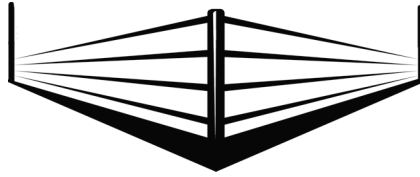


# 2



**T**rinity checked her watch as she sat beside Jay. Ten more minutes before Blane’s meet-and-greet time was done. Surely, she could entertain her son for that length of time. He’d flown through lunch, barely touching his kid’s meal in favor of chattering non-stop about every scenario he could dream up for what the afternoon would be like.

Wrestling had been Tucker’s favorite way to spend father-son time with Jay. Every week they had watched Maverick and a host of others she obviously couldn’t name, much less picture, fight it out in pre-determined matches. And the monthly pay per view shows? Those were like the Super Bowl to them. It had taken everything in her not to interfere with their dramatized play during and after the matches.

Now, she was thankful for every dive off the couch and ineffective chokehold Jay had tucked away in his memories. Picturing them together left her regretting the lack of photos of their roughhousing. They would have meant so much to Jay. But she’d been less than interested in their hobby.

“Who do you think we’ll get to meet?” His barrage of chatter continued.

Who? Besides Blane Sterling and Maverick, she’d be hard pressed to name anyone. “I don’t know who you’ll meet. It could be just you and Mr. Sterling.”

“I don’t think so,” Jay countered. “There’s got to be lots of wrestlers there.”

“Maybe.”

An impatient huff escaped his little lips.

“Jay, honey,” she began, “I know you want to meet a lot of wrestlers. But remember what Mr. Sterling said. They might be there. He can’t guarantee it. But you can be thankful even if Mr. Sterling is the only one you see because you still get to be in the ring. Lots of people don’t get that chance.”

“It’s so cool that I get to be in the ring.”

“Yes, it is.” She smiled. Message sent and message received.

“But who do you really think I’ll get to meet?”

A little of the wind was sucked from her parenting sails. So maybe the message wasn’t fully received. She couldn’t blame him, though. This trip was a way for Jay to connect with his dad once more. It was a priceless gift, even if Jay was too young to fully understand it. And Blane was stepping in to make it even better for him. It wasn’t required, and it was the last thing Trinity expected from the world of wrestling that held no interest for her.

But Blane, from their brief meeting, seemed different than she imagined. Or maybe she simply didn’t know what it meant to be a professional wrestler after all. She’d scanned each poster of the current champion as she and Jay walked down the hall to the conference room. Shots of him in the ring were enough to trigger the intimidation she’d experienced when he approached them.

Between his height and muscular build, he made most of

his opponents look like average-sized men, when they were far from it. And his face. He sported the same blue eyes and even the dimples in some of the shots, but it looked completely different. His eyes telegraphed an intensity she could feel through the photos. He was fierce, and he was on a mission to annihilate his opposition.

The man in question was across the room. Even wearing a dress shirt and slacks, he could never be confused with a businessman. But paired with the smile he turned on the camera while posing with his fan, the warrior stepped aside to reveal the man who'd offered her son the afternoon of his dreams.

She placed an arm around Jay's shoulders. He was watching the action at the front of the room. When his hand lifted in a quick wave, she looked back to Blane. He returned the wave with a wink in Jay's direction before turning his attention to the fan standing beside him.

"Mr. Sterling," She couldn't make herself call him Blane in conversation with her son, "should be done in a few minutes. Do you need a trip to the restroom before we leave?"

Jay's gaze darted around to make sure no one heard her question. He shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

Slender shoulders rose and fell. His lips were a tight straight line as he nodded.

"Yes, you do?"

His exasperation was barely contained. "No. Yes, I'm sure I don't. Can we talk about something else?"

"Sure." Trinity smiled and ruffled his hair. "What do you want to talk about?"

He shrugged and turned his attention back to Blane at the front of the room.

And while I'm at it, when did he stop being my little boy?

Though his voice held no disrespect when he answered, his message was clear. He could take care of things like remembering to use the restroom without her aid. This new territory that mixed her child who craved cuddles when scared by a nightmare with the boy who clearly thought he could get along fine without his mother's help, was unfamiliar and uncomfortable.

With her focus on her son, Trinity knew when Blane drew near. The shadow that fell across them as he blocked the path of the room's overhead lights would have alerted her even if her son's bright smile hadn't.

She turned and stood in one move. Jay followed her example.

Blane nodded to her before looking down at Jay. "Looks like I'm done here. Are you ready to head over to the stadium with me?"

"Yes, sir!"

Excitement oozed from every pore of her son's body. With this kind of stimulus, he might never sleep again.

"And what about you, Trinity? Everything set to go?"

"Yes, just let me get my keys." She opened her purse and dug through the contents.

"Why don't we take your car back to your hotel, and you two can ride with me. The company SUV has enough room for us to be comfortable, and it will be easier than you trying to follow me on unfamiliar roads. Besides, parking at the stadium is a nightmare."

Trinity paused with her hand on her keys in the bottom of her bag. Following him to the venue was one thing. Riding alone with him, company car or not, was another.

"Oh, no. I couldn't ask you to do that. It's too much already."

Blane looked her in the eyes, and she nearly forgot what

they were talking about. When he added a pleading smile, all hope of remembering was lost. She forced herself to listen.

“You’re not asking. I’m offering. It’s not any trouble. I’ll be able to get you in and out of the venue quicker and without the parking charge.” He paused in his plea to wave a well-dressed businesswoman over. “Besides, Pamela, will be with us for the duration since we’re technically going to share her vehicle. Isn’t that right, Pamela?”

The woman scanned back and forth between them. Trinity knew she could be wrong, but she had the distinct impression Pamela had agreed to no such thing.

“Pamela, I wanted to introduce you to Trinity Knight and her son Jay. They came to see Maverick today but missed him. They’re the ones who are riding with us over to the stadium for dress rehearsals.”

Though she smiled, the woman still seemed a little confused. Trinity accepted the hand she offered for a brief shake.

“Yes, of course. Give me fifteen minutes to wrap things up here, and I’ll be ready to leave. It is so good to meet you, Trinity.” She glanced down. “And you, too, Jay. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get everything taken care of here so we can go.”

With introductions out of the way, the woman nodded politely and left their little trio to join a couple of men in discussion across the room. Trinity opened her mouth to point blank ask if Pamela’s afternoon had just been hijacked, but Blane beat her to the punch.

“Please, let me do this for you.”

With that disarming smile still doing its duty and the prospect of going with him alone handled, how could she say no? She grabbed a scrap of paper from her purse and scribbled her phone number and the motel address on it before handing it to him.

“Okay. Jay and I will drop off our car, and you can pick us up there. We’ll head out and wait for you.”

The wattage of his smile would have shattered light bulbs. “Great. I’ll get my stuff. And when Pamala finishes whatever it is she’s working on, we’ll meet you there.”

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“Are you going to tell me what’s going on?”

Blane shrugged in response to Pamela’s question. “Nothing’s going on.”

The look she shot him as she pushed her glasses up farther on her nose told him she didn’t believe him. When he realized the idea of riding alone with him to the venue made Trinity uncomfortable, he’d seen Pamela’s presence as a blessing. She could be the buffer, and she’d played the part perfectly even though he’d surprised her.

Did she deserve to know what was going on? Probably. But he hated to divulge Trinity’s situation without her knowledge. He was sure it wasn’t a secret. However, Pamela was part of the PR department at Universal Wrestling Organization. She was also a sister in Christ. As a believer, she worked within a different code of ethics than some of the other PR people he’d met through the years.

She still watched him. Waiting. She knew, but she wasn’t going to push.

“To be honest, I’m not sure what it is about those two. They came to see Maverick, but I guess she got lost or something. They missed him. Trinity was close to tears as she apologized, and instead of whining about it, Jay comforted her. He was the one who missed his big chance to meet his wrestling hero, but he didn’t want his mom upset.

“It wasn’t until I stuck my foot in my mouth that I found

out he was there with his mom because his dad passed away. I don't know why. I just felt I had to do something."

Pamela smiled and shook her head. "I know why. It's because you're a good man with a heart of gold, Blane Sterling. You may look big and tough on the outside, but inside you're all squishy and soft."

Blane forced a scowl. "You can't be letting that out, Pamela. I've got a reputation to protect."

"Don't I know it. The company makes enough off you and that intimidating scowl to keep us all in jobs. But seriously, you felt a nudge from the Spirit, and you took it. I wouldn't have expected anything else. Next time, though, try to give me a little warning."

Blane smiled and considered her words. Had it been a nudge of the Spirit? He hadn't even considered it at the time. The ideas came quickly, and he acted on them without giving it much thought. But he had prayed that morning, as he did each morning, for God to bring the right people to him and to use him to make a difference for Him. It seemed God had done exactly that.

The SUV turned into a parking lot, and Blane frowned. He leaned forward so the driver of the modified SUV would hear him. "Are you sure this is the place?"

"Yes, sir. 2210 West Bridge Street, the Sunset Motel. Not the Ritz, huh?"

In his early years wrestling, Blane stayed in some shady places. There wasn't a lot of money or notoriety as he worked his way up to the big leagues. As bad as some of those places had been, they looked like the Taj Mahal compared to the dilapidated building in front of him. Peeling paint, outdoor entrances, and gutters barely hanging on the roof's edge were only the start of the problems.

If he wasn't mistaken, there appeared to be a drug deal

going on in a remote corner by the graffiti-covered dumpster. He and Pamela looked at each other. He didn't know for sure what his expression held, but Pamela's shock and discomfort were written all over her face. There was no way a single mother and her son should be in a place like this.

And over at the front entrance, apparently oblivious to all the things currently sending shockwaves of unease through his system, Trinity waited, with Jay holding her hand. He couldn't in good conscience let them stay in the sketchy neighborhood, much less this motel, another night. It simply wasn't safe. But could he arrange a move without offending?

Pamela read his thoughts. "This is not good. Don't worry, Blane. We'll figure a way to get them into a safer place."

There was only enough time for him to nod and push down his unease. He had to make everything seem normal. Blane exited the back of the car and waved. Trinity and Jay waved. Jay started to take off in a run, but one word from Trinity had him walking by her side. The kid had enough energy to take out the entire UWO roster. Blane moved to the side to let Jay in first. He stuck his head in but immediately popped back out and turned to Trinity.

"Wow, Mom! Look at this. It's like a limo!"

Trinity shook her head. "How do you know what a limo looks like inside?"

"I've seen movies, Mom."

Blane hid a smile. The kid had a point. With the seats customized in a *U* shape and the extended length, the vehicle was enormous. Maybe it wasn't a traditional limo, but it was an SUV version. He was glad he'd been able to arrange this one. It would help make the trip memorable for Jay.

"Well, get in here, and let's get you buckled up," Pamela called.

Jay scrambled into the vehicle, and Blane waved Trinity in



next. He pulled the door shut behind him and took his seat next to Jay, who chattered on excitedly.

“David and Spencer aren’t going to believe this! A real limo! David’s always bragging that his dad has a sports car, but riding in a limo is so much cooler! Don’t you think a limo is cooler than a sports car, Mom?”

Trinity looked unfazed by the onslaught of words and smiled at her son. “I think both a limo and a sports car are pretty cool. They’re a different kind of cool. We can be happy for ourselves riding in a limo and happy for what David has too.”

“Sure, Mom. I’m happy for him. But this is *so* cool. Mr. Sterling, do you get to ride in this one all the time? I bet you do. I bet you never have to drive yourself anywhere. You’re the champion, and the champion shouldn’t have to drive everywhere. Do you? Do you have to drive everywhere?”

“Jay.” The single word from his mother stopped the boy in his tracks. “It was very nice of Mr. Sterling to ask us to join him today, and I know you’re really excited about everything. But others can’t answer if you don’t stop long enough to take a breath. Remember to be polite.”

Jay sucked in a deep breath. “Yes, ma’am.” He looked up at Blane. “But do you get to ride in the limo all the time?”

A laugh rumbled in his chest, but Blane fought it back. Laughter would not earn him any favor with Trinity. Jay’s excitement and energy oozed from every pore, lighting up his eyes. He was doing an admirable job trying to follow his mother’s instructions to contain it, but it bubbled just below the surface.

What she didn’t realize was that wrestlers fed off that kind of energy from their fans. Coming out to the music and the cheering, even the jeering in the case of the current company

heels, pumped up each one of them to put on the best shows possible.

He leaned over to Jay as if he was sharing a big secret. “I don’t get to ride in the limo all the time. But I think it’s pretty cool too.”

As Jay sat back in his seat with a satisfied look on his face, Blane glanced across the space to the bench seats where Pamela and Trinity sat. Pamela tried to look busy with some papers in her lap, but he could see her smile even with her head down. Trinity, however, sent him a look that he believed translated into “*Et tu, Brute.*”

Maybe his comments did border on traitorous, but at least he hadn’t fueled Jay’s fire with how he really felt. Riding in a limo was way cooler than a sports car, no matter what David might think.