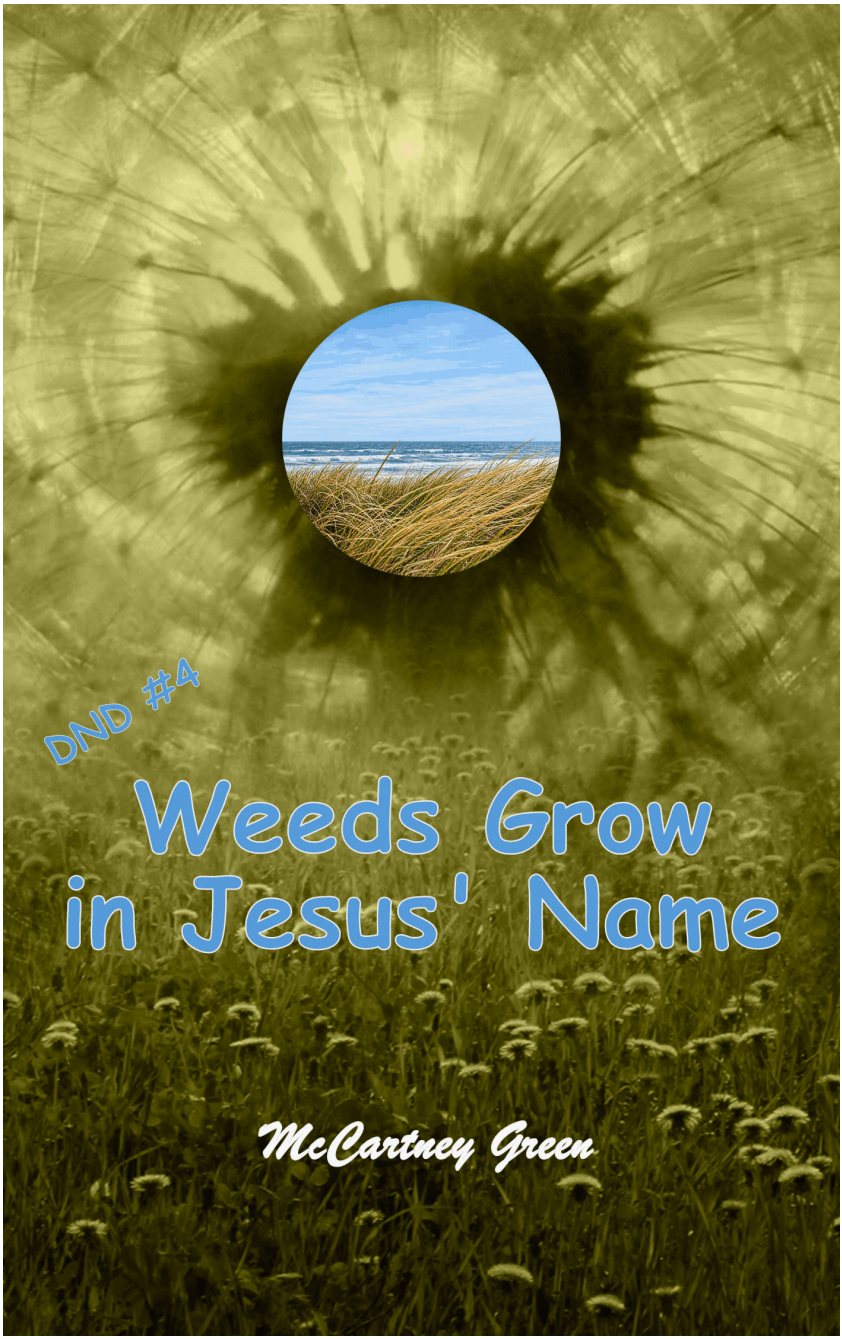

DND #4
Weeds Grow in Jesus' Name
McCartney Green

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Weeds Grow-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!

Keeping Tabs

If you've read the first three books in the *In Jesus' Name Series*, you will remember that #3 *Finding Home* began on Lisa's birthday, May 15th. Now, #4 *Weeds Grow* begins late summer/early fall of the same year. Here are everyone's ages.

Kino Family
Eric Kino turned 48 in June
Shelley Adams Kino is 43
Ricky Kino turned 30 in May
Breanna Adams turned 27 in August
Mark Adams is about to be 18
Joey Adams turned 16 in August
June Flower(Jeffy) Kino was 7 in March.

Lee Families
Justin Lee is now 45.

Jason Lee is now 36.
Angel Pritchard Lee is 34.
Kimberly (Kimmie) Lee is 5.

Nash/Smith Family
Toby Nash (Smith) is about to be 33.
Caroline Jones Smith is about to be 31.
Gracie Smith was 3 in March

Stewart Family
Chaz Stewart is about to be 29.
Lisa Lewis turned 25 in May.

Appel Family
John Appel is 29.
Jodi Appel is 25.

“A flower falls, even though we love it;
and a weed grows, even though we do not love it.”

~Dogen Zenji~

"Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and left. And when the wheat sprouted and produced grain, then the weeds also became evident. And the slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; while you are gathering up the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and at the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the weeds and bind them in bundles to burn them; but gather the wheat into my barn."'"

Matthew 13:24-30

Note to Reader:

Sometimes the weeds begin to grow because we forget to put on the full armor of God.

The Belt of Truth, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Gospel of Peace, the Shield of Faith, the Helmet of Salvation, the Sword of the Spirit/Word, and Prayer. Ephesians 6:10–18.

In this story we focus on the Breastplate of Righteousness. The breastplate was the piece of armor that gave protection to the vital organs, most importantly, the heart. When a soldier wasn't quick enough to take up his shield against the unexpected advances of the enemy, the breastplate was there to protect. But what if the breastplate had cracks? Then the weeds—the enemy—will find a way to get through. When we knowingly make a decision to be unrighteous, to turn our backs on the laws of God, we put cracks in the breastplate.

The laws and commandments of God are not given to us to make life hard, any more than telling our children to not play in the street is to make things difficult for them. We tell our children that because we love them and want to keep them safe. God's laws are given to us for the same reason. (Though this is a simplistic illustration.) When we know right from wrong and willfully choose wrong, then there will be a battle coming on. There are consequences to every choice.

'Weeds Grow-In Jesus' Name' touches on many evil things that people face in this earthly life, such as revenge, sexual promiscuity, rape, torture, murder and death. As horrible as these things sound, the Bible addresses all of them and we find that we can and WILL overcome them all. This book also addresses honesty, the importance of family, loyalty, prayer, courage, strength, faith, and love. The Bible too addresses these beautiful things and tells us how to obtain them all.

If we must be likened to weeds in any way, then let us take on their good qualities. Let our love grow like a weed. Let our faith be strong against barren ground, like a weed. And let our fruit multiply like a weed, for, Dandelions Never Die!

Chapter 1

"Take a look at that."

Ricky Kino glanced at the scandal mag his friend tossed on the table as he joined him for lunch. On the front was a picture of one of Hollywood's favorite sweethearts. She wore a bikini with a man's tailored shirt pulled on over top of it. The open shirt revealed a slim, toned body and long, shapely legs. Her long chestnut locks were swept up in a ponytail. She was smiling at, and holding hands with a large, muscle-bound guy in swim trunks. The man wore dark glasses and a baseball cap. The headline pretty much summed it up.

Breanna Adams and new bodyguard, Nicholas James, more than a working relationship.

Ricky sighed, folded the paper in half and handed it to the waiter who came to take their order. "Toss that please," he said softly.

"Of course, sir," the waiter replied, tucking the offending paper under his arm.

"Don't bring me trash like that," Ricky implored of Steve Reynolds, his longtime friend.

Steve shrugged. "Doesn't that bother you? Because, I tell ya, it sure as heck bothers me."

Ricky frowned. "You gotta stop reading that stuff. Those papers never print the truth."

"You didn't see the pictures, man. Bree and this guy, they're definitely, um, together."

"Good grief, Steve, will you give me a break?"

"Sorry, Rick. I guess it's my way of encouraging you to just go after her."

"It's not that easy, especially now that she's a big celebrity."

"Big celebrity? And what are you?" Steve asked of the martial arts icon and heartthrob leading man. "Besides, you've been around a lot longer than her."

"It doesn't matter who's been in the public eye longer. That's not what I'm talking about. Her celebrity status makes her vulnerable to

gossip and what she wouldn't like is what they'll print if she and I were to get together. You know, the brother-sister thing."

"You're not her freakin' brother."

He sighed. "I think I know that very well," he said softly. Then louder, "But that's not how the world will see it. My father and her mother got married and they have a child together who is my sister and Bree's sister."

"Still, you and Bree are not related, Rick. Not by blood. Besides, since when have you cared what the world thinks?"

"Since never, but you see, it's not me that cares. It's her. Her career means everything to her. I don't blame her for that. She's worked darn hard to get where she is, and she's not about to put her career in jeopardy. Not for me. Not for anyone."

Steve nodded his head. "Then maybe she *should* consider a relationship with you. It would be amazing publicity. I can see it now, the big scoop: *Breanna Adams and Ricky Kino have been secret lovers for years.*"

"Shut up, Steve."

Steve eyed his friend. "It's true, isn't it? I think I've just hit the nail on the head."

Ricky drew a deep breath. "No, it's not true. We got together and dated for a brief time the year our parents first met. That was a long time ago. About eight years, actually."

"Come on, man. Do you mean to tell me you haven't been in those pants one time?"

Rick's eyes flashed. "If you weren't my friend who I know says ridiculous things without thinking first, I'd kick your butt right now. Bree and I have barely seen each other more than a few hours at a time for the better part of five years. She barely acknowledges me and then it's only as her stepbrother."

"You weren't watching her last summer at the party at your father's house. I was. She has the hots for you, Rick. She watched you every second you weren't looking at her. I'm telling you, you've gotta go after her before it's too late."

"I'm not gonna waste my life mooning over someone who doesn't give a flip about me. She's made that clear enough over the years. Look, Steve, at one time I really thought I was in love with the girl. We had our fun and she called it quits first. Yeah, that hurt, but I'm over it. Got it?"

Steve shook his head. “Like hell you’re over it.” He went on quickly, taking note of Ricky’s fierce expression. “I’m your friend, Rick, so I’m gonna tell it like it is. If you gotta kick my butt for it, then so be it. You’re still in love with Bree and she has feelings for you too. The two of you need to be honest with yourselves and give in to it. It’s the only way you’re ever gonna be happy.”

“I’m happy enough.”

“Yeah, you got hot chicks hanging all over you and whenever the mood strikes you take your pick and bring one home to play around. But I know you’re not happy.”

Ricky’s eyes narrowed. “This discussion is over.”

“Okay. I’ve had my say and I got your back. But bro, I’ll tell ya, maybe it’s the private investigator in me, but I don’t like the looks of this Nicholas James guy and I intend to do some digging.”

“You do that, Mr. PI. Just please, do me a favor and don’t come to me with the details.”

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“Ms. Adams, ten minutes.”

Bree sighed and pulled out of Nick’s arms. “I have to get ready.”

He yanked on her arm bringing her flush against him. “Not so fast.” Grabbing her hair, he held her still and kissed her hard.

“Ow, Nick. You’re too rough,” she complained.

He grinned. “You know you like it.”

She sighed. “You messed up my hair, Nick, and Trish is not gonna be happy.”

He shrugged. “She’ll fix it.”

“I’ll fix what?” Trish said as she opened the trailer door and stepped inside. She gasped. “Oh, look at that hair. What happened?”

Bree rolled her eyes toward Nick. Trish glared at him before she turned back to Bree. “Sit,” she directed. “We have to hurry.”

Nick started toward the door but stopped to whisper in Trish’s ear. “Watch how you look at me.”

Trish’s face drained of color. She glanced up to see if he was kidding. It was hard to tell. He grinned at her, blew a kiss at Bree and left the trailer.

“Sorry about the hair, Trish,” Bree said after he’d gone.

Trish smiled at the actress in the mirror. “It’s not so bad. This won’t take long at all.” She worked on the thick brown hair, replacing pins, spraying curls. When she glanced back at the mirror and caught
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Bree's sad expression she couldn't hold her tongue. "So, is this guy giving you a hard time?"

"Hm?" Bree looked up. "Who, Nick?"

"Who else?"

Bree sighed. "No, of course not. I mean, he's a little rough around the edges, but that just comes with the territory, you know, ex-cop, etcetera."

"You really like him?" Trish asked.

"Of course. I mean, I guess. What makes you ask?"

Trish shrugged. "I guess you just seem sort of sad."

Bree flashed her brilliant winning smile. "I'm not sad. Not at all." She kept the smile on her face while Trish finished her hair. She wasn't sad. However, she *had* been thinking about someone she shouldn't be thinking about– her brother, Ricky Kino. Well, her stepbrother. She was thinking how he was so protective of her and how he would not be happy with the way Nick jerked her around sometimes. Her mind flashed back to when she and Ricky first met.

Ricky's father, the legendary martial arts master Eric Kino, and Bree's mom had been madly in love. They'd sent Ricky to the airport to pick her up. She couldn't have been more thrilled. Here was this gorgeous martial arts movie star with his long, black hair blowing back as he walked, carrying her luggage, opening her door. The chemistry was there and they'd hit it off immediately.

She smiled. They'd dated pretty steady for a while. She'd been only eighteen, he twenty-one. He was so full of life and energy and not a bit shy and they always had so much fun. He'd received a first class education around the world. He had a brilliant mind with so many insights to share and a quick wit that kept her constantly on her toes and constantly laughing. Icing on the cake, his body was smokin' and every time he'd accidentally brushed against her it sent chills racing over her.

The first time he'd kissed her they'd been in New York. He'd flown in especially to see her. They'd gone for pizza and then back to her apartment. In the kitchen, as she poured him a Perrier over ice, he'd lifted her chin with one finger, moved forward and kissed her. It was slow and soft and warmed her to her toes. He was a big movie star and she a struggling actress, which admittedly made him all that more appealing. He was so very sexy, all six feet of rippling muscle.

They'd taken their drinks and had a seat on the old, worn sofa, spoken briefly about the latest Broadway show. He'd leaned over and kissed her again. Suddenly it had been like a frenzy. She'd wanted to give him everything. Then she mentioned something about being relieved that she would no longer be the only virgin left in New York City. He'd stopped. You could've heard a pin drop.

He'd said something ridiculously honorable about not taking advantage of someone so innocent. Something about God's laws. She'd tried to make him forget what she'd said, tried to show him she wasn't quite so innocent. He'd almost wavered. She thought she'd won. But he'd forced himself to back off. He'd said it wouldn't be right or fair. She smiled now, sighed, thinking about the past. His resolve lasted. He was bound and determined to do the honorable thing. She was definitely attracted to him, but at that time she was young and not ready to be in love.

On the other hand, he said he WAS in love with her, but if she didn't love him there was no way he could take her virginity. He also had an idea that people should be married before they were intimate. Then Ricky's dad and her mom were married and had a baby, and that was the end of that.

"All done," Trish said, bringing Bree out of her reminiscing.

Bree smiled. "Thanks. You're the best. Time to go to work." She rose and walked out onto the movie set.

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The girl giggled. "The problem is, no one is gonna believe me when I tell them that I spent the night in Ricky Kino's penthouse and in Ricky Kino's bed."

He sighed.

She rolled over on top of him. "Wanna do breakfast?"

He grimaced. "Sorry, I really don't have time. Gotta be downtown in an hour."

"Are you sure you really have to?"

He gently pulled her off him and rose from the bed. "I'm sure. I really do have to go." Pulling on some jeans, he left the room.

When she found him again, he was on the balcony, in the early morning light, moving through a series of stretches and martial arts type movements. She watched him for a few minutes before he finally turned to her.
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"How about a protein smoothie?" Ricky asked, realizing he'd been on the verge of rudeness earlier.

The girl made a face and shook her head. "How about some coffee?" she asked.

"Don't have any. Maybe some herbal tea?"

She made another face. "You're not normal are you?" she asked with a grin.

"Apparently not."

"I've heard that about you."

"Well, now you've confirmed it." He smiled at her because he knew his comment seemed brusque. "Look, can I run out, grab some coffee for you?"

She grinned. "Aww, and you're sweet too. That's okay. I guess I'll get going. Besides, I can't wait to tell my friends about you."

Lips pressed together, he nodded.

"Just do one thing for me. Tell me I can call you to prove it to them and you won't deny it."

"I don't ever lie."

She sighed. "I've heard that about you too. Well, Ricky Kino, thanks for a great time."

He bowed graciously.

She giggled, gathered her purse, and let herself out.

Ricky slumped down into a chair. His usual sunny demeanor had deserted him. I never lie, but apparently sexual misconduct is not a big deal. He usually didn't think about the public or the media, and what they thought of him. But when this girl tells her friends that she'd been with him, what kind of example is that? What was he doing? He was not himself. He was down. Really down. There was no way he should have brought a girl home with him. What in the world was he doing? His father would be disappointed in him, but no more than Ricky was in himself. He glanced heavenward. He also knew God was probably frowning down on him right now.

The words his friend had spoken to him the other day played back in his mind. *You're still in love with her, and she has feelings for you. You're never gonna be happy unless you do something about it.* Ricky shook his head. "What the heck am I supposed to do about it?" he asked aloud. All he knew is, he couldn't live like this. He immediately dropped to his knees and asked forgiveness. He completely emptied his

heart and by the time he finished his prayer he knew exactly what he needed to do.

I need to speak to my father, he thought. I need family. I need the ocean. I need home. And that's exactly where I'm going.

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Shelley had been watching the girl for some time now. It's amazing, she thought, that no one else had noticed the small, attractive, young woman who was moving around the crowd, stealing them blind. The park was crowded, the day sunny and bright as always in southern California. The kids had just started back to school and were noticeably absent, but parents with toddlers, lovers, dog walkers, musicians, clowns and kite flyers abounded.

Shelley sat on a green wooden park bench, people watching. She loved to guess their occupations or situations, like, a woman in a cream-colored suit paired with athletic shoes probably worked in an office and was trying to get a little exercise during her lunch break. A man with a pencil and a small book was doing crossword puzzles. A woman in shorts and t-shirt holding hands with a man in a business suit were having a steamy love affair, in Shelley's imagination. Yet she couldn't quite peg the little scamp.

The girl's age could've been anywhere between sixteen and twenty-five. She was pretty, with bright blue eyes, creamy fair skin and black hair that was chopped off short and spiky. Her body was athletic, lean and wiry, thus the reason for not being quite able to guess her age. Why was this girl picking pockets, stealing watches, cameras even a yo-yo? She wasn't really very good at it since Shelley had been able to follow her every move.

The girl sat down on a bench next to an elderly woman just across the lawn from where Shelley watched. The woman's purse was the obvious next target. Just as the hand reached down to grab, the girl's bright blue eyes lifted and met Shelley's eyes. Shelley's deep brown eyes, filled with understanding and a desire to help met with icy blue, arrogant and hard. Or was there a trace of fear? The girl hesitated for just an instant, and in that instant the older woman realized what was happening.

The commotion that followed was classic, the cry for help, the tugging back and forth for the purse. The girl won that battle and scrambled away with a couple of do-gooders in hot pursuit. She was quick though, weaving back and forth, actually leaping a bench in full
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stride, skirting around a picnic pavilion and disappearing around the bend in the crowd of people.

Fascinated, Shelley wished she had a chance to speak with her, discover what motivated her, what's her story and mostly, how could Shelley help her to straighten out her life. Shelley decided she would definitely keep an eye out for her the next time she was at the park.

Gathering her things, she stood to leave, smiling with the anticipation of meeting her husband at the diner and telling him about the girl in the park. They'd celebrated their eighth anniversary a few months ago. She sighed with pleasure. Eight years and the anticipation of seeing Eric still turned her to mush. Then again, so does everything he does. The way he pulls her chair out for her at the dinner table, or kisses her on the cheek in greeting, or wrestles her to the ground during an impromptu sparring match.

They say all those feelings fade over the years. They certainly had for Shelley and her first husband, but so far so good for her and Eric. In a lot of relationships, as soon as they get together one or both begin to worry about the other person losing interest. It was Shelley's theory that this lack of confidence in one's own self and this lack of trust in the other is what brings about the beginning of the end of a relationship. It's over really, just as it's getting started. Shelley believed three things kept her marriage fresh and alive. First, she and Eric trusted each other and second, they never became stagnant because they each believed in progressing as individuals, so that means no one loses respect for the other, no one loses self-esteem, leaving them free to simply revel in each other's love. But the third and most important thing in a marriage is, God. When their love is based in both husband and wife striving to live a Godly life, then the trust and the respect is always there. It's a beautiful thing.

Just as she turned to leave, two children approached, giggling and smiling. "Hi," Shelley said, returning their smile.

"Hi," the boy answered shyly. "Um, aren't you Shelley Kino?"

"Yes, I am, and who are you?" she asked.

"I'm Ethan. I saw you on TV."

"You did?"

"Yeah, lots of times. Do you really live with Ricky Kino?"

She grinned. So, he finally cut to the chase. "Well, sometimes, that is, when he comes home. He has his own place now and he travels a lot."

"Wow."

"Why aren't you in school?" Shelley asked.

"We didn't get moved in time. We had to wait for somebody to finish working on our house and they took their own sweet time."

Shelley laughed. "Oh, really?"

"Yeah, that's what my dad says. My mom says we gotta go tomorrow, even if we're not all the way unpacked. I'm ten. My sister's eight. We used to take martial arts where we used to live. There was a picture of you and Grandmaster Kino on the wall. Dad says he'll get us signed up here somewhere."

"That's great." Shelley reached into her purse, pulled out a business card and wrote on the back. "Give this to your dad. It's one of the Kino studios not far from here. They'll give him a good deal."

The boy nodded. "Yes ma'am."

"How long have you been taking?" Shelley asked.

"I've been taking two years. I'm a blue belt. Donise is a green belt. She started later than I did."

Shelley noticed the last statement made Donise frown. She smiled at the girl. "Well, we all have to start sometime. I didn't start until I was thirty-four years old." She turned back to the boy. "You'd better work hard. It wouldn't surprise me if Donise caught up to you."

Shelley could see a new fire light up in the young girl's eyes. Good. A little competition for brother couldn't hurt.

"Could we have your autograph?" Donise asked.

Shelley looked around. "Is that your mom?"

The children nodded.

"Tell ya what. Why don't I get your address and I'll send you some autographed pictures, and I'll add some from Ricky too."

The children were ecstatic. Shelley went to meet their mother, chatted for a short while, promised the pics and wound her way out of the park, shaking her head in wonder. It still amazed her that people thought of her as some kind of celebrity.

She'd won the MART eight years ago. The Martial Arts Recruiting Tournament was "Olympic-like" in importance in the world of martial arts. Since her win, Shelley had endorsed cereals, developed her own line of workout clothing, had a doll in her own name, had some sporting equipment and shoes and even did some commercials for shampoo since her hair had become her trademark.

She wore it differently from most women her age. When she'd begun training for the MART at the age of thirty-four, she'd worn the long, curly, golden brown tresses in a thick single braid. Eight years later, she hadn't changed a thing even though she'd threatened to. Her eldest daughter was dead set against it, but Shelley swore the minute she went gray she would cut it all off rather than look like the wicked witch of the west.

Her daughter Breanna, also had long, thick, hair, but hers wasn't curly like Shelley's. Bree's long hair was straight and sleek and a deep, glossy brown. The newest addition to their family, Jeffy, had the thick, black hair of her father's ancestry, and the curls of her mother. Her hair was waist-length and usually worn in braids.

Shelley smiled at the thought of her youngest child. How could she not? Jeffy was happiness personified. There was something about her that just made people smile. It had been a miracle that Shelley had conceived in the first place. When they'd discovered Shelley carried Eric's baby they'd never been happier.

At the time Shelley met Eric she'd never dreamed she would end up the wife of the renowned martial arts master. And she certainly hadn't considered that she would be stepmother to martial arts movie star, Ricky Kino. Thinking of the children to whom she had just promised to send Ricky's autographs, she understood completely. Her own boys had only been six and eight when she'd first introduced Ricky into their lives.

They had been euphoric with the idea that they would be a family together with a real live movie star and only slightly disappointed that the movie star was also mesmerized by their older sister. Yet when Ricky took on the responsibility of instructing the boys in their martial arts it made up for any flaw. In no time they had earned their black belts and were on their way to their own notoriety.

Mark, Shelley's eldest son, was now about to be eighteen and a senior in high school. A second degree black belt, he'd put martial arts on a back burner when high school football grabbed his attention. He'd ended his junior year as an all-state, all-American quarterback and was being highly recruited at several Division I colleges. He also loved music and was a darn good percussionist. They'd had to add a soundproof studio to their home.

Younger brother, Joey, had taken off in another direction. He was about to be a third degree black belt and followed the tournament

circuit. He was good. Really good. Of course, having Ricky Kino as his instructor and Grandmaster Eric Kino in his corner, you could be nothing but excellent. Ricky and Eric would not allow anything less. Shelley should know since they were the reason she'd become MART champion. They would disagree. They would say the fight came from her, from her heart. The same went for Joey. Joey, however, had one flaw. He only just turned sixteen and was still looking for the maturity and control that came with his black belt.

Shelley glanced at her watch as she walked. The diner where she was to meet Eric for a late lunch was only another block. They would have lunch and then Shelley would pick up Jeffy from school. Beautiful, sweet little Jeffy, June Flower Kino, had been nicknamed Jeffy by her brothers. Shelley sighed. The experts call her Jeffy a genius. At seven years of age she was doing high school work with ease. She attended a special school for gifted children. To Shelley she was just a baby girl with the same wants and needs any child would have; toys and clothes and fun and laughs and love. It bothered Shelley that her doctors and teachers were always wanting to analyze her and test her and see how far they could push her, or see what new tricks Jeffy could do. Shelley and Eric kept a close eye on the situation though and if they felt things were getting out of hand, they would step in. That was why this was the third school she'd attended.

Shelley looked up to see the fresh green and white sign of her and Eric's favorite diner, *The Elements*. They served organically grown, health foods. Sandwiches made from whole grains, free-range turkey and chicken, fruits and veggies, homemade soups, health shakes of every variety, yogurt, sprouts, spelt, whatever the current craze in health, they carried it.

The moment she walked in she was overtaken by the aromas. It was amazing to her that they could make such healthy foods taste and smell so scrumptious. She spotted Eric the same moment he spotted her. The smile that came over his face as he rose to greet her made her warm all over. Lord, would she ever get used to being so loved? He rushed to her and escorted her to their table.

"Hi, Eric, how's your day so far?"

He brushed his lips over her cheek as he guided her to their usual corner booth. "It's been hectic, and stressful, and you are just what I needed. Umm, you smell good." He kissed her neck before he could pull himself away and sit opposite her.

"The regular, Eric?" JonPaul called from behind the counter.

Eric nodded then turned back to his wife. She sat there smiling at him. She was like a breath of spring. Her skin glowed, her hair shone, and her eyes sparkled with life and love. What was it about her that made her so incredibly appealing? He wanted to make love to her right now. He'd been married to her for eight years and he couldn't keep his hands off her.

"So, what have you done today that makes you look so gorgeous?" he asked.

"Let's see," she said coyly. "It could be the four mile run. Or the call from Bree. It probably isn't the way I got my butt kicked in a sparring match at the class I attended this morning."

He frowned, which made her laugh. "I can't win all the time, Master Kino."

"Uh, yes, you can."

"Would it help to know that it was a man who was about six feet tall and outweighed me by more than fifty pounds?"

"No."

"Oh, Eric, you can be so impossible. I guess that's why I love you so much." She reached for his hand, which he gave automatically. "Let me tell you about this girl I saw in the park a little while ago."

He rubbed his thumb over her wrist. "Okay, tell me."

As they ate lunch, Eric listened to his beautiful wife tell the story. He watched her face as she spoke. She was glowing like a child on Christmas morning, which made him happy. "So, why does this little thief intrigue you so much?"

"I don't know, there was just something about her. It was like, I don't know, like we were destined to meet. I know that sounds crazy but– oh, my goodness!" Her eyes went wide.

Never one to overreact, Eric stayed still and calm. "Tell me what you see."

"The girl– the one I was just telling you about. She just came into the diner!"

"You're kidding." He started to turn.

"No! Wait. Don't scare her away."

He frowned. "And you think my looking at her will do that?"

Shelley smiled at her husband. "Eric, you can be very intimidating, and don't tell me you don't know that." She glanced toward the girl. "I want to meet her. I want to talk to her."

Eric shook his head at his wife. “No you don’t.”

“Yes, I do, Eric, I really do,” she whined.

He sighed. “Do you absolutely insist that you have to get involved with this girl who will probably be nothing but trouble?”

Shelley smiled sweetly, batted her eyes. “I do. Now, how can I get her attention without scaring her away?”

“You can’t.” He sighed, started to rise, “but I can.”

She grabbed his arm. “Wait, what are you gonna do?”

“Trust me,” he said. “If she really is how you described her, this should only take a minute.”

She did trust him. With her life. She watched him, wondering what he had in mind. He strode to the counter to pay his bill, laid his wallet on the counter and made small talk with JonPaul, the owner of the diner. Shelley’s eyes grew wide as the girl slowly approached the bar and sat at the counter right next to where Eric stood.

It happened in only a split second. Quick as a shot, the young girl’s hand reached out and grabbed Eric’s wallet. Even quicker, Eric’s hand slammed down on top of hers, pinning her there. Their eyes met. Defiantly, she lifted her chin and tugged. He didn’t budge.

“You’re had, sweetheart, so you may as well stop trying to get away,” Eric said.

“Should I call the police?” JonPaul asked.

The girl struggled again to free her hand. Eric grabbed her by the wrist and raised her hand up to show her there was no way of getting free. “I suppose that’s up to her,” Eric answered. He raised his eyebrows at her. “Would you like him to call the police?”

“Do I actually have a choice?”

Eric nodded. “You actually do. The alternative is to have a conversation with my wife.”

“Your wife?”

Eric motioned toward Shelley.

“Oh, man, she’s the lady that was in the park.”

“Correct. So, what will it be, conversation or jail?”

She glared at her captor. His eyes were like stone, but the wife, yeah, that was the way to go. She nodded and he pulled her toward the booth, shoved her in first and sat beside her.

Shelley smiled sweetly at the captive delinquent. The girl, however, did not reciprocate. “So talk,” the little imp ordered.

Eric only shook his head at his wife. She'd become quite a philanthropist over the past years. She said she felt so very blessed and she just wanted to give back. He realized this young girl was about to become one of Shelley's projects. A major one. Not that he minded. They pretty much prayed every day for God to place in their path someone they needed to help or teach or maybe someone who needed to help them or teach them. He wasn't sure how this one would turn out.

"What's your name?" Shelley asked.

"Why is that important?"

"Well, it's not really. I mean, a name is not so important as the person inside, but I'd like to know your name so that I can call you something other than, 'hey you.'"

When the girl only sat sullenly, Shelley sighed. "Okay. Anyway, I'm Shelley and this is Eric."

Ice blue eyes sliced up at the man.

"Are you hungry?" Shelley asked.

She was starving. Hadn't eaten all day, but she certainly wasn't gonna let them know that. She schooled her features.

The Kinos caught the act. Shelley glanced up at her stalwart husband who motioned to JonPaul.

"Will you bring us another sandwich, Jon, and some juice?"

"You got it."

"So, what's the deal?" the girl asked. "What exactly do you want from me?"

Shelley smiled. "I want to help you."

"You want to help me. Oh, yeah, right. Help me what? You want to go into business together?"

"Come on now," Shelley cajoled sweetly. "You must know you need help. A young girl as beautiful as you, running around stealing from people, it's not normal– and it's not right, but we'll get to that part later. I think you're crying out for help and I want to help you."

The girl lowered her head as she thought. This woman is so nice. So honest. She exposes her heart so easily. Not like Tommy described her at all. Still, as he'd said, people could be deceiving. She glared up at her. "Beth."

"What?"

"Beth. That's my name."

Shelley grinned. "Well, then, Beth, it's nice to meet you."

JonPaul sat a plate down in front of her and left them.

Shelley made polite conversation as Beth ate. She spoke of the good food at the diner, what was good for a healthy body, the weather. Beth only listened, offering no comments.

Eric smiled at his wife. She was an angel as far as he was concerned, but an angel who had a knack for getting into trouble.

Shelley waited for Beth to finish eating before she probed any further. When it appeared she'd had her fill, Shelley began again. "So, why do you do it, Beth?"

"Do what?"

"Why do you steal?"

Beth shrugged. "Why does anybody steal? For the money."

"You could get a job," Eric suggested.

Beth glared at him. "Not as easily as you think. Besides, stealing is much more fun."

Shelley sighed. "Jail time is no fun."

Beth had no ready answer for that, so she skirted the issue. "Look, if what you're tryin' to do is teach me about your idea of morality, forget it. I have my own code I live by."

Shelley smiled kindly. "We, Eric and I, we would never force our ideas of morality on anyone."

"Yeah, right."

"You'll just have to trust me on that, but tell me, Beth, why it wouldn't be easy for you to get a job. You're obviously smart, very strong and very pretty. What's holding you back?"

Beth sneered. "Well, they sort of require you to prove your identity and have a place of residence. If I had the money to have a place of residence then I wouldn't need a job now would I? Life is funny like that."

"Why don't you have any identification?"

Beth sulked at the question and met it with stony silence.

Eric shook his head. "She's obviously on the run, Shelley."

Beth and Shelley's eyes met. There was something there in those blue eyes that pleaded, "Don't go there."

Shelley pressed her lips together, then smiled. "Listen, whatever reason you find yourself in the situation you're in now, I want to help you. Help you get on your feet. Get cleaned up. Find a safer occupation. Find a direction that is not so self-destructive. I won't pry into your personal life if you would rather I don't. I won't ask personal

questions. Just let me help you. You need someone you can depend on. Someone you can trust."

"So, what are you suggesting?" Beth spat. "You wanna take me home like some stray puppy?"

"No." "Yes." Both Eric and Shelley answered at the same time. Shelley turned her big brown eyes up to meet her husband's. He closed his eyes in defense, but he knew he was fighting a losing battle. He sighed.

"Yes," Shelley repeated. "Come home with us. Meet our family. I only ask that you make an effort."

"An effort to do what?"

"An effort to get along with those around you. An effort to improve yourself. Follow my rules and at least give my suggestions a chance. What could it hurt? I'm offering to put a roof over your head. Food in your mouth. Get you off the street and out of danger. Try it. If after you've given some time and effort to helping yourself you still don't want my help, then leave. No strings attached."

"How will you know that I won't steal from you? I mean, I wouldn't trust me if I were you."

Shelley smiled. "I don't know, but, generally speaking, stray puppies don't bite the hand that feeds them."

Beth made a face. Sighed. Gave in. "Sure. I'll let you do your thing for a while, maybe, but I'm not promising anything."

Eric's eyes narrowed. Something was not right. She gave in just a bit too easily. Maybe because it was an offer too good to pass up, but his instincts told him this girl was not on the up and up. However, his instincts also told him she was not dangerous.

Shelley clapped her hands together. "Wonderful. So, now, you come with me. I have some errands to run. It'll be great. You'll see."

"Okay now, hold up a second, Shelley," Eric said. He turned to Beth. "Are you carrying?"

"Carrying what?" Her eyes opened wide. "You mean a weapon? Of course not."

His eyes narrowed.

"You don't believe me? You can search me."

"Good. I will. Step out to the car."

He walked the women to Shelley's BMW, searched Beth's backpack first, found no weapons, separated out the wallets and credit cards to be sent back to the owners and tossed the pack into the trunk.

"Face the car," he ordered, and then motioned to Shelley. "You do it or I will."

Sighing, Shelley searched Beth. "Nothing," she finally said.

He nodded. "Be careful, Shelley. I'll see you soon."

Shelley kissed her husband good-bye.

Eric watched her leave. He was not pleased with her. Shelley usually had good instincts when it came to people and he certainly did. He sensed trouble from this girl, yet nothing sinister. If she was a handful, so be it. As a rule they didn't shy away from something difficult. Nevertheless, there was something not quite right. He would have to keep a close eye on the little rogue. He did trust Shelley's instincts, though, and that was the only reason he was allowing her to go through with her plan. Well, allowing wasn't quite the correct word. More like conceding. Still, he was sure Shelley could handle herself with Beth. At least physically. Emotionally, she would get herself all caught up in the girl's troubles until she was sure of a happy ending. Shelley always envisioned a happy ending in every situation. That was her way.

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1 John 1:9

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Chapter 2

Mark closed his locker and gazed down the senior hall. She was running toward him. Man oh man, Jana was beautiful. Her long blond hair swinging back and forth with the motion of her body, her skirt flipping up to expose muscular, cheerleader thighs. He had to force himself to look at her face as she approached. She appeared anxious and worried.

"What's wrong, Jana?" he asked as he pulled her close and brushed the hair from her face.

She pulled at his hand urgently. "Come on, Mark, it's Joey. He's at it again."

"Aww, not again." Mark took off at a run, leaving his girl to try to catch up.

It was easy enough to find Joey once he got outside, even though he couldn't see Joey himself. The crowd that had gathered consisted of a number of students who looked more like bikers, about half the football team who had been on their way to practice, and all the girls who usually accompanied them.

Mark pushed his way through the line of boys. The kid known as "Bean" was standing off to one side, holding his arm, being attended to by another who was bleeding profusely from the nose. Joey was on the ground along with the kid who had not been smart enough to give up. Little Joe's muscular thighs were wrapped around the kid's neck. Calmly, Mark knelt down beside his brother.

"Let him go, Joey."

Joey never looked up. "I'm gonna break his neck first."

"Joe, I know you don't really want to do that. C'mon now, little bro, let him go. He's not worth it."

Joey looked up into Mark's calm face. Of course, his brother was right. He sighed, released his hold and sprang to his feet. The kid lay on the ground, gasping for breath. Immediately the crowd began to break up before a teacher or administrator showed up.

Mark's offensive line gathered around. "We had little bro for ya, Mark," one said. "We wouldn't let anything happen to him."

"We witnessed the whole thing, man," another said. "Joe was awesome. They started it. I'll vouch for that. Joe was walking along, toward the auditorium and I saw a bunch of guys running all of a sudden. They all came at him at the same time."

"Yeah, Mark, they started it, but Joey totally finished it." He patted Joey's back.

Mark nodded. "Thanks, guys. Tell coach I'm on my way."

"You got it."

Mark looked Joey over. His face was scratched on one side. "You okay?"

Joey huffed out a breath. "Sure. Look, I know what you're thinking. Man, I tried to walk away, but the three of them jumped me all at once. I had no choice."

"I believe you, Joe. You know that I know how it is, but you also know Mom's gonna freak and Ricky's gonna say that you always have a choice."

Joey wiped his nose on his sleeve, checked for blood then chuckled. "Yep, that's exactly what Ricky will say."

"Well," Mark said thoughtfully. "Maybe we can avoid the subject this time. They don't have to know."

Joey nodded. "Yeah, maybe. At least Ricky won't be there, but we'll have to get past Mom."

"That shouldn't be a problem. So, you goin' home or what?"

"No, I have a drama club meeting."

Mark rolled his eyes but said nothing. Joey had already played parts in two of Ricky's movies and Mark didn't understand why his little brother insisted on being involved in the silly little amateur school drama club.

"Meet me at the car after practice," Mark said.

Joey nodded. "I'll be there."

Mark turned toward the gym.

"I like the people," Joey called after him.

Mark turned back. "Huh?"

"That's why I go. I like the kids. It's fun. No pressure."

Mark smiled. Sometimes it was spooky how it seemed they could read each other's thoughts. "And I bet that cute girl with the streaky hair ain't bad either."

Joey grinned. "Not bad at all."

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Shelley, Beth and Jeffy burst through the kitchen door loaded down with packages. The two girls had hit it off immediately. It didn't surprise Shelley. Jeffy loved everyone and everyone loved Jeffy. She had an aura about her. She was truly like an angel, though, a very talkative angel.

The shopping trip turned out well. They had quickly purchased a starter wardrobe for Beth.

"Well," Shelley began. "We need to show Beth around and get her settled in her room. Which one do you think, Jeffy? The blue or the rose?"

Seven-year-old Jeffy wrinkled her nose and pretended to think really hard.

"The blue. It will match Beth's eyes."

"How many bedrooms are there in this giant place?" Beth asked.

"There are thirteen in all. Twelve upstairs, one on the main level. Upstairs there are six taken, so six extra bedrooms upstairs, depending on who's home, but I always like to say we have enough for everyone."

They walked from the kitchen which ran along the back of the house, to the next room which offered a huge dining room table sitting in front of glass doors that led to a giant several tiered deck, an elaborately landscaped swimming pool set up like a tropical island, and finally the ocean.

"Oh, my," was all Beth could say as she gazed out the doors.

"I know," Shelley commented. "Kinda takes your breath away, doesn't it? I grew up in much humbler circumstances and when I first came here that's all I said for about a month."

Beth looked her over. "Oh, really? Where did you grow up?"

"In a tiny house in Georgia. Then I married my first husband and I moved to another tiny house. It's still there. We stay there when we travel to Georgia. Come on, I'll show you around." She motioned to her right. "Those are the back steps. They lead up to the bedrooms. Everyone at our end of the hall usually uses those steps instead of the big ones in the front hall."

They moved from the giant dining area to a great room via three large steps that ran the width of the dining room. The large front room looked more like a hotel lobby. It sported three couches, several antique tables and chairs, magnificent works of art, vases and a mammoth entertainment center. Heading to the left out of that room was the entrance foyer with a curving staircase.
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Beth looked up at the beautifully carved wooden banister that overlooked the foyer as they climbed the steps. It was like living in a very modern castle. Once upstairs they headed to the left.

"Mine and Eric's bedroom is the last one on the right, just over the dining room and overlooking the ocean."

"This one is mine," Jeffy said, opening the door of a room across from her mom's.

Beth stepped in, took the tour with Jeffy pulling her along. The room was purple and pretty and included things that weren't usually found in a little girl's room. Oh, there were the usual dolls, a few anyway, but mostly there were books, computers, science kits, a real doctor's bag, a large work table and by the window an easel with a lovely painting on canvas of the front lawn. Beth glanced out the window and was surprised to see that the painting was amazingly accurate and detailed, including the fountain and lavish flowers. She gazed across the manicured lawn to the security gate they'd driven through. It was spectacular.

"Did you do this?" Beth asked, motioning to the painting.

"Uh huh. Mommy says I'm getting better and better. She loves flowers and I like to paint pictures for her, but I really like to draw people. Would you like to see all my drawings?"

"Another time, Jeffy," Shelley laughed. "Let's finish showing the house."

There were six guest bedrooms, the rose colored room next to Jeffy's and the blue room across the hall next to Eric's and Shelley's room. Next were the four rooms that were the only ones visible from the entrance foyer; a green room, a brown room, a soft yellow, and lastly a white room.

"If you turn right at the top of the stairs you'll find Mark and Joey's rooms and Ricky and then Bree."

"You have five kids?" Beth asked.

"I have three from my first marriage. Bree, Mark and Joey. Bree is twenty-seven. You've probably heard of her. Breanna Adams."

"You're kidding. You're Breanna Adams' mother?"

"Yes, I'm her mother."

"That's crazy. You don't look old enough."

Shelley smiled with pleasure at the compliment. "I was barely sixteen when I had her. Sometimes people think we're sisters."

"I bet that makes her mad."

"Oh, no, we're very close."

"Well anyway, I can't believe I'm in the home where Breanna Adams lives."

"What's more, my husband is Ricky Kino's father."

"Really? Wow, Ricky Kino is the sh– , oh, sorry."

"Daddy doesn't approve of cursing, even in jest. But he says profanity is merely a form of expression and Ricky can express himself any way he wants since he's a grown up, but I can't. Not yet."

"Ricky doesn't live here," Shelley added. "He moved out a few years ago to a ridiculously giant penthouse in Los Angeles, but he comes home to visit when he can."

"And Breanna, does she live here?" Beth asked.

"Yes. She likes to spend as much time with her brothers and sister as she can when she's not working. As I said, we're very close. She's filming on location in Florida right now."

Beth nodded. "And who were the others you mentioned?"

"My sons, Mark and Joey. Mark is a senior in high school and Joey is a sophomore."

"What's up there?" Beth asked, pointing to another short flight of steps just off the balcony.

"Oh, up there is what the boys used to call the space room. There's a room full of TV monitors up there. When security is tight we can actually have someone watch the monitors. There's cameras everywhere on the property."

Beth nodded. "This place is really something. I mean, it's so big. It seemed like forever from the security gate out by the road to the front door."

Shelley laughed. "It's a little under a mile, but it does seem longer, doesn't it?"

Beth nodded. "It's a real pretty drive with all the gardens and fountain and stuff. How do people get through the security gate, like to make deliveries and stuff?"

"They have to press a button and we'll answer the intercom, and punch in a code and buzz them through. Come on, let's head back downstairs."

At the bottom of the stairs they turned down a hallway that led back once again to the kitchen and then down toward the wing of the house that was under the boys' bedrooms. Shelley showed Beth a library, a study, a playroom and a trophy room.

From that hallway they took stairs down to the lower level. Beth was surprised to find an entire workout studio, sparring mats, a

soundproof music studio complete with the largest drum set Beth had ever seen, along with a prodigious keyboard and a room devoted entirely to weaponry.

"Wow, look at all this deadly lookin' stuff," Beth remarked.

"Yeah. Daddy and Ricky are weapons experts. Joey is learning. I know a bo staff routine. Daddy is going to teach me a Sai form and Ricky promised we're gonna start on the nunchukas real soon."

"You do all the martial arts stuff too?" Beth asked, surprised.

"Uh huh. I'm gonna be a black belt soon. I train with Daddy every morning. He says I'm almost as good a student as Mommy was except I talk too much. I'm working on that."

They went back upstairs and circled to the kitchen. "Jeffy, why don't you help Beth get her things up to her room," Shelley said.

"That's okay. I don't need help."

"That's what everyone says," Jeffy put in. "I think it's just because I look really small, but I can do more than you think and I'm great to talk to."

Beth grinned. "I just bet you are. Well then, Jeffy, I guess it's you and me."

However, before they could gather Beth's things, Ricky came striding in through the kitchen door.

"Ricky, Ricky," Jeffy cried, arms outstretched.

She was immediately swooped up in his arms and spun around as she giggled. Shelley was next. Once he put her down he immediately turned to the pretty girl standing near the kitchen table. He put his hands to his heart and sighed.

"Really, Shelley, you shouldn't have, but since you did, I just love it. A beautiful new little doll for me to play with!"

Jeffy giggled. "She's not a doll, she's our new friend," she proclaimed.

Ricky eyed her. "Really?"

Beth frowned at him. "I'm the type of doll that little boys shouldn't play with," she said with a sneer. "You might get hurt."

Ricky moved closer. "Ooh, really? Let me see!" He reached up to touch her face but she slapped his hand away.

"Behave yourself, Rick," Shelley ordered. "Beth, this is Ricky. Rick, this is Beth. She's gonna be our guest for a while."

"Interesting," Ricky said softly, then turned to Beth. "Welcome to heaven."

Beth only pressed her lips together.

"So Beth," Ricky said. "How old are you?"

"Old enough."

He nodded with a smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Jeffy took Beth's hand to lead her upstairs to her room. "C'mon, Beth. Don't worry about Ricky. He's really nice, and funny too."

Ricky watched them leave. "Hmm, sooo, let me guess, Shell, Beth is your new project?"

Shelley frowned. "She's not a project. She's a human being."

Ricky stood waiting, eyebrows raised.

"Okay, okay, yes, she has some problems that I want to help her with. Sit down and I'll tell you all about it."

Ricky listened intently and she barely finished the telling by the time the girls came back downstairs. Shelley rose. "All settled in?"

"Well, there wasn't much," Beth said.

"We'll fix that soon. Come on, you can help me start dinner."

Beth's face registered surprise.

"What?" Shelley asked.

Beth shrugged. "Well, I mean, all this money and you have no one to cook for you?"

Ricky laughed. "Oh, believe me, Beth, we would all love to have someone else do the cooking, however, Shelley needs all the practice she can get."

He ducked barely in time to miss a black eye. "Her fighting skills, on the other hand, are nothing to mess with," he quipped.

Shelley nodded in satisfaction. "I actually enjoy cooking. It's relaxing, but we do have someone come in once a week to help with some of the cleaning and the laundry."

"Must be nice."

"It is. It took me a while to get used to it. We're all pretty self-sufficient. We clean up behind ourselves. Everyone changes their own bed linens and personal stuff like that. Rosa is a lady who used to help Eric back when Ricky was little. Her niece, Lily, is who helps us now. She is such a sweet girl. She's in college and says the extra money really comes in handy. Okay, well, let's get started."

They washed their hands and Shelley set Beth up with some carrots and a knife and a cutting board.

"So," Beth began, turning to Ricky. "Miss Shelley is your stepmother, right?"

"Right. My mother died when I was eleven. My father met Shelley when he recruited her as his student for the MART eight years ago.

Best thing that ever happened to him, or me for that matter. She's the greatest."

He winked at Shelley as she turned and smiled at him. "And then she gave birth to this little monkey and she's so cute, we think we'll keep her."

Jeffy giggled as Ricky picked her up and sat with her in his lap. Beth smiled. She had to agree, Jeffy was adorable. She had long, black, or maybe very dark brown hair that fell in large curls down her back like a Hawaiian princess. Her eyes were big and brown and her skin glowed like molten gold mixed with cream. Her nose was tiny and turned up and she had a perfect little rose-colored mouth. Ricky was kissing her cheeks and tickling her and Jeffy laughed a deep belly laugh and squirmed around trying to get free.

"Jeffy, is that a nickname or her real name?" Beth asked.

"It's her nickname," Shelley answered. "I wanted to name her my favorite flower, which is a dandelion."

"Dandelion," Ricky said, shaking his head and rolling his eyes.

Shelley turned without apology. "As you can guess, the kids were adamant that I not name her 'Dandelion'. So, I asked what the French word is for 'Dandelion'."

"And instead of telling her 'pissenlit,' which would be horrible, I told her the French for 'little yellow flower' would be 'la petite fleur jaune,'" Ricky said.

"You speak French?" Beth asked.

"He speaks five languages," Jeffy answered.

"And so la petite fleur jaune literally means, the little flower yellow," Shelley said. "I liked that yellow in French is jaune. It's like the month of June, the first month of summer. It sounds yellow to me. So somehow it all got put together and Jeffy got named June Flower."

"June Flower, that's a very cool name," Beth said to Jeffy.

"Then, Mark and Joey started calling me by my initials and then they just started calling me Jeffy. I don't mind."

"It's kinda cute," Beth told her with a smile. "So when will Mark and Joey be home?"

Shelley smiled. "Anytime now. Mark had football practice, and Joey had a drama club meeting, but they should be home soon." Shelley turned and watched a moment as Beth cut up veggies for the salad. Working in the kitchen wasn't new to Beth, Shelley surmised.

Dinner was almost ready by the time Eric came through the door, much in the same way Ricky had, scooping up Jeffy and Shelley in great bear hugs.

He offered Beth a polite hello, much warmer than earlier in the day, and Beth was able to catch a glimpse of what had attracted Shelley to him. He had to be around fifty, but he didn't look like it. He had broad shoulders and a trim waist and what she thought of as hippie hair, pulled back in a tail. Beth decided the dark eyes, handsome face and warm smile, all had been passed on to his son.

Nevertheless, she watched the men warily. They were strong. Not just physically, but mentally and spiritually. She could sense it. She could almost feel the power that emanated from them. They could make anyone feel utterly protected or very afraid. But she wasn't afraid. She could barely keep herself from glaring at Ricky. He was so very cocky. So self-assured. And he and his father had murdered a man and gotten away with it.

Looking at Ricky she realized it would be easy to forget that. He was a gorgeous, hunky male with a totally hot body. She remembered him in earlier movies. He'd had long hair then. His father still did, but now Ricky wore his hair short. It was thick and black and a lock of it fell over onto his forehead. It made her sick to think of how the world seemed to revere him. She would not be seduced by his charisma, however. She was here for justice, and justice would be done.

The front door slammed. "We're home. We'll be right down," Mark called.

"Okay," Shelley called back.

Ricky however, was not fooled. They always came in the kitchen door like everyone else, so why not today? He slipped out of the kitchen and quickly up the stairs. "Hold it," he ordered just as the boys were creeping down the hall.

They stopped, turned. "Hey Rick! Didn't know you were here. How's it going?" Mark asked.

"Not bad, not bad," Ricky said casually, as he scrutinized them. "And you? So like, did you guys have a good day at school?"

"Sure. No problems."

"Oh, okay, then that means you won?"

The boys looked at each other, then back at their stepbrother who also happened to be their martial arts Master. They loved Ricky like a brother, practically worshiped him, had the utmost respect for him– but man, it was impossible to get anything past him and that was somewhat

frustrating. Also frustrating was the fact that the one time they tried to keep a secret, Ricky would have to be home.

Joey smiled nervously. “Of course I won.”

Ricky’s jaw tensed. “How many times do we have to go over this, Joe?”

Mark jumped in to defend his brother. “He had no choice, Ricky. There were three of them. They jumped him all at once.”

“They jumped you out of the blue?”

Joey shrugged. “Not exactly. They followed me across campus, yellin’ stuff, daring me to fight them. You know how it is.”

“He ignored everything they said, but that only fueled the fire, know what I mean?” Mark added.

“I know exactly what you mean. Nevertheless, there is always a choice. Always.”

Mark and Joey quickly glanced at each other before they let go and burst out laughing.

“What?” Ricky asked.

“You said exactly what we said you would say,” Mark answered, still chuckling.

“Is that so?” Ricky asked. “I didn’t realize I’d become so predictable. Maybe I should turn your instruction over to Dad. I’m sure he won’t be so cliché.”

“No! No. That’s okay,” both boys said at once.

Ricky smiled. His father was a legendary teacher. He was the best. He was also the hardest. Shelley would vouch for that. “So, you wanna keep this one quiet? Okay. I guess that’ll be no problem, but it’ll cost ya.”

“That’s blackmail,” Joey complained.

Ricky shrugged. “As I said, it all comes back to choices, doesn’t it? You always have a choice my bros, and there are always consequences for what you choose.”

“So what are the consequences this time?” Joey asked.

“Hmm, you know, my car could use a coat of wax.”

Joey sighed. “Fine. I still say I had no choice. Besides, part of this is your fault.”

“Mine?”

“Yeah. Why do you think they’re always trying to jump me? Because I’m your stepbrother, because you trained me, because I’ve been in some of your movies.”

Ricky frowned. “Would you have it any other way?”

"Well, no, of course not."

Ricky grinned. "See? Choices. Come on, go get cleaned up for dinner and I'll see if I can figure something out to keep you from being a target."

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Dinner at the Kino's was quite pleasant Beth observed. Everyone listened when anyone spoke. They all seemed to be genuinely interested in her. Beth gave them very little information, yet none of them really pressed her. She wondered if they'd been instructed not to, or if the family in general had respect for the privacy of others. She noticed that when Eric spoke he did so very softly. He expected others' attention when he spoke and he got it. Mark and Joey seemed like regular high school guys even though they lived with famous people. Shelley seemed truly sweet with a heart full of love and compassion. Of course, that was what Beth had been told she would act like and that was what got her into the house. Her eyes met Ricky's. He'd been watching her. She raised her chin defiantly. A look she'd perfected.

Ricky grinned. Beth turned to Mark. "So, do you know where you want to go to college?"

Mark smiled at her. "I have a few offers right now. UCLA is recruiting me. USC, Hawaii, Washington, Washington State, Arizona, Colorado. So is the University of Texas and then there's several other smaller colleges. It really depends on how my season goes this year."

She smiled sweetly at him. "Well you're so big and strong, I predict you'll have the best year ever."

Ricky frowned, glanced at his father who was also frowning.

Beth turned her smile on Jeffy. "And what do you want to be when you grow up?"

Jeffy giggled. "I want to be the king of the world."

"You mean queen," Joey corrected her.

Jeffy frowned. "No, I don't. Daddy said I can be anything I want to be and I want to be king, not queen."

"Jeffy, girls are queens, boys are kings." Joey looked up at Eric, appealing to him.

Eric shrugged. "Well, I did say she can be anything she wants to be. However Jeffy," he said, turning to his young daughter. "What Joey says is correct, girls are queens, boys are kings, but they both have the same power, so why not be a queen?"

"Because, 'king' sounds better," Jeffy said with a pout.

"Okay, so, what makes it sound better?"
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Jeffy thought. “I dunno. I guess cuz it seems more powerful.”

“Veery good, and there’s a reason why it seems more powerful.”

“Why?”

“Because, although I said kings and queens hold the same power, they are still different, because physically men and women are different. Men are stronger than women physically. So in that way they are more powerful. That’s science and you should do some research on that.”

“Okay I will.” She sat back thinking and frowning.

“Good. Besides, the world already has a king, right?”

She nodded. “Jesus is the king.”

“Right, and are you smarter than Jesus?”

“Ha, of course not, Daddy, He knows every single thing in the whole world and in the whole universe.”

“Then why do you want to take his place?”

“Oh, well, I don’t really. I love Him.”

“That’s what I thought. So search your heart a minute and tell me, why do you think you wanted to be king?”

She frowned. “It just sounded like the best thing to be.”

Eric nodded patiently. “Well, sweetie, the best thing we can be is different for each person, but one thing is the same, and that is the best thing we can be is what God made us, and we should strive to be what He intended us to be. And did God make you a girl?”

“Yes.”

“Then don’t strive to be a boy. Instead, simply strive to be the best girl you can be. For example, I know you want to be a good martial artist, so strive to be strong and fast. I also know you want to be the smartest, so keep working on that. If each of us does our best to make the best out of what God created us to be, then it doesn’t matter if we’re a boy or a girl.”

“See,” Jeffy said, nodding her head at Joey in victory. “Daddy says it doesn’t matter.”

Joey laughed. “Wow, Jeffy, out of everything he said, that’s what you got out of it?”

She smiled. “Well, I sort of twisted it around a little bit.”

“More than a little bit, young lady,” Shelley put in.

Jeffy frowned. “What do you think, Beth? Does it matter if you’re a boy or a girl?”

Beth glanced up at Ricky. “Oh, it matters a lot.”

“It does?” Jeffy asked.

"Well, sure. There's a big difference between being a boy and being a girl."

"Is there?" Ricky asked. "By all means, fill us in."

Beth dipped her finger in her water glass and used it to wet her full bottom lip. "A boy, for example," Beth said slowly, "has sex whenever he can."

The table became eerily quiet. Shelley glanced at Eric, wondering if he would put a stop to the topic of conversation. She hoped not because she was interested in what Beth had to say. It might give her a clue as to where Beth's problems stemmed from. It seemed Eric too was interested.

"And a girl?" Ricky asked.

"And a girl has sex whenever she wants."

Mark choked on his water. Joey snickered.

"That's enough," Eric said quietly.

Shelley pressed her lips tightly together to keep from giggling. Eric rolled his eyes at her.

"I know about sex," Jeffy protested.

"Good for you," Mark said. "But how are you doing in math?" He stood, reached for Jeffy's hand. "Come on, Jeffy, let's get your homework done."

The family stood and began clearing dishes. To Beth's amazement, except for Mark and Jeffy, the entire family helped clean the kitchen.

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Ricky walked along the beach with his father as the sun began to set. Silently they turned out toward the water, as they had countless times since Ricky was old enough to walk, to witness the incredibly beautiful sight. As the sun disappeared beyond the horizon, Ricky turned his gaze toward his father. He was a good, strong man. The best man Ricky had ever known or even known of. An incredible father, a loving husband, a brilliant business man, a loyal friend, a superb martial artist and even more so a teacher. Ricky had turned to him many times for counsel and he was about to do it again.

Eric turned to face his son. "There's a problem."

Ricky smiled. "Is that a question or a statement?"

"A statement."

Puzzled, Ricky ran a hand through his hair. "Are you speaking about me or this Beth person?"

"I was referring to you, even though I believe Beth is, or soon will be a problem."
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Ricky nodded. “Well Dad, I surely agree with you. Something not quite right there.”

“I can’t put my finger on it, but let’s keep on our toes,” Eric said.

“I’ll do my best to keep an eye on her. Why did you even allow Shelley to bring her here?”

Eric raised his eyebrows. “Allow Shelley?”

Ricky laughed. “Yeah, that was a stupid question, huh?”

Eric eyed his son as the darkness grew around them. “Well?”

Ricky nodded and sighed. “I guess what I wanted to talk to you about is, well, I’m– not happy.”

Eric was silent for some time as he considered the best way to help. Finally he spoke. “And so, son, you’re here to discuss the cause of this unhappiness?”

“I was hoping you could help me figure out what the cause is and how to fix it.”

Eric shook his head and spoke sharply. “No you weren’t. You know what it is.”

“I do? I’m not so sure about that,” Ricky said softly.

It was the defeat in his son’s voice that got to Eric. “When did you lose touch with yourself, Rick?”

Ricky lowered his head. “I’m not sure.”

“Okay, then let me ask you a more specific question. What particular incident triggered you coming home today?”

Ricky sighed. “Well, I guess it was when I woke up this morning next to a girl I don’t even know.”

Ricky watched for his father’s reaction, which was only a slight nod of the head. If he was disappointed, he didn’t show it. Of course, he didn’t have to.

“And I’m guessing that indiscretion was not the first one?”

Ricky’s lips pressed together and he shook his head.

“When you chose that path, did you have an excuse?”

“An excuse?” Ricky asked.

“What rationale made you override all you knew about why that path is no good?”

“Oh, well, I don’t know. I mean, women are always throwing themselves at me. It wasn’t a conscious decision. I really didn’t think about it too much. I just finally gave in and then after the first time, the second time was easier.”

“Of course. That’s the way sin works,” Eric stated.

Ricky breathed deeply and hung his head, listening to the waves as they crashed on the shore. "Are you about to preach?"

"I don't think I need to do that. You know all the reasons we choose to live the way we do. You know that there are over a hundred and eighty scriptures about sexual immorality. There's a reason for that. God knows and understands the power of our sex drive. It's strong, but that doesn't mean we can't master it."

Ricky pushed his bare foot through the wet sand. "I guess I wasn't exactly trying to master it."

"That much is obvious. And your honesty is good, but you know, Rick, I'm not the one you should be confessing to."

Ricky nodded. "That's why I came home, so I can clear my head and talk to God."

As if choreographed, they both stepped closer to the water to allow it to bathe their feet.

"I feel like there's another reason you're home, Rick."

"What's that?" Ricky asked.

Eric sighed. "You *know* the answer to that question which tells me that you're not being one with yourself."

"I'm *trying* to be," Ricky said, his irritation showing.

"You don't try, Rick. You DO."

Ricky looked up smiling. "You sound like Yoda."

Eric allowed a small twitching of his lips. "Seriously, do you not remember how to regain the oneness?"

"If I did I wouldn't be here bothering you."

"Back to basics, Ricky. What are the basics I taught you over and over again?"

Ricky went over the old mantra in his mind before he spoke it. "Patience, a calm spirit, let go, allow, always be honest, trust God."

"Which one is your biggest problem right at this moment?" Eric asked and then waited while his son considered his answer.

Ricky looked into his father's eyes. "Honesty?"

Pleased, Eric nodded. "You know, of course, that you cannot be dishonest with yourself and still be at one, meaning, at peace. You must be true to yourself in order to feel true joy."

"What do you think I'm being dishonest about?" Ricky asked.

Eric surprised Ricky by giving him the answer to that question. "About what you want in life."

Ricky looked down. His father saw everything so easily. Ricky had been denying what he wanted for years and it was destroying him, yet

he saw no noble way to go after his desires. He looked up. "What if what I want, even what I need, isn't the best thing?"

"If it's what you truly want then it is the best thing. Trust God."

"Dad, will you stop being so philosophical for just a moment and help me please?"

"I'm doing my best, Rick. If a man is born an artist, and all he wants in the world to do is paint, then he should at least pursue painting, even if others tell him he should do something else. He can try to do what others tell him to do. He may even be successful at it, yet until he is honest about what he truly wants, he will not experience true joy."

"I'm not speaking of my career."

Eric sighed. "Nor am I. I'm speaking of honesty." He touched Ricky's shoulder. "Do you want me to say that it's okay to want what you want, or *who* you want?"

Ricky's head jerked up. "Okay, then, you do know what I'm talking about, *who* I'm talking about?"

"I know you've been denying what you feel for a long time. I wondered when it would catch up to you."

"What do I do, Dad?"

"I just told you the answer to that question."

Ricky drew a deep breath, blew it out in frustration, and dug his toes into the sand.

Eric had mercy. "Son, you have to be honest with yourself. If you love her, go after her."

"What difference would it make? She doesn't love me back."

"Are you so sure? It almost sounds to me like you're afraid. Will you let your fear keep you from going after what you truly want? Face that fear. Tell her how you feel. Give her your love. What she does with that love is up to her, but you must be brave enough to put it out there. How can you know whether it's for the best if you never test it?" Eric smiled at his son. "Remember when I refused to let Shelley know how I felt about her? I was miserable. You told me to jump in the water and swim around."

Ricky grinned. "It seems like just yesterday."

Eric smiled, turned back out toward the sea. "Your promiscuity, son, is in an attempt to fulfil a need. A void. No man was meant to be celibate. You either go after who it is you want, or you settle for less, and you've never seemed to be the type who settles."

Pushing his hands into his pockets Ricky sighed and then looked down. "Thanks, Dad."

Eric put an arm around his son. "I love you, Rick. When you were little, I didn't think I'd ever be able to love you more, and yet, every minute of every day proves me wrong on that. I could never have asked for a better son. You're a good man, a good son, a good brother and you're gonna make some lucky woman a good husband. And then, one day, some very lucky little boy or girl is gonna be very happy to have you as their father."

Ricky's eyes moistened. He swallowed hard to control the emotion. "That will be very cool."

"Yes. Yes it will," Eric agreed as he looked his son over. "You're not centered. How long will you be home?"

Ricky shrugged his shoulders. "As long as it takes I guess."

"Good. Train with me."

Ricky bowed to his father. "I'd be honored."

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Back inside the house Ricky made his rounds. It was nice to be home among the people he loved and the people who loved him and saying goodnight to everyone had always been a part of his routine. First he kissed his father's wife on the cheek and told her it was great to be home. She hugged him warmly and told him it was always wonderful to have him home.

Next, he headed upstairs to see Jeffy. However, as he neared Jeffy's room he noticed the door to Beth's room was ajar. He glanced in as he passed and came to a complete halt. He could see clearly that she was in the bathroom, taking a bubble bath with the door wide open. He watched her as she dribbled water over her body, humming to herself as she did. His eyes narrowed as he thought of Mark and Joey just down the hall with an abundance of teenage hormones rushing through their bodies and wondered just what kind of game was this girl playing?

She looked up and their eyes met. Slowly, seductively, she rose up out of the water. She stepped out of the tub, walked out of the bathroom and straight to where Ricky stood at her bedroom door. Without taking her eyes off him, she softly closed the door in his face.

Shaking his head, he moved on to tell Jeffy goodnight. Of course, that was never simple. The little magpie told him about her school project, about her science teacher who'd been wrong about some principle of physics, about her love of some new music she'd just
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learned and about what she intended to wear to school the next day. She'd kissed him and hugged him and as a final request, asked him to please be nice to Beth. Next he stopped by Mark's room. The door was open but Ricky knocked out of respect for privacy. Joey was there and the boys' conversation came to an abrupt halt.

"Mind if I come in?" Ricky said.

"Of course not," Mark answered.

"So what's up?" Ricky asked.

"Not much," Mark said. "Same old."

"You guys keeping up with your training?"

"I am," Joey said. "But now that school's back in session I may be down to once a week of a formal class."

Ricky nodded. "I'm gonna be home for a while if you want to train with Dad and I."

In their household, whenever the subject matter centered around the martial arts and their training, their discipline and respect for their art and their teacher always took precedence over their familial relationships, which is why when Ricky made the offer to Joey, the young man rose and bowed. "I'd be honored."

Ricky bowed to his student before turning to Mark. "So, bro, I know football is taking up your time. You need anything though, you let me know."

"Thanks, Rick," Mark said.

Ricky nodded and looked the young man over. "Are you and Jana still together?"

"Yep."

"Gettin' any yet?"

"Geez, Rick."

Ricky grinned when Joey burst out laughing. "Just thought I'd try to stay in the loop."

"Yeah, and I'll try to keep you informed," Mark said dryly.

"Look, it's not my place to say anything, but before you do anything with your girl, you might want to discuss things with someone, like Dad, or your dad, or your mom."

Mark looked at him like he'd lost his mind.

"Yeah, not your mom. Okay then, maybe Pastor Cole."

Mark's eyebrow raised.

Ricky shrugged. "This is not my area of expertise. You can forget I said anything. It's just that, ya see, I've recently stumbled and I am

suffering the consequences, so I was just trying to help you learn from my mistakes."

Mark nodded his head. His older, much respected stepbrother and martial arts Master was humbling himself in front of him, and the effect was instead of Mark losing respect for Ricky, he gained even more respect. He bowed to show that respect.

Touched by that, Ricky had to clear his throat. "Well, Good night, guys."

"Backatcha."

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Bree turned abruptly at the call for help, her hand shielding her eyes from the sun. She and Nick both scanned the water but Bree spotted the man first. "There," she pointed, pulling her hand away from Nick's grasp.

He grabbed it again. "Where do you think you're going?"

She jerked her hand away. "I'm going out to help that man. You go see if you can find a lifeguard." She started toward the water but Nick grabbed her arm.

"Stop. You're not going out there in that water."

"Nick, don't be silly. I'm an extremely strong swimmer. I was on the swim team in high school and I life-guarded in the summer. Please, go find help," she said pulling away. Without waiting for his reply she took off running toward the waves.

Within seconds she was swimming out towards the man. Some people who'd been fishing off a nearby dock pointed toward the drama taking place. Nick's jaw clenched, nevertheless, he did as Bree instructed. Where was the lifeguard anyway? He passed the tower and went to the station. The lifeguard was emerging as Nick approached.

"Where have you been?" Nick yelled at the young kid.

"Sir?"

"There's some dude out there in the ocean drowning while you're messing around."

The young man quickly grabbed his gear. "I just came on duty. Where's the victim?"

Nick pointed to where Bree was already pulling the man toward the beach. The lifeguard took off, speaking into his radio as he ran. Nick turned and followed.

By the time Nick got back to Bree there was a crowd. The lifeguard knelt by the man, speaking into his radio. Bree stood by, breathing heavily, her hands on her knees.
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"Is he okay?" Bree asked.

"He's alive, thanks to you," the lifeguard answered.

A moment later a jeep arrived and a team hopped out to attend to the man who apparently had a bad case of cramps.

"That's Breanna Adams," someone in the crowd called out.

Phones were pulled, pictures and video taken.

Bree grabbed Nick's hand. "Let's get out of here before there's a story in the paper."

He said nothing as they made their way toward the hotel. He waited to get to their room before he exploded. He grabbed her by the shoulders. "When I tell you 'no,' you'd better listen to me."

Her brow wrinkled before she smiled. "You're kidding, right?"

He moved closer to her and spoke in a low, menacing tone. "Do I look like I'm kidding around?"

Bree stepped back. "What's your problem?"

"I don't appreciate you trying to make me look bad."

"Make *you* look bad? What are you talking about? I wasn't trying to do anything but help that man."

"You know exactly what I'm talking about. 'Oooh, look, that's Breanna Adams. She jumped in and saved that man while her bodyguard stands by and does nothing.'"

She shrugged. "Then I guess you should've jumped in too."

His hand snapped out and grabbed her by the ponytail, pulling her close. "Listen girl, you'd better watch how you talk to me. I'm not one of your minions."

Bree reached up, tried to loosen his grip on her hair. "Let me go," she ordered.

He tugged hard. "You don't give me orders. I'm the man in this relationship. I don't care that you're *the* Breanna Adams. I don't care if you're *the* Queen of England."

She grimaced. "Ow, let me go, Nick. You're blowing this all out of proportion."

"Maybe," he said softly. "Or maybe I'm just reeling you in now, before you think you can walk all over me."

"Who's walking on who?" she said, wincing in pain as he tugged on her hair again.

He pulled her toward the bed and threw her down on it. "Like I said, I'm not one of your little minions who snaps to whenever you bat an eyelash, Bree."

She righted herself on the bed. "I don't treat you like that and you know it, but let me tell you this right now–don't you dare think you can toss me around either. I'm not some meek little girl you can have your way with." She started to rise but he pushed her back down.

"Oh yeah? Let's just see about that." He knelt on the bed.

Bree rolled to the other side and rose quickly but he grabbed her by the back of her swimsuit and jerked. She flew backwards onto the bed. "Stop this right now," she ordered, her irritation evident.

He pinned her down. "Where do you get off talking to me like that? You don't give me orders. No one gives me orders," he said as he held her down.

"Get off me!" she screamed.

His hand clamped down across her mouth. He laughed. "I'm gonna show you who's boss."

She bucked, fought, struggled against his strength. By the time he realized he'd let himself get out of control, the deed was done. He'd lost his temper and that was something he needed to tamp down. He looked down at her tear-stained face.

"Man, I'm sorry, Bree. Really, I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me."

"Can I get up, please?" she asked softly, showing no emotion.

He moved off her. Bree stood shakily, went into the bathroom and quietly closed the door.

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Galatians 6:7-8

"Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life."

Chapter 3

"There you are," Shelley said as she entered her bedroom and moved toward the open French doors.

"Oh, hi," Beth said, turning from the balcony where she'd been watching Ricky and Eric do forms. "I know this looks bad, me being in your room and all. I came in looking for you, and I saw them outside doing their karate stuff and I stopped to watch."

Shelley nodded with a smile. "It's okay, and yeah, they're pretty impressive, aren't they?"

"They're actually amazing. Even I'm impressed, and that takes a lot. How long have they been doing the martial arts stuff?"

"Both of them from the time they could walk. It's ingrained in them. It's part of who they are."

Shelley watched a moment as her husband and Ricky twirled large swords within inches of each other, jumped high in the air, did flips and somersaults completely in sync.

"What's the name of their, um, what do you call it, style?"

"Their art is Zendo Ryu, the complete school of thought. It's like taking the very best from every single art and combining it for your own needs depending on your situation. It was one of the first forms of mixed martial arts. Of course, in order to use it, you have to know each art, which they do. It's constant study, constant training."

"And they all do this?"

"All except Bree. And they're all quite good. I train early in the mornings with Eric and Jeffy before she goes to school, and we all teach, either at one of Eric's schools or as guests here and there." Shelley smiled at her houseguest. "So, how are you feeling, Beth? You've been here almost a week. You've had a chance to meet everyone but Bree. What do you think so far?"

Beth returned the smile. "Everyone is very nice. No one's given me a hard time and I really appreciate that."

"And have you thought of what you might want to do with your life, now that you've had time to think?"

Beth shook her head.

"Let's sit down," Shelley said, moving outside toward two lounge chairs that occupied the balcony.

Beth sat on the comfortable chair. She imagined Shelley and Eric sat in them and watched the sunsets at night. She looked over at Shelley who stretched her arms over her head and moaned with pleasure. Beth couldn't miss the thin, white scars that ran along both of Shelley's arms.

"What happened to your arms?" Beth asked.

Shelley turned her arms over, rubbed her fingers over the scars. "It's a long story, and not a very nice one."

Beth shrugged. "I've got time, unless you don't want to talk about it."

"I don't mind talking about it. I'm over it. At least I think I am. Let's see if I can tell a quick version. It was about eight years ago, right after the MART when I won the championship. Eric and I were up at a cabin in the north Georgia mountains. There was this man who hated Eric."

"Why?"

Shelley sighed. "It was stupid really. The man picked on Eric in high school and Eric had to defend himself, which he did rather well, as you can imagine. The man, his name was James Crane, he lost face I guess, along with his girlfriend to Eric. Eric ended up marrying the girl. She was Ricky's mother. She died of cancer. But this James guy, he had it all mixed up in his head. He thought Eric killed Ricky's mom to keep her from coming back to him."

"This guy sounds a little crazy in the head," Beth said.

"He was. Anyway, he wanted to make Eric suffer, to have revenge for Eric taking Ann away and he showed up at the cabin, grabbed me and tied me to the bed."

Beth gasped. "You must've been terrified."

"I was. I'd tangled with this man several times before and I knew what he was capable of. Anyway, he waited for Eric to come home. When Eric came in the door, he whacked him in the back of the head with a two-by-four."

"Wow, it's amazing Eric lived."

Shelley nodded.

"Go on," Beth prodded.

"He tied Eric up so he had to watch what was happening to me." Shelley stopped, drew a deep breath. "And then he raped me."

Beth reached out, took Shelley's hand. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have made you tell me."

"It's okay. I'm okay. I've learned that no matter what someone does to my body, they can't touch my spirit, my mind. Besides, it was what came after the rape that was so bad."

Beth waited. Shelley looked out over the water as she spoke. "He took a knife and he tortured me. He cut my arms, my legs, my hands. I was in a lot of pain. I remember thinking I wanted to die."

Beth wiped a tear from her eye, sniffed. "But you didn't die. How'd you get away?"

"I kept thinking about my baby. I was pregnant with Jeffy at the time. He untied me and tried to get me to kill myself, but I couldn't do it. So, he took the knife back. He was about to stab me right through the heart when everything happened at once. I told him I was pregnant which made him hesitate. I shoved the knife into him. Eric got his feet free and jerked him off me and I ran."

Beth shook her head. "So, *you* killed him?"

"No. I stabbed him in the stomach but he didn't die. It didn't even seem to slow him down. Eric told me to run and I did, but I barely remember it. James followed me and eventually caught me. In the meantime Ricky showed up and freed Eric. They came looking for me and found me just in time. James was about to slit my throat. One of them threw a knife and killed him."

"Which one?" Beth asked.

Shelley smiled. "I'm not sure. They decided that no one needed to know that little piece of information. All I know is either Ricky or Eric killed James. I don't care who it was. If they hadn't I would be dead and so would Jeffy."

"But *they* know," Beth said.

"Yes, of course Eric and Ricky know. Justin and Jason too."

"Who are they?"

"They're Eric's friends. Brothers. Great guys. I really love them. They're from Korea. I'm sure you'll meet them eventually. They were there and they know what happened."

"But the police must know who actually killed the guy."

"They have it officially as Eric."

"Then that's who did it?"

Shelley shook her head. "It came out that the police put it down as Eric having done the deed so it wouldn't affect Ricky's career and so everyone thought that it was really Ricky who did it."

"So, you're saying, it really *was* Ricky?"

"No. I actually don't know. Really. I truly don't know. No one really knows for sure and they're not talking. Both of their prints were on the knife."

Beth eyed Shelley's arms, glanced down at her legs. Shelley opened her thighs and showed Beth the parallel white lines that ran along the inside of each of her thighs.

"You're right, it's a horrible story."

Shelley nodded. "It wasn't the first time James Crane had gotten to me, but it was the last. Makes me appreciate every minute I spend with the people I love." Shelley smiled at Beth. "I'm over it. Really. I almost never think about it. It took me a while to get to that point though. I'm just so grateful to be alive and to have all that I have. That's why I wanted to help you. Because I'm so grateful. So tell me now, Beth, what do you think you would like to do with your life? Is there something you've always wanted to try?"

Beth shook her head as she pretended to think about it. "I can't think of anything. Can I have more time?"

Shelley took her hand. "There's no time limit, sweetie. Take all the time you need. Enjoy life for a while. Breathe in the ocean, meditate. Pray. God is real and He will help you. All is well."

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"I'm telling you I think you have it all wrong," Beth whispered.

"I can't believe they already have you buying into their lies. They're not gonna tell you the truth. They can't take the chance of ever telling anyone what they've done. They're like freakin' serial killers who seem to live the perfect lives. No one really knows what's going on in their sick minds."

Beth was silent as she considered his words.

"Why is it," Tommy continued, "that everyone always believes the people with money. Why do people automatically think that if you've been poor then you must be a liar."

"I don't believe that, Tommy," Beth said. "My family was dirt poor. *Is* dirt poor. And they're good people."

"I know. I know they are. They'd have to be to raise such a great kid as you. And they're not gonna be poor any longer. As soon as I get my money, I'm setting your family up for life. They'll never have to worry about money again."

"I can't tell you how much I look forward to that day, if I'm still around then."
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"You will be. You have to think positive, sweetheart."

"I know, I know."

"So, you understand why we need to go through with my plan. I'll never be able to get my money if we don't prove what the Kinos really did that day to my brother. And they'll never break unless we break them first."

"I understand. They just seem so nice."

"They're good at their game, but that's all it is. A game. Their hearts are black. And I'm depending on you to uncover that."

"I'll do my best. I've planted the subliminal CD."

"Good. You changed it out for the one he usually uses?"

"Yes."

"What did you do with the one you took?"

"It's in the ocean."

"Good girl. This should be interesting."

"To say the least. Shelley says he listens to his meditation CDs every night before he goes to sleep."

"There should be a difference in a few weeks. I want to know if you notice anything, got it?"

"Got it. I'll keep you posted. Someone's coming. Gotta go."

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Ricky came in from his swim to the sound of screaming.

"Okay, okay, I give, I give," Beth was yelling.

Ricky's eyes narrowed. In the front living room, Mark straddled Beth's midsection, her hands pinned to the floor by his hands. Beth was laughing.

"What's going on?" Ricky asked.

Mark got up immediately, smiling. "I was having to show her who's boss around here."

"I see," Ricky said. "So where *is* Jeffy?"

"Funny. She and Mom and Joey ran to the store. Jason and Angel and Kimmie are coming over for dinner and she wanted to get something special."

"Is Justin coming?"

"I'm not sure."

Ricky eyed Beth before he turned back to Mark. "How about we toss the football around until they get back and put us to work?"

"Sounds great," Mark said. "We can show Beth how to throw."

"Yeah. Let's do that," Ricky said, on the verge of sarcasm. He looked at the girl. "Whaddya say, Beth?"
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She tossed her head. "No thanks. I think I'll go for a swim."

"Suit yourself."

"You can count on it."

~~~~

The giant dining table accommodated the large group with ease. Beth looked around at the group of people. They were all so arrogant. Especially the men. Even Mark and Joey came across as being very self-assured. Eric's friends fit in easily and were just as cocky. Especially Jason, the younger one. Justin, a single man, was a lawyer. Jason was married to a pretty woman named Angel and they had a little five-year-old girl named Kimmie. Jason was a martial arts consultant for national and state law enforcement agencies. He also owned a company called Ameritech Security. Beth wondered if Tommy knew that. Angel was the head of a national women's shelter and self-defense group. All of them had one thing in common. Eric Kino either was, or had been, their martial arts instructor. Except for Angel and Kimmie. And with them he'd instructed the one who instructed them.

"So Beth, you've been staying here with the Kinos a week?" Jason asked.

Beth smiled at him. "A little over two weeks now."

"And what is it you do?" Justin asked.

She glanced at Shelley before she answered. "I'm, uh, I'm trying to figure that out. Shelley is helping me to um..."

"We met and got to talking and I ended up offering her a place to stay while she figures out what she wants to study in college," Shelley volunteered quickly.

"Shel-ley, you are a saint," Angel said.

Eric made a slight noise and frowned at his wife. "Wish that she were," he said under his breath.

Ricky, within hearing distance, looked at his father incredulously. Eric didn't acknowledge Ricky. Then Ricky's eyes met Justin's across the table. Apparently Justin had heard the same thing. Justin looked questioningly at Ricky who only shrugged. He had no idea what that was all about.

Justin sniffed the air. "Do you smell something burning?"

"Oh, no," Shelley moaned, jumping up to tend to the burnt bread.

Eric rose to help. Ricky headed for the kitchen to grab another pitcher of water and what he heard stunned him.

"Do you think you could go through one meal without burning the bread?" Eric asked sarcastically.
~~~~

Shelley looked up in surprise. When she realized her husband wasn't kidding, she lowered her eyes. "I'm sorry. When I put it in the oven I actually made a mental note. Then, I got so interested in what everyone was talking about, I guess I just forgot."

"Sometimes you have to think of something besides yourself."

Shelley's mouth dropped open. So did Ricky's. Ricky cleared his throat to let them know he was in the kitchen. He glanced at Shelley and the look of misery on her face broke his heart. Were Shelley and his Dad having marital problems? He'd never heard his father speak so disrespectfully to anyone. The man had always been madly in love with his wife and this was so very much out of character that Ricky was at a complete loss. He refilled the pitcher and headed back into the dining room.

Shelley and Eric followed. "Well," Shelley announced to the company at large. "I suppose we'll have to do without bread tonight. Sorry everyone."

"This is the last time she'll burn the bread, right Shelley?"

She looked up at Eric, her chin quivered. "Um, of course."

Ricky glanced around the table. Beth was smiling. Mark and Joey looked puzzled. Jason and Angel were at least as stunned as he was. Justin seemed angry. Ricky's eyes met Justin's. He shook his head slightly. The rest of the meal was quiet and strained.

Shelley offered to clean up alone while everyone retired to the deck to watch the sunset. Truthfully, she just wanted to be alone. She needed to think. What in the world was going on with Eric? He'd never been short with her. Not ever. And he'd certainly never been rude to her or made her feel small in front of others. What had she done to incur his wrath, she wondered. She cleaned the kitchen spotless and stood staring into the glass of the window when Eric came in behind her.

"What are you doing now?" Eric asked.

She turned, startled. "I've just finished." She raised a trembling hand to her face and brushed some hair back over her shoulder.

"Would you mind joining us then?"

"Of course. I'm coming."

Eric turned to leave.

"Eric?"

He stopped. "Yes."

"Is something wrong?"

"What makes you think that?"

"You seem a little angry."

He sighed. "No, I'm not angry."

She smiled and went to him. "Good."

She leaned her head against his chest. After a moment or two he put his arms around her. "I guess I've been a little grumpy tonight, haven't I?"

She nodded. "Are you okay?"

He sighed. "I think so." His brow furrowed, as he took her hand and walked out to join the family.

~~~~

Jason looked around the study as he delivered his report. Eric, Shelley, Ricky and Justin were in attendance. "So, Tommy Crane has been out of prison for two months. There has been absolutely no movement from his camp as far as looking for retribution for the death of his brother. He's found a job as a bartender working at one of the hotels he and James used to own. He goes to work, comes home. Sometimes a woman shows up to stay the night. Different women each time. He appears to be keeping his nose clean. The question is, Eric, how long do you want to continue surveillance?"

Eric looked around the room. "Any input from anyone?"

"I'd feel better if we continue for a while," Shelley said.

"I agree," Rick said. "Why take a chance? At least a year."

"Justin?" Eric asked.

"Keep the tail," Justin said. "I'm not comfortable yet. He's clean. But almost too clean."

Eric nodded. "Okay then, we stay on him."

"Got it. I'll take care of it," Jason replied.

~~~~

Nick reached for Bree but she pulled away. "Nick, we have to talk," Bree insisted.

When he didn't say anything she continued on. "Last week, when you, well, you know, when you lost your temper, it made me have to re-evaluate our association. I don't think our relationship is going in the direction I'd like."

"And what direction is that?" he said, a sneer on his face.

"A relationship should be based on respect and care for one another. I don't think we have that."

He rose and approached her. "What are you trying to say?"

Bree backed up, wishing now that she'd waited to be in public to have this discussion. She realized she was afraid of him and that was

not good. She wrung her hands together. "I'm saying, Nick, that we should call it quits and go our separate ways."

He came close, towered over her. "Oh, I get it. Now that the shoot has come to an end and you don't need a bodyguard anymore you're letting me go. Is that it?"

"No, it's not like that, Nick. It's more like this; if you're my bodyguard, then who's gonna protect me from you?"

The blow came quickly. His backhand caught her just below her right eye. She landed face down on the thick carpeting. Stunned, she closed her eyes and lay still, her instinct for survival telling her to stay put.

"Stupid little girl. You think you're better than everyone else. That's just a little reminder."

He gathered his things and left.

~~~~

Shelley picked up the phone. "Good morning, Bree!"

Ricky had been on his way out, but he stopped when he heard who Shelley was speaking with.

"You're coming home? Wonderful!"

Ricky smiled and Shelley nodded at him, but then Shelley's expression changed.

"He what? . . . Oh, Bree. Oh, sweetheart . . . No. No, baby, it doesn't matter. He's not allowed to hit you. No matter what . . . It's black? Which eye? . . . Oh, honey. Why, what happened last week?"

Ricky's knuckles turned white as he balled his fist. He waited while Shelley listened to Bree's story.

"You listen to me now, Bree, sweetheart, it doesn't matter if he's someone you're having a relationship with, it wouldn't matter if you were even married to him, that's still rape . . . Maybe not, but that's what it is. No one is allowed to force you . . . Oh, honey, you should have called me."

Ricky closed his eyes and prayed for restraint.

"When is your flight getting in?" Shelley asked.

Ricky touched Shelley's shoulder. "Will you ask her if he's on the same flight?"

"Bree, Ricky wants to know if your bodyguard is on the same flight as you."

Bree's answer was negative and Shelley shook her head at Rick. "Okay, baby. Okay. We'll see you when you get in then. I love you too. Bye."
~~~~

Shelley hung up the phone. "He hurt her, Ricky."

Ricky hugged Shelley. "I heard. Did she say what happened?"

"She didn't want to go into detail on the phone. She did say that last week she said something to upset him and they had a fight. He was so angry he took her by force. Today, she tried to break it off with him and he hit her in the face. She says he blacked her eye."

"I'm gonna kill him."

Shelley began to fret. "Now, Ricky, we need to talk to Eric. I'm sure there's a better way to handle this other than violence."

"I'm sure there is, but that's not how I'm gonna handle it."

"Ricky, is that what you teach your students?"

He paced, ran a hand through his hair. "No. No. Look, Shell, I'll just talk to him, let him know where he stands. I won't do anything over the top."

Shelley raised her eyebrows. "Please Ricky, be careful."

~~~~

Ricky stood at the edge of the balcony off his bedroom, sipping wine and watching the sunset. Bree should be home anytime now. He hadn't seen her in three months, not since Jeffy's school play this past June. He remembered when he'd seen her then, just outside the auditorium. She'd been signing an autograph and looked up. Her smile had faded. He'd leaned forward, kissed her cheek. She'd wrapped her arms around his neck and said something about missing her long lost brother.

He shook his head. I'm not your brother, Bree, he thought. I've denied my feelings for you long enough, and tonight, you're gonna acknowledge yours for me. Tonight, you will have to look deep inside, and we'll just see what we find. The hairs on the back of Ricky's neck tingled and he knew she was there, watching him through the doors of her bedroom. His heart began to race. His blood thickened. It was time to go after what he wanted.

~~~~

She'd come straight up to her room after her mom made a fuss over her eye. Thankfully no one else had been around. She needed some time to think and be alone. Sitting on her bed she took comfort in the things around her that were her life, her home. She and Jeffy had chosen the red and gold bedspread together. The large oil painting on the wall over the bed was a gift from her mother when she'd gone on a shopping spree with her newly acquired riches from the MART. Pictures of her brothers taken from the walls of their old home in

Atlanta graced her dresser along with wedding pictures of her mother and Eric.

She smiled at the thought of her mom and Eric. They were so very much in love. If only she could find a love like that. She frowned. And then there was Rick. She sighed. Ricky who had always been there for her. Who fancied himself in love with her back when they'd first met. Who refused to be her first.

Sighing, Bree kicked off her strappy sandals and lay back on the bed. Ricky Kino. Women dreamed of him, lusted after him, accosted him at every corner. She couldn't blame them. He was a beautiful man. Part Asian, part white, part Hawaiian. Her mom said Eric and Ricky had many ethnic backgrounds. All Bree knew was, he was gorgeous. Perfectly muscled body. Golden skin. Dark, expressive eyes. His thick black hair was shorter now than when she'd first met him, his body a little heavier. His movie roles still showed off his skills as a martial artist, but had progressed to deeper, multi-dimensional characters. Never one to take himself too seriously though, he joked that the only way he'd ever get an Oscar would be to kick someone's butt and take it from them.

She rose and went to sit at her dressing table. Leaning closer, she examined the shiner Nick had given her. No way to hide it, she thought. When she'd walked in the door her mom had clucked and fussed over it. She sighed. How had she not seen what kind of man he was? What was it that drew her to men like him? Men who were dark, men who were dangerous. Ricky would never hurt her. Picking up the brush she ran a few strokes through her hair then stood and went to the balcony doors to watch the sunset.

He was there. Standing on his balcony, looking out to sea, drinking wine, a rarity for him. He wore jeans and no shirt. His feet were bare as they often were and his hair was wet as if he'd just gotten out of the shower. She opened her door and he turned to face her. She smiled as he leapt up on the railing and hopped from his own balcony to hers.

"Hey," she said softly.

Reaching out, he grasped her by the shoulders and held her still while he looked her over, inspecting the damage. The flash of fierce anger that crossed his features she expected. It was the look of loving compassion that followed that broke her. Her eyes welled with tears.

"Oh, baby," he said softly. She fell against his chest. His strong arms came around her and suddenly, she was safe.

After a few moments she looked up, wiping her hand over the tears on his chest. "I made a mess," she said, laughing softly.

"So you did," he said, smiling at her. "Welcome home."

"Thanks," she said sweetly. She tried to pull away, but he took hold of her hands.

"So you've had a rough couple of weeks?"

She shrugged. "Not as bad as it appears," she said motioning toward her eye. She shook her head. "I sure can pick 'em."

He looked into her eyes. "I don't know what to say to that."

She laughed softly. "No, I guess you wouldn't." She drew a deep breath and shook her head. "Anyway, it's done. I'm over it. Thanks for the shoulder to cry on."

He shrugged. "It's always here." He reached out and touched her cheek. "I've missed you."

She moved toward the edge of the balcony and looked out at the darkening sky. "I've missed you too. I just don't know what I'd do without my big broth..."

"Stop." He came up behind her, placing his hands on the balcony rails on either side of her. "If you're about to call me your big brother you're making a big mistake."

"But you are."

He turned her around and leaned close, pressing his body against her. "I am nothing of the sort."

"Ricky, we've had this discussion before."

"No we haven't. You have. I just went along with you, trying to be what you wanted me to be. Trying to give you what I thought you needed. Denying myself in the process, but no more, Bree."

She turned away, her heart beating hard in her chest, but he kept his arms on either side of her, blocking her from leaving. "Ricky, you have to listen to reason."

"That is exactly what I'm finally doing," he said into her ear. "I know you've had it rough this past week and I should probably postpone this discussion, but you know what, Bree? Enough is enough. No more lies. No more procrastination. We're gonna be honest with each other and with ourselves."

She swallowed hard. "My mother is married to your father, or have you forgotten?"

"How could I forget? You remind me at every turn. Here's the clincher, Bree. I don't give a flying fig if they're married."

Even though the words were brutish they were said softly just before his lips touched the nape of her neck. She drew in a breath, gave into the sensation. Just for a moment, she told herself. His hand left the railing and spread across her abdomen, then pulled her back against him. His lips made their way down her throat. She moaned. The sound brought her out of the trance. "Ricky, we can't do this."

He turned her toward him again. "Bree, we are going to do this."

"No, we're not."

"Yes, we are, but I have several points to make first, so just close your mouth and listen."

"Don't you talk to me that way."

He smiled. "That's my girl."

"I am not your girl."

"Bree, I'm asking you to try closing your mouth and just listen."

Her mouth opened but no words came out.

"That's better. Okay now, point number one," he said, stepping back. "Let's pretend for a moment that you and I met first, before our parents did, and we became a couple, and then they met and fell madly in love and realized how right they were for each other. Now, should they deny their love for each other simply because their children were a couple first?"

"That's a ridiculous question."

"It is, isn't it? You think that one over. Here's another. Our parents did meet first, then we got together. You wanted me to take your virginity. You do remember that, don't you?"

She huffed out a breath. "Of course I do."

"So your mom and my dad being together sure didn't stop you from wanting me back then, did it?"

"That's not fair."

"Just answer the question. I didn't seduce you, Bree. I practically had to peel you off of me."

She gasped.

"Okay, that was mean. I was certainly all for it, but stopped myself. But that didn't stop you from trying to seduce me, did it?"

She shrugged.

"How many times did you try? Three? Eight? Fifteen?"

"I don't know. What does it matter?"

"It matters because our parents were definitely a couple from the time you and I met and that didn't stop you from wanting me whenever the fancy struck you, Bree."

"You're making me out to be a slut," Bree said defensively.

"A slut? No way. A dream come true? Absolutely."

"So what's your point, Rick? What are you trying to say?"

"So stop telling me we can't be together because our parents are married. We didn't even meet until we were both adults. So, stop calling me your brother. You say that one more time and I will..."

Her brow rose. "You will what?"

"I don't know, I'll go crazy."

She started to protest but he held up his hand.

"No, our parents being married is not the reason you won't admit your feelings for me. Not the true reason."

Her eyes narrowed. "So, what is the true reason?"

"You're worried about your career. You're worried about what the world would say."

She shook her head, held her hands to her face. "No. You see, Ricky, you're assuming I have feelings for you. I'm saying the reason we can't be together is I see you as my brother."

"Really? So tell me, Bree, all those years ago, was there a defining moment the last time you tried to get me to make love to you, a moment that made you think I seemed more like a brother to you? Was it when you kissed me, or when you took my hand and placed it on your..."

She pushed past him, headed toward her room. "Don't be crude, Ricky. It doesn't become you."

"Sorry. Don't you think I'd need to know something like that, whatever I did to make you think of me as a brother because I want to make sure I never do it again. Because, when I make love to you, and there will definitely be a time, I don't want you to think of me as brotherly in any way."

"There won't be a time, Ricky, because I don't feel that way about you."

He followed her inside, her words cutting into his heart, but he would not be deterred. "Oh, you have feelings for me, Bree."

She turned. "You're mistaken."

He took her by the arm, pulled her to him. "Bree," he said softly. His head dipped close to her mouth. "You have feelings for me."

"Ricky..." She breathed in protest, but couldn't bring herself to push him away.

"Admit it," he whispered, his lips brushing back and forth against her cheek, then moving to gently caress her injured eye.

"Don't do this, Ricky," she pleaded.

"I have to," he said softly, his knuckles skimming over her collar bone, his mouth close to her ear. "I have to or I'll go mad."

He smelled of soap and man and it would be so easy to give in. Just this once. It'd been so long since she'd been close to him. Admittedly, her body yearned for his. Maybe her heart did too. She swayed. "Ricky, please..."

"You want me, I can feel it. The heat between us is strong. Just like it always is. Like it always has been from the moment we met. Come on, Bree, admit it. Say the words. Tell me you want me."

His mouth hovered over hers. She could almost taste the wine he'd been drinking.

"If you can't tell me you want me, if it's just too hard for you to admit, then just stop me, Bree. Stop me."

She could pull away at any time, still, she didn't.

"For once, tell me what you really feel, Bree," he whispered. "Finally, I'm being honest with you. Now you be honest with me. Be honest with yourself. Either stop me, or tell me how much you want me to love you."

She whimpered.

"Tell me, Bree, or stop me. If you don't want me then why haven't you pushed me away? Tell me," he demanded.

She lifted her head, opened her eyes. "Ricky, I..."

"What? What do you want? Tell me. Tell me what you want. You want me. You want me to love you? It just takes one word, Breanna. Say it. Say yes. Just say yes. Please, just say yes."

One breath. Two. "Yes," she said softly. "Yes."

Their lips met.

He thought his heart might explode right there. Eight years. Eight long years. His hands came up to cup her face as he deepened the kiss. She whimpered and he lifted his mouth from hers. A tear ran over her cheek. It's the only thing that could have stopped him. Closing his eyes, he sighed, pulled away. He wouldn't push her any further right now. "I promise you, Bree, it's gonna be okay. We'll make it okay."

"Ricky, I don't know what to do. I don't know how to do this, how to be with you."

"Okay, shh, don't cry. We'll figure it out. This is enough for now. Just let me hold you."

✞✞✞

1 Peter 5:8

"Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking for someone to devour."

Chapter 4

Ricky peeled away in the silver 911 Carrera Cabriolet. “Talk to me,” he said to Steve. “Whaddya got?”

“Nicholas A. James. Former New York cop. Retired early due to a gunshot wound that caused deafness in his left ear. Bree’s manager hired him through Starpoint Security.” He looked up. “Don’t know why she’s not using Jason’s company. Anyway, police records show several reprimands for excessive force and conduct unbecoming.”

“Age?”

“Thirty-two.”

“Address?”

“That’s where it gets weird. I can’t find a listed address here in California. His last known address is Sixteen Charles Street, New York, New York.”

“Keep digging,” Ricky replied.

“You got it. Meet me at *The Sunset*.”

“I’m on my way,” Ricky said and ended the call.

Ricky smiled as he headed toward the *Sunset Club*. A regular haunt of his and Steve’s, it had just the right amount of class and raunch. He was feeling pretty good since his little scene with Bree. She admitted to wanting him. It was a start. Of course, sex isn’t what he’s after. He wants her. He loves her, and he wants her to love him. One step at a time, he thought. The first being, getting her to stop thinking of him as her brother. Their little chat accomplished that, he hoped, and later tonight after he took care of some business, he intended to go home and make sure she wasn’t falling back into any old ideas.

“Call Jason,” he said.

“Hello, Rick,” Jason said. “Out and about?”

“Yes I am. I’m on my way to *The Sunset*. Just letting someone know— in case.”

Jason was silent for a few moments. “In case? What are you up to Rick?”

“Looking for someone.”

"For Nick James by any chance?"

"Got anything for me?"

"Former New York cop. Likes to slap people around."

"Yeah, got that. Need a California address."

"Can't help you there. Have to wait for him to surface."

"Right. Okay, well, wanna join Steve and me for drinks?"

"Well, I'm a little busy tonight. Why are you calling me and not talking to Eric?"

Ricky grimaced. "Dad seems a little, I don't know, preoccupied."

"Justin told me what he heard at dinner the other night."

"I don't understand," Ricky said.

"Me neither, but keep your eyes and ears open."

"Trying to. Anyway, you've got my last known communication."

"Be careful, Rick and don't be stupid."

~~~~

"I'm telling you he's already saying some stuff, you know like, cutting her down, insulting her cooking. Stuff like that . . . No, only toward her. Those subliminals are working… It's crazy. What kind of stuff is on there? . . . Oh, man, that is so wrong. I mean, she's not lazy and she definitely wouldn't ever look at another man . . . No, I'm not getting soft, it's just that, well, she's okay, ya know . . . Yes, I know, I'll keep that in mind . . . Not much else right now. Breanna is home . . . The younger brother, Joey, he's been warned about fighting at school."

"Hello," Bree said as she entered the kitchen.

Beth whirled around. "I'll call ya later. Okay. Bye." She ended her call and eyed Bree, wondering how much she'd heard.

"I'm Bree," Bree said, extending a hand to the strange girl.

"I'm Beth. I'm a, um, friend of your mom."

Bree looked around. "Where is mom?"

Beth shrugged. "I guess she's in bed."

"Oh, then you're staying with us?"

"Yeah. So, like, I just came down to get something to eat. Hope that's okay."

Bree motioned toward the refrigerator. "Help yourself."

"Yeah, thanks." Beth rummaged through the fridge, and finally just grabbed an apple.

"How long have you known my mother?"

"Almost three weeks now. She's real nice."

"Uh huh. Where's your family?"
~~~~

"Haven't got any family."

"So, who were you talking to?"

"Um, ex-boyfriend. We're like, friends now."

"That's good," Bree said, as she poured herself a glass of milk. "Because you know what they say, keep your friends close, keep your enemies closer."

"Yeah. Well, I guess I'll be going back up to bed."

"Okay. Well, nice to meet you."

"You too. Night."

Bree let the false smile fade from her lips. Her brow furrowed as she made herself something to eat. Strange girl. Her mom must be working on another project. Bree wasn't so sure if she approved of this one. The one-sided conversation she'd heard was strange to say the least. What did she say about someone not looking at another man? And who was she telling about Joey getting into fights as if it were anyone's business. This girl was at least nosy, and at worst, some sort of media spy. She'd better not be trying to sell stories about our family, Bree thought.

Bree grabbed meat and cheese and bread and mayo and began making a sandwich. She was starved. Sighing, she thought about Ricky and the things he'd said to her earlier. It was like opening a floodgate of emotions and she had no idea how to stop them.

She shook her head slowly as she cut tomatoes. She admitted to him that she wanted him. Darn it, why was she so weak? He'd held her too close, he'd smelled too good, and his power vibrated through her. It felt good. Really good. She'd said she wanted him, and then, instead of taking her to bed, he'd been so tender. He'd tucked her into bed and kissed her goodnight. She didn't know what to think about that. She'd awakened hungry in more ways than one, but now that she had a little distance, she wondered if she should take it back. Chalk it up to a moment of weakness. He wasn't home now, but he'd be back sooner or later and what was she gonna do?

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"That's Ricky Kino." The young man swung his camera up and started across the street.

His veteran buddy grabbed him by the back of his shirt. "Hold up, buddy."

He tried to pull away. "Why?"

"Listen, what'd you say your name is, Brad? Listen, Brad, we don't mess with him."
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"Why not? He's right there. Let go of me."

Another photographer laughed. "We sort of have this deal. We leave him alone and he lets us live."

"Wh, what?"

"Okay, well, yes, I'm exaggerating. Still, we really don't mess with the Kinos."

"That's bull, man. It's a free country. He's walking on a public street. You'd think I wouldn't have to tell you guys this. Both of you have been to court to defend our rights."

"Yeah, well, you wanna take a chance, go ahead. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The strip was in full swing. Ricky and Steve had decided to stroll, put out some feelers for Nick James before they settled down for a few drinks at the *Sunset Club*. So far they hadn't had any luck.

Ricky turned when someone called his name. A camera flashed in his face. Rick nodded, waved and kept walking.

"Hey, Rick, did you hear what happened to Breanna?"

Ricky stopped. The words came from the guy who'd just taken his picture.

"I heard some guy roughed her up pretty bad? Got anything to say about it?"

Ricky shook his head and continued on.

The man got in front of Ricky to impede his progress. Ricky simply walked around him. When the same man jumped in front of Ricky again, he stopped. "Let me just tell you, man, you're pushin' your luck," Ricky said softly.

"Are you gonna do something about the guy who roughed up your sister?"

"Get out of my face."

"I got a right to be here. Just as much as you."

"Absolutely. You're correct, as long as you don't impede my progress, because I have a right to walk here without you impeding my way." Ricky stepped around the man and continued on.

But the idiot ran past Ricky and Steve and stopped in front of them again. Ricky shook his head, held up a hand. "Fair warning, man, back off."

"You can't touch me and we both know it," Brad said.

"Oh, but I can," Ricky said softly. "And what's more, I will."

"I'll take you to court. I'll ruin your career."

Ricky laughed. “My career? You mean like making movies? You think me kickin’ your butt will hurt my career? It wouldn’t. That’s just the sort of thing the public loves. Still, let’s say, for a second, that no one wants to see another one of my movies. You know what that means to me?”

Brad raised his eyebrows haughtily. “What?”

“Nada.”

“I don’t believe that. Besides, it’ll be more than that. I’ll send you to jail for assault.”

Ricky shrugged. “If that’s what you think would happen, you go ahead and try. A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do. But you get in my way one more time and you’re gonna regret it.”

“So, you’re telling me you wouldn’t mind spending twenty years in jail?”

“First, it wouldn’t be twenty years. But whatever jail time I’d get it wouldn’t matter. Now listen up, I’m about to give you a zen lesson, absolutely free. The world as you see it is not the same one I see. We create our own reality, not just virtually, but here in this physical world. I live in my own universe, in my own reality. You can’t touch me there. No one can.”

“Hocus, pocus,” Brad said.

Ricky looked at Steve, shrugged and tried to step around but the guy blocked him. Ricky leaned close, put his arm around the guy’s shoulder, looked up and smiled for the other paparazzi who’d gathered around. Then he leaned his forehead against the side of the young guy’s head. “Let me see if I can help you to understand,” Ricky said softly. “If you mess with me, you *will* lose.”

Brad stepped away. Spoke loudly. “Is that a threat? Are you threatening me?”

Ricky smiled for the cameras flashing away, scanning the crowd quickly for those taking video. There were plenty. He grinned. If the guy wanted to use media exposure, he was taking on a pro. “Absolutely. And I’ll say it again so *everyone* can hear. If you take me on you’ll lose.”

“There’s nothing you can do to me. Not legally.”

Ricky shrugged, stepped back and raised his hands in the air as if pleading to an unseen deity. “Why?” Ricky said loudly. “Why, no matter where I go, people are always trying to pick fights with me. I swear it’s like something from an old western where guys are always

drawing on the gunfighter. I'm really tired of it. This guy thinks he can take me on."

"I didn't say that," the guy challenged.

"No? That's what it seemed like to me. Well, I want the whole world to know that I don't want to fight you. I simply want to be left alone." He sighed dramatically, shook his head. "Please, please, no more challenges. I'm tired of defending myself. I mean, I will if I have to, but please, if you want to challenge me, let's not do it playing footsy on the sidewalk. I know! How about on the mats? You could meet me on the mats!" Ricky's voice oozed with false enthusiasm and cheesy sincerity.

The young guy backed away. "You're crazy."

"I don't understand. You challenged me. I'm opening the door, giving you the opportunity. Now you change your mind?" Ricky shrugged with a smile. "Probably for the best. You take care now."

Ricky and Steve laughed as they walked away, leaving the young man looking after them.

"What the hell?" Brad mumbled as one of his peers stepped up beside him.

"He just set you up, you idiot. You can't touch him now. It's on record that you tried to challenge him."

"That's not what happened though."

"It's what I got on my camera."

Brad looked around at all the others laughing at him. "Yeah? Well, we'll just see about that."

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They sat with their backs to the wall, looking out over the crowd. Steve had a beer, Rick a Perrier with lime.

"So, I think I caught you in a lie," Steve said jovially.

"I don't think so."

"You said that guy challenged you and he really didn't."

"He didn't challenge me to fight and I didn't say he did. He did, however challenge me every single time he stepped in front of me impeding my progress."

Steve considered the statement, finally nodded. "Okay, you win."

Several ladies approached them which had Steve grinning and Ricky groaning.

"Hi gorgeous," one voluptuous blonde said, sitting down in the chair opposite Ricky.

"Hi yourself," Ricky answered shortly.
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"Buy me a drink."

"What would you like?" Rick asked as he nodded to the waitress.

"Whiskey sour," the young lady said.

"And I'll have a Redbull and vodka," said the redhead who'd taken up with Steve.

Rick's eyebrows rose. Looked like his friend Steve had a handful tonight. Ricky, on the other hand, had his own handful waiting for him at home, and he couldn't wait to get back to her.

They chatted with the women, talking about nothing of importance when Steve sat up straighter. Ricky's senses came on full alert. His eyes scanned the crowd and stopped on a guy with dark brown hair that fell loosely over his forehead, wearing shades, black slacks and an expensive sport coat.

"Black coat?" Ricky asked.

"That's him."

"I don't like the setup here. I'm gonna move up to the bar."

"Want me to come?"

"No, because though he appears to be alone, I wouldn't count on that. I need you to watch my back."

"You got it."

"And better alert the others."

"Of course."

Ricky moved to the bar, leaving his back open. He'd have to trust Steve with that. This guy didn't stumble across the *Sunset Club* accidentally. He was here for a reason. Apparently, the feelers they'd put out earlier reached the correct party. Ricky's skin began to tingle. Here goes. Good. The faster this gets over with, the faster he can get back to Bree.

He caught sight of Nick James in the mirror as he approached. Rick lifted his glass, swallowed the contents, placed it down. Nick laid a hand on the counter next to Ricky. Rick looked up at him.

"So, Kino, I hear you're looking for me," Nick said, a wicked gleam in his eye.

Ricky turned, looked him over. There was something familiar about the guy. Maybe it was simply because of the paper Steve had shown him. He had dark eyes, dark hair. Big guy, maybe six-four, at least two-twenty. Had a scar on the left side of his face.

Ricky stood. "Pretty sure of yourself, huh?"

Nick glanced around. "Why do you say that?"

Ricky shrugged. "You know who I am. You know I know what you did to Bree. You must know I'm looking to retaliate. You show up here alone. Come straight up to me. Get right in my face. I'd say you're either very confident, or stupid. Or both."

Nick smiled. "I guarantee you I'm not stupid."

That told Ricky that Mr. James was not alone. Ricky nodded, touched his eyebrow. That was Steve's cue as well as Ricky's other friends who stood nearby. "Excuse me ladies," Steve said as he rose.

Ricky moved so fast no one even knew what happened. With blinding speed his leg swept Nick's. One moment the large man was standing there smiling at Ricky, the next his legs were in the air and the back of his head struck the floor. Somewhere in between Ricky's elbow bashed into Nick's nose. At the same time the three men who rushed forward were detained by Steve and a few others.

"Oh, man. Are you okay?" Ricky knelt over the guy, looked up, called the bartender.

"Do you think this guy is on something, JJ? He's fallen, looks like something hit his face. You'd better call an ambulance. He's bleeding all over the place."

A short time later Ricky and Steve watched as Nicholas James, still disoriented, was loaded onto a gurney.

Steve continued the argument. "No, Rick, at least five seconds. You're slowing down."

"No way, bucko. Three. Three seconds. Maybe less."

Steve rolled his eyes. "You know what they say. Pride goeth before a fall."

Ricky grinned. The blonde moved in and latched onto Ricky's arm. "Your place or mine," she offered.

"Sorry," Rick said. "Thanks for the offer, but I have somewhere I have to be."

He shook Steve's hand and within minutes was flying down the Pac Coast Highway, headed toward heaven.

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Bree stretched and turned over, pulling the comforter up over her shoulder. She couldn't get Ricky out of her mind. She'd done that successfully for eight years and suddenly her emotions were running rampant. No one had ever hit her. Ever. Having that happen made her stop and think about what kind of guy she wanted in her life. She habitually went after the classic bad boy, though she didn't know why.
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Rick, on the other hand, was so very good. A gentleman, polite, classy, educated. And— her eyes flew open. "Ricky, you scared me."

He lay beside her, face to face. "Sorry. You know, it's pretty scary to think how easily someone could sneak in here while you're sleeping and you'd never know it."

"You're not just anyone."

"Well now, that's good to hear." He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her close. "Where did I leave off?"

"Ricky, I've been thinking about what I said before."

"I was afraid of that. Are you trying to go back on the 'yes' you gave me earlier?"

She sighed. "Maybe."

"Please don't. For just a little while don't think. Just feel. Just feel, Bree, with your heart. Let me show you how much I've missed you." He kissed her deeply, slowly.

"Ummm," he sighed. "You taste so good. Be honest, Bree, this feels right, doesn't it? It does to me. Does it to you? Please, babe, please be totally honest."

She whimpered slightly. "It does. God help me but it does."

He rose, covered her face with soft, feathery kisses. "I've missed you, Bree." He wanted to tell her he loved her, however, that had been his mistake all those years ago. She'd run away from that. He wasn't sure why, but this time he would find the answers. He would understand her and figure out what made her tick. He would discover all her secrets. And if after all that she still doesn't love him back, then so be it.

"Look at me, Bree," he said softly. "Open your eyes and look at me. Do you see me? I'm not your brother. I'm a man."

"Ricky," she cried softly. "I don't know what to think."

He held her tight. "Okay, hon, like I said earlier, don't be afraid. We'll figure this out."

He meant to kiss her, hold her a minute, and leave, but the comfort of being close to her was too alluring and he fell asleep with the girl he loved in his arms.

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They woke at the soft knock on the door. It made Ricky glad he'd locked the door the night before.

"Bree, are you awake?" Jeffy's tiny voice asked.

Bree drew a sharp breath. "Oh, no. Ricky, go back to your room across the balcony."
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He swung his legs over the side of the bed. "No way." He rose. "We didn't do anything other than sleep. We have nothing to hide and nothing to be ashamed of."

Ricky opened the door. Jeffy came bounding into the room, jumped onto the bed and into Bree's arms.

"Hi, Bree, I'm so glad you're home. I missed you so much. I was gonna come up and see you last night, but Mom said you needed to rest. Wow, look at your eye. Mom said a man hit you and you were pretty upset about it. It looks really bad. Does it hurt? Oh, hi Ricky. Are you gonna get the man who hurt Bree?"

"Been there done that," Ricky answered.

"What?" Bree said, finally getting a word in edgewise.

Ricky shrugged. "Took care of business last night."

"Ricky, how could you do that without talking to me first?"

"Well, it happened faster than I thought it would, not that there was anything to talk about. He showed up last night at the club I was at, and I took care of business."

"What did you do?"

He shrugged innocently. "I made him fall down. Last I saw him they were taking him to the hospital."

"Who was?"

"Paramedics."

"Good grief, Ricky, what if he presses charges?"

"I don't think that's gonna happen."

"How do you know?"

He shrugged. "It's a man thing."

Jeffy was jumping on the bed. "Mom says we're having a family breakfast to celebrate you coming home and I'm supposed to tell you that she's giving you fair warning to get up and get dressed and then hurry downstairs."

Bree sighed with a smile. "Mom and her family breakfasts. Okay, I'll be down soon."

"You too, Ricky," Jeffy said, still jumping.

Ricky sat down on the bed next to Bree. "Jeffy, I have a question for you. Tell me what you think, okay?"

She jumped up high and landed on her bottom. "Okay."

"Do you know that Bree and I are not really brother and sister?"

"Yes, of course. Mark and Joey are brothers because they have the same mother and father but they're not your brothers. Not your real

brothers. Bree is their real sister but not yours. But we are a family. One, big, happy family."

"That's right, princess."

"And Bree and me, we're half sisters because her real mom is my mom, but her real dad is not my dad. And you're my half brother because my dad is your dad, but your mom is not my mom. Your mom is dead." She frowned. "Oh, Ricky, I'm sorry, I mean, about your mom being dead. I know it was a long time ago, but does it still make you sad?"

He smiled at her. "Sometimes. And now Jeffy, here's another question I want to ask, okay?"

"Ricky, I don't know if this is the right thing to do," Bree tried to quickly interrupt his line of thinking.

"It's always right to talk about things, to let the truth be known."

"Daddy says we must learn to be honest with ourselves and everyone around us," Jeffy added.

"That's because Dad is a very smart man."

"What were you gonna ask me, Ricky?"

"How would it make you feel to know that Bree and I were like, boyfriend and girlfriend?"

Her brow furrowed and her arms crossed as if she were deep in thought. "Bree is your girlfriend?"

"Yes."

"Do you kiss her?"

"Oh, Lord," Bree uttered softly.

Ricky grinned. "Yes. I kiss her."

Jeffy shrugged, turned to Bree. "Is it okay with you?"

Bree looked up into Ricky's face, knowing he waited for the answer as much as Jeffy did. "I don't know, Jeffy."

Ricky frowned.

"Why don't you know?" Jeffy asked. "Don't you like Ricky?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"He's real cute and Daddy says he's a fine young man."

Bree laughed. "Yes. He is."

"And he likes you– right Ricky?"

"Yes," he said softly.

"Don't you like it when he kisses you? It's okay to kiss someone you love. Sometimes it's just someone you like, but I know there are different kinds of kissing."

"What is up with all this talk about kissing?" Bree said. "When did you learn so much about kissing?"

"Mommy and I have had a long talk about kissing because a boy at school kissed me once."

"What's this?" Ricky asked, a frown on his face.

Jeffy looked down. "Don't be mad. Mom said I wasn't in trouble." She looked back up with a grin. "I told her not to worry about it because— I liked it."

Bree giggled. "You did, did you?"

"Yes. And Daddy said he didn't care if I liked it, that I'd better not kiss any more boys until I'm at least thirty years old."

"I bet he did," Ricky said, chuckling. "And I agree with him."

Jeffy frowned. "I don't think it's fair."

"Sometimes life isn't fair," Ricky said.

Jeffy climbed over onto Bree's lap. "So, are you gonna be Ricky's girlfriend?"

"I'm still trying to decide."

"If I wasn't his sister I would be his girlfriend, and you're really not his sister so you're luckier than me."

Bree sighed as she eyed Ricky. "Yeah, I guess I am. Well, run on down, sweetie and I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Okay. We're having pancakes and bacon and we hardly ever get bacon, so this is really special, even though it's just healthy bacon with no preservatives, but it tastes really good, and I'm starved so hurry up." She jumped down off the bed and ran out the door.

The moment Jeffy fled the room Ricky grabbed Bree and pulled her up off the bed and into his arms. "One hurdle gone," he said before he kissed her.

"Hey, Bree, welcome ho..."

Bree pushed away from Ricky. "Hi, Joey," she said, her face turning red.

Joey turned and started back down the hall the way he'd come, grabbing Mark as he went.

"What?" Mark said, trying to shake Joey loose. "I was just coming to say hi to Bree."

"You'll have to wait your turn. Bree and Ricky are at it again."

"At what?"

"It."

Mark looked back over his shoulder. "Really? That's interesting."

Ricky smiled down at Bree. "Two more hurdles gone."

She leaned her head against his chest. “This is all happening too fast for me.”

“I realize this might be hard for you,” Ricky said, tilting her chin up. “All I ask is that you try to just go with the flow for now. Don’t fight it. You don’t have to promote it either if you don’t want to, but don’t shut me out. Please.” He kissed her softly. “How’s the eye feel?” he asked.

“A little sore. I’m okay. Really.”

He wrapped his strong arms around her and held her tight. “I can’t tell you how good it feels to just do this. To just hold you.”

“It feels good to me too, Rick. I have to admit. It feels right. Sort of like coming home, but I just don’t know how to feel, about you.”

“I can accept that. For now. We’d better get dressed and get down there.”

Bree took a long, hot, shower, dressed in capri pants and a cool, sleeveless blouse and headed downstairs. Ricky emerged from his room just as she passed his door.

“Good timing,” he said, grabbing her by the elbow and pressing her against the wall.

She didn’t resist. She did look up at him with a grimace. “I’m not used to this yet, Ricky. You live in the same house as me. It really is as if you’re my br...”

“Don’t you even say it.” He lowered his head and brushed his lips softly over hers. “You smell good.”

She closed her eyes, let him kiss her. He smelled so masculine. He tasted so good. His touch made her melt. She wanted him. How had she been able to put these feelings aside for so long, and now just standing near him made her ache inside? What had he done to her?

He pulled away and smiled down at her. “Come on, let’s go down before we get in trouble.”

Ricky entered the kitchen with his usual flourish, greeting everyone with a sunny “good morning” and scooping Jeffy up in his arms. “Jeffy, why are you giggling so much?” he asked as he tickled her under her chin.

“Because you’re tickling me,” she said, trying to get away.

“I am not. How in the world can you say that? Mark, what do you think about that?”

He tossed the child into the air. Mark caught her, and began his own tickling. She screamed for him to stop.

“Stop what?” Mark asked innocently.

"Stop tickling me," Jeffy cried.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Mark said. "Do you know, Joey?" he asked as he tossed her into the air.

Joey caught her and swung her over his shoulder. "No idea." He took one of her feet and began tickling it mercilessly.

"Daddy," Jeffy cried. "Daddy, help me."

Eric looked up from the batter he was stirring to smile at his daughter. "Help you? Help you what?"

Jeffy could see she would get no help from that corner. "Bree, help me!"

"Oh, I'll help alright." She approached her and helped by grabbing the other foot and starting in.

Jeffy laughed uncontrollably. "Help me. Please help," she cried.

Beth moved forward. "I'll save you, sweetie," she said, reaching for her. She pulled Jeffy off Joey's shoulder and held her close.

They all turned to watch Beth sit down with their sister and hold her on her lap. Jeffy cuddled up to the girl.

"I see we have a softie among us," Mark said, smiling at Beth.

Ricky frowned, then pushed the uneasy feeling aside for the time being. He clapped his hands together. "What can I do to help?"

"You can set..." Shelley began before she was interrupted.

"Nothing," Eric said, raising his eyebrows at Shelley. "Shelley can certainly handle things in here. You go spend some time with your family."

Ricky eyed his father, his brows drawing together. He glanced at Bree who had an identical expression on her face. Then he looked toward Beth. She was smiling. Ricky got the distinct feeling she was enjoying his father's rude treatment of Shelley.

Beth's eyes met his, and she raised her chin in her normal haughty expression.

Bree moved to her mother's side. "I'd like to help, Mom." She glanced at Eric with a haughty stare of her own.

Shelley looked worriedly over at Eric before she responded. Her voice though, was quiet and halting. "Um, okay, if you really want to. Um, you can help set the table."

"Sure."

Ricky watched the scene, becoming increasingly worried. His father wasn't himself. What in the heck was going on? His father was completely in love with Shelley. Usually, he worshiped the ground she walked on. Ricky intended to have a word with him. As much as he

dreaded it, it was better to take the bull by the horns, which is exactly what it will seem like. But Shelley, having to blink back tears at what should be a happy homecoming for Bree, was extremely disturbing at the very least and the problem had to be addressed.

The family chatted over breakfast. Of course everyone wanted to know the story behind Bree's shiner. Ricky was quiet, watching the group interact. His eyes kept moving toward Beth who again seemed almost pleased about the way Nicholas James had roughed up Bree.

"Well, he certainly deserved what he got last night then, didn't he?" Eric said.

Ricky's eyebrows rose. "How'd you know?"

"Justin called me this morning."

"What's going on?" Shelley asked.

"If you'll be quiet I was about to tell you."

Mark and Joey looked at each other with confused expressions. Ricky and Bree did the same.

"Of course, Eric. Go on, I didn't mean to interrupt," Shelley said, her voice quivering.

Rick looked hard into his father's eyes. His father seemed oblivious to everyone's discomfort, yet he did stop and draw two long breaths before he went on, like someone who was trying to control their temper.

"It seems Bree's ex-boyfriend collapsed at *The Sunset Club* last night. Apparently Ricky was standing right next to him when it happened and had the bartender call 911. They had to transport the guy to the hospital. He had a concussion. They said he must have hit his head pretty hard when he fell. You have anything you want to say about that, Rick?"

Ricky shrugged. "Stuff happens."

Jeffy giggled. She straightened up when Eric raised a brow at her.

He turned his gaze back on Ricky. "Yes, it does, especially when there is a catalyst, and I believe you are that catalyst."

"Do you think what he did to Bree, to one of ours, should go unanswered? I know you're gonna say we should follow the right channels, but Bree didn't want to go through all the publicity of having to press charges. For her sake, something had to be done."

"For her sake, Rick, or for yours?"

"I realize it sounds like I was just indulging my need for vengeance, but I promise, I was thinking of Bree. I mean, we all understand her not wanting to press charges. Yet that means she'd have

to think of him walking around with a smirk on his face knowing he'd roughed her up with no consequences. There had to be consequences, Dad. The world needs to know that you don't get away with smacking around Breanna Adams."

Eric nodded. "Perhaps. Justin also told me to make sure I read the rest of this morning's paper. Which I did." He addressed the table at large. "A paparazzo challenged Ricky last night and Ricky asked him to step into the ring with him. The man backed off. No shortage of pictures in the paper and video on the morning news." Eric looked up at his son. "It appears you were quite busy last night."

Ricky grinned as Bree's face turned red.

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Ephesians 4:14

"...so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes."

Chapter 5

The table conversation turned to Mark's upcoming birthday.

"How old will you be?" Beth asked.

He grinned. "I'll be eighteen, finally."

"Oooh, a real man," Beth said.

"Hah," Joey laughed. "That's a good one."

"So Mark," Shelley began with a smile. "Since your birthday happens to fall on a Saturday this year, how about a night out on the town with the family?"

Mark frowned. "Um, Mom, uh, do you think we could do the family thing on Sunday instead?"

Shelley nodded. "After church, sure. If that's what you want. May I ask why?"

Mark looked abashed.

Eric stepped in. "He obviously has other plans."

"And I bet those other plans include a hot date," Ricky added.

Shelley smiled. "Oh, wouldn't want to interfere with love. Okay, then, of course we can do it on Sunday."

"Thanks, Mom," Mark said. "I'm really glad you understand. You too, Eric."

"No problem," Eric said, smiling. "I understand that a man's got to have some privacy."

"Yeah, and speaking of privacy," Mark started. "I guess we're gonna have to be a little more careful around Ricky and Bree again."

Mark grinned at Ricky as Bree frowned and Ricky smiled and turned to meet the questioning stares of his father, Shelley and Beth.

"So, uh, Bree and I, we're gonna be dating again."

Beth gasped. Eric nodded. Shelley smiled.

"That's wonderful," Shelley said.

Bree addressed Beth who was aghast. "We're not really brother and sister. Before our parents married, Ricky and I dated quite a bit."

Beth shrugged. "Well, I knew the two of you weren't actually related. It's just that, it seems weird, you know, I mean like, the whole world thinks of you as brother and sister."

Bree's look of distress had Ricky's lips pressed into a thin line. He sighed. "Well, we're just gonna have to change the world's view about that, aren't we?"

Bree frowned. "Well, for now, I'd like to keep this quiet." Bree looked around the table at everyone. "Please."

"You got it, sis," Mark said.

Everyone else gave their word.

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Ricky stuck his head back into the kitchen to offer help on the clean-up committee. He hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but what he heard sent chills through him.

Shelley had tears running down her cheeks. "What have I done, Eric? Just tell me what I did to make you so angry at me."

"You know, Shell, that's a good question," Eric answered. "Take breakfast for example. The bacon was overcooked, the juice was warm, the pancakes were cold. I can't attribute any of that to anything other than laziness."

Shelley gasped at the affront.

"I don't know what's gotten into you," he continued. "And while we're at it, let's talk about the way you threw yourself at Justin's new law associate."

Shelley's eyes opened wide. "Are you out of your mind?"

Eric's hand snapped out, grabbed her arm and pulled her forward. He drew a calming breath. "I'm going to ask you to not talk to me like that. You haven't had respect for me since the first day I began training you."

Ricky made the decision to step in. "Dad," he said firmly.

Eric looked up at his son, then looked down at his hand clasping Shelley's wrist. He let go. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm sorry, Shelley. Excuse me." He left the room.

Ricky eyed Shelley. She turned away, busying herself with the dishes, obviously embarrassed that Ricky had been privy to such a confidential discussion.

Ricky thought he would try to talk to her, maybe comfort her, but he'd never been the one to do that in the past. It was his dad's specialty. Now his dad was the cause of her distress. Who could he turn to? Justin. His father's best friend. Justin would know what to do for
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Shelley. Right now though, Ricky needed to speak to Bree. He went straight to the great room where she sat listening to Jeffy, took her by the hand and pulled her to her feet.

"We have to talk."

"Okay," Bree said, huffing out a breath.

They went into Eric's study and locked the door. At first Bree thought he was just being cute about getting her alone, but then he offered her a seat on the large brown leather sofa and he sat on the coffee table in front of her.

"We have problems," he began.

Bree searched his face. "Other than you and me?"

"You and me, Bree, are not a problem."

"Then this is something serious?" she asked.

He sighed. "Yes, and I could keep what I know to myself, but I consider you my equal in this household, *and* my companion."

Eyebrows raised, her eyes opened wide. "You're not kidding around are you?"

"No. I'm not kidding." He looked down. "There's something going on between Dad and Shelley. Actually, that's not true. There's something going on with my father and your mom appears to be an innocent bystander."

"Are you talking about how rude Eric was to Mom earlier?"

"Yes that, but it's more than that. Bree, you know my dad. You know he would never, or has never in the past, been disrespectful or cruel to anyone, especially not to Shelley."

"Yes, I know. When he spoke earlier I did a double take. I thought he had to be kidding."

"And yet, he's not. There's something wrong with him. I promise, Bree, it's not that I'm saying it's not possible for my dad to make a mistake, but you have to believe me when I say, there is something very wrong."

"I do believe you, Rick."

"There's more. I went into the kitchen to see if I could help with the dishes and I overheard a conversation between Dad and Shelley. Your mom was crying and Dad was tearing into her about breakfast. He even called her lazy."

Bree drew a sharp breath.

Ricky held a hand up. "It gets worse. He accused her of throwing herself at the new guy at Justin's law firm and when she finally got angry enough to talk back to him he grabbed her arm."

Bree's eyes narrowed. "Did he hurt her?"

"No, and I can't imagine that he would ever do that, but then again, I would never have imagined that he'd be this cruel either. So anyway, I stepped in, and when I did, he acted as if he'd been in a trance, and he excused himself and left. Bree, this can't go on."

"Well, what can we even do? I mean, how can we find out what in the world is going on in Eric's brain?"

Ricky's eyes lit up. "That's it, Bree. It's like there is something strange going on in his brain. It's almost as if he's been given some sort of mood-altering drug."

"You're kidding, right?"

Ricky sighed. "Do I look like I'm kidding? Bree, I do not accept that suddenly my dad turns into some sort of monster overnight. Something is going on."

Bree nodded with a frown. "Well, what about this Beth person? How long has she been here?"

"Several weeks now."

"Do you think she might be putting something into Eric's food? I mean, she is the only thing different around here and Eric didn't start acting strange until recently, right?"

Ricky ran a hand through his hair. "As far as I know. And I know it seems far-fetched that Beth would be putting something in Dad's food, but, there are drugs that can cause extreme paranoia and irritation and anger. Why though? Why would Beth do that?"

Bree shrugged. "Who knows what kind of crazy person she is. So, what kind of drugs are we talking about?"

"Well, there are several, for example, the effect steroids have on people is the exact kind of behavior Dad seems to be demonstrating. He would never take steroids, not by choice. *That* I know. He's big time against them, so look, keep an eye on Beth. A close eye."

"I will, and maybe you should speak with your father."

"I'm gonna have to, because I cannot allow him to mistreat Shelley. But I tell ya, Bree, I am so not looking forward to it."

Bree watched his face. "You're a good man, Rick."

He smiled. “You’re just figuring that out? I’ve been telling you that for years.”

She frowned. “And now you’ve just ruined it.”

“Darn it.” He stood. “Anyway, back to the issue. I think we should speak to Justin and Jason and Angel. I don’t feel equipped to handle this alone. I’ll call and see if we can arrange a meeting. Are you in?”

“Of course.”

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Saturday morning Ricky poked his head into Mark’s room. “Happy birthday little brother.”

“Thanks, Rick. I believe it’s going to be.”

Ricky handed him a large envelope. “This is from me and Dad. Just a little sumpin sumpin.”

Mark took the offered envelope, opened it. Stood. “You’re freakin’ kiddin’ me. What the... you’re freakin’ kiddin’ me!”

“You already said that. And no, we’re not kidding.”

Mark thumbed through the brochures showing pictures of various cars. “I mean, a few months ago Mom and Eric said they were gonna look into a more dependable car. They said I really needed it since I’ll be going away to school soon, but these cars, these are incredible.”

“You deserve it,” Ricky said. “You’ve worked hard. You never ask for anything or complain about that pile of junk you bought when you were sixteen. I think a man needs a decent set of wheels, so, look them over, and then all us guys will go check some out and go on a few test drives.”

Mark nodded. “This is great. Thanks, man.”

“My pleasure.” Ricky walked around Mark’s room, peered out the window that overlooked the large front lawn then turned, looking Mark over. “A man also *thinks* that he needs to get laid.”

“Geez, Rick. Give it a break.”

Ricky shrugged. “Word is you have a reservation tonight.”

Mark grinned. “Yes, and as I’ve already told Eric and my father, it’s at the *Golden Hotel* over on Paseo Del Mar.”

Rick frowned. “*Golden Hotel*?”

“The Crane brothers don’t own them anymore, Rick, so, what’s the problem?”

“Well, Tommy Crane runs bar at the one downtown.”
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"That's downtown. I'm at the one near White Point."

Ricky sighed. "Okay, you're right. Just be aware of your surroundings at all times." He frowned. "So, what did your dad and my dad have to say about this little plan of yours?"

Mark shrugged. "My dad has no problem with it. Your dad feels it's a mistake, but says it's my choice. I mean, I know at church and all, they talk about this stuff."

Ricky nodded. "And with all of that, you still intend to go through with it? Look Mark, speaking from experience, it's better to stay away from casual sex."

"Like you've never had sex."

"I have and I regret my decisions."

"Cuz there's always a choice," Mark quoted.

"And consequences," Ricky added. "Look, Mark, I'm not your parent or your pastor, but I am your brother and I do care for you. I know you know right from wrong. And I know it's your choice, like Dad says." He sighed. "So, is this a sure thing?"

Mark nodded. "Looks like it. Jana said she had a gift for me and she's the one who told me to get the room."

Ricky sighed. "Okay, well then, take protection."

"Man, Rick, I'm not stupid."

"We're men, Mark. There are times when we don't think with our brains."

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Mark came in before midnight, went straight to his room. He was in a bad mood. A very bad mood. The day had started out great. The promise of a new car from Ricky and Eric. New iPhone from Bree. A leather scrapbook of his football accomplishments from his Mom. Clothes from Joey. A story about a girl who thought she wanted to be king from Jeffy and a ski trip from his father. What a birthday. And then there was Jana. He'd put off a birthday dinner with his family so he could take Jana to dinner and then to a hotel room. Her suggestion.

Dinner had been good. Jana had been chatty and flirty. By the time they got to the room, he was literally straining at the bit. Then she'd gotten cold feet. She couldn't go through with it. Of course, he'd known that was possible. He just wished she hadn't led him on like that. He did his best to not be angry with her. He knew a girl losing her
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virginity was a big deal. Heck, it was a big deal for him too. He'd been kind. Taken her home, kissed her goodnight. She'd kissed him passionately. Yeah, thanks for nothing, he thought as he flopped down on his bed. Well, maybe a cold shower. Maybe he'd go downstairs and work out. Maybe pound on his drums for a while. He rose up at the soft knock on his door.

"Yeah, come in," he said despondently, thinking it was Joey come to commiserate with him about his failed date plans.

Beth stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

Mark sat up. "Hey. Is something wrong?"

She smiled. "No. I just saw you come in. I was sitting downstairs in the dark."

"Oh. Why were you sitting alone in the dark?"

She shrugged. "Just thinking over my life. Anyway, I saw you come in and I knew you were supposed to be much later so I thought your hot date probably didn't go as planned."

He slumped back down, a little embarrassed. "Uh, no, it didn't."

She moved forward. "And I thought, you being such a nice guy and all, you know, you've been so nice to me, I thought I'd return the favor." She sat down on the bed next to him.

Now, she had Mark's interest. "And how are you gonna do that?" he asked.

"Well," she said, leaning over close to him. "I thought I'd start out here," she softly touched his lower lip then moved forward and kissed him.

He forced himself to breathe.

"Well?" she whispered. "What do you think?"

"Well, I mean, if your heart's set on it, who am I to stop you?"

"My heart's set on it."

Happy birthday to me, he thought.

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When Mark didn't show for breakfast Ricky went up to rouse him. He knocked first, then opened the door. "Hi," Rick said. "You missed breakfast. Just wanted to be sure you made it home last night in one piece."

Mark smiled. "Missed breakfast for a good reason."
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At that moment Beth strode out of Mark's bathroom wearing one of his t-shirts. She gathered her clothing and moved toward the door. "Bye gorgeous," she said to Mark.

"Later," Mark answered.

Beth glared up into Ricky's eyes. Ricky stepped aside so she could exit the room and then he turned to Mark for an explanation.

Mark shrugged. "Things didn't turn out like expected, but Beth came in and made me not care."

"Mark," Rick hesitated. Mark was not gonna like what Ricky had to say. Nevertheless, he had to say it. "She's bad news, Mark. She's a problem, and you need to stay away from her."

Mark rose from the bed and began pulling on jeans. "Oh, she was bad alright. Very bad."

Ricky sighed. "Look, Mark, okay I'm happy you had a good experience, but man, I'm telling you, stay away from her."

Mark grabbed a shirt. "Rick, where do you get off telling me who I can or can't have a relationship with?"

Rick nodded his head because it was a good question. "Look, I don't have anything concrete yet, but there's something not quite right about that girl."

"You know what I think, Rick? I think you're just upset that for once, you didn't get the girl."

Ricky's eyes narrowed. "Give me a break."

"Oh, that's right, I forgot— you're doin' my sister."

Ricky moved so fast Mark barely had time to blink before he was pinned against the wall. "I don't give a damn what you think about me, but you won't disrespect Bree, got it?"

Mark's hand balled into a fist.

"Don't even think about it, Mark," Ricky warned.

They stood glaring at each other. Finally Ricky sighed, stepped back. "Look, Mark, I'm sorry." Blowing out another breath he ran a hand through his hair. "I'm asking you to just trust me, okay? Have I ever given you a reason not to trust me? Have I ever done anything that wasn't in your best interest?"

Mark straightened, his head lowering. "No," he said sullenly.

"This girl is trouble. Be careful."

Mark nodded. Rick extended his hand. It took Mark several seconds before he finally took it.

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"I heard . . . The paper said you were taken to the hospital . . . I do see . . . Yeah, we're all going to dinner tonight . . . Oh, I had my way with the older boy . . .Yeah . . .With them it's getting worse. I stood at their door last night after they went to bed. She practically begged him to make love to her and he refused. He's pretty mad at her and I think it's the CD . . .Yeah, a few times . . . He has protein shakes in the mornings and I've been able to get to a few of them. You're sure it won't kill him if I put that much in? . . . Well, okay. You're the boss, but so far I think it's all the CD anyway. . . Yeah, something real big to report on them. You ready for this? Ricky and Bree do not have a brother/sister relationship."

"Who are you talking to?" Bree asked sharply.

Beth ended the call. "That would be none of your business."

"Since I believe you were talking about me and about something I asked to be kept private, that makes it my business."

Beth stood, started toward her room. "Sorry. Sometimes I get carried away with gossiping. It's a flaw. I'll try to do better."

Bree frowned as Beth hurried out of sight. There was a lot more to the conversation she'd heard than gossip. Something about a CD. And maybe Ricky was right because it sounded like she said something about putting something in Eric's protein drinks.

"Hi, doll," Ricky said as he came down the stairs.

Bree looked up at him.

"What's wrong?"

"I just overheard Beth talking to someone on the phone and I know I heard her say something about putting something in Eric's protein shakes. And I think she also said something about your dad won't have sex with Mom."

"How does she know that?"

"She said she listened at their door. She said that Eric is really upset with Mom, and that it had something to do with a CD."

"A CD? You mean like a CD you listen to?"

"I don't know. She also said something about having her way with a boy."
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Ricky frowned. "That one I know about."

"How do you know about that?" Bree asked suspiciously, raising her eyebrows and crossing her arms over her chest.

Ricky rolled his eyes. "Not *me*. Come on, Bree, you're the only one for me. Besides, do I look like a boy?"

"No."

"She's talking about Mark."

Bree's mouth fell open. "Mark and Beth?"

"Yes. I caught them this morning. Apparently *she* stepped in when *Jana* bailed."

Bree puffed out a breath. "I don't like it. Not one little bit."

"Me neither. And I really pissed Mark off when I tried to warn him about her."

"I want her out of our house, Rick."

"Me too and the sooner the better."

They both looked up when Shelley appeared. The strained look on her face had Ricky's heart breaking and Bree concerned.

"Hi Mom," Bree said softly.

Shelley looked slowly up at the two of them as if she'd just noticed them. "Oh, hi." She hesitated. "Would— the two of you mind coming up to my room. I'd like to speak with you."

"Sure," Bree said, glancing at Rick.

They followed Shelley up the back steps to her bedroom. Shelley motioned them to sit in the two wingback chairs while Shelley sat on the bed. Wringing her hands, Shelley drew a long breath and let it out. "I asked you up here to speak with you because I don't know who else to turn to. I was wondering if either of you have noticed that Eric has been acting, well, strange lately?" She shrugged. "It may be just me and my crazy imagination," she said, forcing a smile.

"Where's Dad?" Ricky asked.

Shelley's chin quivered slightly before she answered. "He went into the city to have lunch with Justin."

Ricky nodded, waiting for Shelley to go on.

"He said," she stopped, drew a breath. "He said he needed to get out of here for a while. He said– he couldn't stand the sight of me."

A giant tear fell over Shelley's cheek.

"What's going on between the two of you, Mom?" Bree asked.

Shelley looked up and shook her head as if in a daze. “I don’t know. I can’t seem to do anything right.”

Ricky shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if you do everything right or nothing right, Dad loves you. I don’t understand this.”

“I’m not sure that he loves me anymore, Rick.” Tears now flowed freely. Ricky grabbed a tissue for her. “Thank you,” she said as she wiped at her face. “What is it about me? That’s two marriages I haven’t been able to keep together.”

“Whoa, wait a minute, Shelley. You’re really jumping the gun here. Whatever the problem is, the two of you can work it out.”

She shook her head. “Too tired. It hurts too much.”

“Mom,” Bree said softly. “I know you’re hurting. It makes me want to get in Eric’s face real bad, but I don’t think he’s himself. Mom, listen to me, I think Beth is putting something into Eric’s food, into his protein shakes.”

Shelley shook her head. “What? That’s crazy, Bree. Why would she do that?”

“I don’t know why, but I intend to find out. Until then, Mom, you’ve gotta hold on. You’ve gotta be strong.”

Shelley spoke as if she hadn’t heard a word Bree said. “You know, your dad said I was worthless. Maybe Eric has finally discovered the truth about me.”

“Dear Jesus,” Ricky pleaded softly as he stood. “It’s not like that Shelley. And Robert totally messed up where you were concerned. He’s even told you that.”

Shelley nodded her head. “Eric won’t even touch me.”

“What?” Bree said.

“Eric. He won’t touch me. He hasn’t kissed me in days. I tried to, to, you know, cuddle up to him in bed last night, and he actually pushed me away.”

Ricky ran a hand through his hair and looked around the room for an anomaly, but everything seemed normal. The bed was made. The room was spotless. A picture from their Hawaiian wedding sat on Shelley’s dresser, along with a silver brush set his dad had bought for Shelley in Paris. Some potted violets sat cheerfully on a table between the two wingback chairs. Shelley’s nightstand held some lotion, a clock, a lamp and a journal with a pen lying across it. Eric’s nightstand

held a book, a piece of jade, and an old personal CD player with headphones that he'd listened to for at least twenty years. Ricky looked around the room.

"Where's Dad's marble clock, the one his students gave him?"

Shelley sniffed. "It broke. I accidentally knocked it off the table."

"Oh, Mom," Bree said.

"I didn't mean to. I've been so clumsy lately. I drop everything."

"Does Dad know?"

"Yes. He was so angry. He..."

Bree and Ricky waited. When she still didn't say, Ricky urged her on. "He what, Shelley? What did he do?"

She shrugged as if it didn't matter anymore. "He grabbed me by the shoulders and he shook me. I really thought he was about to hit me, and then suddenly, he seemed to get control. He stepped back and said he couldn't do this anymore and that's when he said he was going in to see Justin."

Now Ricky's eyes filled. His father was no longer his father. "Shelley, you have to know that this is not like Dad. There's something going on here, and I intend to find out what it is."

Shelley stretched out across the bed. "I just want to lie down for a while. Will you keep an eye on Jeffy for me? She's with Beth right now. They're in the pool."

"Of course, Mom. But listen, please don't worry. We'll figure this all out. You rest. We'll take care of everything."

Bree rose, pulled a blanket over her mother and left the room, Ricky right behind. They walked down the hall past the landing that overlooked the front foyer and straight to Bree's room. The moment they were inside, Bree turned and buried her face against Ricky's chest. He held her close, let her cry. His hands stroked her back, smoothed her long, silky brown hair.

"It breaks my heart, Ricky. I can't stand to see her so broken. It's just like before, when she was married to my father."

"Yeah, I know he mistreated her."

Bree nodded. "Don't get me wrong, I love my dad."

"Of course you do."

"Still, I wasn't blind to how cruel he was to Mom. She'd been through so much. Then, out of the blue, she found the strength to stand

up to him. Then your dad came along and I was so grateful to see him treat her with such tenderness and love. He healed her. And now, it's like she's right back where she was. So vulnerable."

Ricky sighed. "I know it seems that way, but I also know Shelley is strong. Do you remember what she went through the year she trained for the MART? She came through that with flying colors and she'll do it again."

"Yeah, only this time she doesn't have Eric in her corner."

"Maybe not, Bree, at least not this very minute, but she has me, and you. We'll get her through this. We will figure this out. And I refuse to accept that my father is suddenly a monster."

"Of course he's not. We both know, this isn't like him."

"So, it's time to fix things. And we can't heal the wound if we don't get rid of the thorn first."

Bree smiled at him. Touched his face.

"What?" Ricky asked.

"You sound just like your dad."

He grinned. "I do, don't I?" He kissed her hard. "Now, let's go pull a giant thorn out of our side." He held his hand out to her.

She took his hand. "How?"

"I'm gonna go find Beth and get to the bottom of this and no more kid gloves."

Together they headed straight to the pool. Joey was chasing Beth and Jeffy around in the water, his eyes closed tight. The moment they entered the pool area Jeffy came running to Bree.

"Are you coming swimming?"

"Not now. How about you and me walk down to the beach, gather some shells."

"Okay, but can Beth come?"

"No," Ricky said. "Beth and I are gonna have a little talk."

Beth climbed up the steps out of the water. "I don't think so."

Ricky moved close to her. "You have no choice in the matter." He took her by the elbow.

Bree took Jeffy's hand. "Come on, honey."

"Okay, bye, Beth. See ya later."

Beth watched Jeffy leave with Bree, then snatched her arm free and took off running. Ricky caught her before she'd run five steps.

"Something serious going down?" Joey asked.

"Yeah there is, but I'll have to get back to ya. Do me a favor and watch out for your mom. She's resting, but she's not feeling well."

"Got it," Joey said, climbing from the pool.

Beth turned to Ricky. "I don't know who you think you are, but I don't have to speak to you at all. I'm sure Shelley would not be happy to know that you're pushing me around."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever." He directed her toward the house. They stepped inside through the dining room doors and Beth broke free and took off toward the back steps. Again, Ricky caught her. She tried to pull away but he tightened his grip on her arm.

"Listen Beth, we can do this civilly, or you can fight it. Either way, I will win."

She whipped around, trying to scratch his face with her free hand. Ricky threw her over his shoulder and carried her downstairs to the workout room so that they wouldn't wake Shelley.

Mark came out of the music room. "What's going on?"

"We're about to find out," Ricky said.

"Mark help," Beth appealed. "He's gone crazy."

Mark looked up into Ricky's eyes. Ricky had been his martial arts Master for years now. Mark had always had complete honor and respect for his stepbrother. He decided to go with what he knew but keep an eye on the situation. "I want to come in the room with you."

"You can stay, but don't interfere."

Mark nodded in agreement.

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Luke 8:17

"For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open."

Chapter 6

Ricky tossed Beth onto a beautiful Chinese rosewood bench. She stood immediately. He pointed at the bench. “Sit.”

When she continued to stand, he moved closer but his voice got much softer. “Now.”

She slumped down onto the bench but looked past Ricky to Mark, hoping for an ally, however, he showed no signs of sympathy.

“It’s time, Beth. Suppose you tell me what you’re doing here in our home,” Ricky began.

“Shelley invited me to...”

“That’s not what I mean and you know it.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Beth, tell me who you were talking to on the phone this morning when Bree overheard you.”

She remained silent.

“Need I remind you that you were caught stealing the day Shelley brought you here? I have no problem getting the law involved, right now. I mean it. This is serious.”

“She was caught stealing?”

Beth looked toward Mark then glared at Ricky. “So? Shelley didn’t care about that. She sees people for how they really are.”

“And this is how you repay her for her kindness?”

Beth rose. “I had to do what I had to do. I’m sorry that Shelley is being hurt. That’s not my fault. It’s yours.”

“Mine? You’re kidding. You’re not making any sense. Let’s go back to my original question. Who were you speaking to on the phone this morning?”

She frowned. “My um, my ex-boyfriend.”

“And what were you telling him?”

“Again, that’s none of your business.”

“I guess it would be Mark’s business though, wouldn’t it?”

“Why would it?” she said.

"Bree told me you were talking about how you, quote, 'had your way with the kid.' I can only surmise that you were speaking about my brother here."

To Mark's credit, he remained stone-faced as he leaned against the wall as if he was unaffected by the news.

Beth pouted. "So? So I was bragging a little to my ex. So what?"

Ricky watched her eyes. "I don't believe you."

"I don't care if you believe me."

"You'd better care. I'd be happy to have you arrested, or simply kick you out of the house."

"Shelley won't let..."

"Shelley is out of the picture. My father, on the other hand, would be happy to send you to jail. It was his wallet you tried to steal." He paused and let the information sink in. She was worried about it. He could see it in her eyes. She was frightened. Probably had no one to bail her out. She was on her own. Good. He could use that. "Now, let's get back to the phone call. Why would you tell your 'ex' about your little escapade with Mark?"

Beth rose and paced back and forth between Ricky and Mark. The gig was up. Maybe not completely. She could get in a few more digs. Hopefully she'd done enough to still get the money for her family. It would be the least she could do before she died. Because she was going to die. She sighed. She hadn't wanted to hurt Shelley. She was a pretty cool lady. And she loved Jeffy. What a great kid. But the men. The pompous, arrogant males of the Kino family, they deserved everything they got. Well, maybe not Mark. Ricky moved forward, getting her attention. She raised her hand up slightly in surrender. "Okay, okay. I'll tell you— but I have to have your word that once I tell you what you want to know, you'll let me go."

Ricky considered her proposition. He may never get the information he needs to fix things if he doesn't cooperate with her. That doesn't mean he can't take care of her later if he has to. He nodded. "You have my word, now sit and talk."

She eased back onto the bench and looked nervously up at Ricky. "He wasn't my ex-boyfriend."

"Who was he?"

"A man I met when I first came to Los Angeles."

"When was that?"

"A few months ago. I was homeless. He found me and took me in. He said he would help me and I could help him."

"I bet."

"No, not in that way. He never touched me. He gave me food and shelter and promised to help my family."

"Help them how?"

"Uh, my father, he's sick. He's, um, he's dying of cancer. My mother is gonna lose the house. All us kids, I have an older sister and two brothers, we were working to keep the bills paid, but it was just too much. The man said he would take care of everything for us."

"And what were you supposed to do for him?"

"Infiltrate your family. Cause trouble, and then report back to him anything that might help him."

Ricky sighed and shook his head. "What's his name?"

Beth looked down. "Tommy Crane."

"Son-of-a..." Mark murmured.

Ricky drew a breath. "Okay, now, let's take this bit by bit. Why would Tommy care if you had sex with Mark? Were you and Tommy having a relationship?"

"No. I told you, he didn't want me that way."

"Why not? Did prison change his sexual preferences?"

Beth looked toward Mark. She was thinking that he should step in to help her, but he just stood there against the wall, glaring at her. Well, fine, he was about to get his. "Because, I have AIDS."

Silence. Then a strangled sound from Mark. Ricky glanced at him then back to Beth, his expression thunderous. "You— are you that full of hatred that you would ki..."

He stopped himself and glanced over at his brother. The look on Mark's face told him they hadn't used protection. Their eyes met. Ricky nodded at him to let him know he understood and that all hope is not lost. "You want to leave?" he asked Mark.

"No. Let's hear the rest of this crap," Mark muttered.

Rick nodded and turned back to Beth.

"Bree said she heard you say something about putting something in my father's protein drinks."

"I, um I put steroids in his drinks."

"Steroids." Ricky drew a breath. "What kind?"

She shrugged. "I'm not sure. Tommy gave them to me. There was some liquid and some pills."

He rubbed his chin. Steroids. Just as he'd suspected. So, could his father be experiencing some kind of 'roid rage' this quickly? And can 'roid rage' be directed only at one person? He needed information. He turned back to Beth. "What else?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. What do you mean?"

"What was the rest of your mission? What else were you supposed to accomplish?"

She shrugged. "Just cause trouble. Wear you down. Try to break up your perfect little family."

"And you were willing to do this for the money?"

"I'd do anything to help my mother."

"So, Beth, how do you think your mother would feel if she knew what you did to get the money?"

"She'll never know," Beth said, her chin raised.

"The question was, *if she knew*, how would she feel?"

Beth frowned and shrugged. "Probably not very good."

Ricky sighed. He wasn't getting the whole picture. "You're not telling me the whole story. A young girl with a close family, willing to tear apart another family with no qualms. It doesn't make sense."

"It does when you consider what your family has done to his," Beth returned immediately.

"*My* family? Are you kidding me?"

"You killed his brother, or your father did. Tommy said that was the most important thing I was supposed to find out; which one of you killed his brother."

Ricky laughed a brittle laugh. "Bet you failed there."

"Maybe."

Ricky shook his head. "Nobody knows the answer to that question. No one in this house anyway, except my father— and me."

"What's the answer?" she asked.

He shook his head. "You really are whacko, aren't you? Answer me this; why does Tommy want to know so badly?"

She shrugged and saw no reason not to tell him. "He said he needed to know the truth. He said he needed to find out what really

happened and then he'd be able to bring suit and get his money and when he did, he'd help my family."

"Get his money? What is he talking about? A lawsuit? Does he think he can bring suit against us for the death of his brother?"

"I'm not sure," she answered, realizing how weak it sounded.

"Did Tommy tell you why we had to kill his brother?"

"Yes," she said defensively. "He told me how you drove his brother to do all the things he did. He told me how you rubbed your cocky ways and perfectly rich little family in their faces."

"*My* rich family? Did he mention that the Crane brothers were stinking rich themselves?"

She paled. "What? No. That can't be. He said they'd always been poor. Just like my family."

Ricky put both hands to his head and walked away. "Dear God, will this ever freakin' end?" He turned back to Beth. "Have you ever heard of *Golden Hotels*?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, the Crane brothers owned them. They've had to liquidate their assets, but Tommy's got money coming out his wazoo."

"That can't be," Beth said slowly.

Ricky sighed. "I really don't care if you believe me or not. Is there anything else you're not telling me?"

She shrugged. "Not that I can think of."

"Okay, so, how many men does Tommy have working for him?"

"Three or four."

"Which is it?"

"I've only seen three of them, but he *does* talk to some other guy on the phone."

Rick stood watching her, and finally he spoke. "I want you out."

She was quiet for a moment. "Okay, but can I say goodbye to Shelley and Jeffy first?"

"Nope. Sorry Beth, you've had all the chances you're gonna get to wreak your havoc. We're going up to your room together. We're gonna pack up your stuff and I'll drop you off at the bus station. That's the best you'll get."

He watched as big tears coursed over her cheeks. Stepping away, he sighed and turned. "Beth, I can't show you compassion. You knew

what you were doing when you had sex with Mark and when you put steroids in my father's drinks. You came here with an intent to destroy my family. How can I show you compassion? I will do this, though. I'll give you some advice. Go home. Get as far away from Tommy as you can. Tommy has a twisted grudge against our family. He's a bad guy. Go home, Beth. I'll pay your way. Just go home."

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Ricky punched the end button after his conversation with Bree. He was on his way home after running his mission to the bus station. He'd instructed Bree and Mark and Joey to meet him in Bree's room. Bree told him Shelley was awake and getting her and Jeffy all dressed up for Mark's big night out. She said it broke her heart to see how nervous Shelley was about choosing the right dress, hoping Eric would be pleased.

When Ricky got home he went straight to Bree's room, feeling the immense pressure his father must feel to know that all these people depend on you. "Where's Mark?" Ricky asked.

Bree sighed. "He's coming. I asked him to tell me what happened but he said he would wait for you."

"Okay. So, what is said in this room here today is absolutely confidential. That's a decision I've made and I take responsibility for it, everyone got it?"

"Yes," Bree and Joey answered.

Mark came in, his face pale, his eyes red.

Bree patted the bed next to her but he chose to sit on a chair across the room.

"So, what's going on," Bree asked. "The suspense is killing me."

Ricky took the reins and told them about the conversation with Beth. Bree and Joey conveyed the expected sentiments.

Ricky sighed. "Okay then, so let's talk about a plan of action. Concerning Mark, it doesn't necessarily mean that he has AIDS. We'll have him tested. I think after that there's a waiting period like two or three months before the second test. We'll find out for sure. But we'll get you to a doctor right away and find out exactly what we need to do." He turned to Mark. "So, during that wait time I don't suppose I have to tell you brother, do not have sex."

Mark didn't speak, but blinked his eyes to show he understood.
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Ricky turned back to Bree and Joey. “After the first test, then I think it’s like so many times over the course of a year. Like I said, we’ll find out exactly. I’ll make an appointment soon with a doctor who will keep it secret. I’ll pull some strings if I have to. We’ll not let this get us or him down. We’ll be his support when he feels low.”

“So, how ya feelin’ right now, bro?” Joey asked. “Cuz I feel like I want to tear something apart.”

Mark smiled at his little brother. They’d always been so close. They were in sync on most things and this was no exception. “You *would* feel that way, Joey. Fortunately, there are no classmates around for you to jump on.”

“Really, Mark,” Bree said softly. “What are your thoughts?”

He blew out a breath. “Well, I’m a little scared. You know, this is my last season of football in high school. If things go as expected, I’ll play at a division one college. If things go well there, I could end up in the NFL. All that could be taken away because I was stupid.”

“You didn’t know,” Joey defended.

“I forgot to use protection. I wasn’t thinking. I’d planned to use protection with Jana and when those plans went south and Beth came into my room, I stopped thinking at all. Rick reminded me earlier, he told me that ‘not thinking’ was a possibility. Then, I went and did just that. But really, I have to say, the bigger thing is, I outright chose to disobey God’s laws and I got just what I deserved. Eric warned me. Ricky warned me, and I went with my hormones and not my spiritual heart. I was stupid. Just stupid.”

“Okay, you got that all out?” Ricky asked.

Mark nodded.

“Positive thoughts,” Bree added.

“And talk to Jesus about it,” Ricky added. “He’ll forgive you and bring you peace.”

Mark nodded again.

Ricky went on. “Now, do you all agree that Shelley and Dad are in a bad place right now and there’s no reason to put them through all the worry when nothing will probably come of it anyway?”

They all nodded in the affirmative.

“So, do you really think that the steroids in Eric’s protein drinks are what’s causing him to be so down on Mom?” Joey asked.

"I don't know what else to think. Now that Beth is gone, he should snap out of it. We need more information. Why don't you do some internet research? I think I'm gonna get Dad to call Dr. Chin."

"Who's gonna tell Eric and Mom and Jeffy why Beth is no longer with us?" Bree asked.

Ricky looked up at her with a hopeful face.

She sighed. "Okay, I'll take care of that."

"And tell them about Tommy," Ricky added. "I think we all need to know the danger. But let's wait to tell them about the steroids because I want to be nearby when dad finds out that piece of info."

Bree glanced at her watch. "Well, Eric should be home by now, and we all need to get ready to go out for Mark's birthday dinner. I'll get dressed and try to speak to them before we leave."

Ricky nodded. "Let's do it."

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Tommy hadn't spoken to Beth the entire way back to the house. She could tell he was angry. She hoped it was directed toward the Kinos and not her. She'd gone inside the bus station and sat on a bench and thought long and hard about everything. She knew she couldn't go home. Ricky just didn't understand. She couldn't. She had nowhere to go and nowhere to turn. Tommy had always been kind to her and she was thinking that he couldn't be the bad guy Ricky seems to think he is. It was all so confusing.

Well, she really didn't have a choice, did she? She couldn't go home and she couldn't go back to the Kinos. That left Tommy. Once she'd made the decision, she called him immediately. Ricky had given her five hundred dollars and told her to go home. He hadn't even asked where home was. That would be because he didn't care.

She glanced over at Tommy as they pulled into the drive of a small brick home. It was old and run down. The yard was overgrown. Tommy said when he got the money he was gonna fix it all up. Ricky had said the Cranes were rich. She wondered what happened to the money. She didn't dare ask what with him being in such a bad mood.

She did have one good thing to tell him. "Um, Tommy, they still don't know about the CD," Beth said, breaking the silence.

Tommy glanced at her. "They don't?"
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"No. I led them to believe that Eric was acting like he was because I'd put the steroids in his drinks. They accepted that."

Tommy smiled. "Okay, well, good. That's real good, Beth. I guess you did a fairly decent job after all."

"Thanks. I hope it was good enough. Our deal is still on, right?"

"Sure. Sure. Where are the roids?"

"Ricky took them. He searched my stuff and he got your cell phone number off my phone."

Tommy nodded. "I would expect nothing less. They think they'll be able to track me, but I already tossed my old phone."

They entered the house. The moment they walked inside Tommy's demeanor changed. He grabbed Beth and slammed her against the wall.

Her eyes wide she pleaded with him. "I did my best, Tommy. I swear I did. This kind of stuff is new to me."

He was looking at her in a strange way and she drew a deep breath trying to tamp down the panic. He moved closer, towering over her. He was much larger than Ricky, and much more intimidating. She began to panic and tried to swallow her fear.

"Remember that I have AIDS," Beth said quickly.

"I remember. You've messed everything up though, and I'm thinking it's the least you could do for me. I mean, you had no problem doin' the kid."

"No, Tommy, you don't want to take the chance."

He started laughing. "You're right, I don't."

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Bree looked around the table at the people she loved most in the world. Dinner was strained and she was sure Mark would note it down as the worst birthday ever. Along with their family there was Justin, who was Eric's best friend and the family lawyer, Jason, who was Justin's younger brother and the head of Ameritech Security, Jason's wife Angel, who was Shelley's best friend, and their daughter, Kimmie. Jeffy and Kimmie kept up a steady strain of conversation, with Jeffy asking for adult input whenever she could. Jeffy had an IQ of one-ninety-two, to two hundred, but she was still a little girl. Just a brilliant little girl. And sometimes she became exasperated with other little girls who couldn't understand what she was talking about.
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Mark's and Joey's moods were subdued and they spoke very little. Justin sat on the other side of her Mom, involving both her and Eric in conversation. Jason and Angel filled Ricky in on their latest doings. Ricky looked over at Bree and she smiled at him. He'd stepped in and taken on the responsibility of the family with both feet and she was tremendously grateful for that. He was a very good man. How could she not have feelings for him? She did. The question is, what are those feelings?

"So is everyone coming to my game Friday?" Mark asked.

"Five days and counting. Wouldn't miss it," Jason said.

"I'm really proud of you, Mark," Eric said. "You've played well, great progression, thinking fast. I'm looking forward to it."

"Has everyone heard Eric's latest news?" Justin asked.

"No, but we have a feeling you're about to tell us," Ricky said.

"*Celebrity Times Magazine* is doing a feature on your dad. They're very interested in what makes him tick and how he was able to build his little martial arts school into the giant empire it is now, and they want to know about his wholesome way of life. So, next Saturday Eric and Shelley are going to dinner with Jillian Knight to get the ball rolling."

"Oh my goodness, Shelley," Angel said. "You are so lucky. Do you know what you're gonna wear?"

Shelley shook her head. "I can't decide."

"We have to go shopping. How about Tuesday while the kids are in school?"

"I think I can do that," she said, looking anxiously at Eric. He only rolled his eyes at her.

Ricky caught Justin's eye. Justin shook his head.

At that moment the very woman they'd spoken of approached their table wearing a big smile.

"Well hello there, Kino family," she said in her deep sultry voice.

Everyone nodded politely. Eric stood. "Everyone, this is Jillian Knight." He turned back to face her. "It's amazing. We were just speaking about you and the interviews we have scheduled. Would you like to join us?"

"Oh, no, I was just leaving and I noticed your large group and thought I would stop to say 'hi'." She looked around the table. "Okay,

let's see, I recognize Breanna and Ricky, and of course, Shelley. You look so young. It's amazing. I can't believe you're Breanna's mother."

"Thank you, I was very young when I had her."

"I see where Breanna gets her looks."

"What a wonderful compliment. I can see we're gonna get along great," Shelley said as she stood, intending to shake Jillian's hand, but as she extended her hand, she nicked her water glass. As she tried to grab it, she ended up slamming it harder. The glass hit the edge of Eric's plate, broke, and flooded Eric's food with water. Shelley gasped and began apologizing as she tried to clean up the water.

Eric clasped his hand around her wrist. "Stop," he commanded.

"Heaven deliver us," Eric muttered. "Hopefully we'll make it through our dinner next Saturday alive. One never knows with Shelley along." He motioned for a waiter. Jillian said her goodbyes.

Shelley sat, stunned. She didn't look at anyone. She couldn't force herself to hold her head up. She felt like a complete idiot.

"It's okay, Mommy," Jeffy said. "I sometimes spill my milk and Daddy says to never cry over spilled milk."

Shelley smiled at her but didn't respond. She was afraid if she opened her mouth she *would* cry. On her other side, Justin's hand covered Shelley's where it lay on her thigh. He squeezed her hand.

"Eric," Justin said, after the mess had been cleared. "I was thinking about spending a few days at your house. You know, get away from the city for a while, breathe in the ocean. Whaddya say? Got room for an old friend?"

"You don't even need to ask, Justin," Eric said. "You're welcome always, if you can stand Shelley's cooking."

There was nervous laughter. Shelley stood with as much dignity as she could muster and excused herself. She headed to the restroom. Bree and Angel immediately joined her.

In the restroom Bree filled her mom and Angel in on the steroid thing. Angel was stunned. Shelley was somewhat comforted. She wiped tears from her eyes, trying not to mess up her makeup. "So it's just a matter of time, then, and this will all be over?"

"Hopefully," Bree said.

"Why only hopefully?" Angel asked.

"Well, we're trying to get more information. He's having awfully powerful reactions for just the little bit of juice she was putting in his drink. And usually "roid rage' isn't aimed at just one person."

"This is all my fault," Shelley said softly. "It was me who brought that girl into our home."

"They knew you would Mom," Bree said. "They played on that very thing. They knew you were a warm-hearted compassionate woman and that you would want to help some young girl. They knew that about you, they used it, and you know what? I hope you never change. So there."

Back at the table Ricky asked Jason to join them at the house for a meeting with Justin and his father. When Eric questioned his son as to the subject matter, Ricky asked him to wait until later tonight after the women and boys have gone to bed. He definitely wasn't looking forward to the conversation.

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Ricky drew a breath as he looked his father over. A nod from Jason and Justin gave him the courage to go on. "I know Bree spoke with you and Shelley today about what Beth's been up to."

"She said Tommy put her up to infiltrating our family and try to stir up trouble."

Ricky nodded. "Yes. Fortunately I was able to force her to tell me the truth before she caused too much damage. Unfortunately, some of the damage she caused was to you, Dad."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, have you noticed how irritable you've been lately? And twice this past week you mentioned you had a headache and you never have headaches."

"Okay. Yes, you're right about that. I have been feeling a little under the weather. Maybe a little anxious."

"Beth was putting steroids in your protein shakes."

"Steroids? Anabolic steroids?"

"Yes. I confiscated them from her bags. I've turned them over to Jason and he's having tests run on them to see how potent they were."

Eric was silent as he digested the information.
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Ricky finally broke the silence. “I imagine you’re gonna want to have some tests done yourself, you know, to see what is actually in your system.”

Eric nodded.

“I know, Eric,” Justin began, “that you are adamant about what you put in your body. I hope you realize whatever amount she was able to deliver to you was too little to do any real damage.”

“Okay,” he said softly. He looked around the room. “You mentioned that I’ve been irritable. You think that the steroids may be the cause?”

Ricky frowned. “That’s what we’re hoping.”

Eric looked up. “We? So, it’s the consensus of this group that I’ve been irritable?”

“Yeah, to say the least, Dad.”

“I did some research, Eric,” Justin said. “Early effects of steroid use are seen as changes in mood. Some of those are an increase in confidence and energy, but there can also be sleeplessness. Another is an ability to train through pain. I realize it would be difficult to note anything different about you in that area. There can be a marked increase of libido, but also it can be just the opposite, meaning a marked decrease. The parts that jumped out at me though, were irritability, anger, agitation and a ‘strange edgy feeling.’ Those symptoms are commonly reported.”

“If you’re already hot tempered the juice makes you worse,” Jason added. “If little things piss you off, even smaller things will put you into a rage. Some roids are worse than others though, more notorious for causing angry outbursts. One study said three days of consuming simple four androdiol at a hundred milligrams made animals out of twenty men and to control this they put them on some type of tranx like Xanax.”

“So, everyone here thinks I’ve become an animal?”

“No, Dad. Not to us. Only to...” Ricky stopped. He wasn’t sure if he should say it, but he had to, didn’t he? Someone had to.

Eric’s eyebrows rose as he waited. “Only to what?”

“Only to Shelley.”

Eric eyed Ricky, and then turned to Jason and Justin. “You all feel this way?”

"Yes," Justin said softly.

He could feel the anger build at this very moment, yet he wasn't angry at Ricky or his friends, only at Shelley. "Did she go to you with a complaint?"

"No. Of course not," Ricky said quickly. "She came to me and Bree to ask what she should do about the problem, to ask if we'd noticed it. She wasn't complaining. She was worried about you."

"Yeah, right."

"Do you hear yourself? A few weeks ago you would never say something like that."

"Eric, it's noticeable," Justin said firmly. "You've never been cruel to anyone, nor rude, nor even impatient. Yet, these past few weeks, you've done nothing but ridicule her. We don't blame you, Eric, but we need to find the cause and until then you need to think about what you're saying, what you're doing concerning Shelley."

Eric tapped his fingers against his mouth as he thought. "I suppose it was hard for you to come to me with this," he finally said.

"Extremely," Ricky replied.

"It's a touchy subject to speak with a friend about how they're treating their spouse," Justin said. "But this is not normal circumstances. We know you. We have the greatest honor and respect for you. We thought you would want to know what was happening to you and why you were feeling the way you were feeling."

Eric was silent again. "Tell me this, why am I not angry with everyone? Why just Shelley?"

"Well, Dad, we don't know that yet," Ricky said. "It's a question that definitely worries me and I was hoping you might find some time to speak with Dr. Chin."

Eric nodded his head. "Yes, of course, if you think that will help, I'll give him a call," he said softly.

"Dad, you're being very cooperative and very quiet. Will you tell me please, what you're thinking about all of this and, what you're feeling about it?"

Eric leaned back in his chair, drew a deep breath. "A myriad of thoughts, Ricky. I'm thinking that I *have* been feeling strange lately. I have almost a constant headache. I'm thinking that I feel a great deal of anger toward Shelley. I know that I've said several hateful things to

her this week. Things I logically know I would never usually say, and yet I can't seem to help myself. Also, logically, I know I've been deeply in love with her and yet, I can't seem to remember why. I'm also thinking that I would trust my life with you and Justin and Jason and so I must do exactly what you say right now, since I don't seem to be in my right mind. And I'm feeling the guilt of having to lay all this trouble at my own son's feet."

"Well Dad, you've taught us that guilt is a negative concept. So stop with the guilt. Please. We'll get through this and you'll be back to your normal self, and we'll all live happily ever after."

"I hope so Ricky." He rose. "Now, if you'll excuse me I'm going upstairs to see if I can look at my sleeping wife and figure out what my deal is. Now that you brave souls have called my attention to what's happening, maybe I can find the strength of character to keep myself from hurting the person I've chosen to share my life with."

Ricky watched him go. A defeated man. Once Eric was out of earshot Ricky whirled to face Justin and Jason. "I'm gonna kill him."

"I assume you're speaking of Tommy Crane?" Jason replied.

"There's more to this than steroids isn't there?" Ricky asked.

"My educated guess would be 'yes.' I can't figure it out," Justin said. "But I'll be staying here all week or longer if necessary, and maybe we can make some progress."

Ricky nodded. "Thanks, guys. You've always been there for us. When Mom died. All through that hideous year that James went after Shelley. You were always here. I'm humbled by your friendship."

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Eric watched Shelley sleep. She tossed and turned. He sat down on the bed, forcing himself to remember the first day he'd met her. She'd been an angel. She'd run into him and dropped her bag. He'd helped her gather her things and she'd looked up at him and he'd practically fallen over. She'd knocked the breath right out of him. He felt a sharp pang of sympathy and guilt for how he's been treating her. Sighing, he touched her hair. She gasped and sprang from the bed, her face a mask of horror and fear. He held his hands out, like one would show a dog to make friends.

"It's just me, Shelley," he said softly.

She shivered. "What's wrong?" she asked.
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He patted the bed. "It's okay. Come back to bed, please. I didn't mean to wake you."

Cautiously she did as he asked. She lay down next to him and he covered her with the comforter. "There, all better?"

"Yes," she whispered.

He considered making love to her, but suddenly felt very tired. Maybe tomorrow. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Good night," he said.

"Good night, Eric." She waited for him to roll over and go to sleep, hoping she wouldn't accidentally sniffle, because she couldn't stop the tears that wet her pillow.

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Bree waited for Ricky to come to her. When she heard the shower come on she thought it wouldn't be long, yet the shower had been off for at least a half hour now. Finally, she got out of bed and went down the hall to the next door on the right. Quietly, she opened Ricky's door and eased inside. Even though the room was dark, she could see that the bed was still made. Then she saw his broad shoulders outlined by the moonlight out on his balcony.

She moved forward, opened the French door and slipped outside. She stood watching him. He was troubled. The talk with his father must have been rough. They'd known it would be. Ricky was so strong to be able to take on such a burden. Her heart melted. She'd denied him for so many years, yet he wasn't bitter. He was so full of light and love. He was tough as nails, a fighter, lightning fast, and a master in his own right. Or so she'd been told.

He turned suddenly, his eyes searching.

She offered a slight smile. "You spoke to your dad?"

He blinked. Nodded.

"How'd he take it?"

"With humility." Ricky sighed heavily. "Like a man who'd been shamed in front of his family. He's confused and, I don't know, he looked so defeated. I hate this."

Bree moved forward, took his face in her hands. "He'll get through this. So will mom. We all will. We'll figure it out, Ricky." She kissed his mouth softly.
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He took her hands in his, kissed them and pressed them to his chest. “Thank you, Bree.”

“No, Ricky, thank *you*. I don’t know what we would’ve done if you hadn’t been here. I’m so glad you’re here.”

His expression changed from grief to desire. Roughly, he grabbed her upper arms and brought her to him. His mouth met hers. The kiss was not soft and not sweet. She met his desire with one just as fierce, for she knew it was what he needed.

When he carried her into his room it was with only one thought, to love her. As he pulled the cover over both of them, he hadn’t meant to say it, but it slipped out before he could stop it. “I love you, Bree.”

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Galatians 6:9

“Let’s not become discouraged in doing good, for in due time we will reap, if we do not become weary.”

Chapter 7

Things were supposed to get better. After all, they'd removed the problem. They understood now what they were dealing with and yet, the week was becoming one from hell.

It began with Jason stopping by early Monday morning to throw five of the latest scandal magazines on the breakfast table. Each led the reader through the sordid tale of Breanna Adams having a torrid affair with her brother. One magazine stated even though they weren't truly brother and sister it was kind of like, *'Marcia Brady going to bed with stepbrother Greg. Eeeew.'*

Ricky's reaction was unemotional. Bree's reaction was the complete opposite. She'd run to her room and thrown herself across her bed. It'd taken Ricky half the day to be allowed entrance. At first he thought she'd blame him, but thankfully she was merely angry at the situation, and also at Beth. She allowed Ricky to hold her and comfort her. For Rick that was huge since she just as well could have shut him out right then. He understood that her career meant everything to her, so the fact that she wasn't turning him away was a signal that he also meant something to her.

Eric's blood tests showed a surprisingly large amount of anabolic steroids in his system. Even so, the doctor advised him that he didn't think it was the sole cause of the mood swings described. Especially since they were directed at one person. He suggested Eric schedule that appointment with Dr. Chin.

Jeffy overheard two teachers at her school talking about Ricky and Bree. Being a Kino, she confronted them. She hadn't meant to be disrespectful. She'd just told them that they didn't understand. That Ricky and Bree had done nothing wrong and that they were stupid to think that. When she'd been sent to the principal's office and realized she was being disciplined, she'd burst out crying and had been inconsolable. Shelley had been called. When Shelley went to pick Jeffy

up, she had her own two cents worth to add to Jeffy's opinion. It ended up with Jeffy being pulled out of the school.

Shelley making the decision to pull Jeffy without consulting Eric turned out to be a bad idea. Eric had thundered his displeasure. He stormed out of the house to try to get himself under control, realizing he was doing it again, but it was too late for Shelley. She was left curled up on the bed in a state of shock.

On Wednesday, Joey's temper got the best of him as some kids at school rode him mercilessly about Ricky and Bree. It was the use of the word incest that had finally sent him over the top. It started as Joey against three, but as he hurt more and more people, others joined in to finally defeat the cocky member of the Kino family. Mark had run to help Joey and the two of them were able to hold off the other eight or nine.

Unfortunately, the fact that they hadn't started the fight hadn't kept them from being suspended from school. The principal didn't want anyone accusing him of giving the Kino family preferential treatment. Mark was devastated. The high school All-American would miss one of the most important games of his senior year. The coach also let his displeasure be known. Joey was consumed with guilt for getting into the fight in the first place and causing even more pain for his brother.

Then to add insult to injury, Mark felt he had to let Jana, his girlfriend of two years, know why he suddenly refused to kiss her, and she immediately broke up with him. He couldn't blame her. He'd cheated on her and might have AIDS.

Ricky tried to dismiss the guilt feelings he was having. It had been his desire to come home and find love. He hadn't meant to destroy everyone's life just so he could have the woman he wanted.

Shelley was consumed with guilt for bringing Beth into their home. If not for her, no one would know about Ricky's and Bree's relationship until they'd been ready to handle the publicity correctly, and Eric wouldn't be going through whatever it was he was going through. None of this stuff would have happened if not for Beth. So when Eric rode her about inviting Beth into their home, she actually felt she deserved it. She *was* an idiot.

Ricky watched his father try to control his temper every minute of the day. His hand would ball into a fist. His jaw would clench. Instead

of trying to speak civilly to Shelley, he decided not to speak at all. When Shelley found out the doctor didn't believe it was the steroids in Eric's system that was causing his mood, she plummeted.

Thank goodness Justin had volunteered to stay the week. He'd been a tower of strength for Eric and Shelley. When Eric, in a fit of anger, grabbed Shelley by the arm on Thursday, Justin had been there to step in. Ricky never thought he'd see the day when he'd have to keep his father from hurting a woman. After seeing to Eric, Justin had gone to Shelley and let her cry on his shoulder. He didn't know what else to do. Dr. Chin had promised to come see Eric, but couldn't make it until Sunday.

Friday night, when the family should have been cheering away at Mark's football game, they, each in their own world, rambled listlessly around the house. Mark, not allowed to attend a school function while under suspension, finally announced he was going out. Joey decided to join his brother. Jason and Angel stopped by to pick up Jeffy and take her to their house for an impromptu spend the night party with Kimmie.

Eric and Justin sat in the great room, speaking in low tones. Ricky and Bree were in the kitchen making sandwiches. Shelley came downstairs, excited about a new project she intended to start in the morning. She came into the kitchen to get Bree's input.

"So," Shelley began, "I thought, Eric's been talking about painting the weapons room for months now. I could do it for him. You know, as a surprise. He would be so pleased."

Bree eyed Ricky before she spoke. "Mom, I think it's a great idea. You want to go get the paint tonight?"

"Oh Bree, I was really hoping you'd say that," Shelley said. "I'll go get my purse."

Bree watched her mom leave before she turned to Ricky.

Ricky sighed and shook his head. "You know, we can just hire someone to paint the room."

"I know, but she looks so excited and I didn't have the heart to put a damper on her spirits."

Ricky nodded. "Okay. I get it. You want me to come with you?"

She grimaced and shook her head. "No, that's okay. I'm not really ready to handle that yet."

"Handle what?"

When she didn't answer he frowned and then it hit him. "Do you mean that you can't handle being seen in public with me?"

Wringing her hands she turned to him. "Please, try to understand. I need to take things slowly. It's not that I don't care about you."

"Care about me?" He sighed. "Okay, so then, you care about me. That's a start I guess. I'm glad to know at least that." He pushed his sandwich away. "I think I'll go for a run." He started out of the kitchen, but then turned. "I'll tell you the same thing I told Mark and Joey. Be careful. If Tommy will send Beth to do his dirty work, there's no telling what other plans he has."

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Beth lay across the filthy bed Tommy had provided for her. She didn't care that it was dirty. She didn't care that she had nothing. She didn't need anything. She only wanted her family to have the help they needed. Right now, she was simply grateful that Tommy seemed to have lost interest in her after that first night back. He'd pretty much left her on her own since then, so it was a surprise when one of his boys knocked on her door.

"Tommy wants to see ya," he called.

She sat up, dreading what lay in store, yet she knew she had to go. Sighing she went downstairs to find Tommy.

He sat at the small kitchen table. "Have a seat," he said.

Beth sat.

"You've been making yourself scarce."

She shrugged. "I'm just ready for all this to be over so I can go home and help my parents."

"Well, it can't be over until we have the information we need."

"I don't know what else to do, Tommy. I tried my best."

Tommy nodded. "You didn't do too badly, but you see, I still need more information. I want you to think if there is ever a time when Ricky Kino is alone. Alone and outside of the house."

Beth's brow furrowed. Finally she looked up. "He goes out at night sometimes. I think he drives into town to party."

Tommy frowned. It was a possibility, but it would be hard to catch him alone. "There must be something else."
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She shrugged. "I don't know what else. He and his father work out together almost every day. And they spar out on the beach. He runs pretty regularly. Almost every day."

Tommy looked up. "What time?"

"Not always at the same time, but always during daylight hours."

"Where does he run?"

"On the beach."

"How far does he go?"

"I don't know. He's usually gone about an hour, I guess."

Tommy smiled. "Perfect."

"I really don't think he's gonna tell you what you want to know."

"I bet he does," Tommy said slyly.

Beth frowned. "Tommy, are you sure you've got all the facts straight? I mean, Shelley has scars all over her arms and legs, supposedly where your brother cut her up. Did you know that?"

"Is that what she told you?" Tommy laughed. "Oh, she's good. She did that to herself. She's one of those weirdos who hurt themselves on purpose. They can't help it. That right there should tell you what perverts they all are."

Beth shook her head. "I don't know, Tommy, they really seemed so nice. Especially Shelley. And their little girl, Jeffy, she is just the cutest kid in the world."

Tommy looked Beth over. She'd served her purpose. Of course, he never intended to send money to her family. He had plenty of money and could have bailed her family out a long time ago. He certainly didn't intend to get any out of the Kinos. He would only get blood from them, but Beth didn't need to know that. He'd needed Beth to do a job and she certainly did it. It was the information he wanted that she'd failed to get. Maybe she's reached the end of her usefulness. The AIDS thing really kept her from being very attractive as far as he was concerned. He scratched his forehead. The AIDS thing, hmm, actually, it could be useful in and of itself. Yep. He'd keep her around a little longer.

"What were you saying?" Tommy asked.

"I was talking about how cute little Jeffy is."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully. "Well, little Jeffy may just be the way to go to get the information I need."

Beth gasped. “You wouldn’t hurt a little girl would you?”

Tommy smiled. “As long as the Kinos cooperate, she would remain safe.”

“No.” Beth stood. “No, Tommy. I can’t let you do it. You are not gonna hurt Jeffy. She’s innocent in all this.” Beth stood and started for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Tommy asked, rising from his chair.

“I’m leaving. I will not be a party to you hurting Jeffy.”

He moved quickly, grabbing her by the arm and jerking her away from the door. “You’re not going anywhere.”

She struggled to get away. “Let me go, Tommy. I’m leaving.”

He pulled her back and slammed her down into the chair. “I said, you’re not going anywhere. Not unless I say so.”

“You can’t keep me here,” she yelled.

He laughed. “Oh, can’t I?” Looking up at his flunkies, he nodded. “Get some rope.”

She sprang from her seat and ran toward the stairs. If she could just get to her room and lock the door she could buy herself time to make a phone call. She only made it as far as the stairs when one guy grabbed her ankle, jerking her leg out from under her. She landed hard on the steps, smacking her chin and busting it open. Blood spewed down her neck and onto her shirt. Moaning, she rolled over, trying to get her bearings.

The man twisted her arm behind her back and forced her back to the kitchen. “What do you want me to do with her?”

Tommy turned from looking out the window. “Take her down to the basement. Tie her hands and feet and toss her in one of the rooms that has a lock.”

“Will do.”

He dragged Beth toward the basement door and headed down the steps. Beth fought him with all her strength and the guy finally slapped her hard.

“Hey,” Tommy yelled from upstairs. “I need her alive.”

“Yes sir.”

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Saturday morning arrived. Unfortunately it didn't change the prevailing mood in the Kino home. Ricky knew it was up to him to bring his family out of the funk, but he wasn't sure how to do it. Usually, he could lighten a situation with a well-placed joke. Only at present there truly was nothing to joke about.

The main news of the morning was Mark's team had lost the game. Shelley tried to cheer him by pointing out that the team couldn't get along without him. He saw her point; if they'd won, maybe his coach, who was extremely angry with Mark, would keep the number two QB as his starter just for spite. Still, he also needed his team to have a winning season to garner the attention he needed and other players needed to keep the recruiters focused on them.

Joey went with Eric to help teach a Saturday morning class. Jeffy was still at the Lees'. Bree tried to help Shelley with her new project but Shelley wanted to be able to say she did it all by herself so she shooed Bree away. Justin had also offered help. When Shelley refused him too, he gave her advice on how to handle the movement of some of the weaponry. He didn't want Eric to be angry about her damaging something. When he felt she was doing okay, he went to the study and used it as his office to catch up on some work.

Meanwhile, Ricky found Bree out on the deck just off the dining room. "Hi, gorgeous."

She turned, smiled. "Hey."

"You okay?"

"Sure."

He watched her face. She was as down as everyone else. He sighed. "All this is gonna go away, sweetheart."

She nodded. "I know."

"Bree, I know you're worried about the media and how all this will affect your career. We'll figure something out. We'll talk to your manager and to your publicist and we'll find an angle. Your career is not in jeopardy."

Bree smiled. "I believe you."

He came to her, placed his hands on her shoulders, started to say more but realized it wouldn't make a difference right now so he changed his mind. "Come walk on the beach with me and we'll think only happy thoughts."

She looked up into his dark brown eyes. He was so very sincere. So loving and caring and strong. She accepted the invitation.

They walked hand in hand along the line where the waves were just starting to retreat. Bree stopped to pick up shells for Jeffy whenever she saw one that was particularly lovely.

"I missed having you in my bed last night," Ricky said.

Bree brushed some hair out of her face. "I missed you too."

"Then why didn't you come to me?"

"Why didn't you come to me?"

Ricky smiled. "I was afraid of wearing out my welcome."

"Do you think it can be worn out?"

"I'd like to try and see," he said, laughing. Then he frowned. "But really, it's been worn out before."

She nodded. "I was confused back then. Actually, I still am. The only difference is I'm more willing to admit that I want you. What I want you for, is a different issue."

"Normally, I would be making a joke, telling you to feel free to use me for anything, but that's not funny anymore, because Bree, I want more than that. I think you know that."

"I do."

He was actually feeling pretty guilty about his recent actions. What had he done? He'd gotten on his knees and asked for forgiveness, then he'd come home, spoken to his earthly father, then gotten on his knees to his heavenly Father, turned over a new leaf, and then only a few weeks later he'd taken Bree to his bed. It had seemed like it was essential, almost crucial to their moving forward in their relationship. He would have to speak with her and share these feelings with her. He was sure she'd understand. And now, he felt even more guilty because knowing all this, he still just invited her back into his bed. Maybe it's out of habit. Maybe he's one of those guys who simply cannot control his urges. No. He refused to fall to that weak excuse. He is NOT weak. He does, however, need to have a conversation with Bree about his most recent spiritual convictions and that would help him gain back control.

He sighed as they walked silently for a while. "Do you want children, Bree?"

She looked at him, surprise on her face. "I haven't really given it much thought. I guess all I've thought about for years was my next career move." She moved along beside him, the image of creating a child with Ricky running through her mind. Carrying his child. Giving birth to his child. Presenting his child to him. What would it look like? Probably a lot like Jeffy. Would it be a girl or boy? What kind of father would Ricky be? He'd be the best. The question is, what kind of mother would she be?

He tugged on her hand. "Did my question upset you?"

She smiled. "No, just prompted thought. Do you want children?"

"Lots. A huge house filled with children. And grandchildren. And great-grandchildren."

"Stop. I get it. Now you're scaring me," Bree said dramatically.

He laughed. "I wonder what that is," he said, pointing to something shiny glistening on the sand.

He let go of her hand and moved to retrieve the shiny object.

Bree joined him. "A CD?"

Ricky frowned, all joviality gone. "Yes."

"I guess someone doesn't like that particular music."

"It's not a music CD. It's a meditation CD."

"Meditation?"

"Yeah, it's a Synchrogram CD. Back in the eighties they discovered that certain sounds can produce the effect of being in a deep meditative state. After much research and trial and error a few companies came out with the technology on CD. Synchrogram is the one my Dad likes to use. They have the newest technology. They actually have programs you can just download now, but Dad says it's not as powerful as the ones on CD, which they still make because a lot of people feel that way. Their CD expands your mind by helping you to achieve extremely deep meditative states. Some people even swear they've had out-of-body experiences. The technology synchronizes the right and left brain, like, puts you in different deep meditative states like Theta and Delta."

"Wow."

"Yeah. Wow." His expression though was not one of awe.

"What's the matter, Ricky?"

"Don't you think it's odd that the exact same almost obsolete CD that my father listens to, is out here, in the sand?"

"The exact CD? So, maybe he decided he didn't like it anymore and threw it out."

Ricky looked at her like she was crazy. "He wouldn't do that."

"He's doing a lot of things he wouldn't necessarily do lately."

"Maybe, but even with that, I'm more inclined to think that if he suddenly didn't want the CD he would simply throw it away. He wouldn't toss it into the ocean like a frisbee. Believe me, he wouldn't ever trash the ocean."

"Maybe it belonged to someone else."

"Come on, Bree, that would be too much of a coincidence, and there are no such things as coincidences."

He took her hand and started back toward the house.

"What are we gonna do?" she asked.

"We're gonna do some investigating."

They went straight to their parents' bedroom and straight to the CD player on Eric's nightstand. Ricky opened the player to find what looked like the exact same CD. Sitting down on the bed, he removed it and held the two side by side. One was scratched and worn, of course, from being tossed around in the waves, but the logos and design were the same.

"Ricky, I just thought of something."

He looked up. "What?"

"Remember, I told you one of the times I overheard Beth talking on the phone she said something about a CD? I didn't think anything of it at the time. You know, people talk about music all the time, but now that we know she was talking to Tommy, and they were talking about a CD—well, as you said, there are no coincidences, right?"

Ricky put the headphones on and played the CD that was already in the machine. He listened carefully, but all he could hear was rain falling, and thunder and a series of chimes and sounds. He shook his head and passed the earphones to Bree. She listened for a few minutes, and then handed it back to Ricky.

Ricky rose. "We're taking these to Jason. He'll have a sound guy go over them. Hopefully we'll know something soon."

They wasted no time. They checked on Shelley's progress, let Justin know where they were headed and went straight to Jason's house. While there, they stayed and played with the girls for a while, thinking they would bring Jeffy home with them, but Jeffy wanted to stay another day. They could hardly blame her. The atmosphere at home was not conducive to a great time.

It was early evening by the time Ricky and Bree returned home. They came home to bedlam. Eric, dressed in a suit came downstairs, calling Shelley as Ricky and Bree came in. "Have you seen my wife?" he asked.

Bree and Ricky realized at the same time that Shelley was probably still working in the room downstairs. They had completely forgotten about the big dinner with Jillian Knight and they were sure Shelley had also. Justin emerged from the study about the time Shelley came up the steps. She was spattered with red and white paint and wearing a big smile.

"Hi Eric," she said happily. "I have a big surprise for you, but I'm not done yet. It's taken me a little longer than I thought it would."

When he only frowned, her expression fell. It was then she noticed his clothes.

"Why are you not ready to go to the dinner with Jillian?"

Her mouth fell open. Her face paled. "Oh, no, I completely forgot. I got so involved in what I was doing, I didn't even realize it was today. Just look at me, I'm a mess."

He shook his head. "How selfish can you be, Shelley? This interview is not just about me. It's about the whole family. With the bad publicity going on with Ricky and Bree, I'd think you'd be more than willing to at least try to make a good impression."

Ricky immediately butted in. "Dad, don't worry about me and Bree. We can take whatever they can dish out."

Shelley looked almost ready to pass out. "What time is it? Do I have time to get dressed?"

"If I don't leave within the next ten minutes I'll be late. I don't intend to be late. I'll not keep Jillian waiting for us."

Justin stepped in. "Shelley you go get cleaned up and dressed. Eric, you go ahead. I'll bring Shelley along as soon as she's ready. You can let Jillian know Shelley was held up."

Eric considered the solution for a moment, sighed and nodded. "Thank you, Justin. I appreciate your willingness to help."

"No problem."

Without a word, Shelley took off up the stairs. Bree rushed to help her.

Ricky looked his father over. "Dad, do you think you're being a little hard on her?"

Eric heaved a sigh. "Apparently, I am. Damn it."

His father never cursed. Ricky felt like he was in an alternate universe. He glanced at Justin who only shook his head.

Eric ran a hand over his forehead. "It would help if this headache would just go away."

"Another headache? Dad, we need to get you to a doctor."

Eric nodded. "Ray is coming tomorrow. That will be soon enough. In the meantime, I have to get to this interview."

Ricky and Justin watched him leave.

"Ricky," Bree called from upstairs.

"What is it now?" he asked as he entered the room.

Shelley sat on the floor, her back against a wall, her arms hugging her knees to her chest.

"Mom says she's not going."

Ricky knelt beside her. "Come on, Shelley, you can do this."

"No. I can't." She looked up into Ricky's eyes with such a look of sorrow it broke his heart. She wiped tears off her face with the back of her hand. "I can't do this anymore. I won't do it. I'm not going to that restaurant so he can belittle me in front of the whole world. I'm not going."

"Mom," Bree began. "Don't you think it will make things worse for you if you don't go?"

"I don't care. I can't take any more. I just can't. Please don't try to make me."

"No one's gonna make you do anything. Oh, Mom, I love you so much. Don't worry, Ricky and I will take care of everything."

Shelley looked up. "How will you do that?"

Bree looked at Ricky. "We'll go instead."

"You and Ricky?"

"Yes. We'll go and we'll make an excuse about your not being well and we'll say all the right things so that Jillian Knight will be very happy. There's gonna be more than one interview, Mom, so you can go to the next one."

Shelley sniffed. "Thank you."

Ricky helped Bree up with a nod. "Well okay, then, I guess we'd better go get ready."

"You go ahead," Bree said. "I'll just be a moment."

Once Ricky left the room Bree helped her mother undress and put on a gown. "Mom, I have some pills that may relax you. Would you like one?"

"What are they?"

"Valium."

"What are you doing with Valium?"

"A friend on the set gave them to me when I was having trouble sleeping. I only used them once. They really do help you relax. I know you're not supposed to take anything without a prescription, but people do it all the time. Do you want one?"

"I'll try anything to make the pain stop."

"I'll go get them. Be right back."

Once Bree had administered the medicine she took her mother's hand. "This is gonna get better."

Shelley didn't respond. Bree pulled the comforter gently over her mother's shoulders and left quietly.

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As the valet drove the car away, Ricky took Bree's hand. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

Bree nodded. "We may as well test the water and see how people react to us."

He offered his arm and she held on for dear life. As they moved through the restaurant there was definitely a low murmur. Bree held her head up high. Ricky covered her hand with his and squeezed tight. Bree was happy to finally get to the table. Time for a performance.

Eric rose, his eyes questioning.

"Hi, Dad," Ricky said. He turned to Jillian, beautiful in her red suit and ice blond hair. "Nice to see you again. Bree and I wondered how you would feel if we came and crashed your interview."
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Jillian's eyes lit up and she smiled broadly. "Please do. What an unexpected treat!"

Ricky seated Bree then sat across from her.

Bree smiled sweetly at Jillian. "To be honest, I also came with a message from Mom. She is terribly sorry she won't be able to make it. She's not feeling well at all." She leaned forward. "A woman's thing, you know," she whispered. "Last night when she went to bed she was already feeling bad. She thought it might be better by today but it only seemed to get worse. She does hope you'll understand and looks forward to the next time."

"Oh, of course," Jillian said. "Poor Shelley, I completely understand. I suffer some of the same symptoms."

"Me too," Bree said, glancing at Ricky. He was grinning at her.

"So, we don't want to steal any of Eric's thunder," Bree added.

"I have a feeling there's no way that could be done," Jillian said quickly glancing at Eric. "He's a remarkable man."

"Yes, he is," Ricky agreed.

"He taught you everything you know, right?"

Ricky glanced at Bree. "Almost everything."

Jillian, catching their undertones decided to take the bull by the horns. "Well, even though I'm here to interview your father and find out all about him, why don't I ask about the elephant in the room and get it out of the way."

Ricky nodded.

"The rumor is that the two of you are having a fiery affair."

Eric choked on his water. Bree froze. But Ricky smiled broadly. "Absolutely torrid."

Jillian remained quiet.

"No really, so Bree and I dated a long time ago, before our parents were married. It was instant chemistry. We cooled things off while she pursued her career and I pursued other women."

Jillian laughed. "You're very honest, aren't you?"

"My father would accept nothing less."

Jillian nodded. "Another feather for Master Kino. So, what made you suddenly decide to get back together?"

"We've never really stopped having feelings for each other, and I realized I wanted more out of life than what I had. I realized that

whatever more I found, I wanted to find it with Bree, because again, being honest, I think she's my soul mate. The one God meant for me."

Jillian sighed. "This is all so very romantic."

"Yeah, but too bad the rest of the world can't seem to see it that way," Ricky replied.

Jillian smiled. "Well, who knows, maybe after they read my article with the romantic spin, the whole world will hope that you're one of the few Hollywood couples that actually stay together."

"Yes, who knows," Ricky repeated lightheartedly. "That would be awesome and I'd like to read the article before you print it."

"That would be my pleasure," Jillian said.

The waiter came and took Ricky and Bree's order.

Jillian smiled. "So, after dinner Eric is taking me around the strip, showing me all the hot spots and clubs and favorite places the Kino family likes to frequent. Will you two be tagging along?"

"We just might," Bree said, frowning at her stepfather. He certainly hadn't mentioned *that* part to her mom.

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Shelley kicked the covers off. With the help of the pill Bree had given her she'd fallen asleep quickly. Unfortunately, she was now wide awake. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and the room spun. Moaning, she put a hand to her head, trying to ward off the dizzy spell, but as her mind cleared the emotional pain of the past weeks came to her in a rush and all she wanted to do was go back to sleep. She didn't want to think of the pain in her heart. She didn't want to remember all the hurtful things Eric has said to her over the past weeks. It felt as if life was over. It wasn't of course. She had the kids. She gasped. The kids! Where are the children?

Panic overtook her briefly, but then she remembered: Jeffy was spending another night with Kimmie, and Mark and Joey had driven up north to San Francisco to visit their father and stepmother. She was all alone. Except for Justin who was probably in bed. Good old Justin, Eric's best friend in the whole world had also befriended *her*. He'd been there through some tough times.

Shelley peered at the clock on her nightstand. Eleven. Then she noticed that Bree left the bottle of pills. She opened it, took another one, then went downstairs in search of solace. She found it in the form
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of an expensive bottle of Scotch that had been a gift from someone who didn't know them very well. She took out a crystal glass and poured the amber liquid, filling the glass to the rim. She held it up in front of her eyes. That ought to do it, she thought. Taking a large swallow, she shuddered with the burn. Her eyes watered— and then she felt warm. Deciding it was a good feeling, she gulped down the rest of the glass, the goal: to feel nothing but oblivion. Grabbing the bottle she slipped down on one of the huge couches in the front living room and allowed herself a good cry.

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Justin sat in bed, his laptop propped on a pillow on his legs. The keys made a pleasant clicking sound as he finished up the official letter, giving a particular corporation fair warning of possible suit if they didn't acquiesce to his client's wishes. It was late, after midnight, so he was surprised when he heard the loud knock on his door.

"Come in," he called, thinking Eric was home and wanted to talk.

The door opened sharply and banged against the wall. Shelley stepped inside the room.

"Jussin," she said, her speech slurred. "Jussin Lee, I really need to talk to you."

"Oh, Shelley, what in the world are you doing? You know you don't drink well."

She snorted. "Well enough."

"I see that."

He closed his laptop and set it aside. "Okay, doll, what do you want to talk about?" He rose, not worried about the fact that he wasn't dressed. He had on some pajama bottoms. Good enough. She, on the other hand, had on a white, lacy nightgown and he couldn't help but think she looked like an angel, albeit a slightly mischievous angel. She stumbled forward, held up a mostly empty bottle of Scotch.

He took her by the shoulders and guided her to sit in a chair.

"I doan wanna sit down," she said as she struggled to her feet. "I need to talk to you."

He reached for the bottle. "Okay, but no more of this."

She let him take it. "You wanna drink?"

He smiled. "No, that's okay, and I'm thinking that you shouldn't be drinking either."
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She gave an exaggerated shrug. "Who cares anyway. Jussin, why doesn't Eric like me anymore?"

"Oh, sweetheart, Eric loves you. He does. He's just going through a bad time right now."

She shook her head. A tear dripped over her lower lashes and coursed down her cheek. "Bree said it was because of the steroids, ya know? But I doan think so, cuz it's been a while now, ya know, sinze lil' Beth-y was here."

She stumbled again and this time Justin caught her and sat her on his bed. "We'll figure it out, hon. Please don't worry. But Shelley, drinking doesn't help. You know that." He sat next to her, put his arm around her.

She sniffled. "I wuz jus tryin' to sleep. I need to sleep." She turned and curled up on the end of his bed and cried into the mattress.

"Okay, hon." He rubbed her back as he spoke soothingly to her. "There now. Everything will work out. You'll see. Please don't be sad, Shelley girl." He closed his eyes a moment and prayed silently over her.

She finally quieted. "I juz need to sleep," she said softly.

"Okay, but you can't do it here. Come on, I'll take you to bed."

He tried to pull her up but her body was limp.

"Shelley, come on, let me take you to bed," he said gently.

She rolled over and sat up. "Oh, Jussin, I need Eric. I need him like he used to be."

Grimacing, Justin ran his hands over his face. She was in so much pain, and he had no idea what to do about it. He could think of nothing he could do to comfort her. "Turn your heart to Jesus, Shelley, and He will give you peace."

"I don't want anything but Eric." She stood and went for the bottle on the table where Justin had placed it. She got a gulp down before he was able to grab it from her again.

She threw herself in his arms, laid her head against his chest. "Why doesn't he love me anymore? Why?"

Justin wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "He does, sweetie. You just have to trust him."

She tossed her head back and forth. "No, he doesn't. He's sick and tired of looking at me. Thaz what he said. Sick and tired."

Justin wished he knew what was wrong with his friend. It was like he was a different person. And he'd been having headaches. He wondered if it was something like a brain tumor, or bipolar disorder. They would eventually find out, but it was hell not knowing.

"Jussin, do *you* think I'm pretty?"

"You're beautiful, Shelley. Absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you, Jussin." She grabbed his hand, brought it to her mouth and kissed it. He immediately tried to draw it back but she held on. "What do you think about that?" she asked.

"I think I'm Eric's best friend and I have no business being here in my bedroom with you in the middle of the night."

He tried to pull away but she came with him, backing him up against the bed.

"Shelley, you have to stop this now. I know you need reassuring. I'm telling you, you are a beautiful woman. Everywhere you go, men look at you with desire in their eyes. However, Shelley, you are the wife of my best friend. Now you have to let me take you to bed."

She giggled. "Thaz what I'm tryin' to do."

He smiled. "Very funny." He finally jerked his hand from her. He was Eric's best friend but he was also a red-blooded, single male who hadn't been in a relationship for a while, and Shelley was one of the sexiest women he'd ever set eyes on. Her athletic body. Sweet mouth. Huge brown eyes. And that hair. Thick, long, voluptuous, golden brown curls. She leaned closer and he tumbled back across the bed. She came down on top of him.

"Umph. Oh, now, this is nice," she said, running her hands over his chest. "You're very handsome, did you know that? Very hansummmm."

He tried to toss her off him, but she held on. "Shelley, get up."

"Why don't you love me anymore, Eric? Why?" she cried.

"I'm not Eric, Shelley. It's me, Justin." He grabbed her shoulders and pushed her upward. "Shelley, get up," he demanded. "Dear God, help me please," he muttered. He rolled her over onto her back and pushed himself off her, but she was too quick. She wrapped her arm around his neck in a headlock and pulled him back down.

"Please Eric. Show me you still love me."

"Shelley, I'm not Eri..." She pulled his head down and kissed him. That gave him the motivation to pull away from her.

She was crying, whimpering really. How he hated what was happening to this family. He turned away, trying to keep his eyes off her. When he turned back, she was sound asleep. "Thank goodness," he said softly.

Justin scooped her up and carried her to bed. After tucking her in he went quietly back to his room. He sat on the bed in a daze. And then it hit him. Guilt consumed him. He'd wanted her. He'd wanted his best friend's wife. The man who'd befriended him when he and his brother first came to America. The man who'd trained him. Who was completely loyal to him. And how had he repaid him? By taking his wife? He hadn't of course, but he'd wanted to. And he now had knowledge of things he should never have knowledge of, like, how it feels to kiss her among other things. What had he done?

He groaned inwardly. Would he ever be able to look Eric in the eye again? Would he ever be able to look at Shelley at all? She probably won't even remember the episode. Hopefully she won't. It would relieve his conscience to talk to Eric, to tell him how it happened, to confess and have Eric absolve him. Yet, with the way things are between Eric and Shelley right now, that would be selfish. Who knows what Eric would do? No, Justin thought, it would definitely be best to keep this to himself and hope that Shelley doesn't remember anything.

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Proverbs 18:24

"A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother."

Chapter 8

Ricky opened the door to Bree's bedroom the next morning. Her bed was made. Spotting her on the balcony watching the ocean, he joined her.

She didn't turn when he approached. He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her, bent to kiss her cheek. "Good morning," he whispered cheerfully.

She didn't answer in kind. "How do you do it, Ricky?"

"Do what?"

"How do you get up each morning so positive, so happy, when it seems the whole world is falling down around you?"

He sighed. "I'm grateful. That's all. Just grateful. Be grateful for all the good things you have and God will continue to bless you. So, I'm grateful. For you. For Jeffy and Mark and Joey. For my father and his wonderful, sweet wife. We're having some problems, yes, but at this very moment, every one of the people I truly love are still alive and kicking and that gives me an opportunity this very day to interact with them. If they weren't alive, I couldn't do anything to help them. But I have that opportunity, to somehow help them, or to even make them happy, and that makes me happy."

She turned in his arms. "How did you become so wise? Huh? Is it a Kino thing?"

He smiled, shrugged. "I'm not so sure about me being wise, but I think my father is a very enlightened man. My grandfather too. Yet, Dad will tell you, they weren't born with it. They strove for it."

"How? What action does one take to strive for wisdom?"

"Dad says first, one has to realize that we, as humans, know very little about God's universe. So, first is humility."

Bree laughed. "Humility? Ya know, some people think the Kino men, and even those taught by the Kino men, are very cocky."

He bent to kiss her nose. "There's a difference between being cocky and being confident. Our training gives us confidence. I

wouldn't get anywhere in life if I didn't believe in my abilities and in the things I've trained so hard to learn to do."

"Do you think there is anyone who could beat you?"

"In a fight? Sure. On any given day."

"What? You're kidding."

He laughed. "You seem disappointed."

"You just said you were confident in what you can do."

"I am, but I'm also realistic. For example, Dad trained Jason. Jason decided to specialize in certain lethal disciplines and he instructs FBI agents, Navy SEALs, police officers. Some of those agents are trained to be nothing but killing machines. They've honed in on the killing. Against them, I could probably hold my own for a bit, but because I don't have that killer instinct, I'd probably die."

Bree shivered. "Okay, no more talk about dying. Back to the original question. What action do you take to gain wisdom?"

"None."

"None? What is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we be still. Quiet our minds and just listen, so that we can hear God's voice. He will give us clarity of mind. That's the purpose of meditation, or at least OUR meditation. To still our mind and soul and tune in to God. Listen to the still, small voice. Connect. Connect to the Holy Spirit. I try– but I have a long way to go. My father still insists he has a long way to go, which is why he was intrigued by the meditation CDs that Synchrogram came up with, and which is what I came to speak to you about in the first place."

She looked up. "Oh, okay. Go ahead."

"First, I was gonna suggest that even though no one feels up to it much, we should probably go ahead and get dressed and head to church. When you don't feel like it is the best time to go and fellowship with the saints."

"Okay, so you were going to suggest that, but not now?"

"Right, because Jason called. His man worked on the CD all night and they found that there were subliminal messages encoded on it. Jason's coming over a little later when Dr. Chin gets here to speak to him and us about everything."

"Did he say what the messages said on the CD?"

"No, but he *did* say that they were bad and that it explains

everything that's been happening."

Bree sighed in relief. "I hope so. Last night, when we were out on the town, it hurt to see Eric being kinder to Jillian than he is to Mom. Without Mom around, he seems back to his old self."

"I know. Hopefully, Jason has the information needed to put this chapter of our lives behind us."

Bree nodded. "Well, what do you say we go down and eat a little something? If we're not going to church I'd like to get in a light workout this morning."

"A what?"

"A light workout."

Ricky grinned. "What's that?"

"Funny. Ha, ha."

"No really. Never heard of that. A light workout? Sounds interesting–but like, what good is it?"

"Okay, Ricky. Point made."

He took her hand and they made their way downstairs. The house was silent, so when Shelley screamed, "No Eric," it echoed through the walls. Ricky dropped Bree's hand and took off, passing Justin as he came flying out of his own bedroom. Throwing open the door of Eric's and Shelley's bedroom the sight caught him off guard.

His father had Shelley pinned against the wall, one hand against her throat, the other hand, drawn back in a fist. Ricky sprang at his father, tackling him. Eric was back on his feet in seconds. Justin stepped in to help Ricky subdue him, but there was no fight left. He looked up into his son's face, then Justin's. His eyes were glazed with tears. He groaned and gripped the sides of his head with both hands, then slipped to the floor, unconscious.

Ricky glanced back at Shelley. Bree had her arms around her mother. They were both sobbing.

"Help me with dad," Ricky said to Justin.

Bree pulled her mother out of the room and guided her downstairs. They sat on a sofa, close together. It wasn't long before Ricky and Justin came to join them.

"Tell me what happened, Shelley," Ricky said softly.

"He, he said," she stopped, sniffed loudly. Bree grabbed her a tissue. "Thank you, Bree," she said softly.

"It's okay, Mom, now, can you tell us what happened?"

"He said I took his CD. He wanted to listen to his meditation this morning since he was out so late last night, but the CD, it isn't in the player. I tried to remember, if I accidentally put it away, but I couldn't remember. I don't think I did."

"You didn't, Mom. We took it."

"You did? Why?"

"We haven't had a chance to tell you yet, but Ricky and I found a CD on the beach when we were walking yesterday. It's the same one that Eric listens to and we thought that was weird. So Ricky got the idea that there was something wrong with the CD. He took it to Jason to have one of his sound men analyze it."

"What do you mean? What do you think is wrong with the CD?"

"Jason called me this morning," Ricky said. "There are subliminal messages on the CD. Jason is coming over to tell us what they are, but I have a feeling they aren't nice."

Shelley shook her head. "This is too crazy. How did..."

"Beth," Bree interrupted. "Beth changed out the CD. I remembered her talking on the phone about a CD."

Shelley suddenly jumped up and ran to the nearest bathroom. Bree ran after her and held her hair back while she was sick. Bree kept her arm around Shelley's waist as she led her into the kitchen where Ricky and Justin had gone so that Ricky could make Shelley one of Eric's herbal concoctions.

"Justin just told me you tied on a big one last night, Shelley," Ricky said as he set it in front of her.

"You did?" Bree asked.

Shelley slumped down into a chair. "I did," she moaned.

"Mom, you know you shouldn't drink. You don't do it well."

"If one more person says that to me I'm gonna go crazy."

"Sorry, Mom, I'm just concerned. How much did you have?"

"I have no idea. It's all a blur to me."

Justin raised his eyes and offered a silent prayer of gratitude before he gave them the information. "She off'd almost an entire bottle of Scotch."

"Oh Mom, it's a wonder you're not dead," Bree said. "And on top of what I gave you?"

Ricky turned. “What did you give her?”

“I had some Valium. A friend gave them to me on the shoot. She thought I looked strained and upset. Last night, mom was so distraught, I thought one little pill wouldn’t hurt.”

Ricky sighed, nodded. “I guess I would’ve done the same.”

“Well,” Shelley said softly. “You left them by the bed. I took at least one more after you left.”

“Mom!”

Shelley slammed her hands down on the table. “I needed to make the pain stop. Don’t you understand? Eric hates my guts. My husband hates me. Do you get it? Do any of you get it? So, I took another pill. So what? And now my husband just tried to bash my face in. Do you understand what that means? How that makes me feel? This man can kill with a well-placed punch and he acts as if he wants me dead. I’m sleeping in the same room with him. And– and– I’m speaking about the man I love.” She slumped down. “I love him,” she whispered.

“Okay, Mom. I’m sorry.” Bree hugged her mother. “It’s okay to love him, Mom. Everything is gonna work out. Shhh, now. We’re all here for you.”

Ricky watched Bree comfort her mother. Bree, who usually gets a bad rap for being mean, doesn’t even realize that she is a sweet, loving woman. She’s so strong. It’s not really fair. Strong women are called bitches, while strong men are called strong men.

Bree drew a deep breath. “Okay, let’s be calm. Mom, I need to ask, are you sure you only took one more?”

Shelley placed both hands to her temples. “No, I’m not sure. Right now, my head is going to explode and I’m gonna be sick again. Excuse me.”

Bree rose to go with her, but Shelley stubbornly refused her help. When Shelley came back her eyes were swollen and red and the sight broke Bree’s heart.

Ricky set a cup of something in front of Shelley. “Here ya go, Shelley. You know this will help.”

She knew better than to refuse. She also knew it *would* help her to feel much better. Physically anyway. She drank it down and sat staring into space as Ricky, Justin and Bree spoke in soft tones. Ricky left the kitchen. Shelley supposed, to check on Eric. Eric who’d taught her how

to defend herself against an attacker. She'd never thought that attacker would be him. She touched her throat where his hand had gripped her. He'd wanted to hurt her. She could see it in his eyes.

"Mom," Bree said softly.

"Hmm?"

"Mom, I said we need to get you dressed."

"Oh. Okay. But I don't want to go in that room."

"I'll get your things and meet you in the blue room."

Shelley agreed. Bree left the kitchen. Shelley stood slowly and started to follow behind her, but stopped and turned to Justin. "Justin, I know I came to your room last night. I have visions of throwing myself at you. I'm sorry. I am so very embarrassed and I hope you can forgive me."

Justin sighed. "There's nothing to forgive, Shelley. I'm not only Eric's friend, but yours too. You came to me for comfort. You didn't do anything wrong except stumble around a bit. I just took you to your bed. There's absolutely nothing to be embarrassed about. We've all had our bad moments."

She smiled. "Thanks, Justin."

He nodded, keeping his eyes firmly on her face.

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Shelley is weak. I abhor weakness. Shelley is lazy. I abhor laziness. Shelley is everything I despise. Shelley is promiscuous and has been unfaithful many times. I can't stand to be near her. I can't stand to touch her. Everything she does makes me want to hurt her. I want to hurt her. I need to hurt her. I want to cause her pain. I need to cause her pain. Causing Shelley pain will give me great satisfaction. I must cause her pain. I must end her life. I will only find peace when I end her life. My very existence depends on causing Shelley as much pain as possible. I hate her. I hate her. I hate her.

The room was silent as Bree, Shelley, Ricky, Justin, Jason and Dr. Chin each read over their copy of what was found to be on the CD.

Ricky looked at Justin and Jason, noting the blank faces. That's what they'd been trained to do; school their features in moments of intense stress. Bree had her arm around her mother. Both women had tears running down their cheeks. Dr. Chin was thoughtful.

When everyone had lowered their papers, Ricky asked the obvious
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question. “So, this can be reversed, of course. Right?”

“Oh, absolutely,” Ray Chin answered almost cheerfully.

“How?”

“Actually, quite easily. The first thing is to tell Eric what’s been happening. I imagine he’s in quite a bit of turmoil.”

“To say the least,” Justin said.

“Well then, just knowing the cause will start the healing process. Just the knowing will tell his subconscious mind that it’s okay to let these thoughts go. It’s like finding the answer to a question or solving a puzzle. When you finally find the one missing piece, everything else falls into place.”

“This whole thing just blows me away,” Jason said. “I know subliminals can be extremely effective and are getting to be very high tech and there are even a few government agencies that employ their use, still, I wouldn’t think Eric would be susceptible. He’s so very strong. His mind is so very strong.”

Dr. Chin smiled. “Well, he IS human. This technology is based on the science of the way the brain physically functions. Do you think Eric’s brain is formed differently from yours or mine?”

Jason smiled. “Uh, yes.”

Everyone chuckled.

“I assure you, Eric is no God,” Dr. Chin continued. “If anything he’s more susceptible.”

“How’s that?” Ricky asked.

“His mind is completely opened. He’s like a Zen master. He’s extremely good at clearing his mind in order to bring in new information. He more than likely told himself to be open and accepting of whatever was on the CD and his mind obeyed. Only the information he was receiving was contradictory to what he knows to be true. I’m sure he was fighting a mighty battle inside his head. Tell me, has he complained of headaches?”

“Yes. Many. And for him to even admit he has a headache is something. It would have to be really bad for him to mention it,” Ricky answered.

Dr. Chin nodded. “So, you see, here’s this good man, fighting a war inside his own mind. You speak of his strength, Jason, here is where you see his strength. Another man may have already murdered

his wife and hidden the body. Eric has been battling for weeks. Sometimes, the weeds growing in his mind get the better of him and he strikes out with words or like this morning, with actions. Somewhere deep inside his brain, he's been convinced that the only way he can survive is to hurt or even to kill Shelley, and yet she lives. He sacrifices his own mind for her."

Dr. Chin spoke to Shelley now. "Shelley, you have been through a lot, notwithstanding, now that you know the 'why', don't you already feel better?"

She nodded. "Yes, actually, a lot better."

"Eric's relief will be just as immediate. I'll work with him extensively today. You'll see an immediate improvement. It will be like a light goes on."

"I don't understand how something that's taken weeks to build up can suddenly be wiped away," Shelley said.

"Let me give you an example. Suppose there is a little boy who is raised with anger. When he commits a wrongdoing his parents are angry and harsh. This goes on for years. Then this boy grows up and has children of his own. He wants to be a good father. He tries to be a good father, yet when they spill their milk or get a bad grade he gets angry. He can't understand why he's always so angry. He fights it. It's very difficult to control. Then he reads one day that someone who is raised with anger will be an angry person. Boom. That's all it takes. Just the knowledge, just the understanding. Suddenly he feels lighter to know that it's not just his natural state of mind. He's not a bad person. When he begins to understand where the anger comes from, suddenly it's not so difficult to stop, because he is aware.

"This is a very simplistic explanation, but I hope you're able to understand. Eric *will* feel immediate relief. He's not a bad man or a bad husband. There is a reason for this, and those bad thoughts can be swept away. We'll schedule some clean up sessions, even possibly have some hypnosis sessions to make sure nothing remains, and we'll have a few joint sessions with you Shelley, if you'll agree."

"Of course. I'd do anything to have this all over."

"Good. Now, I'm gonna have to ask you to stay away from him for a few days." When she frowned he explained further. "You're the trigger. You need to give me time to unload the weapon." He looked

around the room. “This may take some time today. I’ll ask that you not interfere.” He watched for several nods of consent before he went on. “And so now, I don’t see any reason to prolong Eric’s suffering. I’d like to go up and speak to him.” He rose. “If you will all excuse me.”

They watched the doctor leave, grateful for his knowledge and certainty in being able to help Eric. Dr. Chin had been Eric’s psych professor twenty some odd years before. He’d been his friend ever since. They had complete trust in him. The room was soundless except for the ticking of a pendulum clock in the corner. It was Ricky who finally broke the silence.

“Jason, I want the address of Tommy’s residence.”

“Now, Ricky,” Jason started firmly, his tone like that of a forbearing parent.

“Jason, do not speak to me as if I’m a child. I want the address. I can get it myself. I’d just rather it come from you.”

“Rick, I’m gonna let that disrespectful attitude pass because I know you’re upset. Look, I know you want to get Tommy for the pain he’s caused this family. I do too, but, please, let’s get Eric well first and let him be a part of it. He’ll need the satisfaction.”

Ricky frowned. “And while we’re waiting, what else is Tommy planning? Huh? I don’t want to give him any more time.”

“So, what are you gonna do then, Rick, if I give you the address? Do you intend to rush right over there and kill him?”

“If I have to. What’s the alternative? To go on with our everyday lives wondering what dirty little tricks he’s planning next?”

“Are you telling me that you’re stepping over the line? Have you thought about what that would do to Bree? Or the rest of your family? Think of Mark and Joey and how much they look up to you. Think of Jeffy for God’s sake, and your dad and Shelley. Because if you cross the line, don’t think you’ll get away with it. Celebrity hunting is good business. Especially now with this new police chief. He’s by the book and is looking for a celeb to bring down as an example. Don’t think you won’t pay the price. You will. And so will we.”

Ricky stood and paced, his frustration evident. “Then what are we supposed to do? Just sit and take it?” He let rip a string of profanity.

“Rick, watch your language please,” Justin admonished, gesturing toward Shelley and Bree.

He looked up, realizing what he'd said. "Sorry, Shelley. Bree."

"Ricky," Bree said softly. She rose, went to him and leaned her head against his chest. "I need you. Please, you're scaring me."

He sighed and ran his hands down her arms and hugged her. "Sorry. Okay. Okay. I'm under control."

He stepped back and looked around. "I vented. I'm over it. My apologies." He turned and left the room.

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Bree quietly slipped inside the workout room. Ricky lay on his back on the bench press wearing nothing but a pair of shorts. Grunting each time he hefted the barbell, he finally placed it in the cradle. He sat up, grabbed his towel and wiped the sweat from his face. She moved forward and straddled the same bench, facing him.

"Hey."

"Hi," he answered curtly.

"You missed dinner."

"I'll eat something later."

"Jeffy's home. She was asking about you."

"I'll go up to her in a little while."

Bree sighed, looked up at the weights he'd been lifting. "I thought you're not supposed to bench without a spotter."

"I'm not lifting heavy."

Her eyebrows rose. "Four times forty-five, that's one-eighty, plus two times twenty-five, that's two-thirty, plus the bar that's two-ninety-five. That's not heavy?"

He shrugged. "It's relative." He stood, leaving her alone on the bench, grabbed a couple of forties and started curling them.

Bree swung around to watch. His lips pouted as he blew out a breath with each pump. His eyes focused on the mirror on the far wall. It was obvious he was upset, tense, and needed a release. She smiled. She could help with that. She rose and went to stand in front of him. His eyes shifted from the far wall to her face.

"You're sort of in my way," he said.

"Am I?" Her hand reached out to stroke his chest.

He stopped working his biceps, let the weights hang by his side. "You should know, Bree, that you're in a danger zone."

"I know. I'm not scared of you."
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He turned and replaced the weights on the rack. “Bree, this is not a good idea.” When he turned back she was locking the door. Ignoring her, he went back to his bench, lay back, gripped the barbell, lifted it from the safety catch and began to press.

She waited for him to place the barbell back in its cradle, then leaned forward and kissed him. He reached up to pull her closer and they tumbled off the bench. Ricky turned his body to hit first and cushion Bree’s fall. She giggled. He laughed. Then he pulled her to him for a long, luxurious kiss.

“Thank you, Bree,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“For being here for me. For helping me through. For understanding. And for pulling me out of my funk.”

She laid her head on his chest. “You’re welcome.” She rose back up. “Your stomach is growling.”

“Yeah. I guess I need to eat. Ya wanna come?”

“No thanks, just did.”

Ricky laughed.

“What are you laughing at?”

He grinned. “Nothing. I was thinking crude thoughts.”

She frowned. “Well, you’d better clean up your act. We’re going upstairs to see Jeffy.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She smiled. “I like it when you say that to me.”

“I bet you do.”

“Ricky!” Jeffy cried the moment they appeared above stairs. She ran to him and he scooped her up and put her on his shoulders. “I had so much fun at Aunt Angel’s but I missed you too.”

“You did? I didn’t miss you. I barely even knew you were gone. Now where did you say you’d been?”

“Very funny, Ricky. I know you missed me.”

“How do you know?”

“I’m smart like that,” Jeffy said with a giggle.

“Yes you are,” he agreed.

Jeffy suddenly frowned. “But Ricky, Mommy took me out of school. She said she didn’t want those close-minded people teaching her daughter anything.”

"We heard," Bree said. "And Mom is right."

"Yeah, but I don't know where I'm gonna go to school now."

"Don't you worry, munchkin," Ricky said. "We'll find you the best school in the entire country. In the entire world."

She grinned. "Okay, but they have to have pretty uniforms."

"Oh, like that's real important," Ricky said as he carried her to the sofa and threw her down.

"But it *is* important," Jeffy argued.

"Hmm, I think it's time for a lesson, little one," Ricky began.

Bree watched in awe as his whole demeanor changed.

He sat on the sofa and pulled Jeffy into his lap. "Remember the pictures of the little children in Africa that had no food? The ones we sent care packages to?"

She nodded her head solemnly.

"Remember the clothes they had on in the picture?"

She shook her head. "I can't always remember everything."

"I know. That's okay. I'll tell you. They had old, stained and tattered clothing."

"Oh yeah, I remember now."

"And they were very hungry. They didn't just miss dinner. Sometimes they miss breakfast, lunch, dinner and breakfast again before they have something to eat. Let me ask, Jeffy, have you ever been really, really hungry?"

Jeffy thought hard. "I don't think so."

"Well, Jeffy, when you get really, really hungry, it makes your tummy hurt, and it gives you a headache, and it makes you feel very weak and sometimes dizzy."

"Like when I had the flu?"

"Yes, very much like that. Just think how bad it would be to feel like you have the flu all the time. Every day."

"It would be terrible."

"It is terrible. So, when some people arrive at the village where these children live and offer them food, how do you think that makes the children feel?"

"Happy?"

"Yes. Now what if the people came to their village and said, 'you can have food or you can have these very nice clothes, but you have to choose one or the other?' So tell me, which do you think the children would pick?"

"Well, the clothes won't make the flu go away so I hope they pick

the food."

"Me too, because the clothes aren't really important, are they? Not when you truly think about it."

Jeffy nodded her head in understanding, and then she frowned. "But Ricky, you have a whole lotta nice clothes."

"Good point, Jeffy. I do and I'm grateful for them. Still, if someone came to me tomorrow and said you can keep Jeffy or you can keep your nice clothes, which do you think I would keep?"

She giggled. "That's easy, Ricky, you would pick me, *but*, what if they said, you can keep your nice clothes or you can send them to the children in Africa. What would you do?"

Ricky's eyes welled with tears. "Aw, Jeffy, you are so very brilliant. I'd have to send them to the children, wouldn't I?"

"Yes, and, Ricky, that's exactly what we need to do. I mean, not your clothes because they're too big, but we need to buy clothes for the children. For all of them. Mommies and daddies too. In a whole village. Can we do that? I mean, we'll send food too, but they won't have to choose. I'll use my allowance money, and I'll work really hard to get more money. We can find out how many outfits we need to buy. Will you help me, Ricky?"

Bree chuckled. "Who's teaching who?"

Ricky smiled at her then kissed Jeffy's cheek. "Yes, sweetie, I'll help you. We'll make it our big project. We'll get everyone in the family to help."

"That would be so awesome."

"Maybe we can get Dad to get all the Kino schools involved. That would be a whole lotta people."

"Yes, but Ricky, Mommy told me that Daddy isn't feeling very well and I wanted to go in and see him but she wouldn't let me." Her little chin quivered.

"Dad's gonna be okay, don't you worry. You can see him tomorrow. Just not tonight."

She frowned. "When are Mark and Joey coming home?"

"They'll be home tomorrow because they have to be back at school on Tuesday."

Jeffy frowned. "I think it sucks that they kicked them out of school when they didn't even start the fight."

"Well, Jeffy, they have a no-tolerance rule, and the no-tolerance rules are an 'out' for lazy people," Ricky explained. "Instead of figuring out the right thing to do they just punish everyone. That way

they don't have to use their brains. They don't have to think and make a decision, which means they won't have to take accountability, or have to explain their decisions later. We don't ever want to be that lazy. We always want to use our minds." He picked her up and jostled her. "And don't use the word 'sucks'."

"Why not?"

He was quiet. "Good question. I'll have to think about it. For now, it's bedtime." He stood and scooped her up.

"Bree, will you read with me?" Jeffy asked as Ricky carried her up the back stairs to her room.

Bree followed along behind. "Yes I will, as long as it's fiction and not another science textbook."

Jeffy sighed. "Okay, but something good."

"You got it."

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1 John 3:17

"If anyone has material possessions and sees
a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them,
how can the love of God be in that person?"

Chapter 9

Eric eased inside the darkened room. He'd been told to stay away from her for a few days, but he had to see her. He had to know how he would react to her. He'd hurt her. He'd hurt the person he loved most in the world. Eight years earlier, he'd given his all to save her life. Twice. Once on the day a boulder held her captive under water and again the day he'd had to kill James Crane.

All the horrible things he'd said to her over the past weeks were burned into his memory. None of it seemed real. It was as if a blurry movie played back in his mind, ending with this morning's deed. He remembered holding her against the wall. Her entire body trembled and that had made him feel good. He remembered drawing back his fist. He remembered thinking how good it would feel to just let go and do it. He'd wanted to bash her face in. For just an instant. Then Ricky stepped in. Thank goodness.

He shook his head. How weak he must be to have let subliminal messages get to him, to let them take root in his mind. He sighed. Ray had reminded him that they weren't just normal subliminal messages. They were combined with the Synchrogram technology and embedded deep in his brain. He tried to take comfort in that. Looking toward the bed, he could see she'd kicked the cover off as if she'd been restless. The moonlight shone on her hair and the side of her face that was exposed. She was so very beautiful. He suddenly smiled at the thought. The good thought. She's beautiful! She is. And sweet. And, oh, dear God, what have I done to my Shelley? Never in a million years had he thought he'd be the one to hurt her.

He blew out a breath to get control of his emotions and she stirred. Suddenly, she sat up. Next thing he knew she drew a startled breath and sprang out of bed. He stepped backward, his hands held up. "I won't hurt you, Shelley. I won't hurt you."

She drew back away from him, her eyes large with fear. It broke his heart that he was the cause of that fear.

"You're not supposed to be in here," she said, struggling to keep her voice from shaking.

"I had to see you. I had to see if..." He stopped.

She waited, trying to figure out what he'd been about to say. "To see if what? To see if you still can't stand the sight of me?" The words were challenging, but spoken in a tiny voice.

He sighed heavily. He had to be honest. It was the only way to regain her trust. "Yes. And to see if you're okay."

"Wh– what do you feel?"

"Shame."

His answer told her it was the old Eric, but she was still afraid.

"What do you feel about *me*?" she asked, emphasizing the 'me.'

He started forward but she backed up. He stopped. "I love you, Shelley," he said softly.

Her lips trembled. Her eyes filled with tears. She'd cried so much over the past few days she'd thought there wouldn't be any tears left.

"I never thought," he continued, "never, that I would hurt you– that I even *could* hurt you. I remember the things I've said to you, Shelley, but it seems oddly unreal. Saying 'I'm sorry' will never be enough, I know that."

Shelley sighed. "I do understand that it wasn't really you. I know what they've said about the subliminal messages, but, I mean, it was you. The words came from your mouth. I can't help but feel that you believed some of what you said to me."

"That's logical. Of course you would think that, yet, the words didn't come from my heart. They came from my brain. Shelley, I realize there's nothing I can say to make you believe otherwise, but I'm hoping you'll give me a chance to prove myself to you."

Shelley nodded. "Sooo, just like Dr. Chin said, boom, everything is better? You no longer have hatred for me? You no longer want to hurt me or cause me pain? Not even just a little?"

He was silent while he searched his mind and heart for the truth. Finally he looked into her eyes. "I feel only remorse and sadness. That, of course is what Tommy wanted. He accomplished his purpose. I was weak."

"Dr. Chin says you were incredibly strong. He says you protected me as much as you could."

"I can't imagine what you've been through. What you must have been thinking."

"I wondered why you'd stopped loving me. I wondered what was so wrong with me that I would fail at two marriages. And then–I wondered if I had enough money and clout to get custody of Jeffy."

He winced audibly at the last statement. It took a few moments before he could speak. “Is that what you want, Shelley? I won’t blame you if you don’t want to stay with me. Do you want a divorce and custody of our daughter?”

The last words were barely spoken between the sobs that had built up in his chest. The sound had Shelley’s heart breaking. The big, strong, legendary master, broken and crying. She couldn’t let this happen to him. She loved him. James wanted to hurt him. His legacy lives on. Now, Tommy wants to hurt him and he’s doing it. Beth is long gone and yet the pain goes on. She had to put a stop to it.

Eric dropped to his knees. “All I can do is ask you to forgive me, Shelley. Please,” he whispered.

“Oh, Eric,” she cried. She ran to him. He opened his arms and she melted into him. His arms came around her tight. They rocked back and forth together on the floor, sobbing, loving, reveling in the feeling of being connected once more.

He didn’t know how long they’d been there, on the floor. He didn’t want to move, for fear of breaking the bond. He brushed her hair back from her face, something he’d done constantly since the day he’d met her. She looked up at him.

“I need your forgiveness,” he said.

“There’s nothing to forgive. It wasn’t your fault.”

“I should have gotten help. I should have realized something wasn’t right. Thank goodness my son was on top of things.”

“If you want to play guilt games, try this one. I shouldn’t have brought that girl into our home, into the place where our family is safe. She could’ve done so much worse. Who knows what she’s capable of? It was my fault. You didn’t want her here, but I insisted. It was me. Can you forgive me?”

“You were doing what comes naturally to you, Shelley, being a loving, nurturing person who just wants to help. You can’t help being what and who you are. I, on the other hand, should have known something was up the moment Beth walked into that diner. It was no coincidence. There are no coincidences.”

She snuggled her head up under his chin. “Is it really over? Are we back?”

“Honestly, I don’t know if it’s over. I’ll take each minute as it comes. I just hope you don’t give up on me.”

“I almost did.”

“Well, if you were thinking about getting custody of Jeffy I’d say

you were there."

"It's not that I don't believe in you, Eric. It's me. It was so easy to slip right back into the me you met nine years ago. Weak, unsure of my worth. I'd been beat up on my whole life before you came along. All it took was a few harsh words from you and I lost all that I thought I'd gained since meeting you. What does that say about me?"

He rubbed her back. "Oh, honey, you've been taught by me, trained by me, loved by me, protected by me. When I speak, you listen. You listened even when those words were harsh and cruel. It's such an odd situation. This little plan was brilliant of Tommy. Brilliant. Of course, he had many years in prison to think and plan."

She looked up into his face. "I'm just so glad it's over."

"Yes," he said, yet his thoughts were completely different. Tommy Crane had eight years in prison to plan his revenge for his brother's death. They'd been naive to think he hadn't planned something. He'd been stupid to not recognize Beth as a threat. Certainly Tommy had more planned than sending one small girl to wreak a little havoc. Right now, though, he had to concentrate on getting his mind right and putting his marriage back together, and that would begin with kissing his wife. Something he hadn't done in over three weeks.

She was looking up at him, still somewhat fearful, but also obviously hopeful that all the pain is behind her. He knew he wasn't supposed to be there. They were both acting against doctor's orders. At the moment, he didn't care. He cupped her sweet face in his hand. "Oh, Shelley, I do love you."

His mouth touched hers softly at first, then more firmly. She sighed into him and her tears began to fall anew.

"No more tears, Shelley. No more."

She reached her arms around his neck, then pulled away and touched his face. "You don't feel any animosity? None?"

"No. Only sorrow. And guilt. And shame."

"Eric, I love you."

His answer was to stand, scoop her up and carry her to bed.

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At Monday night dinner, the table quieted as Eric approached. He stood at the head of the table and looked over the people he loved. Mark and Joey, Ricky and Bree, Jeffy and Shelley, Justin and Jason, Angel and Kimmie. Each looked up at him with expectation on their faces. What could he say to them? He felt so much shame and he needed to apologize.
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"I, uh, I..." His voice broke.

Joey jumped to his feet. "Um, Eric, Master Kino, I have something I'd like to say. I wanted to," he paused, looked around at the others. "I mean, I wanted to thank you, sir. We knew it wasn't like you. We were very slow about sorting things out. If Ricky hadn't figured it out, things would seem pretty dismal right now."

"Then thank Ricky," Eric said softly.

"I have. We all have, but still, we wanted to thank you too. I mean, for, like, being so valiant in teaching us all these years, and showing us how to live and how to fight and how to be honorable in all our actions. It was actually your teachings that have held us together during these weeks. It was your teachings that gave Ricky the ability to figure things out. It is because we all love you and honor you so much that we stayed strong. We hope you don't think that we blame you in any way for Tommy Crane's treachery. You were a victim, sir. And I feel as do the others at this table that you should not ever apologize for being a victim."

Eric smiled at the young man, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "Joey, you've become quite eloquent, haven't you?"

"It's the drama club thing," Mark said.

Eric smiled. "So, did it seem as if I was about to apologize?"

"Yes sir, it did," Joey said.

He nodded. "And so I was. Though, I must correct you on something. I have to apologize for being a victim. I was careless and lazy. I should have known something was up. I can say those words a hundred times over the next few days and it won't change anything, will it? So, we won't focus on what was past. We will focus on the present moment and moving forward. I am grateful to my son for putting two and two together. I'm grateful to my wife, for accepting me back into her good graces. I'm grateful for all of you and how you believed in me even when things seemed so dark. I am humbled by this experience and by your love."

He reached down and took Shelley's hand, raised it to his mouth and kissed it. Then he shook Joey's hand, bowed to him. They sat. Eric watched as everyone passed plates and bowls. The pleasant clicking of silverware against the china was music to his ears. The normalcy of sitting together with his family was comforting. It was broken by the next comment.

"Do you smell something burning?" Jeffy said.

Shelley's eyes opened wide. She glanced at Eric, started out of her

seat. He pulled her down. "I'll get it."

He came back to the table with a basket full of rolls, black on the bottom. "If you use your knife to cut the black off, you'll never know the difference."

"You're funny, Daddy," Jeffy said.

"You're funny lookin'," Ricky teased.

"Not as funny lookin' as you," Mark added.

"Oh yeah, you wanna settle this in the ring?"Ricky asked.

"Any day, any time, Master Kino," Mark retorted.

"You need some help, you just let me know," Joey offered.

"What makes you think I need help?" Mark asked.

"*I* think you need help," Jason said.

"I got fifty on Mark," Justin said.

Eric smiled. His eyes met Shelley's and he winked. Back to normal. Almost.

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After dinner, once Jeffy and Kimmie were settled watching their favorite movie, Eric called the rest of the family together.

"I know Jason needs to get his family home. It's a school night, but I felt we needed to have a quick meeting about some things. It occurred to me that Tommy had a lot of years in prison to plan his revenge. So far he's been pretty innovative. I don't know what it is about the Crane brothers but they keep surprising me. I never saw it coming when James attacked Shelley all those years ago. I never saw it coming at the cabin when he showed up. It seems the few times I've let my guard down they're always right there.

"Now, I've let someone into my home and she was able to hurt the people I love. I understand it was her that leaked the news about Ricky and Bree being a couple. That news got Joey into a fight, got Jeffy pulled out of school and made Mark miss an important game. All hurtful things. She definitely wreaked havoc. Thank goodness she wasn't able to do any real damage."

Mark and Joey eyed each other. Bree and Ricky did the same. No one else knew of the possible "real" damage Beth had done to Mark.

"What I'm getting at is, I don't think he's finished. Planning a few good pranks is not lethal and I have to think that his plans *are* lethal. So, until we can figure things out, I say no one leaves the house alone. Mark and Joey stay together. Shelley, Bree, this goes especially for you two. And Jeffy. Do not let her out of your sight. Jason, I'd say the same for Angel and Kimmie."
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Jason nodded.

"And so what do we do now?" Ricky said. "Just sit and wait? Because I say we pay him a little visit."

"And do what? Beat him up?" Eric asked.

"Sure, that's good for a start."

"I'm with him," Joey said.

Eric raised his eyebrows at Ricky. "You see what you're teaching this kid?"

Ricky heaved a sigh and sat back.

Eric turned to Joey. "Ricky was a great kid, Joey, but he was a lot like you. Hot tempered. It took us a long time for him to conquer that and apparently, there is still some work to do." He sighed and turned to look over the rest of the family. "We don't break the law," Eric said firmly. "Not yet anyway," he allowed.

Ricky smiled.

"So," Eric continued. "That was really all I had to say– but it appears we have one last piece of business to attend to."

He turned a piercing gaze on Mark, then Joey, then Bree and finally Ricky.

"Who wants to go first?" Eric said.

They looked back and forth, feigning ignorance.

"Do you think I didn't see the covert glances?"

Ricky sighed. There was no use trying to hide it. "We didn't want to put more on you and Shelley, not since you were under such strain."

Eric nodded. "I appreciate that. I appreciate the way you stepped in and took care of everyone, but I think it's time to clear the air. What haven't you told Shelley and me?"

Ricky glanced at Mark, turned back to his father. "On Mark's birthday, he and Jana had plans to, um, go to a hotel and, uh..."

"I know," Eric interrupted.

Mark spoke up. "Good grief, do we have to have this discussion in front of everyone?"

"It's okay, hon," Shelley said. "I'm your mother. I understand about these things."

Angel started to rise. "I'll leave if it would be easier. "

Mark sighed and shook his head. "No, Aunt Angel, that's okay. Mom will just tell you later anyway. I'll just suck it up."

Ricky sighed. "Everyone needs to take a deep breath and just listen. The rendezvous with Jana didn't work out. Mark was feeling pretty low and Beth came to cheer him up– if you know what I mean."

Mark's head was down. Shelley's cheeks were red.

Ricky went on. "When I interrogated her I asked her about her relationship with Tommy. She said she didn't have one. I asked her why not and she said it was because– she has AIDS."

Shelley gasped. "Oh, no, oh Mark." She rose and went to her son, sat beside him and gripped his arm. "Oh, baby."

Mark sighed. "It's gonna be okay, Mom. I know I don't have it."

"How do you know?" Shelley asked, trying to fight back the tears once again.

"I just know. I feel it, so you'll just have to trust me."

"Didn't you use protection?" Justin asked.

Mark shook his head. "It all happened so fast. I mean, I didn't expect Beth to come waltzing in my room and, well, you know..." He circled his hand around as if searching for the right words.

"Seduce you," Shelley offered, her eyes fierce.

"Mom."

"Sorry baby. I'm angry. Not at you. At her. *And* at myself."

"Mom, I knew what I was doing. I'm not innocent in this. I was caught off guard though and I didn't use protection. I'm sorry, Mom. I didn't mean to bring you any more troubles."

She shook her head. "I brought that girl into our home. *I* did this to you." She rose and ran upstairs.

"Ugh, Mom, I don't have AIDS, Mom," he called after her.

"Well," Jason said. "This is certainly lethal."

"Maybe," Eric agreed. "And maybe, hopefully, just as harmless as the rest. Only time will tell. He'll be tested. Until then, emotionally, we act as if what Mark says is true. He doesn't have AIDS." He put a hand to his head.

"Another headache?" Ricky asked.

"Yes." He rose. "I think I need to go upstairs and rest. Thanks everyone, for everything."

Bree tugged on Ricky's hand, a worried expression on her face.

"Mind if I tag along, Dad?" Ricky asked, taking her cue.

Eric looked to Ricky and then Bree. "Come along and make sure I don't go upstairs and pound on my wife?"

"Well, no offense, but Dr. Chin did say you weren't even supposed to see each other for two days. He said she was a trigger. If you're having a headache, well..."

Eric nodded. "You're thinking logically. Come along, then. You too Bree. Maybe you can be some comfort to Shelley. Mark and Joey,

would you mind getting your sister to bed?"

"We got it covered."

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Bree and Shelley sat on the deck speaking softly about all that had recently come to pass. It was comforting Bree thought, to sit side by side with her mother and share their innermost hopes and fears. Her mom was only sixteen years her senior. They'd sort of grown up together. At this moment she looked like an angel with the early morning light playing on her golden hair and lashes.

Even though her mom was her mom and had been a tower of strength for her daughter, she still seemed so innocent, while Bree thought of herself as being seasoned and tough. Notwithstanding, her mom was tough too, in a gentle sort of way. Bree loved her dearly and truly cherished the time they spent together.

Out on the beach in front of them Eric and Ricky moved through bojutsu forms using the bo staffs, beautifully in sync. It didn't matter how often Bree had seen them do their thing, it still impressed her. Her mind shifting gears though, she peeked over at her mom. "Mom, would you do it all over again?"

"Do what?"

"You know, marry Dad, have us kids?"

"Of course. I love you guys. I can't imagine not having you in my life and if I hadn't been with your dad, you wouldn't exist, so I have to say, yes. Everything that's happened in my life has led me down the path to where I am, and made me who I am, and I'm so very happy to be where I am. God knows that hard times make us stronger. Your dad and I had problems, but they made me strong."

"Do you hate him?"

"Oh no, of course not, honey. I still have love for him. I care about him. He's your father."

Bree sighed. "You're a good person, Mom, but, I mean, what I want to ask is, he made you unhappy, didn't he?"

"Yes, but I didn't realize it at first."

"Because you were young and thought you were in love?"

"Yes, and there was the physical thing too. You know, when a girl has her first sexual encounter, she tends to fall immediately in love. She puts on blinders. She doesn't see the faults of the man who can make her body feel so good."

Bree sighed. "And that's why you married Dad?"

Shelley laughed. "Well, I guess, besides thinking I was head over
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heels in love, but mostly, I married your dad because I got pregnant with you, and my parents and brothers and your father seemed to think it was the best thing to do in the situation."

"So, that seems to me like you sort of had your life dictated to you. You know, if your parents and siblings pushed you that way."

"Well, yes and no. That's a little too simplistic. I thought I was in love with your dad. He was older and sophisticated and I thought he loved me and I gave myself to him, something a lot of girls do to prove they love someone. Of course there's another whole side to that, but I'm not gonna judge your father. Anyway, when I got pregnant, everyone, including me, thought marriage was the best thing. It was when I realized your father didn't love me for who I really was that things got sticky. I accepted it for a long time. I think I didn't even realize how things were until that day in the park. Being raped and then my own husband treating me so callously, it woke me up. It took something that drastic to be the catalyst that made me stand up for myself, and after sixteen years of marriage, to finally do something for my own well-being."

"That's what I don't want to happen to me," Bree said with sigh.

"What?"

"I don't want to get into a relationship now, that ten years down the road I have to figure out how to get out of it."

"Bree, you realize, that's living in fear. You can't be too afraid to experience life, for fear you may make a mistake, or change your mind. You'll die an old, lonely person."

Bree sat silently, digesting her mother's words. Her eyes remained on the man below spinning a bo staff, who could make her body feel so good, as her mother put it. Was she in love with him? And if so, was that only because of their sexual encounter? Why was she so afraid of committing to him, or to anyone? She'd seen her mother mistreated so often. Did that have anything to do with it?

"Earth to Bree," Shelley said.

Bree smiled at her. "I won't die old and lonely, Mom. I'll always have you, and the boys and Jeffy."

Shelley pressed her lips together. "What about Ricky? You're not interested in him for the long haul?"

"I don't know, Mom. I just can't figure out how I feel about him."

"Well, sweetie, he's a pretty great guy, don't ya think? Most girls would die for a man like that."

"He's more than a pretty great guy. Believe me, I know how lucky

I am to have him. He's so honest. So strong. He'll take on the whole world if he has to, to protect those he loves. He's smart. He's funny. He's classy, but not a snob. He's perfect. Just maybe too perfect."

"Now you're not making any sense. First, there's no such thing as a perfect man. Not a human one. Second, there's definitely no such thing as a too perfect man."

Bree laughed. "Maybe not."

"So, if he's such a great guy, what's the problem?"

"I don't know. He's so– nice. So– respectable."

"He's a thirty-year-old man, he should be, and that doesn't sound like a problem to me."

"I know. That's why I'm having such a hard time figuring out why I feel the way I do." She glanced back out at the men. Gasping she stood. "They're fighting."

Shelley grabbed her hand, pulled her down. "They're sparring."

"Well, it looks real enough. They're pounding on each other."

Shelley shrugged and gave a slight laugh. "It's a guy thing. I think they get off on the pain."

"Hmm," Bree said. "That's what Ricky says about me."

"What do you mean?"

"He says I get mixed up with the bad guys because I'm attracted to the pain they cause me. The danger. He said little girls subconsciously go looking for their fathers and if their fathers treated their mothers bad, then they look for someone to treat them bad."

Shelley nodded. "Ricky has a point."

Bree shrugged. "I guess, but ya know, sometimes he sounds so, I don't know, smarty-pants."

"Wow, Bree, your pride is definitely showing. Eric is a psychologist. What Ricky said about what you look for in a man is probably something his *dad* told *him*."

Bree nodded and they didn't speak for a few minutes as they witnessed the skilled warriors down below.

It was Shelley who broke the silence. "Bree, I know you're wary of a relationship, but one thing we haven't really talked about is God."

"God? What does religion have to do with a relationship?"

"Well, first, it's not about a religion. It's about a relationship with Jesus. We haven't had a chance to talk much about this. I guess in all honesty, I've sort of avoided the subject, but sweetheart, since I met Eric, he's taught me all about Jesus, and through prayer and learning, the Holy Spirit has borne witness to me that Jesus is real. He's not just

a figment of our imagination."

"Okay, so, I'm not trying to be a smart alec, I guess I love that you found Jesus if it makes you happy. Still, what does that have to do with Ricky and me?"

"Well, let me see if I can put this into a nutshell. Eric and Ricky, who they are, what they are, the amazing men they are, is really all because of their relationship with Jesus. They put God first in all things. Even in our marriage, Eric puts God first. Which is perfect. Because I know he's always striving to serve God and do God's will which means, he wouldn't break our vows, he wouldn't mistreat me or you kids, he would be mindful and prayerful in everything that has to do with our lives, and that makes me not only respect him, but I can trust him. I can relax because I know he's got us and won't let us go astray. It's really such a blessing to have a good, honorable man of God by your side. I know if I falter, Eric will kindly help me up and set me straight. Which is why I was so confused when those subliminal messages started messing with his mind."

Bree sighed. "That reminds me, how are your sessions with Dr. Chin coming along?"

"Good. Eric still has some headaches. The last session Dr. Chin put Eric under a drug induced hypnosis."

"That surprises me. Why use drugs?"

"He wanted to make sure he was completely under. He put him under and gave Eric his own version of self talk. Like with things to counteract any remaining negativity."

"So, does Eric seem better?"

"Well, he seems much better in the way he treats me. Back to normal. It's just that, he seems a little down. Maybe depressed. And that's not like him, so it concerns me."

Bree reached out and squeezed her mother's hand. "Maybe it's a longer, slower, process than we realized."

"Maybe."

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"Call Jason," Ricky commanded of the dash phone in his car.

"Yo, Ricky," Jason said. "What's up?"

"Do you want to be my last known communication or do you want to join me?"

Jason sighed. "Here we go again. Okay, Rick, what danger are we courting today?"

"I'm paying a visit to Tommy."
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"Rick, your dad said..."

"My dad said we won't break the law and I don't intend to break the law. I just wanna have a little talk."

"How'd you get the address?"

"I told you I could get it and it helps to have a PI for a friend, and Steve will be joining us. That is if you've decided to come."

Jason sighed. "So, you're going regardless of what I say?"

"That's correct."

"Then yes, I'm coming. Someone has to keep an eye on you."

"Cool. Meet you there. You might want to call Justin and have him be last communication."

"I'll tell Angel, no, she'll call Shelley. Okay, I'll call Justin."

Ricky laughed. "For such a deadly guy you sure are a chicken."

"Yeah. Whatever. Wait 'til you're married."

The three men met down the street from the target house. Jason met with his surveillance man, found that Tommy was alone and let him know they were going in to have a little talk.

They approached the house silently. Ricky headed for the back door, while Steve and Jason went to the front. Steve rapped on the front door twice before the door opened. A large, blond, blue-eyed man answered the door. He leaned against the frame. "Yeah, what?"

"Looking for Tommy Crane," Jason said.

"You got him, what do you want?"

Jason sighed. Eight years ago Tommy and James had pulled the old switcheroo. And now— they'd done it again. This man was not Tommy. Oh, he resembled him, but it wasn't him. Jason spoke, "That's funny man, cuz, I know Tommy Crane and, you're not him."

The man's head jerked up. He stepped back and tried to slam the door, but Steve's foot caught it. The man took off for the rear of the house. Jason and Steve stopped halfway down the front hall and waited. They could hear the man fumble with the lock on the back door. Heard him throw the door open. Heard a thud. Heard a moan.

"You guys gonna just stand there or are you gonna help me move this guy back inside?" Ricky called.

They moved forward and helped Ricky drag the large man into the small living room.

The man moaned and sat up.

"We got a problem, Rick," Jason said.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"This isn't Tommy."

Ricky was silent while he thought. He'd never seen Tommy close up. He'd seen pictures. Tommy was six-foot-four. Solid. White blond hair cut in a crew. Stark blue eyes. This man fit the description perfectly. "I don't get it, Jason. Didn't your surveillance pick him up right at the prison gates as he walked out."

"This guy must have been in the car that came to get Tommy. Tommy got in at the prison. This guy got out here at the house. Is that how it was?" Jason said loudly as he kicked the guy on the thigh.

"Ow, yeah, man."

"When did he contact you?" Jason asked.

"Some red-headed dude hired me back about six months ago. He said he had a part for me to play. The pay was good and I wasn't getting any work, so I took the job."

"You're an actor?" Ricky asked.

"Yeah, but it's hell gettin' work. I mean, really, you can't blame me for taking the job." He shook his head to clear his vision and squinted up at Ricky. "Hey, you're Ricky Kino."

Ricky rolled his eyes. "Did you know who Tommy Crane was when you agreed to pretend to be him?"

He shrugged. "I knew he was some guy doing time for assault and grand theft auto. The guy wanted to change his identity when he got out and he needed someone to cover for him for a while. That's all I know. That's all I wanted to know."

"What's your name?" Steve asked.

"Clay. Clay Bennett."

"Okay Clay," Jason said. "You say that's all you wanted to know, but you did know you were doing something that wasn't quite right."

He hung his head. "Yeah, once I was here they told me if anyone came looking for Tommy and realized I wasn't the real McCoy, I was supposed to take off. Get lost. When they told me that, I knew I was in over my head, but I didn't know how to get out of it without getting hurt or killed or something."

"You could've gone to the police," Ricky said.

"I actually considered that. I was still considering that. I guess it's too late now."

Steve laughed. "Well, it may be too late to go to the police, but you lucked out man, cuz we— are the good guys."

Clay breathed out a breath. "Okay, so what do I do now?"

Ricky thought. "That's a good question. Has Tommy ever come to visit you here?"

"No but he does call every once in a while."

Ricky looked up at Jason. "So, if this guy disappears, maybe Tommy will come looking for him and we can pick him up then?"

Jason shook his head. "No, I don't think Tommy will take that chance. If this guy stops showing up at his job, and stops answering the calls, Tommy will know this deal is over. He won't come. He'll stay hidden. I say we just get Clay out before he gets hurt."

"Thank you, man," Clay said quickly to Jason.

Ricky nodded at him. "Okay, Clay Bennett, go grab up anything you want to take right now and you'll come with us."

He scrambled to his feet. "Right away."

"Wait," Ricky ordered. "What about Beth?"

"Who?"

"Beth. Small girl, short black hair. Cute."

He shook his head. "Don't know her, man."

Ricky nodded at Jason with a sigh. "I guess she was with the real Tommy Crane."

Steve followed as Clay ran down the hallway of the small home. Within a few minutes he was back, a bag thrown over his shoulder.

Jason looked him over. "Clay, does Tommy know your real name? Does he have any information on you?"

The guy swallowed. "Uh, He has my résumé. He knows everything about me."

Jason sighed. "Okay. So, it looks like you're gonna have to lay low for a while."

"Oh, man. I'm broke. How am I supposed to do that?"

"Ricky will get you money, Steve will get you ID and a new phone. Lay low and don't take any acting jobs."

"Yeah, that shouldn't be a problem."

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Tommy's shoes made a horrible clunking sound as he came down the basement steps. Beth shuddered. Hopefully he only came to speak with the three flunkies that remained at his beck and call who sat playing cards just outside her door. They'd told her plenty about Tommy. He was a very bad man. He was rich. Filthy rich. Which meant he had no intention of helping her family. He'd wanted her to cause harm to the Kinos as part of an old blood feud between Eric Kino and Tommy's dead brother, James Crane.

She felt bad about that. Shelley was such a sweetheart. Hopefully, they'd already recovered from her little invasion. What worried her was
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Tommy was still talking about taking Jeffy. That terrified Beth. She wasn't worried about her own life. That was already over, but Jeffy was special.

She rubbed her hand over her hair. She hadn't been able to bathe in several days. They gave her just a few minutes in the bathroom twice a day. They brought her hamburgers to eat from the MickyD's down the street. Luckily, other than when Tommy had roughed her up the first night back, she'd been left alone. Apparently, Tommy knowing she had AIDS was helping her a lot. Beth couldn't understand why Tommy was keeping her around at all.

She lay very quiet on the concrete floor and listened to what Tommy had to say to the men.

"Okay, we'll try tomorrow and if he doesn't show, we'll try again the next day," Tommy said.

"You gonna let us try to take him without the gun?" Duke said.

"No."

"Aww, come on, Tommy, he's a freakin' movie star. He can't be as badass as everyone says," Duke argued.

"He is," Tommy answered simply.

Duke wasn't ready to give up. "Okay, look, Roy can hold the gun on him the entire time. I got a hundred bucks riding on this," Duke said. "Give me and Hector some time to try. That's all I ask. If we fail, he can shoot him."

Tommy shrugged. "Don't say I didn't warn you."

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John 8:44

"You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies."

Chapter 10

Ricky and Steve walked slowly down the strip after having dropped actor-boy Clay Bennett off at the home of one of Steve's buddies who'd been willing to put Clay up for a few weeks. Jason headed back to his family. Before Ricky went with Steve to the strip, he gave Justin a call to let him know they were alive and well.

Justin had heaved a huge sigh of relief. Justin was the worrier. He was a very good worrier, Ricky thought with a smile. Justin was also a darn good martial artist. Especially for a corporate suit. He and his brother Jason had been his father's first students and more importantly, they'd been loyal friends. It was Justin who'd devised the "last known communication" plan, in an effort to keep him from worrying when he couldn't reach someone. As it turned out, the plan had become a major source of nail biting for him.

"So what do you think Tommy is up to?" Steve asked.

"Nothing good. He's been moving around without anyone knowing what he's doing. He obviously has plans. After Beth and now this imposter, I'm gonna have to say that his plans are big ones." He blew out a breath, shook his head. "Steve, I am so very sick and tired of this ridiculous game of the Cranes seeking revenge. I mean, it's been going on since before I was born, and enough is enough, man. Somehow I gotta end it. I just hope that once I do, some long-lost Crane cousin or something doesn't come crawling out of the woodwork vowing to defend the Crane family's freakin' honor."

Rick came to a sudden halt and backed up two steps. He stared at a poster in a shop window. He bent closer, trying to see past the glare. It was a "Missing Persons" poster. It showed a picture of a girl in a cheerleader outfit. She had long, blond hair and wore a sweet smile. She was missing from Garden City, Kansas but her most recent sighting had been a few months ago in Los Angeles. Her name was Elizabeth Carter. However, Ricky knew her– as Beth.

He quickly looked down the street to find a poster that wasn't locked up inside a store. Plucking one from a light post, he studied it closely. Beth had obviously cut her hair and dyed it black, but it was definitely her. Ricky folded the paper and tucked it in his pocket.

"You've seen that girl?" Steve asked.

"Yep. It's Beth. The one I've been telling you about. The poster says she's ill and may need medication."

"Sounds like there's a story there."

"It does. Wanna do some digging?" Ricky asked his friend.

"Maybe. You wanna hire me?"

"I guess I do."

They walked along, Steve making a silly comment every once in a while, but Ricky was in no mood to be jovial. Finally Steve gave up. "You wanna talk about it?" Steve asked.

Ricky gazed at his friend and shrugged. "Have you ever thought about gettin' married?"

Steve stumbled. "Uh, no. No way."

"Why not?"

"I watched my parents do nothing but rip at each other my entire life. So, no thanks."

"Okay. Ever been in love?"

"Darn, Rick, I don't know. Maybe. But my inability to commit makes it difficult to have a lasting relationship with anyone."

Ricky chuckled. "I guess that would."

"You thinking about asking Bree?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking about it. I don't have the same hang-ups as you. My father was madly in love with my mother. And my father is madly in love with Bree's mother."

"Your father is one of a kind."

"Yeah he is. I was eleven when my mother died. My father was thirty. My age. I'm saying that at my age he already had an eleven year old son and I can't even decide what to do with my life."

"Well, I'd say you're doing pretty well so far. You've been in show business since you were a kid. You crossed the line into adulthood and continued to make movies. That's an accomplishment."

"And yet, you know that acting career means nothing to me. I'm a martial artist. The movie star thing was just me trying to share my art with the world."

"Well, yeah, because every artist needs an outlet, right?"

Ricky nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. But maybe I need to get back to the tournament circuit. Ya know, prove myself again."

"Good grief, Ricky, you have nothing to prove. The world reveres you. You have everyone's respect."

He shrugged. "Maybe I need to prove it to myself."

"Hmm, and maybe you need to prove something to Bree."

There was silence, as the words sank in. Ricky eyed his friend with a smile. "Well then Steve, guess you're not so shallow after all."

Steve chuckled. "Yeah, even a blind hog gets an ear of corn every once in a while."

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"Where have you been?" Bree asked the minute Ricky got back.

"I had some business to take care of."

"Well, that's just nice for you, isn't it?"

Wary of the bite in her words he answered carefully. "Would you have come with me if I'd asked you?"

"It depends on where you went."

"To the strip."

She frowned. "No. I'm not ready for that."

"That's what I thought. Let me know when you're ready to be seen in public with me and I'll take you anywhere you want."

He hadn't meant for the words to sound bitter but he realized they did once he'd said them. Softening, he smiled. "So, what, did you miss me?"

"There's a problem with your father."

He started up the stairs. "What's going on?"

"He's meditating."

Ricky stopped. Sighed. "That's not a problem."

"Well, Mom is upset about it. She hasn't disturbed him yet, but she says she needs to speak to you."

"You could have called me on my cell."

"We did."

He pulled his cell out of his pocket. Five missed calls.

"Sorry. I had it off for a little bit, I didn't even glance at it when I turned it back on."

Ricky went to the bedroom door, knocked softly.

Shelley opened it. "Ricky, I'm worried about Eric."

"What's wrong?"

"He started meditating early this morning. He's still at it. He's out there on the balcony. He's changed positions only twice that I can tell. I tried to speak to him but he won't answer me."

"Leave him alone."

"What?" Shelley asked.

"He's cleansing. Leave him alone."

"Cleansing? What is that?"

"He's cleansing his mind."

"I've been married to him for eight years and he's never meditated like this. And if cleansing is what he's doing, couldn't he have told me that's what he intended to do before he started so I wouldn't worry?"

Ricky held out his hand in a calming gesture. "You two come downstairs and I'll talk to you about it."

Ricky led Shelley and Bree into the study. "So, in Zen Buddhism, Kensho, which is like, um, an experience of awakening, there's a special mantra for cleansing and purifying our minds. The other day Dr. Chin said that Dad is like a Zen Master. Well, that's not really true. First, he's not a Buddhist, as you well know. He is very much a disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ. But, Dad does practice a meditation similar to Kensho, except, you might call it a Christian version of Kensho. He seeks to fast and pray and sit until he communes with God. You know Shelley, from when you first learned about Zendo Ryu, that Dad believes in taking the good and useful and worthy from any source and putting it to use in our lives."

Shelley nodded.

"So, Kensho literally means, seeing into one's own nature. Dad is more after Satori. Again, a Christian version of Satori. Kensho and Satori mean almost the same thing and so sometimes are used in the same way, but the term Satori is a little different. It is like, hmm, I guess you could say a deeper experience."

"Experience?" Bree questioned. "I mean, you make it sound like your dad is tripping."

Ricky nodded with a smile. "Yeah, tripping on God's light. Ya see, he's seeking to commune with God. Ya know, some people think that's completely crazy, but that's because they don't believe God interacts with us. They don't think it's really possible to simply sit down, get your mind really still, reach out, and communicate with God Himself. But Dad has been blessed. He doesn't just think it, he knows it's possible because of what happened in the cave. So, he is seeking to cleanse his mind, he seeks a mental upheaval, so that he can tune himself into God."

"Mental upheaval? That sounds dangerous," Shelley said. "I mean, hasn't his mind been through enough?"

Ricky shrugged. "Yes, his mind has been through enough, and he is seeking God probably to make sure nothing remains of the darkness that he allowed to infiltrate his mind. As far as it being dangerous, I trust God, don't you?"

"Well, yes, of course. But why didn't he just tell me beforehand what he was gonna do?"

"It's probably because he didn't know. He probably sat down to pray and meditate, hoping to clear his mind, and made it to such a deep level that he didn't want to stop any progress he was making."

"But, is it healthy to sit for such a long time?"

"Shelley, God will not let anything happen to him. God's got him. God would not stop someone who's been praying for hours. In essence, Dad is quieting his mind, getting rid of everything, so he can truly hear God again. It will end when it ends. He won't be harmed."

"Well thank goodness," Shelley said, heaving a sigh.

Rick's brow furrowed. "Shelley, I mentioned the cave a few minutes ago without thinking. Has Dad ever told you about his experience in the cave back when he was a kid?"

"Yes, he did, actually the very first year we met."

"Oh, okay, good. I should've known that. So, anyway, we have to always remember that God is at work in our lives. I'm really saying that to myself rather than preaching that at you. During the time when Dad was acting so strange, I wasn't showing my faith very much. I should have and I'll try to do better. Unfortunately, I'm not near the man Dad is. His footsteps are hard to fill."

"You're doing fine Ricky. You were a rock when we needed you. And you too, Bree. You both stepped up and your help was priceless." She looked at Bree. "Sorry about thinking there was something wrong with Eric. I got worried and upset and then I worried you."

"It's okay, Mom. It's understandable after everything that's happened. I hope you know, I'm always here for you."

Shelley took her hand. "I know you are sweetie. You've been such a great help to me my sweet daughter. Thank you." She kissed her cheek. "I guess I'll go up to bed."

As soon as they bid Shelley goodnight. Ricky took Bree's hand and walked her to her room. "We have things to talk about."

"Oh. Um, personal things or things about what's going on with Tommy Crane?"

"Both."

Bree sighed. "Oh, Ricky, please not tonight. I'm so very tired of talking and worrying and planning and wondering. I don't want to talk. I want you to come into my room and make love to me and just let me, how do you say it, be one with the universe?"

Ricky smiled. "Well, since you don't want to talk, I would love that, Bree. But, out of respect for you and for what I just said about trying to follow in my father's footsteps, I think I should go to my own room and maybe do some praying and meditating of my own."

Bree, surprised by his answer, sighed deeply. "Sometimes I truly don't understand you."

He grimaced. "Sometimes I don't understand myself."

She turned without another word and went to her room.

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Ricky woke the next morning feeling clear on what he wanted to say to Bree. He went straight to her room, but she wasn't there. A quick scan showed she was out on the balcony, staring at the ocean as the morning light sparkled on its surface. He smiled contentedly. Their entire family had a propensity to do that, to stand out on the deck or on their private balconies and stare out at the sea. The ocean drew them, and they drew strength from it.

She wore nothing but her nightshirt. She was pacing back and forth, dragging her fingers lightly over the railing as she went. He wondered what she was thinking about that had her brow creased.

He was in love with her. Completely. Emphatically. Yes, he'd come home and taken her to his bed in an effort to make the statement clear that he was not her brother. Still, he wanted more than just sex. He wanted her to be his wife. He wanted to have children with her. He wanted a family of his own. A home of his own. He walked through her room and joined her on the balcony.

"Good morning," he said softly.

She smiled. His heart raced. That famous smile affected him the same way it affected the entire world.

"Hey," she said.

"What ya thinkin' bout?" he asked.

"Nothing in particular."

He put his arms around her. "I have an idea. How about we get all dressed up tonight and I'll take you to a nice restaurant and we'll have a glorious dinner and then maybe a tour of the new art exhibit."

When she frowned, he quickly added. "Or maybe a show. I think there was a new play opening this week."

She sighed. "I don't know Ricky. I'm not sure that I want to hear all the gossip if we go out together. I mean, just going to that restaurant to meet Jillian the other day was hard enough."

He let go of her and stepped back. "Well, we can't be prisoners in our own home, can we?"

"Maybe not, but I'm not sure if I'm willing to face it."

Ricky's eyes narrowed. There was something about her tone that put him on edge. He spoke slowly. "You mean now— or ever?"

She crossed her arms over her breasts and sighed. "I'm not sure what I mean."

His heart dropped. He turned and ran a hand through his hair.
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"Bree, do you feel anything for me?"

"Yes."

He turned back. "What?"

She was silent.

"Okay, maybe if I take the first step it won't be so hard for you. Let me tell you how I feel. I'm in love with you, Bree. I have been for a long time. During the eight years we've been apart, I doubted myself, thought maybe I just didn't know what love is, ya know? But I believe I do now, and I love you. I love your strength. Your sweetness. Your bitchiness. Everything about you. I can't think of anyone else I would want to spend my life with, to wake up to every morning, to give me children."

He stopped when she gave a slight groan.

"Okay, maybe I'm moving too fast, but, Bree, you must feel something for me."

"I do. I'm just not sure what to call it."

His eyes closed briefly to hide the pain. "Let's see," he said slowly. "Maybe— maybe it would help to break it down. Like, name one thing. Just one thing you like about me."

She shrugged. "You were really good in bed."

Obviously disappointed, he hung his head. Breaking God's laws had consequences. He looked up. "So, like, I was hoping for something deeper."

"Okay, well, I admire and respect you."

"Great. Just great." Usually those words would be a compliment, but they were something someone could say to a stranger. As a matter of fact, many strangers had spoken those same words to him. He turned and walked away. He didn't want her to see how her words hurt him.

She sighed. "I dunno, Ricky, so, I guess I think you are a really nice guy."

His temper flared. He whirled. The statement had been made as if that was a bad thing. "That's it, isn't it? I'm nice. You've always had an aversion to nice guys. Men for you have to be mean and dangerous, don't they Bree? They have to give you that edge. I would've thought you'd learned your lesson when Mr. Nick James worked you over, but I guess that's the way you like it."

She slapped him. The resounding whack seemed to expand and travel out to sea. His mouth pressed into a straight line. He drew several breaths before he spoke. "I suppose I deserved that," he said softly. He drew a deep breath. "I'm going for a run." He climbed the

railing and jumped to his side of the balcony, then turned toward her. "And I'm gonna try very hard, from now on, to not be so nice."

Bree stood frozen. She couldn't believe she'd slapped him. He'd made her so mad. She drew a breath. She realized she was so mad because he hit the sore spot. Why didn't she tell him how she really feels about him? Why is she so afraid of telling him that she cares for him? Maybe even loves him too, and that she's also thought about having his children. Why? Why does he scare her so much?

A few minutes later she saw him headed for the beach in nothing but a pair of shorts and running shoes. She sighed. When he gets back she'll apologize and maybe try to be more honest with him about how she feels.

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Shelley took a tray of breakfast up to Eric. He'd finally finished meditating and climbed into bed around five in the morning. He'd wrapped her in his arms and gone to sleep. She thought he deserved a little pampering.

When she opened the door it was obvious he was in distress. He tossed and turned and then gasping, sat straight up.

"Eric, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

He continued to breathe, drawing the oxygen into his lungs as if he'd been drowning. Finally, he closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard.

"I think I've had a precognitive dream."

Shelley frowned. He'd had them before and they were always a precursor of something bad. How much more can the family take?

"Tell me," Shelley urged softly, sitting down next to him and resting a reassuring hand on his chest.

"Let me sort it out a moment." He was quiet, his eyes shifting back and forth as he thought about what he'd just been shown. "I saw one of us, is hurt, or ill maybe. They're in a great deal of pain."

"Mark?"

"I'm not sure who it was in the dream. It seems like one person. Then it seems like all of us."

"Maybe because if one of us is in pain the others are too?" Shelley asked.

Eric nodded. "That has to be it. So, one of us is going to suffer and I mean suffer greatly. There's a burning feeling, in my heart. As if someone died."

"But we can avoid that, right? Didn't you tell me once before that
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you were able to use your dreams to change the outcome?"

"Yes, and at times I've been able to do that. Hopefully, I'll be able to do it again." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "There's so much anguish, I almost can't see around it, but still, there seems to be more. Someone else maybe. I can't see. There's too much pain. It's as if I can feel it myself. It's consuming. It's everywhere."

"Like an illness?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. I can't tell."

"I hope it's not Mark. I mean, the AIDS thing, you know? Or with football, I'm always worried when he's out on the football field."

Eric nodded. "I hope it's not anyone. Maybe, somehow, we'll be able to avoid it." Eric knew however, that something bad was coming. He just hoped he'd be able to do the right thing at the right time to avoid disaster. Smiling up at his wife, he patted the side of the bed. "Thanks for the breakfast, sweetie. Sit with me."

Sighing, she sat down, her face drawn in worry. "Jason called," she began. "He said he needed to come over and fill us in on what happened last night. He said he wanted to set up stronger security."

Eric nodded as he thought about the dream he'd just had. "Sounds like a good idea."

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Just admit it, Ricky thought as he ran. It's not gonna happen between me and Bree. She doesn't love me. Oh, I'm good enough for some steamy sex alright, but as far as a real relationship, I don't do it for her. Well, I went and put myself out there. My father advised me to put it out there. He'd also said it was up to her what she did with it. Well, now we know. He shook his head. I blew it. I went and jumped the gun. I meant to take time, give her time. Maybe I can still do that. Maybe she'll come around. I need to back off, but not too far off. I won't become her brother, not ever again.

Ricky's cell buzzed in his pocket and he pulled it out, talking as he ran. "Yeah," he said.

"Hello, Rick, so, I had a friend in New York do some digging on Nicholas James," Steve said.

"Find anything?"

"Yeah. He's dead. He died three years ago in a drug bust gone bad. Apparently someone hacked their system and changed the details of his leaving the force. What are you doing? You're breathing hard. Did I interrupt you and Bree?"

"No. And I'm not breathing hard. I'm barely breaking a sweat."
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"I was just kidding, Rick. What's got your panties in a wad?"

"Listen, I don't wanna talk right now. I'm running. I'll call you when I get back." He stuffed the phone back in his pocket.

So, Bree's bodyguard is not who he says he is, Ricky thought. She'll be tickled to know that. It should make her real happy that she's been having an affair with an imposter. She likes things like..."

He should have been more aware of his surroundings. He'd had his mind on other things. If he hadn't been thinking so hard about Bree and feeling sorry for himself he would've seen the two men long before they'd jumped out in front of him. It wasn't them that had him worried though. It was the red-headed guy up in the rocks with a rifle trained on him that had him concerned.

A glance back over his shoulder told him he was no longer in sight of the house. Of course, this was the perfect spot for an ambush. The sharp bend, the rocks, little visibility. The nearest home would be the neighbors at least three or four hundred yards beyond where he stood and also out of sight. His father said to stay alert, so far Tommy hadn't planned anything lethal. Looks like things have changed.

"Caught you off guard, didn't we, Kino?" one of the men said. "And they say you're almost invincible."

Ricky smiled. "Yeah, good job. You did catch me off guard, but that won't help you."

"They also say you're a hotshot."

"You mean, I'm confident," he said as he backed up, hoping to draw his assailants into the line of fire between himself and the guy with the scope rifle.

"Trying to run, Kino?"

Ricky rolled his eyes. "Yeah."

Actually, he was. Once he took out these two, he needed to make it to a place in the rocks where the rifleman would have to hunt for him. That would be his only chance. He backed again, trying to get closer to the edge of the jutting cliffs. His hand slipped into his pocket. He just needed to punch a few buttons. He could toss the phone aside. His father would come. Unfortunately, the moment the men spotted the phone they charged at him.

Ricky spun and delivered a kick to the face of the first one to reach him. Blood spurted from an obvious broken nose. The large man sank to his knees for a split second before he fell over moaning and holding his face.

The second man moved in. Ricky grabbed him and held him close,

dragging him along with him, but unfortunately the phone fell from his grasp. He hoped he'd be able to get back to it momentarily.

Apparently, the rifleman realized why Ricky was dragging the man along. He fired. The man Ricky held stiffened then went limp. Ricky was able to drag him a few more steps before he had to let him fall. Ricky ran several steps and dove as the rifleman fired again. He rolled and came up, headed toward the rocks. Another shot. Pain exploded in his ankle and moved upward. He looked down to see a dart hanging from just behind his left ankle. Darts, he thought. Not bullets. So, I guess I'll live a little longer anyway. Quickly pulling it out, he took off running again, was almost to the rocks when he was hit again, in the thigh this time. He went down.

The rifleman came to stand over him. Ricky looked up at him, memorizing his face, noting his red hair. They wanted to take him alive and that didn't bode well. Ricky's breaths slowed, his vision blurred. One thing he knew for sure– he was in big trouble.

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Tommy stood over the great Ricky Kino. He was out cold right now, but he would wake soon enough, and when he did they were in for a real treat. Currently he looked his three guys over.

"Give you a hard time, did he?"

Red nodded toward his cohorts. "Gave them a hard time. I had no problem shooting him. Too bad I had to shoot Hector too. He got in the way. If Duke hadn't regained consciousness I would've had to leave both him and Hector behind."

"It's been six hours. They'll both be awake soon. Get Kino in that chair." He motioned to an old, large, wooden desk chair that he'd ripped the padded seat from, leaving a big hole. "I want his arms taped to the arms, his legs to the chair legs. And make sure he's secure. I don't care if you have to use an entire roll of duct tape on each leg."

"But Tommy, there's no seat. He's gonna fall through as soon as we put him in it."

"Well then, put a small board across the back to give him a little ledge to sit on."

They shrugged. "It's your game."

"Yes. Yes it is," Tommy said firmly.

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"Eric," Bree said, coming quietly into the study.

He looked up, smiled. "What ya need, hon?"

She wrung her hands. "I'm worried about Ricky."

Eric was instantly alert. "Why?"

"We had a fight and he went for a run. It's been hours now and he hasn't come back. I walked down the beach, but I didn't see him. I thought at first he was just mad and staying gone to make me worry, but then I realized, Ricky wouldn't do that no matter how mad he is at me, at least I don't think he would."

Eric stood. "No, he wouldn't. Stay here. Make sure Jeffy's okay and don't let her or Shelley out of your sight."

"Okay."

Bree, Shelley and Jeffy waited by the dining room doors for Eric to come back. When he finally came running back to the house, his face was pale. He was on his cell phone. He looked up as he came through the doors.

"They've taken Ricky."

Jeffy burst into tears. Shelley picked her up, held her close. Bree was silent, her face a stone mask.

"They who?"

"Has to be Tommy."

"How do you know?" Bree asked.

Sighing, Eric tossed Ricky's cell phone and a small green dart onto the table.

"What's that?" Bree asked.

"It's a dart, from a tranquilizer gun."

"What are we gonna do?" Shelley cried.

"I've called the police. They're on the way." Eric stopped and drew a calming breath. "I have to call Jason and Justin."

He turned away. He was having a difficult time holding it together. They had his son, and if they'd taken him with a dart that meant they had plans for him when he wakes up, and he would be completely at their mercy. He *would* eventually wake up. The question is, what kind of situation would Ricky wake up to?

Bree remained stoic. When the police arrived she remained stoic. When Mark and Joey got home and were ready to tear the city down to find Ricky, she remained stoic. When Jason and Justin got there and went into a private meeting with Eric, she remained stoic, and even when the police finally got around to questioning her and she had to tell what the argument had been about in front of everyone, she remained stoic.

The house was swarming with activity. The FBI had been called in. The dart was sent away to make sure it was Ricky's blood on the

tip. The beach was scoured. They found the site of a brawl. They found several sets of footprints. They found more blood samples and sent them to a lab.

There was no way someone could have carried a man off that beach without being noticed, so they assumed he was taken by boat. Agents and officers were sent to nearby harbors, to neighbors. When night came someone brought food for the family. No one ate.

Phone taps were being established. Each member of the family was being interviewed separately. Everyone was surprised when Jason let everyone know that the real Tommy Crane was not the one they'd been watching. The information only confirmed what they knew. Tommy had Ricky.

The media arrived. Fortunately, they couldn't get past the security gate. Shelley lay down with Jeffy until she fell asleep, then went to join her husband. She found him on the deck, staring out at the ocean. She wrapped her arms around him.

"We'll find him. I know we will."

He nodded. "I believe we will. Alive or dead is my concern. In my dream, there was so much pain, and it seemed someone died."

"Positive thoughts, Eric. That's what you always tell me. He's alive. He'll come back to us."

Eric sighed. "There's something else that's bothering me. The timing of the dream. It came so late. I mean, I was having the dream about the same time Rick was probably trying to fight them off. That's not how it usually happens. I can hardly call that precognitive."

"Maybe it's because of everything that's been going on with your brain. I mean, you haven't really been yourself."

He nodded. "I guess I wasn't in the right vibration to receive any messages." He shook his head.

Shelley squeezed his hand. "He's alive. I know he is and what's more, Jeffy knows it."

Eric looked down into his wife's eyes. They didn't often talk about Jeffy's psychic abilities, but the child had uncanny insights and had predicted events before their happening many times. Eric nodded. "Then he's alive." And he's suffering, he thought. In the dream, there was so much pain.

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He came to slowly. He couldn't feel his arms or legs and he really hoped they were still there. Opening his eyes just a tiny slit, he could see a concrete floor. He kept his eyes lowered to buy himself some time
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to get oriented. He was nauseated. Had a headache. And was completely immobile.

He allowed slight eye movement to make sure his arms and legs were still attached. He was in a chair that was missing most of the seat. His legs and arms were taped securely to the chair's arms and legs. From elbow to wrist and knee to ankle, there was no way he could move them. Keeping his head down, he made a quick scan of the room which showed him the lower half of an old desk, with an old metal wastebasket next to it on his right. Beyond that, a few cardboard boxes and finally, two doors, both closed. On his left, steps leading upward. The floor was concrete.

His senses were returning and he knew there were others in the room with him, watching him. He could hear them breathing. He raised his head enough to see shoes. Four pair. Two pair were those of the men who'd jumped him on the beach. It was the ones closest he was interested in. He drew a slow, deep breath.

Ricky knew he was in big trouble. This may very well be the day he dies, he thought. And even though he wasn't one hundred percent sure about *that* fact, he was about another– he was about to feel pain. A lot of pain. That would be the only reason to have him so completely secured. He drew another deep breath. He didn't do pain well and he had a feeling this was gonna be bad. Well, he thought, time to face the music.

Slowly, he lifted his head and peered around the room, taking note of the faces that'd been on the beach. Finally, he shifted his eyes to meet his nemesis. He showed no surprise that the man standing in front of him was the one he'd known as Nicholas James. His hair was a little longer now and it was showing the beginnings of blond roots, and his eyes were now blue. He'd obviously been in disguise, but it was the same guy. Nicholas James was Tommy Crane, which means that Tommy himself had been posing as Bree's bodyguard.

The large man gestured toward Ricky's bindings and the room, then nodded back at Ricky. "Got the situation?"

Ricky's jaw clenched. He nodded back slowly. "Got it."

Ricky watched him pull on black leather gloves.

"Do you know who I am?"

Ricky sighed heavily. "I know who you're not. You're not Nicholas James. He's a dead New York cop. You are someone who has a vendetta against my family and the only people I can think of who have a vendetta against my family would be the Crane brothers. So, I'm

gonna surmise that you must be Tommy Crane, since eight years ago I had the distinct pleasure of watching James Crane die."

The blows came fast. Once, twice, three times across the face, Ricky grunting with each hit.

Tommy stepped back, his face a mottled red, his breathing labored, his fists opening and closing.

"Hold up, hold up, hold up," Ricky said, a little breathless himself. "I made one comment. You hit me three times. What's up with that? You're gonna do this, at least do it right."

Tommy's mouth fell open. The three other men in the room looked decidedly nervous. Then Tommy chuckled. Then he outright laughed. "I always heard you were a funny guy, Kino."

"Yeah, that's why they pay me the big bucks," Ricky countered.

"So this is gonna be much more fun than I originally presumed."

Ricky didn't respond, because it wasn't gonna be fun for him.

Tommy walked back and forth in front of Ricky. "I've brought you here for a reason, Kino."

"Okay, so this is not just to be vindictive?"

"Oh, it's that too."

Ricky twisted his arm, hoping to loosen the tape but he couldn't budge. Tommy didn't miss the effort. "What? You want out?"

Ricky looked up. "Very much. Is that an option?"

"I don't think so."

"Awe, come on, now. I know, how about just one arm. Just untape one arm."

Tommy laughed. "Do you really think that untaping just one of your arms would make a difference?"

"I do. And you do too or you'd do what I ask and let one hand loose. Come on, just one, or are you scared?"

Another blow. This one caught his lip just right. Ricky's tongue darted out to taste the blood. He spit the remainder toward the floor.

"Get to the point, Tommy. What is it you want?"

Tommy moved forward swinging. By the time he finished Ricky was almost out.

Tommy grabbed Ricky by the hair and held his head up. "I'm in charge this time Kino. Me. Not you. I ask the questions."

"No problem, sorry man," Ricky said, slurring his words.

Tommy let go of Rick's hair and his head fell forward. "Get some water," Tommy barked to one of the men in the room.

A few minutes later Ricky felt cool water washing over his hair

and skin. Revived somewhat, he lifted his head. Tommy offered him a drink of bottled water. He accepted it. Drank greedily.

"I apologize, Kino. I lost control."

Ricky shrugged. "It happens."

"Yeah, it happens, but it doesn't ever happen to you, now does it? You, the great Ricky Kino."

"Sure, it happens to me all the time. As a matter of fact, I see it happening to me in the very near future."

Tommy chuckled. "Another funny one." He stepped back, picked up a knife that had been lying on the desk next to Ricky.

Ricky heaved a sigh. And we're moving a step up, he thought, yet I still don't even know what it is Tommy's after. He watched as Tommy pulled a lighter from his pocket and held the flame to the knife blade. Ricky swallowed hard.

Tommy watched the blade closely, then held it up to inspect as if contemplating its temperature. Apparently satisfied, he pressed it against Ricky's chest.

Ricky's eyes closed, he grunted, his breathing labored. Ricky cursed under his breath. There was instantaneous relief the moment Tommy pulled the knife away. Ricky drew several deep breaths to calm his rapidly beating heart.

Tommy, extremely pleased with himself, paced in front of Ricky like a tiger, preening. "You know, Kino, you and me, we're almost like brothers."

"How you figure that?" Ricky asked, reaching for composure.

"Well, I figure it because, like, we've shared the same woman. And what a piece she is, huh?"

Ricky's eyes narrowed, his jaw clenched.

"Those long legs, those little sounds she makes. You know what I'm talking about, don't ya?"

"You'd better kill me."

"Why you say that, Kino?"

"'Cause if you don't, I WILL come back and kill you."

"Is that a threat?"

"A promise."

"Now, now, Kino, you're really in no position to be making threats or promises." He picked up the knife, flicked the lighter. "Well, let's get started. As I mentioned earlier, I brought you here for a reason, and that is, I want some information. I'd like you to tell me, Kino, who it was that threw the knife that killed my brother."

Finally, the big question, Ricky thought. He smiled up at Tommy. “It doesn’t matter who it was. Your brother getting dead is the only important aspect of that day.”

The smell of burning flesh filled the room. Ricky groaned, cursed and made more threats.

“Remember when we got your dad that day all those years ago?” He nodded toward the red-headed man. “Roy was there. What a great time that was. Did you know I was the one who held the belt? I was the one that got to beat your father into oblivion. He never said a thing. Never made a sound. I have to say, Kino, you are not even close to being the man your father is.”

Ricky nodded his head, his lips pressed tightly together. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t know.”

“Ahh, there it is. The famous Kino family loyalty.”

He moved forward and punched Ricky square in the mouth.

“What was that for, I didn’t say anything?” Ricky said.

“I guess just for being a Kino. Now, let’s try again. Who threw the knife?”

“Why do you want to know?” Ricky asked.

This time the punch was to the eye. Ricky winced. He felt himself start to nod out, but good old Tommy was there with the refreshing water. Ricky now realized this truly was gonna get bad, because he really didn’t think he wanted to tell Tommy who threw the knife.

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1 Peter 5:10

“And after you have suffered a little while,
the God of all grace, who has called you
to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore,
confirm, strengthen, and establish you.”

Chapter 11

Bree made her way toward her room, but stopped when she got to Ricky's door. Moving forward she laid her cheek against the cool hard surface. Slowly, she placed her hand on the doorknob and turned it. His bed was made. Everything neat and in its place. That's Ricky. He said it was good feng shui to keep your surroundings uncluttered. He also said cleanliness is next to Godliness.

Moving slowly around his room, she touched things he'd touched. A book, an iPad, a pair of nunchukas, a lamp, some cologne. She opened his dresser drawers and touched his clothing, opened his closet and walked through, remembering the conversation he'd had with Jeffy the other day. It suddenly hit her. He was so right. The clothes were not important. Not now. She'd wear rags the rest of her life if she could have Ricky back. Speak to him one more time. Feel his arms around her. What had she done?

"Ricky," she whispered. "Where are you? Are you still alive? What's happening to you?"

She sat on the end of his bed, seeing what he saw when he went to bed at night. Scooting back, she laid her head on his pillow. It smelled of him. She turned over, buried her face in the pillow and cried until she could cry no more. Then she closed her eyes and fell into a fitful sleep.

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"Look at me when I talk to you," Tommy screamed, his hand jerking on Ricky's hair.

"I'd like to, I really would, Tommy," Ricky said weakly. "It's just that I can't appear to open my eyes. They seem to be swollen shut."

The words were slurred, barely audible. Tommy shook his head, as if coming out of a trance. He stood back surveying his work. Ricky's face was unrecognizable. His chest and thighs were a mass of burns and cuts. Two fingers on his right hand were broken. Yet still, Ricky hadn't told him what he wanted to know– but he would soon. He would because Tommy was about to step it up another notch.

Tommy shook his head. "Come on, Rick, do yourself a favor." He
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reached out gently with both hands, cupped Ricky's face. "All you have to do is tell me who threw the knife. How hard can that be?"

Ricky sniffed, trying to clear his airways. "I want to tell you, Tommy. I do, I want to tell. I just need to know what you're gonna do with the information. That's all I need. That's all."

Tommy dropped his hold, walked away, turned, came back a few steps. "What does it matter? I want the truth."

Ricky nodded sloppily. "I always tell the truth."

"That's another thing I've heard about you, Ricky Kino. So, if you always tell the truth, then just do it."

When Ricky didn't answer Tommy rushed forward.

"Okay, okay, Tommy, I will. I will. I'm gonna tell you the truth, man. I swear."

Tommy halted, waited.

"Just tell me what you intend to do with the information."

The expected blow did not come. That worried Ricky. He tried to open his eyes enough to see what was happening. Tommy was setting two small stones, about the size of a strawberry, on the desk. This did not bode well.

"This, Kino, is a little trick I learned while I was in prison. I learned it firsthand, if you know what I mean, so I'm gonna tell you now– you're gonna wish you'd told me what I wanted to know."

Ricky swallowed hard, hoping Tommy wasn't right.

Tommy came close, bent down, and surprised Ricky by reaching down between his legs. He looked up at Ricky's face.

"Oh Jesus, please help me," Ricky uttered softly. It wasn't a curse. It was a prayer.

Tommy laughed. "Yep, this is where most men get religion."

Ricky's respiration doubled.

Tommy's hand constricted. Ricky's chest bowed, his head fell back and he cried out.

The tingling, stabbing pain crept up his body in excruciating waves. Please, God, Ricky's brain cried out. The pain consumed his entire body. His blood boiled. Bile rose. Enough, he thought. Please, enough. It seemed to go on and on. It seemed it would never end. Then finally— Tommy let go.

Ricky drew in great gasps of air. Sweat poured from his body. Moisture ran from the corners of his eyes.

Tommy watched him, imagining and remembering just what Ricky felt as the pain slowly receded.

"That's some bad mojo, huh?" Tommy said, sounding sympathetic.

Ricky's words came out on a long, slow groan. "Go– to – hell."

"Most guys are crying by now," Tommy informed him.

"I thought I was," Ricky mumbled.

Tommy chuckled. "You truly are extremely honest. Almost to a fault. I feel your pain, man. I've gotta say, you handled it fairly well. Maybe Beth was right. You're not so bad. Maybe you're actually a good guy, Ricky Kino. No, really, I think I've misjudged you."

"So, we're done?" Ricky asked hopefully.

"Sorry. And I mean that. I'm sincerely sorry, but I gotta have the information." He moved forward. "Ready to go again?"

"Can you wait another minute?"

"No problem." He backed away. "I know how you feel. It takes a little while for it to stop hurting."

Tommy walked to the high window and peered out. It was getting dark. They'd been at it for almost twenty-four hours. Ricky Kino had been highly entertaining. Tommy found himself enjoying each bit of conversation they shared. However, it was getting late, and he needed to bring this to a close. He looked over at Ricky. "Ready yet?"

"Just a few more minutes. It's almost gone."

Tommy obligingly waited the requested time, then returned to Ricky's side.

"So, was it you?"

Ricky nodded. "I'm gonna tell you, Tommy. In just a second. I just need to know, if it's me, what happens?"

Tommy slammed his hands down on Ricky's taped arms. "I didn't want to move on to the next step." He walked away and came back. "I have to tell ya, you're tough. I mean, I've been where you're at, ya know, and by now I was willing to drop to my knees and beg."

"I guess I should be glad that's not what you want from me."

Tommy picked up one of the stones, gripped it in his fist. "So this is how it works. If you thought what's happened was bad, when I do it with this rock in my hand, it's– it's– well, I can't even tell you. I get emotional just thinking about it."

Tommy grabbed Ricky. He squeezed. The stone pressed, Ricky's eyes closed, and he cried out.

When Tommy finally let go, Ricky found he couldn't breathe. It took several tries before he was able to draw air into his lungs.

"I'm gonna be sick," he said quietly.

One of the men grabbed the wastebasket by the desk and held it under Ricky's chin while he emptied the contents of his stomach, which was only water and bile.

"Ready to talk?" Tommy said softly, his eyes full of compassion.

Ricky nodded, blinked the tears away. "Give me a minute," he said breathlessly.

Again Tommy paced around the room waiting for Ricky's pain to subside.

When he came back Ricky was shivering.

"You cold?" Tommy asked.

Ricky shook his head. "N-no. My b-body is going into s-shock."

"So I need to work fast, huh?"

"P-probably. Look, T-tommy, I've earned y-your trust, r-right?" Ricky asked.

"Absolutely."

Ricky breathed deeply several times, trying to calm his trembling body long enough to speak. "Then please, please, just tell me." His head fell back a moment. Ricky had to force himself to continue. "You know I'm gonna tell you the truth. I give you my word. Just tell me, if it was me who threw the knife, do I die now?"

Tommy sighed. Why not tell him the consequences? Besides, he'd said 'please' and it is time to finish this up. "No, Rick. If you threw the knife you don't die. If it was you then I have to kill someone you love."

Ricky nodded. "So, that means that if my father was the one who threw the knife..."

"Then I kill someone he loves."

Ricky drew a breath, relief washing over him. "My father threw the knife."

Tommy came forward. "Really?"

"Yes," Ricky said, his voice weak, the words tumbling out between the tremors of his body. "We were running toward the creek . . . your brother had a knife to Shelley's throat . . . I pulled the knife, I was gonna throw it . . . but my father . . . he's better than me . . . so I tossed the knife to him."

Tommy looked closely at Ricky's face. "I actually believe you," he finally said.

"I have a favor to ask now," Ricky said, his teeth chattering.

Tommy nodded.

"I want to be the one."

"What one?"

"You said you'd kill someone my father loves. Let it be me."

Tommy thought hard. "I don't know, Rick."

"Listen, Tommy, it would be so much easier. I mean, hey, I'm already here, and I'm halfway gone anyway. Let me be the one."

"You make a good argument, Kino. Really, but you know, I actually like you. You're something different. I'm not sure that I want to take Ricky Kino away from the world just yet. What would they do without you? What would Bree do without you?"

Ricky's eyes filled. He mentally said goodbye to her and his father and his entire family. Tommy's question meant he didn't intend to go after Bree. He wants to hurt my father, Ricky thought, so the obvious choices are Shelley, me or Jeffy. "Tommy, please, you gotta do this. I think I've earned it."

Tommy nodded, thought. "I tell ya what. We got one more stone to go. I'm gonna use that to put you out now."

Ricky's head fell back. He'd thought it was over.

"And while you're out I'm gonna think real hard about what you've asked. I promise. Real hard. So when you wake up, *if* you wake up, you'll know I chose someone else."

Tommy picked up the second stone, and ground the two against each other in his hand, making Ricky wince. "Ya know, Kino, no one in prison ever got to two stones."

"That's good to know," Ricky answered even though his casual answer did not hide his dread.

Tommy smiled. "I know. I know just how you feel. I swear Kino, I think if we'd met under other circumstances, you and me, we could've been friends."

Rick closed his eyes. "Not on your best day."

Enraged, Tommy reached between Ricky's legs and squeezed. The pain engulfed him quickly. He let himself go.

Tommy stood back, his breathing labored. He ought to kill him. Then he realized, Ricky made that last statement to get him to kill him. He was smart, but not smart enough this time. Tommy motioned to his men. "I want you to cut him loose from the chair, then re-tape his hands and feet."

"Why? We're just gonna dump him."

"If he wakes up while you're transporting him and he's not secured, it will be your body being dumped."

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Bree turned over when someone opened the door of Ricky's
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bedroom.

"She's in here," she heard Eric say.

"Thank goodness," her mom whispered.

"Would you mind if I speak with her a minute?"

"No, of course not."

Eric came inside the room and quietly shut the door. He felt led to have a talk with the girl with whom his son was so deeply in love. Bree sat up, rubbing her eyes.

"Have they found Ricky?"

"No. Not yet." He sat on the side of the bed, scrutinizing the young lady.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Numb I guess."

He nodded. "I understand that feeling. So, Bree, you and I have never had a real heart to heart," he began.

"I have no problem with you Eric."

"I know that."

"I actually appreciate the love and care you've given to my mom and my brothers."

He nodded. "I understand that. Loving and caring for your mom and brothers has been easy. I love your mother with all my heart and she loves you and the boys, therefore me loving you and the boys has been a natural thing."

"Me?"

"Of course, you. Did you think I don't love you?"

She looked down. "Like you said, we've never really talked seriously about anything."

"Well, Bree, you are a headstrong young lady. You've always seemed to know what you want. You seemed happy and determined and focused. I saw no reason to interfere. Your career took off and just look at you, you're America's sweetheart. Your mom and I, we couldn't be prouder of you."

Bree looked up, surprised by his words. "Thank you."

"You love acting, don't you Bree?"

"I do. I really do. I'm not all into the Hollywood celebrity thing, but I love to act. To create."

"I understand. So really, it doesn't matter what's written about you or Ricky, as long as you can continue to create through your acting, is that correct?"

Her eyes opened wide as if she just realized that what he said was

true. "Yeah, I guess that's exactly right." She shook her head. "None of that really matters now."

"Why?"

"With Ricky gone, my whole world has fallen apart."

"As callous as this is gonna sound coming from Ricky's father, no matter what happens to Ricky, life goes on."

"Mine won't."

"Then you love him?" he asked immediately.

"I do. I should have told him. I should have. I didn't because I was afraid."

"What were you afraid of?"

"I'm not sure."

"Would you mind if I tried to help you sort out your feelings?"

She gave a short laugh. "Good luck."

"Well, let's begin with the fact that you told your mom that Ricky accused you of liking dangerous men."

Bree nodded. "I suppose it seems that way. I always seem to get involved with the ones that end up mistreating me."

"And I know Ricky told you that was because you look for someone like your father."

"Eric, how do you know all of this stuff?"

"Shelley and I have great communication. Communication is the key to a good relationship. It solves just about every problem."

She nodded. "Well, my father is not a bad man."

"No he's not. I'm not attacking him. Not at all. However, Ricky is probably right about why you end up with the men you do."

She sighed. "My father was emotionally abusive to my mom. She just took it."

He was silent as he thought. "Bree, are you angry with your father about that or with your mom?"

Bree looked up, surprised. She started to give him an automatic answer, then stopped and thought. "Well, maybe both."

He nodded. "Good, you're being honest."

"She should have stood up to him," Bree said suddenly. "He might have given her more respect if she'd demanded it."

"Let me fast forward a minute. What has your mother taught you, as far as your worth?"

"*My* worth? Well, I guess from the time I was a little girl I remember her telling me I was special. The smartest. The prettiest. The funniest. The most talented. She told me I could do anything, be

anything I wanted to be. She told me to not let anyone keep me down or tell me differently, especially just because I was a female."

Eric nodded. "And those things are all true, but Bree, when your mom was a little girl SHE was told that women were second class citizens. That they should just shut up and do what they're told. She was told that she was not very smart. She was not pretty. She was worthless. Her brothers were allowed to ridicule her daily. Both her father and her mother expressed their disappointment in her on a regular basis. When she became pregnant with you at only fifteen years of age, to them it was just par for the course. They were happy to send her off to live with your father. So, unlike you, your mom had nothing inside her to use to stand up to your father. It took her almost thirty-three years to go deep down inside and find some tiny piece of courage and reach for her own happiness."

He touched Bree's knee. "Yet she didn't let that keep her from telling you all the right things or from teaching you about your self-worth. It was a case of asking you to do what she says and not what she does, and she did that because she loves you."

Bree's chin quivered. "And now, though, now she knows her worth, right?"

"Well, Bree, she's still learning. She actually still doesn't even believe she's beautiful. Compare that to yourself, Bree. You ooze confidence about your appearance. You ooze confidence about everything. Now, let me go back a minute to your father, because he's where you get a lot of your fear."

"Okay."

"Your father has his own battles to fight. He was a senior in college when he got your mom pregnant. That's statutory rape in my book. Nevertheless, it happened. I don't know his history, but classically, he sought a much younger woman because for some reason he needed to be able to dominate her completely. And he did. Who knows, maybe his mother was a mean, spiteful woman who made this necessary for him. Or maybe his own father taught him that's how to treat women. I don't know and that's why I don't judge. I'm only going with the facts. So, this being the case, your mom never stood a chance, and your dad was allowed to handle her as he saw fit."

"And then you came along," Bree murmured.

"Yes, but we're not talking about me and her today. Other than I have only her highest good in my constant thought."

"Okay, so I've lost track" Bree said. "It seems like we're going

around in circles. What are we talking about?"

"We *are* going around in circles. I wanted you to see your mother as the strong person she is, not weak, like you've been thinking. I wanted you to see that your father had his reasons for being like he was. Now I'm not gonna examine the men you've dated in the past. They are the past. I'm only concerned with the now. You are a person of great worth, with a good upbringing, a good base, and so is Ricky. You both know your own worth."

"And so I shouldn't fear being with Ricky?"

"And so, now that you have a little background, you should be able to figure out for yourself why you fear being with Ricky, or why you withhold your love."

"You're not gonna tell me what I should do, are you?"

"Of course not."

"Please, Eric, I mean, I don't mind. Really, I want you to tell me what I should do. I'll listen to you. I promise."

"Oh, no. Then you would have someone to blame. That would give you an out. Sorry. Now it's up to you to work through some of the junk in your mind. Your anger with your mom for not standing up for herself. Your anger with your father for treating your mother poorly, and your anger with Ricky, for being exactly what you want him to be."

"I'm not angry with Ricky."

"Good. I want to tell you one more thing. I have grown to love you, Breanna. You act as if you're cool and tough, but I see your commitment to family. I see the way you dote on your brothers and Jeffy. I see the support you give your mom. I see your generosity and your strength of character. I see your courage, even now."

"I'm not courageous now. What I am is scared out of my mind. I can't imagine what's happening to Ricky. I keep thinking they probably won't kill him, right? That's probably not their plan, but what if they accidentally go too far? I keep thinking that just yesterday he was here, with me and now..." She choked on the sobs that welled up in her chest.

Eric pulled her to him and she moved forward and laid her head on his knee. He rubbed her back and comforted her the best he could.

"I know how you feel, Bree. I keep remembering him when he was little, like three or four and he could already do backhand springs and cartwheels and flips. His tiny body was so very strong, even back then, and I keep wondering what Tommy is doing to that body and I keep hoping that it stays strong."

"So you don't think they'll kill him either, do you?"

"No, but I do think they're gonna mess him up, and I think it's gonna be bad, and I'm terrified at what we'll find when we find him."

"It's all my fault," Bree cried.

"Nonsense. Don't go down that path. Ricky was going running regardless of whether you had a little argument or not."

Her head remained on Eric's knee. She sniffed. "I need him, Eric. I want him back. I love him."

Eric sighed. "Me too."

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Tommy jerked the door open. "Okay, okay, stop banging."

He bent down and jerked the tape off of Beth's mouth. He rubbed his thumb over the tender flesh of her cheek. "Sorry, but I had to keep you quiet."

"You haven't let me out in two days," she screamed.

He rose. "Keep it up and you won't get out at all."

She quieted. After listening to what he'd just done to Ricky Kino she was sure he had no qualms about being cruel to her.

"That's better." He looked her over. "You are a mess. I'd bet you'd like to take a bath, get cleaned up. Put on some clean clothes. Have a meal."

She looked up into his eyes wondering if he was just being mean.

"I think we might be able to arrange that."

She swallowed. Her eyes filled with tears.

"Aw, come on now, it can't be that bad."

Beth looked up. "Are you gonna keep me forever?"

"Not forever. I have plans for you. I'm gonna have need of you when I get the little Kino brat."

"No, please, Tommy, please leave her alone. She's just a kid. She's innocent."

He laughed. "She won't be by the time this is over."

"And when will this be over? Huh, Tommy?"

His eyes narrowed. "It will be over when I say it is."

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The agent touched Eric's shoulder and asked to speak with him. Eric stood and left the great room where the rest of the family had gravitated to watch the news. Top story was the missing actor, Ricky Kino, who'd now been missing for two days. They inaccurately reported the circumstances surrounding his disappearance and possible motives for his kidnapping, all ridiculous. It was comforting however,

to see the pictures, interviews and clips of film that the media had quickly put together of Ricky's career.

"Anything new?" Eric asked as they moved into the kitchen.

"South Beach rentals rented a small motor boat to a Nicholas James day before yesterday."

Eric frowned. Bree's bodyguard. She will probably not handle this well. "Description?"

"Large man. Well over six feet with a muscular build. Dark hair and dark eyes."

Eric sighed. It could still be Tommy because he could certainly change his appearance. "How long did he have the boat?"

"Kept it for twelve hours. Could have gone anywhere in that amount of time."

"Anything else?"

"A witness remembered a white van. A man fitting Crane's description got out of the passenger side at the harbor. The witness remembered because she thought he was "hunky", as she put it."

"Did she get a look at the driver?"

"No."

Eric nodded. "Thanks."

"I'll keep you informed."

"No detail is too small," Eric said.

"I understand."

Eric rejoined his family. Bree sat in the corner of one of the sofas, her knees drawn up in front of her, her arms wrapped around them. Her eyes were glued to the screen. Shelley sat in a large overstuffed chair, Jeffy cuddled in her lap, quietly reading a book. Joey paced, looking up at the TV screen every few seconds. Justin and Jason were absent, putting together their own search. Angel and Kimmie were in the kitchen, preparing food that would more than likely mostly go to waste. Mark sat with his head in his hands, his elbows propped on his knees. Eric moved forward.

"Mark," he said softly.

Everyone but Mark looked up.

Eric placed a hand on the young man's back. He looked up slowly. "Yes sir?"

Eric smiled kindly. "If you miss any more school you won't be allowed to play on Friday."

Mark shrugged. "I don't care."

"Mark, Ricky would want you to play."

Mark stood. “I can’t. How could I? Who cares about a freakin’ football game when Ricky is missing? Possibly dead? Ricky is my brother,” Mark yelled. “My brother. And if the coach and the school and the colleges can’t understand that then I don’t want to be associated with them.”

Eric stood quietly, nodded. “Well said.”

Joey approached his brother. “Wanna go looking?”

Mark nodded at his younger brother then looked to his mom. “We’re going out.”

“Ricky is not dead,” said a small voice.

They looked over at Jeffy. Her chin quivered. “He’s not. I know. I can still feel him.” She rubbed over her heart. “In here.”

Eric smiled at her. “That’s good to know, baby girl. Thank you for helping us to keep that in mind.”

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“Whoah,” Freddie complained to his friend. “They usually got more than this, man. What’s up with dat new manager? She’s stingy.”

They sat down in the alley way, just behind the diner. Closing time used to offer a literal buffet. Half eaten hamburgers, bowls of chili, bread. Lots of bread. Tonight it was a couple of foam plates with leftover salad, some crackers wrapped in cellophane and some leftover scrambled eggs. A man could starve like this, Freddie thought. He looked up when a van came to an abrupt halt at the end of the alley.

Freddie had to squint to see what was happening. His eyes weren’t as good as they used to be. A door in the side of the van opened. There was some grunting and scuffling. Something large hit the pavement and the van took off. Freddie looked at his friend. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin?”

His friend nodded. He hadn’t spoken in the ten years since Freddie had known him.

“Wanna go check it out?”

His friend shook his head.

“Could be a dead body,” Freddie said, matter-of-factly. “Could be something valuable. Could be someone needin’ help. I’m goin’ to see.” He stood up. “If it looks like I’m in trouble, you run and knock on that door, got it?”

The man nodded.

Freddie edged his way to the end of the alley. He inched closer and realized he’d been right. It was a dead body. A man, all curled up in, like a ball. He wore only some shorts. His hands and feet were all taped
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together with duct tape.

"Whoah," Freddie uttered. He bent closer. The man groaned. Freddie jumped back. He turned and ran back down the alley. "It is a body, old friend, but he ain't dead." He started toward the back door of the diner. "I sure hope that stingy witch will open the door again."

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"Eric."

He raised his head. Looking around him, he realized the entire family was still in the great room. The TV had been turned down to a soft chatter. Shelley and Jeffy slept in the same big chair. Mark and Joey had returned and were sleeping at opposite ends of a sofa. Bree was curled up at one end of another sofa. It was she who had spoken his name. He squinted at her. "Yeah?"

"Your phone was buzzing."

Groggily, he reached for his phone to see who'd been trying to call him. He was distracted from his intent when Bree gasped.

She sat straight up, grabbed the remote and quickly turned up the volume. Eric glanced up to see his first-born's handsome face on the screen and the words 'breaking story'. The raised volume on the TV woke the rest of the family.

"*This just in. The body of actor Ricky Kino was found early this morning behind a diner in downtown Los Angeles.*"

Bree stood, her hand to her mouth, her eyes filling with tears.

The rest of the family came to their feet.

"*It's not known at this time whether the actor is alive or dead. The body was discovered by two homeless men. Emergency vehicles were called and are currently en route to the hospital with Kino. As always, as soon as we know. You'll know. This is...*"

Eric's cell phone went off again. He punched a button. "Yes."

"He's alive," Jason said.

Eric breathed and raised his eyes heavenward. "Thank you." He waved his hand, getting everyone's attention. "He's alive," he said loudly. He listened to Jason.

"I've been trying to reach you for fifteen minutes. They found him in an alley behind the *Early Bird Diner*. They're transporting him to the UCLA Medical Center."

"I'm on my way." He looked up at the family as he ended the call. "Take different cars, but no one goes alone. Keep your phones on and..." He stopped. "Come here." Eric motioned to everyone. He held his hand out to Shelley, who took Jeffy's who took Mark's who took
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Bree's who took Joey's who took Eric's.

Eric closed his eyes. "Father, we are so very grateful that— so very grateful..." He couldn't go on.

"Well said," Mark offered.

Eric smiled and nodded. "Let's go."

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James 5:16

"Therefore, confess your sins to one another
and pray for one another, that you may be healed.
The prayer of a righteous person has great
power as it is working."

Chapter 12

He felt as if he were diving deep on the ocean floor. There was no sound. Zero visibility. No matter how hard he tried to swim to the surface he couldn't reach the top. At times he was frantic to reach the top, then exhausted he would sink further into oblivion.

The first real sense to return was touch. He could feel things around him. The vibration underneath him as if he were in a moving vehicle. The constant motion was keeping him in the floating mode. Then suddenly he was lying on a hard surface. That stimulated him enough to try once again to swim to the surface. He tried hard, struggled, but it was as if something in the dank, murky bottom was pulling him ever downward.

After the hard surface there was soft, then hard and cold, then soft again. He could feel hands. They seemed to be all over him at once. They moved over his chest, his face, his arms, his legs, his genitals. He was naked and cold. Then very, very warm.

The next sense to return was sound. At first there was just a murmur of sound from very far away. Then more distinct sounds, like footsteps, the rattling of a cart, voices, though none distinguishable, and the bleep, bleep, bleep of a heart monitor. It finally dawned on him that he was in a hospital and the heart being monitored was his own. That meant Tommy chose someone else.

The fight to the surface became frantic. He swam hard. Desperately trying to force his mouth to form words. It took forever to bring his tongue behind his teeth to make the 'd' sound. Emotions welled up at the frustration of not being able to communicate. He couldn't give up though.

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"He's awfully restless," Bree said, watching Ricky toss his head back and forth. "His mouth keeps opening and closing as if he's trying to say something."
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Eric moved back to Ricky's side. Laid a hand on his arm. "It's okay, Rick. You're safe."

His head moved violently. "D, d..."

Eric leaned closer.

"Dad."

The word was barely a whisper, and barely formed, but it was an audible word.

Bree squeezed his thumb, the only part of him she'd been able to hold onto that wasn't hurt.

Eric leaned over. "I'm here, Rick. I'm right here."

Ricky fought to get the words out. "Wh– where's Jeffy?"

"Jeffy? She's with Jason and Angel."

He shook his head. "No. K– keep her with you. He's coming after her. T– tell me you understand."

"I understand."

Ricky's body relaxed. He sank back into oblivion.

Face pale, Eric dialed Jason. "Where is Jeffy?"

"She's right here. Angel and I are teaching her to bake cookies."

"She's in your sight?"

"Yes, she's right next to me. Why?"

"Ricky says Tommy is coming after her."

"I'll call my men."

"I'm coming to get her. Your family is in danger if you keep her."

Jason stopped to think. "Okay. When will you be here?"

"Within the hour."

"New code."

"Got it."

"Then Ricky's awake?"

"No. He fought his way out of it long enough to deliver the warning then went right back under."

Jason sighed. "Remind me to tell Rick that he's my new hero."

"Mine too," Eric agreed.

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Smells. He could smell. Antiseptic, coffee, and he could swear that he smelled Bree. He sucked air into his lungs and breathed her in. Yes, Bree was nearby.

He tried to lift his eyelids. It was difficult, but he was able to open them a tiny slit. The light hurt his head. Everything was blurry. He decided to try speaking again.

"Bree, is that you?" The words were slurred and he barely
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recognized his own voice. He heard her gasp. A weight came off his hip. She must have been resting her head against him.

"Ricky?" she said softly. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah, baby, I'm awake."

His hand was lifted. He could feel her encircle his thumb. She squeezed. He wiggled his thumb.

"Oh, Ricky," she cried. "I, I..." The sobs came again as they'd been coming off and on over the past week.

"Shhh, now. It's okay. Shhh," he comforted.

She laughed through her tears. "I think I'm the one who's supposed to be telling you that."

"Why?"

"You're the one hurting."

"Oh, no. This isn't hurting. This— is heaven."

"Oh, Ricky," she said again, lightly touching his face. "I'm so sorry. I have to tell you something. I need to say it right now."

"What's that?" he said weakly.

"I do love you, Ricky."

He sighed and then licked his lips to get out the next sentence. "Nothing would make me happier than to believe that, Bree, but don't get pity or sympathy confused with love."

She sniffed. "I knew you were gonna say that. I knew you were gonna think that, but I'll just have to show you, won't I?"

"I'll look forward to it." He sighed. "I wish I could see you."

"Your eyes are so swollen. That's why you can't see."

"I guess I'm probably pretty scary looking right now, huh?"

"You're beautiful." She looked around. "I suppose I need to go tell the others that you're awake. I'm being selfish."

He held on when she tried to pull away. "First, I know I'm probably a mess, but I just want one small kiss."

She leaned down and lightly brushed his swollen mouth with her own. "There's plenty more where that came from," she said softly.

Bree left the room. Fifteen seconds later a crowd of people rushed through the door. His father's hand rested on his forehead. Ricky's eyes filled and ran over.

"Dad," Ricky said.

"Ricky. Welcome back."

"Thanks. Jeffy's with you?"

"I'm right here, Ricky," she said.

He tried to lift his head.

"Hey squirt."

"You look terrible, Ricky. I want you to get better."

"I will, little one. Give me a few days."

"It's already been three days."

"Really?" That piece of news surprised him.

His father's hand left his head and it was replaced by a cool hand and a soft kiss.

"That must be my Shelley."

"Hey, little boy. You've been through hell haven't you?"

"I'm okay. Wish I could see."

"You will soon enough," Eric said.

Joey grabbed Ricky's foot and shook it. "It's really good to hear your voice, Ricky."

"Joey, little bro, you doin' okay?"

"Better now."

"Hi, Rick," Mark said softly. "Can I like, get anything for you?"

"Can't think of a thing right now, man, but I'll keep you posted."

He felt the pressure around his thumb again and he squeezed. He truly was in heaven.

"Dad, I'm sinking again. Do they have me on something? Like for pain or something?"

"Yes."

"Can you get it turned off? I can't stay awake. It's torture trying to come out of it."

"I'll see what I can do."

"So, what's my condition?"

"Well, there's some head trauma, both eyes are black and swollen shut, two fingers on your right hand are broken, both splinted. There are thirty-eight burns to your chest and thighs, mostly first degree, a few, second and third. Several minor cuts and abrasions. And– last but not least, severe testicular trauma. Fortunately, there is no rupture."

Ricky shivered. Eric gripped his shoulder.

The younger man drew a deep breath pushing the memories out of his brain and focusing on the current problems. "Tommy and Nicholas James are the same person."

Eric nodded. "We talked to Steve and figured that out. By the way, Steve has been here every day. He's gonna be disappointed that you woke up while he was gone. Same for Justin."

"Me being awake won't be a problem if you can get this stuff turned off. Everything is getting fuzzy. I need to be alert."

"I understand. Special Agent Dixon wants to talk to you as soon as you're able."

"Who's that?"

"FBI. He's not a bad sort. One of Jason's friends."

"Okay, but not now."

"Get some rest, Ricky. We're all here for you."

He relaxed. "Thanks. Really, everyone. Thanks."

He slipped under.

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"Please, Dad, a protein shake or something."

"I'll take care of it. Now settle down. I know you're antsy."

"I'm going crazy in this place. I have to get out of here. How long has it been?"

"It took you three days to wake up. You're on day five now."

"Hi, Mr. Kino, how are we feeling today?"

Eric turned with a smile at the nurse who came through the door. Little did she know she'd come at the wrong time.

"I'm ready to go home," Ricky answered.

"I'm sure you are. Are you in much pain now that we've taken you off the medication?"

"It doesn't matter."

"Of course it does."

"No, it doesn't, because even if I am in pain I'm not accepting anymore medication, and when I go home I won't have access to it, so it doesn't matter."

"But that's not gonna happen for a little while." She pointed a digital thermometer at him and pulled the trigger.

He waited for the beep before he spoke again. "On the contrary, sweetheart, it's happening today."

She smiled sweetly, her hands on her hips. "It's not possible. The doctors haven't released you."

Ricky smiled back. "Get my doctor, I want to talk to him. I am going home today."

Her smile faded and was replaced with a stern look. "Mr. Kino, you can't leave here in your condition."

His smile remained in place. "Oh, but I can, and I will."

"The doctor will not release you."

"I really don't need his permission to leave. Now take the IV out of my arm or do I have to do it myself?"

"Mr. Kino, do you *understand..."*
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"Let me see if I can make *you* understand. Look at me." He motioned to his chest and his face, held up his broken fingers. "I have been tortured enough. I'm through. I want to go home to my father's house, to my own bed and, I can't believe I'm gonna say this, to my stepmother's cooking."

The nurse looked to Eric, who simply shrugged.

"I'll see if I can contact Dr. Jenkins." She left the room, her nose in the air.

"Rick, you were a little hard on the nurse, don't ya think?"

Ricky shrugged. "I'm serious about leaving here. Five days is long enough. I want out. I want the IV out. I want solid food. Healthy food. Sugar water in my veins is killing me. Chicken broth and Jell-O is nauseating. I need vitamins and minerals and healthy pure foods if my body is gonna heal. Help me, Dad."

He came to his son, took his hand. "Breathe. Pray, meditate, Ricky. Get centered."

Ricky calmed. "Okay. Okay. When is Bree coming back?"

"In a few hours. Shelley had to force her to go home and shower. She's been by your side for five days. She refused to leave."

"Is she alone?"

"No. Jason has a man on each member of the family. We've put someone in the security house at the gate and a monitor on the screens at the house."

Ricky nodded. "Good."

They were interrupted by a knock on the door. A man in his forties, dark suit and tie, poked his head in.

Eric motioned him in. "Ricky, this is Special Agent Dixon."

The agent looked for a clear place to shake Ricky's hand. Ricky saluted. Agent Dixon nodded. He looked Ricky over.

"This guy, Tommy Crane, he did a number on you didn't he?"

Ricky sighed. "Yeah he did."

"Your father gave me the background. He told me about James Crane and his feud with your family. I want to know if you can tell me anything about the place where they took you."

He shook his head. "I didn't see much of it. It was a house. Too small to be anything else. There was a full basement. Concrete floor. Two doors off the main room. No furniture except an old wooden desk and a..." Ricky stopped. He hadn't expected the sick feeling that rushed through him.

"You okay?"

Ricky swallowed hard and nodded his head as he got his bearings. "And a broken chair," he finished.

"Gotcha. Okay. So, we've had a witness say they saw a van fitting the description of the one that dropped you off in the alley. It had been parked at a home next door to him. After the news hit that you'd been found, the white van was gone and a red truck appeared. The neighbor thought it was suspicious and called it in. We raided the house. It's the one you describe. We found blood on the stairs but it's not yours. It's that of a female. Any ideas who that might be?"

"Yes. Her name is Elizabeth Carter, from some town in Kansas. She's got missing posters up on the strip. She's the same girl, Beth, who stayed in our home and caused all the trouble. I have a feeling, if she's still alive that she's in way over her head."

"Did you see her there at the house?"

"No, but she was definitely involved with Tommy. I took her to the bus station and told her to go home. I should've made sure of it, but I was angry with her for trying to hurt members of my family. She must've gone back to Tommy. I realize now, he's not gonna let her just slip away."

The agent frowned. "Okay, and now the hard part. I need you to tell me exactly what happened. Everything Tommy Crane said. Everything you can remember."

"I wish I could forget, but unfortunately, I can remember it all. He wanted to know who threw the knife."

"The knife? Please explain."

He did. It took him the better part of two hours to tell the story. It had been difficult, but it actually felt better now that he'd told it. His father's face was void of any emotion though, and that worried Rick.

Once Special Agent Dixon was gone Eric approached his son, brushed his hair off his forehead and spoke fiercely. "I want to hunt him down and kill him."

Ricky grinned. "That sounds funny coming from you, Dad."

"So glad I can be your source of entertainment."

"You can't kill him," Ricky said.

"Why not?"

"You got to kill the last one. It's my turn."

Eric smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"Seriously, Dad, I have to get out of here and start trying to track him down," Ricky said.

"Cool your jets, Ricky, I've already started. Jason's on it and we

also hired your friend, Steve."

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You could've heard a pin drop. Eric peered around at the group. The men, Jason, Justin, Mark and Joey seemed extremely uncomfortable as they digested the information Eric had just delivered, which was an accounting of Ricky's experience. Shelley wrung her hands, he was sure, identifying with Ricky because of her own torture at the hands of Tommy's brother. Bree's eyes met his. He also knew what she was thinking. This man hurt a person they love.

Eric's caveat to that is, and he won't get away with it. Eric had only once threatened to kill a man– and that man was dead, and he was dead at Eric's hand. Albeit, it would've been at Ricky's hand had he not tossed Eric the knife. Eric had been glad he was the one that had to do it. Taking a man's life is not an easy thing to do. Now, that man's brother has caused his entire family immense pain and suffering. Possibly more depending on Mark's condition, and still, he threatens to kill a loved one of Eric's. Ricky believes as well as Eric, that the target is Jeffy.

They looked up when Ricky walked slowly into the room. He gazed around. "What? I got hair sticking up?"

Eric smiled and cleared his throat. "I've just finished briefing them on your ordeal."

"Oh. Well then, does this mean I get special treatment?"

"It does to me," Mark said.

Ricky smiled at his brother and found a place to sit next to Bree. He did so gingerly.

Jason winced. "So, are you still, um, hurting?"

"I guess I should be embarrassed since it seems everyone's minds are on the private parts of my body. At the moment though, I'm so happy to be back home that I can't find anything to complain about. And the answer is, yes, I'm still a little sore. Well, maybe a lot sore, but I get a little better every day. My eyes are open, the swelling is almost completely gone, the burns are healing. No pain in the fingers. I'm doing well." He looked around and realized they each were trying to read him, to see if he spoke the truth. He sighed. "I'm not lying. If I need some extra sympathy from anyone I'll let you know."

"Okay then, we'll get back to business," Eric said. "Jason, the room is yours."

Jason spoke from his chair. "So, we know Tommy is going after one of us and we believe it's gonna be Jeffy. Needless to say, there is
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no way we can let that happen. The police and the FBI are working hard trying to find this maniac.

"The white van he had been using has been found at a car dealership. The red truck taken from that dealership has also been found, near the harbor. That makes me think he's close by and not in the city or its suburbs. The house where Ricky was taken was located in southeast LA on Hornsby Street. The truck was found out near Balboa Bay. That's too close for comfort."

"Steve Taylor has called in all favors but Tommy hasn't left much of a trail. He has three men working with him. The redhead has been with him a long time. He was in with James. He may be family, but is probably just a loyal friend."

"I hope he's not family. I really don't want to have to kill anyone else," Ricky said.

"Well so far, we've been unable to find any uncles, cousins, stepbrothers, etcetera, so hopefully you'll be free of that burden, Rick. Now, next," Jason continued, "let's talk about Beth. Ricky dropped her off at the bus station but she didn't go home. There was blood found of a female at the house where Ricky was held and we now know it's hers, so we assume she went back to Tommy."

"How do you know it's her blood?" Mark asked.

Jason rifled through some papers and pulled out a sheet. "The night before Ricky was taken he found these on the street. The FBI has contacted her family. Using rapid DNA technology, it's confirmed to be Beth. This is her 'Missing' poster." He passed the poster around. "Her hair is different but it's obviously the same girl. Do you agree?"

Mark nodded. "It's her."

"The story she told Rick was pretty close. Only her father doesn't have cancer. However, he did lose his job and financially, the whole family is in a bad way."

"She's a victim in all this," Shelley said. "Yes, she got involved with the wrong person, but she was thinking of her family."

"Are you forgetting what she did to your son?"

"No. Of course not. I'm just seeing things the way her mother would be seeing them."

Eric took his wife's hand and kissed it. "You are being Christ-like, Shelley, and I truly love you."

"Then you won't mind if I look into helping her family out, at least financially?"

"You don't even have to ask me that."

Shelley nodded with a smile. “No, I don’t, do I?”

“Okay,” Jason continued. “Well, what I’m getting at is she is probably still with Tommy. Since they found blood they’re assuming it’s no longer of her own free will.”

“So what are we gonna do?” Joey asked.

“Bottom line,” Jason continued. “First and foremost, we keep Jeffy safe. This place becomes a fortress. From now until we catch Tommy, no packages are to be delivered to this address. No flowers. No pizza. No service will be done. So, if the cable goes out, you do without. If the AC breaks. You do without. And absolutely no one goes anywhere without the men I’ve assigned to you. No one goes down to the beach until a sweep of the area has been done. Jeffy doesn’t play alone anywhere outside or inside. She’s to be in the vicinity of one of us at all times.

“She’s already out of school and you don’t put her back in school until this is over. I’m sure I don’t have to point out that since she’ll be in high school by this time next year, a semester out of school won’t hurt her.” Jason continued. “Jeffy sleeps in your room,” he said, motioning to Eric before he turned to Mark and Joey.

“You two go to school together and you arrive home together without fail. If Mark has football practice you’re there until he leaves school. If Joey has drama club stuff or science club or a chess competition, you’re there until he’s done.”

The boys nodded.

“No problem. Can we take my car to school?” Mark asked.

“Yes. I have men assigned to you so they will follow you to school each morning, make sure you arrive safely. They will follow you home each day, so if your schedule varies from what you originally tell us, you have to let them and us know. We’re gonna assume that you are safe while at school.”

Jason moved on. “We have someone upstairs watching the monitors and someone in the gate house until further notice. The landscape crew can come on Wednesdays as usual, but no new hires. Shelley knows every single one who usually works here by sight. She has to eyeball them each Wednesday morning before they’ll be allowed on the premises. No one else comes on this property other than those who are in this house right now, Steve Taylor who’s working with Eric to track down this idiot, FBI and the police. I’ve already told our law enforcement officials that no new faces will be allowed entrance. That if a new face even tries, uniform or not, we will assume he is the

enemy."

Jason motioned to Justin who stood and went to the desk, picked up a box, reached in and pulled out a cell phone. "You each have a new cell phone. Jeffy too," Justin stated. "Number one is programmed to send a help text to me, Jason, Eric, Ricky and Special Agent Dixon. Number two is nine-one-one. Number three is Eric. You are free to program the rest."

Bree leaned close to Ricky. "You're my four," she whispered.

He grinned. "And you're mine," he answered.

"Keep these phones with you. Do not turn them off. Do not let them run out of battery."

"Do you think we're overdoing it a little?" Joey asked.

It was Eric who answered. "Well son, the moment Tommy gets his hands on Jeffy you will wish we had overdone it. So, no, I don't think so. Realizing the terror we would all feel to know that our Jeffy is in the hands of Tommy Crane should be inspirational. He intends to end her life. Who knows what other plans he has for her. No, no precaution is too much."

"What if I need to go somewhere? To the grocery store? To teach a class? I've committed to several events this month. Should I cancel?" Shelley asked.

"As far as you leaving the premises as I said before, no one goes anywhere without the men I've assigned to you. So, if let's say, you and Bree decided you have to go, you would have two agents with you, yours and Bree's. You can teach your classes, I see no problem with that. The other events are subject to mine and Eric's approval."

"I'm beginning to see a pattern here," Shelley began, frowning.

"No you're not," Jason answered quickly before she could say what he knew she was about to say. "Eric and Ricky and the boys follow the same rules. They have agents assigned to them also. They don't leave alone either. And their possible activities are also subject to approval."

"Whose approval?" Shelley asked.

"Mine," Jason said. Would you like to be included in that?"

"Yes," she said firmly.

"Fine."

She smiled. "Thank you," she said prettily.

Eric chuckled. "Jason, you're getting very good at that."

"I live with Angel. Enough said."

"Speaking of Angel, do you think her and Kimmie are in any

danger?" Shelley asked.

"Well now, as you know, my house is a freakin' high tech fortress, so, when they're home, no. There's a small chance Tommy could mistake Kimmie for Jeffy, but until this is over, the girls won't be together enough to worry about that."

Jason looked around. "So, that's it for now. Are there any other questions? If not, I'm done. Eric?"

Eric nodded. "Thanks, Jason. If anyone has a problem following Jason's orders let me know now."

Joey laughed. "Well, if we did he'd just kick our butts until the problem was gone. Right?"

"Right," Jason said shortly. "So, are we done?" Jason asked.

"Not quite," Eric said softly. "While I have everyone together, mind if we have prayer?"

Everyone quickly agreed and bowed their heads.

"Father," Eric began, but immediately his voice filled with emotion. He took a few seconds to gather himself, clear his throat and begin again. "Father, we don't ever want to take anything for granted, so I, we, wanted to thank you, for Ricky returning to us safely. We are so grateful he's alive and we pray for his continued healing. We're grateful for our family, Lord, for their strength. We're grateful that You are the main focus of our lives. Please have us know Your will, for we are here to do it.

"Please Father, bless each member of this family and all of our loved ones with healing, both physically and mentally, with protection from the dark forces of this world, and with wisdom. Help us to have what it takes to keep your commandments, which will give us your armor, the breastplate of righteousness. We strive to wear the full armor of You, God, and to do good works. Forgive us for our anger, and our quest for vengeance, for we know that belongs to you, however, know that we are more than willing to carry out that vengeance for you, if it is your will."

The prayer was interrupted by a murmur of laughter.

"Again, Father, forgive us our human weaknesses, and know that we love You, we seek you, and we strive to have you call us, 'your good and faithful servants.' In Jesus' mighty name we pray, Amen."

They sat silently for a few moments.

It was Ricky who broke that silence. "I'm starved. Whaddya say we go into the kitchen and cook up something delicious?"

"Sounds great," Shelley said.

"Um, Shelley, you need to go with Eric and help with briefing Jeffy," Jason answered.

"Oh, okay."

"Whew, thanks, Jason," Ricky said, making everyone laugh.

"Oh, come on, guys, I'm getting better, aren't I?" Shelley asked.

Everyone quickly gave some small affirmative answer, kissed Shelley's cheek and left the room.

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The room was quiet except for the soft moans. Bree stood at the door, watching Ricky. He tossed and turned. His breathing increased, his brow furrowed. He winced. He'd been in relatively good spirits in the two weeks since he'd been home, she thought. He hadn't complained. Hadn't asked for special treatment. He was such a good man. And she loved him. She really did.

She watched as he drew a sharp breath, then let it out slowly. His head tossed, his left fist gripped the sheet. He moaned again. Then again, louder. His breath became labored, then stopped completely, then slowly returned to normal. Bree moved across the room and sat down on the side of the bed. Gently she placed her hand on his chest.

Ricky stirred and then rested his splinted hand on hers.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"You seemed to be having a nightmare."

"Yep, I think I was."

"You're so brave. You haven't complained. You haven't even shed a tear."

"Oh yes I did."

"You did?"

"Yeah, I cried like a baby when it was happening."

"Oh." She reached up and brushed his hair off his forehead.

Ricky smiled at the loving gesture. "I'm okay now, though, so don't worry about me."

"What can I do to make it better?"

"You can kiss me," he said softly.

She did. Slowly, gently, lovingly, and he felt his body stir.

The gratitude washed over him and the tears she'd spoken of filled his eyes. "I'm in heaven," he whispered.

"I'm so grateful you're alive, and here. I thought I'd never see you again. Never feel you again. I realized while you were gone that you, Ricky, are life to me and, you always have been."
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He rolled to his side so he could see her better in the soft moonlight. “Always?”

“Way back when we first met and you said you were in love with me, I think I was in love with you too. The problem was, it was too easy. Too perfect. You know what I mean?”

“No. Explain.”

“I’d just gotten out of high school where I’d had a few boyfriends, but no one serious. I expected to go to New York to study acting and to have a wild, crazy life filled with good times and parties and friends. I think I imagined it would be like it is in *Friends*, the TV show, you know, but I met you and it ruined everything.”

“Oh, well, sorry I ruined everything, even though I’m not sure how I ruined everything.”

“I wasn’t supposed to find the perfect guy right away. I kept trying to have those good times. I kept trying for the wild, exciting things. Then exciting somehow morphed into dangerous. I wasn’t afraid because I realized I think, that at any time I could run to you.”

“You could have.”

“And that, I think was the problem. You were my safety net. The one person I could depend on to love me and accept me no matter what. So, I could do whatever I wanted and still feel safe. Then, of course, there were the other issues.”

“Which are?”

“I didn’t want to be trapped like my mother had been. I mean, she was trapped in a relationship that stripped her of her pride and self-esteem.”

“You thought I would do that to you?”

“Not really, it was some deep irrational fear and your father helped me to see it and work through it.”

“He did?”

“Yes. When you were missing we had a long talk.”

Ricky remained silent as he digested this information. While Ricky had been gone, his father had been busy clearing a path for him. He’d probably felt like he had to do something, anything, and that was what he’d come up with. The thought filled him with love and gratitude for his father.

Bree went on. “I also had some anger issues to work through and then there was the problem of me worrying about my career.”

“And what have you decided about that?”

“Again, Eric helped me to see something clearly. He asked me

how I felt about acting and as I answered him I realized it is the acting I love. Not all the celeb stuff, and I realized as long as I'm true to my creative outlet, then I can't go wrong."

"And so what does all this mean to us?" Ricky asked softly.

She lowered herself onto the bed next to him and kissed him softly. "It means, I can finally say that I love you, Eric Kino Junior. I love you, everything about you. I feel so very bad that I've caused you hurt or pain for even one second. I've been selfish."

"No, sweetheart. Not selfish. Each person has to be responsible for their own well-being. You were protecting yourself the best you could. Don't start down a path now of, 'I wish I had or if only this, if only that.' The past is gone. There is only now. You can make 'now' anything you want."

She touched his face. "Well, Ricky, I *want* you."

He smiled. "Do you know how many men in the world fantasize about hearing you say that?"

"I don't care."

"I do, but I'll try not to think about it."

She giggled. "Jealousy. That seems funny coming from you."

"I wouldn't call it that. It's just those protective instincts coming into play."

"Ricky," Bree said, suddenly serious. "Speaking of protective instincts, are you and Eric still going out to hunt Tommy?"

"Without a doubt."

"But what about what Eric said in his prayer?"

"Umm, what part?"

"About vengeance belonging to God."

"We're not hunting Tommy to carry out some kind of vengeance. We're doing it to protect our family. As long as Tommy is at large, we are not safe. It's up to us, with God's help, to take the action we need to take to keep our family safe."

She sighed. "I understand, but, Ricky, please, be careful."

"Promise."

✝✝✝

Luke 10:19
"Behold, I have given you authority
to tread on serpents and scorpions,
and over all the power of the enemy,
and nothing shall hurt you."

Chapter 13

Justin pushed away from his desk and eyed his friend. It had been a long meeting because it takes time to go over the Kino portfolio. Eric's brokers and financial planners had already taken their leave. Eric remained relaxing in a chair opposite Justin's desk.

"You look a little tired," Justin commented.

"So do you," Eric answered. "I guess all this with Tommy is wearing down on us."

Justin nodded. "I'll be glad when it's over."

"Me too," Eric replied. "Jason's services don't come cheap. It's costing me an arm and a leg along with a good night's sleep."

Justin made a face. "Umm, maybe the tip of your little finger, definitely not an arm and a leg. If you're worried about the money we can bring suit against the Crane estate."

Eric smiled. "I make it a point to never worry about money. I was speaking in jest. However, you may have something there about going after Tommy's assets or the Crane fortune."

"You're kidding?"

Eric shrugged. "No, I mean, it's just sitting there. He's not gonna need it where he's going."

"You mean prison?"

"I mean hell."

Justin sighed. "Well, you won't need it in prison either."

"Point made." Eric shrugged, smiled sheepishly. "I guess I can't set a very good example for the family when I'm feeling just as vengeful as Ricky is. I'll do better. Seriously though, there are no heirs to the Crane money and we can put it to good use. Jeffy has this idea about feeding and clothing an entire African village for a year. We could use the money from the suit."

"Eric, you realize we're talking about millions of dollars?"

"Some of the money can be used logistically, some for publicity and advertising, we could get others involved. If I know Jeffy she won't want to stop at one village."

"And what happens when Jeffy tires of her newest project?"

"She's a child and I fully expect her to grow bored and want to move on and learn about other things and that's not a bad thing. So, we'll hire someone or pass the foundation on to someone who can keep it going. It will be such a good learning experience for her, beginning with the suit itself, right down to not abandoning a project just because we want to move on. Yes, the more I think about it, the more I think we will go after the estate."

"As you wish, Eric." Justin walked to the window and stared out over the sprawling metropolis. "You say you're not sleeping well?"

Eric shook his head. "I'm sleeping fine, but keeping our senses on high alert can be a little draining."

Justin nodded. "So, what I really want to know is, are there any more ill effects from all that subliminal bunk?"

"Well Justin, none that I'm aware of. I guess you'd have to ask Shelley that question."

Justin remained silent for several moments while his mind returned to where it had been too often lately. Shelley. Drawing a deep breath, he turned. "Eric, now that you're back to being yourself, I've been wanting to speak with you about something."

Eric remained silent, giving him time to organize his thoughts.

Justin sighed. "Sooo, the night you had that first interview with Jillian Knight, I..."

Eric waited.

"Uh, Shelley, was very upset. She was not in her right mind."

Eric nodded.

"Bree gave her a tranquilizer and apparently, Shelley took another one later and washed it down with a bottle of Scotch." Justin sat back down and rested his elbows on the desk. "As you can imagine, she was extremely intoxicated."

"I can see it clearly in my mind," Eric said, chuckling.

Justin stood again and began to pace. "She came to me. She needed someone to talk to and I was the only one there." He turned away and looked back out the window, running a hand through his neatly trimmed hair. "This is difficult."

Eric decided to give him a break. "Justin, sit down. I have to apologize. I've been enjoying your discomfort. I knew this discussion was eventually coming."

Justin sat. "You knew?"

Eric grinned. "Yes. Shelley told me she came to your bedroom and

threw herself at you."

"She did?"

"Of course. We communicate on a regular basis."

"Did she tell you everything? Because I can't imagine she could remember everything."

"She said she took all her clothes off and made wild, passionate love to you."

Justin paled. "She what?"

Eric laughed. "Just kidding. Justin, you have to lighten up."

"Lighten up?" he sighed. "Just listen, Eric. She was crying and she needed to know she was still, well, you know, attractive."

"You mean desirable?"

"Darn it, yes, desirable."

"And was she?"

"Good grief, Eric, give me a break."

Eric chuckled. "You seem to need to talk about it so go ahead. I'll try not to interrupt."

"Eric, she grabbed me, I tried, I tried to pull away, but she wouldn't let me go."

Eric's lips twitched but he remained silent.

"She stumbled around and we fell onto the bed. When I tried to get off her she put me in a headlock. I give you my word, Eric, I couldn't get away without hurting her, and she pulled me down and kissed me. Now, Eric, she wasn't in her right mind. She was even calling me by your name. She didn't know what she was doing."

"But *you* did," Eric said softly.

Justin slumped onto the desk. "Yes, I did. That's the problem."

Eric was silent for several moments. "Are you telling me you had sex with my wife?"

Justin stood. "No! Of course not."

"Justin. Sit down. Relax. I'm just playing with you. Okay, all jesting aside, what is it you really want to tell me?"

Justin sat and breathed. "I was, I was..." he stopped. He just couldn't say it. "I don't know how to say this."

"You were aroused?"

Justin laid his forehead against the desk blotter. "Yes."

Eric shrugged. "Who wouldn't be? A beautiful, intoxicated woman comes to your bedroom late at night and throws herself at you. You're a man. I can't blame you for that."

Justin looked up. "Eric. I'm your friend. I'm supposed to be your

loyal friend. I had visions of making love to your wife."

"Do you still have those visions?"

Justin looked down. "Occasionally," he admitted.

Eric grinned. "She's pretty hard to forget, huh?"

"Oh Lord, help me," Justin pleaded.

"Sorry. I love your honesty, Justin. Look, every once in a while I have visions of some sexy scene I saw in a movie or something. We're men. Men are visual creatures. Just the thought of some scene can get to me. It happens."

"We're not talking about an actress I'll never meet. We're talking about Shelley. Your wife. My friend. The hot, little number you're married to."

Eric sighed. "Would it help you if I get you in the ring and take you down? Just beat the heck out of you and tell you to never touch her again?"

"Maybe."

"Okay, then I'll arrange it. For now, let's do lunch because I'm starved, and I'm sure Jason's man that's waiting on me outside will be happy to get to eat."

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They'd cuddled again until they'd fallen asleep. Ricky stirred and gently rubbed his hand over Bree's arm. He knew he shouldn't be in her bed because he was tempting fate. He was wrestling with his own thoughts when he sat straight up, listening intently.

Bree rolled over. "What is it?" she asked sleepily.

He sprang from the bed. "Go to your mom, now. Move."

He was out the door. She got to the bedroom door just in time to see him swing himself over the railing and land softly on the foyer floor below. She looked down the hall to see Eric fly from her mother's room and head down the back steps. What in the world is happening? She hadn't heard anything. Then just as she had that thought, she heard yelling and cursing and glass breaking. Mark came running from his room and flew past her.

"Go to mom's room, right now," Mark yelled.

He disappeared, also jumping over the railing. Forget that, she thought. She made her way down the steps.

Ricky stood at one entrance to the kitchen. Eric stood at the other. Mark stood beside Ricky. Bree tried to peek over their shoulders.

"Stupid lowlife," Joey said as he whipped around and delivered a tornado kick to the red-headed man's stomach.
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The man flew backward against the refrigerator. The cookie jar tumbled down and broke. The man picked up a shard of glass and came at Joey. Joey laughed. He grabbed a dishtowel and as the man lunged at him, he wrapped the towel around the glass and whipped it away. The man swung at Joey several times but never landed a punch. Joey was just too darn quick.

"Freakin' maggot think you can come into our home. You must be stupid. We'll freakin' kill ya, you stupid, good-for-nothin' rodent." Joey's tirade didn't stop as he continued to pound the man. "A guy can't even come down into his own kitchen in the middle of the night without some stupid moron trying to mess with him," Joey complained as he threw the man over his shoulder.

Ricky judged the man to be over six feet, at least one-eighty. Joey was currently on the short side of five-eleven and one-sixty soaking wet. He nodded his head in approval.

Joey kicked the man in the face, blood spurted. He elbowed him in the solar plexus. The man doubled. A hammer fist to the top of the head. The man dropped to the floor.

Ricky stepped in. "I need him alive, Joey."

Joey looked up, breathing hard. "Yeah. Sorry. Okay. I'm done."

Eric moved through the kitchen past the man, toward the kitchen table. He pushed the table aside, grabbed a chair, turned it around and set it down solidly. Mark and Ricky grabbed the guy, dragged him to the chair and slammed him down on it.

"Do you want me to call the police?" Bree asked.

Ricky looked over at her sternly. He wanted to call her down for not following orders but that wouldn't get him what he needed right now. "No. Not yet. Bree, please go check on Shelley and Jeffy. I want to be sure there's only this one."

Bree nodded and left the room.

"Fool tried to shoot me," Joey said as he moved to the corner of the room and scooped up the gun he'd knocked out of the red-headed man's hand, luckily just before he'd had a chance to pull the trigger. He handed the gun to Eric who took it, released the magazine, unchambered it, and placed it on the far counter.

The red-headed man grinned. "There's no arms on this chair, Ricky boy. No way to strap me down like we did you."

"No need to strap you down," Ricky answered calmly. "You're not goin' anywhere."

The man looked at Joey on one side, Mark on the other and Eric

standing nearby. He definitely wasn't going anywhere. He was good and caught and so decided he could get in a few barbs anyway. He grinned at Eric. "Hey man, long time no see. How long has it been? What eight years? Last time I saw you, you were hanging up like a bloody piece of meat."

"Ah, those were the days," Eric said.

Roy frowned and turned to Ricky. "And you, the great Ricky Kino, how's it hangin'?"

Ricky grinned. "Never been better. Thanks for asking, though. I appreciate the concern."

"Well, I'm glad everyone's in such a freakin' great mood," Joey said. "But do you think we can put aside the happy reunion and get on with this?"

"Patience, Joey," Eric said.

Joey breathed and nodded. "Yes sir. Sorry, sir."

Roy cursed. "Shut up, you're all so ridiculously polite. Now this *is* torture," Roy said.

"Not yet it isn't," Ricky assured him. "Now, how'd you get in?"

Roy shrugged. "Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes," Ricky said calmly. He patted his boxers and looked at his father. "I don't seem to have my knife on me. Would you mind handing me one of those steak knives?"

Eric eyed his son, trying to decide quickly the best road to take. They were walking a thin line. Still, they needed the information in order to protect the family and that came above all else. He turned toward the knife caddy, pulled out a small paring knife instead and handed it to Ricky.

Ricky looked it over. "That will do." He motioned to Mark. "Mark, headlock if you don't mind."

"Certainly," Mark said. He stepped forward and wrapped his arm snugly under Roy's chin and secured it with his other hand. The man resisted but Mark held him firmly.

Ricky inserted the knife up into the man's nose.

The man winced. "Please..."

"As I was saying. Yes, I'd like to know how you got in."

The guy didn't even hesitate. "I was in the trunk," he ground out between clenched teeth as Mark held him.

Ricky nodded at Mark. "You can let him go. If he tries to move there's no telling which way the knife will go. Up, into the brain. Maybe out, through the skin of his nose. Possibly in, toward the eye

and nasal passages. And I'm having to use my left hand, thanks to Tommy, so I suggest you be very still." He didn't bother to say that he actually was left-handed.

Mark slowly let go. Roy stayed very still.

"Now speak slowly so you don't accidentally hurt yourself," Ricky warned. "In what trunk?"

"Silver Impala."

Ricky nodded. "So, you got into the trunk of the boy's car while they were in school?"

He started to nod but the pain stopped him quickly. He drew a sharp breath as blood trickled down his upper lip.

"Ahh, look what you've gone and done. Don't move. Just speak slowly. How did you get into the house?"

"Came in right away, right after the boys, through the kitchen door before the alarm was turned on for the night. Then I found a place to hide in the library."

"Good." Ricky said, encouragingly. "You're doin' real good. And your mission?"

He was silent. Ricky pushed the knife up a little farther. Blood gushed down.

Roy began to whimper. "I was supposed to get the kid and bring her to Tommy."

"Why didn't Tommy just get you to kill her? It would be easier than transporting a kicking, screaming kid."

"She wouldn't be kickin' and screamin'. In my pocket– there's a syringe– we were gonna put her out. Sneak her out of here, get her out to the beach. We have a man there, in a boat."

Ricky nodded, the visual of his baby sister's tiny, unconscious body being taken away causing his heart to pound. He cleared his mind. The man waiting in a boat would be long gone since seeing the lights in the house come on. "Why does Tommy want you to bring Jeffy to him?"

"He wants to be the one to kill her. He says he promised his brother the last time he spoke to him that if anything happened to James, Tommy would avenge him. He's really mad that they wouldn't even let him out of jail to go to his brother's funeral."

Ricky sighed. "Yeah. I'm all broken up about that. So, here's the big one, Red, where is Tommy?"

Roy began to cry. "Man, if I tell you he'll kill me."

"He won't be able to do that if I get to him first."

"Please, man."

"Where's Tommy?" Ricky said a little louder.

The man only whimpered.

"Where is he, you sack of..." Joey yelled.

"Okay, let's calm down," Ricky said softly. "How about a smaller question, like, is he within ten miles?"

"No."

"Twenty?"

"Yes," Roy said. "I, I can't breathe."

"Calm down, you're doing fine," Ricky said, feigning concern. He waited for the man's breathing to slow. "Okay, let's try again. Tommy, is he in a house?"

"No."

"A business?"

"No."

Ricky thought. "A vacant building?"

No answer.

"Okay, so he's in a vacant building within twenty miles of our home. You're doing good, Red, see how easy it is?"

"No more, please."

"Just a few more questions and you'll be done. You want to be done, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Is he north or south?"

"North."

"Near the harbor or farther east?"

"East, near the reservoir."

"There's some abandoned buildings out that way near the state park," Mark said.

Ricky eyed him. "How you know that we'll talk about later." He turned back to the man. "Are we getting warm?"

"He's gonna kill me."

"Then he's in one of the buildings Mark's talking about?"

Roy remained silent. Ricky jabbed the knife higher.

"Oh, freak, you got my eye, oh, man my eye."

"I didn't get your eye, I just stimulated your tear ducts. It feels like it's in your eye. Now all you have to do is answer to keep me from actually pushing into your eye socket. You may as well tell me, you've given me so much anyway. Or we can keep playing twenty questions. It depends when you want some relief."

"There's an old bridge that crosses the river, just past the buildings he's talking about. Across that bridge there's two old buildings. One used to be like a general store or something. It has a large porch. Tommy's there."

"There now, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

Roy sniffed and then choked. Ricky pulled the knife out just as he went into a fit of coughing.

"One more thing. Is Beth still with him?"

Roy wiped blood from his face with a towel Eric handed to him. He nodded. "He keeps her locked up in his room."

"They found her blood. Is she hurt?"

"Some. She'll live. For now. Until Tommy gets tired of her or the AIDs kills her."

Eric was already on the phone, Ricky imagined, to Jason and Special Agent Dixon.

Ricky pulled Roy to his feet, searched him, found the syringe and nothing else. "Have a seat. Your ride will be here soon." Ricky regarded Mark and Joey. "Great job guys. Keep him down until the cops get here. Joey, if he tries to run, now you can kill him."

Ricky turned, charged up the steps and flew into his room. He quickly pulled on jeans and a t-shirt and shoes. He went to his dresser to grab his keys. They weren't there. "What the...?" He knew he didn't misplace them. His keys are always on his dresser, in the box that holds his watch and wallet. He strode into Bree's room. She was there, her chin held high.

"Give me my keys," he said softly.

Her lips trembled. Her chest heaved. "No."

"Bree, I am not playing around now, where are they? Give me my keys right now."

She waited several moments before she answered. She wrung her hands and finally shook her head.

"Dammit, Bree, give me the keys," Ricky yelled, his hand slamming the door frame.

She jumped backwards in startled reflex. Her voice was choked. "I can't do that, Ricky."

Cursing, he turned, left the room and headed down the stairs. "Dad, I need the extra set of keys I gave you for my car."

Eric looked calmly at him. "Son, I'm gonna ask you not to go."

Ricky ran a hand through his hair. "How can you ask me that, Dad? You must feel the same way I do. Tommy is threatening the

people we love."

"I ask selfishly, son, for my sake and because I love you."

Ricky turned away, breathing heavy. His father came and laid a hand on his shoulder. "A few weeks ago, Rick, when I threatened to kill Tommy, I mis-spoke, out of passion. He'd hurt my son, but killing and revenge Ricky, that's not who we are. That's not what we're about. Breaking the law, unless absolutely necessary, is not what we're about. It's enough we carried out this little question and answer session. We have a responsibility to ourselves and to those we love, to do the right thing. I understand what he did to you. I understand you want to be the one to bring him down. However, as silly as it might sound, vengeance is a dark path. It doesn't suit you."

Ricky shook his head. "You said that's not who we are. Then tell me, Dad, who am I? Who the hell am I? An actor? Somebody's version of a beefcake celebrity? That makes me sick to think about."

"You, my son, are a light for this world. I'm surprised you don't realize that. You're a martial artist. An extraordinary martial artist, but even that is not who you are. You're a leader. You lead others. Every action you take every day is an example for the world. Your movies inspire others to be strong, to be courageous, to have honor, to stand up and do the right thing. Your movies make an impact on the world. You're not an actor. There is no acting involved. You are simply being you, and you are a magnet for the martial arts world. Do you love your art?"

"Yes. You have to know that. If I didn't I wouldn't train every day. Still, I'll never be like you."

"You surpass me."

"Dad, that's not true. You are a legendary teacher."

"A teacher. You're not a teacher. Teaching is what I do. Leading is what you do. You need me. I need you. Ricky do you realize how the world responds to you? Do you realize the positive influence you have on everyone you come in contact with? I'm not exaggerating when I say you're a light, because you *are*. You're a very bright light, and I don't want the world to go a day without Ricky Kino."

Ricky gave a brittle laugh. "That's the same thing Tommy said."

Eric nodded. "I guess that means he's not a complete idiot. However, remember, the demons immediately recognized the brightest light, the Son of God."

That statement seemed to calm him down. Ricky sighed. "I try to be bright enough to serve Him. Right now I'm not doing that very

well." He drew a deep breath. "So, what now?"

"There are already agents on the way to pick up Tommy. We should know something soon. Now though, I have to ask something else of you."

"What is it?"

"Will you please go upstairs and make amends with Bree?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty mad at her right now. She shouldn't have come down here when I told her to stay with Shelley, and she had no right to take my keys."

"Her love for you gives her the right. She was doing her best to protect the person she loves most in this world and it took a good deal of courage to stand up to you because you probably scared her."

"Scared her? When? When I yelled at her?"

Eric shook his head. "No. She came back downstairs shortly after you sent her away. She watched how you handled the guy in there. The violence emanating through you I'm sure had an effect on her."

"I thought I was very calm."

"You were, but she's connected to you on a more basic level than the rest of us. She could feel it. She was pretty shaken by the time she slipped back upstairs."

"Collateral damage," Ricky muttered. "I'll go see what I can do, but I'm still mad that she disobeyed me."

Eric smiled. "Yes, well, good luck on that one. I'm sure if it wasn't for Jeffy, Shelley would have been right down here in the thick of things herself."

"And you'd allow that?"

Eric shook his head. "You have a lot to learn, son."

The FBI arrived before Ricky could go back up to Bree. They went about making the arrest. One of the agents took Ricky aside.

"Just for the record," the agent motioned toward Roy as he was being led out. "This is one of the men that kidnapped you?"

"Yes. He was the one who shot me with a tranquilizer."

"You're positive."

"Yes."

"Did he take part in your assault?"

"No."

"Was he present during that assault?"

"Yes."

"Did he try to help you in any way?"

Ricky laughed. "Uh, no."

"Thanks, that's all I needed. For now." He stopped, put a hand to his earpiece. "Yes sir, I'll let them know." He turned back to the Kino men. "We didn't make it in time. The place is empty. There's a stolen car in the back which means he has new transportation. Nothing left behind except some McDonald's trash."

"Maybe they'll be back," Ricky offered, his frustration evident.

"Maybe, though not likely. This guy missed his rendezvous. Crane probably packed up immediately and took off."

"So here we go again, waiting around like ducks in a pond," Ricky said. Wearily, he turned and went to fight another battle. This one with Bree.

He found her in her room, in a chair, her knees drawn up, her chin resting on them. He couldn't help but notice how beautiful she was sitting there in the dark with only the moon for light. Those gorgeous legs were bare. She wore only a simple nightshirt. Her long, hair tumbled down over one shoulder. Her large, gray, catlike eyes blinked slowly. Her luscious lips were drawn into a pout.

He stood in the doorway breathing deeply, trying to calm himself as he watched her. Make amends, his father asked. Soon enough, he thought. She looked up at him and held the keys up.

He went to her, gently took them from her and then tucked them into his pocket. "You know you made me furious," Ricky said.

"I know."

He sighed. "I understand what you were doing."

"You do?"

"Well, I think I do. You were protecting me."

"Yes, I was. *And* me, because I can't live without you."

He nodded. "So, you can understand how angry I am with you about not doing what you were told?"

She stood. "What did you say?"

Even though she was becoming agitated, he remained calm. His eyes skimmed over her. He had to force himself to stay angry. "I said I'm angry with you, and I'm saying, when I tell you to do something in a situation like that, you do what you're told."

She advanced. "Let me tell you something right now, buddy. No one tells me what to do. I haven't needed you to tell me what to do in the past and I certainly don't need you to now."

"Is that what you think?"

"That's exactly what I think."

"How many hours of survival training do *you* have?" Ricky

demanded. “Huh? Do you know the best thing to do if someone holds a gun to your head? Can you defend yourself against an attacker?”

“I can hold my own.”

“You think so? Okay. Defend yourself.”

He moved forward putting his hands around her throat.

“I don’t want to play this,” she said.

His eyes darkened. “I’m not playing, now defend yourself.”

She immediately kicked to his groin. He shifted slightly, causing her foot to hit only his thigh. “You must know more than that, right? Because that just made your attacker mad, and now he really wants to hurt you.” He tapped her cheek softly with his hand. “He strikes you easily. He likes the way it feels to hit you. He likes the sound you make when you feel pain.”

She tried to retaliate, drawing her hand back to deliver a mighty blow. He merely grabbed her arm and twisted it behind her, bringing her close to him. “Now that he’s tussled with you a bit and gets a good look at you, he decides he’d like to do more than just hurt you.”

He pulled her toward the bed. “Stop me,” he ordered. She struggled with all her strength now, trying to show him she *could* fight, but against him her efforts were like that of a child. He pushed her down on the bed and pinned her there.

“You’re vulnerable now. He would take you now, and there’s nothing you could do about it.” She tried to push him off her but he stayed right there.

“Then again,” Ricky continued, “a bad guy might be after straight up murder and would have broken your neck immediately after you tried to kick him. Or, maybe he would’ve just pulled a trigger and blown your head off.”

He stood and looked down at her where she lay sprawled on the bed. “I’m all for equality of the sexes, Bree, but facts are facts, sweetheart. The strongest woman is, for the most part, still weaker than a man, weaker than a weak man. That’s the way we’re made. It’s physiology. It’s not an opinion, babe, it’s science. They’ve done experiments where they took female athletes and trained them with heavy weights. Then they asked normal men, not even athletes, to try to pin the women. Each man did so easily. Easily, Bree. It was an eye opener for the women. What I’m trying to get to is, I can understand you wanting to protect me. I’ll even accept it, but you need to accept that I also want to protect you. I need to protect you. More importantly, I *can* protect you.”

"There was no danger," Bree argued.

"Darn you're stubborn. You didn't know that at the time, did you? Will you just trust me? Bree, I've been trained to think quickly in times of danger. I've been trained to think logically. There could have been more than one in the house."

"And he could've been exactly where you sent me."

He sighed. "Go further down that road. My father just left the room I sent you to. Do you think he would've left Shelley and Jeffy in danger? He would've left them secure. With your line of thinking, that there was a perp with Shelley and Jeffy, then the least you could do would be to try to help them."

She was silent and he knew he'd gotten through.

She studied him and then heaved a sigh. "I'll try to do better. I'm not used to taking orders."

"I understand. Just like I'm not used to having someone keep me from doing something I really want to do. Nevertheless, I understand your motive. I hope now you understand mine. It certainly wasn't a bid for male domination."

Drawing a deep breath, she sat up. "I guess I knew that, somewhere deep inside. It's just that I can't help but bristle when a man gives me orders."

Sighing, he smiled at her. "Kiss and make up?"

They rushed to each other. By the time their lips parted they lay side by side trying to catch their breath.

Ricky lay thinking about what he'd just done down in the kitchen, what she witnessed. "You know, Bree, I would never hurt you?"

She nodded. "Yes, I do know that."

"You saw what I did to that man?"

"Yes, I saw."

"I hope you understand that it was important that I get information from him?"

"I understand, but where did you learn something like that?"

"It's an old Ninjutsu way."

"Ninjutsu? You mean like, Ninjas?"

"Yes."

"Seeing you like that, was— scary. You're always so happy and kind and cheerful, telling jokes and playing around. To see that side of you, it was a little frightening. I admit, it was also a turn-on."

He grinned. "I'll keep that in mind," he said lightly. But he'd known that, hadn't he? Dark and dangerous had always been a turn-on

for her. He hoped it wouldn't be something she actually ended up attracting when he's not around.

✞✞✞

Ephesians 5:24-28

"Therefore as the Church is in subjection to Christ,
even so let the wives be to their husbands in everything.
Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the Church,
and gave himself for it, That he might sanctify it,
and cleanse it by the washing of water through the word,
That he might make it unto himself a glorious Church,
not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing:
but that it should be holy and without blame.
So ought men to love their wives, as their own bodies:
he that loveth his wife, loveth himself."

Chapter 14

The high security lock-in was making her crazy, Bree thought as she stood on the deck just outside the dining room. It was making the entire family crazy. This couldn't go on indefinitely. She had to do something. She could go to the FBI and tell them she wanted to be bait, like, go out alone and pull Tommy out of hiding. Yet with her celeb status and the Kino family name they'd probably tell her no way and then they'd tell her family what she'd offered and then they'd lock her in her room and she'd never see the light of day again.

There must be something she could do though, something no one had thought of doing. She'd been told that possibly someone from Tommy's camp was either watching the house, or at least the road outside the house and that Tommy would know in an instant if one of the family were to leave alone. Security had made several sweeps of the area around the Kino property and turned up nothing, however, that didn't mean they weren't there. She knew though, that if they were being watched, it wouldn't be Tommy himself watching. He'd have one of his little 'yes men' doing the hard stuff.

That took Bree's mind in a different direction. She wondered how much Tommy was paying these guys to do all his dirty work for him. Surely they realized he would let them take the fall in an instant. Were they family members with undying loyalty? No, Jason said Tommy was the last of the Crane family. So, that means they were doing this for money. Well, she had as much or more money than Tommy. Could she persuade his men or at least one man to change sides? All he'd have to do is give up Tommy's location. Enough money could make even the most loyal guy change sides. It was a possibility. The question is, how can she even arrange to talk to one of Tommy's men?

Ricky would never let her out alone. Neither would her assigned bodyguard. She glanced toward Agent Jeff Davis standing a discreet distance away. Possibly she could give him the slip. Maybe. Definitely with a little help. Like one of her Valium, or, maybe something even more potent. The question was, how could she get a message to Tommy's man that she wanted to meet with him? She'd have to come

up with that. Where would she meet him? Maybe on the beach. If she could ditch her bodyguard on the beach, she could head south. That's the quickest way to disappear from the view of the house. She could meet him, strike a deal and have him turn. How hard could it be?

Starting to feel the exhilaration of taking something into her own hands, she realized she really could do this. It could work. Her brow furrowed as she thought. She'd have to choose a time when Ricky was away. She might have to send him away. Yes, that's it. She'd send Ricky into town for something. Her heart beat hard in anticipation. Finally, she could do something. Something to help. She won't be just the pretty face everyone wants to protect. She'll show them she's brave and innovative and she won't feel so worthless. And she truly was willing to do anything to protect Jeffy.

"Hi."

Bree startled out of her trance.

"Hi, Mark. You scared me."

"I see that. Everything okay?"

"Yes. I'm just getting antsy."

"I know what you mean. At least Joey and I get to go to school and interact with other real live people. Speaking of getting out, you comin' to my game tomorrow?"

"Yes. I can't wait. I'm really looking forward to it."

He smiled at her. "Great."

"How are you feeling, Mark?"

"I'm okay. Really. Can't wait for all this to be over."

She smiled. "Me too. Mark, I know this year's birthday turned out to be a real downer, but you know, I watched the way you handled yourself through all this and I have to say, little brother, I'm very proud of you. You've turned into a man right before my eyes."

He blushed. "Thanks, Bree. So, I guess all the times we got on your nerves growing up are forgiven?"

"I don't remember anything but good times with you guys. I was so much older than you, really it was kinda like the way you feel about Jeffy. I just thought you and Joey were both the cutest kids in the world. It was hard for you to do something that really bothered me when you were so adorable."

"Hmm, think that would still work?"

"Unfortunately, yes." She reached up and ruffled his hair. "Let me ask you something now. Has all the celebrity hype since my first Oscar nomination been difficult to deal with? Has it made it harder for you

and Joey in school?"

"Naw. If anything it got us a few hot dates."

"Ah, come on now, you don't want girls to date you because your sister is some stupid famous actress, do you?"

Mark grinned. "Well, it depends on the girl."

Bree laughed. "You sound like Ricky."

He shrugged. "He's been a big influence in my life."

"I hope you picked up some of his good qualities too."

"Me too, because I have much love and respect for Ricky."

She looked down. Mark moved forward and put his arm around her. "I have much love and respect for you too, Sis. I know Mom and Dad's divorce was hardest on you. I know you were torn. I know you kept a smile on your face and gave Mom all your support. I'm proud of you for finishing college and keeping at the acting when you felt discouraged and down and all the while, you were always there for me and Joey. You're the best, Bree."

She sniffed and laid her head on his shoulder. "Thanks, Mark."

"No prob."

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Joey and Mark had elected to attend public school for the benefit of Mark's football career and because they wanted to be like normal kids, not pampered, not snobby, not spoiled. They wanted to work hard for what they achieved. They weren't worried about not getting as good an education as they could in more elite private schools. Between their father, mother, stepfather and stepbrother, always pushing knowledge being the key to excellence, they were constantly going way past the curve. Their high school teachers recognized that.

Jason's Ameritech agents were always complete professionals and therefore approached accompanying the family to the very public high school football game soberly. Their huge entourage caught everyone's notice and Joey, for once, felt almost ashamed of his family's celebrity status. Joey had to get permission to sit with some friends and even then, his agent never left his side.

It was the football game that gave Bree the great idea. Mark's team won, thanks to Mark and his perfect mechanics, perfect arm slot, his ability to scramble, his ability to audible and passing for two-hundred-eighty yards. If she had an arm like Mark's, she thought, she could put a message in a bottle and throw it over the security gate and up the facing embankment with no problem. Then she thought of writing on a football and tossing it over, but she still didn't think she
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could throw it far enough. Then on Sunday afternoon, she'd watched Mark and Joey playing frisbee with Jeffy and she realized that was the solution. As silly as it seemed, she just knew it would work. She could write a message on a frisbee to have Tommy's man meet her somewhere to arrange a deal. She would throw the frisbee over the gate and across the road. If someone was watching like she'd been told, he would retrieve the frisbee. It would work. It had to. She was at her wit's end.

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Bree walked toward the front gate with her frisbee. The words were written in black permanent marker.

Meet me tomorrow beyond the rocks, at the top, south beach. I'll make it worth your time. This is not a trick. No one knows I'm making you this offer. Don't tell Tommy and you stand to double whatever he's paying you. BA

She smiled. It sounded so cryptic, but this was definitely no game. She'd gone to great lengths to make this work. She whipped her arm out and the frisbee went sailing off over the iron gate, across the street and up into the wooded area. That ought to do it, she thought.

She'd obtained a tiny dose of GHB that tomorrow, would be administered to Agent Jeff Davis, the bodyguard assigned to her by Jason. Bless his heart. She hoped he wouldn't be in too much trouble. She'd decided that she'd send Ricky out for something she was craving, maybe ice cream. She didn't really need much time. Just enough to make a deal. Money for information. Everything depended on Tommy's man being for sale to the highest bidder. And if things didn't go as planned, well, she'd made arrangements for that too.

She turned back to see her bodyguard, Agent Jeff Davis, coming quickly. "You want me to go get your frisbee?"

"No, thanks. It was old anyway." She took his arm. "Tomorrow, I'd like to go down to the beach and work on my tan. Do you mind?"

"No, of course not. I'll arrange it. What time?"

"Ummm, how about around noon?"

"Yes ma'am."

She squeezed his arm. "I know you'll be around, but I'd like you to stay close by. I'll need someone to talk to. Keeps my mind off the heat. Would you mind terribly?"

"Um, no, ma'am, I don't mind talking to you. Just don't distract me too much or I won't be able to do my job."

"I wouldn't dream of it," she cooed.
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"Good morning, gorgeous," Ricky said softly from the doorway.

"Mmm, morning." She rolled over and crooked a finger at him.

He came to her and kissed her.

She smiled. "Is it too soon since your, uh, trauma, to ask you when you intend to make love to me again?"

He swallowed. He needed to have a talk with her about that, but it just didn't seem like the optimal time. "I, uh, well..."

"It's okay, Ricky. There's no pressure. Just so you know that I still love you, and really look forward to us being together. Every time I look at you, every time you touch me, my body yearns for you. It's a wonderful feeling." She sighed. "What if it wears off? What if we burn out and there's nothing left?"

He frowned. "Don't borrow trouble."

"No really, Ricky. What if?"

He lay down next to her. "My feelings for you are about much more than sex, Bree. Sex is good. Sex is really good, but Bree, I want you for my *companion*. I want to share with you my beliefs, and my thoughts and hopes and dreams."

She sighed. "I guess we haven't had much time to talk."

"Yeah, it's been a little hectic, but we'll make up for lost time once Tommy is back behind bars."

"Ya know, Ricky, I used to know you really well. Remember when you would come visit me in New York? We'd visit all the art shows and museums. We'd go to the little Off-Broadway shows then go to a coffee house and talk about what they'd meant for hours."

He touched her nose. "I remember. That's when I fell in love with you. You were so young and so very smart. You found deep meaning in everything. You taught me so much."

"I taught you? You the world traveler? You who had two college degrees and multiple black belts in multiple disciplines? You who spoke three languages?"

"Five."

"See? How could I teach you anything?"

"Well Bree, everything I'd learned, everything I'd experienced up to that point had no meaning. Then you came along and pointed it out to me. *You* opened my eyes. I'd say I enjoyed a book and you'd ask me why. You made me think."

"You were already a thinker. Your father trained you to be so."

Ricky nodded. "Yes, my father is an amazing man and an amazing
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teacher and I still struggle to make him proud."

"Oh, Ricky, he is so very proud of you. You should see how he looks at you. Sometimes I think he might burst he's so full of pride for his son. You're so very lucky to have him."

"I am. I know. Right now though, I'm feeling extremely lucky to have *you*. I've wanted you for so long– and here you are, talking to me, lying next to me in my bed."

"Um, this is my bed."

He smiled. "Oh yeah, whatever. Point is, I'm grateful Bree, for you and for this time."

She moved close. "Me too," she said, lifting her mouth for his kiss. Her mind went to what she had planned for the day. With luck, all the bad stuff would be over very soon, then she and Ricky could figure out just what they were gonna do with the rest of their lives.

She moaned with pleasure, because his kiss was so sweet.

He lifted his head. "So, what are your plans today?"

"I'm, umm, I'm going down to the beach to work on my tan."

"Wish I could join you."

She sat up. "Why? Where are you going?"

"Steve and I have a meeting. He may have some information about Tommy. He's been feeling pretty bad that he's been able to turn up absolutely squat. He's hoping this lead may pan out."

She smiled. That would make things so much easier for her as far as getting Ricky out of the house. She couldn't wait to be able to come back home to him and have Tommy's location in her hot little hands.

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"Thank you so much for going to the trouble of arranging this outing. I was going out of my mind. I know you had to go over the entire beach first."

"It's no problem, Miss Adams," Jeff said.

"Please, call me Bree."

"Yes ma'am."

She smiled at him. He was young and oh-so-very serious about his job. She felt a small pang of guilt for what she was about to do to him. "Right here looks good," she said. She looked back up at the house. Hopefully, Eric and her mom and Jeffy would stay down in the music room for at least an hour. Ricky left for his meeting a couple of hours ago and she didn't expect him home anytime soon. Mark and Joey were at school. She licked her lips.

Jeff helped her spread out a blanket and set her cooler down next
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to her. He then moved a few feet away and opened a lounge chair. Once Bree was settled on her blanket he sat in the chair, his back straight, his eyes continuously scanning the area.

Bree watched him through the corner of her eye as she removed her swimsuit cover. She wore a tiny white string bikini. The man visibly swallowed. She smiled. She admitted, sometimes it's fun to know you have that kind of impact on men. Sighing as she moved, she pulled out her tanning oil and began to apply it.

"So tell me Jeff," she stopped, looked up at him. "Do you mind if I call you by your first name?"

"No ma'am. I don't mind."

"Is it really Jeffrey?"

"Actually, it's Jefferson."

She glanced up, smiling. "Your name is Jefferson Davis?"

He blushed. "Yes ma'am."

She looked him over. He was devastatingly cute. Neatly trimmed dark blond hair, green eyes, dimples and a gorgeous smile that showed straight, white teeth. He was over six feet, lean and well-muscled. "Okay, so tell me Jeff, why did Jason pick you to watch over me?"

His eyes scanned the rocks to the south before he answered. "Well, he chose the three fastest with the highest testing scores to watch over you, Mrs. Kino and June Flower. He figures the men just need someone to watch their backs."

"So, Jeff, you're saying that you're one of the best?"

Jeff didn't lower his head. "Well, Mr. Lee seems to think so."

She nodded. "You seem very young. How old are you?"

"I'm twenty-two ma'am."

"I see. And this is the line of work you'd like to go into?"

"Yes ma'am. At one time I thought I would join the FBI, but then I realized I don't do government well. Ameritech Security has a huge reputation. I went through the application process and Mr. Lee accepted me. He runs it like his own personal FBI. The training is the same or better. The technology Mr. Lee uses is the best."

Bree nodded. "Jason consults for the FBI so I guess he would know how to train his own men to the same degree."

"Oh, yes ma'am. Mr. Lee is the best. And I know Master Kino trained him originally, so, it's like, I'm surrounded by all my heroes here on this job. I mean, Ricky Kino is right here, and then not to mention you." He stopped. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'll stop now."

Bree smiled. "Don't stop. It's okay."

He looked down. “Well, ma’am, I just meant that, it’s a privilege to have this opportunity.”

“I understand.” Sighing, she realized Agent Jeff Davis was a good guy and she’d have to step in with Jason and help him out, bless his heart. She watched him work. He stood every once in a while, did a sweep of the area, then sat back down so that she could talk to him like she’d requested. He wore slacks and a dark t-shirt. He began to break a sweat and Bree made her move.

She reached back and pulled the small cooler toward her, opened it up. “It’s getting pretty warm. I’ve brought two bottles of lemonade. Here, this one’s for you.”

He accepted it. “Thanks.”

She smiled sweetly. “You’re welcome.” She opened the cap on hers and drew from the bottle, watching him as he did the same.

It only took fifteen more minutes of conversation before she noticed him wiping his brow, breathing heavy.

“Jeff,” she said softly.

His head turned slowly to look at her. He blinked his eyes as if he were trying to focus.

“Yes,” he answered.

“I want to tell you now that I’m sorry and that I promise I’ll make it up to you.”

His brow creased. “Ma’am?”

“How are you feeling?”

“Actually, ma’am, I’m not feeling very well. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’d better call for backup.” His hand went to his mic.

“No!” Bree said quickly. “I’m sure it’s just the sun and you’re wearing dark colors. I think you’re overheated.” She began pulling on her swimsuit cover.

He went again for his mic but Bree reached up and grabbed his hand. “It’s okay, Jeff.”

His hand went slack in hers. His head fell on his chest. She laid his hand gently on his lap and patted it. “I promise Jeff, I’ll make it up to you,” she whispered.

Bree quickly gathered her bag, checked its contents and took off down the beach, glancing over her shoulder one last time as the house disappeared from view. Her heart pounded. Now that what she was doing was actually a reality, she felt a prickle of fear. She drew a deep breath. She could do this.

A half mile down the beach she eyed the outcropping of rocks. She

expected and felt the surge of adrenaline. Moving forward past the first large rock cliff, she turned left and started to climb. About halfway up, she came to a small landing, about twenty feet in diameter. She considered waiting there, but realized he may never find her there. Also, she wanted more room, so she continued upward.

Once she got to the top she stood for a moment or two catching her breath. There was no one in sight. She thought if he was coming he was probably watching her to make sure she was alone. She turned to face the ocean and sat down near the edge of the rocks she'd just climbed. "Well," she thought, here goes.

As she sat she kept her senses on full alert. She'd been there about twenty minutes when she sensed someone's approach. She turned. Stood. She was looking at a Hispanic male, about her age. He was sweaty and dirty.

"Hey, pretty lady," the man said, with a thick Spanish accent.

Bree nodded. "Hello."

"So, you want to talk money?"

"I thought it would be a good place to start."

He circled around her, looked down the rocks toward the beach. "You're alone?"

"Yes. What's your name?"

"Hector."

"I'm Bree, but I guess you know that." Duh. She felt like an idiot and suddenly way out of her league.

"I know who you are. So talk," Hector said.

"I, uh, I was wondering why you were doing what Tommy asks you to do and I realized he must be paying you."

"So?"

"So, I was thinking, whatever he's paying you, I could top it."

"You want to pay me? For what?"

"First, for information. Then, to just go away."

His eyes traveled her body and came back to her face. "What kind of information?"

"Tommy's location."

He nodded. "Then once I give you this information, you give me the money and I slip quietly away and no one messes with me?"

"I can't guarantee what happens to you after I pay you, and yes, you go away and don't bother our family again."

He reached out and touched her bag with one finger, making Bree take a step back.

"So, like, you have the money with you?"

"Of course not. You tell me what I want to know. I take that information and we see if it's correct. Then you get your money."

He stepped forward, his finger moved to stroke her arm, just above her wrist. "Well, no money, no information."

She thrust her chin into the air. "No information, no money."

He smiled at her, called her bluff and shrugged. "I suggest we reach a compromise or this meeting is over."

Bree frowned. "Surely you understand that I have to have something, anything, to take back with me?"

He gave a wicked laugh. "Well then, how about I let you go back with your life?"

She stepped away again. "Listen, Hector, I'm offering you a great deal of money."

He sighed and thought. "How do I know you'll keep your word?"

She shrugged. "I don't know how you'll know. All I can say is our family is very big on honesty and honor. If I say I'll pay you, then I will. If I say you just walk away. Then you will."

"How much money are we talking about?" he asked.

She thought. "You can name the price."

His eyebrows shot up. "How about two hundred thousand?"

Now her eyebrows shot up. "You're kidding me?"

"Do I look like I'm kiddin' lady?"

"No. You seem quite serious." She walked away, turned, stepped closer and nodded. "Okay."

Hector laughed. "Funny. You think I'm gonna buy that? How stupid do you think I am? You ain't gonna pay me no two hundred thousand dollars. This is bull."

"No, really, I'm not lying."

"Yeah, right." He reached out and grabbed her arm. "So, you thought you were gonna be a smart girl and get me to tell you where Tommy is? Well, let me tell you something, little white lady. Tommy and I go way back. In prison, he had my back and I had his. Your money doesn't mean anything to me."

Bree's heart raced and when she didn't answer he jerked on her arm, yanking her forward. "I, I, didn't realize, I was hoping, I mean, I thought you would be willing to make a smart business decision."

His eyes filled with anger. "So now you callin' me stupid?" He pulled her against him. "Don't nobody call me stupid and get away with it. I ain't stupid."

Bree stuck her hand inside her bag and pulled it out quickly. She held the business end of a 9mm pistol to his forehead. "Nor am I."

He stilled. "Okay, lady, now calm down."

"I'm calm. Now, we're just gonna climb down these rocks. You're going first. I'll be right behind you and I'm not used to holding a gun and I don't know if it will accidentally go off, so, no sudden moves that might startle me."

"Come on, little lady, I wasn't really gonna hurt you. I was just playin' around."

"Well, I wasn't," she quoted, thinking about their old game where they quoted movie lines and '*Tombstone'* had come to mind. "Now move. Head down the rocks to the beach," she commanded.

They moved to the edge of the rocks. "Go," she said, gesturing with the gun.

He turned and lowered himself down, making sure he had his foot planted firmly on the rock below him. His eyes ran over the expanse of leg in front of him. In a flash, his hand grabbed her ankle and pulled her feet out from under her. The gun went flying down the rocks, Bree grabbed air as she fell over Hector's head. She landed with a thud on her back on the landing below.

He turned and lowered himself down next to her. "Stupid, white lady. You in big trouble now, aren't ya? Now, it's just you and me."

She groaned. She hurt everywhere. She tried moving her arms and legs. Everything seemed to be working. Probably just knocked the breath out of her. Struggling, she scooted toward the edge of the landing, but Hector grabbed her and pulled her back. "Oh, no. You ain't goin' nowhere."

The moment he let go, she stood and scrambled the opposite direction, headed up, toward where they'd just been, but he grabbed her by the legs and jerked. She came back down level with him, banging her legs on the rocks in the process. Leaning forward Hector placed his hands on the rocks on either side of her. "Might as well accept it. You ain't goin' nowhere 'til I'm done."

Her body trembled. "Wh, what are you gonna do?"

"This for starters." He swung hard, hitting her across the mouth. The blow knocked her to the ground. He knelt down beside her, turned her over. "And now, it's playtime."

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Ricky chatted with the man at the security gate for several minutes. Finally, he moved on, swinging the car toward the front of the house.
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Jumping out, he left his bodyguard shadow behind, grabbed the flowers he'd bought on a whim and jogged quickly up the steps. The house was silent as he came in the front door. He went straight upstairs to Bree's room. She wasn't there. He checked his parents' room. No one there either. Little prickles of something not quite right, tickled his senses. He went downstairs next, finally finding his father and Shelley and Jeffy in the music room along with a captive audience consisting of their assigned bodyguards.

"Hi, guys. I was beginning to think no one was home."

"Hey, Ricky," Shelley said. "Jeffy is giving us a Mozart recital."

"You are?" Ricky asked, scooping Jeffy up and kissing her cheek. He set her back down in front of the keyboard.

"Yes, and I'm gonna play the piano just like him and write music too. Daddy says if he enrolls me at the Smithfield's School of Music I have to keep going for at least two years and I'd better think really hard about it but I don't have to because I've always loved to play the piano and I already know I want to get really good. Mom says I'm already really good and that I'm a prodigy. Do you want to hear me play something?"

He smiled. "I do, only not right now, okay? I want to talk to Bree first. I guess she's still out working on her tan?"

"She didn't get out until almost noon so she's only been out an hour," Shelley said.

"Well, an hour is long enough. I'll catch you guys later."

The moment Ricky got to the deck he knew something was very wrong. Bree was nowhere in sight, yet there was her blanket on the beach with a cooler sitting next to it. Agent Jeff Davis sat in a chair a few feet away. He seemed to be dozing. Rick scanned the water, looking to see if she decided to take a quick dip. Nothing. He ran down to speak to Davis.

The man was unconscious. Ricky's heart began to pound. "No, oh no," he said aloud. He pulled out his cell.

"Dad, Bree's gone. I'm going after her. Get help."

Her footprints went off south. Only one set. Hers. He picked up the bottle of lemonade. Tasted it. Spit it out. Slightly salty. "Bree, what have you done?"

He flew. It seemed to take him forever to cover the short distance from their private beach to where the rocks jutted out toward the ocean. The place *he'd* been taken. He still spotted only one set of prints, and they stopped at the rocks.

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She scratched, she bit, she used every bit of energy she had to fight him. Everything she did only seemed to make him madder and more determined to do his deed. He'd had to hit her several times to stun her enough to keep her still but he finally accomplished it. It didn't take long for him to rip off her swimsuit cover. He pinned her with his body, his hands holding her hands down over her head. It was as if he was exactly following the scripted choreography Ricky had written days ago when he'd demonstrated what could happen.

And it looked like what could happen was going to happen. She screamed in a last ditch effort to get someone to help her. That earned her another slap across the face. He was so heavy, she felt as if she were suffocating. Her efforts to fight were slowing down. She was losing consciousness. He let go of one of her hands, to work on removing her clothing, and then suddenly, she could breathe.

Looking up, it seemed as if his body was floating just above hers, and then astonishingly, it flew away from her and landed against the rocks. Blinking to clear her vision, Bree raised her head to try to see what in the world was happening.

Ricky was happening. Her head fell back down and tears of relief began to flow. She closed her eyes, unable to gather the strength to move. The scuffle between Ricky and her tormentor seemed to be happening far away. She could just barely hear the sounds. Her body was fluid, a limp puddle that she had no control over.

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The rage engulfed him. He'd heard the tussling and grunting of a battle being fought as he'd approached the rocks. He'd been almost to the first landing when she'd screamed. The scene he'd encountered when he arrived drove him to madness. Even though he was immediately grateful to have found Bree alive, another side took over pretty quickly.

He pulled the man off her and tossed him against the rocks as if he were a lightweight. The man came at Ricky but was no trained fighter. Realizing that quickly, Ricky egged the man on. He came at Ricky, threw a punch. Ricky dodged and delivered two, three, knocking the man to the ground. Ricky helped him up again, made sure he could stand, and started all over again. Finally the man fell to the ground and stopped moving. Ricky grabbed him by the hair and pulled his face out of the dirt to make sure he was totally gone. It was Bree's soft moan that pulled him out of it.

He went to her, knelt by her side. Her eyes were closed. He touched her face. She moaned and opened her eyes.

"Can you move?"

"I'm not sure," she mumbled.

Gently he pushed his arm beneath her back and lifted her to a sitting position. He pulled his shirt over his head, helped her put it on and then pulled her up onto his lap. Gathering her snug in the circle of his arms, he held her tight against his chest while her shoulders shook with the uncontrollable sobs that overtook her. While she cried he pulled out his phone and gave his location.

He stroked her hair, touched his lips to her head, and squeezed her tighter until she finally quieted. She looked up into his face, blinked the tears from her eyes. "I'm sorry."

His lips pressed together in a straight line as he noted the bloody lip and bruises already starting to form on her cheek. He nodded. "I bet," he said softly.

"I thought I could help. I thought, finally, I could do something to bring all this to an end. I can't physically fight like you. Even Mom can do that. I'm nothing. Just a liability. I wanted so much to help. I'm sorry. It wasn't supposed to happen like this."

He sighed. "We'll talk about this later, baby. You're alive. Right now, I'm just so happy with that thought that I can't find it in me to be properly angry with you. I will, though, and I guarantee so will Dad, and your mom, and your brothers and I don't even know what to think about Jason."

She sniffed. They could hear Jason's men climbing the rocks. "Come on, let's get you down off these rocks."

He looked over the edge and motioned to the group of men. "There's one guy, unconscious. No weapon."

"Oh, there's a weapon alright," Eric said loudly from below, holding up a 9mm.

Ricky shook his head. At that moment Agent Dixon arrived from up top. He looked down over the edge. "Do we need medical?"

"For one, definitely," Ricky answered, motioning toward the man who'd attacked Bree. "As for Bree," he said, looking into her eyes.

"I'm okay. Please, I just want to go home."

Ricky looked back up. "She says she's okay."

He helped her over the edge and stayed right behind her as they climbed down in sync.

When they got to the bottom Eric handed his cell phone to Bree.

"Here, tell her you're okay."

Bree took the phone. "I'm okay, Mom. No, it's all my fault. I just wanted to do something to..."

While Bree spoke to her mother on the phone, Eric unbuttoned his shirt and removed it. Ricky tied the long sleeves around Bree's waist to give her a little more length for modesty's sake since one side of her bikini bottoms was ripped apart. When Bree finished speaking, Eric took the phone back, put his finger under Bree's chin to hold her still while he scrutinized her face. Blood ran from her swollen lip, a bruise had begun to form on her cheek. He shook his head. "I guess you're more like your mother than I originally thought."

Tears welled in her eyes again. "I'm sorry, Eric. Please don't be mad at me."

"Okay. I'll be happy to leave that completely up to Ricky and the others." He smiled. "Pretty scary experience, huh?"

She nodded with a smile. "Pretty scary."

Eric's eyes met Ricky's. Ricky nodded. "Yeah, pretty scary."

✝✝✝

Psalm 37:23-24

"The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives. Though they stumble, they will never fall, for the Lord holds them by the hand."

Chapter 15

Halfway home Bree began to limp.

"Are you hurting?" Ricky asked.

"My back is sore." She turned to look back at the rocky cliff. "I fell from the top."

Ricky eyed the area. "You fell from the top to where I found you on that ledge?"

"Well, it was more like he pulled me down. I landed on my back. I think it's starting to stiffen up."

"Lord, Bree, that's at least fifteen feet. Honey, maybe we should take you into the hospital and let them check you out."

"Please, I just wanna go home. I hate going to the doctor."

Eric sighed. "And again, more like your mother."

As they neared the house Bree remembered poor Jeff. The beach was empty now.

"What did you do to Jeff, by the way?" Ricky asked.

Bree grimaced. "I put GHB in his lemonade." She looked up at the silent, stony-faced men. Realizing that meant they were pretty upset with her, she tried to explain herself.

"When I thought of doing what I did, it seemed so harmless. You know, almost like a joke."

"Where did you get it, Bree?" Eric asked, his voice deceptively soft. "It's not something you can just run out and buy."

"An acquaintance of an acquaintance. Just like the gun."

"The gun is *yours*?" Eric asked, incredulously.

She looked down. "Yes. Well, it's a loaner from a friend."

Ricky shook his head, while Eric immediately called Agent Dixon with that piece of information.

"When did you meet with your *acquaintance*?" Ricky asked.

Bree sighed. "Two days ago I met with friends and picked up the drug and the gun. Remember when I said I was running to the store?"

"I remember it clearly. So, poor Jeff accompanied you, keeping you safe, while you picked up the means for his demise."

Bree screwed her mouth into a delightful pout Ricky thought, even

though his frown showed no evidence of his observation.

"When you put it that way, it seems like a pretty cruel thing for me to do, huh? I swear I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I just wanted to help. I feel so useless."

Neither man offered her any words of forgiveness or consolation. They walked in silence the rest of the way. When they arrived at the house, Shelley ran to her daughter, shooing the men away. She took her upstairs and stayed with her while Bree showered and slipped into a nightgown and her robe. They sat together on the bed while Bree told her mother everything. Shelley's anger at her daughter putting herself in danger lasted all of thirty seconds.

They cried together over the helpless feelings of a sexual assault. Bree finally understood a little of what her mother had been through, something Shelley would never have wanted her to understand so well. Only her mom's body had been completely violated. Thank God, Ricky arrived when he had.

Bree and Shelley laughed together over the cockamamie plan Bree had executed. Shelley marveled at the courage it had taken to go through with it. Their mother-daughter time came to an end when Ricky knocked on the door.

Shelley let him in. "I'll let you two talk," Shelley said. She leaned close to Ricky. "Don't be too hard on her."

Ricky frowned. "I'll try, but I'm not promising anything."

Shelley left and Ricky came to sit on the bed next to Bree. "Are you feeling any better?"

"Yes. Thank you, Ricky, for coming when you did. I don't know what would've happened..."

"Yes you do," he said abruptly.

She nodded. "Oh, I see you found the anger."

"Yes I did," he said fiercely but softly.

She swallowed. "Well, Ricky, before you start in on me, may I ask how Jeff is doing?"

Ricky's expression softened. She was worried about someone else. He had to admit, she was usually worried about someone else. She actually took very little thought for herself, which was obvious. He understood that she'd just wanted to help, however, her helping could've turned out to be a tragedy of the worst kind.

"Jeff is dizzy, nauseated and when he's completely awake, he will be receiving quite a bit of ribbing from his fellow agents. Do you realize he could press charges if he wanted?"

She hung her head. “Does he want to?”

“No. But Jason is pissed at both of you and is unclear if he’s gonna even allow Jeff to continue working for him.”

Bree frowned. “Ricky you can’t let Jason fire him.”

“*I* can’t let Jason fire him?” he asked. “I’d say it would be up to you to keep that from happening.” He shrugged. “Maybe you can talk to Jason on Jeff’s behalf.”

“I will, because Jeff is a truly good guy, an intelligent, young man who wants to be a force for good in this world.”

“He is a good guy. I like the kid.” Ricky’s eyes moved over her. “Besides what I see on your face, what other injuries do you have?”

She shrugged. “I’m not sure, but I think my back is messed up because the shower really stung.”

“Want me to take a look?”

She pulled off her gown.

He blew out a breath and looked at her medically. “Scratches here,” he said lightly touching the right side of her chest. He gazed lower. “Scrapes on both shins and on your right knee. Claw marks on your right hip and more on your left thigh. Turn around.”

When she obliged, he cursed softly. “Your back is covered with a bunch of little scratches, and a really large one on your right shoulder blade.”

He lifted her arms, examined her hands, pointing out various scratches and bruises. He handed her gown back to her and shook his head. “Anything I can think of to say to you I’m sure you’ve already said to yourself.”

“Probably.”

“Bree, when I realized you were gone, my vision literally blurred. My world collapsed around me.”

“I know what you mean,” she whispered.

He looked into her eyes. “Yeah, I suppose you do. And I’m thankful I didn’t have to suffer through several days like you did.”

Bree sighed. “It was pure hell, those days you were missing.”

Ricky nodded. “And yet knowing that, you still chose to put me and the family through the same thing that you’d suffered while I was gone. What if, Bree, this Hector dude had taken you back to Tommy? How many times do you think he would have raped you, hurt you, tortured you, before he killed you? Maybe I should’ve gone into more detail in the telling of my experiences with Tommy. Maybe I should have let you know how he would enjoy the pain he could inflict on you.

He would teach you things you'd never thought a man could do to a woman. He would — ugh, what am I doing? If you weren't so banged up I'd put you over my knee."

"Why do guys always say that?" Bree asked, effectively changing his focus.

Sighing, Ricky offered a quick smile in appreciation of her tactic. "I think it's for the visual sensation it provides." He nodded his head. "Yeah, definitely the visual."

They sat quietly for a time, their hands clasped. Bree was the one who finally spoke. "Ricky, can you forgive me?"

"I already do. Then again, I haven't heard the whole story. I haven't asked for it because Special Agent Dixon and Jason will be here soon and there's gonna be a debriefing."

"Great."

"Sorry, but there's no way around it. Would you like to rest until they get here?"

"Yes. I feel so drained."

"You used all your energy trying to survive." He rose, covered her. "Sleep, baby. I'll come get you later when they get here."

"What time is it?"

"It's almost four."

"Wow, time flies when you're having fun."

Bending low, he kissed her. His eyes moistened. "Don't you ever leave me." He rose quickly. Left the room.

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She woke at the knock on her door. "Come in," she said softly.

Joey and Mark came through her door.

"Dang it, Bree," Joey said. "We get home and it's like Grand Central Station. The place is crawling with agents and police cars. You gave us a freakin' heart attack. We had to fight through the media to get in the gate. I swear, what were you thinking? Are you okay?"

She smiled. "I love you too, Joey."

Mark stepped forward. "They told us something about some half-cocked scheme you came up with which I can't wait to hear. They sent us to tell you to come down. We're having a big meeting."

"Okay. Tell them I'm on my way." She rose stiffly, found she could barely move.

"Let me help you," her brothers said in unison. They helped her get to her feet.

"I was gonna throw on some clothes but I'm just too sore."
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"Dang, look at your face," Mark said.

"Is it bad?"

"Well, your lip is swollen pretty big, and there's a huge, ugly bruise on your cheek."

She sighed. "Will you hand me my robe?"

Joey grabbed the robe and held it for her.

"Well, I guess I'd better go down and face the music," Bree said.

"Yeah, I can't wait to hear this," Joey mumbled.

Bree made her way down the stairs and was surprised by the number of people gathered to hear her story. Special Agent Dixon, his partner, and two other FBI agents were standing in the great room near the front window. All eleven of Jason's agents who'd been assigned to the Kino family occupied one sofa, including both arms and the standing space behind that sofa. Agent Jefferson Davis sat in the center, as if they had closed ranks around their friend.

Shelley, Jeffy, Eric, Justin and Jason occupied the second sofa. Mark and Joey headed toward the third where Ricky sat. Ricky stood and escorted Bree over to sit with him.

"So, Miss Adams," Special Agent Dixon began. "I believe you have a story to tell. Mr. Kino requested that you tell it here for all. I've allowed that."

Bree glanced around at Eric. He winked at her. She knew he'd actually done her a favor so she wouldn't have to keep telling it over and over again. She noticed her frisbee lying on the table in the center of the room along with the suspect bottle of lemonade and her gun.

She drew a deep breath. "Okay, but may I begin with an apology? It's really to everyone. I was only trying to help. I didn't mean to cause so much trouble."

There was silence in the room and she guessed that meant the jury was out. She took a deep breath and began with her idea to contact one of Tommy's men and get him to change his loyalties. She mentioned that she'd thought about offering herself as bait for the FBI and thought they'd probably turn her down. She spoke of how she obtained the gun and the drug, keeping her eyes averted from Jeff.

She spoke of how noble and valiant Jeff was, how he tried to call for backup when he realized he wasn't well, how she stopped him. She spoke of her fear when she realized she was really going through with the plan. She'd almost chickened out and had to force herself to climb the rocks anyway. She told them how the meeting went from bad to worse. Smiling, she described Hector's face when she'd pulled the gun

and placed it against his forehead and her elated feeling when she thought she was about to waltz back to the house with her prisoner at gunpoint. Glancing around the room, she could see smiles of appreciation from Jason's men, but not the Feds.

She worked her way haltingly through the rest. Her fall from the rocks, the attempted rape, and finally Ricky showing up. When she finished the room was as silent as when she'd begun.

Wringing her hands she looked from face to face, ready to take her punishment. Ricky reached over and placed his hand on top of hers to still them. She looked up at him.

"I love you," he said softly.

She smiled.

Special Agent Dixon spoke. "We've questioned Hector Ramirez. He gave up Tommy's location, but as before, Tommy had already left the premises."

Jason nodded. "So according to Beth, he had three men with him, and one he only spoke with on the phone. We figure the phone guy was the actor, Clay Bennett. We've taken out Red and Ramirez. He's down to one man, unless he's bringing more in as we get rid of them, and I doubt that. He's got to be getting pretty frustrated."

"And frustrated men do desperate things," Special Agent Dixon added. "Be careful."

"We will be," Jason said.

"That's all we have for now," Agent Dixon said, gathering the objects on the table. He held up the gun. "I will have to confiscate this for a little while."

Bree nodded. Eric rose and saw them out, shaking hands and offering thanks.

"The rest of you can stay right where you are," Jason announced.

Jeffy came over to see Bree. Ricky pulled her onto his lap. "I'm glad you're okay, Bree," Jeffy said. "I cried when I heard you were gone. I thought it was gonna be just like when Ricky was gone. I hate Tommy. I want him to leave us alone."

"Me too, baby."

"He's a bad man."

"This will all be over soon, sweetie."

"I know," she said with a smile. She kissed Bree's cheek and moved on. Next she crawled up onto Jeff Davis' lap. "I know my sister gave you drugs that made you go to sleep. That wasn't very nice and she's really sorry. I hope you still like her. She probably didn't know

that I like you because we have almost the same name. I know my name isn't really Jeffy. It's June Flower. I know that's a weird name. That's what Kimmie says, but I like it. Do you like it?"

"You bet I do," he said with a smile.

"Anyway, I went off on a tangent. I do that a lot. Daddy says it's because I have too much information floating around in my brain and I like learning so I'm adding new information every day. Today before Bree went to make a deal with the bad guys I was learning a new Mozart piece. I've already learned some Beethoven. I'm gonna take real piano lessons at a school of music instead of just with a piano teacher because the piano teacher says she can't teach me. That's okay though. I want to go to school. I love to learn and this new music school teaches all the regular stuff too. Until I can get started at my new school, Mommy is taking me to the museum soon so that I can see all the old stuff. I know I really shouldn't call the collections at the museum old stuff, since it's really a conglomerate of amazing collections of our past, but saying 'old stuff' is simpler. I'm excited about going. We got a brochure in the mail for a kid's day."

"We received a brochure," Eric corrected as he reentered the room. "And Jeffy," Eric said softly. "Enough."

Jeffy smiled broadly at her father. "Okay, Daddy." She turned back to Jeff. "Anyway, I just wanted to tell you to not be too mad at my sister and I hope you feel better and," she leaned close to his ear and said something else. Then she kissed his cheek and scooted down and went back to her mom.

Shelley rose. "I'm gonna feed Jeffy and put her to bed. Mark, Joey, come on you need to eat and get your homework done. You men go easy on Bree or you'll have me to answer to." She left the room with her three youngest children in tow.

"Hey, Jeff," one of the agents said. "What did she say to you there at the end?"

Jeff's face turned red. "None of your business."

"Come on man, you can tell us."

He rolled his eyes. "Okay, she— thinks I'm cute."

Uproarious laughter filled the air. Hands ruffled Jeff's hair, patted his back.

"I think he won over the wrong one," one of them said.

Ricky's eyebrows rose and Bree smiled at him.

"So, let's talk about your behavior, Agent Davis," Jason interrupted. He turned to Bree. "And yours too, young lady."

"Yes sir," Jeff stated.

"First, let me ask this. Do you realize how important the assignment given to you is?"

"Yes sir. Life and death important, sir. I assure you I take my assignment very seriously."

"Then you want to tell me why you were sitting in a chair out on the beach?"

Jeff swallowed hard and glanced at Bree.

"I asked..." Bree started.

Jason held up a hand. "I wasn't asking you, Bree." He nodded at Jeff. "Agent Davis, go ahead, and don't think about giving me half truths to protect her or yourself."

"No sir, I would never lie to you."

"Then proceed."

"She asked me to sit near enough to talk to her and in an effort to please her, I did as she asked, though I give you my word, sir, I never let my guard down."

"In an effort to please her? Your assignment is not to please her. It's to protect her."

Jeff nodded, his face solemn. "Yes sir."

Jason turned to Bree. "Thank you for helping me to understand that I've neglected to address a subject in training. I should have directed Agent Davis to protect you even from yourself if need be."

Bree rolled her eyes at Jason and leaned forward. "Jeff, can you forgive me? The way I tricked you, what I did to you, it was cruel of me. I don't blame you if you want to press charges."

He sighed. "I can forgive you. I mean, who couldn't?"

The rest of the room acknowledged the truth of that statement.

"And if I pressed charges against you, Miss Adams, it would seem pretty wimpy of me, now wouldn't it?" Jeff said with a sigh.

"Still, I wouldn't blame you," she murmured.

"No, of course I won't press charges. I'll be lucky if Mr. Lee even lets me stick around."

"That's correct," Jason said.

"Jason," Bree interrupted. "I'd like to make a statement on Agent Davis' behalf."

"By all means," Jason said.

"I've never been so impressed by any bodyguard I've ever used. He's so very honest and competent."

"That remains to be seen," Jason interjected.

Bree frowned. “He takes his job very seriously. He never lets his guard down for a second. He couldn’t very well have foreseen that the person he was keeping safe would betray him, and that’s exactly what I did. For a good cause, I thought. Nevertheless, he couldn’t have known. The moment he realized something was wrong he tried to call in. Jason, if it had been you sitting out there with me and I offered you a bottle of lemonade, you would have taken it without a second thought and it would’ve been you who was humiliated and there would have been nothing you could’ve done about it.”

The room was silent.

“There’s really nothing I can say to that, is there,” Jason asked. “Except that you are correct. If you had offered me a drink I would have taken it. Agent Davis, I guess that lets you off the hook.”

“Thank you, sir,” he said, trying not to break into a smile. One of his buddies slapped him on the back.

Bree leaned back, finally relaxed. Ricky put his arm around her.

Jason pointed at Bree. “You, young lady, on the other hand, have a lot to answer for. I should turn you over my knee.”

Bree laughed. Ricky smiled.

“I’m glad you think this is so funny,” Jason continued. “Let me just paint you a picture. Ricky is fifteen minutes later getting home. He tracks you to the rocks but he hears nothing. He climbs the rocks and there is your naked, lifeless body lying there. He can’t move you because the FBI will need to cover the crime scene, so he has to leave you there while the place is taken over by the crime scene unit. Eric finally makes it up to the scene and somehow gets Ricky to come back home– home where your mother and brothers and sister are waiting to see you again. Instead, they’re told the terrible news. I could go on but I think you see where I’m going with this.”

Bree nodded, her eyes glistening with tears. “Yes, I see, Jason, and of course, you’re right.”

“Well, Jason,” Justin began, “I think you’ve made your point and I don’t know if you truly got through to her, but you sure as heck got through to me. I won’t sleep for a week just thinking about it.”

Jason laughed. “Sorry. I needed to make an impact.” He sighed, looking from face to face of people he truly loved and cared for. “I guess this meeting is adjourned.”

Everyone left the room, each making their own comments to Bree as they did.

Once alone Ricky took her hand. “Are you hungry?”

"No."

"You haven't eaten all day."

"I'm just tired."

"Let's get you up to bed."

Up in her bedroom, he tucked her in. She reached for his hand.

"Aren't you staying?"

"It's only seven. I'll be back later, Bree. I have some business to discuss with Jason and Dad."

"Is it a secret?"

"No."

"Then tell me."

He sighed. "I don't think it's something you want to hear."

"Just tell me."

"Well, after Steve and I spoke earlier today, he had a meeting with a source on the street who was able to obtain Tommy's whereabouts. It was the same address they got from Hector."

Bree thought. "So, that means that if I hadn't interfered today, you would've been able to surprise Tommy and get him. Tommy must have known about my meeting with Hector and he turned tail and ran as soon as he knew things went south."

Ricky's hand brushed over Bree's hair. "You couldn't have known how things would turn out. Don't worry anymore about Tommy. We *will* get him. Sleep now."

It was an easy order to follow.

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He knew when she left the room. She'd tossed and turned on and off since he'd come to her bed to stay with her, to comfort her. He'd held her, whispered soothing words and finally fallen asleep. He woke when she rose and went to look out the balcony door to the ocean. She didn't go outside. Instead she'd turned and left the room. Thinking she needed some space to work things out, he'd stayed in bed, but it had now been over an hour. He rose and went to find her.

It didn't take long. He found her sitting in the dark in a chair in the kitchen. Bree was bent over double, moaning. Quickly he knelt in front of her making out her features in the moonlight. She was crying.

"Bree? What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," she said, sniffing loudly.

"Are we talking physical or mental?"

"Physical. Something's wrong. I'm cramping. Bad cramping."

He felt at a loss if this was a woman kind of thing. "Um, let me go
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get your mom, okay?"

"Yes, okay," she said breathlessly.

The fact she didn't argue with him told just how uncomfortable she was. "Okay, hon, I'll be right back. Here I'll get you a cool cloth."

Turning on the light, he opened a drawer, pulled out a clean dish towel, ran it under the cold tap water and turned toward her. What he saw made his heart stop.

"Oh, Bree. You're bleeding."

She blinked at him slowly as if she didn't comprehend.

There was blood on the floor around the chair. So much blood. It dripped off the edge of the chair from underneath her. He was afraid to leave her to get Shelley. He hadn't brought his phone down with him. He had no choice but to yell. He did that as he grabbed the kitchen phone and dialed 911.

The family converged almost instantly. By the time he finished talking to the operator, Eric and Shelley were already laying Bree down on the floor.

"Mom?" Bree said softly. "What's happening?"

"It's gonna be okay, baby girl."

"What's wrong with her?" Mark asked.

"I'm not sure," Shelley answered.

Eric looked up. "She's hemorrhaging. Boys will you take Jeffy out of here?"

They obeyed immediately.

Ricky knelt beside her. "Hemorrhaging?"

Shelley looked at him and then at Bree. "Sweetheart, when was your last period?"

"I dunno," Bree said, her words slurring. "A month or so, I guess. I'm not really sure."

Ricky's face paled. "She's pregnant?"

"If she was she's probably not anymore," Shelley said.

"Ricky?" Bree said, panic in her voice.

"I'm here. Right here."

"I don't think I can..."

She went slack. "Bree? Come on, baby, hang with me."

But she didn't answer.

Eric rose and called security to tell them to expect the ambulance. He turned and pulled Ricky to his feet, told him to get some clothes on. He opened the front door then turned and called Mark back downstairs. "Get dressed. I need you to take Ricky to the hospital. Joey, you stay

here and take care of Jeffy and call Jason and tell him what's happening. Don't let Jeffy out of your sight. Got it?"

"Yes sir. Completely."

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Eric looked around the surgical waiting room. Ricky was in a full lotus position in the corner of the room, his eyes closed. That spoke volumes about what he was feeling, because just when others would expect Ricky to be volatile was when he was the calmest. A full lotus in a public place meant he was definitely in another world. His jeans had blood smears across the thighs. His hair was disheveled, yet the look on his face was one of peace as he communed with God.

Mark stared out the window, his hands in his pockets. He never moved. Shelley also had blood stains on her clothing. Her hair was still in the braid she'd worn to bed. She rocked back and forth, tears intermittently making their way down her cheeks.

Ricky opened his eyes and stood. Eric turned toward the door. The doctor walked in a few seconds later. "She's gonna be fine," the doctor began.

There was a collective sigh of relief. "She's in recovery. You should be able to see her in about an hour. One of the nurses will come to get you."

"And so, what happened?" Shelley said impatiently.

Eric smiled. His wife still hated doctors.

"She lost the baby. I'm sorry. I thought you knew what was happening. I was told by the emergency crew that she'd suffered a substantial fall yesterday. I'm sure that was the cause."

"How far along was she?" Ricky asked quietly.

"Not more than three or four weeks. There's no damage to the uterus or her ovaries. She'll be able to conceive again. So I take it you didn't know she was pregnant?"

"No."

"Well, I don't need to tell you that the media is gonna have a heyday with this one."

Ricky snorted. "They could have a heyday with a runny nose. All it takes is the right snot."

"Yes, well, I'll be back to check on her soon."

Eric offered his hand. "Thank you, doctor."

"You're welcome."

Eric, Shelley and Mark all turned to Ricky. "You okay?"

He nodded. "Bree's okay. That's all that matters."
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Eric touched his son's shoulder. "Talk to me Rick."

He shrugged. "What is there to say? I'm mourning the death of a child I didn't know I had, one I shouldn't have had. I wonder if they could tell if it was a boy or girl."

"Yes," Eric answered. "Not visually, but by blood samples. I'll get the information for you."

"Thank you." He looked around him, his eyes moistening. "You all must know that I have plans to ask Bree to marry me. We've already talked about the fact that I want children. It scared her a little. What I'm saying is, I knew that I wanted children, I just didn't realize how much. Now that I find I actually created life, if only for those brief few weeks, it feels like it was such a miracle. Then boom, on top of that, such a loss."

Shelley moved forward, stood on her toes and hugged him. He hugged her back. They held onto each other for a long time.

They were separated by the flash of cameras and barrage of questions being thrown at them.

It took several minutes before hospital security moved in to do their job.

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Ricky stood against the wall, one foot crossed over the other, his arms folded across his chest, watching Bree's face from across the room. He'd been standing there for hours, waiting for her to awaken. How could he feel so much for her? He never thought loving someone could make you feel so many conflicting emotions. God, how he loved her. How he wanted her.

Envisioning their future lives had become a pastime of his. He would imagine himself standing on his own deck, looking out over the water, then he would shift his eyes to watch beautiful Bree playing with a little girl and little boy in the sand. She would smile up at him and beckon him to join them. He could see it so very clearly. He would strive to be a patient father, like his own. And to be wise. And to be everything a perfect husband and father should be. And he would protect them. He would protect them.

Bree stirred and he went to her immediately and took her hand. She opened her beautiful, gray eyes and blinked slowly.

"Hello," he said softly.

"Hey."

He smiled. "Did you know you still have a southern accent?"

"I do not," she said groggily.
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"It's the 'hey.' It gets to me every time." He watched her face. "Are you in any pain?"

"No. Just sleepy. What happened?"

"You don't remember anything?"

"I remember Mom and Eric laying me down on the floor. That's the last thing."

He sighed. "Okay, Bree, so, apparently, you were pregnant and the fall you took yesterday caused you to lose the baby. You hemorrhaged pretty bad."

"I'm pregnant?"

A strong hand brushed hair from her face. "You were, Bree. You lost the baby."

Her eyes blinked in slow motion. After several moments, she turned her head away. She didn't speak again.

Ricky waited. He didn't want to push her. It must be a hard thing for a woman to lose a child. Even one you didn't know you had. After five minutes though Ricky began to worry.

"Bree?"

She didn't answer.

"Bree, sweetie, will you talk to me?"

When she still didn't answer, he stuffed his hands in his pockets, his shoulders hunched. He stepped back. "Okay. Well, I, uh, guess I'll let you get some rest."

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

He came closer. "What did you say?"

"I'm sorry, Ricky. I'm so sorry."

"For what?"

"I killed your child."

"Oh, no, honey, you didn't kill our child. Hector Ramirez did that when he threw you off a cliff. It wasn't your fault."

"Wasn't it? If I hadn't gone through with that stupid idea, your baby would be alive right now."

"Our baby, Bree. Ours. And you were just trying to help. I know that. Everyone knows that. It *was* a pretty silly idea, but you know what, Bree? It actually almost worked. You couldn't have known how things would turn out. It's not your fault."

"I didn't know, Ricky. I promise you, if I'd known I was pregnant, I wouldn't have put your baby's life in danger."

"I know that. And it's our baby. Not mine. Ours. Bree, sometimes things happen that are beyond our control. You can't blame yourself.

I certainly don't. I'm simply grateful that you're okay. Besides, Bree, it's my fault. *I* took you to my bed when I *shouldn't* have. And now, well, I guess it just wasn't our time to have a baby. Not yet, anyway."

He leaned close, kissed her forehead. "Oh, Bree, I love you so very much."

"I love you too, Ricky. So very much."

"Bree, I was wondering about something. I mean, I didn't use protection when I, when we made love. It's not an excuse and I accept full responsibility, but as long as I've known you, you've used the pill. I know I shouldn't have assumed, but, well, when did you stop using your birth control pills?"

"I accidentally left them behind in the hotel in Florida during the shoot. I meant to replace them, I never got around to it. I mean, it has been a little hectic since I've been home."

Ricky sighed. "To say the least. It's been crazy."

She yawned. "It's been so unreal. It's like in a little over a month our whole family has been torn apart. Broken down. Defeated."

"Okay," Ricky said, "I'm gonna have to stop you there. We've had some trouble. Tommy planted Beth to accomplish all the things you've just been talking about, but it didn't work. We overcame everything. Our family is still close. We're all still alive. We all still love and respect each other. There are no rifts in our family unit. None. We've not been torn apart. Nor broken down. We've weathered the storm and we've done a darn good job of it. And never, never will we be defeated. That word is not in my vocabulary."

"That's one of the reasons I love you so much," Bree said, her eyes drifting shut.

Ricky brushed a soft kiss over her lips. "You're tired, hon. Get some sleep, I'll be right here."

Her eyes opened again. "Where's Mom?"

"Dad forced her to go get some breakfast. They'll be back soon."

"I'm glad your dad takes such good care of her."

"Yeah. Me too. I love your mom."

"And I love your dad."

"See, there, baby, there is nothing broken about our family."

"How's our patient this morning?"

Ricky smiled at the doctor as he entered the room. "She's tired."

"Well, she lost a lot of blood, but her energy will return soon." He pulled the sheet down, pressed on her abdomen. Bree winced. "You may still have some cramping, but I think you're good to go. How

would you like to go home?"

"I'd love it."

"I think it will be for the best, though you have to promise to take it easy. Nothing strenuous. And," he looked markedly at Ricky, "and no sex for six weeks."

"Six weeks?" Bree exclaimed.

"That's correct. So, I'll sign your release papers." He nodded at Ricky. "Take care of her."

"Thank you, Doctor," Ricky said, offering his hand. "I intend to."

✞✞✞

Joel 2:12-13

""Even now," declares the Lord,
"return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping
and mourning." Rend your heart and not your garments.
Return to the Lord your God, for he is gracious and
compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love,
and he relents from sending calamity."

Chapter 16

"You're down to one man," Beth sneered, from her place on the floor near the bed in the dirty, smelly motel room. "If you can call Duke a man," she said, glaring at the large man.

Tommy kicked Beth in the thigh. "Shut up."

She tugged on her ropes which only caused her pain. Her wrists were raw, but sensing a possible end to the whole mess, she continued to probe. "What are you gonna do now, huh? The Kinos are not gonna let you near Jeffy. You can't even get close. Bree's little plan cost you another man. You're beaten, Tommy."

In a rage he came at her. She turned, huddled against the wall, protecting her face. He kicked her several times, until she pleaded for him to stop.

"Okay, okay, oh, please, please stop." She grunted in pain. She was saved by the breaking news on the television.

They both quieted to hear a smiling anchorwoman report that Breanna Adams had been transported to the hospital in the middle of the night.

"Well," Duke said, addressing Tommy. "Looks like Hector did a better job than we thought."

"Yeah, maybe," Tommy answered, then turned back to Beth, a look of determination on his face. "The Kinos will not win this time. They killed my brother and the kid is gonna die and you, Beth, are gonna be the one to kill her."

"That will never happen," Beth returned. When he didn't kick her again, she became worried. He was smiling.

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"That was Jillian Knight," Eric said as he hung up the phone.

Shelley looked up from the book that she and Jeffy were reading together. "And?"

"And in light of everything that's going down, she'd like to continue the interviews. She wants to come to the house."

Shelley frowned. "What did you tell her?"

He smiled. "I told her it sounded good, but I'd better check with
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my wife and get back to her."

"You did?"

"Of course. So, what do you have to say, Shelley girl?"

She sighed heavily. "I guess it would be okay. At least I don't have to get all dressed up."

"Okay, then, I'll arrange it."

Shelley nodded.

"No, Ricky, please, don't do this," Bree pleaded as they headed down the stairs. "Mom, you have to reason with him. Eric, you have to forbid him."

"Forbid me?" Ricky questioned loudly.

Eric's eyebrows rose. "Forbid him? From doing what?"

"From fighting. He doesn't have to do this. He's letting them goad him into it."

Ricky shook his head. "No one can goad me into doing anything I don't really want to do and I take that as an insult."

"You can take it any way you want, Ricky, just please don't do this. What if it's Tommy planning a way to get to you?"

"He already got to me, Bree, and it's not me he wants. But if it is me he wants, I'm more than willing to face him with my hands free. Do you think I'm gonna hide in a corner?"

"No, of course not. That's not what I meant."

Eric put his hands up to halt the conversation. "Would you mind telling me what you're talking about?"

Ricky turned toward his father. "Remember that paparazzo that gave me such a hard time a month or so ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's started a big rumor campaign saying I'm a fake. I don't really know how to fight. It's all movie magic. That's why an ex-con like Tommy Crane was able to take me so easily. He's challenged me to a bare-knuckles tournament."

"He wants to fight you?" Shelley asked. "Heck, *I'll* fight him."

Eric laughed. "Down girl."

Ricky chuckled. "Not him. He's lined up five guys, supposedly some of the top fighters in the state."

"And they want to challenge you?" Eric asked.

"Yes."

"Huh," Shelley said. "Either they're stupid or they really believe they have a chance."

Ricky smiled. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, Shell, but

everyone has a chance."

Eric eyed his son, his mind quickly going over the opportunity being presented. Ricky hadn't competed in a long time. He'd been a seven-time national champion at one point. He needed this. Especially after the beating he took at Tommy's hands, it would be good for him; actually good for the entire family. They would have something positive to focus on. A different goal other than catching Tommy. And there was also a certain amount of pride involved. He smiled at his son. "Get some protein in you and meet me on the beach."

Ricky grinned. Bree gasped, her hands on her hips. "Oh good grief, I don't believe this. You're encouraging him? What about his broken fingers? Just because the splints are gone doesn't mean they're completely healed."

"Hmm," Ricky said. "That could be a source of pain, so Dad, you'll have to do a really good job taping my hands."

Eric nodded. "Got it. Listen, ladies, it will actually be good for the family to appear together in public and watch Ricky kick some butt." He turned to Ricky. "And you will kick some butt."

"Oh, absolutely."

"Oh, goody," Jeffy said. "I want to be a cheerleader like the ones at Mark's football games. Can I be a cheerleader, Mom?"

"Sure you can, angelface. We'll get you a new outfit."

"Okay, and maybe Kimmie will want to do it with me. Oh, and I want some music to dance to. Bree, will you help me? You used to be a cheerleader didn't you? Mom says you were. I want you to help me. We can cheer together. Will you, Bree? Please?"

Bree softened and sighed. "Well now, I guess I can't turn that down, can I?" she said with a smile. Then she turned back to Ricky and Eric. "What if he loses?" Bree asked.

"Good grief, Bree," Ricky said, shaking his head. "Will you please have some faith in me?"

"I'm sorry. I will. I do. I just worry."

"Justin will be unhappy if you try to take over his job," Eric said. "So, when and where?" he asked Ricky.

"Three weeks. Saturday. At the *Rosewood Sports Arena*."

"Do you know the names of the competitors?"

"No, but I can get them."

Eric nodded. "Good. Let's get started. Shelley, when Mark and Joey get home from school, send them to us."

"Okay, and Eric, I was just thinking, ya know, we should put a

stipulation on this."

"What sort of stipulation?" Eric asked.

"We should do it only if all proceeds go toward Jeffy's project."

"Oh yay, yes Mommy, that would be awesome!"

Bree's brow furrowed. "Actually, that is a *really* good idea, Mom. I mean, I could get a few celebs involved to endorse the project. We could come up with some catchy phrase, charge a hefty admission. Get producers, get sponsors. I'll make some calls. "

"Good Bree," Shelley said. "And you'll help Jeffy cheer and we'll get some other celebrity cheerleaders, maybe some halftime type entertainment, this could turn into a really big deal."

"Absolutely, so you know what that means?" Bree said.

"No, what?" Shelley asked.

Bree turned to Ricky. "It means you'd better win."

Ricky shook his head as he left the room with his father. "As if there was a question."

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Ricky sprawled on his back in the wet sand, his chest heaving, sweat pouring from his forehead. Next to him, his youngest stepbrother Joey lay panting and beside him, Mark lay doing the same.

"The three of you just got your butts kicked by a forty-eight-year-old man," Jason said.

"A forty-eight-year-old Grand Master," Joey returned.

"Get up," Eric, the Grandmaster ordered.

Joey started to argue, but Ricky shook his head at him. "Yes sir," the trio said.

They rose. "For lying around like that, I want fifty pushups right now. Mark, you're excused since you won your game last night. When you finish, Joey, get the kicking pads and run Ricky through the mill. Then Ricky take a water break, then you got Jason one on one, then Joey, then all three on one. Get to it."

Eric moved aside and watched as Ricky and Joey finished their punishment and worked on the kicking pads. Jason, Mark and Justin stood silently next to Eric. When he was in teaching mode, no one dared speak unless spoken to. They had an audience. Jason's agents who were assigned to the men were having a blast watching the training that had taken place all week.

"What was that?" Eric demanded.

"Uh, a fake roundhouse to a spinning crescent," Rick muttered.

Eric rolled his eyes.
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Rick stood breathing hard, hands on hips, waiting to hear what he'd done poorly.

"It looks like you're moving in slow motion. And your hip is turned out. Do it again."

Ricky focused, spun and kicked, this time knocking the kicking pad out of Joey's hands.

"That's better. Don't get sloppy. And again."

Eric watched and coached and taught and pushed. When it came time for the sparring, Jason wore Ricky down, but Ricky came out on top. Joey held his own for a few minutes. Against the three of them Ricky struggled with fatigue but could've been called the victor. Eric, however, didn't see it that way.

"One week down already Rick. Not much time left. You have a lot of work to do. You, Mark and Joey go have dinner. After dinner I want to see you. You need some mind work."

The three young men lined up quickly and bowed to the Master. Eric bowed back. He turned to Jason's men. "Any volunteers to spar tomorrow?"

They all raised their hands. "Good. 10:00 AM."

His hand scratched his chin as he eyed Justin and Jason. "What do you guys think?"

"He's gonna kill someone," Justin said.

Jason grinned. "I can't wait for this thing, man. Ricky is gonna kick major butt. I can't imagine there's anyone who could beat him right now. You're not thinking otherwise, are you?"

Eric smiled. "No. Just wanted to be sure I'm not doing that fatherly pride, non-objective kind of thing."

"You're not. Ten more days of training and Ricky is gonna be a freakin' machine," Jason said.

"This is really good for him," Eric said.

"It's been good for the entire family," Justin added. "Once Bree got her friends involved, the positive press has sent this event into prime time. I'm sure the little reporter who began this thing is not happy with how it's turning out."

"He wasn't a reporter, but, speaking of reporters, or uh, journalists, how'd it go with Jillian the other day?" Jason asked.

"It went well. She and Shelley hit it off. Jillian is in seventh heaven with all the escapades going on around here. She doesn't think her article will be able to cover it, so she wants to do a book. We're considering it."

"A book about what Tommy's doing to your family?"

"A book about the family including the whole Crane brothers episode in our lives."

"They could make a movie about all this stuff," Justin said.

"She mentioned that," Eric said with a smile.

Jason nodded. "Well, this little competition has been a great help to lift spirits around here and to get everyone's minds off Tommy and his threats. Nevertheless, I've spoken with my men to make sure they don't let the lighter air make them forget the importance of not letting their guard down."

Eric smiled. "That would be wise of everyone." He turned to Justin. "You ready to take your punishment?"

Justin nodded. "Don't get cocky, Master Kino." He pulled his shirt over his head, revealing a strong, trained physique. He bowed. "After you."

Eric and Justin squared off as Jason and his men bandied insults and cheers.

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His eyes opened the moment she opened his door. He'd been sleeping alone in his own room for three reasons. One being, it was too difficult to sleep near her and not have her. Two, he was trying to keep God's law. And three, he was exhausted and really needed to sleep. He'd trained hard over the past weeks, given it his all so that he wouldn't let his family down, so that he wouldn't let her down. She'd seen his movies. She'd seen him train the boys or spar in a class. Yet, Bree had never seen him fight, not a real fight. Was it wrong of him to want to impress her?

He wasn't worried about being focused. He'd learned that long ago. He wasn't worried about getting tired or not knowing how to handle the two bigger guys. He wasn't worried that the event was being televised, that it had become a big moneymaker. His father had always seen to it that he was completely at ease, focused, and at peak. Now, he just needed to rest.

He watched her come forward in the dark, peeking down at him to see if he was awake. He lifted the cover and she smiled and crawled in beside him, snuggling up under his chin. He sighed. Man, but it felt good to have her close. He wrapped his arms around her.

"Well, hello there," he said.

"Hey."

"There you go again, with that southern thing."
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"Well, sorry if that bothers you, Ricky, but I just needed to see you. I am so lonely."

"I'm glad you came. And I don't mind the southern thing, it's just that it gets to me."

"Gets to you?"

"Yeah, makes my heart beat a thousand beats a minute."

She placed her hand on his chest. "Wow, you weren't lying."

"I never lie."

She sighed. "I wish the six weeks were over."

He sighed. He'd never spoken to her about his spiritual beliefs. Of course, she knew they were very much into God, and Jesus, and prayer, and honesty. She'd even attended church with the family a few times long ago. But things had been so crazy lately, he hadn't had a chance to explain to her that he really shouldn't be having sex with her until they were married. It was kind of hard to talk about that when he hadn't actually proposed— yet. It was also hard to do since he'd already carried her to this bed and made love to her and gotten her pregnant. Sin had its consequences. He'd prayed, repented from the casual sex he'd had that had drained his soul and brought him home. Then he'd turned around and taken Bree. Then he'd prayed and repented— again. But now he needed to explain to her that he loved her enough to wait, that sex was not what he wanted from her, well, that it wasn't all he wanted from her.

"Hello?"

"Sorry," he mumbled. He was just too tired to get into a big discussion tonight. "We're only a little over halfway through the six weeks, so put it out of your mind."

"Will you at least kiss me?"

"Gladly."

His fingers lifted her chin, he leaned forward and kissed her softly. She purred.

He pulled away at the sound, smiled at her. "You taste good."

"Oh, Ricky, I want you so badly."

"I want you too, baby, more than you can know."

"I feel fine."

"No."

"Really, I'm back to normal. No bleeding. No pain."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"So, it's okay to make love to me."

"No."

"Ricky," she whined.

"Bree, stop, please."

"Ricky, I need you."

"I need you too."

"Then do it. Just do it."

"No."

"Why?" she asked in exasperation.

"Doc says six weeks."

"So? Do we really care what the doctor says?"

"Not really, but let's say that I make love to you and there is a problem. I hurt you, or you get an infection or you get pregnant before the six weeks is up. It's not like we could hide that from the fam. I would have to answer to your mother and even worse to my father. They will want me to explain how I could say I love you and then be so irresponsible as to put you in danger simply because my hormones were running wild. I want you, Bree, but I'm a man, not an animal. I should be able to control my urges."

"I would tell them it wasn't you. It was me."

He laughed. "You realize that argument would be extremely weak in the presence of our parents? Oh, I can just see it now. 'It's not my fault, it's Bree. She seduced me.' Oh yeah. That would fly."

She sighed. "Of course, you're right."

Ricky kissed her forehead. "Bree, I have to get some rest now."

"You want me to leave?"

"No. Stay here with me, please, but I have to sleep."

"Okay. Sleep."

They curled up together in the spoon position. Bree closed her eyes and nestled her hips back against Ricky.

He sighed.

"Oh, Ricky, I'm sorry. I'm not meaning to tease you."

"Then be still."

~~~~

Tommy paced, ranting and raving as he watched the news. How he hated the acclaim the Kinos receive on a constant basis. Now here they are participating in this event as if he were nothing to worry about. It was a real slap in the face and it was making him crazy. Well, while Ricky is busy smiling pretty for the cameras, Tommy intended to send him a message too. He called Duke.

"What ya need, Tommy?"

Tommy smiled. "I've got a project for you."
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"Good, I'm sick of sitting."

"I need you to go into LA. I want you to take down that friend of Kino who's doing all the snooping."

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Shelley opened her eyes as the drop of water hit her face. Smiling, she stretched and reached up to grab Eric's head and bring him down for a luxurious kiss. "Just like old times," she purred.

"Yes, though I bet this time you're a little more relaxed."

"Actually, it's just the opposite. I'm worried sick."

Eric shook his head. "I'm not sure why everyone is so worried? Rick is the best. I've not seen his equal and I'm not saying that because he's my son."

"I'll just be happy when it's all over."

"Well, do me a favor and don't let him know you have anything but confidence in him."

She drew a deep breath. "I do have confidence in him. After all, he was trained by you."

"Where's Jeffy?" Eric asked.

"Bree came to get her. They're working on Jeffy's little dance."

"Then we're all alone?"

Shelley smiled. "Yes we are. Lock the door."

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What now was being called 'The Kino Challenge' had turned into a huge event. They would be playing to a sellout crowd and that crowd had to pay a pretty penny for their seats. As soon as the Kino entourage arrived Eric left to see to some last minute details while the rest of the family remained by Ricky's side.

Ricky stopped to speak with students, fans and friends. All of them left him with the same command. "Kick some butt, Kino."

Ricky turned when he heard a deep voice call his name. He looked up with a grin to see Toby Nash, the famous country singing legend, approach holding an adorable toddler in his arms. Caroline, his beautiful wife of three years, walked by his side.

"Hey, man" Toby said, gripping Ricky's hand, then pulling him in for a quick hug and a pat on the back.

"Toby, good to see ya. Bree told me you were coming."

"Wouldn't miss this and I wanted to see you alive and well."

"Caro," Bree said, taking her hands. "It's so good to see you."

"You too, Bree. It's amazing, isn't it, how small the world is? When I met you way back when you were in middle school, who

would've known that you would become America's favorite actress?"

"And who would've known that you would one day run the nation's top dance school, plus become a choreographer for *Celebrity Dancing* and for *America Can Dance?*"

Shelley stepped forward and hugged Caroline. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too, Mrs. Kino."

"Shelley. You must call me Shelley."

Caroline smiled. "I promise to try."

"And who is this?" Shelley asked, taking the small hand that reached out toward her.

"This," Toby answered as he bounced her on his hip, "is Princess Grace. Gracie for short."

Shelley laughed. "Hello there Gracie."

The child beamed and reached for Shelley. Toby relinquished his hold and Gracie flew willingly into Shelley's arms.

"That is amazing," Caroline said. "She's usually quite the snob."

"No she's not," Shelley said in a sing song voice. "Oh, no you're not, are you sweetie."

"I want to meet her," Jeffy demanded.

Bree stepped forward then, making quick introductions to the rest of the family. Toby Nash and Ricky had become friends several years ago when they'd done a charity event for breast cancer together. When Toby had been arrested three years ago for a murder he didn't commit, Ricky had let him know he was there for him and willing to do anything Toby needed. Luckily, it hadn't gone that far.

The 'small world' thing came into play when Bree realized the girl Toby Nash was engaged to was the same high school girl who'd come to teach a dance to Bree when she was in middle school. She only knew her for a few weeks but Caro stayed in the minds of both Bree and Shelley because they'd recognized the bruises on her as signs of abuse.

"So, you two staying out of trouble?" Ricky asked.

"So far," Toby said. "Caroline keeps me straight. And that little one," he said, pointing to the cherub in Shelley's arms.

Ricky smiled. "They're worth it, aren't they?"

"Oh, Rick, if you only knew. Man, I never thought life could be so good, and in about seven months, it's gonna be even better."

"Another one? Wow, that's great, man," Ricky said, eyeing Bree, wondering if she felt a pull at the loss of their child. "So, Toby, I hear

you're gonna sing tonight."

"Yeah, well, Bree is hard to turn down, so, yes, but even better, Caroline is gonna dance with the cheerleaders."

Bree smiled. "Caro promised to let us focus a few dances around her since she's the pro and we're just trying to stay on our feet."

"She's one heck of a dancer," Toby added. "I've been watching some of the moves she has planned and y'all are in for a big treat."

"Y'all? As in we all?" Ricky questioned, making fun of Toby's southern accent.

"Watch it, Kino, or I might get into the ring with you."

Ricky smiled at the large man. Toby was a six-foot-four, two-hundred-twenty pound farm boy who could hold his own. "You name the time and place and I'll be there."

"Oh, my, goodness, you guys, too much testosterone for me," Bree quoted from one of her favorite movies. "Come on, girls, let's go get into our cheer uniforms."

"Hold up just a minute, okay, Bree?" Ricky asked.

She stopped. "Sure."

"Well," Toby said. "I'd better let you get doing whatever it is you do before something like this. Kick some butt, man."

"You can bet on it," Ricky returned.

Shelley gave Gracie back to Toby. "We're all sitting over there, near the cheerleaders. We've reserved seats for you. Come on, I'll be happy to escort a handsome man and his little princess to their seat."

Ricky watched them leave and quickly pulled Bree to him. He knew he shouldn't ask because there were cameras everywhere, but he couldn't help it. "A kiss for luck?"

She glanced around. She'd already made the decision to love him no matter what, so, here goes. Wrapping her arms tightly around his neck she laid one on. The camera flashes were blinding.

She pulled away, pushed some hair off his forehead. "Don't get hit," she quoted.

He laughed. "Better advice has not been given."

Steve joined him as Bree walked away. "Now that was a sight. Do you realize you're about to be Hollywood's new power couple?"

Ricky rolled his eyes. "Like that's important. Don't distract me, Stevie boy. I'm focused."

"Good, focus on this. I have a new source who swears he can give me Tommy's location. I'll have to meet with him sometime tonight, so if I suddenly have to leave, that's why."

"Is it costing you money?"

"Don't worry, I'll bill your dad."

"This is great news," Ricky added.

"Yep. I'm hoping sometime tonight, or tomorrow at the latest, we'll have Tommy-boy in custody. Now, go kick some butt."

"Plan on it."

Ricky surveyed the area. Jason's man, Agent Barry Briscoe, sat right behind Shelley and Angel right beside her. Jeff Davis and Cole Faulkner escorted Bree and Jeffy and Kimmie to the women's locker rooms. They would inspect the area before they allowed the girls inside and would be waiting just outside while they dressed. Unfortunately, the agents would have to watch from afar when Bree and Jeffy go off to join the other celebrity cheerleaders to do their little thing. A reason for several arguments with Bree over the past week, which Ricky lost.

His eyes moved around the arena. Jason and Special Agent Dixon were in the security control booth. They would detain anyone fitting Tommy's height and weight no matter the age, infirmity, or sex. Still, Ricky didn't think he would show. Not this time.

Everyone's bags were searched as they came in. Everyone had to pass through a metal detector. He breathed. Time to focus on his art and let Jason take care of security for the duration. This is what he did best. He nodded to his brothers. "Mark, Joey, you ready to come help me stretch out?"

"Honored, bro."

"Let's do it."

In the locker room Ricky took his time dressing. He wore a simple white Gi, over the fitted shorts he would fight in. His black belt with several gold stripes was wrapped neatly around his waist.

His credentials would be read publicly for the benefit of the television audience. They would include his belts in Karate, Jujitsu, Ninjutsu, Judo and Aikido. They would also include his training in Gung Fu and weaponry. They would talk about Zendo Ryu and the fact that means his sixth dan status in Zendo Ryu meant he was a master in all of the above listed martial arts.

As he stretched, there was a knock and the door opened. It was one of his competitors. Mark and Joey immediately blocked his way.

The young man, approximately twenty-five was slightly smaller than Ricky, with dark hair and bright blue eyes. He nodded at Mark and Joey. "I just wanted to shake his hand," he said.

Ricky stood. "It's okay guys." He moved forward.

The young man bowed and extended his hand. “It’s an honor, Master Kino.”

Ricky bowed, shook hands. “Let’s see, you are Gavin Jones, brown hair, blue eyes, five-eleven, one-seventy-three. You’re a second degree black belt in Karate. You’ve won eight gold medals doing the tournament circuit both here in California and nationally. You’ve just married and opened a Karate studio of your own.”

“Wow. You really did your homework, didn’t you?”

“Have to, to stay alive.”

“Look, I just wanted you to know that I accepted the opportunity to fight you today mostly so that I could meet you. You’ve been a hero of mine for a very long time.”

“Well, I guess that’s one way to meet someone,” Ricky said.

“Yes, well, it will be worth it. I’m sure I’ll learn a great deal.”

Ricky nodded. “I am truly humbled and I appreciate the show of honor and respect, so, please do me a favor. Fight me hard. Fight me as mean and lethal as you can. Fight me with all you can muster. This is how you can show me honor.”

The man bowed. “I’ll give it my all.”

Ricky nodded and watched as the man took his leave. Ricky realized he’d sounded cocky, but he didn’t mean it that way. He’d been sincere. This man would be his first fight and Ricky intended to make it short and sweet. Eric had decided the strategy for the bouts and knew the only way Ricky could make it through all five battles was to keep them short which probably won’t be possible for the bigger guys, but should be probable for the first two bouts.

The second fight would be with Ho Sun, the tiger. He was a smaller man of Chinese descent, five feet-six inches, one-fifty. Small but quick. The third was Neal Foster, ex-navy seal. Six-foot-two, two-hundred-fifty pounds. A bouncer from the San Francisco area. Slow, strong, tough as nails. Ricky would have to show some patience during that fight.

The last two were extreme fighting competitors. Big, mean, strong, fast, but they didn’t use their art. They didn’t use their training. Once they were in the ring they focused strictly on a takedown and forcing their opponents into submission. Ricky was no stronger than they were. It was his speed that would be their downfall. They would be hard pressed to take him down. And then what?

Ricky stretched, hydrated himself, warmed up and made his way out to the waiting crowd behind his brothers.

A roar came from the audience as he emerged from the locker rooms headed toward the ring in the center of the arena. They passed the ring and made their way over to his camp.

His eyes scanned the other opponents quickly. He bowed his head at them ever so slightly. Three returned the honorable gesture, the two smaller men and the Navy Seal.

"Ricky," Jeffy yelled. She broke free from the group of cheerleaders and ran across the floor toward him as the crowd laughed. He bent down and swung her up into his arms.

"Hi, kiddo, don't you look cute in your little outfit? And I..."

His words stuck in his throat as he looked up to see Bree approaching in the same outfit. She wore a short, pleated, white skirt and a white tank that had a black 'K' in the center. She had her hair swept up in a ponytail. Her long legs were well-muscled. He guessed the 'light workouts' Bree mentioned did accomplish something after all. His eyes met hers and he was sure from the smile she wore that she knew exactly what effect she was having on him.

His eyes traveled briefly over Caroline, whose dancer's body could make men drop to their knees. Eyebrows raised he glanced toward his friend, Toby, whose eyes followed each swing of his wife's skirt. Ricky smiled.

The cheerleaders came forward, circled around him and Jeffy and gave a group cheer before they left him. Taking a page from Toby, he watched them walk away. It took a minute before he realized they had 'The Kino Challenge' emblazoned on the back of their shirts.

"Okay, then, do you think you can get your mind back to where it's supposed to be?" Eric asked sarcastically. "Or do you want to get your butt handed to you in the very first bout?"

Ricky turned. Breathed. "Oh, hi Dad. Didn't see you."

"I realize that. You need to refocus."

Ricky nodded. "Got it."

While he waited for the event to begin, he went into his stretch. Eric watched as the crowd murmured and the cameras panned. His son was a light. Everything he did, people watched. He couldn't make a move without having someone comment, take a picture or write a story. There would be plenty to write about after today.

Eric glanced toward his family. Shelley was being interviewed. Jeffy and the other cheerleaders sat close, a prerequisite of being a cheerleader, due to security measures. During the introductions, while the other competitors jumped around, shaking out nerves, loosening up,

Ricky remained completely still. Each competitor's credentials were read as the crowd cheered.

When Ricky stepped forward, the cheer became a roar. Ricky stepped back, placed his hand over his heart as the national anthem was sung by the most recent runner up on *American Idol*.

Afterward, the rules were reiterated for the benefit of the audience. No weapons are allowed. The only protection is a mouth guard and taped hands. Each bout consisted of three rounds. Points were awarded for body displacement. A contender could win by points or knockout. The rules for punches, there are no rules. The rules for submission, if a contender taps out, you must back off immediately. At the bell you must back off immediately. The referee's decisions are final. Master Kino will be allowed a rest period between each bout of not more than thirty minutes.

As Ricky listened, he limbered up, ending with a side split to make sure he was still loose. Eric rubbed his shoulders. "You ready?"

"Yes sir."

Together they bowed their heads and prayed. Then Ricky stepped back, untied his belt and pulled his uniform top over his head. He knew, but didn't care, that cameras were zeroing in on any scars remaining from his abduction experience. He quickly removed his uniform pants and was called to the ring to shake hands with and bow to his opponent, Gavin Jones.

When the fight began the crowd went crazy. Ricky allowed Gavin time to throw some punches, but not to land them. Then just before the first bell, he knocked him out with a spinning hook kick. Now he was warmed up.

He helped Gavin to his feet, bowed and promised to come and visit his new studio. He joined his father and Mark and Joey. "I'm warm, I don't want to wait before the next one."

Eric nodded. "I'll go arrange it."

Ricky looked up as the cheerleaders climbed into the ring and performed a choreographed dance with Caroline mesmerizing the audience. He smiled. It was obvious Caroline knew what she was doing and the other celebrity cheerleaders had only had a few weeks to prepare. No one would care because all of them could melt ice with a look. Jeffy and Kimmie, on the other hand were just too cute. They were all having a grand time. They finished and headed back toward the stands. Bree made a detour to him.

"Congratulations, Ricky. You were really good. You had me

worried though, when you were having trouble getting in a punch."

He didn't answer, merely shook his head as he folded himself in half to stretch his hamstrings.

"Uh, Bree," Joey said. "He wasn't having trouble. He was helping the man to save face."

She frowned. "Oh."

"Stay here with us, or, better yet, go sit next to Justin," Mark offered. "Get him to explain to you what's happening. It's not always as it appears."

"Okay. Sorry I said something so completely dumb."

Ricky grabbed her around the waist. "Bree, not knowing something doesn't make you dumb and you know that, but I really need a favor, sweetheart."

"What's that?"

"I need you to be quiet. You're messing with my mind."

Her chin lifted. "Oh. Well, okay. Fine. I'll go sit with Justin."

He watched the swing of her skirt as she turned and walked briskly away.

"You can make it up to her later," Mark said with a laugh.

Eric returned. "Get ready." A second later, Ricky was called to the ring.

✝✝✝

Joshua 1:9

"Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the LORD your God is with you wherever you go."

Chapter 17

Ho Sun was indeed a tiger. He was skilled and he was quick. Ricky found himself enjoying the competition. One of Ricky's trademarks was his speed. 'Lightning' was a nickname some of his cohorts called him. To find someone just as fast was challenging, but Ricky was having no trouble keeping up. Ho Sun used only traditional Chinese Gung Fu. Ricky was about to teach him the positive aspects of Zendo Ryu, but first, he decided, he would give the crowd a thrill and let them see just how fast a martial artist could move.

The rapid hand play between himself and Ho Sun as they punched and blocked, kicked and blocked brought the crowd to their feet. Ricky actually considered letting the match go another round.

"What the heck is he doing?" Justin said, a worried expression on his face.

"What do you mean?" Bree asked. "It looks like he's doing great. He's really fast, isn't he?"

Justin looked over at her. "Uh, yeah, Bree, he's fast. Have you never seen Ricky fight?"

She shrugged and frowned. "Not really. Our paths have barely crossed in the past several years."

"Well, you are in for a treat. Ricky is amazing. He's one of the best I've ever seen, maybe *the* best."

"Then why were you acting so worried a minute ago?"

"He's supposed to be conserving energy. He's not supposed to let these first two fights go longer than one round."

"Does he have a choice in that? I mean, this guy seems to be keeping up with him fairly well."

"He's fast, but he has no power. In Gung Fu that isn't terribly important because they are taught to use their opponent's strength against themselves through give and take, expansion and contraction and..." He stopped, smiled. "You look confused."

"You seem to be talking in riddles."

Justin sighed. "Okay, well, anyway, it will be difficult for this guy to have an advantage over Ricky since he too is trained in Gung Fu,

and Ricky has the advantage of being very, very strong."

"Okay, but you said this guy has no power, how can you tell?"

"Watch, if Ricky will let him land a punch, notice Ricky's body never moves. That's because there is no body displacement." Justin punched his hand to demonstrate what he meant. "Now, watch how Ho Sun's body is knocked back when Ricky lands a punch."

"Oh, I see," Bree said with a smile.

Justin shook his head. "Rick's got about ten seconds to end the fight or he goes to the second round."

Just as Justin finished his sentence, Ricky spun, kicked to the abdomen, spun again, kicked to head. Ho Sun went down. Knockout. Ricky knelt beside him to make sure he was okay.

"Wow," Bree said as she jumped up, cheering long and hard with the rest of the crowd. "I gotta go do my thing. Be right back." She turned to wave Jeffy down from Shelley's side and they joined the other cheerleaders for a silly cheer Bree and the others had made up.

Ricky spoke to Ho Sun in his native language. "You honor your art and your teacher."

They bowed. Ricky left the ring as the cheerleaders entered. He winked at Bree. Breathing heavier than he expected, he joined his father and drank some electro water.

"I understand why you let it go on, but you may regret it later," Eric said. "Sit. Rest," he ordered.

Ricky obeyed.

"Close your eyes. Breathe in. Let it out. Relax. Breathe in. Good. Let it out. Energy fills your mind and body. Each cell, each molecule, each atom down to your DNA is brimming with energy, ready to act as you beckon it. Breathe. Your body is filled with the bright, white, light of Christ. That light fills you. Breathe. Good. You are blinding fast, you are powerful, you know your opponents thoughts, you cannot be defeated. You cannot be defeated because God is with you."

Eric grabbed a towel from Joey, knelt down in front of Ricky, wiped his face and neck. "Stay loose, Son. The next one will be a challenge. He's big, but slow which you already know. Just think of it as chopping down a tree. He's an ex-SEAL so he'll instinctively go after throat, eyes, knees. Protect yourself."

Ricky nodded. Mark handed him a fresh bottle of water while Joey checked the tape on his hands. "Are your fingers hurting much?" Joey asked.

"They're hurting like hell," Ricky muttered.

"So what?" Mark said.

"Exactly," Joey and Ricky answered. They grinned at each other.

Eric smiled. How he loved his family. He glanced up at his beautiful wife and daughter, then over to where Bree sat next to Justin. Life with these people, he thought, is pure heaven.

They called Ricky to the ring. He stood, bounced around to loosen up and went to the ring.

He looked up at his opponent, Neal Foster. "Man, you are big, aren't ya?" Ricky said.

The man smiled.

Ricky backed up, bowed. They bumped fists.

The crowd seemed to hold a collective breath as they waited for the bout to begin. The moment it did, Neal Foster leapt at Ricky, swinging down at Ricky's face. Ricky dodged, hopped away, smiled. "A swing and a miss," he muttered.

Next charge Ricky side-stepped the man and elbowed him in the ribs as he stumbled to the side. The crowd cheered.

This continued throughout the first round. Ricky didn't waste his strength trying to take him out yet. He was patiently chopping at the tree. He would dodge whatever Neal threw and then deliver one or two responses. Dodge, hammer fist to the back of his head, dodge, spinning back kick to the face, dodge, backhand to the stomach, elbow to the face. That one drew blood and pissed Neal off. Bad decision on Ricky's part. Luckily the round came to an end.

Ricky went to his corner for the first time since the challenge had begun. Eric handed him a towel, Joey squirted water in his mouth, then over his face.

"You made him mad," Eric said calmly. "I suggest you be careful when you go back."

Ricky nodded, breathing hard. It was time.

Neal went straight for Ricky's throat. Rick crossed his hands in front of the punch to protect himself, grabbed Neal's fist and twisted. Neal dropped to his knees, but his free hand drove up into Ricky's groin. Ricky saw it coming, shifted, but still took a glancing blow.

He rolled away as the crowd murmured. He hadn't been hit that hard, yet the nausea quickly engulfed him. Realizing he was flashing back to his abduction and torture, he tried to still his mind. He swallowed hard, got to his feet quickly. His opponent had a wicked gleam in his eye. Well, that's enough of that, Ricky thought. He moved in close and went to work. Neal got in a few punches, yet if the judges

were to call it correctly, Ricky was doing all the punching.

Neal threw a roundhouse and Ricky grabbed his leg. Standing with his back to Neal, and Neal's leg in his hand as if Ricky were playing the guitar, Ricky axe kicked straight up and over his own head. His foot bashed into Neal's forehead. Once, twice, three times. Ricky was about to finish him off when the bell rang.

Ricky went back to his corner. Neal hobbled back to his.

"Third and last round, Ricky. How ya holdin' up?" Mark asked.

"Little tired, bro, but doin' okay. This freak is tough."

"Yeah, but you are the lumberjack."

Ricky grinned. "My new mantra. I am the lumberjack. I am the lumberjack."

Eric was not so pleased. "You had a clear groin shot when you had his leg and you didn't take it. Will you let what Tommy did to you affect the outcome today?"

Ricky stood and turned to look into his father's eyes. "No sir, you're right. What Tommy did to me affected my choice. I won't let that happen again." He bowed to honor his father.

His father nodded and returned the honor. Ricky returned to the center of the ring.

The man was big and strong and the few punches he got in hurt, but Ricky's punches were doing just as much, if not more damage. They went all the way to the end and the two of them went back to their corners to await the judge's decision. When they were called back, the decision was unanimous for Ricky Kino. Ricky immediately hugged Neal and then extended his hand.

Neal smiled and shook it. "You're the real deal, man."

Ricky smiled and tapped his hand over his heart to let Neal know how much he appreciated the sentiment.

Back down at their base Ricky sat, feeling fatigued. Eric worked on repairing the tape on Ricky's hands. He winced in pain.

"You may have re-broken your ring finger," Eric said, sighing. "It's swelling. Can you move it?"

Ricky wiggled his fingers. "I'm okay." He accepted the protein bar Joey offered, along with a raw fruit punch laced with vitamins and minerals. He ate and drank with his eyes closed. He could hear the cheerleaders doing their thing. He would definitely take his allotted full thirty minutes this time, and it may turn out to be more since there was a "halftime show" arranged, beginning with another song from the *American Idol* singer and ending with Toby Nash. In between the two

singers would be a board breaking demonstration from a school run by one of Eric's old students.

He opened his eyes as the cheerleaders left the ring. They passed him, each blowing kisses. He winked. They weren't supposed to show him any favoritism over the other competitors, but he knew who at least four of them, Bree, Jeffy, Kimmie and Caroline, were rooting for. Ricky eyed his remaining two opponents.

They had the distinct advantage of watching and learning, besides not being tired, though that part didn't really matter. Ricky had fought tired before. The energy would come when he needed it. He would not be defeated. The one he would fight next gave him a wicked smile, his gold tooth gleaming in the light.

Ricky's mind brought his profile into view; Roberto Vargas, one-time extreme fighting champion. A judo black belt, Vargas would go for a quick take down. Ricky needed energy to avoid that. He closed his eyes again, and looked for the light.

It was his friend Steve, who brought him out of his trance. "Well, it figures just when things are about to get interesting, I get the call. I gotta go, bro. Hopefully, by the time you're done here, I'll have the information we need to get Tommy."

Ricky stood. "Be careful, man." They clasped hands.

"Always. Finish this up quickly."

"You got it," Ricky said.

Ricky's energy surged. They would have Tommy soon. He concentrated on his next battle. Time to kick butt.

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Vargas refused to shake hands. Ricky didn't really care. It was supposed to be a means of intimidation on Vargas' part, however, Ricky was definitely not intimidated. They squared off and circled each other. Ricky's eyes never left his opponent's. When Vargas finally dove for Ricky's feet it was easy to simply dive over him, roll and come back up. The second time Ricky did this, he kicked Vargas in the face as he passed.

Ricky stayed on his toes. In his opinion, the extreme fighters lose the focus on the art. And fighting was an art. Most want to take you down and get you into a submission hold until you tap out. It was a winning tactic. They will also try to weaken you with punches when they can. Ricky didn't intend for that to happen. That's why it was such a surprise when an accidental flailing of Vargas' hand caught Ricky on the side of the head. For a split second the pain blinded him. Rick was
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confused because it wasn't even a direct hit. He shouldn't be affected to this extent. Vargas took advantage of that second and dove at Ricky's legs.

Ricky was still able to avoid the take down, but they finally did come to blows. Ricky punched to the midsection, spun and kicked to the knee. Vargas blocked the kick and aimed a punch at Ricky's face. Ricky blocked, but Vargas' arm slid off Ricky's sweaty forearm and rammed into Ricky's forehead.

Ricky stumbled backward, landing hard on the mat. Blood spurted from his head. The crowd was on their feet. The referee waved Vargas off. Ricky struggled to stand. The referee was about to call the fight a TKO, but Ricky shook him off. He got his bearings, stormed to his own corner, said something to his father and the boys, grabbed a towel, made his way over to the referee, and pointed at Vargas.

The ref motioned for Vargas and his trainer to come to the center of the ring. There was yelling and cursing, Vargas' trainer calling Ricky a coward, a liar, a crybaby. Ricky tried to wait patiently while the referee attempted to reason with Vargas. Ricky's patience ran out when Vargas began slurring the Kino name.

Quick as lightning Ricky wrapped the towel around Vargas' wrist, grabbed the man's arm and held it securely under his own, as Ricky began to tear at the thick tape on Vargas' hand, all the while the referee tried to reason with the star. When Vargas' trainer tried to interfere, Eric was suddenly there, holding him back, while Mark and Joey kept the rest of Vargas' posse out of the ring. It took a minute, but when Ricky was done the crowd gasped in surprise. It was difficult to miss the brass knuckles.

Ricky and Eric stepped back. The referee moved in quickly along with security. Vargas was disqualified. Ricky went down to sit while a doctor saw to the cut on his forehead. He hydrated himself. Breathed. Meditated.

As much as he'd been enjoying himself, he was ready to get this over with. He thought how this had once been a way of life for him. It had been the tournament circuit that got him recognized when he'd been just six years old and he'd made a few little movies. He'd continued with the tournament circuit until after his mother died when he was eleven years old. By that time he was a much sought after child actor/martial artist. He continued in the circuit in between movie shoots until just before his nineteenth birthday. He'd been offered a big movie deal and quit the circuit to give the film studio his all. He'd never

looked back.

He had helped his father several times when he instructed MART competitors. The last one had been Shelley. Then life had changed with Jeffy's birth. No way would his father leave Shelley and his new baby daughter for an entire year while he trained a MART student. Now life was about to change again, hopefully, if Bree would consent to be his wife.

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Steve parked his car and walked down to the end of the dark alleyway. Weasel, a small middle-aged man with greasy hair moved out of the shadows. He'd been the one to come forward with the last address for Tommy. Steve hoped the information was as good this time. Weasel moved forward.

"Hey man, you got my money?"

"I got it. Tell me what you know."

"Money first."

Blowing out a breath, Steve pulled a wad out of his back pocket. Counted out one thousand dollars. He would've paid ten thousand to make the trouble stop for the Kinos.

Weasel made a big deal about counting the money.

"Okay," Steve said impatiently. "Whatcha got?"

Weasel looked up at him, suddenly and decidedly nervous. Red flag. Steve immediately backed away and turned. A large man stepped forward, his white teeth gleaming in the dark.

"So, little man, the word's out that you want to know the whereabouts of Tommy Crane."

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Bree's heart was in her throat. The entire competition had been an eye opener for her. How could she have lived in a house full of martial artists and not understood the art? Justin had helped her immensely, explaining why Ricky did what he did, why at times he punched instead of kicked, and other times kicked instead of punched. She learned why it was important that he avoid a takedown, how much training and dedication it took to be as good as Ricky. He told her the brass knuckles shouldn't have mattered, and if Ricky had been fresh, Vargas would never have even landed a punch and he told her that fatigue was about to play a major factor in the outcome of the last bout and that they knew that would be the case.

In the first round, Ricky's opponent, Denny Flores, came out with guns blazing. It was his chance to take full advantage of being fresh.

Ricky had held his own but had received as good as he gave. Denny was large, and fast. The second round the crowd was on their feet and stayed that way. Denny had taken Ricky down, but Ricky finally made it back to his feet before any major damage could be done.

Bree watched his face. He was tired. Sweat poured from his body. She glanced over at Eric and even his brow was creased. Denny went for another take down and Ricky sidestepped and stomped on his head. As Denny rose up Ricky was able to punch to the face twice before Denny could right himself.

Unfortunately, Ricky had no energy left and he couldn't move away fast enough. Denny lunged at him, wrapped his meaty arm around Ricky's neck and squeezed. Rick knew he'd made a huge mistake, but no way was he tapping out. He purposely bent his knees and sank down until Denny's knees hit the mat. Everyone thought it was over, but once Ricky felt Denny's weight change to his knees he kicked up and flipped his legs over Denny's back, slid them down to his neck. Now Ricky was on top, curled into an impossible position which is why his father was always preaching flexibility.

Ricky wrapped his legs around Denny's throat. He squeezed his muscular thighs. Denny's hold around Ricky's throat loosened. Denny rolled to his back, throwing Ricky's head against the floor. Ricky drew a deep breath and squeezed his thighs. He could feel Denny beginning to relax as he was losing consciousness. Ricky suddenly let him go and rolled away.

Justin sprang to his feet. "What the heck? What is he doing?"

Jason did the same from inside the security booth. And Shelley. And Mark and Joey.

Not Eric, though. He understood. Ricky wanted to finish this on his own terms. He'd always hated the takedown and submit style of fighting. He didn't want to finish like that. The entire competition had been about Ricky's pride. The family's pride. Ricky didn't want to regret anything.

Ricky bounced to his feet. Denny stood, still trying to catch his breath. Ricky gave him a few more seconds then came at him. Spinning crescent, spinning hook, jumping side, Denny went down.

Ricky waited for him to stand and came at him again. Reverse double roundhouse, spinning back. Ribs, ribs, chest, head, Denny staggered. Ricky finished him with another flying sidekick.

The crowd went wild. Ricky stumbled toward his corner. Mark and Joey jumped the ropes and threw themselves at him. The three almost

tumbled down together. Then Eric approached. He put his arms around his son.

"I am so very proud of you, Rick."

Ricky looked deep into his father's eyes and nodded. "Dad, that means the world to me."

Bree made her way into the ring. She approached him excitedly, throwing herself into his arms.

"I'm sweaty," he warned.

"I don't care. I'm so proud of you. You are so..."

He silenced her with a kiss, a long, deep, sensual kiss.

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Steve's head hit the brick wall with a crack. Reaching into the back of his jeans, he pulled his Glock. The extremely large man froze immediately and raised his hands.

"Okay, now, little white boy, you just calm down."

"Back off," Steve ordered.

The man stepped forward.

"I said back off," Steve yelled.

The man stopped. "You don't want to shoot me."

"Oh, but I do."

"If you do, you'll never know where Tommy is."

"At this moment I'm only thinking about myself." Steve slowly reached into his pocket and pulled out the cell phone, opened it. Hit number one. "Now have a seat right there on the curb."

"I don't think I'm gonna be doing that," the man said as he charged at Steve, lunging at the gun.

Steve fired, catching the man in the shoulder just before stumbling back under the man's weight. The gunshot didn't even slow him down. He knocked the gun from Steve's grasp and slammed him into the wall again. The man's large hands gripped Steve around the throat and squeezed.

Just when Steve thought it was the end, the man let go and rammed his fist into Steve's face. Steve pushed away and kicked the man in the groin. He staggered. Steve jumped on his back and held on for dear life, locking his arm around the man's neck. Slowly the big guy weakened, finally dropping to his knees. Steve didn't let go until he was sure the guy was unconscious. When he finally did, he stumbled up the street, grabbed his gun, aimed it at the large man and slid down the wall to wait.

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They awarded Ricky an impressive looking trophy. The press interviewed him both before and after he dressed. They interviewed the entire family. Jason came down from the security booth along with Special Agent Dixon to congratulate him. They were standing around laughing and trying to make up their minds where they wanted to grab a meal together when Eric, Jason, Justin and Agent Dixon all pulled out their cell phones. The group became silent.

"It's Steve," Eric said.

"Shoot, he went to meet a source," Ricky informed them. "He must be in trouble."

Special Agent Dixon began speaking immediately into his phone. His partner joined him. They started out.

"I'm coming," Ricky said.

Eric nodded. "I'll drive. Let's go. Justin, Mark, Joey, see the ladies home, please."

"Go, don't worry about them. I'll take good care of them," Justin answered. "And Angel and Kimmie too," he said before Jason could get the words out. "We'll all be at the Kinos."

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Mark and Joey were downstairs playing video games. Shelley sat on a sofa with Angel, catching up on gossip. They hadn't been able to talk much since all the activity surrounding their once peaceful home. Shelley actually met Angel the same day she'd met Eric at a tournament in Atlanta. Only Angel wasn't her friend then. That happened later, in New Orleans, when Shelley had saved Angel's life. Barely. Angel had been shot in the process but that led to the love that bloomed between her and Jason.

Angel, also a martial artist, had started a school for battered women. She'd said Shelley was her inspiration for that, stemming from the time Shelley had been thrown in jail. It had been a crazy time back then, with James Crane doing his best to hurt Shelley. He eventually tried to kill her, but ended up meeting his own demise. Now, his little brother Tommy was causing all the trouble and Shelley was ready for it to end.

They smiled over at the girls who had changed into pajamas and were camped out on another sofa watching the latest Pixar release. It was inconceivable to Shelley that someone would want to hurt her precious June Flower.

"I guess you're about done in," Angel said.

"It's been hard, but so far we're all okay and I'm grateful for that.
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Right now, I'm worried about Steve. I wish they'd call."

"Why wait? Let's call them." Angel took out her cell and called her husband.

"Steve's okay, just banged up," Jason reported. "I was just getting ready to call you."

"As you can imagine, Jason, us women folk are tired of sitting around while you guys go running off to play cowboy."

"You're right, Angel, I can imagine, so I'm pretty sure what I'm about to say is going to really make you unhappy."

"What are you gonna say?" Angel asked.

"We're gonna go grab a drink before we come back."

Silence.

"Hello?"

"Oh, I'm here. And that's the problem."

"Please try to understand, Angel. Steve and some of the local police wanted to buy Ricky a drink in congratulations and he felt compelled to accept their invitation."

"I see. Well how about the fact that we were all about to go to dinner together to celebrate Ricky's win, and the females got sent home so you could all go play hero?"

"Have you not eaten?"

"Of course we have and that's not what I was talking about and you know it."

Jason sighed. "Where's Justin?"

"He had some work to do and is in the study, and don't you dare avoid the point I just brought up. We wanted to celebrate with Ricky too. It's as if we aren't even part of the picture."

"Now, Angel, how can you say that? I tell you everything. I involve you in everything."

Silence.

"Angel?"

"I don't want to talk to you anymore. You called it right. I'm mad. You guys just go have a grand old time. Shelley and I will sit here and wait for you to come home to us, as usual. Just don't come wanting favors because they won't be coming anytime soon." She tossed her phone on the coffee table.

At that same moment, Bree came storming down the stairs, holding up her cell phone. "Can you believe it? I didn't even get to say anything to Ricky after his win. I mean, I started to, but he grabbed me and kissed me. Now they're all going out for a drink. I can't believe it.

Oh, no, it's not gonna be like this. He can forget it."

Shelley's cell phone rang and she jumped up and quickly retrieved it from her purse.

Angel and Bree listened to the one-sided conversation.

"Yes, Eric, I've already heard...No, it's just that we were looking forward to celebrating with you...Of course I understand."

Bree rolled her eyes at her mother.

"No, of course not...I appreciate that you would come home but then I'd feel bad for making you miss all the fun. Go. We'll survive."

"Mom, how can you be so sweet all the time?" Bree asked.

"I'm not sweet all the time. I just don't see a way to get our way this time, but they'll pay. Believe me."

"Well, I am not gonna take this lying down," Bree said.

Angel laughed. "Me neither and I just told Jason the same thing."

"Are you mad at Daddy too?" Jeffy asked.

"No, darling," Shelley said. "Just a little irritated."

"Me too," she said. "I wanted to go to dinner with Ricky."

Shelley and Angel laughed. Bree turned and stormed into the kitchen. She was slamming things around as she made herself something to eat. She should just go and surprise him, that's what she should do. The bodyguards were gone for the night so she'd be alone, but it would be a straight shot from here to the *Sunset Club* where Ricky said they were going. She'd have to slip out the kitchen door because her Mom would freak. So would Justin, but she was tired of being a prisoner and according to what Ricky just told her, the man that Steve just tangled with was Tommy's last man.

She made her sandwich and went upstairs to eat alone. Then she changed clothes, stuffed her keys and ID in her pocket and put a robe on over her clothes. She nonchalantly made her way downstairs and into the kitchen to put her dishes up. Her mom and Angel were still whispering on the sofa. No sign of the boys or Justin so they were making themselves scarce, she thought. She'd have to sweet talk the man in the security booth at the gate, but that should present no problem. She slipped out the kitchen door.

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At first Ricky had only accepted his usual Perrier with lemon. Then he was talked into one glass of wine. It was Steve who finally convinced him to have a real drink, something Ricky rarely did, but Steve had a good argument. This was a special occasion. Ricky hadn't competed in years and when he finally does, under almost impossible
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conditions, he wins big. *And* Steve had to miss it and almost lost his life, which he put on the line for the Kino family, and so, Ricky felt obligated to drink with him.

Admittedly, he was feeling good, a little buzzed, and admittedly, he knew he would be sorry in the morning. He smiled thinking about the coming morning and the little spat he and Bree had just had on the phone. He thought making up with her is gonna be great fun. He sat near the back of the club. He'd lost track of how many people had bought him a drink, how many had patted him on the back, how many women had kissed him on the cheek and posed for a picture with him, and how many had offered their beds to him. But he'd been down that road. He only wanted Bree.

He was tired. Very, very tired. He waited on the last drink that he'd been talked into. 'One more, old buddy,' Steve had said. One more, Ricky thought, and then home.

Two more women approached, giggling.

"Could we take a picture with you, Ricky?"

"Sure," he said sloppily.

As Ricky dealt with the women Eric answered his phone.

"Hi, Shelley. We won't be too much longer."

"Eric, Bree's gone."

"What do you mean she's gone?"

"She was angry. She left."

His jaw clenched. "When?"

"We're not sure. She snuck out."

Sighing, Eric ran a hand through his hair, glanced at Ricky and then his eyes shifted to Jason.

Jason caught Eric's eye and came to him. "Trouble?"

Eric nodded and held up a finger. "Shelley, I'll call you back." He looked up at Jason. "Bree left the house."

"Sonofa...if you don't beat that girl I'm gonna do it for you."

"Let's not panic just yet," Eric said. "Apparently, she was angry about us being here and she snuck out. So, the logical conclusion is that she's coming here."

"Uh, yes she is," Jason said, nodding behind Eric.

He turned to see the beautiful girl who'd captured the entire world's attention, and more importantly, his son's attention.

Bree saw Eric and Jason but she couldn't see Ricky. Her eyes scanned the place and as she moved closer, she finally found him, underneath two blondes, each sitting on one of his thighs, each with a

hand under his shirt and their mouths pressed against his cheeks. A hush came over the place as she approached.

Ricky looked up, his face paling. "Uh oh," he uttered softly. He quickly ushered the women off his lap and sent them away. "It's not how it seems," he said immediately.

Bree just stood there staring at him. He expected a tirade. He expected her to blow her top. The scene was very misleading and he'd have to explain that to her. He braced for the show, but she only stood there. Then her lips trembled before she pressed them together to keep them still and then– her eyes filled. One tear overflowed and ran over her cheek. Then another. She turned around and started for the door.

Ricky sprang forward and ran after her. "Wait, Bree. Please. Wait, baby, it's not like it looks."

He caught up to her and grabbed her elbow. She swung around.

"If you don't let go of me I swear I'll cause a scene like you've never known."

He thought about her words and held her tighter. "I'm not afraid of a scene."

She jerked her arm away from him. "Of course you're not. You thrive on them, so everyone can see what a big man you are." She stormed away and made it outside before he stopped her again.

"Come on, Bree, that's not true. Listen, what you just saw in there was just a giant misunderstanding."

"Oh, really? When some blonde is working her hand up under your shirt and you're doing nothing to stop her, I think I can figure out what's going on."

"They were taking a picture. You walked right in front of the person with the camera. I wouldn't lie to you." He stopped and frowned. "How did you get here?" he asked, suddenly realizing she was out alone.

"In a car and don't you dare try to change the subject."

His face darkened. "I'll change whatever subject I like. You leaving the house at night alone is a lot worse than me posing for a picture with a couple of harmless females."

"Do you think so? You've humiliated me in front of the world, Ricky. Have you thought of that? Do you think the media won't have a big story about how you went out to celebrate your great victory after you dropped the little lady off at home? How could you, Ricky?"

He fumbled for words. "I, I don't ever pay attention to the media, Bree. It doesn't enter my mind what they'll print, because I don't care."

He sighed as he realized what he said. "And I know you do care. I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking."

"How could you *not* think? How could you be so insensitive?"

"I'm sorry, Bree. I'm sorry. It started out innocent enough. Have a drink with a friend. How was I supposed to get around it?"

"You didn't have to get around it. You should have sent for me. You should have at least invited me."

He heaved a sigh. "Yes, of course, you're right. I should have."

"When Steve wanted to buy you a drink, you should have told him that you and Eric and Jason, all had people at home waiting for you. Waiting for *you*!"

"We did say that at first, really, we did, but it was already so late, and we figured Jeffy and Kimmie were probably asleep."

"Well, Jeffy and Kimmie are not my children, are they? I don't have any children to take care of, do I?"

Bree stopped as the words hit home. The words stung. They stung both of them.

Ricky drew a deep breath. "No," he said softly. "Bree, you're right. I was being inconsiderate and selfish, but you know, I did something tonight. Something that was nearly impossible. Was it wrong to want to accept a few congratulations?"

"Don't you get it, Ricky? You did something incredible, and we, the people that love you, wanted to celebrate with you. We wanted to be the ones to share such a special moment with you. Not a couple of blondes you don't even know."

He nodded. "Again, you're right. So what now? What does this mean? Is that it? Are we over and done?"

She rolled her eyes. "Don't be stupid, Ricky, and don't be dramatic. You don't do it well."

"Oh, well, thanks a lot."

She sneered more than smiled. "You're welcome."

He reached for her. "So, come here and let me make it up to you."

"Oh, no. First, I don't want anyone's sloppy seconds. Second, it won't be that easy, buster. The news and all the social media crap is gonna come out and I am gonna be very upset for some time and you, Ricky Kino the great, are gonna have a very long way to go to make things up to me."

Steve, Eric, and Jason joined them. "Have you two worked things out?" Jason asked.

"Not quite yet," Bree answered. "And you have some working out

of your own to do."

"Sooo, Angel is pretty mad?"

"Oh, she's more than just mad and with good reason."

Bree went off on the same spiel she'd just given Ricky and by the time she was done, Jason's head was hanging pretty low.

"How about Shelley?" Eric asked.

"Mom is okay because at least *you* made the right offer."

"What offer did you make?" Jason asked.

He shrugged. "Oh, well, I offered to come home."

"Traitor," Jason and Ricky said together.

"Smart," Steve corrected.

Jason sighed and turned back to Bree. "And now, little girl, we all have a little bone to pick with you."

Her chin rose.

"May I ask how you got here?"

"I drove."

"By yourself?"

"No."

"Are you lying to me?"

"No, I'm not lying and don't you dare talk to me like I'm a child."

Jason raised his eyebrows. "Then don't act like one."

She started forward and Ricky grabbed her and held her back.

She shook herself free. "I do not have to stand here and listen to this ridiculous display of male domination." She waved her hand in the air and a car pulled up. Agent Jeff Davis jumped out and opened the door for her. She moved close to him, placing her hand softly on the sleeve of his jacket. "Thank you so much for being my knight in shining armor tonight." She stood on her toes and kissed his cheek.

Jeff looked decidedly uncomfortable. He glanced over his shoulder at Ricky as she stepped in and had him close the door. He turned, and nodded nervously at the men standing around him.

"She called you?" Ricky asked.

"Uh, no sir. She tried to sweet talk David at the gate to let her out. In response to her fit when he refused, he offered to contact me."

"Remind me to give you both a bonus," Jason said.

Jeff shook his head. "That's not necessary for me, sir. I'm just glad to be doing my job. I, uh, guess I'd better get her back home." He started to take his leave then turned back. "Uh, Rick, you were awesome tonight, man. Way cool." He offered his hand.

Ricky grinned as he shook Jeff's hand. "Thanks, man."

Ricky watched the car drive off.

"He's a brave young man, considering who his charge is," Jason said.

Eric nodded. "Let's get the champ home. Steve, you have my deepest appreciation."

"It was my pleasure. A little scary, but, truly, shooting that dude was a pleasure."

"I hope the feds are able to get some information out of him," Jason said.

Ricky clasped Steve's hand. "Take care, man. Thanks."

Steve nodded. "That's what friends are for."

✞✞✞

Philippians 2:3-4

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others."

Chapter 18

Beth cowered as the television crashed to the floor. She was now truly afraid. Tommy had gone berserk, throwing everything he could get his hands on. The acclaim the Kinos were receiving on the morning news was driving him out of his mind. She only hoped that all this would drive him to end this ridiculous revenge thing, one way or the other. She needed it to be over. She'd accepted that she was gonna die a long time ago, but she also finally realized she wanted to do it peacefully and comfortably in a bed.

She hadn't been feeling well. She had a constant headache now. Severe nausea. She was weak and tired. She was done. All the plans she'd made to help her family had gone wrong. It seemed a very long time ago that she was a high school junior, cheering on the varsity squad, madly in love with her boyfriend. Happy. Then it had all come crashing down. She would've been a senior now. An innocent, happy senior in high school whose worst problem was what to wear to school or getting the CliffsNotes for a book she didn't want to read.

In the past six months she'd learned more about life than she'd ever wanted to know. She'd learned about hatred, and violence. She'd learned sexual things she never could have imagined. She'd learned how good and how bad people could be. Shelley was good. Tommy was bad. Why she hadn't seen that earlier was beyond her. How naive could a person be? If she hadn't been so blind she could've told the Kinos what Tommy had asked of her. She could have switched sides and they would have protected her. Of course, at the time Tommy hadn't shown his full colors. She'd still been a little taken with him. She'd been so stupid.

She couldn't really blame Ricky for trying to send her home. He'd been angry that she'd hurt their family. And she had, in so many ways. She'd wreaked havoc. She was so very, very sorry. Then listening to what Tommy had done to Ricky– she still had nightmares over it. She'd heard him grunting in pain and cursing at Tommy and when he cried out, she'd felt sick. He'd been so brave and he'd actually tried to give his life for his family. Beth curled herself into a ball and tried to

be invisible. Maybe Tommy would forget he had her. Maybe he'd storm off and just leave her. She could always hope.

~~~~

"There's the man," Joey yelled as he and Mark came out onto the deck just outside the dining room.

Ricky sat in a full lotus, his eyes closed.

The boys came to him, patting his back and ruffling his hair.

"I'm meditating, guys," Ricky said softly.

"Too bad about that," Mark answered. "Cuz today, you get the royal treatment. Joey, grab his legs."

Mark grunted as he lifted Ricky from under his arms and Joey grabbed his legs. Ricky allowed them to carry him down the terraced deck and dump him unceremoniously into the swimming pool. Ricky sprang out though, chased each one down and tossed them in, then dove back in himself.

They stood in a circle in the water talking about the fight, laughing over mistakes Ricky made, but mostly gloating at how he'd kicked butt big time. Ricky happily accepted their accolades. He was glad he could make them proud. They wouldn't have been if they'd seen him an hour ago, hung over and sick. He'd showered, made himself an herbal remedy, prayed and meditated. He'd peeked in at Bree but decided he didn't want to face that yet.

His right hand was swollen, his forehead was sore and his entire body ached, but he'd be okay as soon as Bree forgave him. He hoped it wouldn't be too long.

~~~~

Eric tossed the newspaper down on the kitchen table. "Might as well get it over with now," he said calmly.

Bree slowly picked up the paper folded to a picture of Ricky in the ring, his arms raised in triumph, with a caption proclaiming his mighty victory. Underneath that were three smaller pictures. One of Bree being kissed by Ricky in the ring. The next of Ricky with the two blondes on his lap. The third was a close-up of Bree with tears running down her face. Placing the paper carefully back on the table, she rose. "Excuse me," she said softly.

Ricky and the boys were coming in from the pool and Bree passed them without a glance. "Oh, hey hon, I guess you're still mad at me?" Ricky called after her jovially.

She turned and glared at him. "I wouldn't speak to me right now if I were you."

He watched her walk upstairs. Shelley handed Ricky the newspaper. "She just saw this."

He looked it over. "Ugh, it's worse than I thought." He looked up at Shelley. "Got any easy ideas as to how to make this better?"

Shelley smiled sweetly. "If I did I wouldn't tell you. You have to figure this one out on your own. It will help you to not be so inconsiderate next time."

Ricky looked past Shelley to his father. "Dad?"

"Have I ever helped you to find the easy way out of anything?"

"No."

"Then why would you think I'd do it now?"

"Guess I lost my mind for a moment."

Joey patted Ricky's shoulder. "Let her stew. She'll eventually get over it."

"Great, thanks, Joey." He turned to Shelley. "Looks like *you've* got some teaching to do too."

Shelley eyed her son. "Yes, it does." She looked over at Mark. "And what do *you* have to say?"

"Um, soo, uh, Bree's my sister and Ricky had better do whatever it takes to make her happy?"

"Close enough," Shelley said.

Joey muttered something crude.

"Mommy," Jeffy said as she came running into the kitchen. "Bree is crying."

"Don't worry little one, Ricky's gonna take care of that."

"You are, Ricky?"

"I'm gonna try," he said softly, bending to give her a hug.

"Well, go." She put her hands on her hips. "Right now."

"Okay, okay," Ricky said. "Darn pushy females," he mumbled as he turned and left the kitchen.

"I'm hungry, Mommy," Jeffy said.

"Well, good, sweetie, because Daddy's gonna take over and make you breakfast."

"I am?"

"Yes." She raised her nose in the air.

"I mean, that's fine, but, I get the feeling you're upset with me. Did I say something wrong?"

"Your son did. You heard what he said as he left."

"And you're mad at *me* for something *he* said?"

"He's *your* son and you should have addressed that. And you know

what? He was your son last night. And you were there. And even if he didn't realize the consequences of his actions, *you* should have." She turned and left the room.

~~~~

Ricky knocked softly as he entered the room. He didn't ask permission to come in because he knew she'd just say 'no.' She lay on her bed, her back to the door. He sat down on the side of the bed behind her. "Bree, you said last night you knew this was coming."

"I also said I was gonna be upset about it. And I am."

"I'm sorry, Bree."

"You've already said that."

"Well then, what else can I do?" Ricky asked.

She rolled over. "You can tell me what you've learned."

Here was his chance, he thought. Don't blow it. "I've learned that a small, selfish, insensitive act can cause a lot of problems."

"Problems for whom?"

"For everyone."

She lay quietly.

"Did I pass?"

"I guess, but I still don't feel any better."

"But Bree, you said a few weeks ago you didn't care what the papers print about us."

"I didn't. When they were printing how much we loved each other. Now they're making me out to be a fool."

"I'm pretty certain all the men are thinking that I'm the one who's a fool."

"Not the great Ricky Kino. You can do no wrong."

"We both know that's not true. Bree, we can't have a relationship based on what the media prints about us. We just have to interact with each other and those we love. You're the only person I really have to answer to. Just you."

She sighed. He moved closer, lay down beside her, propped on his elbow and looked down at her face.

"Bree, do you know why I needed so badly to fight in that competition?"

"To show the world what a great fighter you are? To show everyone how manly you are? Because you were bored, maybe?"

"I wanted to impress *you*. I wanted to prove myself to *you*. I wanted *you* to be proud of me and what I can do. I wanted *you* to understand what it is I do and appreciate my art as much as I do."
~~~~

She stared up into his face and blinked slowly. "So, you're saying you did it for me?"

"I needed to share myself with you. I needed you to know me."

Her hand reached up and stroked his cheek. "I thought I did know you, Ricky, yet every day I learn more about you. Every day I'm more impressed. If you were trying to impress me last night, you accomplished that tenfold."

"I *was* trying, and I'm glad I succeeded, because I love you, Breanna. Lord, how I love you and every day I know you, I love you more. You're so intricate, you're such a mixture of people. You are so very sweet and..."

"I am *not* sweet."

"You're sweeter than sweet. The way you are with Jeffy and your brothers. The way you took care of your mom when she was having such a hard time. The little things you do that you think nobody notices. You're sweet, Bree. What about that man you saved in Florida? You never even mentioned it."

Her mouth opened wide. "How did you know about that?"

"It was in the news. Didn't you know?"

"No one ever contacted me about it."

"There was a picture and a short article. I guess there's been so much else going on since you've been home that I haven't thought to mention it. See what I mean? It was a wonderful, selfless thing you did, saving that man, and you didn't even give it a second thought. Bree, you are an amazing woman. You're feisty and strong and smart and nobody's pushover. You're so dedicated to your family and to your career."

She frowned. "What's left of it."

He sighed. "Were you a phenomenal actress yesterday?"

"If you say so."

"Then you still are today. It doesn't matter one bit what the media says."

She frowned. "I wanted to be the one with you last night."

"I know that now, Bree. I was an insensitive idiot, but I can't turn back time."

"You seem to be able to do the impossible."

He smiled. "Sometimes. Not always."

"How about doing this? How about you make all this stuff with Tommy go away?"

"It's really getting to you, isn't it?"

Her eyes closed briefly. “Ricky, I haven’t said anything about this, because I didn’t want to sound like a big baby, but there’s something that’s bothering me. I haven’t said anything because you were recovering from your abduction and then I pulled that stupid stunt and I lost a baby, and I know, I brought it on myself, but I’ve been having a tough time with something.”

He stroked her face. “Tell me what you’re talking about.”

She drew a deep breath. “I thought I was having a relationship with an ex-cop who was my bodyguard, and it turns out, Tommy Crane, the brother of the man who raped, tortured and tried to murder my mother, was having his fun with me out of spite. I’m sick over it. Literally sick. I keep seeing his hands on me. I keep seeing the times I so willingly gave myself to him, and then I get physically ill. Tommy used me, abused me and I feel so violated. I can’t seem to get it out of my mind and I think feeling the way I do is maybe what pushed me to try to do something about all of this.”

“Oh, hon,” he said, pulling her to him.

Bree sighed and laid her head on his chest.

“Bree, I didn’t know you were having these feelings. I really am an insensitive idiot.”

She sniffed. “Yeah, we’ve already established that.”

He chuckled. “You see? Do you see how strong you are? You just told me how much all of this hurts you, yet you turn around and make a joke.”

“I don’t know what else to do. It hurts so bad.”

“It would help to talk about it. If not to me then with your mom or my dad.”

“Let’s just start with you. I don’t think I could talk to anyone else about it.”

“Okay. Then tell me. Tell me everything he did. Everything he said to you. Tell me exactly how he made you feel and how it makes you feel now.”

“Dirty,” she began.

She went on to tell him everything she could remember from his first sweet words to her, to her seduction, to her realization that he was not a nice guy and finally to her finding out who he really was. She told him how she’d found out shortly after Ricky had returned home from the hospital and she couldn’t very well complain about her hurt feelings when she was so grateful just to have him home. Ricky held her, and stroked her and whispered comforting words in her ear. When she

finally cried he stayed quiet and listened to her heart-wrenching sobs. He burned with the need to put all this to an end. For her. For him. For Jeffy. For his family.

~~~~

"What are you doing?" Bree asked Ricky several days later as she peered into his bedroom.

"Working on something."

She came in the room and approached where he sat at his computer desk, typing out an email. "What?" she asked.

He smiled at her. "A surprise."

"What kind of surprise?"

He sighed. "I won't be able to keep it a secret anyway." He hit send and spun around in the chair to face her. "Sit down."

She sat on the bed. "I'm all ears."

He looked her over. "No, you're definitely not. Anyway, I was thinking about my little competition last week and my need to share my art with you and I was wondering if maybe you had the same need. You know, to share your art with me. I've seen your movies, I've seen rehearsals, I know what an extraordinary actress you are, but I've never been able to see you work close up."

Her brow furrowed. "You want to come and watch me next time I do a movie shoot?"

"No. Well, yes. Just listen. I want to work with you. I'm an okay actor. You're an exquisite actress. My publicist has been in touch with your manager and they're talking about us doing a movie together. A movie about us. We would play ourselves. We could tell our real story the way we want it presented. I've been told it's very romantic and with all the stuff with the Crane brothers, there is plenty of action and suspense. They've already asked Lou Dietz to work on a screenplay to present to you. What do you think?"

"What does my manager think?"

"She's excited about it. She's waiting on the screenplay before she approaches you. I was supposed to wait too, but I guess I'm not very good at keeping secrets."

She thought quietly for a minute. "It could be good for us. Like you said, we could tell the real story."

Ricky nodded. "Right. And I could work with you and I could get to watch what you do."

She smiled. "I'd like that, I think. I'd like you to see what I put into my roles. What I put into my art."
~~~~

"So, it's a tentative 'yes'?" Ricky asked.

"I think so," she said nodding.

He looked her over. She was looking very radiant. Her hair was taken up in a clip. Her eyes shone. She wore jeans and a flowy button-down blouse. "So, Shelley says you were out shopping."

Bree smiled coyly. "Actually, I went to see the doctor."

He was immediately concerned. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is perfect. I've been given a clean bill of health."

He frowned. "Yeah, but we still have a week to go of our six-week sentence."

"I know. I went to the doctor because I don't want to wait another day. Another minute. I need to be with you."

He swallowed. "And the doctor has given his okay?"

She smiled sweetly. "He has."

"You're telling me the truth?"

"I promise I will never lie to you, Ricky. Never."

"I promise you the same thing."

She smiled and started unbuttoning her blouse.

Ricky put his hand on hers to stop her. "Wait, babe. I'm sorry. We need to talk."

"About what?"

He gestured toward her hand on her blouse. "About this."

"Oookaay. Are you saying you don't want to?"

"Oh, I want to. So much."

He went on to explain to her his beliefs. He dove deep, even telling her about his father's experience in the cave. He explained how his relationship with Jesus Christ is what shaped him and made him into the person he is. He confessed to her how he'd stumbled and the pain it caused. He explained to her God's laws and how following them can not only keep us close to God, but keep us safe. He even used her relationship with Tommy as an example, for it would never have happened if she'd known and followed God's laws. She certainly couldn't argue with that.

As Ricky explained to her his innermost thoughts and feelings, her respect for him didn't diminish, but instead, grew. Her mother had told her there was no such thing as a perfect man, but Bree thought Ricky came pretty darn close. When she expressed that to him, he became very serious.

He shook his head. "There has only been one man who was perfect, and that was Jesus. I want to be like Him. I try. I fail each and

every day. I lust. I curse. I get angry. I'm prideful. I have hatred in my heart sometimes. It's a long list. But still, He forgives me and I won't ever stop trying to be like Jesus."

Bree smiled and sighed. "I think a man with those kinds of goals would make the best husband, and the best father."

He reached out and touched her face, gently caressing her cheek. "I'm glad you feel that way." He left it at that and said no more. It wasn't that he wasn't gonna pop the question, but the ring hadn't come in yet. Just a little longer.

~~~~

Tommy grabbed Beth by the hair. "I said get up."

Her head lolled back. "Please Tommy, I can't, I just can't stand this anymore."

He shook her. "What's wrong with you?"

"I told you, I'm sick, Tommy. I hurt all over. I'm dizzy. I don't think I can stand."

He pulled her up. "Get up. We're out of here."

He let her go and she fell over, so he hefted her over his shoulder and walked out of the room with her.

She moaned in pain. "Where are we going?" she asked between clenched teeth.

"You'll see soon enough. This is it, Beth baby. Today is the day your little girlfriend dies."

"Please, Tommy, what are you gonna do?"

"I keep telling you, it's you who's gonna do it."

"No. Never."

He only smiled as he tossed her into the newest mode of transportation. "Get into the truck. I'm taking you somewhere no one will find you while I go get the kid."

"You're gonna go back to jail, Tommy. Do you know that?"

"Shut up."

"You hurt that kid and they are gonna fry you."

"Not here in California."

"I'm not talking about the cops, I'm talking about the Kinos."

"We'll just see about that."

~~~~

"Well, we have a houseful of people this morning," Bree said as she entered the kitchen.

Shelley smiled at her daughter. "Eric decided to move his business meeting here this morning which is why Justin is here. I think they're

gonna try to bring Jason down on his security fees," Shelley joked. "Other than them, it's just the usual group of studly Ameritech agents."

Bree grinned as the present agents shifted uncomfortably. She winked at Jeff.

"Anyway, eight of us are leaving shortly," Shelley added.

"Who's leaving?" Ricky asked as he joined the group.

"Mark and Joey are off to school along with their guardians and Jeffy and I and our shadows are also leaving."

"Where are you going?"Bree asked.

"The museum," Jeffy said. "They're having a special kid's day. I'm gonna learn about archeology, which is actually the study of humans by learning about their artifacts, that's like, old stuff. It's important to know about so that you'll know how to do things better than they used to do a long time ago and to help us evolve. I like to learn stuff."

"Ooooh I know you do," Bree said, smiling at her sister. "And you like to talk about it too."

"Daddy says that's okay. That it's good for me to express myself but I have to learn that there's a time and place for everything and that sometimes I need to speak and sometimes I need to be quiet. I've been working real hard at being quiet, especially when the grownups are talking about serious issues, even though I usually know what you're talking about anyway."

Ricky laughed at that and scooped her up into his arms. "You, munchkin, are a trip."

"Joey just said the same thing to me."

Joey looked up from the kitchen table where he was downing a bowl of cereal. "That's cuz you are, now, come over here and help me with my homework."

She giggled. "I can't help you, Joey. You have to learn to do everything on your own, or you won't retain it, right Mommy?"

Shelley grinned. "That's right, angelface."

Mark looked up from eating breakfast. "Well, can you come here and give your brother a big hug and kiss?"

"Sure," Jeffy said. She climbed onto Mark's knee, hugged him and kissed his cheek.

"There, now I can go off to school and feel happy."

"Don't worry, Mark," Jeffy said. "You'll find a new girlfriend soon and you won't feel unhappy anymore."

The family all turned to see the expression on Mark's face.

Mark shook his head. "Well then, kiddo, thanks for the vote of confidence," Mark said, rolling his eyes.

"That's okay. Soon, everything is gonna be all better. The police will catch Tommy and put him in jail so Ricky won't have to kill him and Beth will be okay and be able to go home to her mom and dad." Her hand flew to her mouth. "Oops, I wasn't supposed to tell you that I knew that. I heard you talking about it. Sorry. Anyway, soon we'll be able to go places by ourselves and I'll get to start sleeping in my own room again."

"Oh, so are you saying that you don't like sleeping in Mom and Eric's room?" Mark asked.

"I don't mind too much, but I miss my stuff. And Mommy isn't getting any sleep."

"Why do you say that?" Shelley asked.

"I heard you tell Daddy that with me in the room you weren't getting any and Daddy said he would take you to a hotel and you could have as much as you wanted all night long."

The room erupted.

"What?" Jeffy asked, her mouth turning down into a frown.

Shelley whirled toward Eric. "Don't you dare tell her."

He shrugged. "She needs to know about these things."

"Okay, but not yet, and not here and not now. Please."

Eric smiled. "Okay, but you two should probably have a talk while you're spending time together today."

"Yes, we'd better," Shelley said.

Joey put his bowl in the sink. "And on that note," Joey laughed. "We've gotta get to school. Bye all."

Mark and Joey made their exit as the rest of the family moved into the great room.

"Come on, Jeffy," Shelley said. "Let's get ready to go to the museum. We want to be there by nine."

Jeffy was still frowning as Shelley took her hand and they went upstairs to get their purses. They returned a few minutes later and started toward the front door where Barry, one of the agents who would be accompanying them, held it open.

"Do I get a goodbye kiss from my girl?" Eric said.

"Yes," they both answered at the same time.

Eric scooped Jeffy up into his arms.

"Bye, Daddy," she said.

"Bye, baby. I love you. Have fun and please take care of your mom

for me."

"I will. I promise."

He kissed her gently and set her down.

Shelley stepped close. Eric reached out, placing his hands on her shoulders and slowly pulled her against his body. His arms came around her and he kissed her long, slow, passionately.

Ricky finally cleared his throat. "Um, so like, there are other people in the room."

Eric looked up. "Huh? Oh. Yes. Well then. Bye Shelley."

She headed toward the door, then turned back. "Why don't you make that reservation?"

He smiled. "Gladly." He nodded toward Agent Barry Briscoe. "You and Agent Faulkner, take good care of them."

"Yes sir, we'll be right beside them the entire time."

"So, what's this you've got laid out all over the dining room table," Ricky asked after they'd left.

"Justin and I are about to go over financial reports for the quarter. Stick around, you'll learn something."

Bree shrugged. "We just might do that. I'd like to see what you guys have been doing with all my hard earned money. Not that I'd understand any of it."

Ricky smiled. "Ya know, I was thinking, Dad," Ricky said. "What with me living at home lately, maybe I should be contributing to the household income."

Eric frowned. "Don't insult me."

Ricky shrugged. "Just felt like I should acknowledge the fact that I realize I've been living here and eating here."

"Then acknowledge it. Just don't insult me."

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"Let's play a game while we drive," Jeffy said.

"Like what?" Shelley asked.

"Like, let's make words out of license plates. You too Mr. Cole and you too Mr. Barry if you can still do it while you drive."

He smiled into the rearview mirror of the BMW seven-fifty sedan. "I'll do my best, but I'd better be careful. Your mommy wouldn't want me to mess up her car."

"Okay, oh, there, I see OGN. Um, that's origin."

"Very good word," Shelley said.

"Your turn, Mommy."

"Okay, I see– SLG." She touched Jeffy's nose. "I think that stands
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for silly little girl."

"Ha ha, Mommy, but you're not doing it right. It's not an anagram. It has to be one word, like SLG could be— slug."

"So sorry."

"It's okay. Now it's your turn Mr. Cole."

Cole waited for another car to pass. "Okay, AMN, um, amen, or American, or almond or amend, or..."

"That's enough," Jeffy giggled. "Okay, Mr. Bar..."

Shelley gasped as a big, black, F-250 passed them within inches. "Did you see that truck, Barry?"

Barry nodded. "He had to be doing well over a hundred. Idiot." Barry's voice sounded calm enough but he eyed his companion.

Cole's expression was rightly serious. He removed his belt and turned in his seat to look over into the back of the vehicle. He reached toward Jeffy who sat behind Barry. "Just checking your seatbelt, Jeffy," he said as he tugged on the belt. "Mrs. Kino, your belt good and tight?"

Shelley looked up questioning. "Yes, it's fine. What's going on? What are you thinking?"

"No coincidences, remember?"

The car slowed. Shelley peered up over the seat.

"He's coming back," Barry said. He glanced at Cole.

"I'm calling in." Cole pulled out his cell, keeping an eye on the black truck heading toward them.

"What's happening, Mommy?"

"I'm not sure, hold on baby." Shelley grabbed Jeffy's hand.

"I'm scared, Mommy."

"Okay, darling. It's gonna be okay."

"I want Daddy."

"Me too."

"I've gotta get up some speed in order to maneuver."

The car zoomed forward.

Shelley could see now, the truck that had just flown past them was coming back down the hill from the opposite direction, in their lane, headed straight toward them.

"He's coming right at us," Shelley said.

"Hold it steady," Cole said as he pushed the number 'one' on his phone. "He'll turn off."

Barry blew out a breath. "I don't think so, Cole. I think it's Kamikaze time."

"Hold it steady. Hold it."

Barry waited. If he maneuvered away too soon the truck driver would just adjust and ram them anyway. He had to wait until the last possible moment and that moment was coming fast. He jerked the wheel to the right. The Beamer skidded on the shoulder. Barry tried to regain control but over adjusted. The car rolled. The sound of Jeffy and Shelley screaming, the punch of airbags deploying, glass breaking and metal crunching filled the morning air.

They finally came to rest upright. Shelley grimaced in pain. Her legs were pinned by the front passenger seat. She couldn't see Cole. Barry was pinned between his seat, the deflated airbag, and the steering wheel. Jeffy was crying but appeared to be okay. Shelley reached for her hand.

"I'm here, baby," Shelley said. "We're okay. We're okay. Shh, now. Someone will be coming soon and they'll help us."

"Can you– get out?" Agent Barry asked, pushing against the steering wheel that was wedged against his chest. He was struggling to breathe.

Shelley shook her head. "No, I'm pinned by the seat."

He closed his eyes. "Jeffy, c– can you get out of your seat?"

"Yes. I can," she said as she calmed herself.

"I– need you– to go– hide in those woods. C,can you– do it?"

"I don't want to leave Mommy."

"You have to, baby," Shelley said, unable to keep the tears from running down her cheeks. "Mommy will be alright. I promise. Now you have to go. You have to do what Barry says because he knows his job and he knows how to protect you. Go now."

She unstrapped her seat belt obeying the command, but she started to cry. "I don't want to leave you. Why do I have to go?"

They heard the truck when it pulled up beside them and Barry knew it was too late now for her to run.

"Please Jesus, help us," Shelley cried.

Barry struggled to get his gun out of its holster. He grunted in pain as he pushed against the steering wheel. When Tommy's face appeared at her broken window, Jeffy threw herself into her mother's arms. Tommy grabbed the door handle. It was stuck. He had to jerk on it several times before it finally opened.

Tommy peered into the car. "Well, well, well, finally, I get to meet the little brat."

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Ephesians 5:11

"Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness,
but instead expose them."

Chapter 19

The meeting hadn't even begun when Ricky's cell phone went off. Ricky reached into his pocket. Bree looked up to see Eric and Justin both pulling their phones out at the same time. Suddenly everyone was moving toward the door.

"What's going on?" Bree asked.

Ricky's dead calm face gave her the information she dreaded. "Get in the car," he said.

"What's happening?" she asked. "Is it Mom and Jeffy?"

"Yes, Bree," Ricky said sharply. "Get in the car."

They ran out the front door. Bree was barely able to close her car door before Ricky gunned the engine. The gate was already open. Bree glanced back to see Eric and Justin not far behind.

"He got her, didn't he?" she cried.

"I don't know. Try to stay calm. I have to be able to think."

Bree nodded, taking deep breaths to calm her heart as tears coursed down her cheeks.

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Barry sucked in a breath and pulled the gun free. His hand moved to the door handle. He knew he had only one chance and he'd better make it good. Every move he made right down to blinking his eyes caused pain. He had a feeling his back was broken. He'd sworn he would protect his charges with his life. It was time.

"Go away," Jeffy screamed. "You're a bad man. Go away!"

Tommy stood by her door and laughed. "Oh, yes, I am and you're about to find that out firsthand."

Barry pushed his door open. His body fell out onto the side of the road and he swung the gun around toward Tommy at the same time. There was a sharp burning pain in his back, then nothing. Suddenly, he couldn't feel his hands. He tried to pull the trigger but it was like his mind and body had disconnected. Tommy stepped toward him, took the gun from his hand, turned it on him and fired.

"Noo, oh noooo," Shelley screamed.

Tommy tucked the extra gun inside his waistband and returned to
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the back seat. He grabbed Jeffy by the wrist, jerking hard.

Shelley winced and held onto her daughter with every bit of strength she could muster.

"Let me go," Jeffy screamed.

"Please, Tommy, don't take her. Please."

Tommy put his head in the car and held his gun up to Shelley's head. "Let go, or I *will* pull the trigger. You just saw that I'm not messin' around."

"I don't care if you shoot me. Just please, please don't take Jeffy," Shelley pleaded, tears running down her face.

"Let go of the kid," Tommy screamed.

Shelley shook her head. "No, please," she whimpered.

Tommy moved the gun to Jeffy's head. "I can kill her now or I can kill her later. At least if you let it go to later, she has a chance. Now let— go."

Shelley's grip loosened. "Please, Tommy," she whispered. "Please. What can I do to change your mind?"

Tommy ignored her and tugged hard and Jeffy flew out of the car. A crowd of onlookers had begun to gather. Some moved forward to offer assistance. Tommy warned them away with the gun as he held Jeffy, struggling and kicking under his arm.

"Jeffy!" Shelley screamed. "Jeffy, don't be scared. Daddy will find you!"

"Mommy," Jeffy screamed. "Daddy!"

Tommy quickly climbed into the driver's side of the truck and threw Jeffy into the passenger seat. She immediately tried to open her door but was surprised to find there was no handle.

He gunned the engine and they sped away. Jeffy flew at him, attacking him with her fists, but he simply tossed her away and then backhanded her. She slipped silently to the front floorboard.

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"There!" Bree cried as she pointed at the wrecked car on the side of the road. "Oh, no, look at it. How could they survive?"

Ricky never slowed down.

"Ricky they're right there. Stop! What are you doing? Slow down! Are you crazy? What are you doing?"

"I'm going after Jeffy."

"He has her? How do you know?" She was leaning over her seat, looking at the wreckage as they passed.

"Bree, sit down."
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"But what about Mom?" she asked almost screaming. "We don't even know if she's alive, and it looked like Barry was thrown from the car. We have to go back!"

"Bree, listen to me. Dad will see to Shelley. Now, I need you to turn around, put your seatbelt on and be very quiet. Jeffy's life depends on it."

She sank down in her seat, the shock setting in. She nodded her head to let him know she understood.

"Okay." He drew a breath. "Call Jason."

"I'm here," Jason answered quickly.

"Tell me you have her."

"I do. They're headed north on Pacific Highway, just passing, Northcrest Boulevard."

"That's about five miles ahead of me."

Bree sat up in her seat. "What do you mean he has her?"

Ricky glanced at Bree. "Jeffy's wearing a tracking device. It's her ankle bracelet." He raised a finger to his lips. "Shh."

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The car skidded to a halt just behind the wrecked Beamer. Eric jumped out, his heart in his throat. He looked quickly down the highway at Ricky as he sped away. Justin knelt beside Barry, searching for a pulse.

Eric glanced at him hopefully, but Justin shook his head.

"Shelley," Eric said, his voice soft and calm as always as he climbed into the back seat. Stroking her face he called her again.

Her eyes slowly opened. The tears started. "Oh, Eric, he took my baby," she whispered.

"We'll get her back. I can't leave you until I know how bad your injuries are."

"I'm okay," she cried. "My feet and legs hurt real bad, but I'm okay. Don't worry about me. Please, Eric, go get my baby."

He nodded. "I'm going. Justin will take care of you." He started to leave, then turned back. "I'll get her back." He took her face in his hands. "I love you, sweetheart." He kissed her softly.

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The wheels of Tommy's truck threw rocks and gravel as he sped through the deserted concrete plant, passing stall after stall of different colored sand, rocks, and pebbles. Each stall consisted of fifteen-foot-high walls made of cinder blocks, each row contained at least ten stalls and there were at least twenty rows. Tommy drove toward the far end

and came to a screeching halt.

Jumping from the cab, he went to the passenger side and opened the door. Jeffy lay whimpering, still on the floor of the truck. He grabbed her by the back of her shirt and pulled her up. She started swinging at him immediately.

"You'd better put me down, you big, stupid, imbecile."

He shook her. "Where'd you learn to talk like that? That's no way for a little kid to talk." He approached the wall where he'd left Beth tied up.

"You're a moron. That's what my brother calls you. A stupid, moronic, unintelligent dimwit."

"If I'd talked that way around my elders they would've beat me to a pulp. I think that's what you need." He set her down on her feet, keeping hold of her hand, drew his free hand back and smacked her back side so hard her feet flew out in front of her. He jerked her up to stand again and hit her again. She burst into tears.

They rounded the wall and she spotted Beth who seemed to be sleeping. Tears streaming down her face, Jeffy jerked free of Tommy's hand and ran to Beth, throwing herself onto Beth's lap.

"Beth, oh, Beth, what has he done to you?" She turned back around. "You are a bad man. I hate you. I hate you. My Daddy is gonna kill you and if he doesn't, my brother will. I'd be scared if I were you."

"Shut up you little brat or I'll beat you again."

"It doesn't matter what you do to me. You can hurt my body all you want, but you can't touch my mind. I won't let you. You can't really hurt me."

Beth was dehydrated and dizzy but her eyes were open. "Jeffy, sweet girl, shhh, now. Don't say anything else, okay? We don't want to make him mad."

"I don't care how mad he gets. I hate him. Ricky is gonna kill him. He hurt my mommy and he shot my friend." She stood and went toward Tommy. "I hate you. I hate you. You're gonna be sorry you messed with me."

"Will you just shut up?" Tommy cried. He grabbed her by the arm. "Time to die, baby girl."

He pulled his knife and before Jeffy even realized what was happening he opened her arm up on the outside from the elbow to her wrist. Jeffy screamed.

"Guess I can hurt you, huh?" Tommy said with an evil grin.

"Tommy what are you doing?" Beth said. "Don't hurt her. Please,

don't hurt her."

Suddenly dizzy, Jeffy gave no fight as Tommy jerked her toward Beth and sat her on Beth's lap. Beth's free hand came around Jeffy and held her tight against her. She gasped as Tommy grabbed her hand away from Jeffy and slit her arm also from elbow to wrist, only hers was on the inside. He then lined up the cuts, pressed their arms together and began wrapping duct tape around them. When he finished, he stood, backed up and grinned.

"Bang, you're dead," he said to Jeffy.

Jeffy only whimpered. Her head fell back against Beth's chest. Beth leaned her head forward, rubbing her cheek against the top of Jeffy's hair.

"There now," Beth whispered. "Everything is gonna be alright. I promise, Jeffy. I have a secret to tell you. Everything's gonna be alright. Shh."

Tommy grabbed Jeffy's free arm and secured it to the wall using the other end of the length of rope that held Beth. Several knots later, he tugged it tight. "That outta do it. I guess you two aren't going anywhere for a while. It's time for me to go see your brother or father. Whoever gets here first."

"It won't matter who it is," Jeffy said, this time barely forming her words. "They're gonna kill you."

"Naw, it won't happen like that, because I have this." He held up his gun. "And I also have this." He patted the gun inside his waistband that he'd taken from the downed agent.

He knelt down in front of them and looked them over. "Well, can't say it's been a pleasure, ladies. I have to go. How about a kiss goodbye from my girls?"

He grabbed Beth's cheeks in one steely fist and kissed her on the mouth. Then he grabbed Jeffy's face the same way. "Your first kiss from a real man," he said as he kissed her mouth.

Jeffy spit. He laughed. "You are definitely Kino's kid sister."

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Justin poked his head inside the car. "Shelley, the paramedics are on the way."

She sniffed. "Okay. Are Barry and Cole okay?"

"Cole is on the front floorboard right in front of you. He's unconscious and I'm afraid to move him."

"He didn't have his seatbelt on. He was worried about us. He turned around to make sure we were secure," she cried.
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"I understand, Shelley. He was doing his job. He wouldn't want it any other way."

"Have you heard from Eric?"

"Not yet, Shelley. He's only been gone about two minutes now." He looked down the street to see police cars charging down the hill. "The police are here. I'm sure the FBI isn't far behind."

She grimaced in pain. "And the paramedics?"

"Any minute now."

"I can't move my legs."

"Well, that's because you're pinned in pretty good and Cole's body is keeping the seat from being moved. They'll probably have to work on him first."

"That's fine. I'll be okay. What about Barry? You didn't ever tell me about Barry."

Justin sighed.

"He's dead, isn't he?" Shelley said, her eyes filling again. "Tommy shot him."

"Yes, Shelley, he's dead."

An officer arrived and Justin turned to fill him in on what happened and told him to expect the FBI any moment. Even as he said the words, a couple of sedans pulled up and immediately took over the scene, dispatching the local police to handle the traffic issues that had suddenly become major.

Witnesses to the entire thing remained faithfully to tell their version of events. All of them had been deeply affected by the sight of Tommy ripping a child from her mother's arms and carrying her away, kicking and screaming.

Shelley leaned her head back and visualized Eric finding Jeffy alive and well and bringing her home to her. "Please, Eric, please find my baby. Please, Jesus, please give Eric your power and strength."

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"Okay, Rick, coming up, look for Reef Point Drive on the right," Jason commanded.

"Help me look, Bree."

She nodded her head, started reading off names of streets as they passed.

"They've gone off road," Jason reported. "They're in the middle of a large uncharted area." He was silent a moment. "They're stationary. If he stays put, we've got him."

Bree drew an excited breath.
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Jason waited a bit before he spoke again. He had Eric on the cell listening so he could find Ricky easily. “Okay, Rick, I show you’re getting close.”

“I just passed Irvine Coast Drive,” Rick said calmly. He’d been doing well over a hundred and was having to slow down to read the road signs.

“Okay, another mile, you should see it.”

Bree pointed in front of her. “There. There’s a street. That has to be it.”

Ricky slowed and turned right. “Okay, Jason. I’m on Reef Point.”

“Pass two streets, turn left on Gondoliers Bluff.”

“That’s one,” Bree pointed out as she strained to see ahead. “And two coming up. Take that next one Ricky.”

“There!”

“I got it,” Ricky said. “Go Jason.”

“Left again on Whalers Drive at the end of the road.”

Ricky gunned it to the end. “We’re in a deserted quarry maybe,” he said to give Jason more information. “No one around. All sand and rocks.” He came to the end of the road. “Okay, I’m left on Whalers.”

“Pass one road, then take the next right on Cliffhouse Bluff. Now it’s about to get difficult. Listen carefully. At the end of Cliffhouse is a vast area, I’m going to guess of sand and rocks as you described, if this is an old quarry. He drives straight off the end of the street and goes a hundred and seventy yards, then veers to the right.”

“Okay,” Ricky said. “So a little less than two football fields. Bree, lean out your window and look for tire tracks.”

They drove slowly, trying to judge the distance and look for tracks. Ricky sighed. The wind blew too hard here to leave tracks in the dry sand. “It feels like I’ve gone far enough, Jason.”

“You have. Veer right and stay on course fifty yards.”

“Holy...” Ricky said as they came over the hill.

“Fill me in, please,” Jason said.

“There’s rows and rows of concrete walls. They’re like holding bins for sand and rocks.”

“Okay, a concrete plant,” Jason said.

“Yeah, has to be,” Ricky replied.

“From my screen you should be right in front of Jeffy. Do you see his truck?”

“It could be on the next row, or the next, or the next,” Ricky answered. He cursed. “Sorry.”

"Don't get discouraged. Jeffy is definitely in one of those stalls. Hold on." He was silent a moment. "Your dad says don't go straight in. He says to get centered and use your skills. Rick, if he hears your car coming through there he might do the deed."

Bree's tears started again.

"I'm stopping. I can move silently on foot. Get my dad here."

"Working on it. Rick, be careful. He has a gun. He shot Barry. FBI have dispatched a couple of choppers. I'd like you to get to Jeffy before they show up."

"Got it." Ricky turned to Bree. "Stay in the car."

"He shot Barry?" Bree said.

"I have to go. Wait for Dad."

Bree nodded. She watched as he ran toward the line of walls and silently disappeared around the corner. It took her only one minute before she was out of the car. She paced, straining to listen to what may be happening. Then she stopped, because she could've sworn she heard something.

Standing completely still, she listened. Voices maybe? Moving slowly toward them, she began counting stalls as she moved down the first row along the opposite side Ricky had gone. When she got to the end, she turned left and moved around the far side of the area. When she came to the second row she stopped. Was it the wind or did she hear a tiny voice? She didn't dare call out. She turned and eased her way up the second row from the back.

"Shh, it's gonna be okay."

Bree turned sharply, gasped as she took in the scene. It was Beth she'd heard whispering. Beth sat on the ground her back leaning against a concrete wall. Jeffy was in her lap, her head fallen over sideways as if she were sleeping. Their right hands were tied by a thick rope to a hook in the concrete wall. Their left arms were taped together. Jeffy was pale. Beth was worse. Beth was speaking soft words of comfort to Jeffy.

Bree knelt quietly down in front of them. Beth slowly looked up at her, her eyes unfocused. Bree touched her face. "I'm gonna get you out of here," she whispered.

Jeffy woke and Bree quickly put her hand over her mouth and placed a finger to her own lips.

"Hey, baby," Bree said softly.

"Bree," Jeffy whispered. "He hurt Mommy and Barry and he spanked me."

"Okay, munchkin. You can tell me all about it later. Right now, let's get you out of here."

Bree rose and eyed the knots in the rope. It was thick and tied very tight. Her hands shook as she tried to loosen the knots. After several minutes she realized she wasn't gonna be able to do it. Tears welled in her eyes as she came to the conclusion that she would have to leave the girls and go for help.

"What's taking so long?" Jeffy asked in an exaggerated whisper.

Bree knelt down in front of her, a tear running over her cheek. "I can't untie it. There's too many knots and the rope is too thick and I can't budge it."

Jeffy nodded. "It's okay, Bree. Don't cry. I know you tried."

Bree sniffed. "I have to go find something. Maybe Ricky has a knife in his car."

"Ricky's car? Ricky's here?"

"Yes. How do you think I got here?"

Jeffy shrugged. "I don't always think of everything. Daddy says that's okay. Where is Ricky?"

"He's looking for Tommy. I was supposed to stay in the car, but I just couldn't. I had to look for you."

"Bree," Beth said weakly. "Tommy has guns. He's waiting somewhere behind a wall to shoot Ricky."

Bree bit her trembling lip, drew a deep breath and nodded. "Ricky can take care of himself," she answered firmly, though she was pretty sure she didn't sound very confident.

"That's right," Jeffy said proudly.

"Shh," Bree reminded her sister. "I have to go get something to cut the rope or at least pry it apart. I'll be right back."

"Thank you, Bree," Beth murmured. "Be careful."

Bree hugged both girls. "We'll have you free in no time."

She rose and ran quickly back toward Ricky's car. Eric's car came over the rise just as she got there. He pulled up beside her. Jumped out of the car.

"Oh, Eric, thank goodness you're here. I found Jeffy," she said, her voice filled with panic. "I can't get the ropes untied. I tried, but I can't. You have to come."

"Okay," he said softly, his heart soaring that he'd soon see his daughter. "Stay calm." He reached into his car and pulled a knife Bree recognized from the glove compartment. It was Ricky's old knife, the one he'd once given to her and the one used to kill James. Eric quickly

removed his shoes and socks. "Take me to Jeffy."

As they started back toward the rear, a shot rang out.

Bree startled and gasped. "Ricky!" She turned and headed toward the sound but Eric grabbed her and looked into her eyes.

"Trust him. I need you to take me to Jeffy."

Nodding, she ran toward the rear with Eric at her heels.

"Daddy!" Jeffy cried.

Eric made a cutting motion across his throat and Jeffy silenced immediately.

Quickly, he cut them free from the wall then began to cut through the tape in the space between the two arms. As he pulled the tape away, he realized what had been done. He gathered his daughter in his arms, breathing a sigh of gratitude that he'd found her alive, for now.

"What has he done?" Bree asked in hushed tones, as she saw the girls' lacerated arms.

"He cut me and he cut Beth and he put our arms together because he thinks that will make me be sick with AIDS but it won't. He thinks Beth has AIDS, but she really doesn't," Jeffy whispered.

"You don't?" Bree asked.

Beth shook her head. "I told that to everyone when I left home so that men would leave me alone." She shrugged. "It didn't work all the time. I'm sorry I worried you about Mark and everything. I was obviously on the wrong side. I was so blind."

"No time to talk about that now," Eric said. He picked up Jeffy and handed her to Bree, and then lifted Beth into his own arms.

"Be careful, Daddy," Jeffy whispered. "She's real sick."

"I will, baby. Come on, let's go."

Eric and Bree carried the girls back and placed them in the back seat of Eric's car. Eric knelt beside Jeffy, touched the giant purple bruise on her face.

"Tommy did this?"

"Yes, and he spanked me too."

Eric's face darkened.

"And he kissed me too and I spit it out of my mouth."

Eric's eyes closed briefly. "I have to go help Ricky. Do not get out of this car. Tell me you understand."

"I understand Daddy."

Eric nodded at Bree. "Call Shelley and Jason and tell them we have Jeffy."

Bree nodded. Eric took off. Bree watched as he ran up where some

rocks were in one of the stalls and scaled the wall with ease. He laid flat across the top of the wall, then stood and ran full speed down along the top of the narrow structure. She sighed in relief because she knew Ricky was in good hands.

Bree spoke with Jason first and then her mom. She reached through the back window and handed the phone to Jeffy. As they spoke Bree turned and listened, but she heard nothing.

Apparently the men were playing hide and seek. Then, another gunshot. Her heart raced and she knew she had to help. There is no way she could stay here all safe and cozy while the man she loves is being shot at. She made a quick decision and leaned her head in the car. "I'll be back." She took off.

As she rounded the side where she'd originally seen Ricky go, she heard helicopters in the distance. She looked up to see Eric on top of a wall giving hand signals to someone, whom she could only presume was Ricky. He held up a finger then pointed east. Though she knew the signal wasn't meant for her, she moved that direction.

She knew the moment Ricky finally made contact with Tommy. His kiyai was powerful and loud. There was cursing and the awful sound of flesh hitting flesh. Then all sound was drowned out as the choppers approached.

She came around the next wall to see Ricky holding Tommy's hand, the gun waving madly in the air, as he kneed Tommy in the groin. Once. Twice. Tommy grunted in pain. Ricky pushed him back and slammed his hand against the wall. The gun went off but Tommy still held onto it.

Ricky turned and threw Tommy over his shoulder, still holding the gun hand. The gun went off again just as Tommy's wrist snapped. Ricky took the gun from his hand and tossed it away. Tommy rolled on the ground in pain.

"Get up," Ricky ordered.

Tommy got to his knees. His left hand moved in toward his waist. Pulling Barry's gun, he pointed it at Ricky. With blinding speed, Ricky moved forward and snap kicked Tommy's left hand. The gun went off, barely missing Ricky, and flew into the air.

Ricky spun and his foot bashed into Tommy's face. Blood spurted from his nose. He spun again and hit the side of Tommy's head. Tommy staggered. Moving in, Ricky kicked toward Tommy's knee. The knee cap shattered. Tommy screamed and fell to the ground. Ricky straddled him and swung at Tommy's face until it was nothing but a

piece of red meat.

Eric jumped down off the wall and hurried toward Ricky. "Enough, Rick." He said softly.

Ricky didn't stop. Eric had the urge to let Ricky finish him, but that would only hurt Ricky. He was suddenly aware that the place was swarming with FBI agents. Eric reached down and banded Ricky's arms in a steel-like grip. It took all he had, along with two FBI agents, to tear him away from the fallen man.

It was several moments before Ricky stopped struggling. Slowly, he turned and looked into his father's face.

Eric's expression was one of love and compassion. "Better?" he asked softly.

Ricky breathed, nodded. "Jeffy?"

"She's safe. Bree found her."

"Shelley?"

"She's alive. I don't know the extent of her injuries, but I'm about to find out."

Ricky turned to go find Bree but noticed several agents bent over someone on the ground. Ricky and Eric both hurried forward. The circle of agents parted. Bree lay on the ground, her face pale, her eyes closed, her upper right chest soaked with blood. One of the agents held his shirt against the wound.

Ricky dropped to his knees beside her. "I got it," he said as he took over applying pressure to the wound. The words of the men around him made their way into his brain.

"Stray bullet," one of the agents said.

"Lost a lot of blood."

"Missed her heart."

"Maybe not life threatening if we can staunch the bleeding."

Ricky leaned close, his eyes moistening. "Bree, baby, don't you leave me."

She opened her eyes. Smiled. "I won't," she said weakly. She grimaced. "Wow, it really– hurts to– get shot."

He brushed his free hand over her hair. "I bet. It would probably help if you don't talk." He took her hand. "They'll get some morphine into you and you'll feel much better."

Eric leaned over Ricky's head to peer down at Bree. "They tell me the paramedics will be here any minute now."

"Are you– gonna yell at– me for not– staying in the car?"

"Soon enough."

She sighed. “I thought– I could help.”

“I’ve heard that one before.” Ricky cupped her face. “We’re gonna have a long talk about this.”

“Let me guess. You’re thinking– maybe you should– turn me over your knee?”

He smiled. “That’s very close to what I had in mind.”

✞✞✞

Luke 9:24

“For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.”

Chapter 20

"Shelley," Eric said softly.

Her eyes opened. "Jeffy, is she..."

"She's fine. I left her for just a minute to make sure you're okay. They tell me your leg is broken. Are you in any pain?"

She nodded. "Some. She's here? At the hospital?"

"Yes, honey."

"I want to see her."

"They're about to stitch her up. I have to get back to her."

"Stitch her up? What's happened to her?" Shelley cried.

Eric hesitated.

"Tell me," Shelley demanded.

He blew out a breath. "Tommy cut her. He cut her arm."

Shelley gasped, her hand moved to her mouth and her eyes filled and the tears spilled over.

"I know you're upset, sweetheart, but I really have to get back to our girl."

"I want to go with you. I want to be with her. She's my baby." Her voice hitched.

"Baby, I can't move you yet. Please, honey, you'll see her soon. It won't be much longer."

Shelley nodded, unable to speak. "Go," she said softly.

He started out of the room.

"Wait. Eric, so where's Bree and Ricky? Are they okay?"

Eric didn't want to lie to her, but he also didn't want to upset her. "Shelley, will you let me go to Jeffy and then I'll come back and tell you everything?"

"Just tell me, are they okay?" She said between hiccups.

"Yes, baby, they're okay." He bent down and kissed her.

She nodded. He left her. He ran through the corridors back to emergency. When he got to Jeffy's room he had to smile as he stood outside the door.

"And then he pulled out this big knife. It was really big, maybe this long and he cut me. He thought he could make me sick, but Beth told

me she didn't really have AIDS. And then my sister came to rescue me, but she couldn't untie the ropes so she left and I was kinda worried, but then she came back with my daddy and he got us undone real fast. My daddy can do anything. And he says when I grow up, I can too. Anything I want. I wanted to be king of the world, but Joey, he's my brother, he says I can't be king, I have to be queen, but I still want to be the best most powerful queen."

Eric stepped into the room. "Hi, baby girl, I see you haven't lost your gift of gab."

"Sorry, Daddy. I guess I sort of got carried away."

"That's okay," the nurse said. "You're very smart, aren't you?"

"Yeah, but sometimes that's no fun." She frowned. "Now that my Daddy's back, you are gonna fix my arm, aren't you?"

"Jeffy," Eric said softly. "The doctor is gonna stitch up your arm and they're gonna have to give you a few shots. How are we gonna handle this?"

"Is it gonna hurt?"

"Probably a little bit, baby."

She nodded her head. "I am a martial artist and I can handle it just fine."

Eric smiled. "That's my girl. You can yell if you want. You can cry. You can do anything. You just can't move. Okay?"

"Yes, Daddy."

He stayed with her, off to one side, keeping her gaze directed at him as he spoke to her, rubbing her cheek, telling her how well she was doing as the doctor worked. It broke his heart to see the tears stream down her face, yet she didn't make a sound except for a sniffle or two.

By the time they'd finished she was sound asleep. They sent her for a full body scan, looking for bruising and internal injuries. They found a seat belt bruise across her chest and bruising from Tommy's rough treatment of her on her arms and her backside and thighs along with a small bump on the back of her head. Eric almost wished he'd let Ricky finish him off.

Once they finished with Jeffy they saw no reason to keep her. Eric went ahead and signed her out. The media was swarming, trying to get an interview or picture of the famous Breanna Adams or any member of her family. A private waiting area had been arranged quickly once the hospital administrator discovered who was being brought in.

Justin and Jason and Angel and Kimmie all turned as Eric entered carrying Jeffy. Mark and Joey were there, their faces dark with worry

and apprehension. They started to scoop Jeffy up in their usual hug but Eric stopped them.

"Be gentle. She's got some bruising."

"That's because he hit me," Jeffy said indignantly.

Joey cursed.

Mark sat and pulled Jeffy carefully onto his lap. "There now. How's that?"

"That's good," she said.

"Have you been able to see Bree?" Joey asked Eric.

"Not yet. She was still in surgery the last time I checked. I'm gonna go get your mom then see about Bree. Were you able to reach your dad?"

"Yes sir, he's on the way."

"Don't worry, Joey," Jeffy said. "Bree got shot and there was lots of blood but she was okay. I got to talk to her before they put her in the ambulance. She was smiling and laughing."

"Good drugs," Eric stated when he saw the confused looks on the boys' faces.

Mark nodded. "And what about Beth? Have you heard anything about Beth?"

"Her family is being flown in. We've discovered she doesn't have AIDS. She is pretty sick though. She was weak, barely conscious when I carried her to the car. She was a little more alert in the ambulance."

"She doesn't have AIDS?" Mark and Joey asked at the same time, their surprise evident.

"She was just teasing," Jeffy said. "She was telling everyone that to keep the men from wanting to do things to her."

"Okay, Jeffy, that's enough about that," Eric said, nodding toward Kimmie.

"Is she here in this hospital?" Mark asked.

"Yes."

"Would you mind if I go see her?"

"Not at all. I stepped in to see her briefly but I couldn't stay. I'm sure she would appreciate the company. She is all alone."

Eric knelt down in front of Jeffy. "I know you're tired and I'm gonna take you home real soon, but do you think you can stay here with your brothers a few minutes while I go see about getting them to release Mommy?"

Jeffy nodded. "Yes. I'm fine Daddy. If I get sleepy Mark will let me sleep on his lap, won't you, Mark?"

"You bet," he said softly.

"Hi, Jeffy," Kimmie said as she came closer to her friend. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay. It was pretty scary though. Tommy took out this big knife, it was really big, maybe this long and..."

Eric smiled. He turned to Justin and Jason. "I'm gonna get Shelley. They want her to stay overnight but her emotional well-being is more at stake than her physical and I'm gonna insist they release her. Then I need to check on Bree and Ricky. Have you heard anything about Agent Faulkner?"

"Cole is in critical condition," Jason answered. "Ruptured spleen, torn liver. A lung collapsed. They have him stabilized. He has no wife or kids. His mother and father are on the way. They live in Arizona."

Eric nodded. "And have you had a chance to speak with Barry's family yet?"

Jason nodded. "Yes, I spoke with both his mother and sister. He was their everything. They're in with a chaplain right now and a counselor is standing by."

"Anything they need, anything, you'll let me know?"

Jason nodded. "The insurance will give his family a decent settlement. If there's anything else, I will let you know."

Eric sighed. "Thanks, and of course, you'll get back to me with the funeral arrangements?"

"As soon as I know."

"I'm sorry, Jason. I know how hard this must be for you too. For all your men."

Jason ran a hand over his face. "Thanks. We're close. Like family. We're all very close. It just gets that way."

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Ricky scrubbed his hands over his face. This was the second time he stood in a hospital within a six-week period waiting to hear if the woman he loved more than life itself was gonna be okay. This was hell. He remembered when his father had been training Shelley the year before the MART. They'd lost count of how many times she'd been carted to a hospital. His father was a strong man.

He turned as the door to the private waiting room opened. Eric rolled Shelley in. She was in a wheelchair, her leg sticking straight out in front of her.

"Shelley," Ricky said as he bent down to kiss her cheek. "My wonderful, very young mom, you don't know how good it is to see you
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alive and well. How are you? Does it hurt much?"

"A little. They have me on medication. Have you heard anything about Bree?"

"Not yet. She was fine when they put her in the chopper. I don't understand what's taking so long now."

"Ji yen yen," Eric said softly.

Ricky sighed at his father's Korean words. "Patience is a little hard to come by at the moment," he replied.

"I understand, Rick. I mean, the woman you love is in there somewhere fighting for her life," Eric said. "Who knows what could happen? Her heart could fail while she's on that table. The surgeon could make a mistake. It only takes a small one. They could find the bullet did a lot more damage than first expected. There's a million things that could go wrong."

"Good grief, Dad, there's a million things that could go right too. Don't you think it would be better to focus on that?"

Eric raised his eyebrows. "Yes, I really do."

Ricky's eyes met his. He lowered his head. "Got it."

"I need to get Shelley and Jeffy home," Eric said.

"I'm not going anywhere until Bree is out of surgery and I know she's alright," Shelley asserted.

"I had a feeling you were gonna say that." Eric went to the phone and spoke for a few minutes.

"Who did you call?" Shelley asked.

"I asked security to escort the rest of our family up here to this waiting room."

Shelley offered a smile. "Thank you, Eric. What would I do without you to take care of everything?"

He shook his head. "Let's see, without me you wouldn't be sitting in a wheelchair with a broken leg and cuts all over your face. Your daughter wouldn't be having a bullet removed from her body. Your other daughter wouldn't have a foot-long scar down her arm and bruises all over her body. You wouldn't have scars all over your arms and legs. Bree wouldn't have lost her child. Our grandchild. Ricky's child. The list goes on and on."

Ricky put his arms around his father. "Is it my turn to say something wise to help you?"

Eric sighed. "You'll have to forgive my moment of weakness."

"Whatever Dad, but I have to say that weakness is never a word I'd use in association with you."

"Thank you, Rick. I'll try to live up to your image of me. Right now though, it just really tears me apart to see all the females in our family hurt and maimed simply because I kicked some bully's butt thirty something years ago."

"If you want to place blame, place it on the Crane brothers. Or maybe their parents. It was never wrong for you to defend yourself and the other guys you were defending. You know that and you've taught me that. You've taught thousands of people that, Dad. Don't you believe it yourself?"

Eric's jaw clenched and his eyes closed. "I do. Like I said, just needed to vent a moment. That moment is over. But don't lose sight of the facts, Rick. I wasn't defending as much as I was looking for vengeance, and that was wrong, and I knew it was wrong. There are consequences for willfully choosing to do what you know is wrong."

Ricky nodded, thinking about his recent life choices and the sins he'd willfully committed.

The door opened and the family came in. Mark carried Jeffy who was sound asleep. Jason carried Kimmie. Angel sat and he placed Kimmie in her lap. Shelley immediately reached for Jeffy. Mark placed her carefully across Shelley's lap.

Shelley hugged her hard, buried her face in Jeffy's hair and savored the warmth of her baby's life force.

"You haven't heard anything yet?" Justin asked.

"Not yet, and it's driving me crazy," Ricky answered.

"I'll go see if I can get any information."

"Good luck. Every time I go out there and ask, they tell me, 'when the doctor sends word they'll let me know'."

Justin nodded with a sigh. "Nevertheless, I'll go see if they'll tell me what's taking so long."

Justin left the waiting room, headed toward the nurses' station. Mark and Joey spoke softly to their mother, kissing her cheek and fussing over her comfort.

Eric watched with a smile. He was proud of them. He was proud of the entire family. In his opinion, there wasn't a nobler group of people to be found. Mark looked up. "This waiting is killing me. I think I'm gonna go see if I can visit Beth." He nodded at Ricky. "Buzz me, when you have news."

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Easing the door open, Mark quietly entered the room. Her eyes were closed. An IV line was attached to the top of her hand. Small, was
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the word that popped into his mind. And young. The family had never known her age. He'd assumed her to be twenty or so, but now she looked young and innocent and vulnerable.

She'd been through hell. That he was sure of. Her pale, bruised face held evidence of weeks of captivity. Under what conditions, he wondered. Eric said she was sick. If not with AIDS, then with what? He moved forward to the side of her bed, observing her closely. Her hair had grown, revealing a stripe of blonde hair. No cute spikey hairdo now. It was tangled and dirty. He touched her free hand and her eyes opened.

"Hello," he said softly.

She blinked several times. "Mark?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing here?"

"I needed to see if you were okay."

She didn't respond. She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, the tears were there.

"Does that upset you?" he asked.

"It's just surprising, after what I did to you and your family."

He nodded. "We're gonna talk about that, but first I want to ask about this AIDS thing."

She sighed. "I don't have AIDS."

"Why then, did you say you did?"

She sighed. "I said it to hurt you. Ya see, I was still trying to do what Tommy wanted me to do."

"Tell me about it, Beth. Tell me everything."

She closed her eyes. "I guess you deserve that much. When I left home I started telling people I had AIDS. It made them leave me alone. When I told you that, I was thinking if I did my job well enough, Tommy would still help my family."

Mark shook his head slowly as he considered what she said. "And you actually did meet Tommy here in Los Angeles like you told Ricky and he took you in off the streets?"

"Yes. That part was true. What wasn't true is my father doesn't have cancer."

"So, why did you leave home?"

"Because," she hesitated, "well, because— *I* have cancer."

Mark was silent for a moment. "I'm sorry, Beth." He squeezed her hand. "Would it be too personal for me to ask what kind of cancer you have?"

"You wouldn't remember it if I told you. In short, I have a primary brain tumor. It's inoperable. And it's growing. And I *am* going to die."

"Oh, Beth," Mark began.

"Please, don't. No sympathy. I couldn't bear it. I would like to tell you everything. Can you just listen?"

"Okay. I'm listening."

"I was a junior last year in high school. I remember beginning the year wondering if life could get any better. I was a cheerleader, I had a boyfriend, I was head of the drama club, and life was totally awesome. Or so I thought. Right at the end of my junior year I started getting sick. I had headaches. And I'd throw up every morning. My boyfriend and I both were terrified that I was pregnant. I finally went to the doctor and found I wasn't pregnant. My boyfriend was greatly relieved. So relieved in fact, that he made sure we would never have to worry like that again."

"What did he do?"

"He broke up with me."

Sighing, Mark's lips pressed tightly together. He didn't know what to say about that.

"I was absolutely devastated. We'd been together for three years. He was my first, if you know what I mean. My first and only. Then the doctors found out what was really making me sick. I'd been so upset about losing David, that was my boyfriend's name, that finding out about the tumor was like kicking a dead horse, you know? And my family, they were scared and trying to be brave for me. Each of us were grieving as if I'd already died."

"The tests that had to be run were horrible but they were also the least of my troubles. My family is poor. At least by your standards. We just barely make ends meet. My father helps to manage a mill. My mother taught sewing classes in a local fabric store. Even with my father's health insurance through his job the medical bills started pouring in. My parents took out a loan to help cover expenses. Then another. When the loans got too difficult to pay, they took out a second mortgage on the house.

"Do you see what I'm talking about, Mark? I was destroying my family. I believed I had to leave. If I wasn't around for them to take to the doctor and to seek medical treatment for me, then they wouldn't have to pay for all that. I left before I could do any further damage. I knew it would hurt them, but I figured, I mean, I'm dying anyway and they're gonna be hurt eventually, but this way it would be before they

were ruined financially."

"Beth, when you left, did you know where you would go?"

"I knew I would go west. I had a little money and that got me to LA. After that I didn't care."

"What about the headaches? They didn't incapacitate you?"

"They would come and go. I knew they would eventually get unbearable and I've been pretty scared about that, but I was just glad my family would never have to see me go through all that. Then along came Tommy. I thought he was a messenger from God. He was willing to take me off the streets and fix my family's financial problems in exchange for me playing a part."

Mark looked down, as his mind wandered to his eighteenth birthday, the night she'd come to him.

"I'm sorry, Mark, for the pain I caused your family, and especially for the pain I caused you. I was so mixed up. I don't know how I could not have seen Tommy for what he is. But Mark, I want you to know, the night I came to you, it wasn't something that Tommy told me to do."

He shifted his weight, uncomfortable with the sensitive topic. "Well then, why did you do it?" he asked softly.

"It was selfish really. I saw you come in and knew things hadn't worked out with Jana. You'd always been kind to me. You're a good looking guy and I wanted to have that experience one more time before I died."

"You mean sex?"

"I mean the closeness to another human being. The closeness of belonging, if even for just a few minutes, to another person. And Mark, what I felt with you that night was so very different from anything I'd experienced with my boyfriend. You were so gentle and so giving. I think I fell in love that night just a little and I was sad because I knew you were something I could never have."

He squeezed her hand.

"You'll remember me after I'm gone, Mark, as your first. It was the one thing in all this I don't really regret."

"I promise, Beth, I won't ever forget you."

She smiled. "I know."

He frowned. "Okay, so then, what happened after Ricky took you to the bus station?"

"Well, I sat there a long time trying to decide what to do. I couldn't go home. I still believed that Tommy was gonna help me. I'd

never seen the bad side of him. He'd always been really kind to me, so I just couldn't believe all the things you guys said about him."

"But you *could* believe what he said about *us*?"

"I've thought long and hard about that all these weeks, while I was tied up like an animal. I guess it was just a matter of him telling me his side first."

"He tied you up?"

"Not right away. I called him from the bus station and he came to get me. He was pretty mad. I told him I'd accomplished most of the things he'd asked of me, but apparently it wasn't enough. The moment we got back to that house, he changed. He was not mister nice guy anymore."

"Did he hurt you?"

She shrugged. "He beat me up pretty bad. Actually, too many times to count. Once he started raving about going after Jeffy, that's when I tried to leave, and that was when he locked me up in a room."

"Beth..."

"But, things got much worse right after Ricky."

"After Ricky?"

"Yeah, I was locked up in the next room when Tommy was torturing Ricky. It was horrible, the things he did to him. I couldn't see what was happening though I could hear everything. Like, every time Tommy punched him, that horrible sound of flesh hitting flesh. And Ricky grunting in pain. I could smell flesh burning too. I didn't know what I was smelling at the time, but Tommy bragged to me about it later.

"Near the end, Ricky asked Tommy to take his life, in exchange for anyone else Tommy might have in mind. He was ready to die right then because he loved you all so much. He begged Tommy to kill him, but Tommy had always intended to get Jeffy. Ricky's voice was so sincere. I couldn't stop crying. Then Ricky cried out and everything got quiet. At first I'd thought Tommy had fulfilled Ricky's request. I thought he'd killed Ricky. I thought Ricky was dead and I would be next. When Tommy finally let me out, he was all strange. He took it out on me. After that, it just got worse and worse.

"He started beating me. Kicking me. He kept me tied up by whatever bed he was using so that he could hit me whenever the urge struck him. It was hell. I was getting weaker and weaker and I wished the end would just come one way or the other."

Mark ran a hand over her hair and gave a slight nod. "It's over

now, Beth. You made it through all of that. You're an incredibly strong person."

"I don't know about that."

"I do. I know. I'm surrounded by strong people so I don't say that easily. I'm amazed at your bravery. At what you were willing to sacrifice to help your family. You're an amazing girl, Beth. An amazing woman." He leaned close and kissed her forehead.

Beth smiled. "Thank you, Mark. You don't know how much that means to me."

His hand covered hers again. "Are you in any pain right now?"

"No. Compared to what I've been through, right now I feel wonderful."

He looked down at their hands. Her small one gripping his. He wasn't in love with her but he did have a special place for her in his heart and he did care what happened to her and her family.

"Mom told me she's been in touch with your family. They're on their way."

Beth nodded with a frown. "Eric already told me. He said the FBI actually contacted my family weeks ago to tell them I was being held by Tommy and they were doing their best to find me. They told my parents they would keep them informed. And Eric told me Shelley spoke with them today."

"So why are you frowning? You don't want to see them?"

"Oh, I want to see them desperately, but it's just that, now, we're right back in the same place as before I left. My illness is gonna destroy them."

"Didn't Eric tell you what else Mom has been doing?"

"What else?"

"She's taken care of all the financial problems. Everything. You won't have to worry about that anymore."

Beth's mouth opened, but no sound ushered forth.

"It's no big deal, Beth. I mean, my mom is rolling in dough and she loves helping people. Righting wrongs. It's her way of beating up the bad guys."

Beth sighed. "I don't know what to say. A simple 'thank you' is not enough."

"She doesn't expect anything in return. As a matter of fact, since Eric didn't tell you, I'm thinking I just messed up. She probably didn't want you to know. So now, you have to promise me you won't tell anyone it was me who told you."

She smiled. “My lips are sealed.”

Mark’s phone vibrated and he dug it out of his pocket. “Yeah. Okay. I’ll be down in a minute.”

She squeezed his hand. “Thanks for coming in to see me. I feel so much better. Almost happy.”

His mouth tensed. *Almost* happy. Beth was gonna die. He sighed. Sometimes life sucked. He forced a smile. “Well, I’ve got to go. Bree is out of surgery.”

Beth frowned. “Listen Mark, I don’t want to go all through this with everyone else. I just want to concentrate on my family and spend what little time there is left with them. Would you mind telling your family everything for me?”

“So, in other words, this is goodbye to our family?”

She looked into his eyes. “Yes.”

He thought a minute. “Of course, if that’s what you want.” He hesitated. “They would want to tell you thanks for comforting Jeffy during the time she was with you. They would tell you to be strong and to let us know how you’re doing. They would tell you they forgive you, and that mostly you need to forgive yourself.”

She began to cry.

“And I’m gonna tell you that I feel the need to stay in touch with you. If you don’t want to speak to me, I could email you.”

She smiled, wiped at her tears. “I think I’d like that.”

He leaned close. “Goodbye, Beth. It’s been an adventure.” He touched his mouth to hers. Kissed her gently.

“Goodbye, Mark.”

Turning, he left the room quickly. He didn’t want her to see how much she’d affected him. He hit the elevator button and headed back to find his family. When he stepped off the elevator he saw Justin, leaning on the counter of the nurses’ station, speaking to a pretty nurse. Justin turned as Mark approached.

Mark smiled at the nurse.

“Lori, this is one of Bree’s brothers, Mark Adams. Mark, this is Lori,” Justin said.

Mark nodded. “Nice to meet you.”

“You saw Beth?” Justin asked. “Is she doing okay?”

“Yes, I saw her and no. I’ll tell you all about it.”

Justin nodded and turned back to the nurse. “Thanks for keeping us informed, Lori.”

She smiled sweetly. “Glad I could help.”

He smiled back, held up a business card he had in his hand. "And I'll call you soon."

She smiled again. "I'm looking forward to it."

Mark's eyebrows rose as Justin said goodbye to the nurse.

"You're working the nurses?" Mark asked with a sly grin.

"Not the nurses. Just the one. She's cute, don't ya think?"

Mark nodded. "Sure." They entered the waiting room together.

"How's Bree?" Mark asked immediately.

"She's out of surgery. They said she'll be in recovery for an hour or so and then we can see her," Ricky answered.

"Did they say what took them so long?"

"They said they called in a cosmetic surgeon to see what could be done to reduce the scarring on her chest."

Mark nodded. He looked around the room. Angel sat next to Jason who was now holding Kimmie. Eric sat on the other side of Jason, Jeffy asleep on his shoulder. His mom sat nearby in her wheelchair, a pained look on her face. Eric had been right; he needed to get them home. His mother could be very stubborn when it came to her kids. Joey, restless as usual, was on his feet, rocking back and forth. Ricky was braced in a corner of the room, his arms folded across his chest. Justin now leaned against the door.

"Well, how's Beth?" Shelley asked as she stroked Jeffy's hair.

"At the moment she's fine, but that won't last."

Everyone listened intently as he went on to tell them Beth's story. When he finished, the room remained silent. It was Shelley who finally spoke.

"And she doesn't want to see us?"

"It's not that she doesn't want to see you, Mom, I think she just wants to conserve her energy and seeing all of us and talking things over is very draining on her."

"We understand," Eric said, glancing at Shelley.

"Are you okay, Mark?" Shelley asked.

He nodded. "I'm okay. I'm not at risk anymore, so that's a load off. I feel bad for Beth. I'm gonna stay in touch with her."

They all looked up as the door was pushed open. Justin moved out of the way. Two cops stepped into the room. Jason immediately handed Kimmie to Angel. At the same time, Eric was handing Jeffy to Shelley.

The officers wore grim expressions.

"Officers?" Eric said in his soft, commanding way. The question was clear. Why are you here? From the looks on their faces it appeared

it was bad news.

One of the officers cleared his throat, nodded at Ricky, addressing him. “I want you to know Ricky, uh, Mr. Kino, that I’m a big fan, and that I have a great deal of respect for you and so, what I’m about to tell you is extremely difficult.”

Ricky nodded, his eyebrows raised.

“I have a wife and two kids and I can’t afford to lose my job,” the officer said sadly.

Again, Ricky nodded. “Maybe you’d better just spit it out.”

“Yes sir, I, uh, we, have a warrant for your arrest.”

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1 Peter 3:9

“Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may obtain a blessing.”

Chapter 21

The room tilted for just a second. When it righted, Mark and Joey had moved in front of Ricky. Ricky eyed their backs with a smile. Oh, how he loved his family. His father stood beside them, Jason beside him creating a wall between the officers and himself. Ricky was sure if Shelley and Angel hadn't been holding sleeping children they'd be right there too.

The officers visibly swallowed.

"May I see the warrant?" Justin asked.

They handed him the papers. The room remained silent as Justin examined them. He looked up, surprised.

"Aggravated assault?" He turned to explain to the family. "That is a felony offense."

Ricky patted Mark and Joey's shoulders to get them to move aside. They hesitated and then slowly parted and Ricky moved through to stand in front of the officers.

"Aggravated assault usually involves a weapon," Justin continued. He looked up at Ricky. "Did you have a weapon, Rick?"

Ricky shrugged and held up his hands. They were red and swollen with some scrapes and cuts.

"I'm sorry, Rick," the other officer said. "Tommy Crane is screaming bloody murder about this. He's pressing charges."

"He was trying to kill me," Ricky said softly, making a pleading gesture with his hands.

"Yes sir, we know, but he says you continued to beat him long after he'd been subdued."

Ricky sighed. "I can't believe this."

"Is it just his word?" Eric asked.

Ricky eyed his father. Was he about to lie to try to save him? Because Ricky *had* continued to beat Tommy after he'd taken his gun, and his father knew it.

"Mr. Crane said there were others present, some FBI and you, sir. He also said we should simply ask you," the officer said, nodding at Ricky. "He seemed pretty confident that you would tell the same

story." The officer looked up at his hero. "Did you do what Crane says you did?"

"You don't have to answer that Rick," Justin said quickly.

"That's right," the officer said. "You have the right to remain silent. And with all respect, I would suggest you use it."

Ricky's eyes swept the room. He could get out of this. The FBI agents would probably help him without blinking an eye. Lie or mislead. They wanted justice. Nevertheless, Ricky didn't want his father to be put in a position of lying for his son. "Yes."

"Damn it, Rick," Justin said.

Ricky appealed to the officers. "This man kidnapped my sister with the intent to kill her. He thought he had killed her. He held another girl hostage. He kidnapped me, beat me and left me for dead. He wrecked the car in which my sister and stepmother were riding and could have killed them all. He's responsible for Bree being shot and he shot and killed an Ameritech agent."

"Yes sir, and he's being charged with everything they can throw at him. Really, it's this new chief. He's intent on following the book. He says if it'd been police officers that had beaten Crane to a bloody pulp there would be a huge public outcry. He says the same thing applies to you. Legally, once Crane was subdued, there was no reason to continue."

Ricky ran both hands through his hair.

"This is ludicrous," Jason said.

"I agree, sir, it is. Chief says Crane is innocent until proven guilty in court and he has the right to press charges and will be given his rights. He says he doesn't want any charges against Crane thrown out later because he didn't receive his due rights."

Joey cursed.

"No, Joe," Ricky began. "I did what they say I did, and I should've had more control. And the chief is simply following the law, which is based on our Constitution, which I honor and respect." Ricky paced across the room, came back to stand in front of the officers. His mouth pressed into a thin line. "Bree—Breanna—is in recovery. Can you hold off for an hour? I just need to see her." His voice cracked as he asked the question, causing Shelley and Angel's tears to start.

The officers eyed each other.

Sighing, the officer shook his head. "We were told to bring you in without delay, to give you no special treatment."

Ricky's eyes moistened as he realized he wouldn't be there when

Bree woke. He desperately needed to see her.

"Um, I'm gonna have to ask you to face the wall."

"Justin, you're the attorney, do something," Angel pleaded.

He shook his head. "I'll call the judge, see if I can get him out tonight, but I can't stop this process."

Ricky turned, faced the wall. The officer placed his hand on the small of Ricky's back.

"Please place your hands on the wall," the officer said. "And spread your legs."

Ricky complied, his head hanging down between his arms.

"Sir, do you have anything to declare before I search you?"

Ricky heaved a sigh, his mouth tightening. "Are you talking about the wallet, cell phone or keys? Or maybe you mean the handy little knife in my left pocket."

The room was utterly quiet while the officer ran his hands over Ricky and removed his possessions. Shelley was extremely glad Jeffy remained asleep.

The officer finished his search, reached up to grab Ricky's arm and pulled it down behind his back. He clipped the cuff around Ricky's wrist, then reached up and grabbed the other arm. Once Ricky's hands were securely cuffed they turned him around. Ricky scanned his audience.

"Tell—" He cleared his throat. "Give Bree my love. Tell her I'll come to her soon."

"We'll take care of it," Eric said calmly, doing his best to show strength for Ricky's sake. The visual, however, of seeing his son searched and placed in cuffs would stay with him for a long time. He looked up at the officers. "Since this new chief is so intent on showing no preference, are we to assume they'll put Ricky in with the general population?"

The officers nodded with a sigh. "I think that would be a safe assumption. I'm sorry."

Eric glanced up at Ricky, their eyes meeting. He knew and Ricky knew that meant he may have to defend himself, because many would want a free shot at Ricky Kino and that would mean more charges against him if a fight or brawl breaks out. Apparently, Justin realized the same thing.

"Rick," Justin said. "Keep your head down and don't look anyone in the eye."

Ricky swallowed and peered into his father's eyes for several

moments before he spoke. “Sorry, Justin, I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he said softly.

“Ricky,” Justin said. “This isn’t about pride.”

“I’ll never lower my head in shame or fear. It’s not in me.”

“And you remain my hero,” the officer said softly. He took Ricky’s arm. “Let’s get this over with. The place is crawling with media. I’m afraid this will be all over the news.”

“I don’t care about that,” Ricky responded automatically. He stopped and turned to his family. “I’m sorry you have to deal with this. I let my temper get the best of me and I didn’t consider the consequences to myself and especially to you. Jason warned me about this. I should have known Tommy would use anything he could to continue to hurt us.” He gestured toward Joey. “Joey, take special note, please.”

“Yes sir. I got it.” Joey faced him and bowed deeply.

Ricky returned the gesture.

Mark did the same, then Jason and finally Eric.

Eric nodded at his son. “We learn as we go, Rick.”

“Ricky,” Shelley said softly.

He glanced over at her. She was smiling, a twinkle in her eye.

“Take notes, you may need this experience for a movie role.”

He smiled. Everyone smiled. Eric peered at his wife with approval. She was the best when it came to making lemonade.

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Her lashes fluttered open. “Ricky?” she whispered.

“No, Bree, it’s Eric,” he said softly, running his hand over her hair. “How do you feel?”

“Sleepy.”

“Are you in any pain?”

“Not yet. Is Mom okay?”

“She’s right here. She *is* in pain and I’m gonna take her home as soon as she sees that you’re okay.”

He turned and pushed the wheelchair up to the bed and locked the wheels. Shelley placed her good foot on the floor and Eric helped her to stand. She grimaced in pain, took a moment to breathe, placed a smile on her face.

“Hey baby girl,” Shelley said sweetly, leaning over the bed rail the best she could.

“Hi Mom, are you okay? Eric says you’re in pain.”

“I broke my leg. They gave me something earlier, but it’s worn off
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while I've been waiting to see you. Actually, I'm starting to hurt all over. It was some crash. We flipped several times."

"Mom, you should have gone home."

"I couldn't," Shelley said, her eyes welling with tears. "My baby girl was lying on a table, being operated on. They told me you were gonna be okay, but I had to see you and speak with you."

Bree's eyes fluttered closed. "I understand. Is Jeffy okay?"

"She's fine. She's out in the waiting room. She was asleep but she woke up. She wants to see you too. Then we're going home."

Her eyes opened again. "Where's Ricky?"

Shelley's breathing became labored. Eric took her by the waist. "You need to sit." He lowered her back into the chair.

Eric moved back beside the bed. "Bree, Ricky can't be here right now, but he'll be here in the morning."

"Where is he?"

He sighed.

The lack of tension in his face was enough to make her panic. "Is he okay? Was he hurt?"

"He's fine, but, he's been arrested."

"No. No, that can't be."

Eric did his best to explain the circumstances to Bree between the hiccups and sobs. When he finished, he tried to console her.

"He told me to let you know that he loves you and he'll be here for you tomorrow. Bree, it's not as bad as it seems."

"Ricky is sitting in jail, right this very minute. His freedom taken away. His dignity taken away."

Eric smiled at her. "Since when have you ever seen Ricky's dignity taken from him?" His own mind briefly shifted to Ricky's torture even as he spoke the words. He sighed deeply. "Ricky will survive this night. We all will, and I promise you, he won't be dwelling on his lack of freedom."

She sniffed. "What will he be dwelling on then?"

"God. You. His family. His future. He'll pray a lot, listen for direction and wisdom, and then he'll create his future in his mind as God directs, so that it will soon become his reality."

"Can I call him? Can I talk to him?"

"No."

"I need to see him, Eric. Please."

"I wish that I could make it happen. I need you to accept that it won't happen tonight."

"I love him so much."

"I know you do. And he knows. And he loves you too. Use that love to see you through this night. I'm gonna send Jeffy in for just a moment and then I need to take your mom home. She's suffering. Mark and Joey are here too and want to see you. We'll be back tomorrow. You, young lady need to rest and heal."

She nodded. "I will."

"Bye, baby," Shelley said softly as Eric rolled her out.

"Bye, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too. Sleep well."

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"Eric?"

"No, Bree, it's me."

Her eyes focused quickly. She quickly tried to sit up, but gasped in pain.

"Relax, baby. Everything is okay now."

"Oh, Ricky, when you didn't show up this morning I was terrified that something had happened to you. Are you okay?"

He smiled. "I am oh-so-fine."

"Did anyone try to pick on you?"

"A few tried. I discouraged them."

"You fought them?"

"No. I used my charming personality."

"And it worked?"

She sounded incredulous which made him laugh. "I used it on you and it worked, didn't it?"

Smiling, she gave a slight nod. "Oh yes, it did. I think it worked too well."

"What do you mean?"

"I can't live without you now. I can't think of anything but you. You occupy my every thought. I need you, Ricky. I love you."

"And I you, Breanna Adams."

"Was it terrible, I mean, you know, being in jail?"

"Weelll, it's no piece of cake. It was late by the time I was processed so I didn't have long before I had to bed down."

"Did you get any sleep? Because you look exhausted."

"I don't remember sleeping. I began the night counting my blessings and being grateful for all that I have and for my family being safe, for you and Jeffy and Shelley being alive. Then, I spent the rest of the night in prayer and repentance and meditation and contemplation
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and I came to some clear conclusions."

"Like what?"

"Like not wasting one more minute of life. We could have lost Jeffy yesterday. Or your mom. Two inches lower and I could've lost you. We are so very blessed. Tommy is now out of our lives and will be for the rest of his life if things go as we plan. So we're free." He took her hand. "One of the reasons it took me half the day to get here is I had to do some fast running around."

"What do you mean?"

"First, I went to my penthouse to shower and change and believe me, that was a necessity. And then," he paused and reached into his pocket. "And then I had to stop and pick this up."

He took a small velvet box from his pocket. Her eyes widened.

He sighed and smiled. "So, I know this isn't the most romantic of places, but I promised myself I wouldn't waste one more minute. Bree, I love you more than life itself and I want to be with you always. I want to have and raise children with you. I want to care for you and protect you and I want you to do the same for me."

He bent close to her. "I've known you a long time and I've loved you for just as long. Breanna, will you marry me?"

Her eyes never left his. "Yes."

"Yes?"

She laughed at the puzzled look on his face. "You were expecting something else?"

"I guess so. An argument or something."

"I made some promises myself when Tommy had you. I don't want to waste any more time either. I love you, Ricky. I admire you. I respect you. And I trust you, to take care of me and our children. I was a fool once when I pushed you away. I'd be a fool to let you slip away again. There now, are those enough words?"

"Enough." He covered her mouth with his own.

She breathed in his scent. Soap and man and something much more primal. All these years she'd been seeking dangerous men, when the most dangerous of all was right in front of her. And because he was so dangerous, so capable, so confident, he was able to be gentle and kind and funny and happy and all the things that he was.

He deepened the kiss. Sometimes it was as if he couldn't get close enough. She was so very female. Yet she was tough. No wounded bird. This woman wanted to take care of everyone around her. She gave unselfishly of her heart. She pushed herself to face her fears. She was

intelligent, funny, and a tigress and Ricky couldn't get enough of her. She was strong enough to be his companion. She met him equally on the playing field and that was exactly what he needed. She'd just had a bullet dug out of her chest and she was worried about how he'd slept. She was amazing. And even though the whole world wanted her, she was his. He was a happy man.

He opened the box. "I hope you like it. If you don't we can exchange it. Of course the jeweler was ecstatic that *the* Breanna Adams would be wearing his design. I told him it needed to be understated, because you were one classy chick. He agreed. So, what do you think?"

She smiled sweetly. "Well, it would help if you would take it out of the box and put it on my finger."

"Oh, yeah, let me do that."

She watched his hands shake as he removed the ring. The moment he had it clear of the box, he dropped it. Frantically, he searched through the bed covers, sighing with relief when he finally scooped it up.

"Ricky," Bree said softly.

"Huh?"

"Calm down. I'm not going anywhere."

He blew out a breath. She held out her hand and he slipped the ring onto her finger.

She held it up in front of her face. "It's perfect. Oh, Ricky, it's really beautiful."

He grinned. "So, I did good?"

"You did great."

"I always want to do good for you, Bree. I don't want to ever disappoint you."

"As long as you keep being you, I'll never be disappointed. Now kiss me."

He did.

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Ephesians 2:10

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."

Chapter 22

Six months later...

"And cut," the director yelled.

Reluctantly, Ricky relinquished the kiss, peering down at Bree's swollen mouth. "I almost forgot where we were," he said with a smile. Raising his head, his eyes swept the set. Everyone who could possibly have gotten on the set was here to see the big love scene. Even though the director had cut the scene no one moved. All eyes were still on Bree and him. He shrugged, lowered himself and kissed her again.

She gasped, as did everyone else, but it didn't take her long to forget where she was. Slowly, her hands snaked around his neck. She hoped he'd never stop kissing her.

He did stop though, suddenly stopped, lifted up, his brown eyes looking deep into her gray ones.

He loved her with every fiber of his being. She'd been a champ during all of the wedding hoopla. Though she'd had a dream wedding in mind, as most young girls do, her ideas were not near the elaborate wedding everyone expected. She kept it small and simple, inviting only the closest friends and family and asking all gifts be given to Jeffy's newly formed foundation. They married quickly, as soon as Shelley was back on her feet. But all that was not why he suddenly stopped kissing her.

"Is there a problem?" Bree asked.

"Something is different."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about your, uh," he leaned closer and whispered, "your uh, they seem bigger."

She smiled. "There's a reason for that Mr. Kino."

"Really? And just what is that reason, Mrs. Kino?"

"You think about it, Ricky. Take your time."

The light went on immediately and he jumped up. "Are you?"

"I think so. I've had two positive tests."

"Oh, Bree, oh, wow, man oh, man, thank you Jesus."

She laughed. "It wasn't how, or where I was gonna tell you, but since you are so aware of everything, now you have it. We're gonna have a baby."

He whooped and hollered, jumping on the bed. "We're having a

baby! We're having a baby!"

Bree scrambled up to keep him from trampling her. Jumping off the bed, he picked her up and swung her around. The crowd began to buzz, people began to come forward and offer congratulations.

"You know," he whispered in her ear. "This is gonna be all over the news tomorrow."

She grinned. "Who cares."

"That's my girl."

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The following August... the day started out one way, but took a direction no one could have predicted.

Bree drew in a breath and placed her hands over those of her husband, trying to still them.

"We need to get downstairs for Mark's big farewell breakfast."

Ricky rolled onto his back, stared up at the ceiling. "You know Bree, though I could stay here with you all day, I love going down to our big special family breakfasts."

"Me too."

"Sometimes I wonder if I could possibly be any happier?"

"I was just thinking the same thing," she sighed as she rolled to rest her head on his thickly muscled chest. Her fingers lightly traced the few, small, crescent-shaped scars. "I can't wait until our house is finished, but still, I'm really loving every moment we get to spend around these people that we love so much."

"Me too. It won't be too much longer."

"It's amazing, that it's been almost a year since I filmed my movie in Florida and came home to find you had decided that I was gonna be yours. And everything that happened after that, it's like a distant dream. All that business with Tommy." She shuddered. "Do you ever think about what he did to you?"

"Honestly, I do sometimes. Even more I think about what he tried to do to this family, to the people I love most in this world."

Bree sighed. "And in the end he still almost got you. I was so afraid you'd have to stand trial for the charges against you. I kept imagining everything going wrong and you ending up in prison along with Tommy."

"Gee, thanks," Ricky laughed.

Bree shrugged. "I'm a worrier."

"Well stop that and let's just be grateful. Grateful to be alive and together. Grateful the charges were dismissed. Grateful that in about
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four months, our son will be born, and we'll be living in our new home and making memories together."

"Speaking of being in our new home, poor Mom," Bree said softly. "First Mark's leaving for college and then *we'll* be gone."

"She'll still have Jeffy and Joey. And Dad, of course."

"Hm, yeah, I guess. You know what? I just realized Mom and Eric have never been alone, just the two of them. Except for the summer they met."

Ricky smiled. "I think when Shelley and Dad are together they're always alone. The world shrinks down to just them."

"You're right and I love the way they are together." She frowned. "Ricky, do you think we'll still be that much in love after nine years of marriage?"

"I'll love you forever, Bree. Just like I vowed at the altar in front of God. Tell me you believe me."

"I do. I do believe you."

He ran his hand over her belly. "And I also already love our son, without even seeing him. The feelings are so strong, I can't even express them."

"Our son, Ricky. That sounds so wonderful." She sighed. "We really do need to get downstairs. Besides I can't wait to surprise everyone with news of it being a boy."

Thirty minutes later they joined the family in the kitchen. Everyone was excited about Mark's new adventure. His perspective on life had changed since the happenings of his senior year. Football didn't hold the appeal it once had, but he still wanted the experience of playing college ball. Out of all the offers he received, he'd chosen the University of Hawaii so that he'd be close to his stepgrandparents, Eric's mother and father, and he was leaving today to report to camp.

As the happy family breakfasted together, Ricky caught his father's eye. He smiled easily at him, the man he admired most in the world. Bree nudged Ricky under the table. Ricky smiled down at her and took her hand.

"Everyone quiet down," Ricky ordered.

The table quieted immediately. Bree smiled at that. Ricky now seemed to draw the same authority and respect as his father.

"Bree has some news she'd like to share," Ricky offered.

She peered around at the group. "Mom, yesterday, when I said Ricky and I were going shopping, I lied. Actually, we decided to have an ultrasound of the baby."

"Is everything okay?" Shelley asked quickly.

"Yes. Everything is okay. He is okay. Our son is just fine."

"A boy!" Joey yelled. "Alright!"

It took several minutes before the table quieted down again.

"And Dad," Ricky began. "Bree and I have talked and we wish to honor you by naming the baby after you. And yes, I realize that means he's also being named after me, so he'll be a 'third', but I wanted you to know that it's you I'm thinking of when I call little Eric's name. I, we, want you to know we do this to honor the man who raised me and loved me and taught me all that I know, who showed me how to be a man and educated me through example about honor and nobility, and honesty, and mostly about God and our redemption."

Eric's eyes moistened. He rose, and Ricky met him halfway as they embraced. Shelley wiped a tear from her eye. Jeffy began talking a mile a minute about her new nephew.

They were interrupted by the gate buzzer. "I'll get it," Shelley said quickly. She came back to the table a few minutes later. "You'll never guess who's coming up the drive right now."

"Who?" Bree asked.

Shelley looked at Mark. "It's Sandy Carter. Beth's mom."

"Is Beth with her?" Mark asked.

"No. When's the last time you talked to her?"

He sighed as he thought. "I think it's been like, over a month. I've been so busy getting ready for college, I just haven't had time, but I'm gonna sit down and write her a long email as soon as I get settled into the dorm."

Shelley nodded. "Okay, well, everyone clear their places please and let's go welcome our unexpected guest."

The family worked quickly and was emerging from the kitchen as Shelley opened the front door.

Sandy Carter was an older version of her daughter. Her short blond hair was mixed with gray, her eyes a crystal blue. She was small and slim. She wore tan slacks, and a white blouse, somewhat rumpled from her travels. She smiled politely as Shelley greeted her, but the smile seemed more sad than happy.

Each member of the Kino family stepped forward and introduced themselves, Jeffy waiting politely to be the last, since she was the youngest.

"Hi, I'm Jeffy. How come Beth didn't come with you? I miss her. She was so nice to me. We talked about everything. Well, I probably

did most of the talking, but she didn't seem to mind. I'm glad you came to visit us."

Ricky however, eyed his father. There was trouble. They both noticed the tremble of Sandy Carter's lips.

Shelley jumped in before Jeffy could go on. "Sandy, come in and sit down. Can I get you anything?"

Sandy smiled politely. "A glass of water would be nice."

"I'll get it," Mark said quickly. He hurried off to the kitchen, returning just a few moments later. The woman smiled kindly at him as he handed the glass to her.

"So," Shelley began. "I guess it's safe to assume that you weren't just in the neighborhood."

"No. I've come to see you at Beth's request. I'm sorry I didn't call ahead. I was gonna come and then I wasn't and then I was." She stopped, breathed, shook her head. "It took every bit of courage I had to finally make myself come here. But it has to be done. You've been so good to us and Beth truly loved you." Sandy took another deep breath as a tear escaped. "Beth passed away three weeks ago."

Bree's hand flew to her mouth. Shelley's eyes closed. Joey's head bowed. Jeffy began to cry. Ricky's eyes flew immediately to Mark, whose face had turned ashen. It was Eric who finally spoke.

"We're all deeply sorry for your loss, Mrs. Carter."

"I appreciate that. Even though we knew this was coming, it's been very difficult." She drew a cleansing breath. "Beth was adamant that I not contact you about the funeral when she died. She was adamant about a lot of things concerning her impending death, including what happened after she died." Looking up at Mark, she smiled. "She had nothing but good things to say about you, young man. She talked constantly about what a fine young man you are. I can see she didn't exaggerate."

Mark blinked hard and ran a hand through his hair. "She was a good friend, Mrs. Carter. She was very brave and true and she loved her family with her whole heart."

"Thank you for that." Heartsick and tired, Sandy peered around at the warm, compassionate faces. Beth had spoken of this family as if they were saints. Strong, intelligent, loving, loyal, honorable, virtuous in every way. Sandy thought maybe her daughter had simply been a little star-struck, but Sandy could see it wasn't that. Mark's younger brother had his arm around him. Jeffy crawled into her father's lap. Ricky and Bree's hands were firmly clasped. Sandy looked up as

Shelley Kino touched her arm.

"Sandy, what can we do for you? There must be something we can do to help?"

Sandy Carter nodded. "You've already done so much, but actually, there is something. First, I must tell you the rest." Looking around she saw she had the family's rapt attention. "When Beth was in the hospital here in LA, after she'd been released from that horrible man, she said goodbye to you, Mark, and requested no one else come to see her. Well, there was a reason for that. You see, she didn't want you to discover her condition."

"You mean the tumor? She told me about that," Mark said.

"No, not the tumor. Beth was– well, Beth was pregnant."

All eyes turned to Mark. He swallowed. "With my child?"

"She swears it and we, her family, we believe her, so, yes. There was no one else, thanks to her AIDS story." Sandy glanced at Jeffy. "I'm so sorry, I wasn't thinking about there being a little one present. I guess we should do this another time."

"Oh no, it's okay," Shelley said. "Jeffy is wise to the world. Please, go on."

Sandy nodded. "Okay. Of course, you're welcome to do a paternity test, but I believe it will show that Beth was correct. It was difficult for her, carrying the child. The doctor said it would make things much harder on her already frail body and it did. We don't believe in abortion, but the doctor said it would be the best thing to do. We left it completely up to Beth, and she refused. She said it was life and it was meant to be."

Mark stared straight ahead, breathing heavily and Joey reached up and patted his back.

"Did she have the baby? Did it survive?" Mark asked softly.

"Yes. A boy. He's two months old."

Mark rose, walked to the window and stared out. The sun was shining. The grass was green. Late summer flowers bloomed. The fountain sprayed. A taxi waited in the drive, probably to take Mrs. Carter back to the airport when she finished delivering the news. He had a son. He was about to turn nineteen in a few months and he already had a son.

Sandy watched him a moment and then cleared her throat. "Beth had a will. In it she specifies that she wants her son to be raised by your family. She states that she knows Mark is going off to play football and she hardly expects a young guy with his whole life in front of him to

take care of an infant. Still, she insists that you are the most noble of families and that her son is to be raised by the Kino family if they are acceptable to this. She told me that her son is a gift and that she wants to pass that gift on to you."

"But what about her own family?" Shelley asked gently.

"Beth knew we would be unable to provide the opportunities that you could give him."

"But he's your grandson," Bree protested.

"I promised my daughter," Sandy said as she wiped at a tear. She looked up as Ricky retrieved a tissue for her. "Thank you. It was very difficult to come here and fulfil Beth's wishes. Please, tell me you'll at least consider it."

Eric eyed his wife. He knew what she wanted. "Sandy, let me have a moment to speak with Mark."

Eric rose and went to Mark where he stood by the window because the father should have a say as to what happens to his son.

"Mark, I know this is a difficult decision for you to make and I certainly don't expect for you to make it right..."

"I want my son," Mark interrupted quickly.

Eric nodded.

"I just don't know how I'll be able to take care of him."

"*You* will go to school and make something of yourself. That's how you'll be able to care for him. Of course, we'll help you. We'll work out the details later."

Mark nodded. "Ya know, you and mom, and the youth pastor at church, have spoken to us kids so many times about sexual immorality, the need to keep sex inside a marriage vow, the downfall of casual sex, but we don't really get it. We don't really understand until something like this happens."

Eric nodded kindly and placed his hand on Mark's shoulder. "God gives us laws and commandments, not to make our lives harder, but to make them better. There are consequences for every decision we make, and we ALL make bad decisions. But rest assured, Mark, this child, I believe he was meant to be. So now, the measure of a man is how he accepts his responsibility for his decisions, and how hard he works to meet that responsibility."

Mark nodded. "I'll do whatever I'm supposed to do to make this right. I just know, I want my son."

Eric nodded. "He will be a blessing to our family and since you obviously feel strongly about this, we'll not keep Mrs. Carter in

suspense." He turned, but Mark grabbed his arm.

"Eric, I want him, but we can't take him away from Beth's family. I mean, not completely. They've suffered enough. But I don't know how to work that out."

Eric nodded, "I do." He returned and knelt in front of Beth's mom. "There's no need to consider anything, Sandy. Of course we'll take the baby and raise him and we'll give him everything he needs and that includes the love of two sets of grandparents. So that means, we will take him only on the condition that you and your family be involved in his life on a regular basis. We'll gladly take care of all the transportation details as often as possible."

Sandy blinked up at him. Her prayers had been answered.

Shelley's smile radiated around the room.

Mark came back to join the group. "I have something to say." When he had everyone's attention, he spoke. "Beth and I were not in love, but I cared for her and I believe she cared for me. We created a life. A real person, with needs and wants and as his father..." He stopped as those words settled in. "As his father, I agree with Beth. My family and I will raise our son together. I also agree with Eric. Beth's family must be just as involved and we can work out all the details." He turned to Shelley. "Mom, I'm gonna need help and I know it's unfair to ask you to raise another child."

"I don't think you have to worry about your mother," Eric stated. "I'm sure she's already planning the nursery."

Shelley smiled sweetly. "Sandy, what's his name?"

"Beth named him after her father. Joseph."

Shelley glanced at her youngest son. "Really? And what surname did she put on the birth certificate?" Shelley prodded.

"She gave him his father's name, Adams."

"So his name is Joseph Adams, same as mine?" Joey asked.

Sandy grimaced. "I bet she didn't think about that."

Mark smiled. "I think I like that fact," he said, glancing over at his younger brother.

Smiling, Sandy heaved a sigh of relief. This was turning out much better than she'd originally thought. "Would you like to meet your son?" she asked Mark.

"He's here?" Shelley asked excitedly, her voice high-pitched.

"He's in the cab. I'll get him." She rose. Ricky quickly jumped up, walked her to the door and accompanied her to the cab. He paid the man, unloaded luggage and sent him on his way. Turning, he ushered

the small woman up the steps, stealing a glance down at the newest member of the family as he slept in the baby seat. He was definitely Mark's child.

The family was on their feet. Ricky placed the carrier on the sofa and Sandy bent to unbuckle the infant.

Shelley's hands were on her face, her eyes full of tears. "He's so beautiful. He looks just like Mark when he was a baby."

Sandy lifted the sweet bundle. Every member of the family ached to scoop him up.

"Can I hold him, can I hold him?" Jeffy asked, her voice shrill with excitement.

"In a moment," Eric chided softly. He nodded at Mark. "Go ahead, Mark, take your son."

Mark stepped forward and gently accepted his son, being careful to support his head as he remembered he'd had to do with Jeffy. He gazed down into the child's sweet face. It was soft and round. He had a fine covering of blond hair, a tiny nose and soft pouty lips. Mark's heart lurched in his chest. This tiny baby was his child. It was life that he'd created, albeit inadvertently. The baby was so tiny and frail. He was a blank slate, ready to learn and understand all that life could offer. Mark silently promised God he would do right by this amazing blessing and asked for the Lord's help.

Mark glanced at Eric and Ricky. He had a tremendous amount of admiration and respect for them. He couldn't think of two better role models for his son while he was gone. Nor a better uncle than his brother, Joey. Nor a better mother than his mom or sister. His child would be in good hands while he was gone, trying to make something of himself, so that he would be able to give something of value to his child. He looked back down when the child began to squirm as he awakened from his slumber. He yawned, stretched his little arms out, his hands closed in tiny fists. Mark's heart took a quick tumble. One of those fists went straight to the baby's mouth and he made loud sucking sounds, causing soft chuckles and little sighs from the others in the room.

Shelley watched Mark, seeing the awe of fatherhood in his eyes, the first bloom of love that touched his heart as he peered at his son. He was in for some rough times, emotionally and spiritually, but the family would be there to help him through. She glanced at Eric to discover he'd been watching her. She smiled at him, knowing he echoed her thoughts.

Trying not to be selfish, Mark handed the baby to his mother who took over, immediately crooning the soft baby sounds he'd heard when Jeffy had been little.

"Oh, you are so beautiful," she said softly.

"Bree," Mark said. "I hope this doesn't upset you."

"What do you mean, sweetie?" Bree asked.

"Well, you and Ricky were about to give Mom and Eric their first grandchild and it looks like I beat you to the punch. I didn't mean to steal your thunder."

"Nonsense," Bree stated matter-of-factly. "There is no race to be first. We're not in competition. In this family, there is plenty of love to go around and there always will be."

Ricky smiled at his wife. She was absolutely right. Plenty of love. Love growing like a weed.

✝✝✝

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13

"Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus clear the way for us to come to you. May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you."

✝✝✝

Dear Father,

Thank You. Thank You for all that we have, for great blessings and small. Thank You even for the things that we don't even think about and we know we take for granted. We don't mean to do that, but we know it must happen. We ask blessings, Father, for those who need healing in ANY way, be it physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. Wrap them in Your loving arms, Father, and help them to feel Your love and to realize that You are real... really real! Oh, Father, we pray

for Your grace and forgiveness, for understanding and clarity, for wisdom, and to know Your will for our lives. And then we pray for the strength to do Your will. Thank You for the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Thank You, and we pray in the mighty and powerful name of Jesus, Amen and Amen.

✞✞✞

Ephesians 1:17-18

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people,"

A Note from McCartney Green...

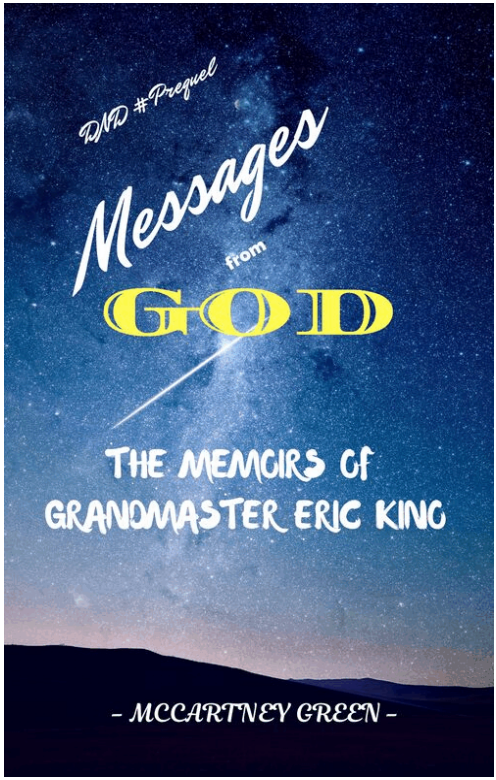
I will go where God leads me. I will write what He puts in my head. I will strive to learn God's will for my life, and I will do His will always. I know He has been with me and I know He is real. Jesus Christ is real. I love Him and pray His blessings upon you all, always. In Jesus' mighty name, Amen.

Messages From God: The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

Before the story begins...
Discover the extraordinary event that changed ten-year-old Eric Kino forever. This short prequel reveals the miraculous experience that shaped the man readers come to know throughout the series. An essential read.

Before Eric Kino became the man readers have come to know throughout this series, he was simply a ten-year-old boy whose life was changed forever. Messages From God is the beginning of that journey—a brief but pivotal story that sheds new light on everything that follows.

Although this memoir was written after the first eight novels, it tells the earliest and perhaps *most important story* in Eric Kino's life. If you've ever wondered what shaped the man who would become Grandmaster Eric Kino, this is where that journey begins.



Continue the Journey
The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series
by McCartney Green

#1 A Healing—In Jesus' Name
#2 Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name
#3 Finding Home—In Jesus' Name
#4 Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name
#5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
#6 The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name
#7 Warriors—In Jesus' Name
#8 June Flower—In Jesus' Name
#9 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name
#10 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Two)
#11 Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name (Part Three)
#12 Feed My Sheep—In Jesus' Name
#13 For Unto Us—In Jesus' Name
#14 Such a Time as This—In Jesus' Name

Prequel—Messages From God:
The Memoirs of Grandmaster Eric Kino

and just for fun... Kino Martial Arts Student Handbook

All Books Available for Free Download at: mccartneygreen.org

About the Books

The Dandelions Never Die—In Jesus' Name Series currently includes fourteen novels and one prequel memoir. Each story brings its own message of faith, courage, love, healing, and hope while following the ever-growing circle of family and friends surrounding the Kinos.

Although each book contains a complete story and may be read on its own, the characters' lives continue from one novel to the next. Readers will experience the fullest journey by beginning with Book One and reading the series in order.

#1—A Healing—In Jesus' Name

When Shelley Adams crosses paths with Grandmaster Eric Kino, she is still carrying wounds from a trauma that changed the course of her life. Eric sees far beyond the frightened, uncertain woman she believes herself to be—and recognizes the strength, beauty, and purpose within her.

A Healing introduces the Kino and Adams families, the Lee brothers, and the dangerous Crane brothers in a story of love, courage, spiritual healing, and freedom from the victim identity. It is the beginning of the family—and the journey—that will grow throughout the entire series.

#2—Suffer the Children—In Jesus' Name

Fourteen-year-old Toby Nash is an ordinary boy with an extraordinary heart. He loves baseball, dreams of helping and healing animals, and thinks becoming a singer might be pretty cool someday. Then he meets twelve-year-old Caroline and recognizes the carefully hidden signs that something is terribly wrong in her life.

As Toby and those around him struggle to protect a wounded child, Suffer the Children confronts the devastating realities of abuse while showing the difference one observant, courageous person can make. It is a story of rescue, patient love, faith, and the long road

toward learning to feel safe.

#3—Finding Home—In Jesus' Name

Lisa Lewis has spent years building a successful life while distancing herself from the painful family secrets she left behind. When circumstances bring her to Pine Forest, Georgia, she encounters Chaz Stewart, his remarkable family, and the grandmother who never stopped loving her.

Finding Home introduces Chaz, Lisa, Maddie, Jodi, John, and the Pine Forest family whose lives will soon become closely entwined with the Kinos. Through romance, danger, buried truth, teen pregnancy, incest, and post-traumatic stress, this story asks what it truly means to come home.

#4—Weeds Grow—In Jesus' Name

The entire Kino family returns in a story centered on movie star and martial arts champion Ricky Kino and the fiercely independent Breanna Adams. Their love has never been simple, and the choices they make will affect not only their own future but the lives of the young people watching them.

As danger takes root close to home, Weeds Grow explores family relationships, fatherhood, personal identity, sexuality, fear, hatred, and the courage required to confront what has been allowed to grow in darkness. Some weeds can be pulled. Others fight to survive.

#5—Angels—In Jesus' Name

Widowed mother Lizzy Anderson is raising five little girls while working nights as a nurse and doing everything she can to hold her family together. Special Agent Keegan Tanner is dark, dangerous, driven—and carrying evidence that could expose a horrifying criminal operation.

When their lives collide, Lizzy and Keegan are drawn into a battle involving corruption, assault, child trafficking, and powerful

people willing to destroy anyone who stands in their way. With help from the Kinos, the Pine Forest family, and Ameritech, they must discover whether wounded people can still trust love—and whether ordinary human beings can sometimes become angels for one another.

#6—The Worth of Souls—In Jesus' Name

Jeff Davis returns in a story that introduces Mickey, a fierce young woman who has spent much of her life believing she is expendable. When she is taken by people who place no value on human life, Jeff and the growing Ameritech family will risk everything to bring her home.

The Worth of Souls is a story of kidnapping, sacrifice, courage, first love, and the immeasurable value of every human soul. It also offers an unforgettable glimpse of teenage Jeffy Kino and Cameron Wallace—two young people whose connection will help shape the future of the series.

#7—Warriors—In Jesus' Name

Shelley's youngest sons, Mark and Joey Adams, are grown men now, each carrying the teachings, strength, and example of the family that raised them. But even the strongest warriors may find themselves facing enemies they cannot defeat with physical skill alone.

Warriors confronts domestic violence in its most recognizable and insidious form—the gradual isolation, control, fear, and destruction of a person's spirit. It is a story about recognizing abuse, finding the courage to escape it, and learning that true strength is not found in domination, but in love, protection, truth, and freedom.

#8—June Flower—In Jesus' Name

June Flower Kino—Jeffy to those who love her—has grown from the miraculous child introduced in Book One into a gifted physician whose discoveries may change the future of medicine. But

there are powerful people who will do anything to prevent that future from arriving.

Her journey takes her across the world, into danger, loss, breathtaking beauty, and the lives of two unforgettable Ugandan children. As Cameron Wallace returns to protect the girl he never stopped loving, the entire cast of the series gathers for a sweeping story of courage, family, sacrifice, healing, reunion, and one final twist that reveals the story may be far from over.

#9—Circle of Life—In Jesus' Name

The next generation steps forward as the series moves between Hollywood and Pine Forest, Georgia. Young Eric Kino begins questioning the path laid before him, while Marine Raider Jacob Appel returns home and discovers that the girl he has known all his life may no longer be merely the little sister figure he left behind.

Meanwhile, 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!"

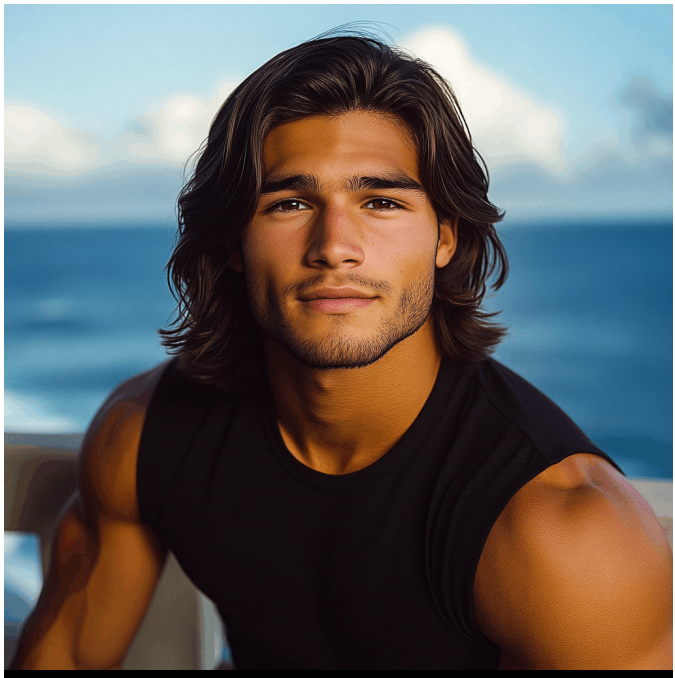
"Hey McCartney~ Thanks so much for sending me "Dandelions Never Die." I absolutely loved it! As a fellow writer and "professional romance novel reader" I can honestly say you are truly gifted with writing talent. I've added you to the list of my favorite writers and I'm looking forward to reading another 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.

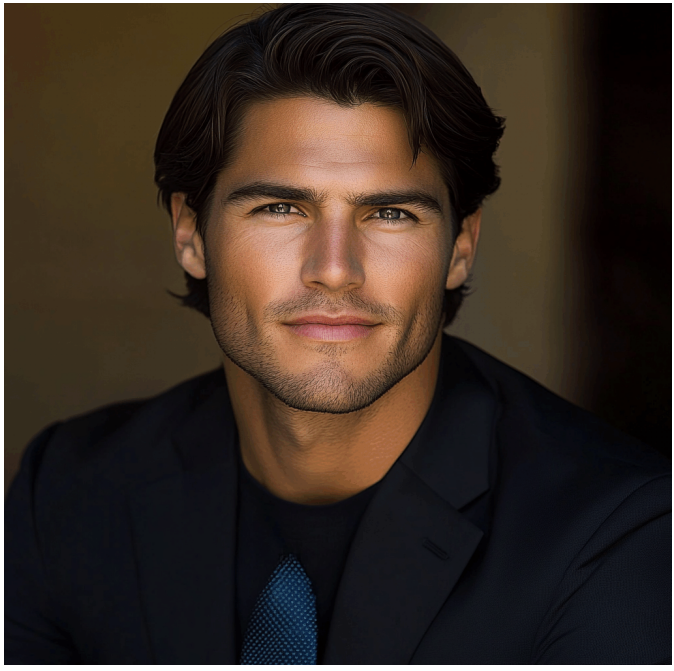
~Melanie Glenise Schmitt~
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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



Ricky Kino Age 30...before haircut

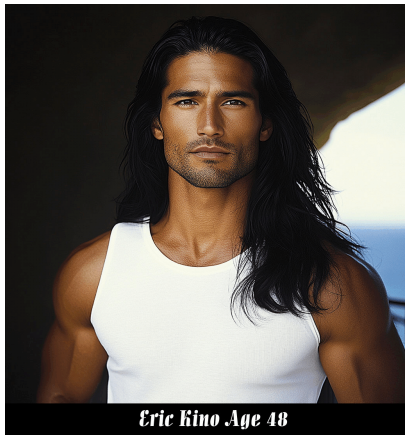


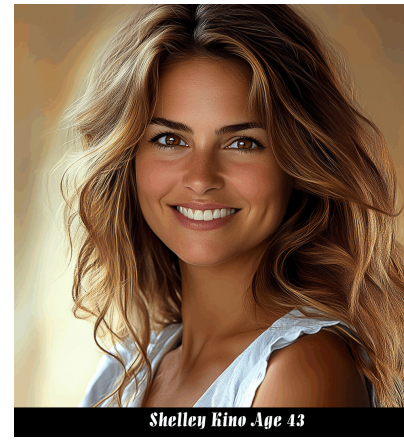


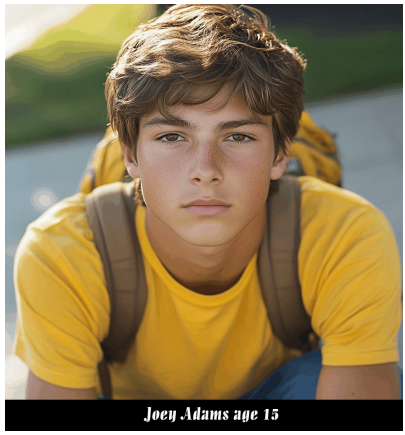
Breanna Adams

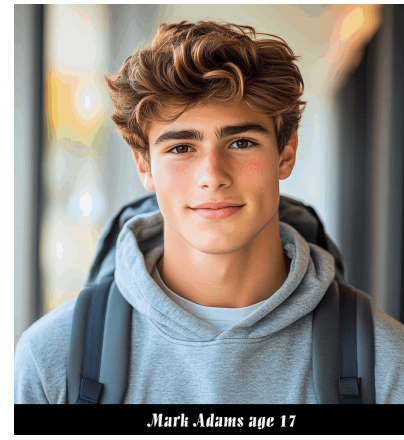


Bree photo from movie set

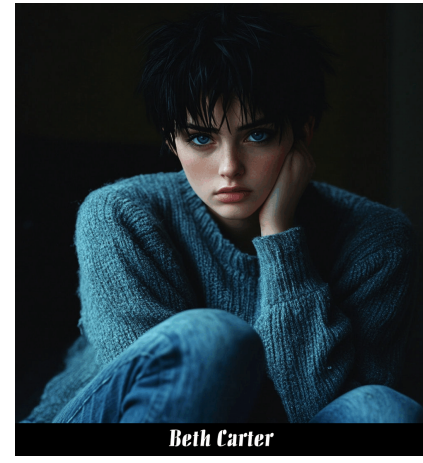

Eric Kino Age 48

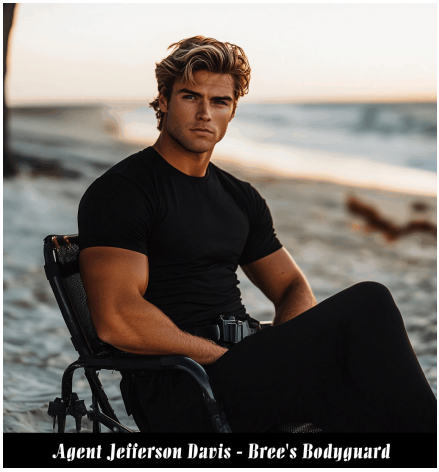

Shelley Kino Age 43

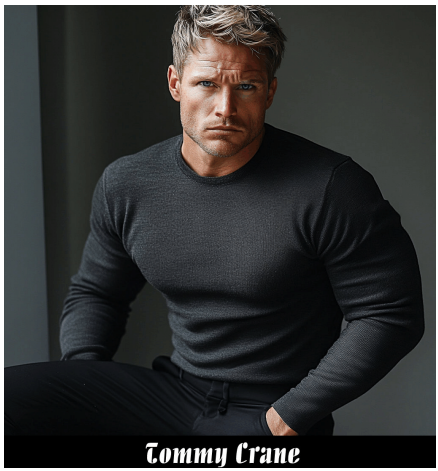

Joey Adams age 15


Mark Adams age 17


June Flower Kino (Jeffy)


Beth Carter







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More Pics at Photo Album

Continue with DND #5 Angels—In Jesus' Name
Sneak preview...

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."

Prologue

Three years earlier... "Hey, man, did you get anymore 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

In Jesus' Name Publishing.org

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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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."

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“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.”