jodi asked.

"Yes. He was with Keegan on opposite sides of a building. Keegan didn't see what happened to him. He heard a scuffle, then Jeff disappeared." He glanced at Lizzy again. "Keegan refused to pull out without Jeff and now he's not responding either."

Lizzy's eyes were wide as saucers. Her hand covered her mouth. She stared straight ahead, not really seeing anything. "No," she whispered under her hand. Her head began moving side to side. "No," she said again louder.

John grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a shake until her eyes shifted to his face. "Lizzy, I will find him. I give you my word. I *will* find him."

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When Jeff woke it was still dark and he was freezing. It took him several minutes to realize he was blindfolded, his hands and feet were tied and he was naked. His entire body shivered, his teeth chattered and his head pounded. Even though it was autumn, in Georgia it shouldn't be as cold as Jeff felt. A few moments later he realized he was so cold because he'd just been immersed in a tub of ice water. A hand slapped down on his head and pushed him under. Only when he was at the point of blacking out did the hand grab him by the hair and pull him back up. He sputtered and coughed.

He was lifted out of the tub and dumped on the floor.

"He's awake," he heard a heavily accented voice say.

"Hang him up," another voice ordered, also a heavy accent.

He was lifted upright. His bound hands were grabbed and then suddenly they were pulled up over his head until his feet left the floor. He grunted in pain as his shoulders took the brunt of his weight.

"Wh– where am I?" Jeff asked, his teeth still chattering.

"You are on the ship. Our American friends wanted nothing to do with you. They turned you over to us."

Jeff discerned the accent as Arabic. He was in the hands of the men who would buy the five American babies. He was in the hands of terrorists. He was in big, big trouble.

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Keegan pulled himself out of the water and moved stealthily up the rope ladder. The cargo ship flew a Portuguese flag, which struck him as odd. Still, it was definitely the ship where they took Jeff. It was now a few hours before dawn and before the new day would come the big bust. A baby bust. If he didn't get to Jeff before the bad guys knew their deal was dead, Jeff would also be dead– if he wasn't already.

Once Keegan eased himself on board, he realized the scope of his problem. How would he be able to search the entire ship, find Jeff and get him off before Brian Cantrell made his move? Crossing the river his earpiece had been swept away and he had no way of

communicating with Jason or Nigel to find out when the action would take place.

As he decided which way to head, he saw two men, walking the deck, rifles swung over their shoulders. Flattening himself against the wall, he calculated his odds. He was one against who knows how many. And he was gonna take as many of them out as necessary to rescue Jeff. His mind jumped briefly to Elizabeth. Her sweet face surrounded by that pale blond hair, her big, blue eyes. Big innocent eyes. He would never want her to see what he was about to do. He shook his head. Geez, he needed to keep his head clear.

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The reinforcements arrived. The group included Nigel, Dan McGraw and Matt Lane, the two Ameritech agents who'd accompanied Jeff and Keegan on motorcycles, and Agents Coker and Small, also Ameritech. Along with them there were eight more FBI and GBI and backup from the National Guard to handle the ship. Nigel took charge. It was his operation. They suited up, loaded up, clipped on their earpieces and waited for his direction.

"The primary goal is to get the kids out safely," Nigel reiterated. "Mr. Lee, who will be arriving shortly, has intel the children are being held in a small office structure midway down on the west side of the building. Be careful. Bullets will penetrate the walls. Outside, there are two guards at the front door and one on both the east and west sides. There are at least five others inside not including how many are actually in with the children. An Ameritech agent was taken last night while on reconnaissance so we will expect Cantrell at any time now. Special Agent Tanner is also MIA as of last night. We wait until Cantrell and the ISIS entourage enter the building. We take the guards out quietly. Agents McGraw and Lane, that's you."

Each agent nodded in understanding.

"We take the warehouse in the sections I've assigned. Any questions?"

When no one spoke, Nigel nodded. "I want those kids safe and I want Cantrell and the money. Be on the lookout for Agents Tanner and Davis. Let's move."

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Jeff cried out, his body bucked, his blood boiled. When they pulled the battery cables away, he slumped down.

"Revive him," the interrogator calmly commanded.

Two men pulled him down and dunked him into the ice water. Jeff

came around quickly, coughing and choking. He wanted to fight back but he had no more energy. He'd lost track of how many rounds he'd gone so far. They lifted his dead weight back onto the hook.

"I don't think your body can take very much more of this. Is it worth your life? Tell us who you were talking to when you were discovered hiding in the warehouse. Who knows about the shipment? Who are you with? FBI? CIA?"

Jeff didn't respond. The battery cables were placed against his skin. Spittle spewed from his mouth as his body jerked. The cables were removed. His body hung limply.

"Let me ask you again," the interrogator said, his tone deceptively soft. "Who– were– you– talking to?"

Jeff only whimpered.

"He was talking to me," Keegan answered, his tone also quiet.

He shot the two assistants before they could swing up their weapons. Their leader was not quite so lucky. The man was able to draw his pistol. Keegan grabbed the hand holding the pistol and they struggled, tumbling to the floor. Once Keegan was able to get behind the man it was all over. His throat slit, he bled to death within seconds.

"Okay, buddy," Keegan said as he lifted Jeff off the hook above his head. Jeff didn't respond. Keegan lowered him to the floor. He was alive, though just barely. Keegan found Jeff's clothing thrown in a corner and dressed him quickly. "Sorry," Keegan said as Jeff moaned with the rough handling. "I'm in a bit of a hurry and I can't have all that light skin reflecting the morning sun." He stood, grunting as he lifted Jeff and hefted him across his back. His bad leg almost buckled under the strain. Gritting his teeth, Keegan forced himself to tough it out. "Whaddya say we blow this joint, Jeff, ol' buddy?"

He wasn't so naive as to think it would be smooth sailing from here on out. He'd lost count of the men he'd had to kill to find Jeff. He had no idea if the bust had gone down yet or if the sun had risen or if the children had been saved. He only knew he had to get Jeff off the ship and going down the rope ladder he'd used to board the ship was not gonna be an easy task, but it seemed there was no other way.

Pleased that he made it to the ladder without being accosted, he lowered Jeff to the deck then picked him back up facing him. It was awkward at first, yet once Keegan was able to start down, his torso made a natural cocoon for Jeff's limp body. They were halfway down when Jeff's body began to contract and convulse. "Okay, Jeff, calm down. It'll be over soon," he comforted, knowing Jeff couldn't really

hear him.

Keegan stilled a moment when he heard gunshots and yelling. All hell was breaking loose. The bust must be going down. He hoped the kids were okay. Looking up, his eyes widened as he saw men with rifles. Fortunately, they didn't seem to be shooting at him. Concentrating on his extremely hard task, he kept moving.

He was about two-thirds down when the pain exploded in his leg. His body jerked. He'd been hit. Suddenly the bullets were flying all around him and Jeff. They were sitting ducks and so he did the only thing he could do. He let go.

They hit the water together, maintaining the position they'd had on the rope ladder. Bullets whizzed past their heads. Keegan tried to dive under towing Jeff with him, but then the unthinkable happened. He lost his grip on Jeff and his friend disappeared below the surface quickly. Terrified he wouldn't be able to find him, he dove and was greatly relieved when his hand brushed some cloth. Knotting his hand in Jeff's shirt he jerked Jeff to the surface. Turning Jeff on his back, he swam with him toward the stern of the ship. Every kick of his leg brought pain and anguish and he relished it because it meant he was still alive.

Keegan swam hard, but the currents were doing crazy things and he struggled. It felt as if a giant hand was trying to pull Jeff from his grasp. It seemed the harder he swam the farther from shore he went. He was tiring quickly, he was losing blood, and he held Jeff's life literally in his hands. "You can do this," he told himself. "Swim."

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"Mommy, come quick," Heather called. "Mommy!" She turned and ran to find Lizzy. "Mommy, come here," she called frantically.

Lizzy came running down the stairs, her heart pounding. "What's wrong, Heather? Is someone hurt?"

"No, Mommy, come look. Mr. Mike is on TV."

Lizzy ran to the dining room where a television was mounted above the windows. It wasn't Keegan on TV, but it *was* his picture. Grams and Jodi also hurried into the room to see what all the commotion was about.

The anchorwoman was reporting a story about a huge bust where nine people were arrested for child trafficking. An undisclosed amount of money was confiscated. Lizzy knew that amount. She went on to say, "...the incident was directly related to the recent arrest of Anthony Celados and Senator Jack Hartman. The entire organization was brought down by one man who worked undercover for two years,

Special Agent Keegan Tanner whose whereabouts, along with Agent Jefferson Davis from the private security firm of Ameritech, are unknown at this time.

"Agent Tanner and Agent Davis went missing last night while they kept watch over the warehouse where the child exchange was supposed to take place. The warehouse and a ship in the harbor, a Portuguese cargo ship, have been thoroughly searched and as yet have turned up no sign of the missing agents," the woman said with a smile plastered on her face. She directed the viewers to a live reporter on scene.

The reporter, a man with his hair blowing wildly in the wind, stood in front of the warehouse where the bust had taken place and the last place the missing agents had been known to be alive. They put Keegan's and Jeff's picture back up on the screen, touting them both as heroes. The story then switched to agents carrying infants, all under the age of one toward a waiting ambulance. Then it skipped to the parents of the children and how grateful they were to have their children back and that they will never be able to repay Agent Tanner for his gift to them.

Lizzy turned and fled the room.

Jodi caught up to her. "John will find him, Lizzy," Jodi assured her. "I know he will."

"How do you know? You can't know."

"I do know. I'm not just saying that to make you feel better. I truly believe it. They're like brothers. Closer than brothers. He'll find him. Lizzy, I prayed about it and I had a feeling of peace come over me. I know they're gonna find him."

"Oooh, Jodi, how I want to believe that too, but what if those men have him? What if they've killed him and dumped his body in the river? We may never know."

"We'll know."

Lizzy grabbed Jodi's hands. "Will you take care of the children for me for a few days?"

"You know I will, but..."

"No buts. I'm going to Savannah. I have to be there. If he's gone, I need to be there where he was last seen alive."

Jodi studied her determined face and finally nodded. "Okay, then, girl, let's get you ready."

"What do you mean, get me ready?"

"I mean, when they find Keegan and you see him, you're gonna knock him for a loop."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are. You asked me what I meant when I said you were gonna have to fight for him. Well, it's time you got started. You're no wimp, Lizzy. He's never gonna know what hit him."

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The five men stood together on the dock, their heads down, their frustration evident. Jason Lee, John, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb, the latter four all having served in special forces with Keegan.

John shook his head. "He was on the ship, that much is plain."

"That was definitely Keegan's handiwork," Brayden said. "He really racked up the carnage this time."

"He was trying to rescue a friend," Jason Lee reminded them. "From what I understand from John, all of you would go to any lengths to do that."

John eyed his friend. Jason Lee was in his forties, but he looked no more than mid-twenties. He was an American citizen of Korean blood. He stood about five-foot-eleven. His body was lithe and strong. His thick, black hair was neatly trimmed. He started Ameritech security with a few of his students as his agents while he worked as a consultant for the United States government, teaching martial arts to those who would train SEALs and Special Ops.

As he picked up more and larger security jobs, his company grew. He believed in technology and brought in the best, newest and brightest minds to make his company second to none. He worked closely with the military, FBI, and had friends in very high places, yet he was as concerned about Keegan, a man he'd never met in person, and his own Agent Davis as he would be over a family member.

Brayden nodded to Jason's statement. "Yes, sir, you're right. We would. A few bad guys getting in our way wouldn't deter us. I believe he made it to where they held Jeff. There were three dead men in that room along with the other delightful tools. That had to mean Keegan found Jeff. So where are they?"

Tristan blew out a breath, walked a few steps away, then turned and came back. "Okay, step by step. There's no sign of him in the warehouse. We know he was on the ship and got to Jeff. So his next step would be to get Jeff out of there. You saw what they used on Jeff, so, more than likely he wasn't conscious, which means Keegan had to carry him off the ship."

"Right," Kaleb said, taking up the thread. "And even as strong as Keegan is, it would've been difficult for him to carry a big, strong, guy

off that ship."

"And don't forget Keegan was weakened from his accident and his leg is just barely out of the cast," John added.

"Not to mention he'd been shot in the shoulder," Tristan said. "Okay, so he's struggling to get this big guy off the boat," Tristan went on. "He can't just walk him down the gangway."

All five men turned and eyed the ship.

"He'd have to go over the side," John said.

Kaleb pointed toward the stern. "Like maybe via a ladder?"

They stared at the ladder, envisioning Keegan using it.

"So, how hard would it be to carry a man down a rope ladder?" John asked.

"Difficult. Extremely difficult," Brayden answered with a sigh. "I'd say almost impossible."

"Well," Tristan began. "He may not have made it all the way. He may have fallen."

"Or possibly lost his grip on Jeff," Jason added.

"If you dropped your friend into the water that you'd just been through hell trying to rescue, what would you do?" Tristan asked.

"I'd dive in right behind him. No way am I gonna lose him now," Brayden said.

"Okay, well, I hate to be the negative one," Kaleb said. "But if Keegan and Jeff went into the water, odds of surviving are low."

"Why? Keegan's a strong swimmer."

Kaleb, who'd lived in Charleston, South Carolina all of his life shook his head. "So were a lot of the swimmers who've drowned in this area. The river meets the ocean here. When the tide is coming in, the flow of the river actually changes direction. It makes for crazy movement out there, with undercurrents moving back and forth. They could actually have been swept out to sea. Not many people survive a dunk in the Savannah River in this area."

Jason stepped back immediately. "I'll get the coast guard involved. I suggest you organize searches of the banks on both sides of the river."

The men went to work.

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When Keegan opened his eyes it was dark, which meant he'd been lying there for many hours. He lay on his back looking up at the night sky and had a quick flashback of being pinned under his car. The pain, however, was not nearly as bad. His thigh throbbed, but that was nothing. Then everything came back. Jeff. Keegan turned over in the

sand and raised himself up, his eyes searching in the dark.

He remembered losing his grip on Jeff in the swirling, cold, dark water, but he'd regained it quickly. After that he'd been terrified his fingers would be so numb that he'd let go and he wouldn't even know until it was too late, so he kept his eyes glued on Jeff the entire time he was swimming. He'd reached a point where he had to force his one arm and legs to move forward, pull back, don't stop. Move forward, pull back, don't stop. He heard a soft moan and moved toward the sound.

Jeff lay on his back, his body shivering.

"Hey buddy," Keegan said hoarsely. "You're gonna be okay."

"Ssso. . . ccold," Jeff said between clenched teeth.

"Yeah. I bet," Keegan said. "I'll fix you up. Hold on."

The pain in his own thigh though had him looking down to find where he was wounded. He needed to take care of it first before attending Jeff or they could both die. Pushing his fingers through the hole in his pants, he ripped the pants leg open. With only the moonlight for illumination, he tried to see how bad he was bleeding. It seemed only a small amount of blood trickled down his leg. He wondered if he'd already bled himself dry and he was really only a ghost going through the motions of living. Nevertheless, he pulled his belt from his waist, wrapped it around his thigh at the wound and pulled tight, not going for a tourniquet, more just to put pressure on the wound.

Next, Keegan pulled himself up to kneel over Jeff and took his hand. He began rubbing it briskly, moving up Jeff's arm. He did the same to the other hand and arm, then began working on his legs.

"Any better?" Keegan asked as he worked.

"Nno. Jjjust hhurts."

Keegan stopped his ministrations immediately. He'd been hurting him, and Jeff was so cold he hadn't been able to get the words out. "Sorry," Keegan muttered. He had to get Jeff warm. He moved closer to him, lay down beside him and wrapped his arms around him.

"Don't go getting any ideas, pretty boy," Keegan jested. "I'm just doing my job."

"I wwwon't ttell," Jeff said, giving a short laugh, but the laugh released the pent up emotions and he choked as the tears came.

Keegan held him tighter. "It's okay, man. I've been there. In Afghanistan. John and three other guys wouldn't stop looking for me. It took them five days to find me. By the time they did, I'd given up wanting to live. It was almost the exact same set up, I mean, with the ice and electrical shock."

As if speaking the words brought it all back, Jeff's body shuddered and he whimpered. After a few moments, he got himself under control. "Wwhat did you ddo?"

"I cried," Keegan said and then shrugged. "I'm not ashamed. It's the body's natural way to release emotions that are just too much to take. Listen, Jeff, I know how you feel. Trust me when I say, the memories *will* fade, but it's not gonna be easy. For days after I was rescued, every time I thought about what they'd done to me, I broke down and cried again."

Jeff's body shuddered again as Keegan's words brought on the same response. Keegan held him tight, rocking his body back and forth offering what little comfort he could.

"Hhhow llong?" Jeff asked.

Keegan sighed. "I dunno, man. Everyone's different. I had to get therapy and it took a while, Jeff. At least a year before I was totally functional again, but that's because I fought it. If I'd gotten therapy immediately, if I hadn't resisted, it would've been easier and faster, but ya know, I'm stubborn."

"I know," Jeff said. "A-and I'm grateful for tthat."

"You're gonna be okay, Jeff. I'm sure they're searching for us. They'll find us when the sun comes up. I was hit in the thigh and I don't think I can carry you out of here, but if they don't find us by morning, I'll crawl out of here if I have to and get help. Just think about how good it's gonna feel in that warm hospital bed with all the great looking nurses around taking care of you and pampering you. They bring you these blankets that are heated and it feels so good."

"My pparents are probably ffrantic."

"Mine probably think it's just another ploy."

Jeff chuckled at that. They lay silently for some time. Keegan could feel Jeff's body start to relax. He thought Jeff had fallen asleep, when he spoke again.

"I owe you my life," Jeff said quietly.

"You don't owe me anything."

As Keegan held Jeff and tried to give him his body heat, he realized he was becoming woozy and cold himself. He didn't have the strength to examine the wound in his leg and see if it still bled, and he knew if help didn't come soon, his parents would have to suffer through a second funeral. This time for real.

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John peered up at the helicopter circling overhead. They'd been

forced to abandon the search last night, but at first light this morning a coast guard cutter had dropped John, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb on the far shore, two miles north from where the Portuguese ship sat in the harbor. They were to search the eastern shoreline of the Savannah River while others did the same along the opposite shore.

Even though the choppers circled, they knew it would be difficult to spot two bodies, both dressed in black, with the way the tree line came right down to the shore, and so, Keegan's die-hard friends searched the shore themselves. They'd spread out and had been walking about a mile when Brayden pointed to what looked like a large dead animal washed up on the shore. They hurried toward the scene, dreading the worst and hoping for the best.

"It's them," John said, running toward the figures. He knelt beside Keegan, placed his fingers on the carotid artery and nodded with a smile. "He's alive."

Repeating the procedure on Jeff, he sighed with relief. Jeff stirred, opened his eyes, squinting.

"John?"

"Yeah, it's me. And some friends. We've come to take you home."

"That sounds really good."

Keegan moaned and peered up into a familiar face. "Brayden?"

"Yeah, man. It's me. How ya doin', Keeg?"

"I'm alive. So I guess I'm doin' pretty good."

"So, like, I went to your funeral."

"Thanks," Keegan said, allowing a soft laugh. "I knew you were a loyal friend."

"Hey guy," Kaleb said, looking at Keegan over Brayden's shoulder. "I'm getting tired of having to track you down to find you half dead."

"It beats the alternative," Keegan said, his voice weakening.

Tristan hung up his cell phone. "The cutter is on the way. We'll have you two out of here in just a few minutes."

"You hear that, Jeff?" Keegan asked. "Not long now."

John patted Jeff's leg. "You been through hell, huh?"

Jeff didn't answer. He didn't have an answer. He didn't want to think about what he'd been through.

"It'll get better," Brayden said quietly, remembering the pain Keegan went through, both physical and mental. Watching him suffer had been hell.

When Jeff still made no sound, Keegan sat up, peered at him. "I

know you're in a lot of pain, Jeff. Hold on, man. We'll get you to the hospital and they're gonna give you the good stuff."

Jeff closed his eyes and nodded.

John tugged at the rip in Keegan's pants. "You were hit?"

Keegan shrugged. "I'm okay. It didn't bleed much."

"That's because you have ice water in your veins," Tristan said just as their transportation pulled up.

Fifteen minutes later the now famous agents were across the river and being loaded into ambulances. Keegan was worried about Jeff. He wasn't out of danger yet. He would have both internal and external electrical burns. He faced infection, renal failure and a lot of pain. If only Keegan had been able to get to him faster.

There was a media frenzy on the dock. Keegan glanced over at Jeff. Paramedics worked to stabilize him. Reporters and cameramen surrounded him. Keegan's attention was drawn back to himself as medics inserted an IV. A female reporter was leaning over him, asking him questions before Nigel appeared and had her ushered back.

"We got the kids, the money and all the bad guys including Brian Cantrell," Nigel reported to Keegan.

Keegan nodded wearily. Relieved, he lay back on the gurney and closed his eyes. He was so tired.

"Agent Tanner," Nigel said seriously.

Keegan opened his eyes.

"Good job."

"Thank you, sir."

"We're expected in Washington in a few days for a debriefing."

Keegan nodded. "I'll be there."

"Agent Tanner?"

Keegan's attention shifted to look into the dark eyes of an Asian man. "Yes."

The man held out his hand. "I'm Jason Lee."

Keegan reached up to him. "It's an honor to finally get to meet you, sir," Keegan said.

"The honor is all mine." He nodded toward Jeff. "For what you did for him– thank you."

Keegan nodded. "How is he?"

Jason shook his head. "Not too good. They messed him up, but Jeff is strong. He'll come back."

"He's gonna need therapy," Keegan said.

"He'll have the best of everything he needs for a full recovery,"

Jason promised.

"I believe that," Keegan said with a smile.

Jason stepped back as Keegan was lifted into the ambulance. "I'll be speaking with you soon, Agent Tanner."

"Looking forward to it," Keegan answered.

Keegan closed his eyes as fatigue overwhelmed him. The entire way to the hospital all he could think about was the comfort he'd received from one sweet nurse just a few months ago. His mind and body yearned for her now more than ever, now, now that the entire ordeal was over.

Now that the kids were safe and the organization brought down, all he wanted, all he could think about was getting back to Elizabeth and making a life with her and his girls, and yet, he knew he wasn't worthy of her. As Nigel had so succinctly put it, he was a monster, and if he loved her enough, he'd stay out of her life. He just didn't know if he was that strong. Yet he had to be, didn't he? For her sake. For the sake of his girls– *the* girls, he corrected. So what now? He sighed. He'd get in touch with his family, let them know he was okay. They would want to rush right down to Savannah, but he won't be staying long in the hospital. He'll tell them to stay put and he'll be home.

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Isaiah 43:2

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze."

Chapter Twelve

Lizzy drew in a sharp breath and sat straight up, her eyes darting around the motel room. Never bothering to turn off the TV, which she had turned on in order to follow the progress of the search, she'd finally fallen asleep in the wee hours of the morning. Glancing up at the screen now, she saw Keegan's picture.

In this picture he was a little younger and much cleaner-cut than the man she knew. It was probably an early FBI photograph. Next to it was a much younger version of the same man, but in military dress. She grabbed the remote and turned up the volume.

"This was the scene earlier as the two agents were recovered."

Her heart soared. Immediately, her eyes filled with tears of gratitude and joy. He's alive and she was bound and determined to have him back in her life. Hopefully, Jodi's coaching would accomplish that.

Lizzy watched as Keegan and Jeff were loaded into ambulances. Keegan appeared to be alert.

"Reporting live from *Memorial University Medical Center*, here's Brett Richards."

She didn't bother to hear the rest. She sprang out of bed and headed toward the shower. An hour later she stood dressed and ready in front of the mirror, pulling nervously at the low-cut blouse.

She wore a tight, black skirt that came to just below mid-thigh, paired with knee-high black leather boots. The blouse was violet silk trimmed with black piping. The long sleeves began at the edge of each shoulder with the front of the sleeve held to the back of the sleeve with a tiny black bow. Then there was an open hole trimmed in black until it came together again with another black bow at the elbow. Then it was open again until it met with a third bow at her wrist. The neckline was a deep 'u.' Lizzy had been worried that it showed too much skin, but Jodi convinced her it was the perfect amount.

She'd added a touch of makeup which she usually didn't wear. This she kept to a minimum so as not to appear like a floozy. Her hair was scooped up into a clip at the back of her head, but she pulled little tendrils down here and there to soften the look. Turning from side to

side, she bit her lip. Time to put Jodi's plan into action.

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It was only eleven in the morning. Keegan had been in the OR by seven-thirty, in recovery by eight and in a room by nine-fifteen. That room was now filled with loud, boisterous laughter. Keegan had demanded to be released ASAP and the hospital was only too eager to comply, due to the chaos brought on by the media frenzy. He would be released sometime in the afternoon.

Keegan's Marine buddies, after delivering his bag from the motel room where he'd stayed with Jeff, hung out, flirting with the nurses, giving him a hard time and pretty much causing a commotion. The most recent burst of laughter had been from a joke definitely not repeatable in mixed company.

"So tell me, Keeg," Brayden said from where he leaned against the far wall, his legs crossed, his arms folded over his chest. "Now that you've been resurrected for the second time, how does it feel to be a national hero?"

"Give me a break," Keegan responded.

"What's the matter, Tanner," Tristan asked. "Are you shy?"

"You know as well as I do that I was just doing my job. Any one of you would've done the same thing. The media can make a big deal about it, but that doesn't make me a hero."

John, who occupied the only chair in the room, shifted positions. "According to them right now, you can walk on water."

"If that were so, Jeff and I wouldn't have spent an entire night cuddled together trying to keep from freezing to death."

The men chuckled.

"All I can say, bro," Kaleb began from where he sat next to Tristan on the AC unit, "is you're my hero. What you did wasn't easy and I don't know if I would've been as successful as you. Do you realize how many men you faced in order to get to Jeff?"

Keegan shrugged. "I wasn't keeping count."

"It was twenty-three. You took out twenty-three men in order to save Jeff."

Keegan's face darkened. "That many, huh?"

The room became silent as each man took a few moments to envision what that would entail.

"Hey, man," Brayden said. "You did what you had to do to save a life. An American life."

"Keeg, the men you killed would kill you and your family and any

other American without thought," John said. "They were terrorists. Don't forget that."

"Yeah, I know that. It just helps to hear it."

"So, what do you intend to do when they let you out of here this afternoon?" Tristan asked.

"I was thinking you guys would take an old friend out for a drink."

"Oh, you got that," Brayden said.

"I feel the need to get drunk," Kaleb said.

"Get drunk and get some female companionship, in that order," Brayden said. He turned to peer at the woman who suddenly appeared in the doorway. "Well, hello gorgeous," he sang.

Tristan and Kaleb both stood. "Whoa, momma," Tristan moaned.

John looked over to the doorway to see who had their attention. "Lizzy?"

She walked into the room. "Hi, John," she said softly.

Coming around the corner, her eyes met Keegan's.

"Elizabeth," he said, his tone cautious, his brow furrowed. His eyes traveled over her. His jaw flexed.

"Hello, Keegan," she said.

He sighed. "You shouldn't have come."

"Why not? You said you love me. I believed you. And I love you. So, when someone I love ends up in a hospital, it's only polite that I go and see them."

"I don't think you're being polite, Elizabeth."

She smiled, her chin slightly raised. "You're right. I'm not." She walked slowly to the bed, lowered it all the way, and then put the guardrail down. Leaning over him, affording him an excellent view, she kissed his lips softly. When she lifted her head, she remained bent over, her face close to his.

"Don't do this, Elizabeth," he warned.

"Do what?" she asked innocently, resting her forearm on the bed next to his head.

He breathed her in.

She waited for his eyes to move back to her face. "I'm very happy to see you alive and well. Aren't you just a little bit happy to see me?"

He rolled his eyes. "It's not that, but..."

"But what?" she said, kissing him again.

He closed his eyes. She was clouding his mind.

"It's no good," he said.

"I don't understand why you keep saying that."

His face darkened in anger. "I told you it wouldn't work. Why couldn't you just believe me? Huh? Why couldn't you just stay away? I'm not the man you think I am. You don't know the things I've done."

"Please, Keegan," she said softly. "Don't make me drive all this way and not even get one hello kiss from you."

She brushed her lips over his, back and forth.

He pushed her away. "You don't know what you're doing."

She moved close again. "I'm pretty sure I do."

"Stop. Stop now," he ordered. "You shouldn't have come," he said, his voice gruff.

"I had to. I want you. I need you. I love you, Keegan," she muttered between kisses.

She ran her hand over his chest.

He grabbed it, holding her hand still. "I'm telling you, Elizabeth, you're in a danger zone."

"What are you talking about? I know you wouldn't hurt me. Not physically anyway."

His jaw clenched. "There's this thing, Elizabeth, it's called 'primal post-war or post-disaster reaction syndrome."

"Sounds interesting."

"When a man encounters a life and death situation, and survives, his sex drive goes into overdrive."

"Hmm, interesting. So, just men, or does it affect women too?"

He closed his eyes. "Yes, women too."

She bent again, kissed his cheek, and then his lips.

"Aw, hell," he groaned as his arms came brusquely around her, his mouth clamped over hers and he jerked her across his body.

He twisted in the bed and she gave a squeal as her feet left the floor and he pulled her into the bed and under him.

"Are you sure this is how you want our first time to be?"

"Well, I mean, not in front of your friends."

"There's no one here," he muttered before he lowered his head to kiss her.

She struggled away, looking over his shoulder. There was indeed no one in the room except the two of them and the door was shut. She looked into his eyes. "I'm sure."

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Four large men stood outside Keegan Tanner's hospital room. John, Kaleb and Tristan leaned casually against the wall. Brayden leaned against the door itself.

"So, John, I guess that's the woman you were telling us about?" Brayden asked.

"Yep, that's her. She's a great kid. Jodi really likes her and actually I do too," John said.

"Um, the woman who walked in there ain't no kid. And there's no way that blonde bombshell has five kids of her own," Tristan said.

"It's amazing, but it is true. And she is like an angel when she's with them. What's more, you should see Keeg with them. He teases them and tickles them and tells them fairy stories."

"No way," Kaleb said. "Please, don't tell me anymore. The hero image is fading fast."

John grinned. "It'll happen to you too one day."

"When hell freezes over."

The cute little nurse Brayden had flirted with earlier approached the door, but Brayden stepped in front of her.

"Hello, again," Brayden said, smiling down at her.

She smiled back, causing dimples to appear in her cheeks. "Hey," she said.

"So, what time does your shift end?" he asked.

"I don't think I should be telling you that kind of private information."

"Oh come on now, surely, you can trust me. We're all close friends of the hero in there," he said, motioning toward the door. "We're the ones who found him."

She frowned. "Oh! So then, are you FBI?"

"Nope. I work in the private sector. Got a few businesses going."

"Like what?"

"Well, for one, I own a cycle shop."

"As in motorcycles?"

"Yep. I've got a big one. How would you like to go for a ride?" he said leaning close. He heard one of his buddies give a groan.

She giggled. "I might like it just fine. I get off at three." She tried to move past him to go into the room, but he abruptly put his arm across the threshold.

"I'm afraid I can't let you go in," he said.

She looked up at him, her eyebrows raised. "I beg your pardon?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, but he's doing a, um..."

"A private interview," Tristan offered quickly.

"Yeah, a private interview. Shouldn't take too much longer."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to come back then." She turned to leave.

"See you out front at three," he called after her.

"I guess you just changed your plans for the night," Tristan said.

"Not too much. I'll just– reverse it."

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"This doesn't change anything," Keegan said sharply.

"Doesn't it?" she answered with a smile, keeping calm and confident, just as Jodi had coached her to do.

"Let me tell you something about what happened here, Elizabeth. Then maybe you'll begin to understand what kind of man you're dealing with and why you need to move on and find someone else."

"Fine. By all means, speak."

"When a man goes through what I did yesterday, his survival instincts kick in. Those instincts are— primal. Then you walk in looking about as fine as a woman has a right to be..."

"Really?" she said, smiling in satisfaction.

He shook his head impatiently. "Elizabeth, you came in here while I was still in that survival mode. What we just did, it was pure, instinctive, primal lust. Nothing more."

"You mean, I offered and you took, without a care, period. You were so revved up in the he-man thing, and I simply fit the bill?"

"Very good, Elizabeth, you got it exactly."

She shook her head. "I think I know you better than you know yourself. You love me, Keegan."

"Yes. I do. I've told you that and I meant it, but what just happened here had nothing to do with love."

"I disagree. I could feel it. Keegan, people who love each other are meant to be together."

"Not always."

"So, you have no intention whatsoever of continuing a relationship with me?"

"Now you're getting it," he said cruelly.

She worked hard to keep the hurt out of her eyes. "Fine, Keegan, but I think, after all you've done, after all the lies and still I forgave you, I think you owe me the courtesy of an explanation. I deserve to know exactly why you've come to this decision."

"Elizabeth..."

"But not now. I've run out of patience with you. It's my understanding you're being released this afternoon. You've certainly proven you're physically well. You will come to my motel room tonight and we will talk this out. It's *The River Motel*, just down the

street. Number one-twelve."

"I won't be there."

"Yes. You will. You owe me. I'm not asking for much."

She straightened her skirt and blouse. Pushed her hair back over her shoulder and turned to leave.

"Elizabeth, there's nothing more to say. I won't be there."

"You're no coward, Keegan Tanner. Face the music. I'll see you tonight." She turned and left the room.

Brayden moved aside as the door opened. The four men looked down at her as she emerged. Her face and chest were marked red from Keegan's beard. Her mouth was swollen. One bow at her shoulder had come untied. Her hair hung loose beside her face. She brushed her hair back over her shoulder and turned her head toward John.

"I'm staying at *The River Motel*, room one-twelve, just down the street. Please bring him to me tonight."

"Lizzy, I don't know that..."

She smiled sweetly. "Jodi told me to tell you that she's depending on you to do the right thing."

John muttered something, running a hand through his hair.

She turned her big, blue eyes on the rest of the gang, looking into each face individually. She smoothed some of her hair back and finally, with as much dignity as she could muster, she nodded. "Gentlemen." She turned calmly and took her leave.

They watched her walk away.

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"What the heck are you talking about?" Tristan asked, incredulous.

"You heard what I said," Keegan responded, tossing back the contents of his glass.

"Lemme see if I got thiz straight," Kaleb volunteered. "You found the perfect girl, you fell in loovvee with her and then you dumped her."

Keegan nodded his head several times, sighing heavily. He glanced around the bar, thinking of the difference between this one and the one he and Jeff had patronized a few days ago. This joint was lively, crowded, upscale. On the bandstand a trio of musicians played and sang familiar tunes. It was a nice place.

"Are you an idiot?" Tristan asked, garnering Keegan's attention effectively.

"I don't think so. I have my reasons."

"Aha!" Kaleb said loudly. "So there izz somethin' wrong with her. Izz she a nag? Or, maybe she's a slob. Come on, Keeg. What gives?"

Keegan sighed again. "This woman, Elizabeth, is sweet. I mean really sweet. Innocent, young, eager to please. She could win a mother of the year award. She's intelligent, she works hard, she never complains. She doesn't have a mean bone in her body. She's perfect."

"Not to mention she's great in bed," Kaleb said.

Keegan's eyebrows rose.

"I mean, she looks like she is," Kaleb amended.

Keegan forgave him since he was further gone than the rest of them. "Let me see if I can explain."

"Wait a minute," John said, motioning toward the door of the bar. "Brayden's back. He'll want to hear this too."

Brayden sauntered up to the table, a smile on his face.

"Enjoyed yourself, did ya?" Tristan asked.

"You know it. She likes my motorcycle."

"Yeah, I juz bet she does," Kaleb laughed.

John kicked out a chair. "Have a seat, loverboy. We're just about to hear why Keegan dumped the perfect woman."

"You dumped that pretty little Miss Lizzy who came and– uh– cheered you up today?"

"Yeah," Kaleb said. "He's in llooove with this girl, but he dumped her 'cause she's too sweet or somethin' stupid like that." He sniffed, shaking his head. "It just makes me feel so bad, ya know?"

Brayden motioned to the waitress and took a seat, grinning at his friend, Kaleb. "I think you've about reached your quota for the night, huh, big boy?"

"Who me? I'm juz gettin' started," Kaleb argued.

Brayden gave the waitress his drink order and the others asked for refills. Brayden watched her walk away, his eyebrows shooting up.

"She's mine, you hog," Tristan said.

Brayden switched his attention back to his friends. "Sorry. One can't help but look. So tell us, Keegan dearest, why you dumped the gorgeous blonde."

He sighed. "Like I was trying to tell these guys, it's just better for her all around."

"For her?"

"Yes, for her."

"Cuz, you ain't no good. Right?" Tristan asked.

"That's pretty much it," Keegan said.

"Why don't you tell them why you think you're not good for her," John put in.

Keegan glared at him.

"Go ahead, Keeg," Brayden said. "We're your friends, your brothers-in-arms. We'll understand and support you."

Keegan looked from face to face. Finally he drew a breath. "I was talking to Nigel, who is my SO at the bureau. He reminded me of the kind of violence I'm used to. He pointed out to me, if Lizbeth knew half the things I've done, she'd cringe every time I touched her. I don't want her subjected to that. I don't want her to feel revulsion when I touch her. I don't want her to know what the world is really like. I don't want her to know the things I've done, granted, what I've had to do. I don't want her to see me as a monster. She's such a gentle creature. She needs a gentle man. Like a doctor or a teacher. Someone who hasn't, you know, like, slit people's throats."

They sat quietly, digesting Keegan's heartfelt monologue.

Finally Brayden spoke. "Well, that's a load of crap."

Keegan shook his head. "What happened to you understanding and supporting me?"

"Well, I thought your explanation would be a lot better than that."

"Keegan," John said quietly, the only sober one in the group. "I've seen you with her. I've seen her bring out all the gentle things in you. I've seen how you are with those little girls. There is no one better than you to take care of that family."

Keegan shook his head sadly, looking down at his hands. "I'm a trained killer."

"I went through the same training as you, Tanner," John said sharply. "And I refuse to be labeled a killer. We're protectors. We don't *want* to kill. We don't *enjoy* killing. God knows, I hope I never have to kill again in my life, yet, someone threatens my life or the lives of those I love, I'll do what I have to do to defend and protect. We defend those that cannot defend themselves."

The others at the table nodded in agreement.

"We're all trained, Keeg," John said. "We went through that training because someone has to do the hard things. We decided that's who we are. We were the ones strong enough to do the hard things. The training was pure hell, remember? But we all made it through. It made us strong. At one time you were proud to be special ops. We all were."

"He's right, Keeg," Tristan said. "You took pride in what you achieved. You took pride in what you were, in the man you were." He shook his head slowly. "You know, I'm thinkin' if this chick robs you of that pride, if she makes you feel dirty, then maybe you *should* break

it off with her. You can't change who you are, man."

"Which is why I had to break it off with her."

"So what was that at the hospital?" Brayden asked.

"She seduced me. She knew just what she was doing."

Brayden chuckled. "'Well, it didn't take much."

"Yeah, well, you know, it was just the wrong time."

The waitress arrived with their drinks.

"Hello, sweetheart," Tristan said, deciding he'd better make his move before Brayden did.

"Hey yourself," she said, smiling. "Can I get y'all anything else?"

"Just keep mine coming," Keegan said.

"Will do," she said eyeing him briefly before turning her attention back to Tristan.

"Got any plans tonight?" Tristan asked.

"Maybe. What you got in mind, sugar?"

"You and me, goin' for a ride in my Mustang. Maybe a romantic drive down by the ocean."

"Ooh, that sounds nice, but, I don't even know you. How do I know you aren't some serial killer?"

"You can't tell just from my good looks?" Tristan said.

The rest of the table groaned.

"Ted Bundy was a good-looking guy too," she returned.

"Tristan wouldn't hurt ya," Brayden said, deciding to help out his friend. He motioned toward Keegan. "Don't you recognize him?"

She looked Keegan over. "Well, he does look kinda familiar, but I can't place him."

"This guy is the FBI agent who's been all over the news for the past two days."

She looked again, closer this time, her face becoming animated. "Oh! It *is* you! Oh, my!"

Keegan glared at his friend.

"So you see," Brayden continued. "We're his buddies. You'd be safe with Tristan. The only person you'd be safer with– is me."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah, but he's not available," Tristan said, cutting an annoyed look toward his 'buddy.'

"Well, then, I guess I'll be going for a scenic drive tonight," she said sweetly. "But I don't get off until one."

"I'll still be here," Tristan promised. "Oh, uh, by the way. What's your name?"

She smiled. "It's Honey, you know, like the nectar the bees make?" She turned and walked away and this time they *all* watched her make her exit.

"Okay," Brayden said, clearing his throat. "So let's get back to the important matter of why Keegan dumped that sweet, perfect little blonde number who so sweetly and perfectly came to his room today and turned him to mush."

"No, let's not get back to it," Keegan said. "I'm tired and half drunk and don't want to think about anything right now."

"Okay, okay, but let me just ask you one more question."

Keegan sighed. "Shoot."

"Since you don't want her, can I have her?" Brayden asked.

Keegan remained seated, his body deceptively relaxed. "You keep your hands off her," he said quietly.

Brayden laughed loudly. "Keeg, your answer speaks volumes, man. I don't know what crap this Nigel guy put in your brain, but it totally messed you up. It's obvious you'll never be happy without Miss Lizzy, so I suggest you get your head clear."

John nodded. "For once, Brayden, I think you've got it right."

"For once?" Brayden asked.

"Look, guys, I appreciate your input. I'll figure it out. Let me just put that subject aside a moment so I can tell you idiots thanks for, well, you know, for showin' up here and uh, searching for me."

"Come on, Keeg, you ain't gotta thank us. We got your back and we know you got ours," Tristan said.

Keegan nodded. "I do."

"And for the record," Brayden added. "If I had to pick someone to be on my side in a situation, I'd pick a killer like you."

"Hear, hear," they all said.

Honey arrived with refills, but before Kaleb could pick his up, Tristan took it from him.

"Hey, whazz with that?" Kaleb asked.

"You're done," Tristan said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't feel like carryin' your butt outta here."

Kaleb cursed and slumped back in his chair.

At that moment the manager approached the small stage and took up the mic, asking for everyone's attention.

He started making some patriotic speech about the military and cops and federal agents who put their lives on the line. It took a few

minutes before Keegan realized he was referring to him. The manager had everyone raising a glass to him. Keegan looked up to see his friends joining in. Sighing, because he hated all the stupid publicity, he raised his glass in acknowledgment. A few minutes later, he had strangers coming over to shake his hand.

"Sorry, man," Brayden offered, since it was his fault for telling Honey who Keegan was. "Let's get the heck outta here."

"I'm stickin' around to get a taste of Honey," Tristan said. "The rest of you guys get going."

"Yeah, I've gotta get the man of the hour over to the motel anyway," John said, motioning for the check.

Keegan glanced sharply at John. "What are you talking about?"

"I promised Lizzy I would deliver you to her tonight."

"Well, you can forget it," Keegan said.

"Oh, you're going, all right," John said. "If I have to get these guys to help get you there."

"Your loyalties have changed?" Keegan asked incredulously.

"No, man, they're still the same as always. God, wife and son, my brothers, my friends and family, my honor, my country."

"And you forcing me to see Lizzy tonight falls under which of those categories?"

John grinned. "That would fall under the wife category. You know how women stick together, man. Jodi doesn't ask me for much, but when she does I do my best to comply."

Keegan muttered a curse.

"What's the big deal, Keeg?" Tristan asked. "Go there, let her know what's what and leave. Easy as that."

"Yeah. Easy as that," Keegan muttered.

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Gasping, Lizzy sat up, her heart in her throat. Then she remembered she'd given up waiting on Keegan to show and gone to bed. It must be him knocking on the door. She dashed out of bed, flew to the door and peeked out the peephole.

She was so happy to see him standing there she had to suppress the tears of joy that welled in her eyes. Even though he supposedly was coming to tell her why they couldn't be together, she had other plans. She would do, say or use anything to fight for the man she loves. She jerked the door open. Keegan scowled down at her as his buddies sped away, howling with laughter.

"Elizabeth," Keegan growled, looking her up and down. He

pushed her back from the door and closed it. "You trying to let the whole world see you like that?"

She'd forgotten to pull on her robe. Looking down at the white negligee she'd worn obviously for his benefit, she realized his friends got a good eyeful. Too bad. She shrugged. "Maybe someone else will want what you don't," she said flippantly.

His frown darkened as he tossed his bag on the floor by the dresser. "What has gotten into you?"

"I don't know what you mean." She turned to find the matching robe, knowing it wouldn't really hide anything.

He grabbed her, pulled her up against his chest. "I never said I didn't want you," he murmured.

She wrinkled her nose. "You're drunk."

He laughed bitterly. "No. No I'm not, but I wanted to be."

She jerked away, shaking her head. "I don't understand, Keegan."

"There's nothing to understand. I've already told you it isn't gonna work out between us."

Lizzy lifted her chin. "You say that and yet, you made love to me earlier today."

"I already explained that to you. What did you expect when you walk into my room looking like some high-class hooker?"

Her mouth dropped open. "I've never hit anyone in my life, but you make me want to hit you."

His eyes glittered with anger. "You wanna play rough, Elizabeth, because we can do that."

Somehow she kept her body from trembling. "I, I'm not afraid of you, Keegan Tanner," she said, realizing she didn't sound very convincing. "I know you'd never hurt me."

He grabbed a lock of her hair and considered some of the things he had in mind. If he did them, maybe then she'd believe what kind of man she was dealing with, but the thought of her being afraid of him made him sick. She was right, he'd never hurt her. Sighing, he let go of her hair and moved away.

She stood there for several seconds, twisting her hands together. Finally, she motioned toward one of the chairs. "Um, why don't you sit down? Would you like a soda or something?"

"No," he said gruffly. He blew out a breath as he took the offered chair. She sat on the edge of the bed across from him. Looking into his eyes, she smiled sweetly. His heart did a somersault. He'd just thought about threatening her with violence and she was sitting there making

goo goo eyes at him.

"Keegan, tell me this; did you mean it when you said you loved me?" she asked, timidly.

"I don't say things I don't mean."

"And you went to a lot of trouble to explain to me all about you being undercover and why you lied about who you were. It seemed important to you that I know the truth, that what happened between me and you wasn't part of the lie."

"I didn't mean to fall in love with you, Elizabeth, but I did. Heaven help me, I did. And so yeah, it was important that you know what happened between you and me was real."

"You wanted me to know that I wasn't just some girl you 'did' as you told that man."

He gave a slight chuckle at the sound of that phrase coming out of her mouth. "No, you weren't just someone I did."

"And then I got sick and suddenly, you didn't want me anymore."

He looked away, not able to meet her pleading eyes.

"Keegan, look at me. Tell me, did it have something to do with me being sick? Because I don't get sick very often."

His eyes met hers. "Oh, baby," he said gently. "Of course not. Of course it wasn't because you got sick."

His tone softening brought tears to her eyes. "Then what happened in those few hours that changed your mind? Was I too easy? Too clingy? Do the girls scare you? I understand that because they scare everyone else too. I can't get a man to give me the time of day because they're intimidated by the girls." She gave a false laugh.

"How are they?" he asked quietly.

"They're fine. They love it there in Pine Forest. We're gonna move down there, try to reestablish some semblance of a life. They asked about you when I called them today. They told me to let you know they miss you."

"I miss them too," he said softly.

"You don't have to ya know. You can see them anytime you want– but we've changed the subject, haven't we? Please, Keegan, tell me what I did to chase you away?"

He looked deep into her eyes. There was nothing but love shining in them. He came into her life, made her feel again, made her want again, and then destroyed the only home she'd ever known. And now, in essence, he's taken her innocence. He had no right to do any of that. He shook his head. "Elizabeth, sweetheart, you didn't chase me away."

He sighed. "Look, do you understand what I do for a living?"

"You put yourself in danger to protect others. You go after criminals. Or risk your life to save a friend. Sometimes you lie, but it's for a good cause. And sometimes you have to stay gone for a long time. I wouldn't complain about that. I give you my word. I'm so used to being alone anyway, just knowing that you were coming back would get me through."

His heart broke. His eyes closed. "God, I love you, Elizabeth."

A tear broke free and ran over her cheek. "Then stay with me, Keegan. Forever."

"Elizabeth, I've done things. Horrible things."

"You mean in the line of duty? Like killing those two men who were about to rape me?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Only much worse."

"I understand that, Keegan. You do what you have to do to protect people. I mean, would you rather have let those two men finish what they'd started?"

"Don't be silly and don't make light of what I'm trying to say."

"I would never make light of you, Keegan. I don't even think that's possible. I'm just saying it doesn't matter to me what you've done, or what you may have to do in the future. I love you, and I desperately need you to love me back."

Deciding it was a good time for the next part of her plan, she stood and came to stand in front of him. Placing her hands on his shoulders she leaned forward and offered her kiss.

He hesitated only a moment before he accepted it.

✞✞✞

1 Corinthians 7:2

"But because of the temptation to sexual immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband."

Chapter Thirteen

There was triumph and delight, joy and pleasure from having him willingly kiss her again.

He pulled away slightly. "I do love you, Elizabeth. I love you with all my heart."

Lizzy eyed him. Keegan was the epitome of masculinity. Dark, dangerous. Lean, hard muscle, chiseled good looks. To her he was beautiful. Her eye caught a glimpse of the bulk of the bandage on his thigh. She motioned towards it. "Are you in any pain?"

"Just the regular stuff. Nothing big."

"How about the wound to your shoulder?"

He motioned to the scar. "It's healing fine."

"Does your broken leg still hurt?"

"I limp some, but it's getting much stronger. Are we through with the examination, doc?"

She smiled, gave a shrug. "I guess I can't help it."

"Let me show you that I'm fine."

Over the course of the next few hours, he convinced her that physically, he was doing okay.

Later, as he held her close, she thought for sure she'd won when he spoke to her.

"I love you, Elizabeth. I love you and I don't know what I'm gonna do about it."

"Stay with me. Live with me, Keegan."

"I want to. How I want to."

"Then do it. I don't know what made you think I'd be intimidated by the things you've had to do in your line of work. I was married to a soldier. I understand. If that's what's been keeping you away, put it out of your mind."

"It's not just things a soldier has had to do."

"Fine. No matter what they are, no matter how bad, I'll always know you as the gentle, kind man you are. The man who was skilled enough to save our lives back there at my house, and skilled enough to save Jeff's life. I've been watching the news, Keegan. I'm so proud of you. You're so strong. You're a national hero. Do you realize that?"

"I was just doing my job the best I knew how. That's all."

"Keegan, what started you thinking that you weren't good for me? I mean, it seemed to happen overnight, in just a few hours' time. It doesn't make any sense."

Sighing, he kissed her cheek. "Nigel is afraid of losing me as one of his top agents."

"Why?"

"Because if I married you and became a family man, he knew I wouldn't want to go on long assignments. He knew I would want to come in. I would ask for a transfer."

"Married me? You told him you wanted to marry me?"

His arms tightened around her and he sniffed her hair. "Well yes, of course I want to marry you."

She sniffed and snuggled up against his chest. "Okay, sorry I interrupted. Go on. A transfer to another department."

He chuckled in her ear. "Yes, he didn't want me to ask for a transfer, so he went on to point out to me the things I've had to do and the fact that you would be revolted if you knew. He said you'd be marrying a monster."

Rising up, she looked into his face. "And you believed him? He was using psychology on you to keep you from leaving him."

"I know that."

"You do?"

"Yes, of course I do. I have a degree in psychology."

"You do?"

"Yeah. I do. Two degrees. Criminal psychology and criminology. So that I can understand the criminal mind."

She settled back down. "Oh." She sighed. "So then, why did you fall for his trick?"

"I didn't. The thing is, what he says won't make me stay in his unit, but he was right. I *have* done things, violent, cruel, bloody things, that if you'd seen me do them, you'd be horrified and repulsed."

"I very much doubt that. I'm a nurse. I've seen a lot of bloody, horrible things."

"Have you ever seen someone slit a man's throat?"

She was silent.

"That's what I thought."

"Have you had to do that?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"You poor baby," she crooned, rolling over and placing her hand

on his face. "It must have been horrible for you."

His brow creased in confusion. She was concerned for *him*? For him instead of the dead guy? "It was no fun," he finally said in answer to her question.

"If you were a monster you would've thought it was fun. You're not a monster, Keegan."

She raised her mouth for his kiss. "I still love you. I will always love you."

He could not resist. He kissed her softly. He was sure though, that she didn't understand. He was sure that she had no idea what he was capable of.

Sighing, she sat up, smiling her sweet smile at him, crossing her legs in front of her. "So, are we okay now? Are you back to loving me and staying with me?"

"Oh, Lizbet," he sighed. "I have to admit, I don't know what to do. I love you, sweetheart. I want to spend my life with you."

"Then do it."

"But I think you deserve a man who's not constantly..."

"Okay, I'm about to get angry," she interrupted.

He bit his lip to keep from smiling because she was so darn cute when she was angry. "Why?" he asked.

"Do you think I lack intelligence?"

"No, of course..."

"Do you think just because you're well educated with two college degrees and I've only been to nursing school that you're so much smarter than me?"

"That's ridiculous."

"Then what makes you think I need you to decide what's best for me and my girls? Huh?"

"Well I..."

"Well you what? Huh?" she demanded. "Well, you *do* think you're smarter? Or do you think because you're older than me that I don't know what the heck I'm doing?"

"Elizabeth, that's not what I think at all."

"Let me pass some wisdom on to you, buddy. I never intended to have another man in my life. Oh, I've been accosted a few times, but putting up with five children was out of the question for any man I've ever known. They want me. They don't want them. I completely intended to live the rest of my life dedicated only to my girls. When you came along it was like a miracle. You wanted me, that much was

obvious. Don't get me wrong. I wanted you too, but you were different from the others. You treated my girls like they were real people. Like they were important. And I fell even more in love with you. I knew that somehow you were sent to me. I knew God had answered my prayers. He sent me the perfect man. It would take someone uncommonly brave to take on me and my girls, Keegan. Would you trust someone like Darrell Hornsby to take proper care of me and the girls? Huh?"

"The cop? No way."

"Then who would you trust? I'm betting there isn't one man you'd be willing to trust to treat us right. How about one of your friends who were at the hospital this morning? Maybe one of them would be good to me."

"No," he growled.

"I know," she said sarcastically. "What about Jeff? He's young, single, and definitely good-looking."

"He's gonna be out of commission for some time."

"I'm sorry to hear about that. Maybe I should go visit *him* in the hospital. Maybe *he'd* be happy to see me."

"Shut up, Elizabeth."

"Excuse me?"

"Shut up. You've made your point."

"Don't you tell me to shut up."

He grinned.

Playfully, she swung at his face and he caught her wrist, wrestled her down until she lay on her back under him.

"Stop fighting," he said softly. "I get it."

"What do you get?" she asked, her chest heaving with the exertion of trying to buck him off.

"I get that it wasn't fair of me to make the decision without consulting you. That you'd know more than anyone what's right for you and your children. That life for you since your husband's death has been pretty crappy and that there is no one in this world I would trust to make it better for you, except me."

She relaxed. Nodded. "That's right. You got it right."

He dipped his head and touched his lips to hers. "Even if I still believed you'd be better off without me I don't think I'm strong enough to go through with letting you go."

"I'm glad to hear it. Now make love to me again."

Grinning, he nuzzled her neck. "Yes, ma'am."

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"Hey, sleepyhead," Keegan whispered.

Lizzy opened her eyes, smiled. "What time is it?"

"It's eight."

"You've already showered and dressed?"

"Yeah. I have to get going."

"Going? Where?" she asked, sitting up quickly.

"I need to see Jeff and make sure he's okay. Then I have a ten o'clock meeting with Nigel. Then I'll have a few free hours before I fly to Washington for a debriefing, and during that time, I'd like to take you to lunch, if that's okay with you."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," she beamed. "I guess it will be our first real date."

He smiled at her. "Washington will probably take a few days. After that, barring any new assignments, I'll come to see you and the girls, again, if that's okay."

"Of course it's okay. They miss you. They still call you Mr. Mike, though. I guess I need to tell them the truth."

"If you'd like, I'll take care of that," he said. "It's only fair."

"Thank you," she said softly.

He sighed. "Lizzy, you haven't really said much about what happened back at the house."

"If you're gonna go again into how horrible you are because you killed those guys, please don't."

He smiled. "No, I was talking about what happened to *you*. I mean, what those guys did to you in the bedroom."

She looked up at him, shrugged. "It wasn't much. The big guy tore my shirt. The little guy said some things that I really don't want to repeat. Things, like what they were gonna do to me and how it was gonna feel."

Her voice hitched. He sat down next to her, pulled her close.

"I tried to get away but the big guy hit me." She rubbed her cheek. "The smaller guy pulled me down onto the bed, he," she stopped, sniffed. "He ripped my shirt off." She placed her hand protectively across her chest. "Thank goodness that was all they had time to do."

He closed his eyes as he held her. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart. So sorry you had to go through that. I promise the memories will fade."

"They already have, Keegan— because you love me."

"I do. And I'm sorry I tried to make you feel like I didn't. Sometimes I make bad decisions thinking I'm being honorable and instead I'm just being stupid. Forgive me."

"I do. The hardest thing I've had to go through was being separated from my babies, and thinking you didn't love me. Both of those things are fixed, so, I feel wonderful. I feel like I could fly."

He squeezed her, glanced at the time. "I gotta get going."

Rising, he pulled his issue and holster from his bag, checked the chamber, strapped it on. "I doubt there will be any new assignments for a while. I'll get some recuperation time. If you want, we can go up to the house, get it packed and put it on the market."

She stood. "That would be great. I was dreading facing that house all alone."

He pulled her close. "You won't be alone ever again, Elizabeth. Not if I can help it." He kissed her forehead. "But, I have to go now."

"Do you have transportation?"

"John and Brayden brought my car to me a little while ago," he said as he pulled a jacket on over his knit shirt.

"Oh."

"Can you meet me downtown at the *Boar's Head Grill*?"

She smiled. "Yes, I'll see you there."

Striding quickly back to her, he took her in his arms. "You make me so happy, Elizabeth. Thank you, babe, for coming all the way to Savannah and for being here for me even when I said we couldn't be together. Thank you for forcing the issue. I know I can be scary and you were a brave girl."

She laughed. "Not so brave, because it was a lot scarier imagining my life without you. Besides, I had some coaching from Jodi."

"You did, huh?"

"Uh-huh. She's totally cool. We're already great friends. I had no friends my age in Tyler Springs."

"Maybe me coming into your life wasn't such a bad thing."

"Maybe not," she said with a smile.

He bent his head to kiss her. "I'll see you soon, Sweetheart."

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"Agent Tanner, Agent Tanner, can you tell us how you're doing?"

Keegan's jaw clenched. He'd been trying to get into Jeff's hospital room and was having to battle his way through the media. The woman who'd addressed him actually grabbed his arm.

"Agent Tanner, please. The country wants to know how their newest hero is doing."

"I'm not a hero," he clarified. "I was doing my job. Now if you'll

excuse me."

"Wait, sir, we noticed you limping. Is that from the gunshot wound in your leg?"

"No. I broke my leg several weeks ago in a car accident. That's why I limp."

"Then you weren't shot?"

He blew out a breath. "Yes, I was shot, but it was just a small wound. I'm okay." He moved away quickly.

"Agent Tanner, did you know that you personally killed over twenty men two days ago in order to rescue your friend?"

He stopped trying to get through the crowd. He whirled, his eyes narrowing in on the woman. "Those weren't men. I killed terrorists, lady. To rescue an American."

"I understand some of those deaths were pretty brutal and bloody."

He turned away. He knew he wasn't supposed to talk about what happened before he debriefed. How she got those numbers was beyond him. "Excuse me," he barked as he pushed his way through the crowd and into Jeff's room. Closing the door, he leaned his head against it for a moment.

Lifting his head, he turned. Jeff was not alone. An attractive, blond woman, maybe late forties, early fifties, stood by his bed, holding his hand. A well-groomed man of the same age sat in the lone chair.

Jason Lee, who'd been leaning against the wall, moved forward. "Special Agent Tanner," he said, his hand outstretched. "It's very good to see you again."

Keegan nodded. "Mr. Lee." He looked over at Jeff whose eyes remained closed. "How's he doing?"

"He's gonna be okay," Jason said softly. "He has some internal injuries caused by the electrical burns. Most importantly right now is he hasn't lost any kidney function. He's in some pain and they have him doped up, but he opens his eyes every once in a while."

Jason turned and gestured at the older couple. "Let me introduce you to Jeff's parents."

"Mr. and Mrs. Davis, this is Keegan Tanner."

Mrs. Davis came toward him. Keegan nodded and extended his hand, but Mrs. Davis was having none of that. She threw her arms around his neck.

"Oh, thank you Agent Tanner. Thank you so much for saving our Jeff. I don't know how to tell you how much we appreciate you," she cried, tears now running down her cheeks.

"I'm, uh, I'm sorry I didn't get to him sooner, Mrs. Davis."

She didn't let go and Keegan ended up putting his arm around her. "Jeff is strong," he said encouragingly. "He'll be fine."

"Honey, leave the young man alone," Mr. Davis said as he gently pulled her away. He offered his hand to Keegan. "Agent Tanner, my wife is right. We can't thank you enough."

Keegan shrugged. "I was just doing my job. No need for thanks. Jeff would've done the same for me or for anyone."

"He would've died had it not been for you. You have our gratitude," he reiterated.

"Thank you, sir."

"Mine too."

They all turned toward the softly whispered words.

"Hey, man," Keegan said, moving close to the bed and taking Jeff's hand. "Warm enough?"

Jeff gave a soft laugh. "Too warm, apparently. They've had a hard time keeping my body temperature stable."

Keegan nodded. "Been there. It'll get better each day. Next week, you'll be walking around like normal. How's the pain?"

"Bearable. How about you?"

"Bullet lodged in the muscle in the back of my thigh. Didn't bleed much. They dug it out. It's a little sore. No big deal."

"Keegan," Jeff said, his voice growing weak. "I need a favor."

"Another one?" Keegan said with a laugh.

Jeff glanced at his parents. Motioned Keegan down so he could speak to him privately. "Listen, they want to know what happened to me. I can't seem to talk about it right now. I need you to fill them in." He shook his head. "I can't get the words out of my mouth. I can't..." He rolled his eyes, stanching the flow of emotion.

"Hey, I got it covered, Jeff," Keegan assured him as he rose back up. "You just concentrate on getting better. That includes seeing a shrink, got it?"

"I'll be okay if I could just get the images out of my mind."

"Jeff. Don't be stubborn."

Jeff nodded. "Okay, I got it. I'm sure Mr. Lee won't let me get out of it anyway."

"That's correct," Jason said.

"So, how's Lizzy?" Jeff asked.

"She's fine," Keegan said, smiling.

"I heard she uh, well, I mean, I heard what she did yesterday."

Keegan's eyebrows rose. "John?"

"Yes." Jeff sighed and closed his eyes. "I'm happy for the two of you. Hold onto her. You're a lucky man, Keegan."

"Yes. Yes I am."

The door opened and two more people entered the room. Two people Keegan had never met, yet he instantly knew who they were.

"Hey, Rick!" Jeff said, his voice weak. "Bree! Come on in."

Keegan watched as Breanna Adams, the famous actress, moved close to Jeff's bed, leaned down and kissed his mouth. He remembered Jeff's story that he'd been her bodyguard at one time and she'd drugged him in order to escape his protection. He grinned, thinking about it. Immediately noting her windblown hair, her large gray eyes, luscious mouth and perfect face, she was even more breathtaking in person than she was on the big screen and Keegan was not immune to her charms. He glanced at the man who accompanied her.

Breanna's husband was another famous actor, Ricky Kino. Maybe an inch or two shorter than Keegan, Kino was built like the athlete he was. Ricky was an amazing martial artist. His father, Grandmaster Eric Kino had trained Jeff's boss, Jason Lee. Keegan had nothing but respect for both the father and son.

Rick leaned over Jeff, held out his hand, which Jeff took. Ricky held it and didn't let go.

"Jeff," Rick said. "It's good to see you alive, man."

"Thanks. It's good to be alive."

"The memories are gonna fade," Ricky said softly.

Keegan remembered a few years ago it had been all over the news, Ricky Kino had gone missing. He'd been abducted and tortured. His torture had been of a different nature. Keegan wasn't sure which one was worse. He looked up as Breanna approached him.

"You're Agent Tanner, aren't you?" Bree asked, charging straight at him. She took his face in both her hands and kissed him hard on the mouth. "Sorry," she said, using her thumbs to wipe at the lipstick. "I told Ricky if I ever met you that's exactly what I was gonna do. Thank you, Agent Tanner. Thank you so much."

"Just doing my job," he mumbled. He glanced over at Jason who was grinning from ear to ear.

Ricky approached him then, his hand extended. He nodded at him. "Agent Tanner, what you've done and what you've been through over the past few years, the past few months and especially the past few days is amazing. You have my utmost respect and gratitude."

"Thank you. The feeling is mutual."

Ricky smiled. "I've watched a few of the newscasts where some of the families have been reunited with their children. I don't usually pay attention to what the media is doing, but now that Bree and I have a child of our own, we've not been able to keep from watching the parents being reunited with their kids."

"I haven't seen the news."

"It's been quite a spectacle. I'm not just talking about the five babies you just rescued. I'm talking about the ones that have been tracked down through the child trafficking ring you busted up. Just last night there was a special program about two of the recovered, a fifteen year old girl and a twenty-one year old man, both meeting their biological parents for the first time. It was mesmerizing."

"Wow, that happened pretty fast," Keegan commented.

Bree nodded. "There was so much pain, like in time lost. Betrayal by the adoptive parents who knew or suspected they'd obtained their children through suspicious means. And then there's those who had no idea their adopted children were stolen from their parents. There's so much heartache. It's gonna take a lot of love to get through all that."

Keegan sighed. "It almost seems like it would've been better to leave well enough alone."

Rick shook his head. "No, the truth is always the best. More painful sometimes when faced, but always the best."

Bree turned to Jeff's parents. "I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Davis, I've been so rude. It's so nice to see you again." She went to greet them and then Jason.

While Bree monopolized Jeff and his parents and Jason, Ricky spoke quietly to Keegan.

"Listen, Agent Tanner..."

"Call me Keegan, please."

Rick nodded. "Keegan. I've dealt with the media for most of my life and I know them. I don't let what they say get to me and I'm giving you the same advice. Do your best to ignore them or to use them, but don't ever trust them."

Keegan's brow creased. "I'm not sure I understand."

Rick sighed. "For two days now you've been touted as a hero."

"Oh, well, please believe me when I say I am not caught up in all that," Keegan said.

"No, I can see the kind of man you are and I'm not talking about that. You *are* a hero, in my book and it wouldn't bother me a bit if you

thought of yourself as one. No, what I'm referring to is a report I heard just before I walked into this room."

"What report?"

"A woman reporter was speaking of what kind of man it would take to kill more than twenty men in order to get to one."

Keegan sighed.

"The public is fickle," Ricky warned. "I foresee this going in another direction. It could get nasty. There are always some who look for the negative side of everything. It's what sells. This woman has zeroed in on something she thinks the bleeding hearts are gonna be outraged over. And she could be right."

"I killed terrorists, damn it. Men who wouldn't think twice before killing American men, women or children in their own beds."

"You don't have to defend yourself to me, Keegan. As I said, you have my respect. I'm just warning you, this could get rough for you. I'll be happy to do anything in my power to help. Any friend of Jeff's is a friend of mine."

Keegan looked into the man's eyes. This guy was no mere actor. Power emanated from him, and confidence, and wisdom, even though he was only a year or two older. Now Keegan was beginning to understand John's admiration and respect for him and his father. Keegan nodded. "I appreciate your input. So, tell me Ricky Kino, you seem to be a powerful presence. Where do you get your strength? I understand your father is a grandmaster."

Ricky nodded. "He is, and he's taught me everything I know, but he'll tell you the same thing that I'll tell you, we get our strength from God. He's our source for everything. He's real Keegan. He'll speak to you if you give Him your time."

Keegan nodded thoughtfully. "Elizabeth, who is my, uh, hopefully soon-to-be fiancé, she is very, I don't know what you call it. Very—faithful, I guess."

Ricky nodded with a smile.

"She's come close to making me a believer. She's an angel."

Ricky closed his eyes a moment as his body filled with the Holy Spirit. Keegan watched the man in amazement as he seemed to begin to glow with a light before he opened his mouth to speak.

"God has the power to keep bad things from happening, but that's not the way it works. There's a reason for everything. If not for the bad guys, you and your friends would not reach toward being the warriors that you are. This life is a proving ground. God is preparing you for

great things. Some people were meant to be the warriors and some are meant to be the meek. Eventually, all sin and evil will be done away with. Until then, we have God's grace.

"There's not a single scripture in the Bible that promises life will be easy. There's no promise that God will prevent evil from ever showing its face in our lives. Still, God has his warriors to protect and to rescue and to bring light to a dark world. You, Keegan, and Jeff there, are two of those warriors. There's no guarantee there will never be tragedy. There's nothing that says bad things won't happen. There is, however, a promise that God will never leave us nor forsake us. That He will be with us, even when bad things are happening. That He will love us unconditionally. He was working through you, Keegan, as you worked to help those children and as you worked to rescue Jeff. God is with us. He IS real." He paused, drew a breath. "I'm sorry. I don't usually make it a habit of preaching, but the Spirit moved upon me just now, and I felt led to open my mouth."

Keegan couldn't say a thing for his eyes were filled with tears and his heart was filled with love and compassion and the Spirit of God.

Ricky smiled, put his hand on Keegan's shoulder. "You got this."

Keegan nodded. "Thanks, man. Ya know, it's such a coincidence that what you just said, it like answered pretty much every question I've ever had about God."

Ricky grinned. "There are no such things as coincidences."

Keegan nodded. His heart was full and he felt emotional, so he tried to change the subject. "So, doesn't the *Kino Challenge* usually take place about this time?"

"Yeah, in a few weeks. I had to take a few days off training for Bree. Hopefully, it won't be noticeable."

Keegan smiled. "Good luck with that."

Rick shook his hand then turned away to visit with Jeff.

Jason moved back to speak with Keegan. "I'd like to meet with you when you have time, go over some details."

Keegan nodded. Sighed. "Another debriefing. I have to meet with Nigel at ten this morning," he said, glancing at his watch. "I'm having lunch with Elizabeth at one. I have a four o'clock flight to D.C. for a 6:00 AM debriefing. Depending on how long Nigel keeps me, I can work you in before lunch, but the lunch date is important and I don't really want to break it if at all possible."

Jason smiled. "Relax. I can wait, and you certainly deserve some personal time. I believe you've earned it. I'll just fill you in on part of

what I wanted to speak with you about now so that you'll have time to think about it."

He ushered Keegan back to the farthest corner of the room. "I don't play games, Keegan, so I'll get straight to the point. I want you to work for me. I have divisions of Ameritech all over the world and several right here in the U.S., but I've yet to establish a southeastern division. Georgia, Carolinas, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Florida. I figure an office in Atlanta would be a good central location. I need someone that knows the field. Someone that understands the needs of the agents and wouldn't be afraid to join them if necessary. There's a lot more to it than that, but that's the gist of it. You think about it while you're sorting through the red tape bull that's getting ready to hit."

Keegan remained silent for several moments. "I'm not a great people person. I can be a little abrasive," he finally said.

"That's why we have assistants. And you are not abrasive. You are no-nonsense, which is my kinda guy."

He nodded. "Pay?"

"Well now, yours will more than double. I think you'll find me more than fair," Jason answered.

"What about job security?"

"We're a young company, but Ameritech is also a multi-billion dollar, international company with only ten years behind us so far and in that time we've become well respected. We're known for the quality of our agents and their training. We're known for our use of the most advanced technology there is. We spare no expense and those who use us pay dearly for what they get. Oh, and that reminds me, about your bill, it's been paid in full."

"By whom?"

Jason nodded at Ricky. "By your newest fan."

Keegan shook his head and started toward Ricky, but Jason held him back. "Keegan, don't let pride get in your way. Your bill was a drop in the bucket for him and he felt the need to do something. Would you rob him of that blessing?"

"What kind of question is that?"

"I'm just saying that there were no ulterior motives. You don't owe him anything. He feels the need to show the gratitude of the country."

"He seems to be a good guy," Keegan admitted.

Jason nodded. "He is. Rick, his father, my brother, they are the

best people I know. And my wife Angel— and Shelley."

"Shelley?"

"Eric's wife. Bree's mom. She's an amazing woman."

"Oh yeah, the MART champion, like ten or so years ago. I only remember thinking that she was a fine-a..., uh, I mean a really good-lookin' woman."

Jason laughed. "She was both and still is. So, anyway, accept Rick's gift. The bill was stiff and you're gonna need the money if your lunch goes as planned."

"Excuse me?"

"Aren't you planning on asking Elizabeth to marry you?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, you're not the kind of man who would put off business for a mere lunch date. You said yourself you'd rather not miss it. I can put two and two together."

"You're a scary man, Jason Lee."

He shrugged. "So some have discovered, just as some have discovered the same about you."

Keegan grimaced. "The same old issue keeps coming up."

"It'll pass," Jason said, patting him on the back. "Now, you'd better go say goodbye to Jeff. You still need to speak with his parents and you've got that ten o'clock with Nigel."

Keegan nodded and moved forward again. "Jeff, gotta go take care of business."

Jeff held out his hand. "Thanks for stopping by."

"I'll keep in touch," Keegan promised. "How long are they gonna keep you here?"

"I'm gonna be here a few more days I think they said. Make sure everything is stable. Then I'm headed back to California."

"Take care of yourself," Keegan said. "Mr. and Mrs. Davis, can I speak with you outside a moment?"

He said his goodbyes to the rest of the group and ushered Jeff's parents toward a family waiting room then closed and locked the door. It was difficult, describing Jeff's torture to the two people in the world who loved Jeff the most. He asked them to be strong for Jeff and told them to encourage the therapy. He left them both in tears.

Pushing his way through the media frenzy that seemed to have increased since the arrival of the Kinos, Keegan headed for the Savannah police department where he was scheduled to meet with Nigel. This should be a barrel of laughs, he thought.

The precinct on Oglethorpe was an older brick building surrounded by fall flowers and moss-covered trees. Keegan headed up the steps, limping slightly, nodding at the few officers who looked in his direction. He didn't have a suit with him and realized he was gonna have to remedy that before the morning meeting in Washington.

Once Keegan was ushered back into the detectives' area he spotted Nigel. Nigel shook his hand and motioned him into a small conference room. Keegan felt suddenly weary.

"Keegan, hospital authorities say your condition is good and that your leg will heal quickly."

"Yep, that's the same thing they tell me," he answered shortly.

Nigel's eyebrows rose at the attitude but he said nothing. "I'm not gonna make you start from the beginning as I have your reports from the past two years, but tomorrow morning they're not gonna be that easy on you, so here are the reports." He tossed them across the table to land in front of Keegan. "Look them over, refresh your memory, come to that meeting prepared."

Keegan blew out a breath in frustration, but nodded in agreement.

"I want you to go over with me everything that happened from the moment Hartman's thugs cornered you and Mrs. Anderson at her home up until the day you were found on the shore of the Savannah River. You can leave out your indiscretions with Mrs. Anderson. We'll address those later, but I'll tell you now, those indiscretions are not gonna sit well with the higher ups tomorrow."

"Just like it won't sit well that I was placed in a civilian's home?"

"My actions are not in question. They've already been explained and they agree it was the best situation at the time."

"You've gotta be kidding me."

"Watch it, Tanner. As I said, my actions are not in question."

"And mine are?"

"It's been brought to their attention and to that of the media that seven men were killed at Mrs. Anderson's home not to mention the wounding of two of my agents. It's been determined that twenty-three men were killed on the ship during your valiant effort to rescue Agent Davis. Seventeen of them died of gunshot wounds. Three of them had their necks broken. Two had their throats slit and one died of blunt force trauma to the head. What do you have to say about that?"

The first little icy fingers of panic ran up Keegan's spine. Did they actually intend to make an example of him to appease the sensibilities of some suits who hadn't been in the field for forty years? He would be

sacrificed. He was in trouble.

"Agent Tanner, I asked you a question."

"What do I have to say about it? I'd say that was some pretty darn good shootin'."

Nigel's face turned a mottled red. "Do you think this is some sort of joke? These people tomorrow are gonna ask you to justify your actions. What are you gonna tell them?"

"I shouldn't have to justify my actions and you damn well know it. Yesterday morning as they were loading me into the ambulance you shook my hand and commended me on a job well done."

"That was before the numbers came in."

Keegan's eyes narrowed, barely controlled rage emanating from them. "Of the seven dead at the house, I killed four. Two of them were trying to kill me. Two of them were in the process of raping Elizabeth. The other three were killed by Jeff after I'd been hit. He fired to protect me. As for the injured agents, it wasn't me who shot them."

"Two of the men you killed had no weapons," Nigel argued.

"One of them had no gun," Keegan corrected. "The big one. He was like over six-five, two-eighty. He came at me. I felt myself and Elizabeth to be in peril and I pulled the trigger."

"Brian Cantrell's brother wasn't armed."

"Yes he was. I took his gun. It's in my bag in the car."

"When we break you'll retrieve it. I want that weapon. Now, what about the other twenty-three."

"They were terrorists. They were on that ship to take five American children to join their freaking holy war. I killed only those who stood in my way and threatened my life."

"Twenty-three, Keegan."

"I can't tell you if you're wrong or right about that. I wasn't keeping count. I was trying to do two things. Stay alive and get to Jeff. Every single one of them tried to stop me and tried to kill me."

"You're gonna have to do better than that. You're gonna have to go back and break it down one by one."

Keegan bent his head and ran his fingers through his hair. "Nigel, it's a blur."

"A blur like some crazed killer would experience? You're in better control of your faculties than that. Begin with the first guy you encountered."

Keegan closed his eyes, and heaved a sigh. "Okay. The first guy..."

He'd been at it for two hours and when Nigel finally gave him a

break he immediately called John.

"Okay, Keeg. Again, one thing at a time," John said, his voice calm. "I'll go ahead and pick up a suit for tomorrow's debriefing, and the other items, and I'll keep Lizzy occupied at the restaurant. You just get there as soon as possible."

"Yeah, and if I'm not there by two, give it up. Just please, make sure she gets home okay. As soon as I'm able to contact her, I will."

"You're not alone, Keeg."

"Thanks, John. I spoke to my parents yesterday, but if this gets ugly, I'm gonna need you to talk to them."

"Not a problem. I'll take care of them. No matter what happens, Keeg, I'll take care of them."

"Well, John, I don't know how I'll be able to pay you back for all you've done for me."

"I'll figure something out. Now clear your brain and give your guy what he wants so you can get out of there."

"Will do."

John called Jason the moment he hung up from his friend.

"Jason, Keegan's in trouble."

"Talk to me," Jason said.

"Meet me at the *Boar's Head Grill* at three. They're gonna crucify him. We gotta do something to stop it."

Jason sighed. "Well, Ricky's in town. We'll get him to help us. If anyone can charm the public, it's him. I'll call Justin. He's got some pretty powerful friends. See you at three."

While John took care of Keegan's personal problems, Keegan went back to the room and hashed out the twenty-four-hour period before he was found on the river bank. It had been difficult, but he got out a rough version. He was not pleased with the lack of support coming from Nigel, making Jason's offer more and more attractive. Now, he was beginning to wonder if he would even be free to accept the offer. For all he knew, he was gonna spend the next twenty years of his life behind bars.

✝✝✝

Ephesians 6:12

"For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places."

Chapter Fourteen

"Why is Nigel keeping him so long? I mean, is there a problem?" Lizzy asked.

John glanced over his shoulder, his eyes scanning the restaurant for his friend. "Look, Lizzy, I'll be honest with you. We're not exactly sure where this is gonna go, but it seems some of the big guys at the bureau in Washington are trying to use Keegan as an example."

"An example of what?"

"They're saying they won't tolerate excessive force being used by their agents. They're second-guessing Keegan's actions and bringing him to account for every move he made."

"Isn't that pretty routine?"

"Yes, but Keegan feels fairly certain they're gonna push it with him. They may not have, if he hadn't been so prominent in the news lately. But now, it seems it's something they can't ignore."

"So, what you're saying is, one day he's a hero and the next day, he's a villain?"

"Yeah, Liz, that about sums it up."

Silently, she contemplated the situation. "Will they..." She had to stop to keep the fear from taking over. Clearing her throat, she tried again. "Will they prosecute him?"

"We're hoping it won't get that far. I'm expecting he'll give his accounting of things and it will be enough. It's a matter of politics as to why they may push the matter."

"So, they'll prosecute an innocent man, who was just doing his job, for politics?"

He eyed her. She was so innocent. "Yes, they would. I don't want you to worry, though. We're not taking this lying down. I'm meeting with some people in a little while who might be able to help."

"Who?"

"Jason Lee, the owner and director of Ameritech and Ricky Kino."

"*The* Ricky Kino?"

"Yep, THE Ricky Kino. He's a friend of mine and he'd like to help any way he can."

Sighing, she nodded her head. "That's very kind of him. Thank

you, John, for being such a good friend to Keegan. And to me. I don't know what we'd do without you."

John smiled, and looked up, his relief evident as Keegan approached the table. John eyed him, assessing his condition. He looked bone tired. His features were shadowed and dark with stress and worry, but his face lightened at the sight of Elizabeth.

"Here he is now," John said. He stood, shook Keegan's hand, and handed him a small box. "It's not exact, but it's the best I could do. I'll be over at the bar. I'm meeting with the others here at three. Give me your keys, I'll put your suit bag and luggage in your car."

Keegan handed him the keys, then turned his attention to the beautiful woman sitting at the table. Bending, he kissed Elizabeth's cheek and sat down across from her. "Hello, sweetheart. I am so sorry I'm late."

"Hey," she said, her voice soft. "Keegan, John told me what's happening, with the..."

"I wish he hadn't worried you with it. It may not happen."

"I wish I could do something to help."

"You can smile, and tell me no matter what, you love me."

"Keegan, no matter what, I love you. I do. With all my heart."

"Thank you, Sweetheart." Drawing a large cleansing breath, he smiled. "Are you hungry?"

"Starved. Everything smells so good. John already ordered for you so the food will be here any minute. He said you asked him to."

"I did. I knew I wouldn't have much time. This day hasn't turned out like I wanted. I'm supposed to be at the airport soon."

"Oh, Keegan, you've had a rough day and you've got another one tomorrow. And the few days before today weren't a bed of roses either. You look so tired."

He reached across the table, took her hand. "Elizabeth, we don't have much time and I have a lot to say."

"Okay, I'll shut up," she giggled.

"Thanks," he teased. "Look, I'm not in a good position right now. I could lose my job, even though I'm not real concerned about that since Jason has asked me to work for him."

"Oh, that's wonderful!" She clapped a hand over her mouth. "Sorry. Didn't mean to interrupt. Go ahead."

He smiled at her. "I don't know what's in store for me. All this hoopla could just go away or they could make an example of me and, worst case scenario, I could end up in prison."

She gasped. "It's so unfair."

"Yeah," he sighed. "Anyway, what's not fair is me asking you to stand by me and wait for me. Of course, if I go to prison, I'd release you from that, but, well, oh, dear God, what I'm trying to say and not doing a very good job of it is, I want to marry you. No. That's not what I wanted to say. I mean, I wanted to ask if you, Elizabeth, if you would consider being my wife."

Lizzy's lips pressed together tightly. Her eyes danced.

"Let me try this again. Elizabeth, I love you with all my heart and I want to marry you and I want to honor Bradley by taking care of his daughters as if they were my own." He stopped briefly when Lizzy hiccupped, her eyes filling with tears.

He squeezed her hand as he forged onward. "I want to make a family with you and take care of you and protect you and the girls, presuming I'm not in prison. You won't have to ever worry again about fixing the roof, or feeding the kids or Christmas presents. You can actually think about pursuing something for yourself. Whatever makes you happy." He sighed, looked away and then back at her. "Okay, well, I guess that's it."

"Wow."

"Is that all you have to say?"

"No. I think I have a lot to say. First, I mean, well, just last night I was trying to convince you to not leave me. Now, all of a sudden you're asking me to marry you?"

He nodded. "Once I make up my mind about something, I usually act on it pretty fast. I'm never one to procrastinate or to even take things slowly. You made your argument last night. It was a good one. You convinced me that you and me, we're right together and I see no reason to prolong the inevitable. I love you. I love the girls. I want to spend my life with you. I don't know what's gonna happen in the future. Even in the very near future. If I end up in prison for the next twenty years, I won't hold you to it, but for now, this minute, this day, will you consent to be my wife? I love you, Elizabeth. I truly do."

"Oh, Keegan, I love you too, and of course I'll marry you. The girls and I would be honored to have a man such as you to love us and take care of us, and we'll take care of you too. Oh, this is so wonderful, and I think we'll be an awesome family."

"I do too."

"And I don't think you're going to prison. You have some amazing friends who are working on your behalf. And I've prayed and when I

did I had a feeling of peace come over me. I think you're one of God's warriors and if we show just a tiny bit of faith then everything will be okay. I know it sounds crazy, but that's what I feel."

His eyes moistened.

"What's wrong?" Lizzy asked.

He shook his head. "You're the second person today who's told me I am God's warrior. He seems to be working in my life."

Lizzy closed her eyes in gratitude. "God is amazing."

"I think I'm beginning to see that." He reached into his pocket and brought out the box, snapped it open.

Elizabeth gasped as she gazed down at a diamond ring. "It's beautiful," she purred. "You really do work fast!"

"I had help. The diamond in the middle is you." He bent close and counted. "It was supposed to be surrounded by five tiny diamonds that represented the girls. That's what I asked John to try to find." He looked up. "I would've looked myself, but I was detained. I hope that doesn't upset you."

"Keegan, you know I'm not easily upset."

"Anyway, this has six diamonds surrounding the big one, but we can exchange it for a custom job later."

"This one will be fine. I'm not picky."

"Here, let's put it on," he said. His hands shaking, he removed the ring from the box and slipped it on her finger. "How does it fit?"

"It's a little big, but we can fix that. I love it, Keegan."

"I love you." He leaned across the table and kissed her.

A waiter arrived with a bottle of champagne. Keegan looked over at John at the bar who raised his glass to them.

Lunch arrived and they ate silently, taking a moment to notice their surroundings. The restaurant offered a lovely view of the river and the shops along the street. It was a nice place, and Keegan decided he would bring her back here next year and have a much more leisurely meal. Unfortunately today, time was running short.

He motioned for the check. "I have to go, Lizbet," he said softly.

"Let me come with you. I can keep you company."

"No." He sighed, softened. "Please, no. Go home to the girls, Elizabeth. I'll be there as soon as possible and we'll begin our life together. I have to take care of business and if you're with me I wouldn't be able to concentrate."

She nodded. "I'll be waiting for you, Keegan. Can you call me?"

"I'll call." He quickly took care of the bill and rose, pulled her up

into his arms. "See you soon, baby." He kissed her tenderly, with all the love he felt, in front of everyone in the restaurant. When he turned and walked out the door, he felt as if his heart had been ripped away.

John took his place at the table. Smiling, he took Elizabeth's hand and admired the ring. "I didn't do half bad, did I?" he asked.

Lizzy wiped a tear away and gave a soft laugh. "Not bad at all."

"Tell ya what, Liz, why don't you come join our meeting and then I'll escort you home to your girls."

She nodded. "Thank you."

They both turned at the commotion coming from the front of the restaurant as some people came through the doors.

"Looks like my party has arrived," John said.

Lizzy stood and went with John to meet 'his party.' It wasn't just Jason Lee and Ricky Kino. Breanna Adams and Keegan's other friends all stood together. The commotion hadn't come from them, but rather from the patrons of the restaurant pointing in their direction.

Ricky spoke quickly to the hostess, but before he could finish, the manager of the restaurant came forward. Within only seconds, all eight were seated in a private area overlooking the river.

John stood. "Everyone, I'd like to introduce you to Elizabeth Anderson. She and Keegan just became engaged. Lizzy, this is Brayden, Tristan, and Kaleb, they're old Marine buddies of Keegan and I. I think you'll remember them from the hospital yesterday."

"Oh, um, hi," she said, looking down quickly. She knew her face must be bright red.

"You're his fiancé?" Kaleb asked. "But I thought..." He stopped with a grunt as Brayden elbowed him in the gut.

"And this is Jason Lee," John continued before Lizzy could ask what that was all about. "He's the owner of Ameritech, the company Jeff works for."

Lizzy nodded, offered her hand.

"And I guess I don't need to introduce you to these two, Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams."

Ricky took Lizzy's hand and squeezed it softly. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Keegan's a good guy and we're gonna help him out of this mess so don't you worry."

"Thank you," Lizzy murmured.

"It's wonderful to meet you," Bree added with a sweet smile. "Soo, let me get a look at that ring."

Lizzy held her hand out while Bree ogled the ring. She didn't

know how to act having a famous actress holding her hand and making silly noises over a ring.

"Seven diamonds," Bree exclaimed. "Wow. He must really be head over heels in love."

"He said the one in the middle is me and the little ones around it are my kids, but I only have five, not six," she said, looking up, thinking she was talking out of nervousness.

"You have five children!" Bree asked.

"A five-year-old and two sets of twins."

"You should see them," John said. "They're the spittin' image of their mom. Every single one of them. They're great kids."

Ricky eyed the woman. She was so young. With so much responsibility. Now, a man has come into her life who's willing to take on that responsibility and he stands in danger of being made an example of in front of the whole country. His eyes cut to Bree who was obviously thinking the same thing. They were powerful people, with a lot of pull. They would do anything possible to keep that from happening. Ricky's father always said that whenever a very bright light shines in this world, the dark forces gather to try to put it out. This obviously was a battle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. Light will win, Ricky promised.

They settled at the table and ordered food. Lizzy looked around the table at Keegan's friends. They were strong, kind and commanding people. When Jason spoke the others listened with rapt attention. When Ricky Kino spoke, his voice was soft and calm, and he gave her the feeling that everything he said would come to pass exactly as he said it. Keegan's buddies weren't playful and boisterous as they'd been in the hospital. They were asking specific questions, making specific comments and were very serious about the task at hand.

Lizzy smiled. She felt comforted and knew in her heart that Keegan would return to her very soon.

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"What," Keegan snapped into his cell phone.

"Just making sure you're on the way and on time."

"I've never missed a meeting."

"Wrong, Agent Tanner. You missed the one with me where you were supposed to turn in the evidence."

Keegan sighed and then looked up abruptly. "Is that what this is all about, Nigel? Payback for me not trusting you?"

"Eat breakfast. It's gonna be a long morning."

The call went dead. Keegan sighed, pocketed the phone. He nodded at the cab driver. "Let me out here. I need some air."

"Okay," the driver said, shrugging his shoulders and pulling over just past Sixth Street.

Keegan shoved a couple of twenties at the man and stepped out. Pennsylvania Avenue was certainly not deserted even though it was only a little after five in the morning. And it was definitely colder in D.C. than in Georgia. His mind shifted to Elizabeth and the girls. Halloween was just a few days away. The girls were gonna need costumes and with the weather getting colder he imagined there would be other necessities. He could get John to purchase whatever Elizabeth needed. Maybe though, he would be home with them soon and could take care of those things himself.

He stopped at the Pennsylvania Avenue Diner one block away from his destination and downed hot, black coffee, a couple of eggs and a stack of pancakes. His mind raced. He needed to still it, to get grounded, like he did before a big bust. Throwing money on the table he headed to the restroom and splashed cold water on his face. He grabbed several brown paper towels, dried his face and hands and stared into the mirror.

The black suit he'd had John pick up for him was a tad large. He pulled at the stiff white shirt collar and then straightened the dark tie. He'd nicked himself shaving and the nick suddenly seemed angry and red. Sighing, he ran his hand over his hair and headed for the door. "Here goes," he mumbled.

Keegan was met in the lobby of the J. Edgar Hoover building by Nigel Kort. Two seconds later a gorgeous brunette approached. Normally, Keegan would've smiled, maybe even flirted, but he definitely wasn't in the mood and apparently neither was she.

"Special Agent Tanner?" she asked curtly, her nose wrinkling in distaste. She looked past him toward Nigel and her face relaxed. "Mr. Kort, nice to see you."

He nodded. "Brenda."

"Follow me, please."

They rode the elevator silently to the ninth floor. As they walked down the shiny corridor, Keegan smelled coffee brewing. There was no sound except that of their heels clicking against the tile floor. They arrived at a small, Plexiglas-enclosed conference room. Three men occupied the room. One was seated at a large oval table that was polished to look like brown glass. The other two were standing by the

window, speaking softly. All wore dark suits.

"Nigel," the one at the table said. "Good to see you again."

Nigel walked forward, shook everyone's hand.

"Special Agent Tanner," the man at the table addressed him.

Keegan approached the table.

"I'm David Coleman. This is Norm Walker and Alan Moore."

Keegan shook each man's hand.

"Remove your weapon, Agent Tanner and have a seat," David said.

Surprised by the order, he turned to look at Nigel. His superior only shrugged. Blood pressure rising, Keegan removed his issue, ejected the mag, emptied the chamber, pushed the bullet back into the magazine and laid both gun and mag on the table. It was quickly confiscated and locked into a cabinet.

"Let's get started," David Coleman said. "I believe it's gonna be a long day."

Keegan's eyes shifted to Nigel as he took a seat.

The woman who'd led them to the room reentered carrying a tray with an insulated water pitcher and glasses. She set the tray on the table then took a seat near Mr. Coleman, opened a laptop, clicked some keys and turned the computer to face Keegan. She then informed him that he was being recorded. He rolled his eyes at her. The others in the room took their seats.

"Shall we get started?" David said.

Keegan looked him over. He was probably between fifty and sixty. Mostly bald. A good-sized paunch hanging over his belt. He wore a dark brown suit, white shirt, brown tie, brown socks, brown shoes. Except for his paunch, everything was as it should be. He followed the rules and he would insist that his men do the same, but because of the paunch, Keegan surmised, there could possibly be exceptions.

The other two were younger, fit, both in navy blue. Moore's eyes were hard to the point of appearing angry. Walker's were large and brown and somewhat compassionate. Time would tell if Keegan's assessments were correct.

"Agent Tanner," David began. "I know Nigel went over your statement with you. I know he told you to start from the time Senator Hartman's men arrived at Mrs. Anderson's home, but I've decided to take you back further than that. Tell me, Agent Tanner, why you thought it best to bury the evidence you had against Celados and Hartman for five weeks rather than turn it in to your superior."

Keegan drew a deep breath. As two people had already stated, it was gonna be a long day.

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Keegan stepped out onto the front steps of the building, gulping the cool air to clear his mind. This was such bull. He'd been doing his job. He must've made that statement a hundred times in the past two days. The majority of those hundred in the room upstairs. That and, "I did what I thought best at the time."

It was noon and they hadn't gotten very far. He'd yet to address the twenty-three dead men. Pulling out his cell phone, he plastered a smile on his face and dialed Lizzy. She didn't answer. She'd probably left her phone in the van or on the kitchen counter or on her dresser or under her bed or any-darn-where but on her person. Sighing, he dialed John.

"How's it goin', Keegan?"

"Like crap. Have you seen Elizabeth?"

"I'm not in Pine Forest. I've had to do some legwork for Jason. I'll call Jodi and have her get Lizzy to call you."

"Thanks. I have to be back up there in forty-five minutes. After that, tell her not to bother and I'll try again tonight."

"They giving you a pretty hard time?"

"A hell of a hard time. You'd think they'd never been in the field."

"Hang in there, Keegan. It's gonna be okay."

"I hope you're right. I'm pretty sure I'll be turning in my badge by the end of the day."

"Well now, that won't break my heart," John muttered.

Keegan chuckled as he hung up.

"Agent Tanner?"

Keegan turned at the sound of a male voice calling his name.

He spotted four Marines on the wide sidewalk in front of the building. "Yes," he answered.

They stood at attention and saluted him. His jaw flexed with emotion. He returned the honor.

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His hands slammed down on the table as he flew to his feet. "He was trying to kill me," Keegan shouted. "What the f— what was I supposed to do?"

David Coleman stood slowly, his eyes narrowed to slits. "You'd better get yourself under control this minute, Special Agent Tanner, or I'll have you escorted out and detained until you're able to do so."

Keegan's chest heaved, his head bowed. Finally, he slumped back

down in his chair. "I apologize," he mumbled, then drew a deep breath. "He carried an M16. He swung it up to shoot me with it. I fired first. How simple is that?"

"And the very next man you saw, you slit his throat. Why didn't you shoot him too?"

"I already told you."

"Tell me again, Agent Tanner."

"He took me by surprise. I came around a corner and he was there. We were too close for him to swing his rifle up and shoot me. He had a knife, I had a knife. We wrestled for position and I won."

"And you had to kill him."

"It was him or me."

"That's what you keep saying."

"Because it's the *truth*." The words were spoken softly. He was so tired. They'd been at it all day.

"Okay," Norm Walker said quietly. "It's late. You're tired. We'll continue this in the morning."

David Coleman nodded. "You're right. Agent Tanner, we'll expect you back here same time tomorrow morning."

"Yes, sir," Keegan answered, his tone sarcastic. He rose. "I'll take my weapon."

David took his time, moving methodically as he unlocked the cabinet and placed the gun on the table. Keegan snapped it up, loaded the magazine, racked the slide, holstered the weapon, turned and strode from the room. He was stopped on the front steps of the building by several reporters.

"Agent Tanner, we understand you've been called in to answer for the men you killed."

"No comment," he said.

"Agent Tanner, this is your chance to tell us your side," one man called out. "Don't you want to let the public know why you had to kill twenty-eight men?"

Keegan stopped, his eyes zeroing in on the man who spoke. "First, your facts are off, second, I was doing what I was trained to do. Period. I was doing my job."

He pushed past them and jumped into a cab, but a couple of guys in uniform opened the cab door before it could pull off.

"We'd like to buy you a drink, Agent Tanner," they said.

Keegan eyed them for only a second. "Thanks, I could use one."

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"Jodi," Lizzy said as she entered the dining room. She'd tucked the girls in for the night and come back down to wait for Keegan's call. "What does this mean, this picture of a phone on my cell phone and the number six?"

Jodi looked up from some paperwork and glanced at the phone. "It means you have six missed calls."

"I don't understand. How did I miss the calls? I've had the phone with me all day."

Jodi took the phone and keyed through the calls. "It was Keegan five times and John once." She checked the alert mode. "You have your phone on silent mode."

"I do?"

"Yes. Didn't you put it on that?"

"I haven't put it on anything. I've never had a cell phone, I'm not really sure about how to use it."

"It must've been like that when Keegan gave it to you. Just hit the green button and you can call Keegan back."

She did, but the phone went to message. She left a short message ending with sweet endearments then hit the red button and glanced at Jodi. "I left a message. I guess he's sleeping."

"Maybe. He's probably had a hard day. But I think you have a message," she said pointing to the red numbers on her phone.

"How do you know that?"

Jodi giggled. "Here let me show you."

After a quick lesson Lizzy ended up listening to two messages. One from John telling her to call Keegan and the other from Keegan telling her he loved her.

"I wish I could talk to him. I miss him so much."

Jodi smiled and tried to change the subject. "I wish he could've been there to hear you sing today. My gosh, I can't believe how good you are. Megan was totally freaked. She wants to schedule you the first Saturday in November. How do you feel about that?"

"I guess I'm okay with it. I'm excited, but also kinda scared."

"Don't be nervous. You'll have lots of practice by then. So, how does Heather like the new school?"

"She loves it. She's excited about all her new friends. There's a Halloween party Friday and I've already signed up to make cupcakes."

"Oh, Maddie will be heartbroken if you don't let her help."

"I'd love her help. I still have to figure out costumes. I wish I had my Halloween box from the house. It has a bunch of old costumes and

supplies. It would be so much easier if I could just get it. Maybe I can go to the fabric store tomorrow. Would you like to come along?"

"I'd love to, but I have an even better idea," Jodi said excitedly. "I can go with you up to Tyler Springs. I know you said when Keegan gets back you and he are going up there to pack up the house, but I'm thinking we could go on up and get started. The girls need some clothes. We could pack a few of the smaller things, whatever will fit in the van and we can get your Halloween stuff."

"That would be great. Are you sure you wouldn't mind?"

"I wouldn't mind at all. Besides, I'm dying to see this little house where you grew up and where you and Keegan fell in love. We can get Lisa and Chaz and Maddie to babysit for the day. Without the kids we can get a lot done."

Lizzy reached over and hugged Jodi. "I don't understand why you're so nice to me. You hardly even know me. You are a saint. John is a lucky man."

Jodi grinned. "I keep telling him that." She looked around for her phone. "Speaking of John, I wonder why he called you and not me."

When she didn't find her phone, she went upstairs to look for it, but came back down to announce she couldn't find it. "I guess I've lost it. That's crazy. I hope whoever finds it tries to call one of the numbers on my contact list."

"Maybe it will turn up," Lizzy said. "I can't seem to get used to carrying one. If I'd remembered to bring it with me the day those men came to my house, Keegan would've been able to reach me and we would've made it outta there before they arrived."

"Woulda, coulda, shoulda," Jodi said flippantly. "Don't live in the past. Except to learn from it."

"You're absolutely right about that."

They both turned as the Inn phone rang. Jodi ran to the kitchen to get it, calling to Maddie that she had it.

"*Pine Forest Country Inn and Cottages*," she quipped cheerfully.

"My love," John said softly. "Tell me why you haven't answered your phone?"

"Sorry, darling, I seemed to have misplaced it."

"Well, Jodi, you could've called me to let me know so I wouldn't worry about you."

"Oh, honey, I'm truly sorry. I've been so busy all day and I didn't even realize it was gone until just a minute ago."

"Okay, I guess I'll accept that. And so dear, find it or replace it. I

need to be able to reach you at all times."

"I'll get on it ASAP. Promise."

"Thank you. Now, have you seen Lizzy?"

"She's in the other room."

"Keegan has tried to call her and she doesn't answer. He's worried about her."

"She had the phone on silent mode. I showed her how to change it. She tried to call him back and he didn't answer."

"Strange," John mumbled. "Well, maybe he's asleep. He had a rough day. So, how's my boy?"

"He misses his daddy."

"It'll be a few more days. Can you handle it?"

"Of course. You do what you need to do for Keegan. I'll keep the home fires burning."

"You're the best, Jodi. I love you."

"You're a smart man, John. Love you too."

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"That sucks, man," cried the younger kid named Billy. He slapped Keegan on his back. "Here you are tryin' to do your job and they give you a hard time about it."

"That's the way it is," Billy's buddy, Scott, lamented. "It sucks."

"Yeah, it sucks," Keegan agreed. He glanced at his watch. "Wow, it's already after three in the morning. I gotta get going. I gotta be back there at oh-six-hundred hours." He rose.

"All us guys, ya know, we all got your back, Tanner," they said.

"Thanks," Keegan muttered as he stumbled toward the door.

He was back at the hotel and sound asleep by 3:30 AM. Two hours later he was hailing a cab to head back to Pennsylvania Avenue. The days before he'd been apprehensive. Now, he just didn't care. What could they possibly do to him? No, that was the alcohol talking. This could end up being a public lynching, and somehow he didn't think that would sit well with his fiancé.

He breezed into the room. Moore and Walker were there, but Coleman and Nigel hadn't shown yet. Keegan moved toward the table, removed his weapon and slapped it down. Moore leaned forward and retrieved the gun. He stilled, looking into Keegan's face.

"Special Agent Tanner, have you been drinking?" Alan Moore asked, his tone condescending.

"I had a few drinks with some buddies," he admitted.

"At this time of morning?"

"No sir. We ended our little session about three. I'm almost sober now," he said, his lip turning up slightly.

"Agent Tanner, if I were you I would take these sessions seriously. Nigel put you through the wringer the other day to prepare you for this, and we're putting you through it to prepare you for what's coming."

"What does that mean? What's coming?" Keegan demanded.

Moore glanced at Walker, then back to Keegan. "There seems to be a public outcry concerning your more than aggressive behavior. There were some demonstrations yesterday outside one of the Federal courthouses asking for your resignation. A committee has convened and they'll be calling you in to ask you some questions in a day or two."

"Oh this just keeps getting better and better," Keegan muttered. "Demonstrations by whom? Two days ago the media was calling me a hero for cracking this case and saving those kids. Now I'm being called in front of some committee? This is ridiculous. No, this is bull. I was doing my job just like every other law enforcement official."

"Yes, well, Special Agent Tanner, other law enforcement officials don't kill over twenty men at one sitting."

"Yeah, well, other law enforcement officials don't come into contact with that many bad guys at one time. And ya know what? If they did they would hope I would be by their side."

"Agent Tanner, sit yourself down," David Coleman said as he entered the room.

Keegan looked over at him, taking note of several other agents who came through the door. Nigel was the last to walk in. Four agents stayed by the door.

"I said sit down," Coleman ordered again.

Keegan sat. "I'm not sure that we have anything else to discuss. You people should be backing me. I was doing my freaking job and, by the way, I do it well. Have you ever even been out in the field? Do you know what it's like out there? Have you ever gone under for two years?"

Coleman ignored Keegan's ranting. "While you were under, Agent Tanner, did you lose sight of who you were and who you worked for?"

He flew to his feet. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Agent Tanner, you stay in your seat and speak respectfully or I promise you, I will follow through with my threat of detaining you until you can control yourself."

He didn't sit. Instead, he placed his hands on the table. "Do you

realize..."

Before he knew what was happening there was an agent on either side of him, pushing him down into his seat. He looked up at them. "So, that's how it's gonna be?"

"Answer the question, Agent Tanner. Did you lose sight of who you were working for?"

He shook his head slowly. "No, I never forgot I was an FBI agent. I never forgot I was working deep cover, and I never forgot that what I was doing would save a lot of innocent lives and put a Senator behind bars where he belongs."

"And did you kill anyone while working undercover?"

Sighing, he shook his head again. "If you mean did I commit murder against innocent civilians while trying to maintain my bad guy persona, the answer is no. However, the day my cover was blown, I took out two bad guys in order to get out of there with my life."

"So that means that within a two-month period you've killed twenty-nine men, that we know of thus far. Agent Tanner, do you realize that most law enforcement officers don't ever even fire their weapon, and it's rare for them to kill anyone?"

Keegan made a face. "Try doin' a study on undercover vice, or CIA, or SWAT or any other covert ops and the statistics will go up," Keegan argued. "And do a study on the dead cops who wouldn't be dead had they been able to kill the bad guys first."

Again, he ignored Keegan's statements. "We're gonna go over again everything you've done since you went undercover, Agent Tanner, and I want some clear, concise answers."

No, he thought. I'm not playing anymore. He looked up. "I've given clear, concise answers over and over and you know what? I'm done. Here's an answer for ya— I was doing my job as I was trained to do it. I'm good at it. You guys should be backing me up. So here's my answer." He stood and reached into his pocket.

He was tackled, his face smashed against the table, his hands jerked behind his back and cuffed. A kidney punch took any fight out of him.

"I was going after my badge, you idiots," he ground out. "What? Did you think I was gonna pull a gun and blow you all away? I'm not armed. You know that."

Coleman nodded at the agents, who released him, unlocked the cuffs and shoved him back in his chair.

Keegan made a show of extra slowly removing his badge from his

pocket and tossing it on the table.

"So, are you tendering your resignation?" David asked, obviously not concerned in the least.

"Hold on, Keegan," Nigel suddenly butted in. He turned to David. "Listen, he's a good agent. I don't want to lose him."

"Too little too late, Nigel," Keegan responded.

"Do you have anything else to say?" David asked.

"Yeah, as a matter of fact, I do," Keegan stated. "I know full well the rules of engagement. I had every right to use deadly force. You're the ones playing a deadly game. If some suit is thinking to appease a public minority, he's gonna mess up this bureau. Eventually, it's gonna be impossible for you to find good men to put up with this bull. Tell whoever it is that ordered this hearing it's gonna backfire."

"Is that all?"

"No, one more thing. I'm not answering any more questions."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice in that, resignation or not."

"I do have a choice." He rose. "Just ask my lawyer."

He strode out the door, down the corridor and entered the elevator, as he pulled out his cell phone.

"It's only six-forty-five," John said as he answered. "Why don't I think that's a good sign?"

"Because it's not. I need a lawyer."

"We're way ahead of you, Keeg. We'll meet you at the hotel at five. Plan for a long night."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Your attorney, your brothers and I, Jason Lee and Rick Kino. Jeff has a press conference scheduled as he leaves the hospital this afternoon. He'll be singing your praises. Ricky intends to make a personal plea to let American heroes know when they're appreciated. I think he might even organize some sort of march."

"Don't you think that's going a bit too far?"

"Have you had your television on at all?" John asked.

"No. What's up?"

"Man, Keeg. There's a political battle being fought and you're the lure. Certain groups have been demonstrating, arguing against deadly force laws and they're making you out to be some kind of robocop killing machine."

He sighed. "I am," Keegan muttered.

"Okay. You're pissing me off. Don't say another word until you've spoken to your attorney."

"Why me, John? I mean, why not some cop who shot some innocent bystander. I killed ruthless bad guys who go after kids. Aren't I an unlikely candidate for all this?"

"Yeah. You are. And they are making a big mistake."

"Well, anyway, I turned in my badge. Looks like I'll be working for Jason. If the offer still stands after all of this."

"Jason's a good guy. His offer will stand."

Keegan finished his conversation as he headed down the front steps of the building. Suddenly, he was accosted by media. "Agent Tanner. Agent Tanner. Would you like to make any statements? Wait, let me get my cameraman. We weren't expecting you to be out so early. We were just setting up."

Keegan eyed her. The woman was the same one who started all this back in Savannah. He wanted to give her a piece of his mind. He wanted to make things square, but he didn't want to please her by granting her an interview. He started to walk away.

"Wait. Agent Tanner. Please." She gave him a charming smile. "I'm just asking questions the American public wants to know."

"No, you're not. You're trying to justify your job by tearing other people apart."

The cameraman rushed up. Her entire demeanor changed.

"I don't have anything to justify Agent Tanner, however, you killing twenty-three men needs to be justified."

"Okay, let me play your game for a minute. I'm entitled to use deadly force when my life or the life of others are in jeopardy. In every instance that was the case. It was a difficult job and I did it willingly to save a fellow American who'd been taken hostage on that ship. He's grateful I came for him. His parents are also grateful, as are the parents of those five little babies they were planning to load onto that ship."

"You mean those five *white* babies," the woman said pointedly.

"What?"

"I said, you mean the five white babies," she repeated, her nose in the air.

His eyes glittered. "I don't care what race those children were. They were American children, taken from their American homes. I'm sorry if you're insulted that the terrorists only wanted white children. Maybe you should take that up with ISIS, or Al-Qaeda, or whatever freakin' terrorist group is wreaking havoc at the moment. Yeah, take it up with them, and when you do, and they have YOU in their hot little hands, believe me, you'll pray for someone like *me,* who has the guts

and the skills to come and help you. And ya know what? Because you're an American, I would do just that." He turned and stormed away.

She turned to the cameraman. "Did you get it all?"

"Sure did."

"It's gonna have to be edited. Let's get to it," she ordered.

"Oh no. You are not gonna twist this. You are not gonna touch it," he said as he walked back to the van.

She stood on the sidewalk, her mouth hanging open.

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Deuteronomy 16:19

"You shall not pervert justice. You shall not show partiality, and you shall not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds the eyes of the wise and subverts the cause of the righteous."

Chapter Fifteen

There was still yellow crime scene tape around the house, but Lizzy assured Jodi that Nigel said it was okay to go in the house. Lizzy hadn't realized she'd been standing in the twins' bedroom, her body violently trembling, until Jodi came up and wrapped her arms around her.

Suddenly Lizzy pushed her away and ran to the bathroom. Jodi followed, sitting down on the edge of the tub and rubbing Lizzy's back as she retched.

"Maybe this was a bad idea," Jodi said. "You wanna leave? We don't have to do this."

Lizzy stood and leaned over the sink, rinsing her mouth. "No, it's okay, because I really do need to get the girls' stuff. And mine. I'm okay now. It was just a shock, you know, remembering what happened." She drew a breath and smiled. "Besides, you're not getting off that easy. Let's get to work."

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Keegan punched a button on his phone. "What?"

"Keegan," Nigel said. "We need to talk."

"No, sir, we don't."

"I had no choice in the proceedings, Keegan."

"You played me against the middle. You didn't have the guts to stand up for me, to back me. I can't work for you."

"I need your help on another matter."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Cantrell is demanding to speak to you."

"Me?" Keegan didn't let on that he'd love the chance to have a word with his old buddy.

"We're trying to get him to spill what he knows about the Senator and the possible involvement of other public servants. The problem is he says he'll talk, but only to you."

"May I remind you that I'm no longer with the bureau?"

"He doesn't know that."

It would've pleased Keegan to make Nigel beg, but he was too tired to stretch it out. "Okay, Nigel. What time?"

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"So, Agent Tanner," Brian Cantrell addressed the man sitting across from him in the interrogation room. A slow smile spread over his face.

Keegan drew an impatient breath. "Brian. How did you come to be involved with the good Senator?"

"It surprised you didn't it?" Brian said, not a bit interested in Keegan's question.

"What are you talking about?" Keegan asked.

"I'm talkin' about that day you overheard Hartman telling Celados your real name and you had to make a run for it."

Keegan rolled his eyes. "Yeah. It surprised me. Whaddya want me to say– good one, Brian?"

"It was payback," Brian uttered.

"For what? That's what I don't get. I don't know what it is you think I did to you, but whatever it is, you're mistaken. So, tell me, Cantrell, what is your deal?"

"The fact that you have to ask shows what a self-righteous SOB you are," Brian said.

Keegan shook his head slowly, his eyes on his steepled hands. Finally, he looked up. "Is this about the girl, Brian?"

"Not just about her. It's more about you."

"Look, I'm not the one who made the bad decisions. You tried to rape that girl, Brian. It was a huge mistake on your part. Though I made a mistake too. I didn't turn you in. I didn't speak against you, but I sure should have. You know that, right? I should've kicked your butt. I didn't, but if I had, I can see you feeling some animosity towards me. However, I kept my mouth shut, so, what gives?"

Keegan watched Brian's face go red with barely suppressed anger.

"You didn't have to *say* anything, mister top of the class, top scorer, top everything prick. All you had to do is show up at her father's door with her tucked up safely under your arm."

"You think I should've left her on the street?"

"She came on to me, you know. It was a game with her. To see which of Daddy's flunkies she could get put out."

"I don't believe that. Her face was all beaten. Her nose was bleeding. Her eye was already going black. Her dress was ripped. Her underwear was gone. Pretty incriminating, Brian."

"She did most of that to herself."

Keegan gave a short laugh. Only it wasn't funny. This man was

sick. He'd never realized what a sicko he was. "So, because I'm turning in better scores than you, years later you blow my cover and almost get me killed? A bit drastic don't you think?"

"Not from my perspective."

"Brian, it's not me who messed up your life. You've done that all by yourself."

"Yeah, well, it was *you* who killed my brother."

Keegan met his eyes calmly. "Naw, Brian, it was *you* who sent him to his death."

Brian jumped to his feet. Keegan only sat quietly, eyeing him. "Bring it on," he said quietly. "Bring it, Cantrell, because I'd love the excuse to ram my fist in your face."

Brian stood there, face red, chest heaving for several seconds before he was able to get control. Finally, he eased back down into his seat.

Keegan nodded. "If I were you I'd talk to these guys and make any deal you can," Keegan urged.

"That's what you want, isn't it, Tanner? You want me to deal and testify against Hartman."

Keegan shrugged. "I couldn't care less whether you deal. I've put together enough evidence to fry you all."

"You need me."

"I don't need anything from you. What they want from you is information on Hartman and anyone else involved that they don't know about. It's clear you had no intention of talking to me about that."

"Naw, I just wanted to talk to you about one thing. Lizzy. How's she doing, Tanner? Are you sure she's safe way down there in Georgia and you way up here in our nation's capital?"

Keegan's eyes narrowed.

Brian licked his lips. "Now, there's a lady I'd like. I mean, that's a hot piece. I'd do her first, ya know. Then rough her up. I don't know which one I like better, all that soft, pale skin, bruised and broken..."

Keegan stood abruptly. "And you are out of time. You're goin' down, Cantrell."

"So are you, Tanner. I've been keeping an eye on the screen."

Keegan shrugged. "Time will tell, won't it?"

"I'm not finished with you, Tanner," Brian warned, his tone sugary sweet. "Better keep an eye on Nurse Liz."

Keegan flew over the table, his hands closing around Brian's throat. Brian's eyes bulged as he struggled to breathe, spittle spewing

from his mouth. Four men burst through the door and pulled Keegan away. He didn't stop fighting until he was shoved against a wall, his head snapping back to hit the tiles.

Breathing hard, he shook himself free as others led Brian away.

"What are you doing, Tanner? Are you crazy?" Nigel shouted.

Keegan drew a deep breath, straightened his tie. Without a word, he turned and walked away. Pulling out his phone he dialed John.

"Where are you?" he asked, the moment John answered.

"You know I'm here in DC. I'll be at your hotel at five along with our attorney, remember?"

"I gotta go home. Lizzy could be in danger."

"You can't go home. I'll go. Fill me in."

Keegan told him what Cantrell had to say. John made arrangements to catch the next flight out, then called Chaz in *Pine Forest* to tell him about the possible threat and ask him to be vigilant over the women. He cursed when he was told Lizzy and Jodi had gone to *Tyler Springs* and then he cursed again when Jodi didn't answer her phone.

At the same time, Keegan dialed Elizabeth, cursed and almost threw his phone when she didn't answer. Taking a few deep breaths, he calmed himself and called Jodi. No answer. His blood pressure rose. He dialed the Inn and Lisa picked up.

"This is Keegan Tanner. Do you know where Elizabeth is?"

"Sure do. She and Jodi drove up to Tyler Springs early this morning, long before the sun rose."

"Did she leave her phone behind?"

"Hold on and I'll check upstairs."

Pacing furiously, he waited.

"It's here," Lisa finally said. "What's wrong? Is there a problem?"

"Maybe. I'll have John fill you in. He's on his way home."

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Jodi came back inside after taking another box out to the van. She glanced around the mostly empty bedroom that had belonged to the twins, then found Lizzy in Heather's room. "I'm amazed at how much we've been able to stuff into those boxes. The van's only about half full. I'm sure we can get Heather's stuff and most of yours in there."

Lizzy pulled another stack of games from the top shelf in the closet. "Sounds good. I'm almost done in here."

Jodi nodded. "Great. So, let's get some lunch and we can do your room after we eat."

Lizzy frowned. "It feels good to get so much done. I don't wanna take a break and I'm not really hungry. I'm in the zone. Why don't you run into town and pick up some MickeyD's while I start in my room."

"I can do that. You sure you're gonna be okay? It is kinda creepy, I mean, with the bloodstains on the carpet and bed."

"I'll be fine." She turned, grabbed the duct tape and tore off a large piece. "I've put all that stuff out of my mind. Besides, blood doesn't really bother me."

"Yeah, the nurse thing and all, I guess it wouldn't," Jodi said.

Lizzy taped the box, wrote 'Heather' on it with a permanent marker and gave it a final pat. She glanced around. "I think the rest of this room will fit in one box. I'll have that done by the time you get back."

"Okay. What do you want?"

Lizzy pulled the van keys out of her pocket and handed them to Jodi. "Well, I know you and John are into all the health stuff, but I'm in the mood for some artery clogging junk food. How about a quarter pounder and a sweet tea?"

Jodi grinned. "I think I can handle that. Promise not to tell."

"You have my word," Lizzy said as she held up the roll of duct tape. "Do you think you could stop by the store and pick up some more tape? We're almost out."

"No problem," Jodi called over her shoulder as she left.

Lizzy turned back to pull the rest of Heather's things out of her closet. She hadn't told Jodi yet, but she was hoping if she could get the bedrooms done, that Jodi wouldn't mind staying a little longer and work on the kitchen with her. That was always the biggest job. Besides, she really needed to empty the refrigerator. They could use the stuff in the freezer, but it'd been so long since they left, she was sure everything in the fridge was bad. There wasn't much in the freezer anyway, but she hated for anything to go to waste.

Her mind wandered to that last day she'd been here and the groceries she'd bought while Keegan was busy trying to get the girls out of the house. When Jodi and she had first come in today, those groceries were still on the kitchen floor. Lizzy had then filled Jodi in on the details of that day and let her know that it was her battle with Keegan that had made the mess. Displaying the attributes of a true friend, Jodi understood Lizzy's reasoning and fears.

Working fast while Jodi picked up lunch, it didn't take Lizzy long at all to fill the last box with Heather's belongings. It's not like her

girls had a lot of possessions. A minimal supply of clothes and shoes, a few games and toys, a few stuffed animals and a few books were pretty much it. Their grandmother had made them lovely patchwork quilts for their beds. Lizzy would hold onto Heather's, Lily's and Daisy's, but Rose's and Violet's had been ruined in the melee. Sighing, Lizzy taped up the box and moved into her own room. Taking a deep breath she grabbed a box from the hallway and got started.

She began with her closet, which may have been even more meager than her children's. Working quickly, she filled the box, grabbed another one and filled it.

"Hello."

She gasped, her body jerking around. A man stood in the threshold. He was dressed in khaki pants and a yellow polo shirt. He had his hands tucked in his pockets and wore a pleasant smile. Brown hair and brown eyes, he was clean cut and not unattractive.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to scare you. I knocked, but I guess you didn't hear me. The door was open so I came in. I asked the lady at the gas station if she knew of any homes available in the area and she said she thought you were selling your home. So, like, I'm sorry I startled you."

Lizzy patted her chest to calm her heart, smiled. "It's okay. I didn't hear you knock, I suppose I was deep in thought. I only mentioned that to her this morning. That's how it is in small towns though, news travels fast. So, you're looking for a home in the area?"

"Been looking for a while. So, the lady was right? You are selling?"

Lizzy nodded. "I am selling, but I haven't put it on the market yet. It'll be weeks before the house is ready to be looked at."

He frowned. "My wife and me, we just had a baby and she's says she's gonna leave me if I don't find something. She's going crazy in the little place we have now. Ever since she had the baby, she's been almost impossible to reason with."

Lizzy laughed. "Hormones."

"Yeah, that's what they say." He moved forward, his hand outstretched. "I'm Mike Abernathy."

Lizzy took his hand. "Liz Anderson."

"Nice to meet you. So, do you think there's any way I could get you to show me around so I can report something back to my wife? From what I've seen so far, this might be just what we're looking for."

Lizzy sighed. She'd been on a roll, not wanting any distractions.

Well, she thought, sometimes things just can't be helped; and wouldn't it be nice if she could make the sale without having to sign with a realtor? She smiled. "Sure, I guess we could do a quick tour."

She began at the front of the house, moving quickly from room to room. When she got to the kitchen, her mind quickly calculated how much they might be able to get done once Jodi got back. They moved into the den where she spoke of the merits of the fireplace and the largeness of the room. She talked about the easy access to the large backyard as she went to the French doors and peered out, remembering the night she and Keegan had escaped. The scarecrow clothes were scattered around the yard. She startled when she turned and Mike was right behind her.

"Oh, excuse me," she said, giving a slight laugh. "I didn't realize you were there."

Her statement was casual, but her heart rate accelerated when he didn't move. He was smiling at her. His hand reached up and touched her cheek. "I'm sorry if this sounds rude, but I swear you must be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Lizzy smiled nervously, tried to step around him. "Don't be silly," she said.

He stopped her progress. His hand moved to her shoulder. She shrank back.

"Mr. Abernathy, I don't know what you think you're doing, but..."

"Let me fill you in, Lizzy. It's been a pleasure walking around your house trying to decide which room I'm gonna use while I listen to your sweet voice filling me in on amenities."

"I don't understand. Which room you're gonna use for what?"

He laughed. "To do the deed."

"The deed?"

"I'm supposed to totally mess you up. Make you suffer. Hurt you bad, or even put an end to your life, Lizzy Anderson."

She turned and lunged for the door, hoping to get outside and have some running room, but he was right behind her. His arm snaked around her waist and the other around her throat. Pulling her back away from the door, he moved to the right, pushed her face against the wall and leaned close, his mouth against her ear.

"Shhh, now. Okay, shhh, calm down."

She bucked back against him, but he held her tighter, the arm around her throat cutting off her oxygen.

His mouth went back up to her ear. "Lizzy, I want you to calm

down now. Shh, be still." When she didn't obey he shook her hard and rammed her against the wall again. He leaned close. "Those little girls of yours sure are cute."

She stilled, not because she wanted to, but because the terror that filled her was paralyzing.

"I think you'd better think about them," he warned. "Do you want them to be orphans?"

Lizzy winced. "No," she breathed.

"Good. That's a good girl. All you have to do is cooperate."

She began to cry.

"Shh, now. Good news is, I don't really want to kill you so there's no reason to cry. As long as you cooperate, you'll live through this. Do you understand?"

She whimpered as tears ran down her cheeks.

"Lizzy, tell me you understand and I'll take my arm off your neck so you can breathe."

She nodded her head.

He dropped his arm, but still kept her pinned against the wall and still held the other arm tight around her waist. "See there, I keep my word. It's funny, isn't it, how we take little things like breathing for granted until they're taken away from us. It feels pretty good to draw a deep breath, doesn't it, Lizzy?"

She nodded. "You're not gonna kill me?" she asked in a whisper.

"Not unless you make me do it."

"Why are you doing this?"

"It's nothing personal, pretty lady. You see, I'm in a little trouble myself. I owe a debt to someone and once I take care of you, I'll be able to pay that debt."

"But why? Why hurt me? I haven't done anything to anyone."

"No, and that's really too bad, but apparently, your lover boy has and the way to get back at him is to hurt you."

"But..."

"No more talk now. I don't have much time." His free hand traveled down her back. "I wasn't kidding, ya know. You really are beautiful, and so, the rape part will be a pleasure. The part after that, like I say, it's nothing personal. Just something that has to be done."

The sobs welled up.

"There now, don't cry." He turned her to face him, cupped her cheek. "Just don't make me have to kill you. I will if I have to, but I swear, sweet Lizzy, I don't want to. All you have to do is cooperate."

He let go of his hold on her so he could grab up the tape and she instantly pushed him away and tried to run. But he grabbed her by the hair, bringing her to an immediate halt. "I told you to cooperate," he said quietly. He drew his arm back and punched her in the face.

Her body dropped limply to the floor. She moaned, only half conscious, as he turned her over on her back and straddled her. He used his thumb to wipe the blood from her mouth. "I wasn't kidding, Lizzy. Do you believe me now?"

She sniffed. "Yes," she whimpered.

"Okay, then."

Lizzy closed her eyes as the tears ran freely, but she opened them again when she heard the ripping sound of duct tape. He had a roll of it in his hands. Her roll. Grabbing her hands, he taped them together.

"It's not that I don't think you'll cooperate," he said. "It's just that it's possible your instincts may kick in against your will and I don't want to have to hurt you again." He dragged her across the floor and tossed her onto the sofa. When he knelt over her she tried to bring her taped hands down hard on the back of his head. He punched her again and then ripped open her shirt.

"My fiancé is gonna kill you."

He chuckled. "Your fiancé is trying to save himself right now. I'll be long gone by the time he finds out what happened to his woman."

"It doesn't matter that you're long gone. He'll hunt you down and kill you. Stop right now and I'll tell him to let you live."

"Lizzy!" a man yelled.

Mike cursed.

Lizzy's eyes closed in gratitude at the sound of the masculine voice.

She started to scream, but Mike's hand clamped over her mouth.

He leaned close. "Gotta go. We'll continue this later." He slipped quickly out the French door.

"Lizzy?"

"I'm in here," she cried. "Hurry! He's getting away."

Officer Darrell Hornsby came slowly and cautiously into the den, his gun drawn.

"He went out the back," Lizzy said. "He just left. Hurry."

Darrell spoke into his mic and ran out the door.

Lizzy was so weak and dizzy that when she tried to sit up she only succeeded in falling off the sofa. Lying on the floor, she'd begun to worry that she'd just sent Darrell to his death when he finally came

back inside. Kneeling down beside her, he holstered his gun and lifted her back onto the sofa.

She shivered uncontrollably. "Did you get him?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"No. We have a manhunt in progress though."

Darrell cut the tape from her wrists, grabbed an afghan and pulled it gently around her shoulders.

"Thank God, you came by," she said, her throat clogging with emotion, as her mind went over the things the man said to her.

"Lizzy, I'm so sorry. About this. About everything."

She looked up at him, her eyes not really seeing him.

"Lizzy, I'm gonna take you to the hospital, okay?"

"No!" She scrambled away. "No."

"Lizzy?"

Jodi came in, threw the food on the kitchen counter. "Lizzy?" She moved toward the voices in the den. "Lizzy, there's police everywhere. Are you– oh what happened, sweetie?" She knelt down by her and hugged her close.

"A man came in, he said he was gonna hurt me," Lizzy explained.

"Tell me everything," Darrell said, kindly.

Lizzy told everything she could remember, having to stop at intervals to get control. Jodi stayed beside her. Lizzy rocked back and forth, her eyes blinking in slow motion.

Jodi touched her bruised and swollen face and spoke softly. "I'm gonna get Keegan on the phone, okay?"

When she didn't answer, Jodi started for her purse to get her cell phone and then remembered, she'd lost hers. "John is gonna be really mad at me," she mumbled. She picked up the house phone, but the line was dead. She headed outside to find the officer who'd saved the day.

"Excuse me, Officer, do you have a phone I can use to call my husband? I seemed to have lost my cell phone."

He handed her a phone. "How's she doing?"

"Not good. She's in shock, I think. Thank goodness you got here when you did. It's like a miracle."

He shook his head. "No miracle. Agent Tanner called me, asked me to come out here and check on her. Said he'd interviewed a prisoner who'd made some veiled threats. I, we, came right away," he said, motioning to the other officers.

"Thank you for that," Jodi said as she punched in John's number.

"This is John," he answered.

"It's me," she said.

"Are you with Lizzy?" he asked immediately.

"Yes. I'm sorry, John, I completely forgot to replace my phone this morning. We left so early, it just completely slipped my mind."

"That's okay, darling. No harm, no foul."

She sniffed, feeling the weight of her guilt. "If only that applied."

"What are you talking about? Lizzy is safe with you, right?"

"She is now, but they got to her, John."

He swallowed. "What happened?"

He listened while Jodi told him the entire story. When she finished, he took a few moments to calm himself and take stock of the situation. Finally, he spoke. "Okay, Jodi, first, I know you feel bad for leaving her, but you couldn't have known, so don't blame yourself. Second, don't let Lizzy speak to Keegan until he's been told in person. If I tell Keegan over the phone, he'll hop the next flight home. He absolutely has to face that committee tomorrow. I'd tell him myself but I'm not with him. I'm at the airport. I was on my way home to watch over Lizzy until Keegan could get back to her. Looks like I'm too late. Anyway, I'll call Brayden and get him to fill Keegan in."

"Okay, but she needs to speak to him, so do it fast, please. She's zombied out on me."

"Call you back," he said and hung up.

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Keegan struggled against the choke hold Brayden had on him. He could've gotten himself released if he wanted to hurt his friend, but he really didn't. Besides the fact that Tristan and Kaleb had their limbs entwined with his and they weren't about to let him go.

He bucked one more time, his face turning red with the strain, before he gave up.

"Okay, okay," he gasped.

Still, Brayden wasn't having it. He motioned for Tristan to bring Keegan's cuffs. Before Keegan knew what was happening, they had him cuffed behind his back. Finally, Brayden let go.

Keegan flipped over on the bed and slipped down onto the floor. He looked up imploringly. "Guys, she needs me."

"There's nothing you can do for her right now."

"You don't understand. She's not tough and seasoned. She's innocent and gentle. She needs me."

Brayden frowned. "Keeg, you need to get your priorities straight. You can talk to her on the phone. You have to face that hearing."

"Do you think I care at all about this stupid committee? It's not like I'm running off for some hot date. This guy almost raped her. He hurt her." His head bowed. "I'm gonna hunt him down and kill him."

"You mean you're gonna bring him to justice, right?"

Keegan looked up. "Yeah. That's what I meant."

"She's waiting for your call, Keeg," Tristan reminded him.

"Take the cuffs off and I'll call her."

"No way. I'll dial the number." He punched buttons and held the phone up to Keegan's ear.

"Hornsby," a man answered.

"It's Tanner. Is she still there?"

"Yeah. Hold on."

"Wait," Keegan said quickly. "Listen, man, thanks for getting to her so quickly."

"Yep. Thanks for trusting me to do it. And, uh, Tanner, thanks for not tearing my head off that day."

"Yeah, well, believe me, I wanted to, because you're a jerk cop, but then, so am I."

"You did a good job, Tanner, I mean, with the kids and all. Okay, well, here's Lizzy."

"Hello?"

He closed his eyes. Her voice was so weak. So strained. "Hey, Lizbeth, it's me."

"Keegan?" She broke down.

He listened to her cry. He needed to hold her as much as she needed him to. He drew a deep breath. "Okay, okay, I know, sweetie. I'm sick that I wasn't there for you."

She sniffed. "It's not your fault you weren't here. Please, Keegan, don't blame yourself."

He slowly shook his head. In one second, she'd switched from her own despair to worrying about how he felt. He didn't deserve her. That aside, he realized the best way to help her to buck up was to focus her on something else, namely, him. "If only I didn't have to be here. It's killing me that I can't be there with you."

"It's okay, Keegan. I just want you to get out of all this trouble and come home to me. For right now, I'll be okay. Really. It's over. Darrell got here and chased him off. He told me you called him. See, you protected me even from way up there in Washington. Oh, Keegan, thank you. I don't know what I'd ever do without you."

He sighed. "Listen, I don't want you going off alone anywhere,

okay? Just until all this settles down."

"Okay, Keegan. I'm sorry I caused so much trouble."

"It's not you causing the trouble, Elizabeth. You couldn't have known something like this could happen. I should have though. I wasn't thinking. I know what these men are capable of. Even with them behind bars I should've known."

"You've been a little busy. Finding lost babies, getting shot, rescuing friends and now having to answer for everything. I should've just stayed put. I know you sent me home to be safe with the girls. I bet you didn't realize it would be so difficult to keep track of me," she said, giving a small brittle laugh.

He smiled. She was gonna be okay. "I miss you, baby. I want to be there with you."

"I'm fine, Keegan. Really. Now that I've heard your voice and I've calmed down some, I feel much stronger. I'm okay. I just want you to be okay and come home to me."

"Hopefully it won't be too much longer before I can do that."

"So, Keegan, is your meeting for today already over or are you just taking a break?"

"No. It's over, but, well, day after tomorrow I've got another day of, uh, meetings, and then I should be home."

She sniffed as she made her mind focus on other things besides that man's hands on her body. "Good. So, I have a surprise for you."

"You do?" he said, a smile spreading over his face. Her sweet voice was like music to his ears and she sounded so innocent and full of mischief, he just had to smile.

"Yes, I do."

"Well, what is it?"

"If I tell you it won't be a secret."

"How about a hint."

"No. You'll just have to come home."

"Soon, baby."

"Keegan, I'm okay now. Really."

"You're strong, Elizabeth. I'm so proud of you. Just one more thing. You're gonna hear a lot of stuff about me on the news. It's not as bad as they're gonna make it sound. I'm okay. And I'll be home soon. Promise me you won't let all this political stuff upset you."

"I promise, Keegan. I just know that everything is gonna be okay."

"You just know, huh?"

"Really, I do. It's just a feeling I have."

"That's good to hear. You lift me up, baby. It's crazy. I'm supposed to be comforting you and you end up taking care of me."

"We take care of each other."

"I guess that's what it's all about."

"I guess it is."

"Bye, sweetheart."

"Bye, Keegan. I love you."

He nodded and Brayden took the phone from his ear. He looked up at his friends. "Okay, guys, you can take the cuffs off now."

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Keegan had taken John's advice and actually watched the news. He'd been watching it now for the past two days, and the publicity surrounding his being called in front of a committee surprised even him. Jeff's little press conference went as expected with no surprises, with him attributing the fact that he was still alive to Keegan getting to him as quickly as he did. He'd obviously been in a lot of pain, ensuring the public's sympathy.

Breanna Adams, Ricky Kino and Toby Nash, a country music star and good friend of Rick's, made heartfelt public statements, stirring the hearts of Americans to action. They asked the silent majority to make their opinions known. They asked Americans to recognize the honor and strength of a good man who represented all the good, strong men who do their jobs with little or no thanks. They painted a picture of Keegan, with help from his parents and sisters and childhood friends, that would melt the hearts of mothers and fathers everywhere. And they reminded everyone of the heartache and pain the child trafficking organization had caused hundreds of families.

Keegan was humbled. Nevertheless, the committee would still convene in approximately twenty minutes. He was surprised again as the cab pulled up in front of the courthouse on Pennsylvania and Third, just down from FBI headquarters, to see a dozen or so people behind a metal barricade just at the bottom of the courthouse steps, shaking their fists in the air, their anger directed at him. He normally would be angry right back, but instead his heart was saddened. Keegan and his attorney, Bill Cummins, stepped out onto the sidewalk as insults were hurled.

A glance in the opposite direction brought another surprise. A little farther down the walk, another group of people, held signs proclaiming Keegan a hero. A few signs quoted what he'd said in the impromptu interview with the trouble-making reporter. They read, 'and because

you're an American, I'll come help you too.' Among the group, were his brothers-in-arms and friends, all except John, who remained home to watch over the women. Tristan gave a thumbs up. Keegan nodded, as he fought his emotions. The entire world had lost its mind.

"Keep your head up, Tanner," Bill murmured. "And here we go."

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Lizzy hadn't been able to take her eyes from the screen as the drama unfolded live on TV. She sat in the dining room along with some of the Inn's guests who'd become enthralled with what was happening after they'd discovered Keegan Tanner was Lizzy's fiancé.

"He looks so vulnerable," Lizzy complained.

"He looks strong to me," Lisa answered.

"He's so good looking," Jodi said. "I guarantee you right now all the women in the country are swooning."

Lizzy jumped up and ran upstairs. Jodi, surprised by Lizzy's reaction, was slow to rise. John squeezed Jodi's hand. "Honey?"

"I'd better go check on her," she finally said.

She found Lizzy bent over the toilet. She watched her for a moment then ran cool water over a cloth and handed it to her.

"Thank you," Lizzy said softly.

Jodi didn't answer. She only watched her. Finally she spoke. "At first I felt bad for upsetting you, but that's not what happened, is it?"

Lizzy lowered her eyes, shook her head. "I don't think so."

"How far along?"

"It can only be a week."

"Are you sure?"

"We've never been together. The first time we were intimate was only about a week ago, when Keegan was in the hospital."

"Uh, when he was in the hospital?"

Lizzy shrugged. "It's your fault. You're the one who dressed me."

"Oh, yeah, I guess I did. But you didn't tell me it was in the hospital. And you sure didn't tell me you'd never been together. I guess I shouldn't assume things."

"Well, I didn't plan on it being in the hospital. I was only gonna get him interested and then get him to come to the motel. But he had that thing, what he called 'primal post-trauma' something going on."

Jodi giggled. "Say no more. I know it well."

"But still, it doesn't make any sense. I shouldn't be having any symptoms yet. I don't understand."

"Maybe you're just one of those women who gets sick

immediately and stays sick."

Lizzy shook her head. "I was hardly sick at all with the girls. Not really at all. I think there were a couple of mornings I might have felt a little queasy."

Jodi smiled. "Well then, that must mean it's a boy."

Lizzy gave a soft laugh. "I'm not even sure I'm pregnant and you already think it's a boy."

"Well, Liz, I'd rather believe you're pregnant than think there's something more serious wrong with you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Even though it doesn't make any sense, I just have a feeling that I am pregnant."

"Well, after five kids, I imagine you know how it feels."

"I do. But Jodi, what if this hearing goes badly? No, I can't think that way. Oh Lord, if I really am pregnant, I hope this doesn't upset him." She blinked and the tears ran over her cheeks.

"Don't be silly, Lizzy. He loves you. And, well, heck, when you already have five, what's one more?"

Lizzy laughed softly through her tears. "True," she said, with a sniff. "What's one more."

Jodi hugged her. "Let's get back down and see what's happening. Maybe it will all be over today and tomorrow Keegan will be home in time to help take the kids trick-or-treating."

<3 <3 <3

He wasn't sure if it was because of the capable man at his side, but Keegan felt amazingly calm. Bill Cummins had come highly recommended by Justin Lee, Jason's brother, who was himself an attorney. The man had already corrected the committee several times in their statements and accusations.

Yet, Keegan thought his lack of nerves had more to do with Lizzy's words that kept ringing in his ears. "I just know everything is gonna be okay," she'd said. He realized, he believed her.

The committee had been formed with two members of each political party, two members of the military, an FBI suit and D.C.'s police commissioner. Keegan gave the same responses to the same questions he'd been asked dozens of times over the past week. The good news was, it seemed obvious the committee was leaning in his favor. It made him want to thumb his nose at his former superiors at the FBI. They'd lost a good agent because they hadn't backed him. Instead they'd buckled under political pressure.

During the lunch break, Bill told Keegan that the public outcry by

Toby Nash, Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino, along with Jeff's press conference, and Keegan's own unedited statement to Angela Harris, the reporter, had garnered quite a bit of attention. The politicians were beginning to realize they'd chosen the wrong scapegoat this time and they weren't winning any votes by going after him. The parents of the more than two hundred children who'd been affected by the organization Keegan had brought down had commenced a letter writing, social media, and email campaign.

"To be honest, Keegan," Bill said. "I should refund your retainer. I haven't earned my keep on this one."

"It ain't over," Keegan said quietly. "But once it is, as far as I'm concerned, you more than earned your fee. Even if just for dropping everything else and coming to help."

"Well, it was a high profile case. A thousand attorneys would've taken your case in a millisecond."

"Well then, I guess you're just the lucky one," Keegan laughed.

Break ended and they made their way back into the large assembly room. The lights from the cameras were almost blinding as he walked back into the room. He hated publicity, which probably stemmed from being undercover for so long. Publicity made him nervous. Drawing a deep breath, he braced for the long afternoon.

The moment everyone was assembled and settled, the committee chairman stood. He began a somewhat confusing explanation of how and why the committee had been called in the first place, explaining how when so many men are killed by one law enforcement officer it always bears looking into.

Keegan wanted to roll his eyes, but he schooled his features. His mind drifted to Lizzy. She's sweet and innocent, yet she's a tiger. He couldn't wait to see her again. And the girls. He missed them. He'd been away from them for weeks now and he wondered if they'd even remember him. Glancing over at Bill he realized the man was smiling at him. Keegan snapped his attention back to what was being said.

"And in light of our findings, we see no reason to continue with this line of questioning. Mr. Tanner, you're free to go."

Keegan looked at Bill for confirmation. His attorney nodded at him, rose, offered his hand. Keegan shook it heartily. A few members of the committee strolled forward casually, shaking his hand, wishing him luck in the future.

Keegan finally turned to Bill. "Let's get out of here," he said.

Bill agreed. They hit the door quickly.

When they emerged from the courthouse and stood on the top step a roar went up from the crowd. There were still two groups, but the groups were now quite large. They stood at the bottom of the steps off to each side. There were several barricades now instead of just one. And there was a large presence of DC cops.

It was easy to tell who was for him and who was against. One side was all smiles, the other offered curses and looks of extreme hatred. Keegan spotted his buddies, minus John and plus Ricky Kino at the bottom of the steps. He grinned and they started toward him. A cop held them back until Rick stepped in and did some talking, explaining they were his security. Then the four men headed up the steps to escort Keegan out of the area. Keegan and Bill met them halfway.

It all happened so fast it was a blur. The barricade was knocked aside. Seven or eight men ran straight at Keegan, cops in pursuit. Brayden, Tristan, Kaleb and Ricky stepped in front, forming a barrier between Keegan and the hostiles, but it was difficult to hold them back without delivering lethal blows. They were eventually bowled over. Rick and Brayden were on their feet first, grabbing the irate men and literally tossing them away, down the steps, not caring if they broke an arm or neck. Tristan and Kaleb recovered and started doing the same. Kaleb actually ran after a few as they sprinted away, the cops still trying to get control of the situation.

Bill stood, brushed off his suit, straightened his tie. Keegan rolled from his side to his back on the hard, cold steps.

"Keeg, you okay?" Brayden asked.

Keegan looked up at him with glazed eyes which then traveled down to where his hand pressed against his side, taking in the bright, red stain that was quickly spreading out from under his fingers. The blood appeared vivid against the white of his shirt.

"Aw hell," Brayden cursed, dropping down beside him, ripping off his own shirt and pressing it against Keegan's side. "Hold on, Keeg, help is coming." They all turned at the urgency in Brayden's voice.

Tristan grabbed a cop. "Get an ambulance. Hurry."

Keegan groaned in agony, his breath coming in short gasps.

Ricky knelt down by Keegan's head. "Hold on, man. You're gonna be okay."

Keegan peered up into the deep brown eyes, taking comfort in Kino's level of conviction. He nodded slightly, dragging in a few painful breaths.

Brayden lifted the shirt to peer at the wound.

"Whaddya got?" Ricky asked.

"Looks like two stab wounds. Can't tell how deep."

"Keep the pressure on it, Brayden," Kaleb admonished.

Keegan's vision began to blur, his eyes to close.

"Keegan," Ricky commanded. "Look at me. Stay with me, man."

His eyes blinked as he obeyed. Forcing them open he tried to focus. "Lizzy, tell her..."

"I'm not telling her crap," Brayden said sharply. "You wanna tell her something, you're gonna have to do it yourself."

Keegan's mouth curled into a slight smile as he drew in a ragged breath and grunted in pain.

"Come on, now, open your eyes," Ricky prodded.

Keegan obeyed.

"This is nothing, Keegan," Ricky said. "You've been through worse than this, right?"

Keegan's eyes blinked in response.

"Stay with me, Keegan. Stay with me."

"I'm tryin'," Keegan murmured. His stomach roiled as a wave of nausea washed over him. He moaned and his eyes drifted shut as he sank into the darkness.

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Lizzy stood in shock, her eyes glued to the television screen. Jodi and Lisa stood beside her. John was on the phone with Tristan.

"Yes. I'm on my way with Lizzy."

John looked over at his wife. "Take Liz upstairs and pack a bag."

Jodi tugged on Lizzy but she wouldn't move so John stepped in, grabbing Lizzy by the shoulders, giving her a slight shake. "This is nothing, Lizzy. Nothing compared to what he's been through in the past. He'll be fine. You wait and see. He's gonna be okay, but what that means is he's gonna want to see you as soon as he opens his eyes, now go—pack—a bag."

John watched as Lizzy nodded and Jodi escorted her upstairs. He hoped what he said was actually true.

Maddie, who'd had the girls in the kitchen with her, poked her head out. "What's happening?"

Lisa filled her in quickly. John looked back up at the screen. The paramedics had arrived. Keegan's bloody hand flopped over the side of the gurney, limp and lifeless, before it was retrieved and placed on his chest. John felt suddenly sick. Drawing a deep breath, he put Grandmaster Kino's teachings to work. He sent a prayer, in Jesus'

name. He commanded healing, in Jesus' name. He visualized a happy outcome for the situation, and pushed that out in Jesus' name. Then he went to pack his own bag.

✞✞✞

Exodus 23:2-3

"Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor person in a lawsuit."

Chapter Sixteen

His angel was back. It was dark, as usual. He smelled her first, before anything else. Next, he heard her sweet voice, but he couldn't understand what she was saying. She began with his face, just as before, only this time her hand was cool instead of warm and felt soothing on his brow. She caressed his cheek, then leaned close. He breathed her in. Her lips pressed against his forehead.

He wanted to open his eyes. He needed to see her. He needed to make sure she was really here. Her hand ran over his chest, then down his arm and finally took his hand and squeezed. There were some differences this time. She didn't touch him intimately, even though he certainly wouldn't have objected, and she didn't forbid him from moving. Slowly, his hand squeezed hers back.

She called his name. He willed his eyes to open. It took a few seconds, but finally, the light flooded in.

"Lizbet?" he whispered.

"Yes, Keegan, it's me. I'm here." Her voice broke and she cried.

He tugged on her hand. "Don't cry, baby. Everything's okay, just like you said."

She sniffed. "Everything is not okay."

"Sure it is. I'm alive." He went on, speaking slowly, taking time to enunciate each word. "I'm free to come home with you and be your husband. I have a new job that pays great and I think I'm gonna like it and I won't have to leave you. Everything's wonderful."

She bent closer. "How are you feeling?"

"Sleepy. It's probably the pain medication. I can't stay awake." He looked up at her face. "It's so good to see you. John came with you?"

"Yes. He's outside, waiting to see you."

"Let him wait. I just want you."

Smiling, she bent down and kissed his lips. "Oh, Keegan, is it really all over now?"

"It's over."

"The doctors say you were lucky. They had to repair a portion of your large intestine and you lost a lot of blood, but at least the knife wasn't even close to your heart. If the knife had been any longer though, it would've hit a major artery."

"Close call, huh?"

Her jaw tensed. "Yes, but that didn't happen, so thank you, Jesus. I'm so grateful. Still, the doc says it's gonna be some time before you're one hundred percent."

He sighed. "Naw. Just watch me. I'm strong as a horse. I'll recover quickly. Especially with you nearby."

She squeezed his hand and his eyes drifted shut, then snapped back open. "I keep falling asleep."

"It's okay. Rest. I'll stay right here."

"I don't want to rest. I want to be alert. Talk to me, Lizbet. Please."

"About what?"

"Anything. How are the girls?"

"I spoke to Jodi this morning. The girls are excited about going trick-or-treating tonight."

"It's Halloween? Sorry. I'm sorry you had to leave. You didn't have to, you know."

"You're kidding, right?"

He shrugged. "I mean, I'm okay and the girls need you."

"There'll be plenty more Halloweens to come. Jodi and Lisa are gonna take lots of pictures for me. My place right now is with you."

Keegan shook his head. "I came into your life and turned it upside down, didn't I?"

"Yes," she answered with a smile. "But in a good way. Since you've been in my life, I look forward to every single day. Before, I was just forcing one foot in front of the other."

He frowned. "One foot in front of the other, but you never had anyone hit you. You'd never been assaulted until I came into your life."

"I don't want to talk about that," she said firmly.

"You're gonna need to talk about it, sweetheart. I'm sick over what you've had to endure. If I feel that way, I can't imagine how you're feeling. When I get out of here, we'll talk. It might do you good

to speak to a counselor. There are groups for women who've been assaulted."

Lizzy shrugged. "Well, right now, let's just focus on you getting better and coming home."

He nodded, smiled, and his eyelids fluttered. "Sounds good," he mumbled. His hand squeezed hers. "I can't stay awake."

"Then sleep. I'll be right here."

He allowed his eyes to close, but only a few seconds later the door opened and an older couple walked in. Lizzy looked up and smiled at them. Keegan opened his eyes.

"Dad? Mom?" Keegan said softly.

The woman came forward quickly and Lizzy stepped back.

"Oh, Keegan. You had us so worried."

"Sorry, Mom. I know it's been a hard time for you. But I'm alive."

"Son," the man said. He took Keegan's hand.

Lizzy discreetly edged her way toward the door, thinking to give them some privacy.

"Elizabeth, where are you going?"

"I, uh, just thought I'd step out for a minute."

"Don't go. Please, let me introduce you to my parents. Mom, Dad, this is Elizabeth Anderson."

"Very nice to meet you," the woman said, her eyes zeroing in on Lizzy's face which still had some bruising.

"It's nice to meet you too, Mr. and Mrs. Tanner."

"Oh, please, call me, Debbie."

"Thank you," she said. "And most people call me Lizzy, or Liz."

"Lizzy, how sweet. I like that. So, are you two, well, what I mean is, are you together?"

"Deb, give them a break, okay?"

"It's okay, Dad," Keegan said, stifling a yawn. "I don't mind answering. Yes, we're together. We're very much together. We're engaged to be married."

Deb's hands flew to her face. "Oh! Oh, that's wonderful," she exclaimed.

Lizzy smiled sweetly, if not somewhat nervously at her.

Keegan glanced up at Elizabeth, noting her hands twisting together and her teeth pressed into her bottom lip. He smiled contentedly.

Keegan's father stepped forward then. "I'm Roger," he said kindly. "It's very nice to meet you." He turned to his son. "Congratulations, son. She's beautiful."

Lizzy fidgeted, clearly uncomfortable.

Keegan held his hand out to her and she moved forward and grasped his fingers. "We met while I was undercover. I fell completely in love. I never stood a chance."

"I'm so happy," Deb said, her hands fluttering over her heart.

Lizzy studied her. She was attractive. Maybe mid-fifties with short hair that was a dark chestnut brown and had some streaks of gray. Her hazel eyes were kind and when she smiled, dimples gave her a young, girlish demeanor. No taller than Lizzy herself, her husband towered over her. Dressed casually in jeans and a sweater with pictures of fall leaves and pumpkins on it, she reminded Lizzy of her own mother. Roger, also dressed in jeans and a sweater, had dark, almost black hair, dark eyes, olive skin and it was easy to see who Keegan took after, except he must've gotten his one dimple from his mom.

"I'm about to make you even happier," Keegan said softly, drawing a deep breath. "So, Elizabeth here, has five of the cutest little girls you've ever seen and they are in desperate need of grandparents."

Deb gasped. "Five?"

Lizzy nodded. "It's a long story."

Deb's hands clapped together. "Oh, this is just too good to be true."

Keegan's eyes started to close. Roger watched as Lizzy bent down to peer into his face. She looked back up.

"It's the pain medication."

Keegan roused himself. "Lizbet, will you do me a favor and turn the pain meds off?"

"Keegan, I..."

"Please. I haven't seen my parents in over two years, not since I went undercover and we have a lot of catching up to do. I can handle the pain. You know that."

Sighing, she did as he asked.

"It's okay," Keegan said to his parents, noting the horrified looks. "She's a nurse. That's how we met. When I had the accident that supposedly killed me, she was the one who took care of me."

Lizzy drew a sudden breath. "You thought he was really dead, didn't you?"

"Yes," Roger answered. "It was a bad time."

"But then, Keegan's friend, John, came up and told us the truth," Deb said. "Bless his heart, he'd come to the funeral too."

"John's here," Lizzy informed them.

"Yes, we saw him on our way in."

"So much has happened," Keegan said. "It's a very long story."

"Well, get to telling it," Deb said.

Keegan looked apologetically up at Elizabeth.

She smiled sweetly. "I'll go call the girls and get something to eat."

"Not alone," Keegan ordered.

"Okay, then I'll have John escort me."

Keegan nodded, his lips pressed together, his brow creasing.

Lizzy came forward. "What's wrong?"

He didn't answer.

"You're already hurting, aren't you?"

"A little. Like I said. I can handle it."

"If it gets too bad, call the nurse," she said. "They'll be mad at me for turning it off, but I guess I can handle that."

"I'm beginning to believe you can handle anything," he said. "Kiss me goodbye."

She did.

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When he first opened his eyes he couldn't remember where he was. Then it came back in bits and pieces. His buddies had escorted him and Elizabeth home to the *Pine Forest Inn*. They'd moved his little family out to one of the two-bedroom cottages. The girls had been situated in one bedroom, using two trundle beds with the youngest twins sleeping together in one bed. It was tight, but would do until he could build Elizabeth a home worthy of her.

Looking around the room he occupied, he had to smile. Five tiny blonde heads appeared over the edge of his bed and five pairs of big, blue eyes opened wide as he smiled at them.

"Well, hello there, my little angels," he said softly.

"Hi, Mr. Mike," Heather said. "We missed you. Mommy told us you got hurt again."

"Yes, I did."

"I saw it on TV," Rose said. "Some bad people hurt you and you got cut with a knife."

Keegan frowned. "Does your mom know you saw it on TV?"

She looked down. "No. I was supposed to be in bed, and Mommy was gone with Mr. John and I was scared and I went downstairs to find Miss Jodi and they were watching TV and I saw you."

Sighing, he shook his head. "I'm sorry you saw that, Rose."

"I cried."

"Oh, sweetheart," he said softly. "I can't pick you up right now, but will you come hold my hand?"

She moved toward the head of the bed and took his hand.

"There, that's better," he said. To his surprise, he looked down to see his other hand being lifted by Lily. He closed his hand around hers.

"I missed you, Mr. Mike," Violet said from her place at the foot of the bed.

"I missed you too." He wiggled his foot at Daisy, who stood next to Violet. "You okay, sweetie?"

Daisy nodded her head. "I'm glad you came back. I was a good witch on Halloween."

He laughed. "A witch? You're so pretty, I can't even imagine you as a witch."

"A *good* witch," she said again, emphasizing the 'good' part.

"Good witches aren't ugly," Heather explained. "We don't believe in being bad witches. Mommy says we can't be anything evil for Halloween because we love Jesus. She says some stuff about Halloween is evil, but we go out and give good."

"Your mommy is very wise."

"I was a tiger," Rose said. "And Lily was a Yoda."

"Not *a* Yoda," Heather corrected. "Just Yoda."

"I can say it how I want," Rose argued, her chin lifting defiantly.

Keegan chuckled. "I bet you were an awesome tiger, Rose. What were you, Violet?"

"I was uh angel," she said softly. "Mommy said cuz I really am."

"She's right. And what were you, Heather?"

She shrugged, nonchalantly, as if it didn't matter to her what she'd been. "I was a cowgirl. Mr. Chaz says I'm a natural on a horse and I'd make a real good cowgirl." Her eyes lit up. "Will you watch me ride, Mr. Mike?"

The 'Mr. Mike' made him frown. Time to fix that. "Yes, I'll watch you ride very soon. Listen, ladies, I have to tell you something. It's really important."

All eyes stared at him quietly.

"When I told your mom my name was Mike, I was teasing her. I was pretending to be Mike, but my real name is Keegan."

"Keegan?" Heather repeated.

"Uh huh."

"Why were you teasing Mommy?" Rose demanded.

"Well, there were some bad men trying to get me and I didn't want them to know where I was, so I pretended to be someone else so they wouldn't find me."

The girls were silent while they tried to understand.

"Does it bother you that my real name is Keegan?"

"It's okay, isn't it?" Heather said to her sisters who all nodded solemnly. "We don't care if your name is Keegan."

Okay, Keegan thought. At least that's over with. Time to tackle the next hurdle. "Heather, do you remember when you said you didn't want me to ever leave?"

She nodded, her eyes wary of what he was about to say.

"Do you still feel that way?"

"Yes. I was worried that you wasn't coming back."

He smiled. "How about the rest of you? Do you still want me to stay with you?"

"Uh huh," they said together but he decided he needed to ask individually. "How about you, Daisy? Do you want me to stay?"

She nodded her head.

He tugged on Lily's hand. "How about you, Lily, sweetheart?"

She nodded, with a smile. Rose and Violet also voted 'yes.'

He smiled. "Well, good then, because, I'd like to stay with you."

"Forever?" Heather asked.

"Yes, Heather, forever." He and Elizabeth would sit down together and talk to them about getting married, so he didn't go any further.

Rose poked his arm. "You're in Mommy's bed," Rose said, her little eyebrows arched accusingly.

Keegan smiled at her as he quickly tried to figure out how to address the subject. "Ummm," he said, humming the word.

"It's okay," Heather said. "Mommy says she doesn't mind sleeping on the couch."

"Well, that's kind of her, but I mind. As soon as I get a little better I'm gonna sleep on the couch and she can have her bed back. But girls, I want to stay with you forever because, well, I really like your mom a whole lot. Actually, I love her and..."

"Do you wanna kiss her?" Violet giggled.

The others started to giggle, their eyes dancing in merriment.

He grinned. "Actually, yes I do."

"Do you wanna *marry* her?" Rose asked.

The girls burst out laughing as if this was a great joke.

Well, so much for waiting for him and Elizabeth to sit down with

them and tell them together. "I think that would be wonderful," he said.

"If you marry her then you have to be our daddy," Heather said, folding her arms across her chest.

The others quieted and turned to stare at him.

He swallowed hard. "Um, yeah, so, what do you think about that? Does that bother you?"

"Do you *wanna* be our daddy?" she demanded, not bothering to answer his question.

He had to smile. They were so much like their mother. Keegan thought carefully about his reply. He wasn't sure what would be the best answer. He wasn't sure if what he said here would have some sort of long-lasting effect, but all he could do was tell the truth. "I would love to be your dad," he said softly.

"Mine too?" Rose qualified.

He smiled. "All of yours."

"I want you to be my daddy," Heather said. "Cuz I love you."

He had to clear his throat. "I love you, too, Heather."

He looked around at all the expectant eyes. "And you too, Lily, and you too, Daisy, and you too, Violet, and you too, Rose." He drew a breath. "Where's your mom?"

"It's a secret," Heather said.

"She's not home?"

They shook their heads.

"She left you here with me?"

"No. She left us with Grams."

"Then where is Grams?" he asked.

"She sent us to ask you if you're hungry yet. She's making you some biscuits and stuff," Violet said.

"Oh, biscuits and stuff. Sounds good."

"Yeah. Grams is the best cooker in the whole world," Rose said.

"I like to eat all my food," Daisy said.

"Me too," Lily added.

"So, tell me the big secret. Where did your mom go?"

"We can't tell you," Heather answered, frowning at her sisters to make sure they didn't answer.

"Well, then, I guess I'm just gonna have to get up and find her myself," he said.

"Won't do you a bit of good," Miss Maddie said as she poked her head in the bedroom door.

"Hey, Miss Maddie," Keegan said. "I haven't seen you since right

after Jacob was born. I've missed you."

Maddie smiled sweetly. "Hey yourself, you handsome man."

"Can you tell me where Lizzy's gone off to?"

"No."

He frowned. "I understand it's a secret, but I don't want her going off alone."

"She's not alone. Now, are you ready to eat a little something?"

He sighed. "When you're doing the cookin' I'm always ready."

She smiled with pleasure. "I'll be back with your tray."

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"So, where is she?" Keegan asked, his eyes searching the room. It'd been days of all this secret stuff and he was growing tired of it.

"Just relax," John said. "She's gonna meet you here."

"You know I don't want her out alone."

"She's not alone. I give you my word."

A beautiful redhead approached the table. "Hello, John," she purred huskily. She bent down and kissed Jodi's cheek then moved around the table to kiss both Chaz and Lisa on the cheek. "Hey, Chaz, hey sis."

"Megan, you get more beautiful every time I see you," Chaz said. He turned to Keegan. "I'd like you to meet Keegan Tanner. Keegan, this is my sister-in-law and owner/operator of this snazzy joint."

Keegan stood slowly, extended his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Please, don't get up. It's a pleasure to get to meet you. Thank you, I mean, for you know, what you did."

He grimaced as he said the usual words. "Just doing my job."

Noticing his discomfort, she quickly changed the subject. "So, you're Lizzy's fiancé?" She turned to Lisa. "He's kinda cute."

"Ain't no 'kinda' to it," Lisa agreed.

"Where is my fiancé?" Keegan asked grumpily, apparently not liking the focus of the conversation.

John grinned at him.

Megan smiled. "You'll see her in a minute." She sauntered away.

They ordered drinks and appetizers. By the time the food and drink arrived, Keegan was at his wit's end. He downed his bourbon and looked around impatiently.

"Okay, I can't take any more. This is making me..."

"Ladies and gentlemen."

Keegan looked toward the small stage where Megan stood in front of a microphone.

"I'm very excited to introduce to you a new talent we discovered right here in Pine Forest. Please join me in giving a warm welcome to our own, Liz Anderson."

Keegan's jaw dropped open. He would've looked over at John, but he couldn't take his eyes off the stage. A gorgeous blonde, dressed in a long, tight, red dress with what appeared to be diamonds sprinkled over the bodice, walked shyly out on stage. The top of the dress was cut a little bit low, and he wasn't sure how he felt about that. She smiled that sweet smile that always tore him up and eased onto a tall stool with the mic in her hand.

"Whaddya think about that?" John leaned over and asked.

"I don't like that dress one bit," he said.

Jodi giggled. "Then I guess that makes it perfect."

He shot her a glare. Then he forgot everything because his Elizabeth began to sing. It was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard in his life. He'd always thought she sounded like an angel. If not for the scarlet dress, he would've imagined she'd just been sent straight from heaven to serenade them. The song was slow and sensual and the crowd's silence was proof that she was mesmerizing.

As the number drew to an end, John hit Keegan on the shoulder. "Whaddya think about that, bro? I mean, does she blow you away like she does me?"

Keegan turned his head to eye John and tried to speak, but his throat was clogged with emotion, so he merely nodded. Turning back, he watched as Elizabeth stood and replaced the mic in the stand. At first he thought she was finished, but she smoothed her dress, pressing her hands over her thighs, smiled sweetly and started on the next song. This one, a more lively number, had her body swaying. Her hips moved slightly to the music, her smile widened, and Keegan realized, she was having fun. His Elizabeth was having fun.

He remembered the night he'd asked her what her dreams were, what she wanted for herself. At the time she couldn't think of anything except getting by, providing enough for the girls. Well now, maybe she'd finally discovered she really did have desires and dreams. He smiled. She absolutely glowed. He could feel her happiness and that made him happy.

She sang two more songs before she took her final bow. Keegan grimaced as he pushed himself to his feet to go to the stage and escort her down. Less than a week out of the hospital, he still felt pain, but he didn't care. Hearing his angel sing had been a privilege. He moved

forward and got to her just as she took the last step down from the stage.

Keegan stepped in front of her. She smiled up at him. He brushed a stray hair back from her face. "You blew me away, Elizabeth," he said, his voice low.

"You really liked it?"

Snaking his arm around her waist, he pulled her against him. "Are you kidding me? You were fantastic. I had no idea you could sing. Not like that. You never told me."

She shrugged as she placed her hands on his shoulders. "I never thought much about it. I've always enjoyed singing and Lisa and Jodi convinced me I should do something with it."

"You were incredible. I mean, Lord, Lizbeth, you should be famous. You should make a record. You'd win a Grammy."

She laughed. "I think you're getting a little ahead, but I'm glad I have your vote of confidence."

"Oh, Lizbeth, you have me completely. I love you, and I am so proud of you."

They turned and made their way back to the table where Lizzy received many more pats on the back. Glancing toward Keegan though, she realized he was hurting.

"Ya know what?" she whispered in his ear. "I am so tired. I guess after all the strain of the past week, it's finally gotten to me. So, would you be really upset if we went on home?"

His eyes searched her face and he knew she was saying that for him. He was sure of it. He hadn't been able to fool her. And if he said he'd rather stay, her fun would be tarnished by her worry for him, so he had no choice but to agree.

Once they arrived at the little cottage, Lizzy thanked Miss Maddie for watching the girls and Keegan insisted on walking her over to the Inn. When he returned, he joined Lizzy as she peeked in on each sleeping angel.

"They're so sweet when they're sleeping," Lizzy said with a sigh.

"They have my heart," Keegan whispered. "When Jeff and I found the kids in that warehouse the night Jeff was taken, I wanted to get them out right then instead of waiting for backup. I kept imagining it being the girls in that room, frightened, crying, needing their mom. It made me crazy and it made it very hard for me to back off."

"I'm glad you feel that way about them. I think Bradley is probably very happy that you've come into our lives. I think he knows you'll

take good care of his girls."

"As I said before, I'll do my best to honor him, but make no mistake, Elizabeth, you're not his anymore. You belong to me."

She smiled. "I like it when you get all cranky."

"Whatever," he grumbled as he took her hand. "Elizabeth, I want to sleep with you."

"But..."

"I mean, actually sleep. I just want to be near you. I want to hold you. Can I do that? Please? The girls will be asleep."

She nodded. "Yes, yes, Keegan."

She left the bathroom door open a crack and he couldn't help it. He watched her wash her face clean of the heavy makeup and change. She was beautiful. She approached the bed in a soft, pink nightshirt and climbed in beside him.

Keegan grunted as he lifted up to turn his body toward her. He draped his arm over her waist. "This is great, isn't it?" he asked. "I mean, here we are, finally together, you're safe, I don't have to leave anytime soon, you don't have to go anywhere, and the girls are sleeping safely in the other room."

"It's wonderful," she said, tilting her face up to him.

He took what she offered without hesitation. His mouth moved over hers, firm, demanding.

"So, Keegan, I have another surprise for you," Lizzy said softly.

"You do?" he asked, smiling at the apprehension in her eyes. How bad could it be?

"Um hm, but I'm a little afraid to tell you."

"You don't ever have to be afraid of me, Elizabeth. Surely, you know that."

She sighed. "I'm not afraid of you. Just unsure of your reaction."

His brow furrowed. "Maybe you'd better just spit it out."

"Okay, well, um, you know the engagement ring you bought me?"

"Yes. Did you lose it? Because I think I'll be upset about that," he teased. "I may have to sit you in the timeout chair."

She giggled, held her hand up for him to see. "No, I didn't lose it."

"Then what about it?"

Eyeing the ring, she smiled. "It's perfect."

He grinned. "I'm glad you like it, but I don't understand. Why would you be afraid to tell me that?"

"What I mean is, you don't have to change a thing. My fingers are a little swollen so you don't have to get it resized. Not yet anyway."

"Okay, no problem, we can wait on that. We'll just change the six diamonds to five whenever you want to get it resized."

"No, you don't have to do that. I'm trying to tell you, it's perfect."

"But the five diamonds around the larger diamond, they represent your kids and..."

"That's right—and you don't have to change it."

His brow furrowed. His eyes grew large. "You're not telling me..." He stopped and sat straight up, gasping at the pain as he did. "Are you saying you're pregnant?"

Her lips pressed together. "I think I am. I'll know for sure soon. Are you upset?"

He sighed. "No, not with you anyway, but I am with me. That day in the hospital, I mean, protection was the last thing on my mind. And that night at the motel, I wasn't thinking. I'm sorry. I should've been more responsible."

She frowned. "Don't you want to have a child, Keegan?"

"Well, I suppose. I mean, yes, of course, one day, but asking you to have another child would be extremely selfish of me."

"I love you, Keegan, and if I'm pregnant, then I'm *glad* I'm carrying your child."

"You are?"

She smiled. "Yes. How could I not be? It's like the ultimate gift I can give to you, and it's a gift for me too. I'm not sorry. Not one bit."

He thought carefully, realizing he could've hurt her feelings just now. "So, you *want* to have my baby?"

"With all my heart."

"You're sure you don't mind?"

"I don't mind, Keegan, and it wouldn't matter if I did mind, I don't believe in killing babies."

"Neither do I."

She smiled. "That I know!" She placed her hand protectively over her stomach. "Oh, Keegan, we are so very blessed."

He sighed and smiled. "Yes, we are, Lizbeth. Six children! My mother's gonna go ape over this."

Lizzy laughed. "Then it's gonna be really fun telling them when we go up for Thanksgiving."

"Oh, man. Lizbet, we're gonna have a baby!"

"Maybe, well, probably. I haven't missed my time yet."

"Oh, then how do you know?"

"Well, I've already been having some morning sickness, and I'm

swelling. My breasts are sore and getting bigger. And, well, I've had five babies, so I just know how it feels."

He moved close and placed his hand on her belly. "There's a baby in there. Our baby." He looked up into her eyes. "Don't cry."

"I'm sorry. I'm just so happy."

"Me too, Lizbet. Me too."

She sniffed. "And so, my love, that brings me to the next problem," she said timidly.

"Dare I ask?"

She moved closer. "Lie down. I can see you're in pain and I can't talk to you while you're suffering."

He grinned at her. "Yes, ma'am." He lay flat on his back while Lizzy moved close and peered down at his face.

She stroked his cheek. "Okay, so, because I'm pregnant, I want to either get married pretty soon, before I'm a giant whale, or wait until after the baby is born." Her lips pressed tightly together while she waited for his answer.

"Elizabeth, I'd marry you tonight if it were possible. We don't have to wait. Unless of course, you want to. I mean, women, they sort of like to do it up big, right?"

"I don't really care about all that. I just don't want to be a big, fat, prego when I marry you."

Playing it safe, he made no comment on her comment. Thankfully, she went on.

"I mean, I'm already ashamed because I had sex when we weren't married. I don't want to be so brazen as to parade myself in front of everyone in that state, ya know what I mean?"

He let her words sink in. "I am so sorry, Elizabeth. If I hadn't tried to end our relationship, you wouldn't have felt the need to come to me in the hospital."

"Don't blame yourself. I made a conscious decision to come and seduce you. It was my way of fighting for you."

"Still, you wouldn't have had to do that if I hadn't been stupid. Sweetheart, maybe we can, you know, like, do some praying together or something, and like, ask God to forgive us. I can't imagine that He could stay mad at you for too long."

She touched his face. "I think that is one of the kindest things you've ever said to me. I didn't think you believed in God."

He shrugged. "I didn't think so either, until you came along. Still, even then I had questions. And then, I met Ricky Kino when Jeff was

in the hospital. It was so strange, Elizabeth. Like, out of the blue, Ricky Kino felt inclined to tell me stuff, like, stuff that answered all of my questions. It was amazing. He said God pressed him to say the things he said to me. It really opened my eyes, and I guess my heart. And then, you showed so much faith when you told me how you just knew all that stuff in D.C. was gonna work out. I believed you because of your conviction. And you know, John has always preached to me and the guys. He must've been pretty frustrated with us. But I think I'm beginning to understand. It's like God is waking me up."

Lizzy smiled. "Our God is amazing. He loves us. He loves YOU. Like I said before, I think you are one of His warriors."

"And you, my sweet Elizabeth, must be one of His angels."

She sighed. "Yeah, an unmarried pregnant angel."

"Again, hon, I'm sorry."

She shook her head. "I knew what I was doing."

"Yeah, I know you think you knew what you were doing."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He changed the subject completely. "Lizbet, what kind of wedding do you want?"

She thought a minute. "Oh, well, let me think. I mean, I don't know what kind of shape we're in financially. We need to get the house on the market and maybe it will sell quickly and..."

"Uh, I guess I need to let you in on some important information, Liz. Money is not a problem, sweetheart. I made good money at the bureau and lived on practically nothing for years because I was working undercover. Most of my earnings went straight to an account that my father handled. He is a futures genius. I'm set. We're set. And my parents are rollin' in the stuff."

"You mean you're rich?"

He smiled. "I mean, money is not a problem. Whatever you want, it's yours. Big wedding? Big honeymoon? You got it. Anything you want, Elizabeth, for you or the children, there is no problem."

"I had no idea. Wow, it's like I hit the lottery." She gasped, covering her mouth. "I didn't mean that like it sounds. It's just that..."

Keegan laughed. "It's just that you've always had to struggle. I understand that. I feel relieved to be able to give you and the girls everything you need or want."

Lizzy sighed thoughtfully. "It *would* be so nice to buy a Christmas present and a birthday present for each of them without worrying about how I'm gonna do it."

"And their birthdays are all around Christmas, aren't they?"

"Yes. Violet and Rose were born *on* Christmas day. Heather was January tenth, and Lily and Daisy were born December nineteenth."

"Wow. All within a few weeks," he said. "And our littlest one, it'll be due when? Do you know yet?"

"I haven't been to the doctor yet, but I'm thinking sometime at the end of June or maybe early July."

"Well then, I guess I'd better get to building our house so we can be all moved in way before the baby comes."

"Build a house? You're gonna build us a house?"

"Well, of course. I mean, it's a little crowded in this tiny little cottage, don't you think?"

"Do I get to help decide what the house looks like?"

"Of course." He looked up at her glowing face and smiled. She was like a kid in a candy store. "Are you happy?"

"I'm so happy I think I might burst."

"Elizabeth, I've wanted to make you happy for so long now. I'm happy you're happy." He sighed contentedly. "So, back to the wedding. I was thinking we may as well put it smack dab in the middle of everything else. What about New Year's Day?"

Her eyes lit up. "Really?"

"You like that idea?"

"Oh, yes. It's not too far away, but it still gives me time to plan. And how perfect to start a new life on the first day of the new year."

"It will give you about eight weeks to plan. I'm sure Jodi and Lisa are gonna want in on that and if you don't mind, my mom and sisters would probably like to help."

"Of course I don't mind. I really liked your mom when I met her in the hospital. We're gonna get along just fine."

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Psalm 34:10

"The young lions suffer want and hunger; but those who seek the Lord lack no good thing."

Chapter Seventeen

Her wedding day dawned crisp and clean. The grass crunched underfoot from the frost as Miss Maddie made her way out to the car, loaded with serving platters and cooking utensils. She was headed to the community church to get a head start on the rest of the wedding party.

The wedding itself would not take place until five in the evening. Lizzy and Keegan had decided to make it a late wedding to give people time to recover from celebrating New Year's Eve the night before. Originally, it was to be held at the Inn, but as the guest list grew, they moved it first to the church on the corner and finally to the large community church in town, which was just fine with Miss Maddie because the church boasted an industrial-sized kitchen.

The reception would also take place there, in the large gym. For the past two days, Lizzy, Keegan, John, Jodi, Lisa, Chaz, several of Miss Maddie's friends and Keegan's parents and sisters had been rushing around magically turning it into a ballroom.

Now, Lizzy had to manage this morning alone because John had whisked Keegan off to whatever it was men do on the morning of their weddings, and Jodi and Lisa would be tied up at the church until after lunch. Sometime in the afternoon, Jodi and Lisa would be back to help dress the girls and Lizzy herself.

On her own for now, Lizzy fed the girls their lunch and enjoyed a long discussion with them about their thoughts on their new, very soon-to-be stepfather. Lizzy was happy to find there was no trepidation. Only the normal hopes and dreams for a happy family life, which included visions of piggyback rides, trips to the circus, coming with Heather to school for show-and-tell, and bedtime stories every night. After a huge giggle party, Lizzy forced them to lie down and take a nap. Now, it was time for herself. She took the opportunity to bathe and pamper herself with lotions and creams. She even painted her toenails which in her mind was a silly thing to do, but Jodi had convinced her it was part of the ritual.

Once the girls woke from their naps, they were bathed and their clothes laid out, but Lizzy was experienced enough to know not to let

them get dressed until right before they left for the church. Instead, she sat them down in the tiny front room and turned on the television. Lizzy was surprised she was so nervous about how the girls looked. Then she realized she was nervous about everything really. Maybe it was because Keegan's recent trials had garnered so much attention and the guest list had become quite large.

Celebrities Ricky Kino and Breanna Adams would be attending, along with their little boy, Eric. Jason Lee and his wife, Angel, and their daughter, Kimmie would also be in attendance. Keegan's buddies, Brayden, Tristan and Kaleb were here along with Jeff Davis. Some of Keegan's old FBI friends would also be attending. Then there were Keegan's parents and sisters and their husbands and children along with a huge extended family of aunts, uncles and cousins. Jodi thought it would be a good idea to invite a few of the townspeople, like Heather's new teacher and the pianist who accompanied Lizzy when she sang. Then there was Lisa's family, like Megan and her parents and Chaz's parents and two sisters and his younger brother Tyson, who was the deputy sheriff. Then, of course, there were Maddie's friends who were helping with the preparations. And then others were invited to keep small-town feelings from being hurt and next thing they knew there were hundreds attending their wedding.

And the gifts. Good grief, Lizzy had never seen so many gifts. It was enough to open her own home and garden store. Once the parents of the kids Keegan had rescued got word of the wedding, the gifts started to arrive. They were everywhere. Stacked in corners. Under the dining room table. Under beds. In closets. Not to mention the bridal shower. Lizzy felt guilty for receiving so much. Especially just after Christmas, where Keegan and his family had gone a little crazy buying gifts for her and the girls.

Just the thought of Keegan brought a smile to her lips as she faced herself in the mirror. He made her feel so calm. She'd felt so overwhelmed, but he'd taken care of business quickly and efficiently. He'd hired a moving company to clean out the house and a realtor to sell it. They'd been told it needed some work in order to get a good market price so he'd hired a contractor. Once the work was complete, they had four offers at the first open house. The house was sold and the new owners had moved in before Christmas.

Before the sale, Keegan had suggested they take the girls up to get a last glimpse of the only home they'd ever known and for Lizzy to say goodbye to the house she'd grown up in. There had been some tears,

but all in all, it had been a cleansing time that ended peacefully. They'd spent Thanksgiving with his family up in Tennessee. That had been an adventure. His parents and sisters and their families adopted her and the girls as if they'd known them all their lives. Lizzy had never known such closeness, such camaraderie, and such commotion. It was a blast. The girls were spoiled and then once everyone learned Lizzy carried Keegan's child, they spoiled her even worse.

The moment they returned from Tennessee, Keegan began his new job with Jason. They'd decided the office in Atlanta could be moved a little farther south, so Keegan would only have a short drive to work. They would build an easily accessible facility just off the interstate. Keegan divided his time between giving his new job his absolute best and giving his new family the same. Every chance he got he took Lizzy Christmas shopping for the girls. It was the best gift he could ever have given her, Lizzy thought, to be able to shop for her children without a worry in the world.

With Keegan so busy, Lizzy had taken care of most of the wedding details along with her two newest, best friends, Jodi and Lisa. Add Keegan's mom and sisters and there had been nothing left for Lizzy to do except get her and the girls bathed, which was now done. Even the dressing would be accomplished with help from Lisa and Jodi. Standing in her slip and semi-petticoat, she held the white confection that was her dress up in front of her.

It looked like a gown a fairy princess would wear. It had long billowy sleeves and an empire waist. The waistline and hem were encrusted with seed pearls. The dress spread from the high waist in a froth of the same billowy fabric as the sleeves. A pearl tiara held the long, delicate veil that would trail behind her. She would carry a bouquet of red roses and baby's breath.

Even more charming than the bride's dress, at least in Lizzy's mind, were the dresses for the flower girls. There would, of course, be five tiny flower girls, all dressed in lacy, white dresses with long, red velvet sashes and carrying white baskets tied with scarlet ribbons, filled with red rose petals. Each little girl would have her long blond curls held back with her very own princess tiara. When they had tried on the ensemble, Lizzy had cried.

Lizzy had a matron of honor, Jodi, and three bridesmaids, Lisa and Keegan's two sisters. They would wear matching red velvet gowns. The men would don black tuxes with a single rose for a boutonniere. John was Keegan's best man, with Tristan, Kaleb and Brayden his

groomsmen. Jeff had been given the special honor of giving Lizzy away, since she had no one on her side of the family. Jeff had been humbled by the request. Last night at the big New Year's Eve party, he'd told her that being entrusted to escort Keegan's bride down the aisle was such a privilege, he couldn't be more honored.

Lizzy sat on the bed and sighed. Her life had become a fairy tale. Lying back on the pillows she remembered everything she'd experienced from the moment Keegan had come into her life. Her eyes shut as she replayed the events in her mind and she drifted off to sleep.

She was awakened suddenly. At first she thought Heather had come in to wake her, but the hand over her mouth was too big to be a little girl's. For just a moment she thought it was Keegan sneaking in before the wedding, but no, something was wrong. It wasn't Keegan.

Wide awake now, Lizzy drew in a breath to scream and realized that was why he'd placed his hand over her mouth. She started swinging her fists, but didn't seem to be doing any damage.

"Shh," he whispered.

Her stomach turned. It was the same thing he'd said that day.

"Calm down and be very quiet." His hand pressed harder against her mouth. "Those kids are sure being good in there watching TV. If they come in here to see why you're making so much noise I'm gonna have to hurt them."

Eyes wide with terror, Lizzy shook her head madly. Getting her bearings, she realized the window to her room was wide open. The curtains blew back in the cold breeze. She began to tremble, more from fear than cold.

"So, you're gonna be quiet?"

She nodded.

He took his hand from her mouth and immediately gathered both her wrists in his steely grip, pulled her arms up over her head and held them there with one hand.

"So, you're getting married today, huh?" he said quietly.

She opened her mouth to speak but he stopped her with a look.

"Uh, just nod your head, but you don't have to answer that question. It was rhetorical."

He leaned down to kiss her but she jerked her head to the side. "You are one fine lady." He grinned at her. "I'm gonna give you a wedding day to remember. A nice wedding gift just for you."

She began to fight, but her struggles were futile against his strength.

"Oh, yeah, it's gonna be good," he whispered.

He was all dressed up as if he were attending the wedding. He'd probably been walking around all day, blending in, just waiting for his chance to get to her. "Why are you doing this?" she whispered.

"I told you before, nothing personal. I was hired to do a job and I intend to do it."

"Who hired you?"

"An old friend. He's gonna fix me up. Make things right for me."

Forcing herself to speak softly, she tried to reason with him. "If you're talking about Brian Cantrell, he's lying to you. He's in jail. He can't even make bond. No one is helping him out and he certainly can't help himself. He has no money and no way to get money."

He grabbed her face. "Shut up. You don't know what you're talking about. He's got assets."

"He has nothing."

She shrank back as he raised his hand to strike her, but he stopped himself. Thinking she may have made some headway she persisted. "You're doing this for nothing. You don't owe him anything and he has no intentions of helping you out."

"Shut your mouth," he breathed as he pulled a knife and pressed it against her throat.

Instant terror caused instant obedience. Smiling, he slid his hand down to lift the long petticoat she wore.

"Miss Jodi!" the girls cried.

Lizzy heard the front door close and then heard her daughters talking a mile a minute to Jodi.

The man cursed as he quietly folded the knife and rose off her. "One day, I *will* get this done." He dove out the window.

By the time Lizzy struggled to her feet and ran to the window, he was nowhere in sight.

Hands shaking, she closed and locked the window and backed away. It was her fault. She'd opened the window earlier to get some cool air. As always when she was pregnant, she had hot flashes, but she hadn't locked the window back.

Turning, she caught her reflection in the mirror. She was pale. Her neck was slightly red from his beard, otherwise, she was okay, she thought. She murmured the words. "I'm okay. I'm okay."

Realizing she had a decision to make and it had to be quick, she tried to concentrate. The tears tried to come, but she pushed them back. No time now to feel sorry for herself. If she told Keegan what had just

happened, more than likely the wedding wouldn't take place. He and the others, Jason, Jeff, John, Chaz's brother Tyson, all of them, would be out hunting the guy down, and the day, their wedding day, would be ruined. She thought of all the people who'd come in for the event. Even celebrities. And what of Keegan's mom, and sisters and mostly, the girls? They'd all be crushed.

It would ruin everything just because this guy slipped into her room. He didn't really hurt her. He didn't accomplish what he'd obviously come to do. He scared her, yes, but she could get over that. And she could tell Keegan later, after the wedding. He'd be upset with her. She sank back down on the bed. Well, she thought, heaving a sigh. He'll just have to be upset. If she told anyone, it would ruin her wedding and then who wins? Certainly not her. No. There is no way she was gonna let this stop her perfect day. She'd made the decision just in time. Jodi opened the door and stepped in.

"Hi," she beamed, then frowned. "You okay?"

Lizzy smiled. "Yes. Maybe a little nervous." She rubbed the chill off her arms. "I fell asleep for a minute, are the girls okay?"

"They're being good, but they're so excited. Lisa is right behind me and she's gonna get them dressed and I, on the other hand, am assigned to help you get ready."

Lizzy smiled. "I'm all yours." She rubbed her hand over her neck.

"You need to stop that," Jodi said. "You're rubbing yourself raw."

Lizzy's lips pressed into a thin smile. "Sorry. Maybe a little loose powder will cover it."

"Okay, girl. Let's get you done."

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John and Chaz had already escorted Jodi and Lisa to the front of the church and taken their places. Lizzy smiled as the twins followed their big sister down the aisle. A murmur rose up from the spectators. Sighs and whispers of 'how adorable,' then laughter when Violet stopped and Rose gave her a push to get her going again. At the end of the line Lily was bending down to place each handful of rose petals neatly in little piles along the aisle. Just in front of her, Daisy's hands must've been sweating, because she kept stopping to peel a rose petal from her palm. Walking behind Heather, Violet began tossing her petals up over her head and Rose was telling her quite audibly to stop. Lizzy blew out a breath of relief when they finally made it to the front and Keegan's mother took charge of them.

The music changed, the witnesses rose and Jeff tugged on Lizzy's

arm, but she didn't move.

"Lizzy?" Jeff asked.

Lizzy didn't hear him. For a second she'd thought she'd caught a glimpse of the man who'd twice now tried to hurt her. She blinked hard, bending to see past a woman's big hat.

"You okay, Lizzy?"

She looked up at Jeff, her eyes wide. "Hm? Oh, yes. I, uh, thought I saw someone."

He smiled. "I see lots of someones. Are you talking of someone in particular?"

Lizzy's eyes scanned the pews. Nothing.

"Lizzy?" Jeff said softly.

She looked up at him, smiled nervously.

Jeff's brow furrowed. "Honey, is something wrong? Who did you think you saw? Someone not invited?"

Her heart was pounding. Had she seen Mike Abernathy, if that was his real name, sitting in one of the pews? It was probably her imagination. She swallowed hard, looked out over the crowd to the place she'd thought she'd seen him. She didn't see him now.

"What's wrong, Lizzy?" Jeff whispered. "Keegan is looking worried. He probably thinks you're having second thoughts," he said with a soft laugh. When she didn't respond he placed his hands on her shoulders. "Lizzy, we're supposed to be walking down the aisle now. Is there someone here that's upsetting you?"

Lizzy looked up into his eyes. "You're very observant, aren't you?"

"I'm trained to be. Tell me the problem. We can stop this whole thing right now."

"No!" She breathed hard. "No, I think I'm just being nervous. Really. Okay, I'm better. Let's go." This time she tugged on his arm.

Frowning, he escorted her down the aisle, noting the wary look in her eyes and the way she looked from side to side, a false smile plastered on her face. Something was not right. He left her at the altar and instead of having a seat on the first row as he was supposed to do, he turned to stand off to the side, his back against the wall, his eyes scanning the crowd.

His strange actions did not go unnoticed by the other professionals in the room and their guards were immediately up. Jason Lee acted on his instincts and discreetly left his seat, moving slowly along the wall until he reached the back of the church. His eyes scanned each guest,

but he didn't see anyone out of the ordinary, or anyone that might possibly be associated with the organization Keegan had busted. No men between the ages of twenty and forty sitting by themselves, no one dressed inappropriately. So what had ruffled Jeff's feathers?

Jason stepped into the outer foyer. There was no one there. Then a screeching of tires caught his attention and he quickly shoved open the church doors in time to see a black Ford pickup fishtail down Main Street, turn abruptly around the next corner and disappear.

"Is there a problem?" a voice asked Jason from behind.

Jason turned to see the man he'd been introduced to as Tyson Stewart, Chaz Stewart's younger brother.

"I'm a deputy sheriff. I can help," he explained further.

"Can you get an APB out on a late-model black Ford F-150? I didn't get a tag number."

Tyson pulled out a cell phone. "BOLO for a black Ford F-150, tag unknown, detain on suspicion of..." He stopped and motioned to Jason to fill in the blanks.

Jason thought quickly. What could he say? Crashing a wedding? "Let's try attempted rape. Armed and dangerous."

Tyson finished his call then pocketed his phone.

"Could be I've overreacted," Jason said. "But something scared Lizzy right before she walked down the aisle. A few months ago some guy tried to rape her up in *Tyler Springs*. It wasn't random. He'd been hired to hurt her in retaliation for Keegan bringing down the bad guys."

"Yeah, I heard about that," Tyson said.

"Right, so, Keegan believes it's all over. The guy tried and failed and the man who'd hired him hasn't been out of jail and has no assets to bargain with. Still, maybe the guy is still hanging around. I mean, Keegan has been pretty good about not letting Lizzy go off anywhere alone, so if he's been trying to get to her, he hasn't had a chance. I don't know if he's tried. It could be paranoia on my part."

Tyson shrugged. "Well, Mr. Lee, I think better safe than sorry. We'll know something shortly."

"Thanks," Jason said, offering his hand.

As they shook hands, they heard music begin and they knew they'd missed the ceremony. Keegan and Lizzy were the first to exit the chapel. Keegan's eyes met Jason's immediately. Jason's eyes cut to Lizzy and back to Keegan. He moved forward.

"Take care of your wife, we'll talk later," Jason said quietly. He leaned toward Lizzy. "Let me be the first to kiss the bride." He kissed

her cheek softly, then turned to Keegan. "Congratulations, man. You're a lucky dog."

"That's daawwg," down here in the south, John drawled as he and Jodi joined them. He leaned down and kissed Lizzy then clapped Keegan on the back. "Congrats."

"Thanks."

"Okay, so, Lizzy," Jodi said. "The two of you are supposed to head through the breezeway to the reception hall for the reception line. Lisa's got the girls. Let's go."

Lizzy smiled up at Keegan. "You heard the drill sergeant," she said as she pulled Keegan toward the gym.

He stopped her, tilted her face up to him. "Are you okay?"

She leaned forward, resting her forehead on his chest. His arms came around her, holding her close. "I am now," she sighed.

He blew out a breath of relief. "We're married now," he said softly. "Aw, Elizabeth, I can't believe I can be so lucky."

"Blessed, and I feel the same," she said. "Come on, we need to go."

The reception line seemed to take forever. Lizzy's feet and back were killing her. The girls were getting antsy. Lizzy was grateful when Keegan knelt down beside them and told them to count twenty more people and then they were free to go. Finally, the people stopped coming and Lizzy was quickly escorted to a chair by her husband. Kneeling down in front of her, he removed her shoes and rubbed her feet and legs.

Lizzy's eyes closed in ecstasy. When he finished, he put her shoes back on her feet and went to get her some food. And so it went during the course of the evening, Keegan taking care of Lizzy's every need, as they ate, partied, danced, and socialized. The girls were running around, playing, charming everyone they spoke with while the elder Tanners did their best to keep up with the girls.

They'd already thrown the bouquet and garter and cut the cake when the band stopped playing. Lisa took the mic and explained to everyone what a treasure they'd found in Lizzy with her beautiful voice, and suddenly everyone was begging Lizzy to get up and sing. She'd refused several times when Keegan leaned over and whispered a simple, "please, for me," in her ear.

They applauded as she finally approached the stage, her accompanist at her side. Keegan nodded at a man who'd been sitting quietly unnoticed in the corner with his beautiful wife, their six-year-

old daughter and three-year-old son.

Lizzy sang the first song Keegan had ever heard her sing. He was so proud. Ricky and Bree approached him during the song, Rick holding his small, sleeping son against his chest.

"Wow, she really is as good as you said," Bree exclaimed.

"She's fantastic, isn't she?" Keegan answered.

"She is, and I can already tell Toby is impressed," Ricky said, glancing over at him.

"I hope your little surprise doesn't backfire on you," Bree said.

Keegan grimaced. "Me too. I don't think she likes secrets very much, unless she's the one keeping them." The song drew to an end and Keegan moved forward and took the mic from his wife. "Thank you, Elizabeth," he said into the mic. "And now, I have a big surprise for you. I snuck a special guest into the wedding for the sole purpose of hearing you sing."

Lizzy frowned.

"Everyone, please welcome, Toby Nash."

The place erupted. Lizzy's mouth fell open. "Seriously?"

Toby came forward, shook Keegan's hand, took both Lizzy's hands in his and kissed her cheek. He took the mic from Keegan and looked out to address the crowd.

"I haven't known Keegan very long. I got to know him back in October when I helped Ricky organize a campaign to help him. He asked me to come here and, as he put it, listen to an angel sing. I think you'll all agree, Lizzy is amazing."

"Yeah and she can sing too," one of Keegan's drunk buddies called out amidst gales of laughter.

"She can most definitely sing," Toby agreed. "I'd like to offer her an opportunity to cut a demo, see how that goes, and maybe even put her on my new label. Whaddya say, Lizzy?"

She wiped tears from her eyes. "I can't believe this."

"Believe it," Keegan said.

"Thank you, Keegan."

"You did it, Lizzy. You're the one who's put so much work into it. Now you reap the benefits. That's how it works."

"Thank you." She looked up at Toby, taking in his slightly scraggly black hair, his gorgeous blue eyes and sexy smile. "And thank you," Lizzy said sweetly. "I can't believe *the* Toby Nash is at my wedding."

He shrugged. "I'm just regular people. Ask my wife. Anyway now,

I've got one more thing to do. I'd like to sing for you and for your guests and if you don't mind, for my wife. Today is our anniversary too."

The applause and whistles and cheers were almost deafening.

Toby motioned for his wife, Caroline, to come forward. She was a beautiful woman, with soft blond hair and big brown eyes. She was co-director of the New York School of Dance, but was most known for her choreography on TV's Celebrity Dance. She and Toby had a drama of their own to go through back when they first started dating, but they'd made it through.

Toby reverently took Caroline's hand and ushered her to a chair next to Lizzy. He brushed a soft kiss over her lips before he backed away and took up his guitar. One of Toby's band mates seated himself at the piano. Then the room became very quiet as Toby sang his old hit, 'Four Days,' for both the newly married couple and also for his own wife of seven years.

Keegan watched as his new wife made goo-goo eyes at Toby Nash. Oh, well, he thought, he'd brought that on himself. Thank goodness the man was happily married.

An hour later, the evening drawing to an end, Lizzy noticed Keegan and all his men, as she'd begun to think of them: John, Chaz, Tyson, Brayden, Jeff, Tristan, Kaleb, Ricky and Jason, standing in a corner, their heads together. The look on Keegan's face wasn't a happy one. She wondered if Jeff was telling him that she was uneasy just before she'd walked down the aisle. Her musings ended though when Keegan's father tapped her on the shoulder.

"Deb's gone with Lisa to take the girls and put them to bed."

"Thank you, Roger. You've both been such a help to me."

"You're our daughter now. We'll always be here for you, sweetheart. And Deb and I both are already so in love with those little angels of yours, we don't know what we ever did without them."

She sniffed. "Well, I don't know what to say. I've gone from being very alone in this world to having a large and loving group of family and friends. I'm so happy."

"Good, Lizzy. I'm glad you're happy, and you've certainly made my son happy, but listen now, you two need to get some sleep. Your flight to Cancun leaves early tomorrow."

"I know. But I gotta tell ya, I don't know if I'll be able to sleep. I've never flown before and I'm a little nervous. No, actually I'm downright scared," she said with a laugh.

He gave her a hug. "Everything will be fine."

"Dad," Keegan said as he approached. "Thanks for keeping Lizbet company for me."

"My pleasure, son. You take care of her. I think I like her."

"I will do my absolute best." He took Lizzy's hand. "I'm taking her back to the cottage in just a minute, but first the fellows and I have to speak with her."

Lizzy's eyes opened wide. "You do?" She looked over to the corner where the guys had been conversing a moment ago, but no one was there now.

"Yes. Don't worry," he said with a smile. "It won't take long."

Lizzy swallowed hard as he led her out of the gym and down a hallway. He stopped at the last door and opened it. It was a classroom. All the guys were there, sitting haphazardly in chairs and on desktops. Lizzy looked up at Keegan. He had a pleasant enough look on his face. Nevertheless, her heart raced and perspiration gathered on her brow.

John stood and offered Lizzy a chair which she accepted. Everyone was quiet, which made her more nervous.

Lizzy smiled. "Um, hey, guys, so, like, I feel like I've been called into the principal's office."

"No, it's nothing like that, sweetheart," Keegan said kindly. "Jeff told us you saw someone today who frightened you. Jason thought there might be a problem and caught a guy speeding away from the church during the ceremony. Tyson called it in. The police found a black truck on the side of the road, but it was abandoned. As it turned out it belonged to Mac Turner, an older gentleman who lives here in Pine Forest. He didn't even know his truck wasn't in his driveway. All that said, I, uh, we, were hoping you could tell us who you saw."

Lizzy drew a breath, her big, blue eyes gazing up at Keegan. "I'm, I'm not sure. I only thought I saw someone. He was there one second and the next he wasn't. It was probably only my imagination."

"Who? Who did you think it was?" Keegan spoke as gently as he could. He watched her. Lizzy was already twisting her hands together and biting her lower lip. She was so beautiful in her wedding dress. Long tendrils of hair fell around her face as the upswept style she'd worn had started to come loose. And she was also nervous.

"Lizbet?" he said again.

"I-I thought I saw him. You know..." She bit her lip again.

"The man who attacked you up at the house?" he asked softly.

"Yes." She bent her head and her eyes welled with tears when she

heard several softly spoken curses from the other men in the room.

Keegan's arm came around her shoulders. "It's okay, hon. Tell me, what made you think it was him?"

"I don't know," she lied. "It was a fleeting moment. I thought I saw him, that's all."

"Can you remember what he was wearing?"

"A dark suit. White shirt. Red and black tie."

Keegan's eyebrows rose. "You got all that in a split second?"

Lizzy rose, walked toward the row of windows. She knew she needed to tell him. She just didn't think it would be this soon. Still, she had to, didn't she? They shouldn't go on their honeymoon. The girls could be in danger and even though their new grandparents would be staying here with them, if something happened to them while she and Keegan were gone she'd never forgive herself.

"Elizabeth, talk to me."

She turned. "He came for me," she blurted out.

Keegan's blood pressure began to rise. "What do you mean, he came for you?"

She gasped for breath, her eyes darting from man to man. She hadn't thought she'd have to confess in front of all the guys. Yet they were all good strong men who wanted to help her, and it didn't look like she was gonna be able to get out of it. Swallowing hard, she took a breath. "Today, before I got dressed for the wedding, I fell asleep in the bedroom. When I woke up he was there."

"There where? In the room?" Keegan said, his voice getting louder.

"He was, he was..." She broke down sobbing and threw herself against Keegan's chest. "He was on top of me."

Keegan's eyes closed as he held her tight. He waited for her to quiet and bent his head close to her. "Did he rape you?" he asked softly.

She sniffed. "No. Jodi came and he jumped back out the window."

"Jodi knows about this?" John asked, incredulous.

Lizzy shook her head, the tears falling freely. "No, I didn't tell her."

"What did he do?" Keegan asked. "What did he say?"

"He said if I made any noise he'd hurt the children. He said he had a wedding present for me. He held me down, he, he started to, to touch me, and then he heard Jodi come in the front door and he went out the window. He told me he'd eventually get it done."

"Lizzy, why didn't you tell us?" John asked.

"Because she didn't trust me," Keegan answered, his voice bitter.

"No! That's not it, Keegan. Please, you have to believe me. I just didn't want my wedding day to be ruined. All the people, all the preparations, I just wanted to put it out of my mind."

"But Elizabeth, think about it, we might've been able to catch this guy," Keegan barked.

"Please, Keegan, don't be angry with me. I may have made the wrong decision. I'm sorry, but it seemed if I let him ruin the wedding then he wins. I didn't want him to win."

Chaz and John rose. "We're gonna go check on everyone."

Keegan took Lizzy by the arms and gazed into her eyes. There was so much pain there, he'd have to squelch his anger. He had no right to be angry. It was his fault she'd been assaulted. His fault she'd been targeted. She'd handled it the best way she knew how. She was an innocent. She looked up into his eyes and when she blinked more tears ran over her cheeks. "Okay," he murmured. "Okay, I'm not angry." He pulled her against his chest.

He sat and pulled her up onto his lap. When Lizzy lifted her head, they were alone.

"Elizabeth, tell me everything. Exactly what he said. How he touched you. Everything you can remember. There may be something that you think is inconsequential that could be important."

Cuddled in Keegan's lap, surrounded by his love, she went over every detail she could remember. And they did discover some new things. The man had a tattoo on his neck, a small four-leaf clover, and he had a tiny white scar on his upper lip.

Keegan took her home to their tiny cottage and spent their wedding night consoling her. They didn't go to Cancun the next day, deciding instead to postpone the trip until their first anniversary. Regardless, the elder Tanners stayed at the Inn declaring they weren't going to lose out on their time with their new granddaughters.

Bright and early the next day Keegan had a team dusting the room and window for prints. Several hours later, he got a call from Jason. There'd been a hit in the FBI database. The man's real name was Dennis Hanley. Funny how he'd use the same pseudonym that Keegan had used, Mike. He'd served time for felony assault and theft, and had also faced lesser charges of vandalism and solicitation. He hadn't been in touch with his parole officer for six months. Jason shot Keegan a picture over the computer.

Keegan studied the face, noting the thin scar on his lip, just like Lizzy had remembered, along with the clover tattoo. Keegan's mind went to what this man had done to Elizabeth. He'd put his hands on her. Struck her. Threatened her. Frightened her.

The FBI always gets their man, he thought. Only he wasn't FBI anymore, but he wouldn't let that stop him.

Keegan brought Elizabeth to the table where he'd set up his laptop and asked her to look at several photographs of different men, including Hanley. It took her only a few seconds to point to the correct picture. Jason was in touch with the FBI immediately and agents were dispatched to the man's last known address, which was in Virginia. Keegan was sure they wouldn't find him there. He was right.

Until the man was found, Keegan refused to leave Elizabeth and the girls unguarded. If he was unable to be with them then John or Chaz took over. And for the times they couldn't be with them, Jason had one of his own men on duty.

A few times over the next months, as winter moved into spring, Elizabeth thought she'd caught a glimpse of the man in shopping malls and other crowded places, but he was never caught and Lizzy was beginning to think she was imagining him out of paranoia. True, the constant vigilance was wearing on her along with her pregnancy and the stress was becoming debilitating.

Keegan did all he could to take the pressure off his new wife. He became a real father to the girls. The first time he'd had to discipline them, one would've thought it was the end of the world at the Tanner home. Once the girls realized they had to do as Keegan said, that they had to give him the respect he in turn gave them, they shaped right up, which was a huge load off Lizzy.

If only, Keegan thought, if only he could apprehend Dennis Hanley and get rid of the dark cloud that hung constantly over their family. So, instead of letting gloomy thoughts hover over the ones he loved, he focused on building their home, and loving his wife and kids.

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Micah 2:1-3

"Woe to those who plot evil on their beds and carry it out in the morning simply because they have the power to do so; God promises to plan disaster against them."

Chapter Eighteen

Keegan loved them. Oh, how he loved his new family. Every single one of those little girls and their mother. Completely and unconditionally. They made him smile. They made him laugh. They even made him cry. They made him want to be a better man.

His joy in having them gave him boundless energy which he put toward pleasing them in every way. From piggyback rides, to cooking dinner. From disciplining children to tickling tummies. And from long, sleepy talks with his new wife to longer bouts of making love. One of the biggest, and *the* most important change Keegan made in his life was daily prayer with his family, and attending church. His faith began to grow, and as it did he knew he would stay on this path, because God filled his heart with joy and peace and wisdom, and there was no going back once he'd seen the light. Life was a pleasure and he was grateful for every moment of every day.

The Georgia regional office of Ameritech was open and running. Keegan's new subordinates, a skeleton crew sent by Jason to help man the new facility, were well trained, which didn't surprise Keegan at all. Jason provided the best to his agents. Also important to Keegan was the amount of respect his new men showed him. Keegan vowed to earn that respect. His focus now was to recruit from the new region and send the new recruits to Jason for the intense Ameritech training.

In March, back on the home front, Keegan had begun the building of their home on the rear of the old Winstead property. Chaz talked Keegan into doing a lot of the work himself, vowing to help him every step of the way. Keegan had been a little "iffy" on the project until Chaz and Lisa invited everyone over to their house in the woods that Chaz had built with his own hands. It was a beautiful work of art and had Keegan ready to dive in.

The new Tanner house was only about a hundred yards from the front cottage that they'd been living in, which made it easy to work on early in the mornings before work and late in the evenings after work. There were eight cottages heading back running parallel to the rear grounds of the Inn. The house was just beyond that last cottage. There was a long drive that led to the new Tanner home. The cottages were

on the left side of the drive. On the right side of the drive was a large front yard, then the house and behind, a giant backyard that had actually once been the pasture behind the old Winstead property.

Keegan found it interesting, the story of the Winsteads. They were a brother-sister incestuous duo. The sister, who had more of a dominatrix personality, tried to kill Lisa Stewart. The brother, who had a paraphilic disorder, was killed by his sister. He was a perpetrator of DFSA, drug-facilitated sexual assault, on many girls in the town of Pine Forest, including Jenny Stewart, before she married Deputy Sheriff, Tyson Stewart. The duo had been responsible for the death of Chaz Stewart's first wife, Cari, and their toddler, Julie Stewart.

The Winsteads' land had been bought up by the Stewarts after all the drama, and they sold a large part of the back property to Keegan to build his house. Several times Keegan had complained to Chaz that the work would already be done had they hired contractors to do it, but in actuality, he appreciated the feeling of doing it himself, of building a home for his family with his own bare hands. He'd worried though, that he wouldn't be finished before the baby came. However, his worries had been unfounded. Chaz and John and several others in the close-knit town stepped in to help and finished the house in the nick of time.

Finally, June 14th, just two weeks before Lizzy was due to deliver their baby boy, moving day was upon them. Maddie had insisted everyone come over to the Inn for breakfast. They dined quickly on French toast, crisp bacon and fresh fruit salad and hurried off, anxious to get started on the day.

There wasn't much to move from the cottage. What had been salvaged from Lizzy's former life had been put in storage earlier and already been retrieved and taken to the new digs. Lizzy had already packed up their clothes and personal items from the cottage and headed over to her new home where she was busy ordering men about.

"Please, be careful with that table, guys, I don't want it scratched."

"Yes, ma'am," one of them mumbled.

In deference to her condition, no one dared to argue with her. Realizing her power, she gave a slight giggle. She knew they were scared of her. Rubbing her hands over her swollen belly, she nodded. As well they should be. "No, put the recliner there, please, and the sofa over here," she directed.

Once the furniture was moved in, and the men were busy putting beds together, Lizzy started in the kitchen, putting away new dishes

and small appliances and having a grand time playing house. Her dear new friends, Lisa Stewart and Jodi Appel, were busy hanging curtains and the girls were running in and out, though staying generally out of trouble. Lizzy was content to let them have their freedom until Daisy and Lily came in crying from a tiny little scrape on Daisy's knee.

Lizzy bent down to hug her daughter, using her thumbs to wipe the tears from her dusty cheeks. "Oh, my baby girl, you sure are dirty," Lizzy said sweetly. "Let mommy see the boo boo. Oh, that's not so bad, is it, sweetie?"

Daisy howled, which made Lily cry louder too. "Okay, okay. Mommy will fix it up. Shh, now. You must be tired, huh, sugar plum? I guess I need to feed you girls some lunch and put you down for a nap. We'll go back to the cottage for lunch and I'll fix you up first thing."

They howled even louder. Loud enough to have Keegan come down the stairs to see what the problem was.

"Everything okay?" he asked, winking at Lizzy and kneeling down in front of the tiny four-year-olds.

Daisy sniffed, drew a ragged breath. "I fell down. Look!" she cried pointing at the offending knee.

"Oh, my, that is bad," Keegan wailed. "Oh, no, I think we might have to take you to the hospital." He pulled out his cell phone. "I'd better call an ambulance."

Lily abruptly stopped fussing. Daisy's mouth closed and her eyes grew wide, while Lizzy tried not to giggle.

Keegan pretended to punch in the numbers. He placed the phone against his ear.

"I'm okay," Daisy said softly.

He pulled the phone away from his ear. "Are you sure? Cuz I can get the ambulance here in just a few minutes."

She rubbed the back of her hand under her drippy nose. "I'm okay, see?" she said pointing to her knee.

He looked closely. "Oh, I guess it's not as bad as I thought."

The tiny white-haired angels smiled timorously.

Lizzy brushed her hand over Daisy's hair. "They're tired. It's already lunch time and the little ones need a nap."

Keegan grimaced. "We don't have their beds put together yet. It's probably gonna be another hour at least."

"That's okay. I think I'm gonna take them back to the cottage, feed them there and try to get them to lie down." She yawned. "As a matter of fact, I think I'm gonna get in a little nap myself."

He moved forward, rubbed his hand over the small of her back. "You okay?"

She smiled. "If you're asking if I'm having any contractions, the answer is no. At least not any real ones. A lot of Braxton-Hicks though."

"Good, maybe you can hold off until we're good and settled. Besides, Mom and Dad won't be down until next week."

She smiled. "I'll try to hold on. Right now, though, I'm taking the girls to the cottage."

He shook his head. "Not alone. Let me see if the guys can do without me and..."

"No way. You don't leave them for a second. You know how I want things. I'll get Jodi and Lisa to keep me company. I'm sure little Jacob and Laynah are ready for lunch too. We'll all go down together. You boys need to take a break soon too."

"Don't you worry your little self about us, sweet Elizabeth. We'll be okay. And soon you'll have your new home all set." He wrapped his arms around her from the back and rested his hands on her belly. His head bent and his lips moved over the column of her neck. "I love you," he murmured.

"I love you, too." Sighing, she leaned back against his large body. "Thank you, Keegan."

He nibbled at her neck. "For what?"

"For everything. For coming into my life. For loving me and the girls. For building me this wonderful home." She looked around her. "It's an amazing house, Keegan. Look at this kitchen. It takes up half the first floor. Never in my wildest dreams did I ever think I'd have a beautiful, state-of-the-art kitchen like this. It's crazy. And the rest of the house is amazing. I mean, six bedrooms. What in the world?"

"Then you like it?"

"I love it. I love you."

He came around to stand in front of her, looked deeply into her eyes. "I loved you, Elizabeth, from the moment I laid eyes on you. Then I got to know you and I really believed you were an angel here on earth. You spoke so sweetly to your girls and to me. You were cheerful even though you had to be exhausted. You smiled even though there wasn't enough to eat. And when I selfishly wanted you, you gave yourself to me wholeheartedly and with so much passion, you blew me away. Every day, baby, I'm grateful for you."

Raising her chin with his finger, he leaned down and gently kissed

her. Smiling, he lifted his head and stepped away.

"Okay. Gotta get done. Go rest. I'll see you in a few hours. And take the women with you."

Lizzy gathered her forces. Jodi and Lisa were definitely looking forward to a break, but decided Lisa would take Jake and Laynah to the Inn, feed them and put them down for a nap there, since the cottage was so small. Lizzy, Jodi and the girls made their way back to the cottage.

"I can't thank you and Lisa enough," Lizzy said, as she spread slices of bread out on the counter.

"For what? Are you being silly again?" Jodi answered with a laugh. "We do what we want to do. I love dressing windows. Lisa loves anything to do with fixing up a place, be it home or hotel. We're having a blast. Besides, you're about to have a baby anytime now. We want to make everything perfect for you and your little one."

"You're the best friends anyone could have. You're the closest friends I've ever had."

"I find that hard to believe. Weren't you a cheerleader in high school? I'm sure you had lots of friends."

Lizzy shrugged as she scooped peanut butter out of a jar. "I never did fit in. I only tried out because Bradley was the big, popular, captain of the football team and he said I should. So I did. Believe me, no one was more surprised than me when I made the squad. Our senior year I was even voted Homecoming Queen. I'm not stupid, though. I realize it was all only because of him and the pull he and his family had on everyone else. Still, even as one of the elite, the girls never really accepted me. I went to all the parties because I was Bradley's girlfriend. Otherwise, I would never have been invited." She sighed. "But he loved me. That was real. He was a good man."

Jodi smiled. "So, how lucky are you to have been given two wonderful men in a lifetime."

"Pretty lucky," Lizzy agreed.

"Mommy, you said you'd fix my knee first thing," Daisy complained.

Lizzy looked down at Daisy and her twin, Lily. Daisy's indignant expression said it all. Lily's was one of horror. Lily had always felt the pain of her sister. Lizzy thought that possibly Lily's empathic tendencies acted as a magnifier because she was usually more upset than Daisy herself about anything Daisy suffered, from a stubbed toe to a sore throat. Thank goodness Daisy had never been hurt badly. "Oh,

I did promise that, didn't I?"

"I'll finish the sandwiches," Jodi volunteered. "You play nurse."

She took her daughter's hand and led her to a dining room chair. "Sit right here and I'll get the band-aids," she said. When she heard Lily sniff, she peered down at her daughter. "You want a band-aid too, sweetie?"

Lily shook her head.

"Then what is it, baby? You're just worried about Daisy?"

Lily nodded.

"Heather," Lizzy called. "Please come get Lily and take her to sit on the front steps and..." She bent close to whisper. "And keep her occupied until I fix up Daisy's knee, okay?"

Heather smiled conspiratorially as she held her hand out to Lily. After all, Heather was now a very grown up six year old. They went out the front door. Smiling, Lizzy made quick work of cleaning the small scrape on Daisy's knee and securing it with a SpongeBob bandage. She'd just helped Daisy down off the chair and turned to help Jodi get the sandwiches to the table when Heather came rushing back inside, her eyes wide as saucers.

"Mommy, there's a man outside and I don't know him and he's trying to talk to me and Lily won't come in."

Lizzy froze. "A man?" Her heart leapt into her throat. She rushed toward the door, Jodi right behind her. What she saw had terror ripping through her body. Dennis Hanley, her would-be rapist, held Lily's hand and was walking her toward the parking area. Jodi rushed past her, burst out the door.

Lizzy reached into her pocket for her cell phone and realized she'd left it at the new house. She dashed for the house phone, but realized she didn't know anyone's number, not even her new home number. She knelt down quickly in front of Heather. "Listen, baby. This is an emergency. Run as fast as you can to daddy. Tell him the bad man is here. Run, baby. Don't stop." She turned to Rose and Violet and Daisy. "Stay in this house. Do not come out this door."

Lizzy and Heather both exploded from the little cottage. Heather headed toward the new house. Lizzy headed to where Jodi stood braced and ready, as Hanley faced off with her.

"You're not taking her anywhere," Jodi was saying.

"I don't know who the hell you think you are you skinny little..."

"I'm the woman who's gonna kick your butt," she said calmly.

Lizzy swallowed. She knew Jodi was trying to entice him to fight

with her. Then he'd have to let go of Lily's hand, and to Lizzy's surprise, he did.

Lizzy inched her way around toward Lily.

"Come on, buddy. Let's see what you've got," Jodi said, egging him on. "Two times you tried to rape my friend. I'm thinking you failed because you couldn't get it up."

The man's eyes blazed hatred. He advanced toward Jodi. Lizzy made her way closer to Lily. Hanley swung at Jodi's head. She ducked and punched him in the face– twice.

Just a few more feet and she'd have Lily in her arms.

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"Daddy!" Heather started shouting as she neared the house and could see the men standing on the front porch. "Daddy," she cried.

Keegan stopped laughing at something Chaz had said when he heard the cry. He rushed down the steps to meet the hysterical girl. "What is it, baby? Is it mommy?"

Heather's head was bobbing up and down. "The man," she gasped. "The bad man..."

Keegan didn't wait for her to finish. He started running, John right behind. Chaz grabbed Heather and took off.

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Jodi laughed at the man. His nose was bleeding. "You're going down," she taunted, hoping that fighting with him would keep him occupied long enough for the men to get up here. He'd gotten in a few punches, but Jodi took it like a champ. She needed to keep it up. Out of the corner of her eye she saw that Lizzy had hold of Lily and was dragging her to the side. "Go inside," Jodi yelled.

Lizzy shook her head. "I'm not leaving you."

Jodi didn't waste time arguing because she would've said the same thing to Lizzy. She turned back to Hanley. "Is that the best you can do?"

Suddenly, he stopped and smiled. "No. I can do this."

He drew a gun from his waistband and pointed it at Jodi. Her eyes zeroed in on his finger as his muscles tensed to pull the trigger. Lizzy screamed. Jodi kicked out, hard and fast, connecting with his wrist. The gun went off. Jodi went down.

Hanley moved so quickly, he had Lizzy in his grasp in less than a second. Jerking her around toward him, he reached toward Lily.

"No!" Lizzy screamed, struggling to pull away from him. Stomping on his toe seemed to have no effect.

The man wrapped his arm around the small of Lizzy's back, pulling her and Lily up against his body.

"Sorry, babe, but it's not you I want anymore. I mean, look at you, you're big as a cow," he said, motioning to her belly. "But..." He jerked on Lily's arm. "I'll take the kid." Lily screamed in pain as his fingers dug into her tender skin.

Lizzy grasped his wrist, trying to pry his fingers from her daughter's arm. He slapped her with his free hand, but she didn't let that stop her from trying. She had to save Lily.

He leaned close to Lizzy's ear. "Let go, Lizzy girl," he said softly.

Her stomach lurched. She shook her head madly.

"You know, I thought about waiting around for the kid to be born and taking it. Brian would've loved that, but I've run out of time, so I'm taking this one."

Lizzy snarled like a lioness, grabbing his hair and pulling hard, causing his head to bend to the side. "You're not taking her anywhere."

"Oh, but I am," he growled. "Now let go."

"No! Never!"

Notwithstanding, when he placed his large booted foot against her abdomen and kicked she flew backward. Lily screamed as the man scooped her up and carried her toward the parking lot.

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They could see what was happening as they topped the small hill. They saw Jodi fighting with the man. They heard the gunshot and saw Jodi go down. Keegan didn't take time to look back at John, but understood the terror he must be feeling. They saw Hanley grappling with Lizzy and then Lizzy went down. They saw her rise again and run after Hanley, who'd reached his car and tossed the child inside.

Lizzy ran at the car and jumped toward the driver's side window. He slammed the car in reverse and backed up, tires squealing, Lizzy hanging out of the window. The car was thrown into gear. Keegan was flying across the yard. Lizzy was screaming. Hanley's fist plowed into her face just as he floored it. Lizzy landed hard on the pavement and rolled away, then came up again, attempting to run after the car.

She saw Keegan and pointed at the car. "He has Lily! He has Lily!"

Keegan had no time to waste. If he saw to Elizabeth, Lily could possibly be gone forever. He dove into his car and screeched out of the parking lot.

Pain. There was so much pain. Lizzy swayed and sank to her

knees, her eyes taking in the scene as if she were seeing it through the lens of a camera. John had Jodi cradled in his arms, his ear pressed to her chest. Heather stood by the front steps crying. Three little faces peered out the window of the cottage. Chaz was running toward her.

Lizzy looked up at him as he knelt beside her. "Is Jodi..."

"She's gonna be fine. Bullet grazed her head."

The tears came. She tried to get up, but Chaz pushed her back down. She gripped his hand. "Lily's gone," she cried.

"Keegan will get her back. He won't get out of the county. I've called Tyson. All roads are closed."

"He'll get her?" she whimpered, needing to be reassured.

"He will," Chaz said.

Lizzy struggled to get to her feet. "I've got to see about Jodi."

He held her down. "You're not going anywhere."

"But..."

Chaz shook his head at her, then glanced down toward the ground. Lizzy followed the direction of his gaze. She was sitting in a puddle of blood and what was probably amniotic fluid.

Lisa arrived, with several blankets. "Maddie's taking the girls to the Inn and ambulances are on the way," she said softly as she knelt by Lizzy. She reached out, touched Lizzy's battered, bloody face. "Hey, tell us what you're feeling, okay?"

"He took Lily," she whispered.

"I know, hon, but Keegan will get her back. I trust him to do that, don't you?"

Lizzy thought for only a second. "Yes."

"Right now, you have to take care of this baby for him, okay?" Lisa said gently.

Lizzy nodded.

"Think now, are you in any pain?"

She shook her head. "No. No more pain. I just feel pressure. Lots of pressure." Her eyes opened wide. "Oh, no, Lisa, that means the baby is coming. Oh no!"

Chaz took over. "Lizzy, you know I used to be a paramedic so I want you to trust me, okay?"

She nodded and gave a hysterical laugh. "I used to be a nurse, but I can't remember anything right now."

He chuckled with her, hoping to ease the tension in the air. They'd all give anything to see Keegan come driving back into the lot and getting out of the car with Lily in tow.

John carried Jodi, who was now conscious, over to Lizzy with the promise she would lie down beside her and wait for the ambulance. Once they arrived at Lizzy's side, they realized they were about to witness the birth of one tiny little Gabriel Tanner.

Chaz and John helped ease Lizzy down onto a blanket, while Lisa spread out another blanket beside Lizzy for Jodi. Jodi reached over and took Lizzy's hand. Suddenly, Lizzy let out a loud groan.

"Lizzy, I've got to see if the baby's crowning, okay?" Chaz said.

Lizzy nodded as Chaz removed her torn and bloodied clothing. Lisa draped another blanket over Lizzy's knees as Chaz bent to examine her. He looked up, his eyes meeting John's. "Okay, Liz, your boy is right there. He's not gonna wait."

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Keegan reached for the glove compartment and pulled out his gun. Why, he didn't know. He couldn't shoot out the tires. Lily was in the car and it wasn't as if the guy had strapped her into a car seat. Maneuvering around the light traffic on the highway that led out of town had been easy enough. He had the late-model Caddy in his sights. No way was he gonna lose it.

His mind flashed briefly to the scene of destruction he'd left behind. Dear Father, please let Jodi survive, he thought. Lizzy appeared shaken but okay. He hoped that was true. Refocusing on the task at hand, he gunned his engine and moved closer to the car. Glancing ahead though, he saw the roadblock. Apparently so did Hanley. The Caddy took a sharp left onto a dirt road.

Keegan smiled. He had him now for sure.

The Caddy went right. Keegan had no idea where they were headed, but he figured Hanley didn't either. For all he knew they would go flying off a cliff any moment. The dips and gullies in the dirt road were throwing both cars around in a crazy, haphazard fashion. Keegan's jaw tensed as he imagined little Lily being thrown around in the car. And then— it wasn't a cliff, but it still brought them both to a sudden stop.

A steel gate barred the road, one similar to the one Chaz used to block off the road when he'd run his cattle a few months ago. Apparently, Hanley thought he'd be able to run through it. The car had come to an abrupt halt, the airbags deployed. Keegan prayed Lily was okay as he sprang from his car.

In horror, he watched as Hanley's door swung open and he tumbled out of the car, landing on his backside. His fist was balled in

the back of Lily's shirt. He held a gun against Lily's head. Keegan swallowed hard. Lily wasn't moving. Her body hung limply in the air, flopping around like a rag doll when Hanley shook her in his rage.

"I'll kill her," Hanley threatened.

Keegan's gun pointed toward the man. The stillness came over him. The one that always came when he turned himself over to instinct. At that moment, four cop cars raced into the clearing, skidding to a halt. Their doors flew open and suddenly seven more men had their guns trained on Dennis Hanley. Deputy Sheriff Tyson Stewart moved slowly up to join Keegan where he took cover behind the door of his car.

"She looks like she's already dead," Keegan answered Hanley's statement calmly, hoping to make him give up.

Tyson glanced at Keegan. He'd gotten to know the man. Heard all the stories. He knew he had to trust everything he did and said now, because Tyson had no experience with something like this.

Hanley shook the child and she moaned softly. "Not yet, Tanner. It's all up to you."

"You got the shot?" Tyson asked quietly.

"I've got it. I'm just waiting for him to move the gun away from Lily's head. Just a fraction of an inch is all I need. Or I need him to look away for a second. Just one second."

Lily started to cry. Keegan pushed the sound out of his head and drew a breath. "I'm warning you right now, Hanley. Drop the gun and put the girl down or you die. That's the only warning you're gonna get."

"No, you drop your gun, Tanner or she dies."

"That's not gonna happen. You should know by now, I don't put my weapon down. Listen, Hanley, I'm gonna be fair and tell you that I really want to kill you. I'm really hoping you don't comply. It will make me just glow all over to get the chance to blow your freakin' head off. So, please, Hanley, do me a favor and make me have to do it."

Tyson watched as the man swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing. He glanced over at Keegan. His gun never wavered, his eyes were sharp, piercing, zeroing in on his prey. Tyson had no doubt that Hanley would soon have one of those black holes right in the middle of his forehead like so many others who'd crossed this man. They waited, ten, twenty seconds, and then miraculously, the man's face crumpled.

Keegan tensed. Then Hanley carefully set Lily on the ground, the

gun he held pointed in the air.

"Good decision," Keegan said. "Now hold the gun by the barrel."

The man complied.

"Place the gun on the ground, the barrel facing you," Keegan ordered as he moved from his place of cover and headed toward Hanley.

Tyson held his breath, worried the man would try something at the last minute, but it didn't happen. Within seconds, the cops had Hanley on the ground, searched and cuffed and Keegan held Lily in his arms.

He looked her over. She had a large bump on her forehead, but that was the only injury he could see. "Hey, baby girl," he said to her softly.

She buried her face against his chest.

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"You're not breathing," Jodi complained. "Breathe girl."

"I'm trying," Lizzy sobbed. "Did I say I wasn't in pain? I was mistaken. It hurts so bad."

Jodi lay beside her on a blanket in the parking lot where Lizzy had collapsed. She could feel the heat from the asphalt seeping up through the blanket, but she ignored it and squeezed Lizzy's hand. "You can do this, Lizzy."

Lizzy looked at her friend. "I want Keegan and Lily. I'm so scared."

"I know, sweetie. I know."

"Lizzy, the baby is right here. I'm a little worried about him. Let's go ahead and push him out, okay?" Chaz said, his voice gentle. "With the next contraction I want you to push." He looked up as John came back from the house with towels. "John, get behind her and help her to sit up a little."

John did as ordered.

The contraction came. Lizzy drew a breath and screamed as the pain tore through her. "Ooooohh, I want Keegan," she cried.

"There we go, you did it, Lizzy. Once more, push."

The baby's head appeared as Lizzy bore down with a feral growl.

"I hear the ambulance," Lisa said.

"They took their sweet time," Chaz complained.

The next contraction came and Chaz caught the baby boy in a large towel. They all breathed a sigh of relief as the child howled loudly. Lizzy began to cry as Chaz wrapped the little boy and placed him on his mother's chest just as two ambulances pulled up.

Chaz stepped out of the way as the medics knelt down to take care

of their patients.

Then, the miracle they'd all been praying for happened. Keegan's car pulled through the Inn's entrance escorted by Tyson in his sheriff's patrol car. There wasn't a dry eye around as Keegan made his way toward his wife, holding a beautiful angel girl in his arms.

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When Keegan entered the hospital waiting room he was taken aback. The room was full of people waiting for news that Lizzy, Gabriel, and Lily had all been given clean bills of health. Before he answered any questions he knelt down to put his arms around the four little girls who'd been waiting patiently to see their mom and sister and new brother. The girls, still feeling traumatized by what they'd witnessed, leaned against him, obviously needing his reassurance. Keegan spoke quietly to them.

"Hey, my sweet girls. Mommy is fine, angels. I'm here to take you back to her room now."

Heather sniffed. "What about Lily?"

"She's doing good. Really. You'll see."

"Is the baby out of Mommy's tummy now?" Rose asked.

"He's out and he can't wait to meet his sisters. Hold on just a sec and I'll take you back."

He rose and eyed the rest of the crowd. "They're all doing great," he said in answer to the inquiries that flew at him. "Lizbet looks a little worse for wear but she's gonna be okay. They did a scan on Lily and she's fine. There's a big bump on her head and she has some bruises on her arms and legs but she's good. Gabriel is..." He stopped to get control of his emotions. "He's perfect." He smiled. "I have a son."

John clapped him on the back as Jodi rose and hugged him.

Keegan held Jodi out at arm's length to look into her eyes and scrutinize her face. "You're okay?"

She nodded. "Yes. They scanned me too. I'm good."

"She has a concussion," John corrected. "But she wouldn't let me take her home to rest until she made sure your family was good."

Keegan smiled down at her. "What you did, Jodi, I mean, hell." He looked away, then back at the small woman. "You saved their lives, you know. Lily's for sure. You could've died. But if you hadn't fought with him, he would've been long gone with Lily. I, uh, I can't thank you enough," he said, his voice rough with emotion.

"My Jodi is quite a girl," John said proudly, pulling his wife tightly against his side.

"I agree."

"Oh, stop, you guys. I'll say the same thing you always say, I did what I had to do. No biggie. I was taught by the best."

Keegan glanced at John. "I'll agree to that."

John laughed. "She's not talking about me, she's talking about Grandmaster Kino. That's where we met, ya know, in one of Master Kino's classes."

"Daddy, can we go now?" Rose said loudly, her voice clearly showing her irritation.

He laughed. "Absolutely." He looked over at the others in the room. Chaz, who'd safely delivered his son and Lisa who'd refused to leave Lizzy's side, Miss Maddie who comforted the children, and Chaz's brother, Tyson. Then there was Lisa's father, Joe and stepmother, Shirley, and sister, Megan, and several others from the small town. Keegan nodded his head at the group at large. "Thank you, everyone, from the bottom of my heart for your love and support."

"Our pleasure," Lisa's father, Joe, spoke for them. "We're all family. That's how it is in our town. We take care of each other. Besides, we like having a real live hero living in our town."

Keegan looked around. "It seems to me you have a town full of heroes." He tugged on Daisy's hand. "Come on, girls. Your beautiful mom is anxious to see you."

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Romans 8:28

"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him, who have been called according to His purpose."

Epilogue

Four Months Later

Lizzy had thought that after the birth of their child that she and Keegan's attraction to each other would cool, or at least level out, but every time he touched her she wanted him.

Tonight, their eyes closed as they slipped into that floating place that is half earthbound and half spirit as they came together as one. Their union was so much more than sexual. It was spiritual. It was beautiful, and Lizzy could not hold back the flood of emotion that brought on the tears.

"Hey? Are you okay?" Keegan asked softly.

She shook her head.

"What is it, Elizabeth?"

She sniffed. "I don't know. You're the one with the psychology degree, you tell me."

Gathering her close, he leaned his head back on the pillow and stared at the ceiling. "Okay," he sighed. "Though, it's a criminal psychology degree, but I'll still give it a shot. Let's see..."

His finger stroked her cheek as he thought. "Sex," he said, "can be an emotional release as much as a physical one, especially for women. Or probably mainly for women," he amended. "So, I'm thinking the tears are an emotional release. Now, since we're not really under any stress or strain, at least that I know of, I'm gonna assume that emotional release is a happy one." He rubbed her arm. "How am I doing?"

"Pretty good, so far," she said with a sweet smile.

"Okay. Well then, since this release is a happy one, I'm gonna venture you were crying tears of joy because we're like, the happiest family in the world."

She giggled. "We are, but do you think we'll ever get tired of each other? Do you think you'll ever get tired of making love to me?"

"I can't imagine that. I remember thinking if I could just have you one time, then maybe the fever would die down, but it only got worse. Then I thought maybe after we're married, I'll be able to settle down and not want you and think about you every second of the day, but it

hasn't gotten any better. I love you with all my heart. I want you with every fiber of my being. I don't think that's gonna change. At least not for the next hundred years. After that, we'll just have to see."

She sighed and snuggled closer. "Keegan, I worry about you going out to California," she said softly.

"Air travel is safe, Lizbet."

"I'm talking about what you're gonna do out there."

"You mean fight in the Kino Challenge? Don't worry. I've asked Rick to go easy on me," he joked.

"I'm serious, Keegan."

"Well then, thanks for having faith in me," he complained.

"That's not what I mean and you know it. Why do you guys have to do this, anyway?"

"Well, Rick wants to retire from fighting in the challenges and he wants to go out with a bang. He asked me to fight because he wants to capitalize on the publicity that surrounded me this past year. He thinks me fighting is a big draw. That'll mean more money for the charities."

"Why is he retiring? He's only like thirty right?"

"He's thirty-four and it's taking a toll on his body. The *Kino Challenge* is brutal, and he has other avenues he wants to travel."

"I guess that's understandable, but really Keegan, I just wish you didn't have to leave."

"I'll only be gone a week before you and the kids join me out there," he said. His eyes dropped to her mouth as she chewed on her lower lip and suddenly he realized. "I haven't been away from you since the time I went to DC, huh?"

Her eyes met his.

"Are you afraid, Elizabeth?"

Sighing, she gave a shrug. "I know it's all over, but I may be feeling a little apprehensive."

He ran the back of his knuckles over her cheek. "John and the guys are coming out there with me to help me train so I don't die," he chuckled, "but Chaz will be here. Of course, he's not always nearby. Tell ya what, I could bring Aaron in as your bodyguard while I'm gone. How would that be?"

Lizzy thought about the agent Keegan had been training as his assistant. He'd been over to the house for dinner several times and had that little brother kind of thing going. She smiled and nodded at her husband. "That would help. Do you mind?"

"No, babe, of course I don't mind. I love you and I'll always take

care of your needs."

She smiled provocatively. "Then do it."

"Yes, ma'am."

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Second Saturday in November

South Kino Estate, Crystal Cove, California

Ricky Kino held an ice pack to his nose as he lounged back on the giant sofa at his home on the beach just south of his father's home where he'd grown up. On either side of him and dispersed throughout the room were some of his closest friends, including Steve Reynolds, a PI and confidante to Rick for years and Toby Nash, the country singing sensation. Keegan sat across from Ricky, who was holding his own pack against his eye. He was flanked by Brayden on one side, Tristan on the other and Kaleb sitting on the arm of the couch. Keegan's friends lovingly tormented him, teasing him about losing to *the* Ricky Kino.

"You know what your problem was?" Brayden said.

"I have a feeling you're gonna fill me in," Keegan answered.

"You couldn't figure out a way to beat him without killing him."

The others laughed. Keegan rolled his eyes.

"I guess it's a good thing he likes me," Ricky said. "Even though my nose doesn't think so."

"At least it's not broken," Tristan said.

"Your nose is no worse than my eye," Keegan complained.

"Come on, buddy," Kaleb prodded. "You know you need a rematch. It was too close."

"No freakin' way," Ricky laughed.

The guys continued to razz each other as the rest of the crowd munched on goodies and settled into their own conversations. The giant room was filled with family and friends and children, most of whom belonged to Keegan and Lizzy.

Breanna, Rick's gorgeous and newly pregnant movie star wife sat curled up on a large sofa that sat in front of a huge picture window, offering a view of the ocean. Her son, Eric the third, who would be three in a few months, slept soundly in her lap. Bree sat beside Lizzy speaking quietly while Lizzy sat discreetly nursing little Gabriel under a receiving blanket thrown over her shoulder. On Lizzy's other side sat Shelley Kino, Breanna's mother who was married to Ricky's father, Eric. Next to Shelley, Jason's wife Angel, who was Shelley's best friend, chatted about the events of the night.

The *Kino Challenge* had been a great success as usual. Ricky now limited himself to only three bouts. But so the public would get their money's worth, a young, up-and-coming martial artist fought the two earlier bouts. This year that young man happened to be none other than Joey Adams, Bree's fresh-faced, brown-eyed youngest brother, who'd been trained by Grandmaster Kino and Ricky since he was six years old. He was now twenty and following nicely in Ricky's footsteps.

Joey won both his bouts. He'd appeared in some of Ricky's earlier films, first as a stunt artist, followed by a couple of small supporting roles. Recently he'd played the younger, victimized brother of a serial killer. This being his second showing at the *Kino Challenge*, he was growing in popularity and was currently working on a pilot for a series about the FBI.

Joey stood off in a corner on his cell, getting the scoop from his older brother, Mark, who hadn't been able to make the *Kino Challenge*. Mark attended the University of Hawaii on a football scholarship and had been the starting quarterback since his sophomore year. *The Kino Challenge* had been the one Saturday each year Mark's family had missed his game. Joey was getting the stats from his brother that Mark had thrown for 298 yards and three touchdowns.

Also in the room was Keegan's buddy John Appel, a former student of Grandmaster Kino. He stood off to the side with Jason Lee, and Jason's brother, attorney Justin Lee and Justin's new wife, Lori, whom Justin met back when Breanna had been shot by one of Eric's old enemies. Lori had been one of the nurses who'd cared for Bree. Lori and Lizzy had already spent hours sharing their nursing experiences.

Ricky's father, Grandmaster Eric Kino, sat in a large overstuffed chair, busy playing "grandpa" to the slew of children over in the corner of the room. The children included Lizzy's five girls, ages six, five and four, Mark's son little Joey who was now three, almost seven-year-old Grace, daughter of Toby and Caroline, nine-year-old Kimmie, the daughter of Jason and Angel and finally, eleven-year-old Jeffy, the daughter of Shelley and Eric, whose real name is June Flower.

Jodi Appel sat on the floor near the children, holding her son Jake as he slept. Caroline sat next to her, holding on to her rambunctious three-year-old son, Brody. Jeffy held almost four-year-old Daisy on her lap, while her twin, Lily nestled in Eric's arms. On Eric's other knee little Joey sat quietly, always patient and still. Kimmie, trying as usual to imitate Jeffy, coaxed five-year-old Violet into her lap while Rose

and Heather sat cross-legged on the floor listening in rapt attention as Eric told them his version of the three little pigs, which was closer to a version of "the wise man building his house upon a rock."

Shelley glanced over at her husband surrounded by the children and smiled. There was something about his voice that caused all who heard it to stop and listen. He wasn't loud. Actually, he was quite soft spoken, yet he held the children's attention completely. As long as she knew him it had been like that. His students, his son and daughter, her sons and daughters, his friends, the media, a crowd of people, even other Masters such as him, they all stopped and listened whenever Eric opened his mouth, like something out of an old Merrill Lynch commercial.

Her eyes met his and he smiled at her. He stopped his story a moment. "Everything okay, Shelley girl?" he asked softly.

The room quieted, which proved the very thoughts that Shelley had just been thinking.

"Everything's wonderful," she answered. "I was just thinking what a wonderful group of family and friends we have. We're so blessed."

He bent his head to kiss the top of Lily's head. "I agree. Our family, our old friends and our new friends continue to grow." He nodded at Ricky. "When Rick brought my attention to Keegan's heroism last year and his plight, I could tell Rick was impressed. So it doesn't surprise me that Keegan and his beautiful family are suddenly part of our world. And I have to say, I couldn't be gladder, if only for the opportunity to look at these angelic little ones and feel their sweet spirits. Of course, that has something to do with the woman that raised them," he added, smiling at Lizzy. "You're a blessed man, Keegan."

"I know that only too well," Keegan said. "Meeting Lizzy and the girls, it's the best thing that ever happened to me and I am absolutely grateful every moment of the day."

"Hold it, everyone," Jeff said. He'd been circling the room, handing out glasses and filling them with champagne. "You guys are using up all the things I was gonna say in my toast."

Eric chuckled. "Oh, sorry about that Jeff. You go right ahead. The room is yours."

Jeff nodded and bowed slightly. "Thank you, sir." He looked over the room. Sighed. "What he said," he joked, nodding at Eric.

The crowd laughed.

"No, really, I'd like to take this opportunity to honor and congratulate Ricky. This makes five Kino Challenges he's dominated.

One fight is tough. When he started this whole thing to prove a point to some paparazzo dude, he fought five times in one night. Unheard of. And he won. Truly amazing."

"Well, one was a disqualification," Joey put in with a grin.

Ricky pointed at Joey. "Hey, I fought him first, before he was disqualified."

"Children," Jeff stated firmly. "As I was saying, since then, even though he's only fighting three fights now, he's still kickin' a– , oh, uh, excuse me kids," Jeff said, nodding toward the now giggling group. "He's still kickin' butt. Anyway, I wanted to take this opportunity to honor him." He held his glass high. "To you, Rick."

"Hear, hear," the rest chimed and sipped their drink.

"Before I turn the floor over to anyone else, I've got two more people I want to recognize, if that's okay."

"You go ahead, Jeff," Bree said. "The floor is all yours for as long as you want it."

Jeff grinned. "Thanks, Bree." Ever since she'd drugged him on the beach a few years earlier, she would do anything to make it up to him. He thought it was funny and admittedly sometimes took advantage of it. "So, I also wanted to honor Joey, who's been stepping into Ricky's footsteps pretty darn well. Like I said, one fight is tough, and Joey is very young and for the last two challenges, Joey's been fighting two fights and winning, uh, even though that last one tonight was close."

Joey grinned and shrugged. "Well, final score is all that counts."

Jeff chuckled and raised his glass. "You're right, and this is to you, little Joe, you have my respect."

"Absolutely," Ricky said loudly. "I'm proud of ya, bro."

The rest echoed the adulation, raised their glasses and drank.

"Thanks," Joey said. "But all credit goes back to my teachers."

No one argued with that. The group grew quiet, waiting to hear Jeff's last accolade.

Jeff swallowed hard, finding he had to clear the lump in his throat. "Okay, so, this last one goes to the other competitor in the Kino challenge tonight."

As one, all eyes swung to Keegan, whose face reddened and whose jaw tightened because he didn't like public recognition.

"To me, Keeg, you are– the man. You may have lost your bout tonight, and who better to lose to than Rick, but anyway, to me, you are *my* hero. I think everyone here appreciates what you were willing to give for the kids this past year. And you stayed strong, even when it

seemed your country didn't appreciate your efforts, and what got you into all that trouble was you trying to get to me. Keegan, you risked your life, you risked everything to..." His voice broke. Blinking hard, he went on. "You risked your own life to save mine, a man you barely knew, and I will always be grateful to you."

He held his glass high. "To you, Keegan Tanner, you are my hero."

"To Keegan," John echoed.

"To Keegan," the rest joined.

Eric cleared his throat and the room quieted immediately.

"I would add my best wishes, Keegan, but before I do, I need to tell you all what God has just placed on my heart.

"My life thus far has been an amazing journey. I had no idea forty something years ago what the significance of falling through the earth and being trapped in a cave and being visited by an angel while in that cave, what significance that would have."

Several in the room were stunned by that information. Ricky was not stunned by the information, but was stunned that his father was sharing it, making him realize this was an important moment.

"Since that time in the cave, I've somehow stumbled down the correct path. God was leading me, and at times I became frustrated, because even though God has a plan, He didn't seem willing to share that plan with me. He only showed me the next step. It was up to me to take that step, in faith, not knowing the plan, but knowing God and trusting Him."

Shelley peered around the room. As always her husband had everyone's rapt attention. Even the children were quiet, their little angel faces glowing with light.

"The good Lord," Eric went on, "has just put on my heart that He not only brought *me* down a path that led to this moment, but He brought all of you, each one of you. His plan is vast. It is large and it has many pieces. Each of you is important to His plan. He just told me that. He just filled my heart with that. His spirit is so strong right now, I feel like I might burst."

The others in the room felt it too, for many of them had tears coursing down their cheeks. Shelley looked around again. It was a habit of hers, to look around as her husband spoke, to see how what he had to say affected others. She saw that even the men had tears, and she realized that a man unashamed of how the spirit of God touches him is a beautiful thing. It is the most masculine thing, she thought, to see these strong men allow God to touch them, and she thought she also

might burst with the immense love she suddenly felt for every single person in the room.

"There's more," Eric went on. "There's a lot more to come. There are more coming to join our ranks. God is amassing an army of warriors such as yourselves. Men and women. Many here have been through a refiner's fire and many of you will in the future. When that happens, and it will, hold firm in your faith. God has a plan. We may not be able to see the entire path He has us on, but we can see one or two steps in front of us. Take those steps.

"Each of you are warriors, all of you, right down to this very special newest addition, whose spirit I can feel is very strong." He motioned toward tiny Gabriel Tanner. "Keegan, may you and your sweet wife, Lizzy, and all your beautiful children, be happy and safe and strong. And may life for you and your family be heaven on earth."

"Amen," Shelley said softly.

"Thank you," Keegan said as he smiled at Lizzy across the room. Her face glowed radiant as she smiled back at him. Even though he couldn't see him, he knew his son's head lay nestled against her breast. His eyes swept the room, taking in the five blond little girls who truly seemed to have halos of light around their heads. Life *is* heaven on earth, he thought, and I'm living amongst a whole flock of angels.

✝✝✝

"May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had."

Romans 15:5

✝✝✝

"I lift up my eyes to the mountains—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth."

Psalm 121:1-2

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A Prayer

Father, will You hear my prayer? Father, will You hear my plea? Father, will You give me Your mercy? Father, I want only to do Your will in all things. But sometimes, I get confused and I can't hear You. Forgive me, and help me I pray, to hear You always, to feel You always, for when I do, my joy is complete. I praise You, I give gratitude to all that You do, all that You bless me with, and mostly for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, for His love, for His grace, for kindness, for His smile, which I have felt upon me many times. I ask now, Father, that You will show Your love and kindness to all those who read these words. Bless them Father, with peace, with the comfort of Your love, with healing for anything in their lives that needs healing. Bless their families, bless their children, bless their siblings, bring us out of the darkness and into Your healing light, we ask now, in the mighty name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

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A Note from McCartney Green...

I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...

Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.

Continue the Journey
The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series
by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing—In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors—In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name
#14 Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

Prequel—Messages From God:
The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

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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!"

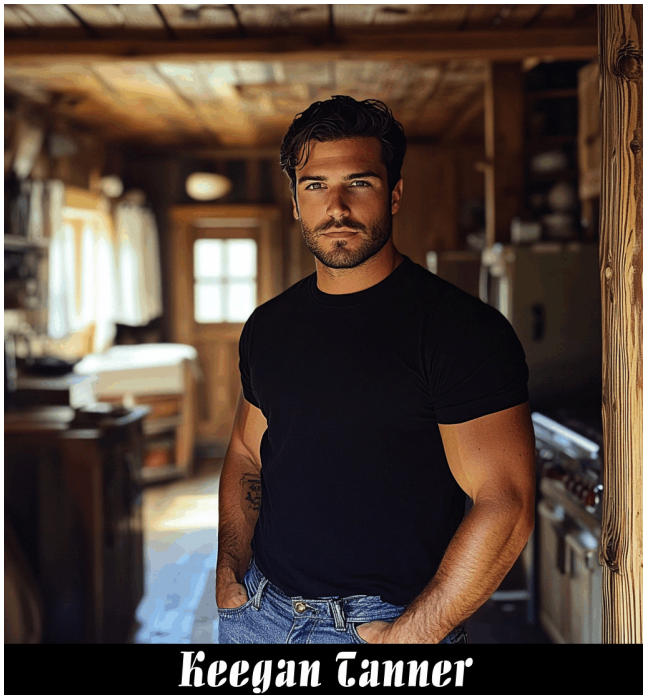
"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another 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.

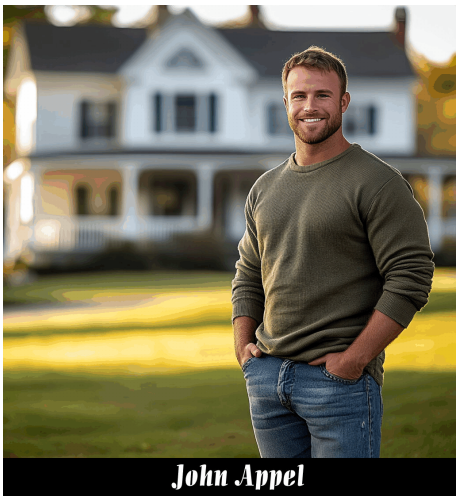
~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

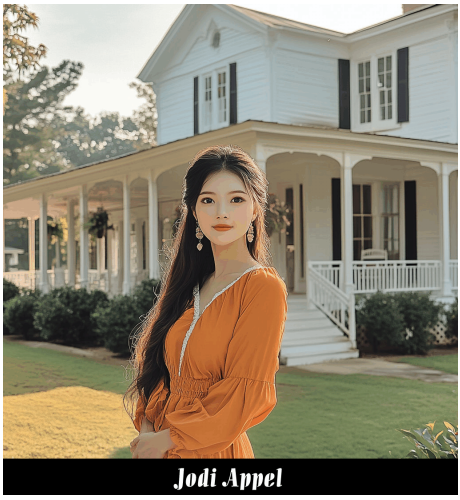
Once again, Author McCartney Green has delivered a well written title that deserves much attention and appreciation. The work is chock full of wisdom spoken through the mind and heart of the much beloved character in her *DND In Jesus' Name series*, Grandmaster Eric Kino, who is based on a personal epiphany. 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


Keegan Tanner


Lizzy Anderson


John Appel


Jodi Appel


Violet
Lily
Heather
Daisy
Rose




Heather - Age 5


Rose - Age 4

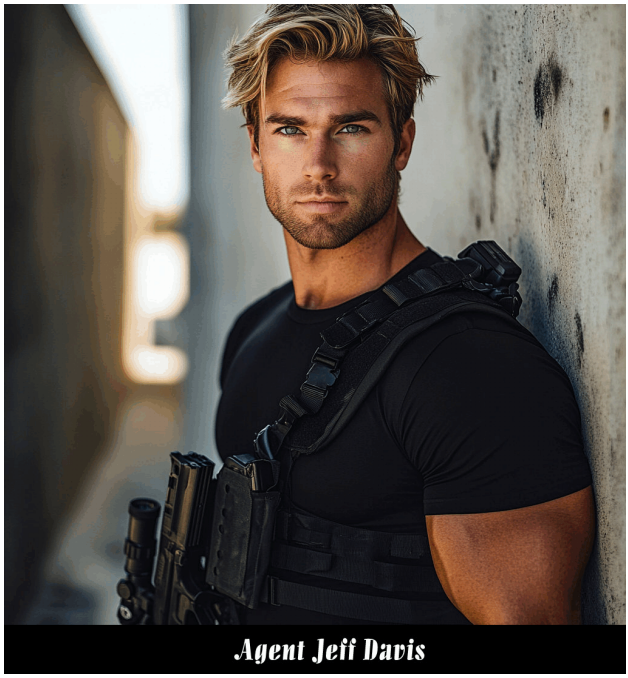

Violet - Age 4


Lily - Age 3


Daisy - Age 3







Savannah, Georgia



Continue with DND #6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

"Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord."
Romans 12:17-19

Chapter One

Jeff Davis' Apartment, North Los Angeles, California

Jeff smiled. Laura's attempts at seduction were working. He'd had a tough day and hadn't gotten home until almost eight. He'd been tired and not in the mood for much of anything, but she'd ordered pizza and bought wine and finally he'd begun to loosen up.

The movie they'd watched had been boring and it had been all he could do to stay awake, but it seemed she knew just how to get to him. Yes, his energy was definitely surging. He rose slightly off the couch, just enough to push Laura down onto the cushions.

"Finally, I have your attention," she cooed.

Her statement made him think. She often complained about him not giving her his full attention. She had a point, he had to admit. They'd been a couple for several months now. She'd even moved in with him, yet they were not getting closer. If anything he was drifting farther away. However, it was the times like right now, when she was able to pull him from his shell that kept him in the relationship. Besides, it was too much trouble to find someone new.

He balanced over her and lowered himself to kiss her when his cell phone went off.

"Oh, no," Laura said, a warning tone in her voice. "Absolutely not," she ordered. "Do not answer that."

"Honey, you know I have to answer."

"No, you don't. You don't have to. It's just that you care more about everyone else than you do about me."

"Not true," he argued. Shaking his head, he moved toward the

dining room table where he'd tossed his wallet, keys and phone when he'd come in a scant four hours earlier. Laura reached out and grabbed his arm as he passed.

"I'm serious, Jeff. You better listen to me. Let it ring. Come back here and finish. Whoever it is can wait."

"Laura, let go of my arm. I'm on call. I have to answer. Besides, it's almost midnight, it must be important." He twisted his arm away from her grasp and rushed to the phone but it stopped ringing by the time he scooped it up. Peering down at the number, his brow furrowed. "It was Jeffy."

"Who's Jeffy?"

"Eric and Shelley's teenage daughter." When she appeared to not recognize the name he shook his head at her. "Laura, we've been together over six months. How can you not know who I'm talking about? Eric and Shelley Kino, you know Ricky Kino's father and Breanna Adams mother? He didn't wait for her reply as he hit the call back button. Jeffy answered quickly.

"Jeff?" she cried into the phone.

"Yes, Jeffy, what's wrong, sweetie?" he asked, trying to keep the worry out of his voice. He could hear her sobbing, sniffling, trying to get her breath. "Jeffy, answer me. What's happened?"

"Jeff, c-can you come get me?"

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the *Best Western Motel* on West Coast Highway near Newport Beach."

"What are you doing there?" he barked.

Another loud sniffle. "Don't yell at me."

"Okay, okay. Just calm down," he said, not sure if he was speaking to her or to himself. "I'm not yelling at you, sweetie. I'm just worried about you. I mean, you're fifteen years old and you're out at a motel at midnight. Where's your father?"

"No!" she cried. "You can't tell my father. You can't tell anyone in my family. That's why I called *you*."

Jeff ran a hand through his thick blond hair, a sick feeling settling in his gut. Jeffy's father was the legendary martial arts master, Eric Kino. Her brother the famous martial arts movie star, Ricky Kino, and her sister was another movie legend, Breanna Adams. Her mother was a martial arts champion. She had two more brothers, Mark and Joey. Also both champions. All were friends of his.

He knew them because he worked as an agent for *Ameritech Security*, a company run by Jason Lee who was a long time friend and student of Eric Kino.

He'd first met them eight years ago when Jeff was a twenty-two-year-old newbie agent. He'd been asked to help bodyguard the Kino family. An agent had been assigned to each family member because some sicko had threatened to kill them. Jeff had drawn Breanna, the movie star, which had almost been his demise. She'd drugged him, left him unconscious on the beach and taken off. She'd almost lost her life that day. And he'd almost lost his job, probably would have if she hadn't intervened with Jason.

Jeffy, whose real name is June Flower, had only been seven back then and had been very attached to him because, as she put it, he was cute and had the same name as her. Now, she is a teenager. She is also a genius. A child prodigy. At fifteen, she is halfway through her college stint and will have more than one doctorate by the time she's twenty. Add in the fact that she's psychic, has visions, is a 4th degree black belt in more than one discipline, plays concert piano and is startlingly beautiful one could say, oh yes, Jeffy is special. And now she's calling him at midnight and asking him to keep it a secret from her extremely lethal family. Good grief.

"Jeff, will you come and get me or not?" she cried.

"Of course I will. I'm on my way," he said, blocking out Laura's loudly indrawn breath. "What room are you in?" She gave him the information. "Jeffy, listen. I'll be there in about thirty minutes. Is there a peep hole in the door?"

She sniffed. "Yes."

"Okay. Do not open the door to anyone but me. You got it?"

"Yes. Hurry, Jeff."

"I'm on my way, little miss June Flower, and when I get there, you and I are gonna have a long talk."

"Okay," she said petulantly.

✞✞✞

"My, my, how I love pi!"

3.14159265358979323846264338327950288419716939937510582097494459230781640628620899862803482534211706798214808651328230664709384460955058223172535940812848111745028410270193852110555964462294895493038196442881097566593344612847564823378678316527120190914564856692346034861045432664821339360726024914127372458700660631558817488152092096282925409171536436789259036001133053054882046652138414695194151160943305727036575959195309218611738193261179310511854807446237996274956735188575272489122793818301194912983367336244065664308602139494639522473719070217986094370277053921717629317675238467481846766940513200056812714526356082778577134275778960917363717872146844090122495343014654958537105079227968925892354201995611212902196086403441815981362977477130996051870721134999999837297804995105973173281609631859502445945534690830264252230825334468503526193118817101000313783875288658753320838142061717766914730359825349042875546873115956286388235378759375195778185778053217122680661300192787661119590921642019893809525720106548586327886593615338182796823030195203530185296899577362259941389124972177528347913151557485724245415069595082953311686172785588907509838175463746493931925506040092770167113900984882401285836160356370766010471018194295559619894676783744944825537977472684710404753464620804668425906949129331367702898915210475216205696602405803815019351 1

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 errrrrr3out 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."