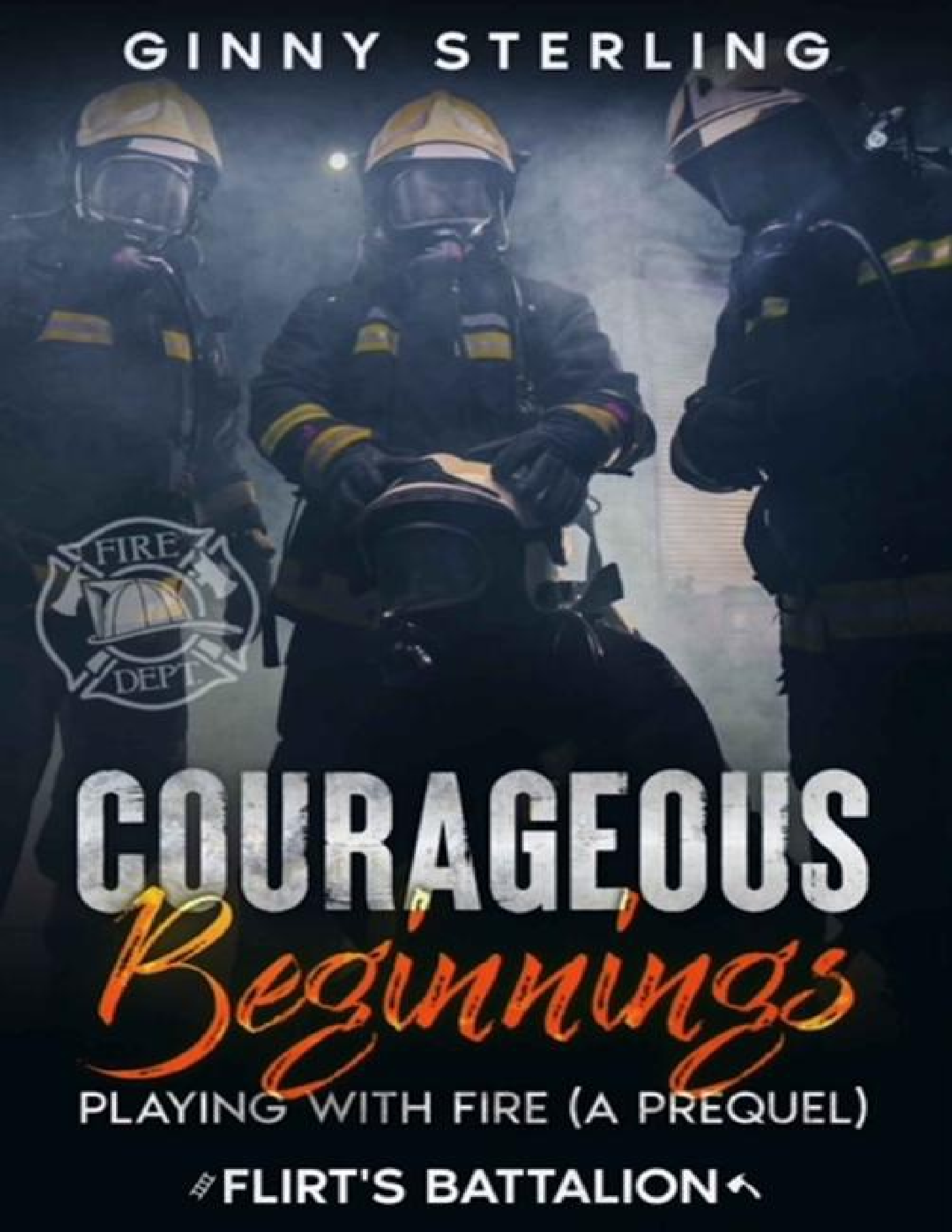


GINNY STERLING



COURAGEOUS

Beginnings

PLAYING WITH FIRE (A PREQUEL)

THE FLIRT'S BATTALION ←

COURAGEOUS BEGINNINGS

PLAYING WITH FIRE: A PREQUEL

FLIRT'S BATTALION

GINNY STERLING

CONTENTS

[Introduction](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Meet the Team!](#)

[Courageous Emotions - Chase Marks](#)

[Courageous Moments - Austin Olivera](#)

[Courageous Feelings - Justin Dailey](#)

[Courageous Promises - Andy Pennington](#)

[Courageous Touches - Chief Reese Carpenter](#)

[Flyboys](#)

[Healing Hearts Series](#)

[About the Author](#)

Playing with Fire: A Flirt's Battalion Prequel

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INTRODUCTION

Firefighter Kyle Rimes couldn't believe how his entire world turned upside down in the blink of an eye – nor how he was standing on an auction block, being foisted off to the highest bidder despite his protests. Had everyone in town lost their mind – including him?

Reyna Mattingly needed some muscle – and the desperate man looking like he was ready to bolt at any moment, certainly had plenty of it. Returning home had given her a second chance to make a first impression... and she was certainly making one!

Just not the one she wanted...

... *Or was it?*

*Because I can't get enough of our favorite characters... can you?
I hope you enjoy this series, too!*



Ginny Sterling Newsletter

The Flirt's Battalion Facebook Group

“I volunteered the entire team, so make sure that your Friday is clear of any activities or events. This is non-negotiable, team, and I really need your help with this charity event. The other shift will be covering for us, and they go up on the auction block this Saturday...” Chief Carpenter said openly, putting his hands on his hips, looking over the table at them.

They’d just gotten back from a roaring blaze that had engulfed a mobile home on the outside of town, and all Kyle could smell was smoke so heavy he could taste it.

It was everywhere, seeping from the pores of his skin and in his clothes, and each of the men at the table reeked of sweat. In fact, several of them had matted down hair that was strange looking because of their thermal gear and helmets.

Hat-hair, he mused, shoveling another bite in his mouth.

“This isn’t bordering on harassment or some other rule? I mean, I’ve never heard of any job condoning this, and while I know it’s for charity... still,” Justin began nervously. “I mean, are there guidelines to this... mess?”

“Huh?” Kyle said distractedly, reaching for a slice of cornbread. “What’d the chief say?”

“Weren’t you paying attention?” Austin hissed behind his hand. “Dude, this is exciting – and scary!”

“Honestly? Noooo... I’m hungry and we just got back from a run. I can actually smell the chili and the woodsmoke together. It’s not half bad,” Kyle said chewing noisily, before blowing his nose and wincing at the smoke-filled residue he left in the napkin.

“You’re disgusting.”

“Hey, at least I didn’t do like Austin did last week...”

“Ugh, don’t remind me!” Chase muttered.

“You didn’t catch any of what the chief just said?” Justin muttered, frowning and kicking Kyle under the table that they were all sitting at.

“I heard him say ‘*you guys can eat while you listen*’... so I’m eating,” Kyle whined, shoveling in a massive bite. “And listening. I’m listening, too. Can you pass the butter?”

“What about the listening part?” Chase uttered. “With them big ol’ ears you should have...”

“I just said...” Kyle choked out openly, chewing with his mouth full and talking at the same time, trying to keep anything from falling out. *Man, whoever made the chili this morning – it was fantastic!* he thought wildly, stirring his bowl and reaching for the package of cheese once again.

“Did you have something you wanted to add, Rimes?” Fire chief Reese Carpenter said quietly, in a voice that brooked no argument.

It was said that the chief never yelled, never raised his voice, and commanded respect from his team easily by being in the thick of things with them – and treating them like equals. He liked Chief Carpenter – even if he set him on edge sometimes. The man just had a way of looking right through you...

“No sir!” Kyle said immediately, swallowing his food noisily before smiling and nodding. “I think it’s a great idea.”

“Good – you’re going to be first,” Chief Carpenter said openly, pointing at each man. “Marks, you’re second...”

“Awww man... seriously?” Chase whined immediately, rolling his eyes. “Charity... it’s for charity. You are not a piece of meat to be ogled... it’s not a date. Charity auction, donating time, not anything else... relax and don’t make this weirder than it already is.”

Chase hesitated – and then spoke up.

“Do we really have to do this?”

“Yes,” the chief said quietly, walking around the table as the men looked at each other in alarm, some in confusion, and Chase looked decidedly uncomfortable as Justin turned a weird shade of greenish-white under his tan.

Kyle’s eyes grew wide as Chase slid down even further into his seat, looking almost despondent at the announcement.

What exactly did he get volunteered for – and why would Chase Marks be worried about being ogled like a piece of meat?

“Olivera, you are third.”

“Does this count as a blind date? I can check that off my bucket list of strange new things to experience...” Austin grinned and rubbed his hands together. “I do love me some fine Texas women, and I will happily go up on the auction block. Do I have to wear a shirt? Can I show off my muscles? I can oil my abs up and...”

“Blind date? What? *Wait* – I think I *really* missed something...” Kyle choked on the bite he’d just taken, spewing little pieces of cornbread – which everyone picked up off the table and threw at him at once.

“Dailey... you’re fourth...”

“Sir, respectfully, can I just volunteer my time? I’m still reeling and going through recovery from my divorce... and I’d rather not be auctioned off for a dinner date.”

“When the person bids on you, you are welcome to discuss your evening plans with the person. They will be made aware ahead of time of the rules and what lines not to cross. No kissing, touching, harassing, no sexual misconduct...”

“WHAT?” Kyle choked again, his eyes bugging out of his skull at the strange conversation that he was suddenly a part of. This time, Austin slapped him hard on the back several times while Chase threw a paper towel at him, landing in his bowl of chili.

“Pennington... you’re fifth. I will even participate and volunteer as the sixth person on the auction block, so that gives them plenty of chance to reach their financial goals for the charity event.”

“Whoaaaaa boy...” Andy grinned, looking at Chase and saluting him. “I might get my sister to come bid, just so Carpenter can come be my housemaid for the day.”

“I’m not wearing the costume unless there is a reserve on the auction – and it will cost you, kiddo,” the chief grinned... causing several of the men to laugh openly while Kyle looked around in disbelief.

The men started talking around him in a flurry, passing the bag of shredded cheese, the plastic container of chopped onion, and the tote of sour cream around the table, while Kyle was trying to comprehend what had just happened...

The chief leaned down and clapped a hand on Kyle’s shoulder, speaking softly beside his head in a hushed whisper.

“Thanks for your support, Rimes. I wasn’t sure you had it in you, but

really appreciate you stepping up to the plate and backing me. According to the Battalion chief, this barely squeaked by for approval, and I think it's going to do really well."

"Sir?" Kyle said, without moving. "Begging your pardon... but what exactly are we doing?"

"We are doing a charity auction for a '*Date with the Firemen of the First Battalion*' – and our entire team is going to be auctioned off to the highest bidder for a date..."

"We are?"

"Yep..." Chief Carpenter laughed. "Just be glad you aren't on the other team."

"Why is that?"

"Let's just say, it involves a photoshoot..."

This time, it was the rest of the team that nearly did a spit-take all at once as they looked up in horror. It was one thing to have to spend time with someone you barely knew, calling it a date for the sake of charity... but photography meant evidence – and they had all seen the firefighter calendars that people ogled all the time.

Kyle couldn't imagine any of them posing nearly naked with suspenders and a helmet for charity... well, maybe Austin?

He'd gouge his eyes out with a Bic pen first...

"That's right – the other truck is making calendars and auctioning them off for some lucky lady to be in the photo *with* them."

"We got the better end of the deal," Chase said openly, his eyes wide. "My ex would absolutely nail me to the wall and show the judge that for evidence..."

"No kidding," Justin agreed quickly, frowning. "I don't need any help with that foaming-at-the-mouth attorney that Lauren sicced on me..."

"Ah – so Honey and Lauren have the same lawyer?" Chase joked.

"She rides a broom in the night sky and cackles when she wins a case?"

"That's her!"

Austin, Kyle, and Andy just looked at each other with wide eyes as Chief Carpenter shook his head, walking off with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Are your ex-wives really that bad?"

"YES," both men said emphatically.

"I'm never getting married," Kyle muttered openly, scooping up the last

of his chili with his spoon.

“No kidding...” Austin agreed. “I don’t need the headache, the heartache, or pants-ache in my trousers. Women are bitter teases and extreme man-haters. There isn’t a girl out there that is worth the trouble or drama she causes.”

“That’s why you date around and live life for yourself,” Andy grinned. “It’s cheaper. You are generally happier. There’s no one to nag you, whine about you having one too many beers, or complaining that you spend too much time at the station...”

“Hear, hear,” Chase muttered.

Attention: MVA – motor vehicle accident...

The announcement carried on, along with a bell ringing in the distance calling them all into motion.

Sure enough, the men were flying into their positions, throwing on their protective clothing. It was almost comical to watch, because shoes were being kicked off onto the floor and flying around them, as they started dressing.

“Grab your bunker gear and packs...”

Kyle ran, grabbed his bunker gear, and threw it down on the ground, kicking off his shoes quickly and leaving them where they lay as he stepped into his boots. He grabbed his pants, hiking them up over his trousers he was wearing, and donned his weighted jacket before making sure everything was fastened appropriately.

Checking his tank and the lights on his mask, he heard Chase start yelling for the ‘round up’...

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Let’s go!” Chase hollered, waving his hand quickly in the air in a circle.

Justin was already climbing into the driver’s seat and the massive rig flared to life as the lights started spinning wildly.

Kyle knew he had seconds to hop on, because Justin would not wait for anyone to dawdle... and you did NOT want Chief Carpenter to find that you were left behind.

“Round it up fellas and let’s get moving...”

Kyle leaped onto the truck and into his seat only seconds before the vehicle started lumbering forward and the siren began wailing in the air around him.

“Rock and Rooooooll...” Austin and Andy crowed happily, angling their

chins to the air, and howling like a couple of playful mutts as the rest of them laughed.

It was showtime!



FRIDAY AFTERNOON...

Kyle was sweating buckets – and it had nothing to do with the temperature of this strangely warm, yet beautiful November afternoon. No, he was nervous, and with good reason. They had all loaded up on one of the smaller fire trucks to make sure to make a ‘good show’ for the sake of charity...

Before they left, the captain literally inspected each of them, instantly making him wary. He didn’t, *shouldn’t*, have anyone to impress – and the fact that he was told to tuck in his t-shirt once again... before they were all told to get their hefty, insulated jackets – to make a good show for the people attending the auction.

Listening in disbelief, he realized that this ‘auction’ was literally going to be an actual meat-market of men for all sorts of women to ogle and bid on. Chase was right! They were going to be ogled like pieces of meat!

He was going to be going on a date with some strange woman, all for the sake of charity.

“I need an adult...” Kyle whispered openly, swallowing nervously.

“You *are* the adult, dipstick...” Chase whispered loudly, grinning nervously, and sweating almost as much as Kyle was.

The temperature was perfect, and the sun was beating down on them, keeping the chill from the air despite the fact it was late in the year.

“God help us all...” Justin muttered, shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck nervously.

“Seriously, I don’t think I want to do this,” Kyle whispered, looking down the line of firemen standing there in the sun wearing their heavy yellow jackets and helmets... and Austin, his partner, wasn’t helping things in the slightest.

The outrageous man was posing for the crowd, grinning and smiling, right before slipping off his jacket, causing a group of ogling women to gather near them where they were lined up.

“Awww yeah, this is gonna be great!” Austin crowed happily. “Check this out!”

He flexed his biceps and kissed each one playfully, causing Justin to put his head down in his hands again in annoyance as the chief laughed from where he stood at the end of the line. Every man hesitated and looked down the line to gawk at the stoic man that led them, who was always so quiet.

“See?” Austin jeered happily, elbowing the two men closest to him – Justin and Chase, the two divorcees. “If Carpenter can loosen up and have some fun? Then you two spaz’s should be able to as well. I mean, seriously?! It’s a beautiful day, there’s a breeze, we are off work...” and Austin’s voice got louder, working the crowd as he stepped forward and jerked off his uniform shirt, much to Kyle’s horror. “... And all these fine women are here to support a good cause – am I right, Ladies?”

A rowdy, boisterous thunder of appreciation swelled around them as Austin flexed again and showed off his tanned six pack, his tattoo, and then openly smiled, shaking hands with the women and kissing knuckles repeatedly.

Yep. The playboy could certainly work a crowd.

“Someone’s gotta stop him,” Kyle whispered in a hushed panic. “They’re gonna expect us *all* to act like *that*...”

“Then *someone*’s gonna be really disappointed, aren’t they?” Chase muttered.

“No kidding...” Justin agreed.

Austin ripped... literally RIPPED... his t-shirt off of himself, causing several women to scream in excitement – and Kyle nearly died as he realized he screamed aloud as well, but in horror.

Like a girl.

What was his partner even doing?

“I can’t do this!” Kyle balked, feeling faint and definitely disturbed at the fiasco that was about to happen. “Chief! Chief! H-Hey – s-someone g-get Carpenter for me... I c-can’t do this!”

His voice was breaking and croaking like a boy going through puberty – and he was thinking of his own pasty skin, if they put him standing next to Andy or Austin. Someone was going to laugh or chase him off the pergola where the auctioneer was...

“Alright... Alright... Alright! My lovely, esteemed ladies of Ember Creek – are you ready to play with fire? Are we having some fun yet? Just

look at these fine specimens we have here today...”

“Not yet... but getting there, Mayor Winstead!”

“Right? You’ve got some flamboyant young men that are eager to get this auction started... and let’s hear it for the Flirt’s Battalion!”

“First...” Kyle hissed, mortified. “*First* Street battalion... not Flirt’s!”

The mayor actually ignored him... and picked up a gavel to bang it on the small podium that she was standing at.

“We’re here today to raise funds for the children’s home, and every dollar spent is being donated one hundred percent to Sister Agatha’s loving care. It will help pay for school clothes, supplies, bicycles, and computers for the children, bringing so much joy and support to our beloved community – that is supported so wonderfully by our wonderful fire chief Reese Carpenter and the Flirt’s Battalion...”

“FIRST!” Kyle hissed, correcting her again. “You’ve got a typo, lady...”

Then Andy and Austin took their places, returning to the line, and Kyle listened in disbelief as he realized that the auction was beginning. He felt several sets of hands shove him up the steps, stumbling, as he walked forward, looking distinctly uncomfortable.

“Now ladies... remember this is for charity, and we have some pesky rules for this proceeding. Now, he might be a very handsome man, but remember this is for one evening with this young firefighter,” the mayor smiled – and immediately Kyle felt a shiver of dread run down his spine.

“This fine, *fine* gentleman of the *Flirt’s* Battalion...”

“FIRST...” he hissed again, pointedly. “She meant to say *First* Street Battalion Firehouse...”

“I think ‘Flirt’ fits so much better...” a woman called out happily, waving her wallet... causing Kyle’s eyes to pop out of his head as he saw that it was Mrs. Kendall, who called them weekly needing ‘assistance’.

It was the same call every single time.

Mrs. Kendall claimed that she’d fallen and couldn’t get up – and specifically asked if Kyle was working that day. They would drive out and Kyle would have to endure the teasing of his coworkers, as he walked in to find her sprawled in various stages of undress, picking her up off the floor, and then suddenly?

She would have a miraculous recovery... asking him if he wanted coffee.

The guys always teased him about Mrs. Kendall – who was the same age as his grandmother Mae... and played bingo with the woman on Sundays at

the Catholic church on Main Street.

“Hi Kyle...” she waved happily, wobbling her fingers at him, and making him feel cheap, sordid, and uncomfortable in that moment. He’d seen more of this woman than he would ever care to, and had requested that the team tell Mrs. Kendall that he was scheduled ‘off’ when she called.

“Hello, Mrs. K-Kendall,” Kyle said nervously, hating the way his voice stuttered, and he could feel his cheeks heating up.

“Ruthie, you behave now, young lady...” the mayor laughed, causing several in the crowd to chuckle with delight – as Kyle wished the floor would open beneath him.

Maybe lightning would strike the pergola and they would have to evacuate?

In that moment, he was sincerely grateful that he wasn’t having to pose for photos like Team Two... because he knew exactly who would mortgage their house or sell a kidney to be in some scantily clad firemen’s calendar photograph with him.

Mrs. Kendall.

Kyle swallowed nervously and scanned the crowd as he listened vaguely to the mayor speak.

“This strapping young man is good with his hands...”

“What?” Kyle whispered, realizing how she was twisting the small paragraph they had to write about themselves. “I do carpentry, work on my truck, and am able do small tasks around the house, like painting and electrical work.”

“He’s sooo good with his big, strong hands and can really work a tool...”

“Oh my gosh,” Kyle gaped, staring at her in shock and dismay as several people started to whoop excitedly, making his face turn even redder than it already was.

“He’s the one that holds the hose, ladies...” the mayor teased playfully. “Charity, remember ladies?”

“I’m on the nozzle team,” Kyle squawked, protesting. “I’m a nozzle firefighter, Mrs. Mayor. You’re painting a terrible picture of me...”

“TWENTY-FIVE DOLLARS!” a voice called out.

“What?” Kyle said, whipping his head around to see who had bid.

“Make him take off that jacket so we can see his muscles...” a woman cried from the back of the crowd.

“Nooooo,” he grimaced, clenching it around him protectively.

“Take off your jacket, young man,” the mayor urged pointedly under her breath. “It’s for charity.”

“Charity begins at home,” he hissed back, glaring at her. “Why don’t you make a donation and get me off this auction block!”

The mayor glared at him and slammed down the gavel to get their attention, causing everyone to look at her – including Kyle.

“Ladies, he said he’s not taking off his jacket or anything else unless you get serious about the bidding...”

“I never said that!” Kyle balked.

“FIFTY!”

“SEVENTY-FIVE!”

“Do I hear a hundred?” the mayor asked openly, smiling happily.

“NOOOO?!” he yelped in shock, realizing this was getting completely out of control quickly every time he opened his mouth.

“ONE HUNDRED!” a woman said from the front row, not looking at Kyle, and her face was almost as ruddy with embarrassment as his was.

Her short cropped brown hair ended at her chin, and she was standing there looking like she’d just come from a funeral, wearing all black and dressed modestly despite the warmth of the day.

“There we go...” the mayor encouraged. “Did I mention that this young man, Kyle Rimes, is right at home getting on his hands and knees easily...”

“I scuttle up the fire engine’s ladder, sheesh woman! Where did you get all of that?” Kyle hissed, looking at the crowd. “I know this is for charity – and I’m happy to participate, but I’m... *this*... this isn’t what you are thinking, ladies...”

“Is he married?” someone yelled out – and the mayor looked at him.

“No,” Kyle muttered, knowing that despite what he said, he had lost this fight long before it ever started. “I’m single.”

“Do you do woodwork or paint things?” the woman with the short hair asked nervously, catching his attention again as a ripple went through the crowd at his words. He was getting a mental picture of himself having to work around a house, shirtless, wearing a blond wig and tossing his hair like some cover of an old romance book cover model.

“Yeah, I’m pretty good with a circular saw and a jig...” Kyle admitted, swallowing hard as he tried to avoid looking at Mrs. Kendall who was literally fanning herself, made eye contact with him, and then pointed openly at Kyle... mouthing at him.

'You're mine, sweet Kyle'.

Kyle cringed, crossing himself openly.

"TWO HUNDRED!" a voice cried out – and he saw the woman with the short hair had bid again, still refusing to look at him.

"What?!"

"Take off your jacket, mister..." the mayor hissed angrily.

"Look – I'll throw in two hundred to end the stupid auction right now," Kyle said angrily, feeling nausea roll in his stomach at the thought of Mrs. Kendall possibly winning him. The old woman was a terror, and he was afraid she would really cross the line this time! "Get me off this auction block and stop this insanity. I'm not exactly what you are wanting up here..."

"SOLD!" the mayor hollered, banging her gavel noisily. "Mr. Kyle Rimes of the Flirt's Battalion..."

"First Street!" Kyle interrupted pointedly.

"... Is yours for one entire twenty-four-hour period, Miss Reyna Mattingly," the mayor continued speaking, smiling at the crowd – and grabbing Kyle by the arm before he walked away.

"Mr. Rimes – you owe the charity two hundred dollars, remember?"

He glared at her, feeling practically man-handled and discomfited as he realized that his time had just been auctioned off like a haunch of meat to a butcher.

Nodding, he dug out his wallet and quickly handed over everything he'd withdrawn from the ATM the day before, intending to get a few things for an apartment he was hoping to lease very soon, that now would just have to wait until next payday...

"Can I have a list of the stupid rules for this farce?" he muttered – and was handed a sheet of paper with the details lined out for him. "Thanks."

"Thank *you*, Mr. Rimes..." the mayor said in a saccharine voice. "Ms. Mattingly? If you'll pay the cashier – there is a small picnic bench where you can discuss your upcoming 'date'..."

"Meeting," Kyle corrected as the woman walked up.

"Meeting," the winner of the auction agreed coolly, still not looking at him as she dug out her wallet and paid the cashier. "I'll need a receipt for taxes – please, and thank you."

"Of course, Miss Mattingly."

"Thanks, Dolly..."

The woman turned and looked at him, spinning carefully as to not dig her

heels into the grass – and he felt something move within him as he realized she had the most beautiful turquoise eyes he'd ever seen.

“You can paint?” she asked candidly.

“Yeah?”

“Wonderful,” she began, and held out her hand in a businesslike manner. “I need your help – and quite a bit of painting done.”

“You don't want to go on a date?”

“No,” she said nervously, her hand remaining out as she waited for him to take it. “I need help with my café – and I can't do it alone.”

“But we are *not* dating...?” he reiterated, arching an eyebrow, feeling slightly disappointed and a little relieved that he was off the hook. He could definitely do manual labor, but a part of him kind of wished that maybe she wasn't so disinterested... because she was really pretty.

“One date doesn't make people ‘*dating*’, you know... besides, it really makes things quite sordid, if I've paid for your company. Don't you think?”

“So, this *is* a date?”

“No, Mr. Rimes... this is me, hiring you, to help me with some manual labor.”

“Is that code for something?” he asked warily, thinking of his partner Austin immediately. Austin was always throwing out things that had a different meaning – and frankly? So did Andy. Those two men spoke an entirely different language sometimes.

“The mayor twisted stuff, so are you doing the same thing? Is *manual labor* code for some weird, kinky thing that I'm too dumb or naïve to understand?”

The woman, Miss Mattingly, smiled nervously, and her cheeks reddened even more than he thought possible as she held his gaze.

“No. Manual labor is just that: manual labor,” she replied. “You are going to work with your hands - painting.”

Kyle nodded and listened distractedly as the crowd suddenly roared in delight as the auction continued in the distance, and he gave the elusive Miss Mattingly his phone number and accepted her business card.

“Text me when you have a day off this next week, and we'll get this out of the way, okay?” the woman said bluntly. “Now, if you'll excuse me? I'm late for a meeting...”

Kyle stared as she walked off. She was crossing the street, heading into the bank at the corner of Main and State Street, leaving him more curious and

mystified than before at seeing her – and her reaction to his questions.

She looked almost like she was as bothered as he was regarding the auction, and the fact that she'd just purchased his time and company.

... And he was fascinated.

I can't believe I just did that... Reyna thought wildly. *I literally just hired and paid for some musclebound guy to come and paint the café – before I even own it!*

This was ridiculous!

She was on her way to sign the papers at the title office and had seen the auction happening in town. Normally she stayed away because of her wilder days when she was a teenager.

Once, she was *'that crazy Mattingly girl'* that was always running around town. She was that wild child with the bleached black hair that was shockingly orange in photographs – and she'd shaved part of her head at her temple – along with shaved stripes in her eyebrows, because it was the cool thing to do...

Now, she was taking over the empty building that had once been her grandmother's grocery store and had sat empty since she was a very young girl. The building interior was dilapidated, dusty, as were all the old cases that used to display jars of candies in the old photos she'd seen when looking through old photo albums.

Her mother talked about reopening the grocery – yet they never did. Then, as time passed, Ember Creek didn't need the store anymore, especially now that there was a large grocery in the next town over.

The lack of need, her parents arguing about the property and what to do with it, everything just sat in limbo for forever... until now.

Now, the property and everything was being signed over to her since her mother wasn't able to care for herself anymore. Dementia had set in, and it was painful to watch it progress. The lively woman that once laughed,

smiled, and cleverly argued with anyone to get her way... was now frightened, scared, and barely recognized people on a bad day.

... And Reyna needed a way to pay for her mother's care.

She'd moved out of her apartment, returned home, and started to get things in order as quickly as possible. It was a shock to find just how badly things had progressed since her father had passed five years ago.

Her mother, who insisted she was fine, would meet her at restaurants or the store to go shopping, and had hidden all the signs for so long... making Reyna feel terrible for not noticing.

The house was littered with filthy adult diapers, unpaid bills, the electricity was off in the house, and flies were buzzing everywhere. There was mold growing in the corners in the bathroom where the humidity had grown to be too much...

She'd walked in, breathed in, and walked back out in horror – turning to drive to the grocery store in Yonder to purchase garbage bags, bleach, cleaners, and call the utility companies. After hauling dozens of bags to the curb, opening every window, hanging fly tape, and wiping down every surface with the strongest chemicals possible, Reyna was actually able to turn on the air conditioning finally.

One disaster after another, one massive change following another... things were finally settling down, and today was the final bit of change.

The titles, power of attorney, and ownership were being moved to her care. Her mother was finally settled into a small nursing home that could help care for her about five minutes down the road – close enough for Reyna to visit easily.

The house was cleaned, molded items thrown out, and everything somehow was managed eventually... now it was time to focus on an income – and building a future here for herself and her mother.

Walking into the attorney's office, she swallowed back the feeling of despair that seemed to hang over her, realizing that she was now the adult and having to take care of her mother.

Adulthood was hard.

Hours later, Reyna walked out of the offices with the papers tucked neatly into a folder, clutched in her hands. The charity auction was now over, and she was still reeling at the fact that she'd been daring enough to do something so crazy.

She knew from painting her mother's house that it was a massive amount

of work and her arms still ached terribly from it. The reason she'd painted it, top to bottom, was because it was outrageously expensive to hire someone to paint, and hearing the auctioneer, combined with the ridiculously low dollar amount... she was hooked.

It had nothing to do with the handsome man, right?

That little voice tugged at her conscious, making her blush as she walked down the sidewalk to the small parking lot that lined the clearing where the pergola and several old pecan trees grew.

Looking down the street, she saw the familiar corner store with the yellowed newspaper taped to the windows to prevent anyone from looking inside... and walked towards it, instead of her car.

Stepping up to the doorway, she looked around, marveling at the beauty of the old stone building, and was touched that it seemed to be frozen in time. Inserting the key, she had to wiggle it in the lock several times before the door finally budged.

As the door opened, the dust went flying once again – just like it had last week when she came to see if it would indeed need to be sold or if something viable could be done with this... and again, she wasn't disappointed.

Those cases, although filthy, were breathtaking to behold and would be downright charming when filled with pretty treats, snacks, or desserts.

She could see the shelves that were once lined with canned goods in the old photographs. They could be lined with plates, cups, various coffee cans, or something to make you feel like it was warm and welcoming.

The single hanging light would need to be updated almost immediately because it looked like it had been installed by a drunk on a crooked ladder, hanging awkwardly at an angle and held together with what looked like was baling wire...

Yes, PawPaw Mattingly was *not* an electrician... but he *was* a doer.

Her grandfather would attempt anything because it needed to get handled, and she remembered as a little girl he would joke all the time about how he didn't see ol' Saint Peter hiding around a corner waiting for him...

Those were days so very long ago that it brought a tear to her eye.

The bathroom was indescribable, and the toilet would need to be replaced. Filth, dust, and debris was everywhere... but it was nothing that some cleaning, fresh paint, and a bit of updating couldn't fix.

"PawPaw... if you are listening? I sure could use a little help and guidance," Reyna whispered openly in the empty building, rubbing her upper

arms and feeling so lost. “I don’t even know if this will work – but I *have* to try it.”

“Miss Mattingly?” a voice interrupted, causing her to jump and scream in alarm as she whirled around. Her heart was beating furiously, having thought it was a ghost talking to her – or her grandfather answering, before she realized someone had called her ‘Miss’...

The firefighter was standing there, holding his hands up in front of him apologetically and looking at her curiously.

“I’m really sorry,” he began. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I apologize again. I saw you walk in here and thought...”

He drew up slightly, and looked at her oddly.

“Are you crying?”

“Can I help you Mr. Rimes?” she said tightly, turning away and wiping her face, embarrassed that she’d been caught crying by this man. It was all so much, and starting to take its toll on her.

“I thought I would let you know that I’m getting ready to head back to the fire station, and I’m free on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday of next week. I checked my phone and when I saw you walk in here – I thought I would swing by instead of texting you,” he hesitated. “This place is really run down, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” she scoffed nervously, looking around. “I’ve got quite a herculean task ahead of me.”

“What is this place?”

“My grandparents had one of the first little grocery stores here in Ember Creek...” she smiled sadly. “It’s been empty since before I was born, and my parents just let it sit here. I’ve only seen it, during its heyday, in old, yellowed Polaroids and photographs.”

“Ah...” he hesitated and looked at her. “I’m Kyle, by the way...”

“Reyna,” she replied, picking up her keys off the dusty counter and heading towards the door where he stood.

“That light looks a little sketchy...” he said openly, pointing at the ceiling and glancing at her. “Are you planning on fixing this place up, or selling it?”

“It’s kinda the reason why I bid on the auction today,” she admitted, feeling a smile touch her face as his own budding one suddenly fell.

“This?” he gaped and looked around. “You want me to paint *this*?”

“It needs help desperately and...”

“It needs some Minwax...” he countered bluntly, looking around in

wonder, and then touching the carved edges of the massive glass case nearby. “This is handmade, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know...”

“Don’t paint it,” he countered and glanced at her. “Can I walk around the counter?”

“Sure.”

Reyna watched as he moved behind the counter and knelt, inspecting the cases and woodwork, before standing up... and looking at her.

“How about painting the walls only...” he began. “This counter has dovetails, and it’s notched. There’s old penny nails and it’s put together with pegs in a few places. I mean, if you want it painted – fine – but it would be a real shame. Someone put a lot of work into building this thing in place, and I’m willing to bet that glass is original... I can see a few ripples or bubbles from here.”

Listening to him, she stared at the case again with new appreciation and then looked back at him.

“What would you do... Kyle,” she said nervously, using his name and feeling a little confused as she looked around.

Her mind had been set on painting things to start afresh, but it had seemed like a shame – now he was suggesting keeping the massive case, along with pointing out other things that needed updating?

“I would polish this, paint the walls, and make a few updates... but use the character of the building for whatever you have intended here,” he began quietly, and then smiled at her.

That single glance, that easy smile, nearly set her back on her heels as she realized just how appealing it was... and how there was no guise or guile in that open expression.

He was being completely transparent and offering his genuine opinion.

“I was going to put a café in here...” she whispered.

“I could see that,” he nodded easily. “A few treats behind the glass, maybe some little tables, and you could really set the mood with a few decorations. I think the nearest bakery, coffee shop, or café is Dixie’s over in Yonder – or the big Starbucks in Tyler. There just isn’t a lot of places to enjoy a good cup of Joe.”

“You don’t think it’s silly?”

“Not at all,” he replied. “Everyone drinks coffee... you know? I would come here when I had free time – and probably pick up coffee for the team,

too. Maybe I could even persuade you to join me in the first cup of coffee?”

Reyna hesitated, running a finger along her collar. He was watching her with this uncertain look on his face and a slight, shy smile. What was it about him that was so adorable and seemed to strike a chord?

It certainly was getting warm in here, because she was feeling quite flushed and needed to put distance between herself and Kyle.

“Reyna?”

“I should be going,” she replied. “I’ve got to pick up the paint, the toilet, a new fixture, and...”

“I’ve got a ladder I can throw in the back of my truck,” Kyle offered quietly. “It’s okay about the coffee. I didn’t mean to make things weird or uncomfortable. Do you need help installing the toilet? I can do that easily for you, too...”

“Let’s see how the painting goes,” Reyna said evasively. “I don’t want to take advantage of your help, and already feel bad that hiring you was a fraction of the cost of a painter.”

“Can I be honest?” Kyle began, a smile touching his face that caused Reyna to smile without realizing it as she tugged at her collar again.

“Of course.”

“I’m really glad you bid on me for a few reasons,” Kyle grinned. “First and foremost? Mrs. Kendall is a terror and going to drive me out of town one of these days... and second?”

He hesitated.

“Yes?” she asked breathlessly.

“I’m really glad that I didn’t go for much cheaper,” he admitted, as Reyna let out her breath in a rush. “My male pride didn’t want to be the K-Mart Blue Light Special, you know?”

What was she expecting him to say? That he was interested in her? Glad she won? He wanted to go out with her, and painting was second best?

Instead, it was the money... and his pride.

Men.

Sheesh.

“Of course,” Reyna said easily, nodding. “I can certainly understand that – and we can meet here next Friday, if that works for you?”

“I can be here at eight AM – then you have me for the whole day,” he agreed, and she brushed off a momentary blip of joy that flared to life like an ember and then faded away, burnt out much too soon...

“I’ll see you then,” she replied, ushering him out of the door so she could lock it behind her.

Part of her expected Kyle to dawdle or hang around, as she turned the key in the door – but to her surprise? He was already walking off towards the station in the distance, his reflection staring at her in the glass before her face.

Just as she was about to look away, she saw his reflection glance over his shoulder before he turned bodily, walking backwards across the parking lot of the fire station, looking back towards the café... and at her.

She smiled.

A week later...

REYNA WAS beyond tired and feeling overwhelmed. There was so much still to do, the bills were coming in, and her savings was getting quickly depleted... not to mention that yesterday was a horrific day at the nursing home where her mother was.

They had called, claiming that she was crying and deliberately messing herself, before screaming at the nurses. Reyna had rushed over, only to have her mother fail to recognize her, making things so much worse.

Oh, it was heartbreaking – and Reyna had cried herself to sleep.

Today she was not feeling quite up to dealing with the handsome firefighter... nor did she feel like being on a ladder all day long painting.

As she pulled up, the urge to flee was stronger than ever before as she saw Kyle standing there, leaning against an old seafoam green pickup truck that had seen better days.

No man should ever look that sexy in ragged work clothes, she mused, and looked away.

“Good morning,” he said cheerfully. “Are we ready to knock this out?”

“Actually – no,” she replied grumpily. “I’ve got the paint, rollers, tape, and brushes, but I forgot to get the light fixture or pick up the new toilet. I was going to get something for lunch – once I pick up everything else that’s a mess in my world...”

“No problem,” he said, watching her curiously as she got out of the

vehicle, slamming the driver's door shut.

His thumbs were hooked in the pockets of his worn-out jeans that were dotted with small holes, grass stains on the knees, and had a few patches ironed on in places. His shirt looked atrocious with a few holes and bleach spots on the material – including a massive grease spot near the hem near his waist.

“I hope you don't mind that I dressed for the part?” Kyle began.

“Of course not.”

“Just checking, because you look really... ready for some hard work.”

He grimaced then and looked away, making her wonder what that expression was for... and feeling slightly insulted.

Did she look *that* bad?

Yes, her own pants were worn out and the shirt she had on was threadbare, forcing her to wear a tank top underneath to keep things modest. Apparently, she looked awful to him – which certainly didn't help how she felt this morning, after yesterday evening's debacle with her mother.

“Why don't I take the paint and just get started,” Kyle offered, opening the back hatch of her SUV without any regard for boundaries or privacy – he just helped himself.

As he opened it, several bags that she had failed to carry inside to the nursing home spilled out everywhere onto the asphalt due to her hurried driving on the country roads this morning.

There – staring up at the two of them from the ground – were the worst possible things that could have ever spilled out of her vehicle in front of a budding crush.

Several bright pink packages of Poise leak protection pads, a package of tampons, another supersize package of adult diapers, a package of Hanes women's briefs in bright neon colors, a tube of hemorrhoid cream, a plastic bed pan... and a King Size Kit-Kat bar that she'd picked up to comfort herself with chocolate.

She had forgotten about that Kit Kat bar and could have used it last night when she was sobbing pathetically.

Chocolate always helped.

“Oh I'm... sorry...” Kyle said in embarrassment.

Reyna immediately stooped to pick up the items, shoving them back into the large plastic totes where they'd fallen out. She wasn't even sure what to say or do, because it was so mortifying.

As she stood up, she looked at his bright red face. He didn't say a word and looked away, leaning forward to grab the two gallons of paint.

"What?" she blurted out defensively.

"Nothing."

"Everyone goes to the bathroom on a daily basis and fifty percent of the population has a menstrual period," she replied, feeling her cheeks heat up even hotter than they already were just ogling him.

Did he have to look so genuinely appealing and down-to-earth?

"You don't have to explain..."

"It's not mine – and I know I don't have to explain."

"Okay."

"Fine."

"Exactly," Kyle retorted in a hushed voice – but she saw a slight glimmer of something in his features before he looked away again.

"Quit judging me," she replied hotly, tying the top of the plastic bags to prevent the items from falling out again. "It's my mother's... well everything but the... oh never mind."

"The tampons?" he said quietly in a strangled voice.

"Yes – and we aren't discussing this."

"How old is your mother?"

"Old enough," she snapped – and then sighed dejectedly. "Look, I'm sorry. I'm not very chatty because my mom had a rough night and I ended up bawling my eyes out. I really don't want to talk about it, and it's embarrassing that *that stuff* fell out in front of you, because..."

"Reyna... it's okay," Kyle said quietly, looking at her for the first time in several minutes, looking genuinely apologetic. "I'm so sorry you had a rough night and if you want to talk sometime - I'm really good at listening."

Looking up at him, she hesitated and nodded.

His warm hazel eyes had flecks of gold, cinnamon, and green that were an attractive combination when mixed with those thick eyelashes. He was simply too pretty – and decidedly appealing in an unexpected way.

"Thank you," she replied softly, unable to look away from the kindness and understanding lingering in those beautiful depths. "I might take you up on that someday."

"I'm free anytime..." he answered, causing her to chuckle nervously.

"We both know that isn't true."

"No, but it sounds better then, '*Let me check the calendar at work*,'" he

grinned openly, taking the paint rollers from the car and nodding. “I’ve got this if you want to go drop that off to your mother, check on her, and then get the other things you mentioned, before I dumped everything out onto the ground.”

“Are you sure?” she asked, stunned at his generosity. That was awfully sweet of him to offer... and would help.

“I was going to be painting anyhow, right?”

“Yes, but I planned on returning in a few hours – this might be pushing noon or one in the afternoon...”

“Then I’ll have worked up an appetite and hopefully will be close to being done with a good portion of it,” he smiled openly. “I honestly don’t mind, and helping each other is something that friends do.”

“We’re friends?”

“I’m thinking it might be nice to have another one,” he said shyly, watching her. “When you pick up the toilet, get a new wax ring and a tube of silicone, too. I can put it in, if you’ll help me?”

Reyna just looked at him in surprise – touched by the offer.

“... And I’d officially like to volunteer for that first cup of coffee here – if you’ll please join me?” Kyle said sheepishly, his cheeks flushing slightly as he smiled at her. “It’s not anything funny or untoward, but I thought maybe we could get to know each other a little better.”

Why did he say things like that, making it completely un-romantic? she wondered, feeling incredibly confused.

One moment she thought he was attracted to her, and the next she was getting smoke signals that were literally opposite in meaning. Maybe he was married or in a relationship? Perhaps she was reading everything wrong and making too much of this?

“Sure,” she replied. “First cup of coffee here is my treat.”

“Together? Do you like coffee?”

“I do.”

“Cool.”

She looked at him peculiarly, again, realizing that he was either not interested or perhaps the worst flirt in the world. What other guy would ask a girl to coffee and then utter ‘cool’ when she finally agreed?

Reyna tried not to ogle him as he hefted up the gallons of paint easily by the handles with only one hand, tucking the other materials under his other arm, like it was nothing. She unlocked the door, allowing him in, and fought

back a smile as he practically shooed her off.

“I’ve got this... don’t worry,” he smiled easily. “See you around lunchtime.”

“Do you need me to point out what to paint in here?”

“Everything but the ceiling, floor, and the counter, right?”

“Yes... but...”

“Go,” he urged, nodding as he knelt down to spread out the trays and put a foam insert onto the roller. “I’ve got this...”

“Thank you.”

“Let’s just get your money’s worth out of me, eh?”

Reyna guiltily turned and walked out of the café, realizing that it was really nice to have someone helping her. It almost felt like that Kyle had her back and was tackling more than needed – but why? She sincerely couldn’t figure him out, nor was he easy to read like other guys. They all made their feelings and advances known – but Kyle was different in so many ways.

He seemed to be genuinely nice, not a lecherous creep. He was unfailingly kind, giving of his time obviously because of the auction, and trying to befriend her.

Climbing into her SUV, she wished she could see how the tan paint would look from the street, but the yellowed newspaper hiding the interior was blocking her view.

... *Of the paint, of course*, she thought with a smirk.

Starting the car, she drove off.



HOURS LATER, feeling much better, Reyna pulled up in front of the café and hesitated for a moment. She’d picked up a nice hot lunch for the two of them in Tyler that had been near the Home Depot where she’d picked up and purchased her things.

The lamp was breathtakingly beautiful with all these little crystals that could be hung around the scrolled metal edges that looked like wrought iron – and thankfully was not. She wouldn’t have been able to lift it alone, if it was! There were also two beautiful sconces to match, and she’d bought them as well to put here, if there was a place for them... if not, she would have an electrician come and install them.

Her mother seemed to be lucid this morning, chatting happily and informing her that they were playing bingo tonight over dinner. Reyna promised to come back by later this evening to check on her. It was completely forgotten what had happened last night, and she was relieved.

The box containing the new toilet was massive in size and she would never be able to lift it by herself. Grabbing the bag containing their lunch, she hefted her purse onto her shoulder and got out of the SUV, leaving everything else.

“Hey Kyle... I’m back...” she began easily, opening the glass door to the café and freezing in place as she stared in horror.

He was standing there, holding a paint brush as he finished painting along the trim near one of the windows. Gone was all the filthy, dingy streaked paint that had been splattered or stained over the years.

Everything was blue!

Not just *blue*... but almost a bright, ostentatious *sky blue* that made her wince.

Where were the soft shades of tan? She’d asked the man to mix the paint, opting for the expensive one-coat stuff in a shade called ‘*Sahara Morning*’ – a very pale, washed-out tan that would be neutral in color.

Not this!

“WHAT IS THIS?” she screeched in disbelief, stunned... as she stared at Kyle’s proud smile that was quickly fading.

“What? What’s wrong?” he asked quickly. “Did I spill on the floor somewhere? I’m nearly done and have only this little panel left to paint...”

“It’s supposed to be *tan*!”

“You *bought* blue!” he countered, looking flummoxed. “There were two cans of bright blue paint – so I painted everything *blue*, Reyna. What do you mean, ‘*It’s supposed to be tan*’...”

She sank down in a dusty wooden chair nearby and stared at the walls around her, putting the bag of food onto the table, before sinking her head into her hands, feeling such overwhelming emotions rocketing through her.

Was nothing going to go right?

Was she cursed?

“Reyna... talk to me,” Kyle said nervously. “Was this really supposed to be tan? I thought the blue was a nice change – very bright and cheerful – and there was so much of it, that I didn’t think twice about painting everything.”

She drew in a deep shuddering breath and didn’t move – only to see blue

splattered work boots appear before her where she was staring at the floor in shock, her head resting in her hands, peering between her fingers blindly as she was thinking of what to do...

She saw him kneel before her, a bluejeaned knee appearing in her vision... only to see the threadbare denim split, revealing a tanned-yet-scarred kneecap. Of course, his jeans would split, wouldn't they?

Everything else had gone wrong, too...

A small nervous giggle escaped her as she looked up, wiping her eyes.

She looked around the room, her eyes touching everything... except the kind man kneeling before her chair, looking at her.

"Blue, huh...?" she said shakily.

"Very blue..." he replied quietly – and she finally looked at him to see a small, nervous smile on his face as he watched her. "Are you okay?"

"Stressed – and probably a little hungrier than I realized..."

"Ah, *hangry*... I can understand that," he teased and touched her hand, giving it a gentle squeeze. "Breathe – everything works out in the end, you know? It might not be what you expect, but it *will* be okay."

She glanced at their hands, feeling the warmth of his palm and every callus, realizing that this was a man who worked hard his entire life... and was trying to comfort her.

Handsome... and sweet.

An unexpected combination! she thought wildly – and saw him look at her nervously before pulling his hand away.

... Annnnd there are the mixed signals again.

Standing up, Kyle hesitated and then spotted the bag of food. He quickly opened it, yanking out several long, wrapped sandwiches, and then smoothed the bag, dumping the large container of fries out onto the bag.

"Do you mind using this as a plate?" he said evasively, handing her a sandwich. "Let's get you fed, and then we can talk about how to fix the blue if you actually hate it..."

Reyna sighed heavily, nodding, and turning her chair slightly towards the table, seeing Kyle sitting opposite of her. It was silent in the café, except for the occasional drip of water coming from the bathroom sink.

She'd need to get that fixed too, she thought, adding it to her mental checklist, as she took a bite and sighed again.

"It's delicious," Kyle said, interrupting the solitude, speaking with his mouth full as he took another big bite. "I'm starving. Thank you."

“I should be thanking you,” she replied, swallowing quickly and nodding. “This was more than I ever expected...”

“Blue,” he offered, chewing, and smiling slightly.

“Blue,” she replied, taking another bite, and looking around the room to keep from gawking at him.

His smile was charming, and she needed to keep things friendly between them. Throwing another wrench into the chaos that was her life wasn’t exactly smart... and she sure didn’t need to throw herself at him, especially if he wasn’t interested in her.

“I like the blue,” he began, reaching for a fry and grabbing three of them, taking a bite of them, pinched between his fingers. “The blue has almost a fun, airy, whimsical appeal to it.”

“I was going for classy and relaxing,” she countered flatly, reaching for a fry... only to hear him snort before he chuckled.

She liked his laugh. It was open, honest, and outgoing just like him.

“... Blue does not strike me as classy,” she continued, smiling softly as she heard him laugh a little harder and looked at him. His eyes were dancing as he chewed, covering his mouth to be polite, and looking completely amused.

As he swallowed, he laughed a little more openly and smiled at her genuinely, causing her to hesitate nervously as she felt the keen yearning in her to see him tickled with merriment once again.

“Time to pivot, Miss Mattingly,” he teased, grinning, and reaching for another fry. “Pivot and make an about-face.”

“Blue,” she muttered, trying to make her voice sound stern as she looked around and realized that it really did brighten the space.

Instead of going with sedate or calming? She could do whimsical, and it might suit her a little better, allowing that wild-child she’d buried deep inside to come out and play...

“Extraordinarily blue...” Kyle smiled easily at her. “This is nice.”

“What?” she asked, glancing at him nervously – only to see him look away quickly as he became flustered.

“All of this... the blue... the counter... the food. I was really hungry and it’s just nice, you know. I didn’t mean anything by it, just my brain rambling on. I hope the light isn’t something ‘*relaxing*’, but rather something that can work with a new theme... or I can paint it all again for you,” Kyle strangled out, stammering a few times, and looking decidedly nervous as he focused on

his sandwich, taking another large bite as if to shut his mouth.

“I wouldn’t make you paint everything again,” she countered quickly, as she realized he was afraid she’d do just that. “This is my fault and I’ll fix it somehow... and yes, the light fixture is very pretty but it will work – I think.”

“I can wire in the light,” he mumbled, chewing, and not looking at her.

Reyna gaped in surprise at the unexpected offer.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’m here for the full day, remember? I was going to work on waxing the counters next, but it would be easier under a bright light,” he began, before glancing at her and taking another bite of his sandwich.

“That would be incredible... if you don’t mind?” she whispered, stunned, and touched by the offer.

It was more than she expected, and this was all going so quickly that she would be able to clean, decorate, and start getting the licenses together to operate next week.

“My hands are... I like working with my hands,” he choked out and then coughed slightly, covering his mouth apologetically. “Wrong pipe...” he choked out again, thumping on his chest as he coughed.

Reyna stood up and leaned over the table, slapping him on the back... only to catch him staring wide-eyed at her shirt that was gaping forward. His bright hazel eyes nearly popped out of his head as he suddenly choked even harder.

She wasn’t sure what he could see, but knew it wasn’t much because of her tank top... but the fact that he was looking? *Yeaaaah*. She thwacked him hard between the shoulder blades, causing him to nod as he held up a hand, coughing, and looked away.

“Get a good view?” she questioned flatly, glaring at him.

“Huh? Oh... that,” Kyle replied nervously, his face turning an alarming shade of red as he looked away. “Sorry, just... yeah. I’m very sorry – and no. I didn’t see anything.”

... *And he’s back to being uninterested*, she realized, sighing heavily.

“I think I’m finished,” he volunteered, wrapping up the last bite of his sandwich in the paper before putting it on the table. “Is the light fixture in your car? I’ll get it.”

“Yes,” she replied, wadding up her own remainder of the large sandwich and putting it in the bag that had held the fries, before picking up his wrapper, depositing it inside too. “I’ll get the door and we can haul everything in

together.”

An hour later, the massive box for the toilet sat on the floor in the distance with the caulk and wax ring sitting on top of the box, waiting. The floor was littered with crystals, wires, and chain, as Kyle read the directions – sitting cross-legged nearby.

Reyna was stringing the crystals to hang from the fixture silently and couldn't help glancing at him a few times... only to catch him watching her once or twice.

"I'm going to move my ladder – and cut the power. Let me get a flashlight out of my truck and my toolbox," he suddenly announced and jumped to his feet quickly, practically darting out of the doorway.

That was strange, she thought, stringing the crystals, and tying them off... only to realize that he'd been gone for several minutes. Getting to her feet, she peered out the door to see him standing there, leaning against his truck, with his head resting on the door with his eyes closed.

Was he tired?

Opening the door, she felt immediately guilty.

This could all wait, she thought. She'd hired him to help her paint, but never expected him to do the lights or put in the toilet. No, she had her money's worth from him, and if he was tired? He was free to go...

"Kyle?"

He leapt away from the side of the truck and looked at her nervously.

"Sorry, was just thinking for a few minutes..."

"We can be finished here today," Reyna said quietly. "I really appreciate the help but if you are tired, it's okay."

"I'm not tired," he said, looking confused. "This was nothing. I climb

ladders, race up flights of stairs, and wear fifty pounds of equipment on a daily basis. Why would I be tired?”

“You had your eyes shut and...”

“Ever have those moments where you just need to think out something because you’re afraid of making a mistake?” he said quietly, looking at her.

“Yeah,” she replied easily. “I hate working with electricity and it scares me. I mean, what if the wire still has some current to it and I get shocked? I was going to hire an electrician and...”

“The electricity...?” Kyle interrupted, nodding, and looking a little taken aback. “That’s it – the electricity. I was thinking about that and getting everything wired in safely for you.”

Reyna hesitated – realizing that maybe he wasn’t talking about the electricity, and wondered what was on his mind, if that wasn’t it.

As he hefted up his toolbox and tucked his Maglite into his back pocket of his jeans, he walked up to the doorway that she held open... and hesitated, looking at her.

“I don’t mind helping at all, you know...” he said softly, his eyes searching hers. “This is a nice change of pace and gives me a chance to do something nice for someone.”

“But you’re a firefighter,” she whispered numbly, feeling herself drowning in those beautiful eyes of his. “You save lives and...”

“I do,” he replied. “I give and give of myself – and do so willingly, because it makes me happy to be of service. I feel proud when the fire is out, and people are safe... but this? All of this?” he looked away from her, glancing around, before looking back at her.

“I get to spend my time with a friend,” he said softly. “This is for me, Reyna, and I’m really enjoying your company.”

Before she could say anything, he gave her this incredibly soft smile that caused anything she was about to utter, to suddenly melt away as she stared at him openly.

“... Even if we both had to pay for me to do this,” he teased. “It was worth every penny.”

“We?” she asked in confusion.

“I matched your price so the auction could be over,” he admitted, looking away nervously. She stood there, her mind processing what he was saying, and then hesitated.

“You matched the price, so the auction would end... with me as the

winner? You did that... to spend time with me?" she whispered softly, stunned, and touched by the sweetness of the unexpected gesture.

He'd done that to spend time – with her?

Kyle angled his head to the side, looked at her in confusion, and then hesitated before he nodded.

"I guess I did... didn't I? I was thinking more that I needed to get off the auction block before Mrs. Kendall started bidding, but sure. I guess? Yeah, I did match the price you bid to spend time with you... in a fashion."

Ouch, Reyna thought, wincing as she released the door. *Yeah, he's not interested in me at all*, she mused, feeling her ego deflate physically.

He looked at her strangely and then let out a sigh, before turning back to the light fixture to finish putting it all together. A few minutes later, he stood back up.

"Where's the circuit breaker at?"

"It's in the attic apartment."

"You're kidding me..."

"Nope. I didn't build or design this place. I'm serious as could be. It's in the attic mounted on a beam with a ton of wires running into it."

"Can we say, *'fire hazard'*?" he said glibly. "You should probably have an electrician move it."

"I'll add it to my list of things to do."

Kyle began looking around at the ceiling and hesitated.

"Where's the attic pulldown?"

"You're going to laugh..." she warned nervously.

"Probably not," he countered, already chuckling as he glanced at her. "Seriously, where is it?"

"There's no attic pulldown," she began, and saw his mouth drop open in shock at her words. "Before you say anything – yes. It's accessible. I've been in there once or twice over the years and..."

"How?"

"You go in through the second-floor window – through the fire escape."

"Are you kidding me?"

"Nope," she hesitated. "Someone in my family once lived there and the entrance was in the old pantry – which is now the entryway... I think."

"Did they just board it up?" he gaped in shock. "What's up there?"

"I don't remember, because the last time I was up there – I think I was about six or seven... but I remember my grandmother telling me not to touch

the box.”

“Ya’ think?” he said bluntly, staring at her in horror. “You went up there as a kid... with no exit?”

“The fire escape is the exit and entrance.”

“It’s an exit in case of fire...”

“It was the entrance too,” she countered, looking at him. “C’mon and I’ll show you.”

“This I’ve gotta see...” he muttered behind her, following her out into the street and walking around the side of the building. She fought the urge to run at the sight of the darkening alley despite it being late afternoon. The street backed up to another bigger building and when the sun was blocked – it was significant in the change.

“Aren’t there any lights back here?”

“I don’t hang around back here much...”

“At all,” he countered bluntly. “You shouldn’t be back here at all...”

Reyna started at the protective sound of his voice as he stepped in front of her and leapt up to grab the bottom rung on the fire escape. Pulling it downwards, he looked at her again... frowning.

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes.”

He took a deep breath, and she ogled the fact that he could pull himself upwards easily on the ladder. His muscles bulged, and then he looked at her as he climbed.

“Are you coming?”

“I’ve gotta get a ladder for me...” she explained. “I’ll be right back.”

“Hang on...”

Kyle dropped back down a few steps, then hung from the bottom of the ladder with one hand, extending the other towards her.

“You’re kidding me...” she gaped in disbelief.

“C’mon,” he urged. “I don’t want you walking around back here in the shadows. Just take my hand and shimmy upwards.”

“I don’t... shimmy...” she muttered, feeling her cheeks blush as he smiled at her.

“Put your hand in mine, then you can put your foot on my leg, climb up on the ladder, and I’ll follow you. Next time, we can bring a ladder – or better yet? We can put in an attic access that works.”

“I’ll add it to my list,” she began nervously and put her hand in his – only

to feel him pull her upwards bodily. Kyle might not be as brawny as some of the other men, but he obviously worked out – A LOT.

Scrambling nervously to get purchase, she indeed put her foot on him – only to feel them both drop as they hit the ground a second later... painfully.

Kyle groaned painfully and sucked in a deep breath before letting out another whimper of pain – just before he turned his head and spat out blood.

“I thought you said that you ‘*had this*’...” she hissed, and clenched at her head where it bumped into his jaw painfully. Her ears were ringing, and she was feeling a sharp pain from where her elbow contacted something.

“I did... until someone decided to use my groin to stand on – and not my thigh,” he wheezed painfully. “Are you okay?”

Reyna hesitated – and then realized that she was lying almost on top of Kyle there in the alley. He broke her fall? She scrambled off him and groaned audibly as she extended her arm, her elbow smarting painfully.

He slowly got to his feet, shaking his head... and then walked a few steps towards her.

“Let me see you...” he uttered softly. “Are you hurt?”

He gingerly examined her elbow, wrist, and arm before nodding.

“I think you are okay,” he began. “You might have a bruise, but I don’t think anything is broken. How about we try this again... but with a ladder?”

“Agreed. Did you bite your tongue?”

“My cheek,” he admitted. “I’m fine and really glad it wasn’t my tongue, or I might be missing part of it. I hit the ground pretty hard.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” he countered. “It was an accident, you know? Let’s get the ladder and try this again so I can get the light wired in before it’s pitch dark outside.”

Nodding, she followed him back to the door of the café and held the door for him as he grabbed the ladder, folding it, and hefting it over his shoulder. They walked back out towards the fire escape and slowly climbed up with Reyna, trying to ignore the fact that he was directly above her. As she got to the platform, he held out his hand and helped her up.

Reyna turned, put both hands on the window sash and moved it slowly upwards, before looking at him.

“You go first then you can hold it open for me...” she instructed.

She fought back a smile as Kyle looked at her warily and then peered inside. He slid a foot in, then moved his body through the window opening

before standing inside, holding it for her.

Reyna climbed in awkwardly and then hesitated by the window. Kyle was standing there, looking at her with this strange look on his face... and she understood.

The way the sunlight was hitting the window that was just above the roof next door was still illuminated with a glow that shone as if it was nothing, a normal everyday occurrence. The dust motes around them floated like little sparkles in the air as everything seemed to be paused... frozen like a timeless portal that they'd crossed into together.

They stood there, looking at each other silently... until Reyna swallowed nervously, the movement audible and echoing in the room.

"I... uh..." she began, unsure of what to say in that moment that wouldn't be taken the wrong way if he wasn't interested in her. His hazel eyes seemed to glow in the sunlight and the dark blonde hair was breathtaking to behold in the shadows, giving rise to streaks of gold before her eyes.

"I'm going to put up the light... then I'm going to buff the counters with the wax. Let's tackle the toilet tomorrow," Kyle said quietly, and it took her a moment to realize that he wasn't saying 'sweet nothings' to her – but rather making a statement, period... about work to be done.

She was so dense!

"Of course," she said amicably and then hesitated as he touched her uninjured elbow, causing her to look up at him again.

"Do you have plans tomorrow afternoon?"

Her heart hammered in her chest at the simple statement, realizing that maybe he was interested in her after all... and perhaps he was going to ask her out.

Oh gosh, what would that be like to date someone that literally made her so vitally aware he was close by? What would it be like to actually date him? Or kiss him? Would he be one of those guys that laughs a lot, smiles, and flirts? Or would he be the serious, somber type that didn't let loose until they were alone?

"No," she breathed softly, waiting.

"Good," he nodded. "I'll put in the toilet and fix the sink."

"Thank you," she said numbly, feeling like the biggest fool in the world and immediately looking away so he couldn't see just how embarrassed she felt right now. This was so pathetic to realize that she was fawning after someone who obviously wasn't interested.

“I really appreciate the offer to help me with the toilet and the sink.”

“Of course,” he said – and she heard the nervousness in his voice. “That’s what friends do, and we seem to get along so well that I thought you might like the help, you know?”

“I would,” she hesitated and then pointed. “There’s the electrical box.”

“What is all of this stuff?” Kyle began, and she saw he was looking around curiously. “You said someone used to live up here? You should use some of these things in the café downstairs to give it a ‘different-era’ feeling. This stuff is quite old and in good condition.”

“I might do so... why? Did you see something you wanted? I don’t mind at all if something caught your eye...” she started, and there was something in his expression that stopped her. “Where do you live?”

“Me?”

“No, the other Kyle... yes, you,” she sassed, watching him closely.

“I was going to be getting an apartment in the next week or so instead of staying on Chase’s couch, but I need to get a few things. I was going to use some of what I spent at the auction and...”

“You could stay here?” she offered – and hesitated. The words just seemed to come from nowhere, causing them both to freeze in place. Kyle looked at her strangely as she felt her face warm tremendously.

“I mean, we’d have to put in a doorway for you and...”

“There’s no real exit and you need an attic door,” Kyle countered. “I appreciate the offer, but I don’t think that this will work for me and...”

“It was a dumb idea, wasn’t it?” she laughed nervously.

“No, it was exceedingly kind of you,” he interrupted – and they both grew silent. “There’s no exterior doorway?”

“Not that I know of... if there is? I don’t have a key for it...” she began, and watched fascinated as Kyle began to inspect the upper apartment that was covered in a layer of dust.

If this apartment was a viable option, she would be so frustrated that no one ever told her that it was livable... because as a teenager she would have jumped at the chance, instead of taking off to live with some friends in Tyler for a few years.

Kyle walked behind a dilapidated curtain, disappearing.

“Reyna... what’s this?” he called out – and she nearly tripped over a wooden box on the floor to get to his side where he was. As she walked around the curtain, she saw he had his hand on a small door that had an iron

latch on it.

“Oh, you are kidding me...” she whispered aloud as Kyle pressed on the latch, lifting it from the base in the shadows, before turning towards her.

“Shall we?”

Reyna nodded silently, wincing as the door crept open. Kyle disappeared into the darkness and then got out his cell phone before cursing softly.

“I broke my phone in the fall... do you have yours?”

She flipped on the flashlight function and handed it to him, expecting to see a boogeyman in the shadows... but never expected to see a very narrow staircase.

“You’re kidding me...” she breathed softly. “Where does that go?”

“So, you are adventurous, too?” Kyle cast a smile over his shoulder at her words and slowly made his way down the rickety stairs that groaned under his feet.

She waited a few moments before starting down them too, not wanting to crash through to the floor below. This had to be a staircase hidden between the walls of the café and the hair salon next door... but it wasn’t on the floor plan, nor was anyone aware of it.

... *Could her mother have known?* she wondered silently, and glanced up as Kyle flashed the light towards her.

“Be careful on this step, it’s awfully bouncy underfoot...”

As she passed the worrisome step, she found herself at his back on the landing, pressed nearly against him in the darkness as they stood there.

“Does it open?” she whispered softly.

“I’m not sure I should open it. I mean, what if someone is on the other side and doesn’t want to have us suddenly appear? We could get shot or something...”

“It’s more like *hairsprayed* by Nadine’s shop next door...” she mumbled – and heard his soft laugh as his back moved slightly with the laughter.

“Shhh...” she chuckled and then reached out to tickle him, realizing that this was the stupidest thing she could do right now, but the need to hear his laughter was outweighing anything.

Her fingers made contact with his sides as she tickled him, only to feel him jump as he struggled to pull her hands off of him.

“Hey... HEY!” he hissed, laughing softly, and trying to keep his voice down. “Reyna... stop... hey, I’m ticklish...”

She was grinning in the darkness as he turned towards her, setting her

phone down on the stairs, and grappling with her hands to stop the torture as soon as possible – only to have him grab her hands, holding them above her head as she realized just how close they were to each other.

“Oh gosh...” he uttered softly in the shadowy darkness, and hesitated.

Reyna looked up at him, feeling such a longing within her that it was almost unbearable. It was crazy to think how strangely everything changed from one simple action – that could bring them here to this moment.

“Kyle...” she whispered faintly, her voice thick with emotion as she stood before him, waiting. He was taking forever, and she really wished he would just kiss her finally and get it over with... yet nothing happened.

“I’m going to lose the sunlight to do the wiring,” he breathed, staring at her.

“There’s always tomorrow,” she countered, feeling her heart beating wildly.

“Tomorrow, I was going to install the toilet...”

“Then there is the day after...”

“We were going to try the door before you tickled me...”

“So try it and see what happens,” she invited softly, knowing just how that sounded to her own ears... and waited. The innuendo of her invitation couldn’t be any more blunt or outgoing, could it?

Kyle unbelievably released her hands, picked up the cell phone, and took hold of the handle, before yanking the doorway open... only to see brick before them. The staircase had been sealed at some point in the distant past, rendering the above floor useless as an apartment.

... And Reyna felt useless as a woman.

Why was he avoiding her so very much?

In that moment, she felt so insignificant, so worthless, that tears stung her eyes – and her pride. She’d basically thrown herself at the handsome man... and he brushed her off like a gnat.

“Are you married?” she asked bluntly, her voice sounding too loud in her own ears in the darkness as Kyle started up the steps to the apartment above.

Something had to be ‘off’ for a guy to reject her this much. She’d been turned down before, but it had never hurt so very much.

He hesitated, without turning towards her.

“No.”

“Seeing someone?” she continued, needing to understand what was wrong.

“Yeah,” he replied, his voice faint and sounding a little unsure. “I’m working on it and things are... complicated.”

“Oh,” she whispered, feeling a little piece of her soul die at his words.

Kyle was interested in someone else, and she was causing problems for him. Without another word, she climbed the stairs behind him and felt so embarrassed for having been so forward with him.

No, she was definitely not trying things again, nor taking any chances. He’d suggested friendship, and now she understood why he’d said that. There was someone else in the picture that he cared for – and she was only getting in the way.

“Let me cut the breaker to the café – and I’ll install the light tomorrow,” Kyle said quietly. “I think I should go.”

“I’m so sorry...”

“You have nothing to apologize about. It’s me.”

“You’ve done nothing – literally.”

“I really don’t want things to be strange or weird between us... and well, that was...” Kyle hesitated, clearing his throat and not looking at her. “Intense - and I don’t think that we should be going down that road yet.”

“Playing with fire, Mr. Firefighter?”

“I’m not ready to get burned either...” he admitted, still not looking at her, making Reyna feel like an absolute leper. “You’re nice...”

She winced.

‘Nice’ was not what she wanted.

Intense, combustible, a roaring desire combined with a fierce longing sounded good – and none of it was ‘Nice’. She didn’t want him to know how awkward this felt, nor did she want to share the keening disappointment within her right now, because he was nearly a stranger...

She knew nothing about him – except that she was finding herself more and more attracted to him as the moments passed.

He was so incredibly... *nice*.

Reyna sighed pathetically.

Yeah, being done for the day was a good idea. She’d already thrown herself at him, stepped on him hard enough to drop him like a hot rock, smushed him when she landed directly on him, and things were just getting worse as the day progressed.

“I can just hire an electrician,” she said thickly, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. “You really don’t have to do anything else, and I appreciate the

help you've already been. I need to come up with a different theme and..."

"Reyna..." Kyle said quietly as they got to the top of the stairs. "I'll be here at ten, okay? There's no need for an electrician or a plumber. I'll take care of both things tomorrow and then maybe we can talk. Alright?"

"Sure."



AN HOUR LATER, she was sitting on the small loveseat in her mother's room, feeling worse than ever before. Her mom was calling her 'Betty Jean' and cursing like a sailor at the gameshow on the television while eating popcorn. It was almost like the dementia was getting worse and worse before her very eyes.

"Betty Jean, do you know where my cat went?"

"No, mom... you're allergic to cats, remember?"

"Phooey..." her mother waved her hand in annoyance. "Next thing you'll be telling me is that the wash needs to be brought in off the line. I'm telling you now that I've already done the wash and the clothesline is empty. I put it all away."

"Thank you for doing that," Reyna said dutifully, because it was easier to go along with her than it was to argue. When her mother was that 'lost' in the moment, it was better to keep her happy, because seeing her mom cry just broke her heart.

"Yep," her mother smiled. "Used the new washboard, too. I really like it because you can really get the dirt out of Grandpa's jeans. I don't like those fancy washing machines that just swish things around. I know your mom and grandma does, Betty Jean... but seriously. It just muddies the water, and you don't even have a rinse bucket, you know?"

"You're right," Reyna agreed, nodding, realizing her mother was thinking of her early teenage years on the farm.

"Grandma made us use the washboards just like she did, and my new Kenmore has a rinse..." her mother's words trailed off as she stared off into space, looking lost.

Reyna hesitated.

"I have a Kenmore...?" her mother whispered, confused.

"The washboard works better, remember?" Reyna volunteered, trying to

calm her, but then grasped at the chance that maybe things were slipping back in her mind. “There is a Kenmore at the house on Grant Road – the little blue frame house with the roses out front...? Do you remember that?”

“We aren’t talking about this,” her mother began tearfully, looking scared. “I think you should leave so I can get a nap before I have to go tend to the goats. If your mother catches you hanging out around my brother again – you’ll be in trouble Betty Jean...”

Her brother? Reyna thought wildly, realizing that her mother was indeed lost in her memories because her uncle Joe had died when he was twenty from a horse throwing him... before her grandparents sold the farm and long before she was ever born.

She’d never met her uncle – and her mother rarely talked about him.

“I’m going,” she began. “I’ll bring you something special tomorrow, okay? Maybe some chocolate or ice cream.”

“I’d like an ice cream. It’s sweltering in the barn in August...”

“It’s not August, mom...” she whispered painfully.

“Go away, Betty Jean... and I’ll tell Joe you came by.”

“Of course... thank you.”

Reyna picked up her purse and left the room, pulling the door to silently – only to hear her mother still talking to someone in the room. It was enough to give her chills and make her feel even more depressed.

Saturday morning was... different.

Reyna was starting to realize just what a toll this was taking on her. She felt like she was floundering between finding her place here – and feeling like she needed to run away to someplace new.

She was looking forward to seeing Kyle again... yet at the same time? She was dreading it with all of her being.

He wasn't interested, and she was panting after him like some long-lost puppy every time she turned around. It was going to take real effort to keep from letting her interest show, and how had this all happened?

Yeah, he was handsome... *appealing*... but there was something to him that just spoke to her.

Through a megaphone, she mused idly as she stirred her coffee in her to-go cup before leaving the house.

Hesitating, she heard a noise and froze.

Something was under the house and moving around? Ughhh, she hated crawlspaces, and most older houses had them here in Texas. Basements here were a rarity.

Listening again, she heard the movement stop. Maybe whatever it was, was now gone? It would be just her luck to end up with a den of rattlers under the house or have some possum family decide to take up residence.

Grabbing her keys, she headed out.



TEN MINUTES LATER, in line at the donut shop – she was kicking herself.

She had to be the biggest idiot in the world, and this was just proof. She was standing here, waiting patiently in line on a Saturday morning, to get donuts for a guy who didn't like her... but with whom she wanted to spend more time talking to and getting to know.

Glancing at her watch, she saw it was almost ten.

Pulling out her cell phone, she quickly texted Kyle – feeling like such a fool.

Hey Kyle – I'm gonna be a few minutes late...

Just FYI

... Only to hear a ding behind her.

Reyna turned – and saw him standing further back in the line, staring at his cracked phone screen and frowning as he tried repeatedly texting a response, before he looked up and met her eyes.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, and heard her phone ding. Glancing at it, she smiled and felt a laugh bubble forward.

Me too... do you like raspberry-filled donuts?

Kyle smiled at her shyly and stepped up to join her where she was in line. Reyna ignored all the looks and only had eyes for him as he moved to her side.

“Mornin'...” he said softly. “You're getting donuts, too?”

“I thought I'd surprise you,” she admitted in a hushed voice.

“See,” he began, smiling at her. “I was thinking that maybe I would surprise you and we could start the day off on the right foot – with lots of sugar.”

He hesitated for a moment as his smile fell slightly, just as Reyna moved forward to order.

“I'll have a custard-filled Long John and a raspberry-filled jelly donut...”

“Make that three raspberry-filled,” Kyle interrupted.

“Oh, I know you rascals over at the fire department,” the woman said playfully behind the counter. “You boys clean out the jelly donuts when you come by...”

“That's only because they are soooo good, Mrs. Beckett,” Kyle smiled before winking at the older woman in a charming manner. “I think you put a

little love in those things. Alex and I usually end up fighting over the last one every time...”

“Where are the other fellas this morning, Kyle? I made some lemon donuts for Chase...”

“I’ll text him and let him know,” he offered politely before glancing at Reyna. “I’m helping a good friend this morning getting a few things taken care of, but I’ll be back on duty Monday morning – so get ready for us.”

“Oh, I will,” Mrs. Beckett laughed easily. “I appreciate the warning.”

Kyle grinned – winking at her again as he took the bag in hand, before handing over a ten-dollar bill.

“I was going to pay,” Reyna protested quietly.

“My treat,” he replied gently, not looking at her as he paid and nodded. “Mrs. Beckett, can you ring me up for an orange juice, too?”

“Just get you one, sweetie...” the older woman crooned.

“No ma’am,” Kyle smiled, flushing slightly. “Charge me for it.”

“You sweet boys are something else...” Mrs. Beckett smiled, and then nodded politely. “Let me at least get you a coffee and top up your girlfriend’s travel mug?”

“Now that sounds like a bargain...” Kyle replied easily as Reyna’s mouth fell open in surprise just as she was about to argue the fact that she wasn’t Kyle’s girlfriend at all. No, he had someone else on the side, and this woman was incorrect.

“I’m not his girlfriend,” she began, unscrewing the lid dutifully on her to-go cup and saw Mrs. Beckett wink at Kyle almost in a conspiring manner.

“Yet...” Mrs. Beckett replied pointedly, pouring coffee in Reyna’s cup. “He’s a good boy.”

“Be sure to tell the chief that,” Kyle interjected, chuckling.

“Chief Carpenter is a complete rascal, and it’s no wonder you boys are getting a reputation for being a bunch of flirts. My goodness, just look at that sweet smile... and Alex, Chase, and Justin? Now, those boys are trouble - but you? You are a sweetie...” Mrs. Beckett crooned and actually pinched Kyle’s cheeks like some grandmother, before patting them.

“You’re the best, Mrs. Beckett,” Kyle smiled and dumped the rest of his change from his ten-dollar bill into the jar – both the bills and coins. The donuts were cheap, and he’d left her over a four-dollar tip.

“You scoop him up little Reyna, and tell your mama I said, ‘Hello’...” Mrs. Beckett called out happily as they moved away from the counter,

surprising her.

She wasn't even sure the woman remembered her without a crazy haircut or torn jeans. This wasn't a place she frequented often unless she came with her mother – who adored a bag of warm donut holes with her coffee.

Surprisingly, Kyle carried the bag of donuts and the plastic bottle of orange juice in one hand... resting the other on the small of her back. She didn't say anything, but rather thought it was a nice sensation.

Ugh... there was that word again: nice, she mused silently as they walked across the street and began making their way towards the corner – only for Reyna to hesitate.

“I need to move my car...”

“It will be fine.”

“They won't tow it?”

“Nahhh... not unless it's here overnight.”

“Whoaaaa no! That will NOT happen,” she replied nervously. “I promised my mother some ice cream tonight and...”

“Will you feel better if it's moved?” Kyle said, coming to a stop and looking at her. His eyes held hers for a moment, and she saw the concern in his gaze as he watched her. “Let me have your key and I'll move it while you unlock the door to the café. I don't want you worrying all day.”

“Are you sure?”

“Sure,” he smiled gently at her. “I'd rather see you smiling or laughing at me than constantly looking out the window to see if a tow truck is threatening your only mode of transportation.”

Digging out her keys, she hesitated and then rolled her eyes.

“You don't have to do it,” she replied nervously, realizing that this was weirdly and strangely personal to have him move her car when she was perfectly capable. She could just unlock the door to the café, drop him off, and then walk back out to the SUV to move it.

“You don't trust me...” he began, looking stunned and slightly offended.

“What?”

“I was just trying to be nice and helpful...”

“I know that, but it's silly when I'm perfectly capable of...”

“No one said you weren't,” he interrupted.

“But you don't *need* to.”

“Maybe I *want* to.”

“That makes no sense,” she countered, realizing that they were

squabbling on the sidewalk and getting several looks from people milling about town. “Why would I have you do something as simple as moving my car - when I can do it in five minutes after I let you in the café?”

“Because I’m right here and can help you.”

“Why?”

He drew up and looked at her strangely, growing suddenly quiet.

“Why do you always have to argue with me?” he said softly. “We do this all the time, like it all comes in waves... and I’m confused.”

“You’re c-confused?” she stammered, stunned. “I don’t know what to think anymore. *What* comes in waves? We do *what* all the time? I’m so confused right now...”

“About what?”

Reyna swallowed nervously and just looked at him, feeling like she’d been tricked and fell into a verbal trap. Kyle was just standing there before her, waiting, and unmoving.

She felt him touch her hand and immediately pulled away, frightened. He had a girlfriend that he was talking to, and it was bad enough that the donut lady thought it was her... when it obviously wasn’t. She felt like she’d given enough hints that she was interested, and had practically thrown herself at him – only to be turned down.

No, she was definitely confused.

“It’s just a friend offering to help...” he said quietly. “Nothing more. If you don’t trust me with your vehicle, the keys, or...”

She shoved the keys in his hands, feeling strangely adrift and a little exposed at this sudden turn between them. His eyes met hers and he looked almost as lost as she felt.

“I don’t know what this is, what’s going on, or what you think this is... but I *do* trust you – and it’s just a set of keys, Kyle. I’m not trying to make a big deal about this, but something is not right in our friendship, and I can’t put my finger on it,” she whispered in a hushed voice, feeling her nose sting as she realized that tears would not be far behind.

He took a few steps and unlocked the café instead of heading towards her car – holding open the doorway for her.

Reyna nodded, entering the café and putting her purse down, before crossing her arms over her chest defensively.

Protectively.

He looked at her a moment, nodded, and then let the door close.

Stunned, she walked over and pushed it open to see him crossing the street towards her vehicle. He held up a hand to wave hello to someone and then disappeared inside. She saw the taillights come on, then the reverse lights, and watched as he backed it out before circling the small park that was in the middle of the town square... then let the door close to the café.

She didn't want him to know she was watching, because she *did* trust him – it was her own feelings that she didn't trust.

Kyle entered the café several minutes later, carrying a toolbox. He set the keys down on the table and moved towards the ladder without another word. He immediately began climbing a few rungs up the ladder before Reyna could say anything...

He was avoiding her.

“Aren't you going to eat your donuts?”

“I'm fine.”

There was a note in his voice that told her that he wasn't 'fine' as he claimed – and none of this was 'fine' between them.

“We'll do this your way then...” she muttered, folding the bag closed and leaving it on the table to move to his side. “Can I help?”

“Nope.”

Yep. There was a tone, she thought to herself.

“Should I start waxing the...”

“Nope.”

“I could clean...”

“Nope.”

“Will you quit saying 'nope' like that and talk to me?” she snapped – only to see him smirk as he removed the light fixture and answered her.

“Nooope...” he drawled in an irritating manner.

Reyna stood there, clenching, and unclenching her fists in frustration as she glared at him, realizing that the urge to shove him off the ladder was pretty powerful in that moment... but also recognizing that she didn't want to hurt him.

She wanted to understand what was going on in his mind, what he was thinking, and enjoyed seeing him move as he worked... but he was just so frustrating and closed-mouthed.

“Whatever...” she grunted, and grabbed her tote of cleaning supplies to tackle the bathroom. If they were going to be changing the toilet, she at least wanted the area they would be working in as spotless as possible – that, and it

got her away from Kyle for a bit.

She didn't want to sit there ogling the man if he wasn't interested – because she certainly was. The more she talked to him, saw him, or was around him... the more fascinated she was becoming with his very person. There was something about him that just spoke to her, called out to her.

He was so bloomin' ... *nice*.

"Ugh... I hate that word," she muttered, getting on her hands and knees to wash the penny-tile flooring. Filling the sink with hot soapy water, she heard him humming softly to himself while she worked in the dim sunlight that was coming through the yellowed newspaper on the window glass in the distance.

Part of her was really glad that she couldn't see exactly how filthy the floor was that she was kneeling on... and knew her jeans would need to be washed in bleach or burned from the grime.

Grabbing a tile brush, she squirted some thick tile cleaner along the seams and began to scrub angrily again. For several moments, she dragged the brush over the old grout, careful not to scratch the tiles... only to hear Kyle humming a pop song off in the distance that she adored.

Larger than Life by the Backstreet Boys had to be one of her favorites and was a go-to on her playlist on her phone. It was funny that Kyle enjoyed the same music apparently... and Reyna began singing softly to herself, ignoring the sounds of him moving around on the ladder as she scrubbed away.

... Only to feel a tap on her shoulder.

Kyle was kneeling there behind her where she, herself, was knelt down, and looking at her... then at the flooring behind her.

"Yes?" she said candidly and knew it came out prickly, but everything was unfinished from their conversation, and she was getting *hangry*.

"You said something wasn't right in our friendship... like what?" Kyle began, looking at her.

"Are you kidding?" she scoffed, hesitating, holding up the grout brush that was covered in foam and on her fingers. "You want to talk about this *now*... when I have thirty years of debris all over my hands?"

"I don't like us being short with each other."

"Me neither."

Both looked at each other almost mutinously, neither budging. Reyna sighed and went back to scrubbing the tile... only to feel Kyle grab her by the arms, pulling her to her feet.

“Kyle, I’m filthy and...”

“Nope...” he uttered.

“I hate that word,” she replied angrily and hesitated as he slipped an arm around her waist – and threw the grout brush on the floor, putting her hand in his despite the filthy foam. “What are you doing?”

“Asking you to dance...” he replied tersely, looking at her.

“You didn’t ask,” she countered, meeting his glare.

“You won’t quit snapping at me long enough.”

“Because you are frustrating – and confusing.”

“How am I confusing?” he hesitated, coming to a stop and just holding her in his arms. There was something in his eyes that seemed to deflate her momentum and she sighed heavily, looking away.

“I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I think we need to,” he countered gently.

“There’s no music,” she began, “... And I feel silly.”

“Don’t,” he replied. “It’s just me, Reyna...”

Reyna looked up at him again and stumbled, only to feel Kyle’s hand tighten around hers as his arm did the same.

“I’ve got you,” he whispered, watching her. “I want to be your friend and I know I’m butchering this... but I *am* trying.”

“What would your girlfriend say if she saw you right now,” Reyna said openly, feeling a wave of sadness wash over her.

“I would hope that she would sing with me... so we could continue dancing while we are alone,” he said tenderly, his eyes searching hers. “And maybe she would let me take her to dinner tonight so we could get to know each other a little better?”

Reyna stared at him in shock as his words sank in, realizing that he was actually referring to *her*.

“Me...?”

“Yeah... you,” he replied in a soft voice.

“I thought you didn’t like me like that...”

“I’m trying to take things slow to make sure I don’t screw up something special that I’m very interested in getting right,” he admitted shyly, watching her.

Reyna noticed that his face was a little flushed. She adored that he was bashful... and sweet. There was something special in a guy that wasn’t embarrassed to be shy about a person that he felt sincere about.

“You are?” she whispered, gazing up at him.

“I’m not exactly suave or smooth,” he began nervously. “But I’m a decent, hard-working guy that doesn’t know how to play a bunch of dating games. What you see is what you get, you know?”

“You’re doing fine,” she said quickly. “I just was reading all of this wrong and...”

“Shhh...” he interrupted, smiling softly and looking a little insecure... as he began humming again. Her eyes widened as she realized he was humming a Disney song she recognized from Sleeping Beauty.

He slowly began moving, dancing awkwardly, and gazed at her... making her melt. This was incredible, amazing, and more than she ever expected. In this moment, she felt like a princess... despite the soapy sludge on her hand – and his.

Reyna began to laugh softly and saw his smile widen as he spun her around again, with a bit more enthusiasm.

“We should wash our hands,” she laughed, smiling at him.

“Just don’t look,” he countered playfully. “If you can’t see it, then it’s not there... right?”

“My hand is filthy and...”

In this moment there was a feeling that was so real and so powerful, it scared her. She was grasping at a chance to pull back, suddenly afraid of herself and opening up to someone so perfect – and wonderful.

Reyna stood there in his arms, her pulse pounding in her ears.

She was starting to think she was imagining the feeling when she finally looked up at him. He was watching her with an intensity that made her heart skip a beat.

Reyna felt herself drawn to him like a magnet. But at the same time, she was scared. What if he didn't feel the same connection – again... what if she twisted everything because it was what she wanted to hear?

She took a few deep breaths, trying to calm her racing heart.

He didn't move, didn't say a word, but somehow Reyna knew he felt the same connection that she did. She opened her mouth, but no words came out.

The feeling was so strong that it overwhelmed her. Everything around them seemed to fade away, leaving just the two of them alone in their own world.

As they danced, the song slowly came to an end and a new one began. Reyna realized that she had been so lost in the moment that she hadn't noticed

the change in the ballad he was humming.

Suddenly, Reyna felt embarrassed and shy.

What if he thought she was too forward? But when she looked up at him, all her worries melted away; he smiled encouragingly and held out his other hand as if asking for another dance.

“Again...” he invited softly, and she nodded.

This time ‘round, the melody was different – slower, more romantic – and it made Reyna's heart beat faster than ever before. They moved around each other effortlessly as they spun around the room like two stars colliding in space.

Reyna felt like she could have stayed like this forever; even after the song ended, neither of them wanted to let go of each other's hands... despite the filthy bubbles between their fingers. They began to move in time with his humming, and as they did, Reyna felt something stir inside of her.

She felt safe and protected in his arms, and she wanted to stay there forever. She knew she should pull away, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Instead, she moved closer.

“That was incredible,” Reyna said, her voice barely above a whisper.

“It was,” Kyle agreed, his voice husky with emotion.

Her heart raced as her gaze locked with his. Heat blazed through her veins like a wildfire and in that moment, she knew that this was the start of something unforgettable. His eyes were captivating, and it felt like the world around them had stopped spinning. She felt her cheeks flush as she looked into his eyes. She knew in that moment that this was the beginning of something special.

“Kyle?”

“I should install the light fixture now, shouldn't I?”

“We should wash our hands and...”

“Reyna, can we do this again sometime?” he interrupted quickly in a hushed voice.

She flushed and nodded, touched that he didn't want this moment to end any more than she did. Obviously, he was as moved as she was by the unexpected moment, and was stunned by the emotion in his gaze.

“I would really like that,” she admitted – and then smiled at him. “That – and to wash my hands.”

He grinned and began laughing as he looked at their clasped hands, nodding. She didn't even want to identify what the discolored soap bubbles

were from, but instead made a face before laughing shyly and pulling away.

Taking a break, both scrubbed their hands with soap and water several times because of the unknown filth... and Kyle finished wiring the fixture in almost record time. He was twisting the wires together, covering them with protective caps, before putting it against the ceiling and fastening it into place.

Kyle shimmied up the fire escape and quickly threw on the power for the light fixture, casting a warm illumination within the room that was breathtaking to behold. The crystals shimmered everywhere, making it look like glitter was sprinkled on the floor around her.

Sitting at one of the little tables near the entrance, she realized just how easy it was to be in his company. It was like they just seemed to fit once the biggest hurdles were crossed – whether or not he liked her or had a girlfriend.

As he returned, he pulled the little table and two chairs closer to the center where they'd been dancing – and held out his hand towards it, indicating she should take a seat, before joining her. They had both opted to use napkins to hold the donuts that they'd picked up, eating because they were starving.

“You never said anything about dinner,” Kyle said persistently, taking a bite of his jelly donut and barely catching the bright red blob that nearly shot out the other side from where it was filled. He managed to maneuver his napkinned-hand to an angle where he could lick at it... before laughing nervously.

“Sorry – horrible table manners,” he offered, and she just smiled.

“It's hard to do this with a napkin, but I'm not touching my food with my hand anytime soon...”

“No kidding,” he agreed, laughing. “Soooo? Dinner tonight?”

“You are certainly persistent.”

“Now that it's actually out there, I really would like to know if you are interested in going,” he admitted, smiling openly.

“I was supposed to take my mother some ice cream tonight,” Reyna hesitated apologetically, feeling bad. “Maybe tomorrow night?”

“How about...” he began, his eyes watching her. “We take your mother some ice cream after dinner, and I can meet her, too.”

Reyna blinked at the unexpected offer – and the sweetness of it. He really was extremely nice, and looked so genuine that she didn't know what to say.

She looked away nervously... only to see him dip his head back into her

line of vision with an insecure smile as he looked at her.

“Would that be okay?” he whispered gently. “If you don’t want me to come, I understand... but whatever is swishing around in that head of yours? Talk to me, because I’m really terrible at reading people.”

“Apparently, I am too...” she admitted.

“What do you mean?”

“I didn’t think you were interested in me – or even my type...”

“Oh,” he uttered painfully, and seemed to physically withdraw from the moment, catching her by surprise. Reyna immediately put out a hand, touching his, and looked at him.

“And I’m finding that I was so wrong about everything,” she breathed, feeling incredibly shy and nervous about admitting it aloud, but she didn’t want whatever was budding between them to fade away or die off before it had a chance to start. “Dinner, and then a quick visit to see my mom sounds perfect.”

“We can make it something unassuming if you are nervous or unsure...”

“Or we can make it a real date,” she countered softly – and saw his eyes light up with hope as he smiled at her once again.

“I’d really like that,” he admitted openly.

“Me too.”

“Cool.”

Reyna couldn’t help the small laugh that bubbled forward as she heard him say the lame little expression that seemed almost childlike as they sat there. What guy ever referred to dating a girl as ‘cool’?

Kyle had a friendly, open face, brown hair, freshly cut, and kind eyes that crinkled at the edges when he smiled. He was wearing a simple, comfortable shirt and jeans, and he had a few of napkins tucked under his arm. Unassuming and approachable... both of which she really was taking a shine to.

He was just the nicest, sweetest, most unassuming guy she’d ever met.

She smiled back.

“Cool,” she repeated.

Less than an hour later – disaster struck.

Again.

The two of them had been swapping stories, and before they knew it, an hour had passed. As they were packing up the tools and supplies, they both noticed something strange - the toilet they'd been replacing wasn't white like the other one - it was a pale gold color.

“A golden porcelain throne,” Kyle laughed, but Reyna wasn't amused.

“Why would I order a golden toilet?” she sputtered in shock.

“We can't return it. It's been installed.”

“I can't believe this...” she muttered, as he turned the water back on to the toilet, and it began to fill.

On closer inspection, they realized the valve was leaking water all over the floors. Suddenly, their moment of peace was interrupted by chaos as water dripped everywhere, and their hands slipped on the slick tile.

They quickly shut off the valve, but much of the damage had already been done. They looked around helplessly at all the wet surfaces, realizing that this would take a lot longer to clean up than expected.

They were both covered in water. Not only were her sneakers wet, but her jeans also from where she was sitting on the floor helping bolt down the toilet were soaked, making her look like she'd wet herself... and Kyle was in the same predicament.

The front of his jeans was wet from where the valve had sprayed suddenly as he was turning it back off, and the backside was soaked where he had once been sitting opposite of her. She could see the outline of his wet wallet in his jeans.

In that moment, she felt extremely grateful for his presence and calm demeanor, which helped her stay focused on finding a solution, rather than getting too flustered by the situation.

He didn't rush her or make her feel bad about what happened; he simply asked if there was anything he could do to help her fix it and didn't comment on their wet clothing.

Together, using some spare parts from his truck, they managed to get everything back in order and clean up all the mess. This time when she smiled at him, it wasn't just out of politeness - it was out of genuine gratitude.

She was really glad she placed that bid in the auction, bringing him into her life.

"How about you text me your address and I'll pick you up in two hours?" he began, smiling at her from where he sat on the floor amidst the chaos. "Then we can both head home, change, and then head out to dinner..."

"Yeah, I'm going to need to change," she chuckled nervously.

"Ya' think?" he laughed, pointing at himself. "I look like I had an accident in my pants, and the guys at the firehouse are going to have a field day with this if they see me."

"Won't you head home?" she questioned.

"It's more like '*I'm looking for one*'," he admitted. "I'm staying on the couch at my coworker's - and my things are either in a suitcase I'm living out of or in a small storage locker in Tyler. Chase is never going to let me live this down when he sees this..."

"You're not from around here?"

"Nahh... My family lives in Aledo, near Fort Worth, but this was the first open position I could find and it's nice here. I like being a little ways out, because I have some space without hurting my parents' feelings. It was kinda smothering sometimes, but I know they mean well."

"I understand."

"Only child?"

"You know it..."

They both smiled at each other in understanding, before Kyle got to his feet and extended a hand towards her. Reyna put her hand in his as he helped her up from where they had been sitting on the floor of the small bathroom.

As she stood there before him, she couldn't help the smile that touched her lips. There was something special about just being near him, in his presence, that made her feel alive and full of wonder at who he was and the

unassuming way they'd met.

If she hadn't been on her way to the bank, hadn't cut through the park where the gazebo was because she was running late... or hadn't taken a desperate chance?

Things would have been so much different.

Now, she had a person she considered a friend – and a date with a gorgeous fireman who said 'cool' a little too often.

"Hi..." he whispered softly, watching her.

"Hi yourself..." she breathed, standing there before him – and then shivered.

"You're cold and probably should get going," he said suddenly, breaking the moment and stepping back from her. "I don't want to get you over to your mother's too late, you know?"

She nodded and watched him leave the café, picking up her purse, before following so she could lock the door.

Kyle was a basketcase...

He actually had a date with Reyna!

There was no way that gorgeous girl would ever go out with him, or so he thought, but when he was dancing with her in the café... and he intended for it to start out as playful? There was just something about her that made him feel like he could do it. That he could ask her out.

... And he had.

She didn't laugh, run away, or make a disgusted face because he was '*poor Kyle Rimes*' that grew up on the farm on the outside of town. No, she looked at him like he was some incredible guy... and she was so far out of his league it wasn't even funny.

That straight cropped hair and no-nonsense attitude she had was just a façade that covered the inquisitive, clever playfulness that was hidden inside.

He adored hearing her laugh and had nearly blown his cover, trying to act all calm or collected the moment they had been standing in the hidden stairwell... when he'd grabbed her hands to quit the torturous tickling – only to pin them above her head, putting them both in a precarious position.

... And she leaned into him, causing Kyle to nearly swallow his tongue!

Gosh, she was exquisite, and he felt like some befuddled, barefoot farm boy from the boonies... the attraction to her was incredibly strong, and he kept thinking that she was just being nice because he was helping her out – which was part of the reason he kept volunteering.

He hated installing toilets or doing any plumbing at all. Electrical? He was always scared to get shocked and cut the entire power to the breakers, not just the one fuse. Painting? He hated painting, and his arms were aching

from having rolled out everything in record time just to impress her.

He had no idea how to use Minwax – or if he would be able to actually buff the massive wooden display counter that was breathtaking to behold.

Yes, the urge to impress Reyna was making him agree to all sorts of stupid things – such as volunteering to meet her mother.

“Oh my gosh... I’m going to meet her mom on the first date?” he whispered in disbelief, slapping his forehead and dragging his hand down his face in dismay. “I don’t even know if my nice clothes are in storage or at the bottom of the suitcase at Chase’s – and I’ve got less than two hours to find something appropriate.”

Starting his old truck, he headed home... feeling dread building almost every mile he passed, knowing how Chase was going to react when he saw his wet britches.

Moments later – Kyle wasn’t disappointed.

Chase and his son, Johnny, were walking out to get in his vehicle... and burst out laughing at the sight of Kyle’s pants.

“Daddy – look at that! Kyle needs a diaper just like a baby...”

“Problems?” Chase grinned, not countering his son’s comments or sticking up for Kyle in the slightest. “Should I get a plastic cover for the couch, buddy?”

“Har, har, har...” Kyle muttered, feeling his face redden with embarrassment as he walked up to the house. “Funny.”

“Seriously – what happened, dude?”

“I was installing a toilet for a friend and the valve sprayed everywhere.”

“You were doing plumbing? You barely hold the hose when we’re on the scene,” Chase taunted, grinning playfully.

“That’s not what your mom said...” Kyle retorted, grinning as Chase’s smile fell. Johnny looked up at his dad questioningly.

“What’s that mean, daddy?”

“Nothing – and that’s not funny, Kyle. My mother is a saint...”

“For putting up with you – yes.”

“Daddy?” Johnny interrupted again, looking between the two men.

“Kyle doesn’t mean anything, Johnny... and don’t repeat that. He was being rude, and Grandma won’t give you any treats if you say that. She’ll cry and we don’t want her upset...”

Johnny looked at him, aghast.

“You were mean about... about *my grandma?*”

Kyle felt like a heel and definitely ashamed of how the little boy was reacting to him being a smartaleck to Chase. There were so many times that Chase had been vulgar, made fun of him, or had taunted the other guys, that it was natural to give him flack...

“Your grandma is a sweetheart,” Kyle uttered politely, kneeling before the boy so he could look him in the eyes. “I was being a jerk, and being mean to your daddy...”

“Don’t do that,” Johnny chastised immediately, frowning.

“I promise I won’t,” Kyle fought back a smile and held out his hand. “Are we bros again?”

“Yeah,” the boy replied – immediately giving him a hard high-five and grunting with the effort. Kyle winced openly, pretending to be hurt, and collapsing in the grass.

“There!” Johnny crowed happily. “That’ll teach you, Mr. Pee-Pee Pants...”

“That’s my boy!” Chase laughed openly, patting his son on the shoulder. “Let’s let *Mr. Pee-Pee Pants* get inside before the neighbors see him out there like that...”

“Thank you,” Kyle grinned.

“Get up, dork...” Chase agreed, chuckling. “We’re heading out to play video games and then going to my mom’s – I’ll be back later...”

Kyle got up and ran inside, digging out a few clean items to wear before throwing his things in the laundry. Getting a shower, he stood there for a while under the stream of water just thinking of how to impress Reyna. He wanted to make sure she was interested in him and that this wasn’t just agreed to out of *politeness* or *pity*...

He would be sincerely crushed if she pitied him and pushed the friend-thing... and he was an idiot for stating that they were friends from the beginning.

Shaving his face, he glided the razor over his jaw and winced as it sliced into his skin.

“Are you kidding me?” he gaped, staring at the shower mirror that hung on the towel bar along the wall. Sure enough, he had a two-inch slice along his jawline that was bleeding profusely and looked terrible due to the water sluicing down his face now as he was trying to clean out the wound.

Kyle completed his facial massacre and gingerly dealt with the splatter of shaving foam and blood that was now all over his bathroom mirror. He

gingerly touched his jawline where he had apparently traded blows with a razor, and thought it was lucky that he hadn't been knocked out.

He quickly slapped a piece of toilet paper on it, hoping to prevent a serious infection from developing. He finished shaving and carefully wiped the remnants of the foam and water from his face. He could feel the sting of the cut on his jawline, but luckily it wasn't too bad. He pressed a square of toilet paper on it to hopefully stop the bleeding.

Getting dressed, he glanced at his watch and realized time was slipping away from him. He really needed to finish getting dressed, change the dressing on his wound to see if it had finally stopped bleeding, and head out towards Reyna's house to pick her up.

He hoped the black jeans and simple Polo shirt would be okay for wherever she wanted to go for dinner. He really didn't have any plans and wanted to kind of play it by ear, so that way if she wanted to go someplace nice – they could. He sort of hoped that maybe she would be as low-maintenance as she seemed in the last two days that he'd gotten to know her.

As he pulled up in front of the tiny blue frame house, he couldn't help but smile at the large orange flowers that were such a contrast to the rest of the little home. It was almost as adorable as she was... in a strange, unexpected way. There was something eye-catching, attractive, and simply appealing... just like Reyna.

He normally liked girls with long hair, a bit thinner, and more outgoing – and she was the opposite of each of those things. She was curvy in the most delightful way, making it hard to keep his eyes off her. Her short hair was almost blunt against her face, falling at her jawline, which was squared off, giving her an abrupt appearance... until she smiled.

When Reyna smiled, he melted instantly.

Looking in the mirror, he carefully removed the square of toilet paper from his jaw, dabbed at a spot that started to well up immediately, and then quickly wiped it away, before getting out of his truck to walk up to the door.

He was early and...

“Oh shoot...” he winced, turning around and practically running back to his truck through the grass. Hopping inside, he put it in reverse and pulled out of the driveway, before quickly speeding away. “I can't believe I forgot...”

Reyna stared through the mini-blinds in shock, and felt insulted to see Kyle make an about-face right there in the yard before literally running back to his truck.

“What in the...” she muttered openly in shock, letting the blinds drop back into place and yanking open the front door, only to see his vehicle was already down at the end of the street.

“He left? *He actually left?*”

Walking out into the grass, she looked back at the house to see if there was some monster on the roof, some horrifying item that could have frightened him off, or some sign of plague, witchcraft, disease, or possibly some hideous ghost looming in the window that she had no idea about... because the way Kyle took off was not normal!

She stared at the plain-looking house, the driveway, the neatly trimmed yard that she'd mowed at sunset simply to get it done, and came up with nothing that could have made him leave in such a rush.

Her phone beeped in that moment, causing her to look down at her hand where she held it, his text message glaring at her.

Sorry – I forgot something and gonna be a few minutes late...

Interesting, she thought. *He was saying he was going to be late, but didn't reveal that he was already here and had left in a hurry.*

Okay...

Walking back inside, she sat down in the rocking chair that was her

mother's and stared at the open front door, looking though the storm door for any signs of his vehicle pulling up again.

She was stunned that first, he was here and left... and secondly? That he was now going to be late.

This was their first date – and that wasn't the impression she would want to make if the shoe was on the other foot. Being late was a huge pet peeve, and had ended a date more than once in the past.

“... But on the other side, they weren't as sweet as he'd been and were actually complete jerks, so it wasn't a big loss,” she muttered aloud, unable to resist staring up at the clock above the television.

“I don't want to be *that* person, timing him...” she continued on, talking to herself... and heard a loud truck in the distance, roaring down the road.

Not getting her hopes up, she was floored to see his truck come to a screeching halt in front of her house, causing smoke to flare up from his tires as he skidded to a stop.

Gaping in shock, she watched as the driver of the vehicle stumbled out of the car. Before Kyle could make his getaway, the seatbelt tightened around him, causing his arms and legs to flail wildly as he ended up falling onto the door sill, a captive of the woven belt.

A shower of bright petals descended around him, as if he was a rockstar being doused in confetti performing an encore...

She covered her lips, fighting back a smile, as she suddenly knew and understood what had happened. He was trying to impress her – and bless his heart – she would let him!

... And allow him to keep his pride intact.

She was going to pretend that she hadn't seen a thing and act surprised, because he'd been sweet enough to bring her flowers.

Grabbing the TV remote, she quickly turned it on and stared in supreme concentration at the screen. As he knocked on the door, she jumped in surprise and then waved in greeting... getting up and turning off the television, hoping he didn't notice that it was golf on the screen.

Getting to her feet, she saw his ruddy face and disgruntled expression, unable to hold back a smile because of how discombobulated he was – and the fact that she was truly happy to see him there.

“Hi,” she smiled easily, holding open the storm door for him. “Do you want to come in for a moment?”

“Sure,” he began, and looked a little nervous – so much so that it was

sweet. He was just a good guy that looked a little out of his element... and she was loving it. "These are for you."

He excitedly pushed the bouquet at her, resulting in a mini flower-shower within the living room. She gingerly accepted the gift, only to be pushed back with a painful thud the moment she bent down to collect the fallen petals off the carpet.

He sheepishly rubbed his head and muttered an apology, while she struggled to hide a painful smirk.

They bumped heads – hard.

"Owww..." she whimpered, wincing, and looking at him as he continued rubbing his forehead.

"Should I be seeing stars...?"

"You're seeing stars?" she asked nervously, wondering if she should take him to emergency. What if he had a concussion or had fractured something? They had hit pretty hard, making a loud hollow sound...

"... In your eyes," he smiled sheepishly, looking extraordinarily shy in that moment, and the corny line completely won her over.

Reyna's mouth dropped open in surprise and wonder at the gentle, sappy, supremely romantic man before her.

"That was the sweetest thing I've ever heard," she whispered, touched that he was trying so very hard to impress her. "I don't know what to say..."

"Tell me I haven't peaked already, because I would hate for everything to be downhill from here tonight. I'd like it to be memorable – but in a good way," he chuckled anxiously, now rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous manner, revealing the red mark on his forehead... and she saw a cut along his jaw.

"What happened to your jaw?" she asked softly, touching his face – as he backed away nervously, causing her to draw back in surprise.

"I was in a hurry and cut myself shaving," he muttered embarrassed, looking away.

She reached up and touched his jaw again, feeling herself melt at how the start to their date was proceeding. It was silly, clumsy, slightly dorky... and sorta perfect. As she touched his cheek, she carefully glanced at it – before turning his face slightly to look at her.

"No," she whispered softly, smiling at him. "I think things are going to go well during our dinner."

"I sincerely hope so," he breathed. "I'm a little nervous."

“Me too,” she admitted. “Maybe we should both take a deep breath, relax, and just enjoy each other’s company without worrying so much.”

He nodded and held out his hand towards her.

“No grime or soap suds...” he chuckled softly, reminding her of their dance earlier as she put her fingers in his hand.

“Are we dancing? I thought you wanted to go to dinner,” she teased softly, feeling her heart flutter happily as she remembered the impromptu romantic moment earlier.

“Dinner, ice cream for Mom, dancing, all your smiles and all your laughs...” he replied, watching her. “Whatever you want, I’ll do my best to provide - always.”

Reyna looked at him again in surprise, realizing that while he was coming on strong... there was something wonderful about it. She should be a little taken aback, except there wasn’t any guile there, no games. He meant every word he was saying, and that was the part that was so incredible.

She could see it in his eyes.

If she asked for the moon, he would find a taller ladder... and a lasso.

Unsure of what to say, she simply nodded, feeling humbled and honored that someone so kind and wonderful had come into her life. If nothing else, she would have an incredible friend at her side... and if everything seemed to work out? It would be an incredible relationship.

“Shall we go?” he asked softly, as if he also realized just how intense everything was getting between them.

Reyna nodded and Kyle took her hand, guiding her towards the front door, holding the screen door for her to lock the house. He then opened the vehicle door for her as well, reiterating her thoughts about him wanting to make her feel special. Between the flowers and the politeness, he was pulling out all the stops...

She watched him slide into the driver’s seat before he smiled at her.

“What are you in the mood for?”

“Oh!” she hesitated, and laughed nervously. “I’m not sure. I thought you had someplace in mind and...”

“Not really, but I wanted to make sure you didn’t have some place you wanted to go. In my line of work, I’m not too keen on surprises,” he admitted in a droll voice, causing her to look over at him again, only to see his lips wobble slightly as he tried to hide a smile.

“You’re teasing me...” she began.

“Maybe a little bit...”

“Let’s do something simple and easy,” she hesitated, feeling her face blush as she realized that her suggestion was going to be silly and completely dumb, but she was trying to be considerate, too.

If this was a date, she didn’t want to suggest some fancy steakhouse in Tyler – because she didn’t eat much steak, and it could get expensive. She had no idea how much firefighters made, but the idea of spending a hundred bucks on dinner didn’t sit well with her. Instead, she preferred laid back or casual – and cheap.

“Do you like Sonic?”

“Sonic? As in Sonic Drive-In? Really?” His eyes widened in surprise as he looked at her in shock.

“I’m kind of a picky eater, but they have the best tater tots...”

“I freakin’ love Sonic,” he interrupted, smiling at her. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, their breakfast burrito is incredible...”

“With the salsa packets?” he grinned – only to match her smile as she realized they were both fans of the same thing.

He was sitting there, his hands resting on the steering wheel as he looked at her, his face alight with surprise, wonder, and happiness at her selection. Gosh, he looked so incredibly appealing, which made her wonder again what it would be like to have someone so easy going in her life, just for her...

“You can’t eat the burritos without the salsa packets,” she teased openly, feeling herself relax.

“No, but you look so incredible sitting there in that pretty dress that...”

“You think I look incredible?” she whispered, stunned – only to see him blush again as he quickly looked away. “Kyle?”

“Very much so,” he said in a quiet voice, not looking in her direction as he started the truck. “You’re so far out of my league that I keep expecting to wake up and find that this is all a dream.”

Reyna’s breath caught in her throat as she stared at his profile in surprise, before reaching over in the small cab to take his hand in hers. He slowly looked towards her, looking supremely unsure... and continued speaking.

“I look at you, and my stomach gets all nervous,” he began, his voice barely audible over the engine, but the meaning was clear. “Your smile makes my knees weak, and just seeing that soft way those incredible blue eyes... well, I’m a mess when you look at me.”

She was glad she hadn’t buckled yet, because everything he was saying

spoke to her, made her feel things she never expected, and she slid over a little closer towards him.

“What are you d-doing?” he croaked nervously, and backed away slightly.

She fought the urge to laugh at the way his voice broke, and realized that he would never take advantage of her, push himself at her, or cross any lines... and she desperately wanted him to kiss her after hearing those words he'd said to her that revealed so much.

“Moving closer,” she admitted evasively.

“W-Why?”

This time, she did chuckle slightly as his voice cracked again.

She was really glad he'd admitted his thoughts and feelings, because normally she would have let it drop thinking that he wasn't interested, but now she knew better.

“Kyle...” she said softly, leaning in a little closer, only to see him pull back a little further until the door was behind him – and amazingly watched him swallow nervously as he stared at her. “I thought maybe if you kissed me, it would break the ice, allow us to relax a bit...”

“I d-don't have to k-kiss y-you,” he squawked. “I'm p-perfectly fine – *can't breathe* – but f-fine.”

She smiled tenderly, releasing his hand from hers and moving it so she was touching his shoulder – only to see him freeze like a deer in headlights.

This was so hard to do, she realized, because everything in him seemed to be balking at this moment... *He said he liked her, didn't he?*

“R-Reyna?”

“Don't you want to kiss me?” she asked, suddenly feeling a little self-conscious as his breath exploded from him in a rush and his eyes nearly popped out of his head in disbelief.

“K-Kiss y-you?”

Stunned, she realized that maybe he actually didn't want to kiss her, and that his sweet words were perhaps just to make her feel special.

Maybe Kyle was one of those guys that waited until... well, waited for paint to dry, the cows to come home, or ice to freeze solid, before he would ever make a move – which only served to make her feel like she was acting like a tramp, being so forward with him.

Play with fire and you're gonna get burned, little girl... she thought.

“Never mind,” she whispered, feeling mortified as her cheeks flooded

with embarrassment, and she moved to back away, wanting to get away from the opportunity for more humiliation. Her cheeks were hot, making the vehicle warmer than the surface of the sun, and as she moved to back away?

She felt him grab her hand.

Reyna looked up into his eyes and found herself frozen in place, captivated by his gaze. He began to lean closer, and she held her breath in anticipation. His lips were just millimeters away from hers, but felt much too far away.

“Kyle...” she breathed.

“I want this to be perfect for us,” he said softly, and she closed her eyes in happiness feeling his hand touch the nape of her hair, pulling her closer to close the space between them.

His breath was trembling, almost as much as his hand... and she didn't think her heart could thrum any faster. It already felt like a hummingbird was fluttering in her chest.

The first feeling of contact of his breath against her lips made her melt, as a wave of emotion washed over her at the intensity of the sensation.

“I shouldn't...” he murmured against her lips.

“Yeah, you should...” she countered mindlessly, as her hand blindly moved to pull his own head closer to hers, desperate to close the space between them.

“I should, huh...?” he taunted softly, driving her nuts as there was such male masculine pride in his voice that was so unexpected that she made a small noise from somewhere deep inside of her – but instead of either of them laughing or commenting on it?

Kyle finally kissed her.

His lips barely caressed hers, slowly teasing her. The sensation of his rough stubble from his skin, mixed with the smoothness of his warm lips, was a heady combination. As they sat there, she was stunned to feel his other hand release hers, moving to hold the back of her head and neck as he deepened the embrace.

Reyna did the same.

Her fingers sank into his hair, holding him desperately to her as she kissed him back with everything in her. This wasn't a sweet, gentle, soft kiss between two people beginning a relationship. No, this was a deep, fevered kiss between two beings that had suddenly found one another, needing this connection between them.

He kissed her almost with a desperation, as if he needed to make his mark or claim her, so she never looked at anyone else... and she knew there would be no one else for her.

This feeling of perfection combined with longing was heady to experience – and was something she never wanted to end, but before she was ready?

It was over.

He pressed his forehead to hers, his eyes still closed, his hands still cradling the back of her neck, holding her close, as she did the same. His short hair was soft and silky beneath her fingertips, as their breaths mixed between them, sounding like they had both run a race that their very lives were dependent upon...

“Wow...” she breathed unabashedly, stunned, and left reeling.

“Cool...” he uttered, sounding as breathless as her – and causing her to chuckle at the softly spoken word between them, as she opened her eyes to meet his.

His beautiful hazel eyes were so full of happiness, longing, and joy, that she couldn't help but smile in response. There were slight creases at the corners of his eyes that seemed only to add to the appeal, seeing something in him for the first time.

The eyes are the windows to the soul, her mother used to tell her... and now she understood. She could see ‘him’ there, lingering in those beautiful depths, and knew somehow that he would be good to her in a way she never imagined.

“Sorry,” he whispered self-consciously. “I’m not the most eloquent guy.”

Reyna stopped him, moving her hands slightly, covering his lips with her thumb as she cradled his jaw tenderly and shushed him right away.

“We’re... *cool*,” she smiled, using his word deliberately – and felt his lips flatten into a smile beneath her thumb as he gazed at her like she was some miracle, before leaning forward to brush her lips against his momentarily.

“We’re definitely cool...”



THINGS SEEMED to be so relaxed and easy between them now that they had shared a kiss. There was no wondering what he thought of her, or panic about

ruining things between them anymore. It was like the veil of ‘what ifs’ had been lifted, allowing them to finally be themselves.

They laughed, talked, and played with each other – tossing tater tots into the paper containers, argued over the last salsa packet, and then ordered three small ice cream sundaes... to go.

She was touched that he had remembered her wish to take ice cream out to her mother – and was planning on the three of them eating it there, together. As he pulled up to the nursing home, she realized that the panicked feeling of dread wasn’t quite so overwhelming, and she didn’t feel so alone right now.

Usually when she walked up from the parking lot, she wondered which nurse would stop her to update her, wondered what kind of mood her mother would be in, or how things would be when she finally arrived... but now she felt like she could handle just about everything.

If her mother was lost in a memory, she would simply enjoy it for what it was – a chance to glimpse at a part of her mom’s past... along with a few stolen moments with her mom while she was here on earth, still lucid. Things could always be so much worse. She was grateful that they still had chances to talk, even if it was about moments and memories that she had no clue about.

“Sometimes her dementia is really bad, and she doesn’t remember what is going on around her,” Reyna warned softly as they walked down the hallway of the nursing home. She smiled at some of the people that had their ‘apartment’ doors open, hoping for a visitor, and tried not to let some of their appearances bother her.

Yes, she was very lucky, because not everyone was ‘there’ mentally. Some people sat slumped and staring off into space while others waited in wheelchairs, watching a television with such a lost expression on their faces. It was hard and there were so many, many lonely people there, unable to take care of themselves anymore.

“Bingo!” a man cried out from behind them, causing Kyle to jump. “Did you hear me? I said Bingo, darn it! Don’t let that blue-haired hussy take my money...”

“Wh-What?” he chuckled nervously, looking a little unsure at the sudden outburst as they walked past a room.

“That’s Bob,” Reyna explained easily. “He’s super sweet, but very passionate about his bingo games. The blue-haired hussy is Mrs. Farnsworth,

who can see the bingo board much better than him. He just dobs the numbers, not caring what number is called, and yells ‘bingo’ every four or five numbers. I think they ignore him now...”

“I see...”

“BINGO! BINGO! BINGO!” Bob hollered angrily. “Judy, ya’ blue-haired hussy, you better put down that dauber... this game is mine.”

“Aww stuff it, Robert,” a woman said peevishly. “Keep playing in whatever la-la land you’re in...”

Both Kyle and Reyna shared a look and tried to keep from laughing as the man named Bob let out a string of insults that ‘Judy’ countered in a shocking statement that would make any salty sailor with a potty mouth blush.

“Wow,” Kyle whispered openly. “That’s a first for me.”

“Right? I bet she led a colorful life to be capable of saying all of that...”

“No kidding...”

“C’mon and meet my mother,” Reyna invited, seeing that the ice cream sundaes were getting awfully soft. Opening the door, she gave it a soft knock and called out.

“Hey mom, it’s Reyna. I brought a friend...” she began and saw her mother sitting on the couch, watching television.

The blinds were open, letting in sunlight, and her mother was dressed today in a pretty robe covered in little pink roses with a long ribbon tied onto the zipper to make it easier to dress herself.

As her mother looked up, she got this strange expression on her face and covered her mouth with a gnarled hand, getting tears in her eyes.

“Mom?”

“It’s about time you found me, Joe...” her mother began tearfully, making her way to her feet as Kyle looked at Reyna curiously.

“Joe is her older brother that died when she was young,” she explained in a hushed whisper towards Kyle, before speaking to her mother who was ambling towards Kyle with her arms outstretched for a hug. “Mom, this is my friend...”

“Joe,” Kyle interrupted, hugging her mom, and looking at Reyna with understanding. “Sorry that I’m late. I was stopping for ice cream with Reyna...”

“Who?”

“Betty Jean,” Reyna prompted tearfully, touched with emotion as she realized her mother was stuck in that same memory again – yet Kyle was

playing along with it. Her mother released Kyle from the hug, patted his face with an arthritic hand, and wiped her eyes, before sitting down.

“It took you long enough,” her mother began again. “Mother told you not to dawdle, Joe.”

“I can’t help it,” Kyle smiled, easily, nodding at Reyna and falling into a role in order to make the older lady happy... for her. “You know how I get.”

“Sniffing after Betty Jean again, huh?” her mother laughed. “You know her pa is going to chase you down with a shot gun one of these days...”

Kyle looked at her sharply, holding up his hand with a finger extended, silently asking if Joe had been shot. Reyna shook her head ‘no’ as she handed both of them one of the sundaes... and he continued on, with relief on his face.

“Betty Jean’s dad would have to catch me first,” he replied, winking at Reyna. “How can I stay away, when she looks so breathtakingly beautiful?”

Reyna stared at him in surprise, realizing that he was speaking to her – not as ‘Joe’, but from *his* heart...

“She’s a very pretty girl, isn’t she?” her mother said knowingly, nodding, before taking a bite of her ice cream.

“Exquisite,” Kyle replied, not looking away from Reyna.

“You need to take your time courtin’ her, Joe. She’s going to want the whole deal. She’s not someone you can dabble around with like those girls on the other side of the tracks.”

“What do you mean?”

“Betty Jean will be expecting marriage before she ever frolics about with you in the bedroom, you rogue. I swear, Mother is right. You do act just like Uncle Bernard chasing after skirts all the time...”

Reyna raised an eyebrow mockingly, smirking at Kyle – who grinned.

“So, you think Betty Jean is expecting marriage, huh?” Kyle replied quietly, looking at Reyna, making her blush as he turned the tables on the conversation before she even had a chance to realize it. “I’d say that things are quite new between us, but pretty incredible...”

“She’s gonna want *the whole package*, my dear brother,” her mother stressed before laughing happily, reaching for a napkin as she got chocolate on her chin. “Marriage, a home, children...”

“Oh really?” Kyle asked, grinning at Reyna. “You think she wants the whole deal, eh? Children, too? Wow, I guess things are getting serious fast between us, huh?”

“You want children, don’t you Betty Jean?” her mother asked, looking at her pointedly – as Kyle lifted an eyebrow, just like she’d done to him.

“Do you, *Betty Jean*?” he asked innocently. “Do you want children - *with me* - someday?”

“I don’t think we should be talking about this...”

“She’s shy,” her mother began. “Go ahead and tell Joe what you told me...”

“Oh, I’ve gotta hear this,” Kyle grinned, putting his spoon down into his sundae and smiling at her. “How many children do you want some day, *Betty Jean*...” he drawled out, grinning.

There was something in his eyes, a playfulness as well as a curiosity, that seemed to touch her. He was genuinely wanting to know, but asking as ‘Joe’ because it felt safer for him to have this discussion.

“If it’s the right person, then a family would be wonderful someday,” Reyna said softly in a hushed voice.

“She wants seven or eight kids,” her mother interrupted, slapping Kyle on the knee in laughter as she cackled in delight, causing Kyle to look at Reyna in surprise.

“You want seven or eight children?” he choked out in shock.

“No, maybe two or three,” she countered quickly, the words slipping out of her mouth before she realized it.

“You’re gonna have to convince her to marry you first, scoundrel,” her mother guffawed. “She knows what kind of hooligan you are – and just how bad you are with those lightskirts you chase.”

“Betty Jean isn’t like those... lightskirts,” Kyle began, hesitating over the old-fashioned term, as he met Reyna’s eyes. “She’s the real deal and I know I need to take my time, so I don’t mess things up with her.”

“Just don’t take too long,” Reyna whispered softly, lost in the moment, and not even comprehending what she was saying aloud, as the words just seemed to come from her very soul. “She’s ready for a piece of happiness that she can share with the right guy – and the rest is just a blessing.”

Kyle’s gaze that was already full of emotion, seemed to melt before her as he stared at her openly and with such an intense yearning that it was humbling.

“I promise I won’t take too long,” he murmured quietly, not looking away from her. “... But I do want it to be right for us both, because you’re a miracle to me, and I don’t deserve someone so incredible as... *Betty Jean*.”

“She’s just a normal girl.”

“She’s my everything...” he countered openly.

“Her daddy will put a muzzle full of lead in you, brother, if he catches you making those mooneyes at his daughter or saying such sweet stuff to her...”

“Is it w-working, because it’s the God’s honest truth...” Kyle croaked nervously, causing Reyna to smile as she wondered if he was still in his ‘role’ or if it was the truth. Either way, she was impressed by the man before her – whatever his name was right now...

“Yeah, it’s working extremely well.”

They shared a tender, knowing smile.



AS THEY FINISHED their visit as *Betty Jean* and *Joe*, Kyle drove her home and walked her to the door politely.

“Thank you for coming with me to see Mom...” she began, suddenly feeling very aware and nervous of how serious things were getting, as well as the unexpected discussion of the ‘future of Betty Jean’ – or her.

“Whatever happened to Joe?”

“He got thrown from a horse and broke his neck.”

“Ouch... and Betty Jean?”

“I don’t honestly know,” she admitted. “It was so long ago, and Betty Jean would be my mother’s age – and they moved here to the area after Joe died, buying the store. She’s originally from Wisconsin.”

“Oh wow – that’s a big change.”

They stood there together on the porch, holding hands for several moments before Reyna spoke.

“Do you want to come in for a cup of coffee or something?”

“I’m tempted,” Kyle admitted softly, looking at her. “But I think I will take a raincheck and try to keep doing the right thing to win over my girl. I don’t want to be too forward or ruin things between us, because I can’t keep my thoughts, or hands, off of you...”

He smiled tenderly.

“This probably needs to be goodnight between us,” he whispered, leaning down to brush a kiss against her lips softly. “I go back on duty Monday for

seventy-two hours, but would you like to... maybe have dinner with me again?"

"We are supposed to have that first cup of coffee together," she smiled shyly, looking up at him behind her lashes.

"Can it be both?" he whispered tenderly. "Maybe dinner, coffee, a lunch... or just sharing some time together talking?"

"I'd like that," she replied.

"Good," he smiled, rubbing his thumb on the back of her hand gently. "Text me tomorrow and let's make some plans together."

"I will."

"Goodnight... and sweet dreams."

Reyna nodded shyly and unlocked the front door as he waited for her to get inside safely. She was touched by the sweetness he displayed so naturally, and how he just seemed to fall into place beside her, looking out for her.

Closing the door behind her, she sighed happily.

Thump, thump, thump

Reyna's eyes shot open in awareness in the darkness, hearing something moving not far from her head. The sun hadn't even come up yet, but she could hear something banging around, much too close by... and it sounded like it was either under the house, near her bed, or right under it!

"Hello?" she whispered out, terrified that she was going to come face to face with some monster from a horror movie or something gruesome that would attack, maim, or kill her.

Reyna cursed softly, trying to remember if she locked the front door to the house when she came inside, and lay there huddled, unmoving under her covers, facing the wall... only to hear it again.

Thump, thump, thump

That was close! she thought fearfully, desperately afraid now as she waited, listening for any signs of breathing, monstrous groaning, or any other signs that she was about to be gobbled or flayed alive.

Thump, thump, thump, thump, swish.... swish.... THUMP!

Grabbing her phone, she almost dialed 911, but had no idea what to tell them. *Hey, there's something thumping under my bed?* That sounded like a prelude to a dirty joke or some prank call.

Finally, she glanced at her phone again... seeing it was nearly five in the morning. This was ridiculous and sooo stupid. There was nothing to be scared of! She was safe in the house and...

Hearing a hiss... Reyna froze as her eyes shot wide open, backing away from the side of her bed and slamming her body against the wall in terror.

Dialing blindly, she heard a soft voice answer the phone.

“Hello?”

“K-Kyle,” she whispered nervously in a hushed voice.

“What’s wrong?” he asked in alarm. “Reyna? It’s four-forty in the morning? Is everything okay?”

“No,” she said fearfully, feeling tears sting her nose as she heard another soft hiss and grumbling growl from close by. “I don’t know what to do. I’m scared.”

“Baby, talk to me... what’s wrong,” Kyle said quietly, and she heard movement in the phone before hearing a buzzing sound from his truck, realizing he was getting in his vehicle. “Are you safe? Is someone in the house? Where are you?”

“I’m at home and something’s under my bed... don’t laugh,” she whimpered painfully. “I’m serious.”

“What do you mean?”

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP... echoed in the silence – follow by a very angry growl.

“What the...” Kyle uttered, and she could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“I know!” Reyna squeaked out in a hushed manner, trying to keep the hysterical panic from bubbling within her, making her want to scream aloud.

“I’m two minutes away...” he volunteered. “Stay put or dial 911 if you are in danger.”

“How can I be in danger? I mean, there’s got to be a reason for... THAT,” she whispered fiercely, trying to mentally wrap her mind around what could be beneath her bed.

“I’m sure there is,” Kyle replied, and Reyna perked up as she heard tires squealing outside.

“Is that you?”

“Yeah...”

“You’ve really got to stop grinding to a halt like that or you are going to wear out your tires and brakes,” she said nervously, feeling relief course through her.

“Can you open the front door?”

“It’s under my bed, remember? I’m trapped! If I get out of bed, it will grab me, attack me, or kill me before I make it to the door. I’ve seen the scary movies, and this is classic,” she whispered softly into the phone.

“Take a flying leap and run,” Kyle countered, “Or I can break a window out because I’m gonna tell you – the police would take out a window or your

front door to get inside, too.”

“Leaping is commencing...” she hissed nervously. “Don’t hang up.”

“I’m right here and armed.”

“You’re armed?”

“I don’t know what’s there, and if something is running behind you...”

“Do you want me to jump out of bed or not, because the idea of something ferocious scrambling after me is making me knock-kneed like a six-year-old kid...”

“Do you really think something would let us talk and *wait* to attack you?”

“I don’t know... maybe?”

THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP, THUMP...

Reyna cursed, shot straight up out of her bed, and leaped from it - bolting towards the front door without even stopping to look behind her. Heart pounding fiercely, she unlocked the front door, yanking it open, and ducked nervously... waiting.

Kyle stood there, looking, and then looked down at her.

“Are you okay?”

“Is there something hideous standing behind me?” she asked nervously, her fingers laced over her head protectively, as she crouched into a tiny ball. “I don’t feel any hot breath on me, nor smell anything rancid, but if I get drooled on by some gruesome monster or see fangs coming down in front of me...”

“Oh my gosh...” Kyle laughed suddenly, causing her to look up in surprise as he took hold of her arms. “You watch too many scary movies, hon...”

She looked at him, pale and frightened, realizing there was nothing behind her at all.

“Oh my gosh, do you think the thumping was coming from my chest cavity and I’m about to have something burst from me...” she asked, horrified – only to see his smile.

“C’mere,” he said quietly, gathering her in his arms for a hug. She easily walked into his embrace, realizing that she was wearing a pair of flannel pajamas and her hair was probably a mess... and didn’t care.

His hand was smoothing her hair, tucking her head under his chin, as he held her close, crooning softly.

“Shhh... it was probably just a really bad nightmare by some sweet girl that has an incredible imagin...”

His words trailed off and they both tensed as the thumping began in earnest in the distance... followed by another angry hiss. Reyna pulled back and looked at his surprised face.

“Do you have a raccoon problem here?”

“No.”

“Where’s your room?”

Kyle didn’t wait for her to answer, walking past her into the house with his hand on the holster where his gun sat. She was glad to see he didn’t automatically pull it for safety’s sake or in a threatening manner.

He was right. There had to be a sane explanation... but she was lost and couldn’t figure out what it could be.

Following him closely, laying a hand on his shoulder, she felt her heart hammering wildly in her chest and noticed that his hair was askew, standing up in a few spots... before noticing that he was wearing grey sweatpants and a bright orange marathon shirt.

“You run?”

“Huh? Oh this...” he chuckled nervously. “Yeah, I like running and needed to sleep in something comfortable. Chase has a little boy that just turned seven, and he gets up early sometimes to watch cartoons.”

They froze again at the sound of something in the distance, before Kyle stood up and looked at her.

“Do you have any pets?”

“No.”

“Interesting.”

“What do you mean ‘*interesting*’...” she asked nervously.

“Stay here,” Kyle said quietly, and she watched him tiptoe into her bedroom, feeling a flush of embarrassment as she realized her bed was a mess and the laundry bin at the end of her bed was full.

Not one of her finer moments...

Stunned, she heard the noise again – and Kyle’s laugh. He turned to her, smiling, and waved her over as he knelt directly beside her bed where the small table was with her alarm clock.

“You have a friend...” he whispered softly, smiling tenderly at her.

Reyna looked to where he pointed – and peered in the vent of the floor, only to see two bright blue eyes staring back at her... and heard a hiss.

There was a kitten in the floor vent of her bedroom!

Her eyes widened in shock and alarm as she glanced back at Kyle. Her lip

trembled as her eyes began to water. How had a kitten gotten in the duct work under the house... and how long had he been there?

“Can you save him?” she asked tremulously. “I bet the poor baby is scared.”

“Yeah, sweetie... I can,” he smiled softly at her, leaning forward to brush a kiss on her forehead. “Do you have a butter knife or a flathead screwdriver?”

“Yes... oh my goodness,” she whispered, getting to her feet and trembling as she realized what was going on – and what the noise had been. She heard something a few days ago and brushed it off, but now she wondered if the poor baby was starved, thirsty, or...

“Reyna,” Kyle said, coming up behind her – and hugging her again. “Why don’t you make some coffee and I’ll fish out the kitten. Once the sun is up, I’ll get under the house and see how your little monster got in the duct work.”

“Don’t hurt him...”

“I won’t, but don’t get attached either,” he said cautiously. “The animal could have rabies or be feral...”

“Or he could be a sweetheart, hungry, scared, and in need of some loving,” she countered nervously, handing him a butter knife, hearing Kyle chuckle again.

“Or all of that...” he smiled at her. “You have a good heart, you know that?”

“Are you hungry? I’m going to get something simple for the fur baby to eat...”

“One thing at a time,” he instructed, his eyes dancing. “Let’s free the little monster from his prison, then have a cup of coffee to wake up, before deciding if we need to call animal control.”

“Why?”

“Reyna – we don’t know if he’s sick...”

“He’s not,” she said stubbornly, looking at Kyle – who smiled indulgently at her. “Don’t give me that look like you are humoring me. We’re on a rescue mission, remember?”

“I remember,” he laughed openly, before turning to return to her room with the butter knife.

Fascinated, she heard him talking softly to the hissing animal as he removed the screws from the vent cover and slowly removed it... only to

hear a faint mew that broke her heart.

Kneeling beside Kyle, she watched him send his hand down the duct as he flinched a few times, before his hand emerged holding a very frightened, angry, spitting orange kitten.

“Ohhhmygoodnesssss...” she crooned softly, reaching for the filthy kitten as tears ran down her cheeks, unnoticed. “Come here, you sweet thing...”

“Let’s hope that little vampire doesn’t have rabies, because he bit me several times,” Kyle muttered, but his gaze was full of emotion, betraying the angry words as he sat there beside her on the floor.

“Don’t you listen to Daddy, little one...” she whispered, smoothing down the matted fur, smiling at Kyle. “Mama has some warm milk for you and a can of chicken chunks for you to eat until we can go to the store later.”

“You’re keeping ‘vent cat’?”

“Of course, I am...”

“Will you at least get him checked out? He might have worms or some sickness...”

“Yes,” she promised, smiling at him. “I can’t believe there was a kitten thumping around in there.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t something else,” he admitted. “I was kind of worried there was a raccoon, possum, or possibly a snake when you said it hissed.”

“What are we going to call him?”

“Stringy? Cujo? Parvo? Zombie? The cat looks half-starved and...”

“Is Daddy being mean to you?” she crooned tenderly to the kitten that was now purring loudly against her shirt. “You don’t look like you have parvo, do you? Nooo... but then again? I don’t know what parvo would look like. No, you look like a big, sweet, filthy, little orange fluffball and it’s November so...”

She looked up and smiled broadly at Kyle.

“What?” he grinned.

“His name is Yam,” she beamed happily, grinning, as Kyle started laughing at the name as he sat there, relaxed, opposite of her. Just seeing her ‘hero’ rescuing the cat had made her heart melt... but this easy, wonderful, happy side of him was doing all sorts of things to her soul.

“Yes, this sweet filthy boy’s name is Yam - because ‘*I YAM sooo in love with him*,’” she crooned again, hoping to make Kyle laugh some more as she began making kissy noises at the kitten, who mewled again in response.

“See? He knows his name.”

“He’s probably *mad* at his name,” Kyle countered, chuckling.

“Nahhh...” she teased, smiling at him. “Thank you for coming and rescuing Yam – and me.”

“How could I not?” he began, gazing at her with so much tenderness in his voice that it was not hard to miss. “My lady called in distress – and I will always be there for her.”

“I’m so glad we met,” she replied openly, touched by his words and wincing at the little claws that were trying to climb up her shirt to explore. “How about I make some pancakes or French toast for breakfast... for my favorite hero?”

“I don’t know about ‘hero’,” Kyle said sheepishly, smiling at her. “But your *boyfriend* would love a cup of coffee, your company, and I can make some killer pancakes for us both so you can play with your new little love...”

“Are you jealous?”

“Should I be?”

“Are you in love with the kitten?”

“Of course, he’s so sweet and...”

Kyle leaned forward from where he was sitting on the floor, his fingers lacing into her hair as he pulled her forward, kissing her tenderly without warning. She would never get over the feeling of his warm, firm lips against hers... and the differences between them, marveling at each one.

“Then yeah...” Kyle whispered softly, his breath brushing against her lips and tickling slightly as the kitten crawled up between them, grasping at both with painful little claws for attention, needing to explore this new world. “I ‘yam’ a little jealous of that kitten.”

Reyna smiled against his lips as he kissed her again.



KYLE SLID two pancakes onto a plate as Reyna looked up from her spot on the kitchen floor where she was gingerly trying to clean up Yam.

The kitten was certainly unpredictable.

The little orange tabby was purring and hissing with each gentle swipe of the wet wash rag along his fur, as she was trying to get off some of the dirt and debris, while shoveling in bites of chicken with a ferocity that was

stunning.

She thought about giving him some milk and bread, but he looked a lot older than a teensy baby kitten. His eyes were opened, he wasn't wobbly in the slightest, but just a puff ball of attitude and sass that she adored...

"Do you want to work on the café today?" Kyle said easily as he poured two cups of coffee, before walking them over towards the little table beside the window in the breakfast nook. He returned to the kitchen, turned off the burner, and slid another pancake onto a plate... before setting them down on the table. "Breakfast is ready."

"I was planning on taking a few things over to start decorating it, maybe moving a few items from upstairs, but I didn't want to wear out my welcome with you," she replied openly. "I like this and..."

"I do too," he interrupted, holding out a hand towards her. "C'mon and eat – and please don't worry about '*wearing out your welcome*', because if I couldn't go or didn't want to? I would say something."

She nodded shyly, feeling a little self-conscious.

"Turns out," Kyle smiled playfully, putting a finger under her chin, "I want to be supportive, help, and get to know you better. I '*yam*' crazy about you and want to spend as much time as I can near your side."

Reyna smiled at him, touched by his words and the way they were delivered, as his thumb brushed against her lips. His eyes were warm, full of emotion, and she could easily lose herself in their colorful hazel depths.

Reaching up, she laid a hand on his cheek tenderly, her thumb brushing against the corner of his lips, almost mimicking his movement.

"Turns out that I '*yam*' crazy about you too..." she breathed softly.

He pulled her into his arms, kissing her softly, before hugging her. She felt him kiss the top of her head, before resting his cheek against her hair, and listened as he spoke.

"Who knew the little blue house on Grant Road would be full of all these wonderful yams, wishes, hopes, and dreams?"

"My favorite yams, wishes, hopes, and dreams..."

"The very best ever," he replied tenderly.

Reyna was surprised at how fast the morning went by – and how wonderful it was to have Kyle simply there, in her world and her home. It was strange to think how peaceful it was to have someone that she considered a friend so close by.

He cut up and cracked jokes while they did the dishes together... until Yam started to climb up the back of his leg, pulling on his sweatpants – which sent his hands flying immediately for his waist band.

She had laughed for several minutes straight, having to get a paper towel to wipe the tears off her face. Yes, Yam was quite a character, and brought such a sense of life to a space that she hadn't realized was so barren and lonely – and combined with Kyle being there?

The house felt like a *home*...

Kyle left for a while to get some things handled, giving Reyna a chance to get showered, changed, and check on Yam. She texted Kyle and told him that she was going into Tyler to get some items for her new kitten.

Hey there – I will be going to the café later.

Want to join me for a cup of coffee?

Love to! Just say when...

I'm getting Yam a few goodies, then gotta pick up the boxes I have here to bring over. I thought of a theme and can't wait to share!

Can I help with anything?

She smiled happily, realizing that it was so wonderful to have someone that was supportive, fun to be around, and simply the best person she had ever met... and it was by chance!

Hello?

Sorry – was just thinking. Bring a hammer, nails... and that handsome smile.

You got it, babe!

Reyna hesitated and heard Yam meow from the floorboard of her car where he sat mulishly watching her from his box.

“What?” she whispered to the cat. “I know, but we’ve got to get you a litter pan, some snackies, and a few toys... plus you need a legit bath that I am not looking forward to in the slightest.”

Yam meowed again.

“This is crazy because I just met him, you know?” she said softly. “But I really like him so much – and I think I’m starting to fall for the sweet guy. I mean, he’s just so nice! I could use a little ‘nice’ in my life...”

Her phone dinged in that moment, and she glanced at the screen, catching her breath.

I know I should tell you to your face, but I get nervous and tongue-tied around you. Reyna you are incredible and I’m so happy that you have given me a chance to win you over. I’ve never been happier than seeing you smile at me... so thank you.

She hesitated, unsure what to say, and realized that maybe this was indeed what she was hoping, something so special and wonderful growing between them, flaring to life.

He texted again a moment later.

Too much? I’m sorry. Just forget my dorkiness – I was single for a reason when we met. I’m pretty lame when it comes to dealing with girls.

Reyna replied, smiling.

No, you aren’t... you were just waiting for me.

Yeah, I was – in so many ways.

What are you doing for Christmas?

Trying to impress my girlfriend... and you?

Trying to impress my boyfriend.

See you soon?

You betcha...

“C’mon, Yam. We’ve got to get your things so we can go see our sweet guy, okay?” she crooned, reaching down to pet the kitten and starting up her vehicle.

Hours later, she was pulling up at the café – ready for some serious work. Yam was at the house, investigating his new litterbox, and supremely angry at the baby-gate she installed to make sure he didn’t get into trouble while she was gone.

She had intended to take Yam with her – but the kitten got carsick in the S.U.V. and it broke her heart to think about subjecting him to that again. He was her rag-tag baby, and Yam had wormed his way directly into her heart... she just hoped that Yam didn’t actually have worms.

“Ewww,” she said aloud, popping the hatch of her SUV and glimpsing at a reflection in the glass just as the lift-gate was opening. She turned and yelped as a set of hands touched her on the arms.

“Hey... it’s me,” Kyle began nervously. “I’m sorry! I never meant to scare you – I just saw your car pass the house as I was getting the mail for Chase and thought I would see if you wanted some help.”

“You scared me to death,” she hissed, her hands trembling as she brushed her hair back from her face.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized again, touching her cheek. “Forgive me?”

Reyna hesitated, and then melted into his arms, just giving into the elemental feelings within her. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and kissed him – only to feel him return the embrace.

“Oh wow, yeah, gonna do that again...” he whispered softly, looking bewildered at the turn of events between them. “How’s Yam?”

She smiled happily and hugged him there in the parking lot, just so happy

to have him close and around her.

“Yam gets carsick...” she admitted.

“Awww, poor thing...”

“I know. He yacked in the box he was riding in, and I felt so bad for the little tyke, so he’s at home getting used to things.”

“Let’s go inside and see your new theme,” he smiled tenderly at her. “I’ll get the boxes if you’ll get the door.”

Reyna hesitated, because she had an extra key made today and almost blurted it out, but it was moving a little fast to just be giving him a key to her café before things were even serious...

It was, wasn’t it? she mused nervously, watching him lift the boxes and realizing that she really wanted this to work out between them. *I want this more than anything...*

As he set down the boxes, she watched as he silently moved over to the counter and pried open the Minwax metal container.

“Do you like pizza?” he asked easily, without looking up.

“Yes, why?”

“You mentioned you were picky, remember?”

“I normally am – but not when it comes to pizza,” she admitted, pulling several photos out of the boxes along with plates, cups, and some tins. “Did you want me to order a pizza?”

“I’ve got one coming already,” he said quietly. “I just wanted to make sure you didn’t mind. I just didn’t want anything to interrupt us working on the place, you know?”

“Kyle,” she said softly, stunned. “You are incredible, you know that?”

“Me?” he asked, looking surprised.

“Yeah, I just... I’m just blown away at how easy this is between us and how it just kind of feels perfect. I keep expecting something to go wrong or for one of us to get on the other person’s nerves, but...” she hesitated. “It’s not, and I can’t see it happening either.”

Kyle looked at her for several moments, making her wonder if she’d said too much or put her foot in her mouth. Especially when he came around the counter to hold her hands.

His warm fingers held hers, his callused thumbs brushing over her knuckles as he stared at her with those beautiful hazel eyes she could fall right into... realizing they were full of wonder and emotion.

“You winning that auction has changed my life,” he whispered tenderly.

“It changed my life, my outlook, my world... and I treasure every second that I get to spend with you.”

“You do?”

“Very much so,” he smiled softly. “If it’s yanking up toilets, falling off fire escapes, or digging out vent kittens, all to save the woman I adore – I’m in.”

She laughed tearfully as she looked up at him, seeing that his own eyes were glossy with emotions. They stood there together, just gazing at each other and holding hands, as if so much was already being said with a look that words were not necessary.

“I love what we have...” he whispered, causing her to draw in her breath nervously as she realized what this emotion building within her was. It wasn’t just happiness or contentment at being with him. This deep sense of joy and yearning was love for this man before her. “... And I’m willing to try anything to put a smile on that beautiful face - and in your heart.”

“Oh Kyle...” she breathed shakily, the intensity of the moment swirling around them, making her head spin, because everything was going so fast it was a little frightening – and she knew he could see it.

His smile fell a little as he stepped back, releasing her hands.

“I’m going to tackle the counter while you work on decorating, okay? I watched a few YouTube videos to learn how to do this, and hopefully I don’t botch things up,” he began, stepping back to where he was.

“Are you okay?” she asked nervously, unmoving.

“Yeah,” he replied brightly. “Why wouldn’t I be? I just have a lot to tackle today, and not looking forward to being away from you for the next seventy-two hours. Can I pester you on Thursday?”

“You aren’t pestering me...”

“I’m glad.”

“Why don’t you come over Thursday afternoon and I’ll make something for dinner?”

“I’d like that.”

Hours later, snacking on bites of pizza between hanging items and decorating every inch of the cafe, she and Kyle talked for forever about nothing and everything. He told her about the guys at the fire station and she laughed at his descriptions.

Austin and Andy sounded quite like a crazy duo.

She could hear the respect in his voice and admiration when he talked

about Chief Carpenter. He really got along well with Chase... and Justin had him a little unnerved sometimes, because the man was so driven and pushy.

He really cared about his team – and she could tell by some of the antics he'd told her about that the feeling was mutual.

The boxes containing things were items she'd gathered around the house – and in the upstairs abandoned apartment. She hadn't told Kyle that she'd gone up there alone because he worried, but she had found several old frame photographs that couldn't just waste away or be hidden. No, it fit in perfectly to her new theme...

Far Away Café.

She wanted old-timey things, whimsical mementos, and a feeling of time gone past, mixed with fairytales. There had to be a welcoming, warm feeling, combined with a sense of wonder... and this was her tribute to her family in a way.

There were photographs of her great-grandparents on the farm, photos of her grandparents as they opened the grocery here, a picture of her mother as a little girl... and a picture of Yam that she had just gotten framed.

Her little orange vent monster.

She loved that precious kitten so much – *almost as much as she loved Kyle*, she thought quietly, glancing at him in the distance. He was hard at work, rubbing the wood of the massive case, getting every nook and swirl with the wax treatment... and he was right.

It would have been a shame to paint it.

There were so many hand-carved scallops, swirls, and 'rope' borders carved into the wood that was made with love so many years ago by some unknown carpenter. She wished she had a chance to ask her grandparents who made it, and had yet to find a name anywhere on the creation.

The counter was the single masterpiece that brought the entire room together. It was nearly ten feet long and curved back at the end to meet the massive wall of shelves behind it.

She had three entire boxes of knick-knacks to go on those shelves, but didn't want to disturb Kyle's work. He was doing so much, and she had to imagine his arms were aching, but he never said a word. He would only look up and smile at her every once in a while, before putting his head back down, polishing away.

"It's all just so perfect..." she breathed openly, looking around. Even the pale-yellow toilet fit in, and she had made a sign to go above it that was

humorous – even if it was a little gaudy.

The Golden Throne Room
(*don't linger – and DO flush!*)

All of the décor in this room was just as whimsical – and felt like it.

She found a few dark purple frames with gold inlay at Hobby Lobby in Tyler – and framed several pieces from a calendar full of fairy tales. Her favorite was Tinkerbell with her eyes covered, yet peeking, and that was hung directly beside the toilet for a laugh... and she wrapped ivy around the light fixture to make it quirky, before hanging a bird cage with a garden gnome inside.

Yes, everything was unexpected, sweet, and fun... just like she wanted and needed it to be.

“This is incredible,” Kyle said, standing up, and stretching for a moment as she left the bathroom to return to where he was at. “Everything looks so inviting and cozy – you have a real eye for this kind of thing.”

“I hope everyone else thinks so too.”

“I'm sure they will.”

“Did I tell you that I called that bakery you mentioned in Yonder?”

“Dixie's?”

“Yeah. She is interested in selling some goods here for a cut.”

“That's fantastic.”

“I need to go over and try a few things – and thought maybe we could do that next weekend,” she invited shyly. “I'm still waiting for all the documents to go through, and don't have an official opening date yet. I know it's backwards and silly, but I've had...”

“You've had a lot on your plate,” he finished softly – and winced.

“Are you okay?”

“Just really sore,” he admitted, rolling his shoulders.

“Sit down,” she ordered immediately, yanking a chair away from a table. “And remind me that I need to get tablecloths later,” she said absently as she put a hand on his shoulder, pressing him pointedly towards the chair.

As Kyle took a seat, she immediately stood behind him, rubbing his shoulders easily, as if this was the most natural thing in the world. He was completely silent and just sat there, unmoving, and so very tense.

“Your shoulders are full of knots,” she said openly. “Try to relax and...”

“Do you do this a lot?”

“What?”

“Rub people’s shoulders...”

She smiled and hesitated, hearing the wary yet possessive tone to his voice that sent a thrill rocketing down her spine. She liked that he wanted to be special... and she hoped he always felt that way.

Leaning down, she put her face next to his and whispered in his ear.

“I only rub the shoulders of guys that come to my rescue in the middle of the night, fish out vent kittens, and wax countertops for me while eating pizza,” she breathed, before leaning in to kiss his cheek.

Kyle smiled softly, looking at her sideways.

“I’m the only guy that better rescue you in the middle of the night,” he whispered tenderly, his eyes full of love.

“Don’t forget the countertops... or vent kittens,” she said playfully as she continued rubbing, digging her thumb in a very tense spot. “And relax.”

“Yes ma’am...”

He turned back towards the front, letting his head sag slightly as he groaned in appreciation of her tending to his shoulders. She smiled to herself and continued the ministrations silently, just grateful to be here with him as she gazed at the counter, realizing it was done... and she couldn’t have done any of this without him.

“Why don’t you come over Thursday morning for brunch – and spend the entire day with me instead?” she asked softly. “I want to see you and I’m going to miss your smile... besides, Yam will want someone to tear up with those little claws of his.”

Kyle chuckled softly, before turning slightly to look up at her. He took her hand from his shoulder and pressed a kiss on her palm, before nodding.

“Yes, ma’am...” he replied softly, and she smiled at him.

“Cool.”

“Awww nawwww.... Guys? Really?!” Kyle groaned pointedly as he climbed in the truck and listened to the call overhead before Justin tore out of the building. The man only had one speed: emergency.

This was *not* an emergency.

Mrs. Kendall.

“Did you tell her I was off today?”

“I think your ol’ biddy knows your schedule...”

“Funny. Seriously – did you tell her I was off?”

“Only when she called yesterday.”

“You’re here today, bud...”

“Thanks,” Kyle said flatly.

“You’re welcome, bro,” Andy said, grinning.

“Why doesn’t she have ‘*the hots*’ for you instead?”

“Because she likes pasty, sentimental, wiry guys like you...” Chase volunteered, laughing and pointing at Kyle across the seating, hanging on as Justin made a wild right, flying around a corner.

“You mean Justin, right?”

“NO!” Justin snapped audibly, making everyone laugh in the truck as they roared down the street in town – including Kyle.

“Think she’s wearing her flowered muumuu for ya, lover-boy? Or do you think she’s going to go with the ‘*I’m naked and I’ve fallen*’ trick again?”

“That’s not even funny...”

“She doesn’t ask for anyone else, Rimes.”

“Maybe I remind her of her grandson?”

“I heard she’s a cougar...”

“You’re sick, Andy.”

“Nahhh... Austin would marry her.”

“No, I wouldn’t. She scares me, too,” Austin said wide-eyed, and then winked. “And you know I would date any female...”

“WE KNOW!” all of them yelled in unison, including Justin from the driver’s seat as they pulled to a stop. “Kyle, you’re up...”

Kyle cursed – sending everyone laughing wildly as they saw that the front door was open to the screen door. Several catcalls followed him as he walked up to the front door, before glancing over his shoulder – only to see Chase wiggle his fingers playfully, grinning from ear to ear.

He sighed and turned back to the house.

“Hello Kyle...” Mrs. Kendall called out. “Yooooohooo... I’m back here, Kyle.”

“Hey Mrs. Kendall,” Kyle said politely, opening the screen door and stepping inside slowly, looking around warily. The recliner had the doilies on the arms of the chair, the television was on and muted, and the lamp in the corner was beside a black and white wedding photo in a silver picture frame. “I’m coming in, okay?”

“Get on in here,” she cackled happily from the other room. “You want sugar in your coffee... *Sugar?*”

“Firefighter Rimes,” Kyle corrected quickly, looking around the living room warily and moving toward the kitchen slowly, sweeping his eyes down the hallway, hesitating. “Where are you? Are you back here? You said that you fell?”

Sure enough, Mrs. Kendall was sitting on the kitchen floor, in a blue satin nightgown that was pleated for modesty, but it was obvious she was flirting with him. She was wearing bright red lipstick, had pink blush on, and blue eyeshadow on her lids behind her horn-rimmed glasses... eyeing him up and down pointedly.

Yep... this was his usual call.

“Aren’t you a strong, brawny, young man...” she murmured appreciatively, patting her white curls on her head.

“Hi, Mrs. Kendall...” he replied, fighting back a smile. It was kinda flattering to see her attempts, even if it was disturbing and highly annoying. “Let me guess, you fell in the kitchen making coffee for me...?”

“How’d you know?” she grinned.

“Because I’m the only firefighter you wear that bright red lipstick for,” he

replied, smirking. “Unless I have competition that I don’t know about? Maybe some buff police officer or one of the other fellas?”

“Nope,” she replied unabashedly, holding out her hand like some mademoiselle in a French drawing room hundreds of years ago. Her wrist was bent, her fingers angled down, and he saw her fingernails on her arthritic fingers were painted bright red.

“Are you ready to get up?”

“Oh yes...”

“Now, Mrs. Kendall,” Kyle chuckled. “You’ve gotta behave, young lady, and you should only call if this is serious. You aren’t hurt, are you?”

She shook her head no, biting her lower lip as she smiled at him. He leaned over and wrapped his arms around her, hefting her up from the floor, and heard her sigh happily.

“I’m completely serious... and is that a new cologne?”

Kyle quickly scooped her up, carrying her over to a recliner before setting her down. He avoided looking at the woman who was obviously fawning all over him as she patted his shoulders, feeling his arms boldly.

“Mrs. Kendall, I would rather you didn’t touch me,” Kyle said kindly. “My girlfriend is a little possessive and I’m here to help. That’s all.”

“I didn’t know you had a girlfriend...”

“And I know that you have a thing for me,” he countered, smiling politely. “Yet I come out here knowing that this is a prank call from my favorite girl... now don’t I?”

“You’re a sweet boy, you know that?”

“And you are a rascal,” he chuckled, smiling at her. “I bet Mr. Kendall was a happy fella before he passed, wasn’t he?”

“You know it,” Mrs. Kendall cackled happily, pointing, and shaking her finger at him. “I like you, boy. You make sure that if you’re girlfriend isn’t the rascal in the relationship – you’ve gotta be one for her! Keeps things spicy at home if one of you is chasing the other around all the time.”

“Like you chase me?”

“Exactly,” she smiled happily, and he couldn’t help but grin at the bright red lipstick that was stuck to her dentures.

“How about I get that coffee for you – and quickly chug mine down?”

“That’s my boy...”

“Yep, I guess I am,” he chuckled, realizing he’d been conned once again by the wily Mrs. Kendall.



FIVE MINUTES LATER, Kyle choked down his coffee quickly before smiling politely at the older woman as he got to his feet. The radio was crackling on his shoulder, and he knew he was out of time. The truck would leave without him if he didn't hurry.

"I've gotta go, Mrs. Kendall. My team is calling..."

"You need to be the rascally one..."

"I'll keep that in mind," Kyle grinned, winking at her. "Thanks for the coffee."

"See you next week, handsome," she laughed happily.

"You know," Kyle began knowingly. "If you ever get out and want to play bingo... check out the nursing home. Bob is an avid bingo player and maybe you'll catch me there with my girlfriend in the future."

"I knew you liked older ladies..."

"I like feisty ladies," Kyle chuckled, blushing, "but my girlfriend's mother lives at the nursing home and we go visit – so any coffee and visiting could be after hours."

"Ohhh," Mrs. Kendall smiled and winked at him. "Sounds like a date. Bob, huh?"

"Oh yes – ask for Bob," he grinned, and heard the truck horn honk loudly. "Gotta go..." he said bluntly, racing out the front door, because if Justin left him – Kyle would lose his ever-lovin' mind...

"I'll be back..." he hollered, waving over his shoulder, and running across the yard just as the truck started to advance. Kyle grabbed the pull on the side and pulled himself into the vehicle bodily, feeling his arms protest painfully after all the painting and work he'd done at the café during his time off.

"You okay, loverboy?" Andy mocked, grinning wolfishly.

"Yep. Same visit as usual. She's lonely."

"She's a holy terror to red-blooded men..."

"She sniffs around more fellas than a lonely hound dog..."

"She's very kind in a strange way that doesn't sit well with most people. It's cute that she's sweet on ol' Kyle... and yeah, she's lonely."

"That too," he chuckled knowingly, shaking his head, because what they said was true. The radio on the truck interrupted anything else they would say

as they all turned to listen to the announcement.

“Dispatch this is Ladder 47’s chauffeur, we are enroute,” Justin said openly in the microphone. “Please repeat.”

Residential fire on Mockingbird Lane, please advise on ETA

“Dispatch, I am five minutes out...” Justin chirped, before yelling. “Hang on, boys...”

The truck suddenly surged forward, sending all of the firefighters nearly off their seats as they clung to their handholds in the cab of the vehicle. If Justin said five minutes, they would be there in three...

The man meant business – and they had work to do!

As the truck suddenly came to a stop, they all flew into action.

“I’m takin’ a walk fellas...” Chase called out, leaping out of the truck.

Kyle smiled to himself.

Chase had the weirdest way of making this seem like a normal event, but in fact he was doing just that. He would walk the perimeter to assess the situation before any of them got into something too deep where they could get injured.

Getting out of the truck, they began to move quickly, heading for the nearest ‘plug’, or hydrant, while Kyle began to unroll the heavy hoses.

“Bros before *hoses*...” Austin guffawed, slapping him on the back, playfully mocking the offensive slang term yet twisting it to make it fit his own corny personality. “Get it? Eh – you get it? We’re *bros* with a *hose* instead of *bros* and *hoes*...”

“Austin, stop while you are ahead... seriously. Stop.”

“Ohhhh geez,” Justin muttered openly, dragging his hand down his face as if in pain at the man’s puns that normally made them all crack up laughing.

“You’re a dork.”

“He’s an *idiot*... there’s a difference,” Andy grinned, hefting a massive wrench onto his shoulder. “I’ve got the ol’ nut buster for the plug, you guys got the spaghetti ready?”

They used all sorts of slang, but Andy had his own set of terms – and some of them were quite offensive and didn’t bear repeating.

“Hoses are ready...”

“‘Bros *with* the hose’ sounds so much better, doesn’t it?” Austin joked, elbowing Kyle as he chuckled.

People were streaming out of their houses around them, crowding the area quickly, as others were screaming and crying, asking questions, and

coming up to them.

“Yo! Where’s Chase? I need a barrier...” Austin hollered openly, shrugging off some woman who was clinging to his arm as he was donning his tanks. Kyle had already slipped on his, just in case.

“Fire on the Delta, boys...” Chase suddenly appeared, yelling loudly for all of them. “We’ve got a fire on the west side, second story... the shed is on fire in the yard, too.”

Chase walked right past them, hollering at the crowd gathering.

“Get back! I’m going to need everyone to step back!”

“I’ve got the attack line for the shed,” Andy volunteered.

Austin and Kyle were hooking up the hoses, focused and working diligently as Justin got out of the truck. He would be running the gauges on the truck that would charge the lines for them.

Andy was already walking back in their direction.

“I’m knockin’...” Andy hollered, donning his gear, and moving toward the front door. He had a pike pole that was about five feet long, using it as he walked up to the entryway.

“We’re going in...” Austin nodded, slapping Kyle on the shoulder. “Let’s move.”

Andy moved the line away from the shed to the front door behind Austin. Kyle was not far behind the duo. There was no fire and very little smoke on the first floor... it was eerie seeing what a fire could do.

There were tendrils, wisps of smoke, crawling along the textured ceiling like some amorphous spiders looking for prey. The dark gray fingers of smoke were sometimes faint and other times thick, but clung fast above their heads. They could hear popping in the distance, even through their helmets that made their breath echo loudly through their respirators.

It was an intense sensation knowing that something so brutal and destructive was directly above them, eating its way through this person’s life they had built and their home... which got him to thinking about Reyna.

“Three with me,” Andy called out in the mic, alerting the others that they were going up as a team to search the second floor. Communication was everything, because if you got lost or disoriented, it could mean life or death.

Kyle was busy counting steps in case they lost their line of sight and mentally mapping the house in his mind... only to have the hose they were holding suddenly stretched taut.

“I’m out of line,” Kyle called out in the mic.

“We need more hose,” Austin chimed in openly. “Chase, hook up the other line.”

“I gotchu bro...” came a crackled voice, causing the three men to chuckle as Andy muttered something foul in his helmet loud enough for Kyle and Austin to hear it.

“I’m going to try to get some slack in the line,” Austin called out.

“Rimes, with me,” Andy replied, suddenly sounding serious. “I’ve got smoke on the right...”

“Losing visibility,” Kyle prompted, talking with the entire team.

“Copy that,” Austin called out. “We’ve got smoke rolling down the stairs, Marks.”

“Copy,” Chase replied on the coms. “Okay to proceed?”

“We’re good,” Andy called out, moving forward.

Kyle and Andy began searching rooms, trying to make sure no one was present, while Austin cleared the hose.

“I’ve got more line and coming,” Austin suddenly chimed in, causing Kyle to turn around, returning to meet his teammate.

“Clear in here...” Andy called, moving past them like some ghoulish zombie; his yellow jacket was barely visible as the smoke seemed to curl around him in the dim light streaming through the windows nearby.

“We are engulfed in smoke,” Kyle amended. “Visibility zero.”

“I need that line in here,” Andy called. “I’ve got heat and smoke...”

Kyle and Austin both dug in their feet, bracing themselves as the massive amount of pressure suddenly surged forth, filling the space. The smoke curled upwards, becoming even thicker, waiting for Andy to reappear somewhere around them or to feel a hand pat either of them, some voice, something to acknowledge contact.

“Andy, where are ya, bud...?”

“I’m here – and we’re leaving.”

His terse voice immediately put Kyle on edge.

Normally Andy would just communicate with Chase, and rarely did he ‘call it’ unless they were in danger. Nothing hit home so much as having the lead man tell you to back out of a situation... especially when you couldn’t see a thing around you.

“What’s wrong?” Chase called out – and Kyle accidentally bumped into Austin or Andy, falling to the ground.

“I’m down, hold on.”

“Did you break through?” Andy said, his voice alarmed and terse.

“Naw, fell on my butt...” Kyle admitted, getting up in the bulky uniform and trying to get his bearings in the darkness swirling around him. “Break through? Where are you two?”

“I’m in front of you.”

Kyle stepped forward and hesitated, feeling a soft spot in the floor.

“I feel heat...”

“Hang on, and don’t move.”

Kyle felt his heart hammering in his chest, fighting the feeling of panic rising up inside of him. Getting lost or disoriented during a fire could be deadly – and if Andy was worried that he’d fallen through the floor? That meant things were serious, and they needed to get out of there fast before something collapsed or crushed him.

“Andy, you got him?”

“Not yet...”

“I’m near a desk or table,” Kyle volunteered, feeling around him blindly. “I can’t see anything, and the smoke is getting thicker. I’m sliding my boot on the floor trying to find a hose or something...”

... And made contact, only to feel the floor start to give again beneath him.

“I’ve got him,” Austin called.

“Floor’s going!” Kyle yelled in alarm, reaching bodily for the man who was grasping at him yet backing away at the same time. If the floor gave, it would take both of them, and Austin was his only chance at hanging on if he went through... and they both knew it.

“Back up,” Kyle ordered. “And don’t let go of me!”

“I’ve got you!”

“Chase! We are losing ground, do you copy? I need a hose on the roof NOW!” Andy called out. “Fire in the attic! Fire in the attic! We’ve got a floor collapsing.”

“Copy that! Justin – to me! I need another live line and you guys need to exit now!” Chase yelled in the mic, echoing in their helmets.

“I’m not leaving Kyle...”

Kyle was breathing hard, despite the smoke starting to seep into his helmet and respirator. Panic was clutching at him as he held tight to Austin’s hand, feeling the floor bow again under his feet.

“Austin, back up slowly...”

“I’m not leaving you!”

“We’re both getting out of here,” Kyle said firmly, trying not to cough and remain calm despite the bubbling fear inside of him.

“Talk to me Austin – where are you?” Andy said from nearby, sounding increasingly alarmed.

“What’s going on in there, boys...” Chase crackled in the mic. “I should be seeing three yellow jackets exiting the house by now! Where are you?”

“I’m in the bedroom doorway upstairs and I’ve got Kyle by the hand – now Kyle, take a step in my direction...”

“The floor...”

“The floor is going to go whether you are standing there completely still or making your way towards me,” Austin bit out tightly. “I need you to get your scrawny buns moving in my direction...”

“I don’t want you to die,” Kyle choked, coughing wildly.

“Yeah, neither of us are doing that today...” Austin replied, also coughing.

Kyle felt tears sting his eyes as he pictured Reyna’s smile as she held Yam up to her face, looking at him like he was everything to her... as it suddenly hit him that he might not see her again.

His level of fear and panic was engulfing him in that moment.

“Andy and Austin, y’all get out of here...” Kyle said quietly, taking a slight step and feeling the floor bow again under his boot. He could feel the heat in the distance, even though he couldn’t see any flames.

“DON’T YOU LET GO OF MY HAND...” Austin yelled angrily – and Kyle felt something hard stab him pointedly in the back, yanking him forward as the floor suddenly gave.

“You got him?” Andy asked and Kyle felt this unreal sensation of floating for only a second before every nerve fired in his arm where Austin was clinging to him... and he felt a snap.

He was dangling almost sideways in the air over a blaze, hooked by Andy’s pike exceedingly close to a kidney on his coat, and clenching despite the pain in his broken arm, to Austin’s gloved hand.

“I’ve got him...”

“My arm’s broken...”

“Better than being barbecued...”

“True,” Kyle chuckled nervously, feeling the heat beneath him and from above. “I feel like a spit roast, right now.”

“We all do – now can we get out of here?” Andy clamored, sounding nervous and upset as he began coughing as well.

Kyle could barely breathe, and Austin was still hacking in his helmet as he felt hands on him, pulling him up to the point that Kyle was able to hook a foot over an edge, crawling forward the remainder of the way onto the floor.

“Exit the house now, team...” Chase said bluntly. “The roof is going up fast...”

“Coming, ‘daddy’...” Austin called out, coughing and sounding much happier than he had only a few moments ago.

Kyle clung to consciousness as he worked through the pain of trying to push himself up to his feet using his broken arm, despite the shocks lancing through him in protest.

Gotta move... can't stop... he thought wildly. Not gonna die today... Reyna...

The trio was making their way down the stairs, and he could feel hands clenching at him as he moved blindly in the dense smoke. He could hear his breathing, broken and struggling inside the helmet, feeling himself falter as the pain of his arm threatened to overwhelm him, but he wasn't going to complain.

Andy or Austin was clenching that arm, helping him get out of there, and nagging about an ‘owie’ wasn't going to happen anytime soon... not when he needed oxygen desperately.

The smoke was choking him, and he was struggling to breathe – and knew the other two men beside him were also having a hard time. He could hear them coughing around him despite their respirator units on their mouths, just like him.

He could see a strange grey glow ahead – and realized it was the front door.

“Oh, thank God...” Andy said openly, saying exactly what was on Kyle's mind in that very moment, echoed wildly by Austin and several others.

“I see them!” Chase announced, and Kyle started to open his eyes, not realizing they had closed at some point.

He felt awful!

He had pain rolling up his arm that felt limp as a noodle, and everything was swimming in his head... as he collapsed weakly in the grass, struggling to pull off his helmet but his hands didn't seem to work as everything went foggy around him.

“Medic... I need a medic!” Justin ordered – as Kyle closed his eyes.



KYLE HAD no idea what was going on around him.

He saw Austin’s grimy face before him as he was being bumped around in an ambulance. He could hear the EMT and paramedic rattling off some code, calling out their findings, and heard them asking him questions, shining a pen light in his eyes, causing him to wince.

“Kyle, buddy... you all there, bro?” Austin asked, his eyes shining with fear and unshed tears as he looked at him.

Kyle nodded slowly, feeling lethargic.

“Call... my girl...” he asked.

“I will,” Austin promised, clenching his hand in his a few times as Kyle clung to his loosely. “I’ll get your phone and call her – I promise.”

“Bros... with hose...” Kyle whispered, but his voice sounded exceedingly gravelly and thick, almost to where it was unrecognizable as it echoed in the oxygen mask they had on his face – only to see his partner smile as the medics laughed around him.

“‘Bros with the hose’, my friend,” Austin grinned tearfully, his sooty face making this strange dysmorphic mask as he succumbed again to exhaustion.

Reyna was with the plumber, who was installing a water line that would run to the automatic coffee maker and espresso machines she had bought. Originally, she was going to have different brew pots, but she wanted things to look exceedingly professional if she was going to charge a decent price for a cup of coffee.

This needed to be an experience, not just an ordinary thing... or else she would need to charge an ordinary price. Fifty cents for a cup of coffee wouldn't pay the bills, but four dollars certainly would – plus if they had danishes, donuts, cakes, and other goodies?

Oh yes, she could certainly see a winning situation out of this little café to help cover her mother's expenses, especially considering the house and the building were both paid off. It was only the cost of water, electricity, and taxes she would need to focus on – that and the nursing home.

“Miss Mattingly, I can run the line from here – and even install it to an icemaker for you.”

“You can?”

“Yep, if you want to pick one up at the store – it won't take me but a few minutes and...”

Reyna's phone rang and she quickly answered it, knowing Kyle was on duty at the fire station and wondering why he was calling. She assumed he would be doing 'fire station-ey' things, like sliding down a pole or washing the truck, lookin' all handsome for anyone driving past.

“Is this 'My blue-eyed goddess'?” a voice spoke, and she almost hung up – except the caller ID said it was Kyle... yet it wasn't.

“Who is this?” she asked.

“Who is this?” he parroted back bluntly.

“I’m guessing this *is* the blue-eyed goddess that was the last number Kyle dialed yesterday?” the man’s voice began. “My name is Austin and I work with Kyle...”

“... At the station,” she whispered numbly, as everything suddenly snapped into place in her mind, grasping at a chair so she didn’t fall onto the floor. Kyle talked about Austin and the other guys quite a bit as he worked, making her feel like she should know them by now... and obviously didn’t.

“Is Kyle... o-okay?” she stammered, feeling panic seeping into her soul painfully as she laid a hand over her heart to keep it from leaping from her chest.

“He is,” Austin said gently. “He’s at the hospital and I’m with him. He asked me to give you a call, so you didn’t worry.”

“What?”

“He broke... well, I guess I broke his arm,” Austin amended, “and he’s suffering from...”

“You... broke... his... arm?” she asked bluntly, repeating back his words and enunciating them, feeling a rage take hold of her that was a little alarming. She suddenly felt the urge to throttle the man for hurting Kyle – only to realize he was still talking to her.

“It was that or let him sizzle, ya know? I mean, my boy was spit roasting between me and Andy over an open fire, if you get my drift? I couldn’t let go, nor did I expect him to pull down so hard, but I always forget about the weight of our gear and ‘snap, crackle, pop’ went the bone. I don’t know if the bird brain has birdy-bones or if he’s got thirty-somethin’-osteoporosis... but yeah, I suppose I did break his arm, and then rescued him. So, you should be doing the ‘swoony-hero-gratitude-stuff’... sheesh! Women!”

Reyna sat there for a moment, stunned, and replaying what he said, trying to put the pieces together, and then hesitated.

“Thank you?” she whispered in confusion.

“You’re welcome?” he retorted, sounding irritated. “Now, as I was saying...” he drawled openly in a pointed manner.

“Ma’ boy, Kyle... he is being treated for smoke inhalation and getting a cast as soon as the swelling goes down in his left arm. Thank goodness it was a clean break.”

“Where is he?”

“Tyler Medical Center,” Austin replied. “Do we all get to finally meet

you?”

“I suppose so,” Reyna said distractedly, gathering up her wallet and keys. “I need to talk to the plumber and then I’m on my way. What room is he in?”

“Two-oh-four... just look for the guys in uniform – and call back this number if you need anything. Okay? I’ll have Kyle’s phone for a bit while he sleeps.”

“Thank you, Austin.”

“Oh!” he said, stopping Reyna in her tracks. “What’s your name, oh blue-eyed goddess?” the man laughed, sounding supremely delighted at having found that tidbit of sentiment saved into Kyle’s phone.

“I wonder what other treasures or goodies, ma’ boy has saved on here?” Austin continued talking. “Maybe I should be looking at the photos or checking his internet browser, hmmm? Am I going to find some scantily clad photos or dirty text messages between the two of you? How serious are you two? I mean, I didn’t think that he had that mushy stuff in him, but then again, he never tells us anything juicy or gives us much to tease him about... except Mrs. Kendall – and she’s something else!”

She hadn’t even processed what Austin had said until now... and smiled.

Gosh, she loved her sweet Kyle!

“It’s Reyna,” she replied, and hung up the phone.



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, Reyna’s shoes were echoing down the linoleum hallway, briefly pausing to see several men in camouflage near the nursery, hugging and talking to each other. She didn’t think there was an army base nearby, but the city was growing by leaps and bounds.

Everything was getting so big in the area, that it was surprising to realize just how fast it was happening. It used to be that Tyler was the main hub for all the little outlying towns nearby, but now they were coming into their own, blossoming as families grew in size. Yonder, Ember Creek, even Hope, Texas were surging and growing.

Rounding the corner, looking for Kyle’s room, she realized that she didn’t need the room number after all. There were three men standing there in dark blue uniform shirts and pants, arms crossed, as their heads were bent together in the hallway.

All three sets of eyes looked up at once as she advanced.

“Kyle Rimes?” she began, feeling a momentary glimpse of trepidation wondering what she would find inside, or if things were worse than what Austin had let on.

“I’m Chief Carpenter,” one man said gently, extending his hand towards her.

“I’m Austin Olivera and this here’s Justin, but most people call him ‘Buck’...”

“Shut up, dork...” the other man muttered. “My name’s Justin and he only calls me that in public to make me feel like a redneck because I won’t give him deer meat in November when I go hunting.”

“And I don’t know why not...”

“Because I pay for my hunting license, ammo, and to have it prepared by a butcher – and you want it for free?”

Stunned, she saw the chief roll his eyes as the two of them began to squabble openly in the hallway, discussing the merits of summer sausage, deer jerky, and steaks for the entire team...

As another man walked around the corner of the hallway, giving Austin a high-five and grinning, before coming to a halt, clutching at his chest, and smiling at her.

“Well hello, Gorgeous... I’m Andy, a Libra, and available for dinner tonight,” the other man began – only to have three sets of eyes turn to him.

“She’s Kyle’s,” they said in unison, causing her to smile in understanding at his crestfallen face.

“Oh.”

“Kyle should be waking up soon and might be a little groggy from the pain medication. The break was clean, and they’ve got him bound right now until they can put a cast on. The mask on his face is to get him some good oxygen since he had moderate smoke inhalation,” the chief explained politely, before angling his head. “Believe it or not, these guys work really well together and saved Kyle’s life.”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

“You can go in,” he offered in understanding, opening the door for her. “Take a few minutes to say hello alone before I let these guys in, okay?”

Reyna entered the hospital room silently, smelling the overwhelming stench of smoke and sweat almost immediately. His beloved face was streaked with soot, and she could see rivulets marring his forehead where he

had perspired, leaving tracks. There was a clear plastic mask over his lips and nose that fogged up slightly with each breath he took.

... *At least he's breathing*, she thought, feeling grateful in that moment to be there with him, as she pulled up a chair beside the bed.

She slipped her fingers into his right hand, touching his palm, only to see his fingers twitch slightly. Glancing up, she saw a faint, pained smile on his face as he lay there with his eyes closed.

"... Tickles," he croaked softly.

"You are much too ticklish, Mr. Rimes," she whispered tearfully, fighting back the sob that was threatening to escape her. He was alive, talking to her, and she was almost undone by the relief in her very soul at being there with him.

"Recognize... you..." he said gruffly, turning his head slightly. "... Always."

"You scared me today," she whispered softly, pulling his hand to her lips and kissing it gently.

"Me... too..." he breathed, and closed his eyes as the door opened. She saw the other firemen, Austin, Andy, Justin, and the chief walk into the room, coming to stand beside the bed.

"Hey wimp," Austin smiled – and just before Reyna laid into him; there was something in his expression that just didn't look right.

"Buddy, glad you hung on there," Andy said gruffly, clearing his throat, "And really sorry about hooking you with my pike. I figured you'd rather have a cool scar than grill marks..."

Kyle smiled softly behind the mask and nodded, looking exhausted.

"Not a... wimp..."

Austin choked back something, cleared his throat, and leaned forward to whisper loudly in Kyle's ear.

"Bros then the hose, always..." he said, causing Reyna's eyes to widen as she tried to muffle her laughter, and the chief rolled his eyes in disbelief, almost in an exact mirror image of Justin.

Kyle pulled his hand from Reyna's, and made a fist just as Austin did the same, before bumping knuckles and pretending their fist-bump made their hands explode, fluttering their fingers at each other.

"Y'all are idiots," Andy chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief. "And I, for one, am really glad the three of us made it out of there – together."

"Me too."

“You know it.”

“Same...” Kyle said softly, looking back at Reyna. “Glad... you’re here.” She smiled tearfully at him, before nodding.

“Of course, I am – and I’m not going anywhere,” she replied. “You’ve got your own nurse for as long as they let me stay...”

“Can I get one of those?” Austin hissed towards Andy, who elbowed him as Reyna ignored him, focusing on Kyle.

She was going to get some warm soapy water and wash his face, neck, and arms, to make him feel a little better... and hopefully find out how bad off he was. The idea of leaving him didn’t sit well, and she could always run home, check on Yam, and then come back out, if necessary.

She smoothed back his matted hair from his forehead and gazed into his exhausted eyes, seeing that tenderness in those beloved depths as she realized that he could have seriously been hurt or killed today.

“Who’s gonna rescue me in the middle of the night and wax my countertop, if you get hurt, my sweet Kyle...” she whispered openly, smiling at him.

“Is that code for something?” Austin muttered to the other firefighters in a hushed whisper. Andy beamed and gave him a thumb’s up. “*Pleeeeee* tell me that is some new slang term, because it sounds exceedingly kinky... and now I really wanna wax a countertop.”

She heard Kyle laugh shyly, sounding so gravelly and rough, right before he coughed in the plastic mask as he glanced at his friends, then back at her. His cheeks were pinkish under the sooty smears, making him look even more wonderful than ever before.

“I knew ma’ boy had it in him...” Austin cheered softly – as Andy elbowed him again, and the chief slapped him on the back of the head softly, before ushering them all out again.

She remained there, gazing at Kyle, and brushing back his hair again with her fingertips. He looked at her for several moments, before the machine nearby whizzed noisily and the blood pressure cuff tightened on his arm.

“I like your friends,” she smiled. “A bit weird, but their hearts are in the right place.”

“Like... mine,” he whispered, lacing his fingers with hers, causing her to look down to see his tanned, soot covered hand linked with hers, the contrast stark as she realized there was no other hand she would ever want to hold in this world – and how fleeting life could be.

Reyna looked up at him, meeting his hazel eyes.

“I love you,” she breathed tenderly, feeling tears well up as she stared at him. “You’ve got to promise to be careful, take care of yourself, so Yam and I can continue to be a part of your world.”

“I love... you, too,” he croaked out softly, his own eyes glassy with unshed tears as he gazed at her. “So much so... and I promise.”

“Good,” she smiled, wiping her eyes, before lifting up off the seat to lean forward, moving his mask for just a few moments to brush her lips against his for a brief kiss. She could smell the smoke, taste the tar, and realized just how badly things must have been for him.

She started to turn away to get him some water, help clean him up, and see if he needed anything else – only to feel Kyle tug her hand sharply, making her feel a moment of alarm as he released her hand almost immediately.

“Kyle...” she blurted out, suddenly afraid. Had he passed out? Did something happen?

She turned to see that he’d yanked off his oxygen mask again and was grinning at her – and wagged his eyebrows at her, a silent invitation for her to kiss him again. Laughing, she returned to his side, leaning forward, and kissed him happily... only to hesitate, wrinkling her nose.

“It smells like I’m kissing a piece of charcoal.”

“Then how about a raincheck? I’ll kiss you the right way when I get out of here, and smell all wonderful for my pretty girl,” he said gruffly, his eyes warm with emotion as he smiled at her.

Reyna grabbed his mask, smiled wryly, and put it back over his face, before leaning down to kiss the outside of it pertly.

“It’s a deal,” she murmured tenderly.



REYNA WAS THERE for a few more hours, washing down Kyle’s uninjured arm, face, and neck... just as the nurse and doctor walked in – along with Austin.

“AWWW maaaaannnn... Kyle gets a sponge bath, too? No fair! I had smoke inhalation too, you know?” Austin whined openly – only to have Justin drag the other firefighter back out of the room as everyone started

laughing openly, including Kyle.

“A little laughter is good for you, young man,” the doctor began easily. “It helps get everything out of your lungs, not to mention - laughter is also good for the soul, or so I hear.”

“So is she,” Kyle said smiling at Reyna – who instantly melted at his words.

“Well, I’m going to take your fellow for a little while, run a few tests, and then we are going to see about wrapping this limb in a cast so he can go home in the next day or so,” the doctor said easily. “Does that sound good, Mr. Rimes?”

“Sounds... perfect,” he agreed, sounding sleepy again.

“You need to let them take care of you, get some rest, and I’ll come back in a little bit. I’m going to go feed Yam...” Reyna began, only to feel Kyle touch her hand.

“You don’t... have to... stay,” he offered quietly.

“My world is here,” she replied softly, pulling her hand from his and touching his face once again. “I’ll be back soon, okay?”

“I’ll be waiting,” he smirked, causing her to chuckle at the playfulness he was displaying. Yes, he was feeling much better and would be alright, she realized gratefully.

A week later...

REYNA COULD NOT GET over how wonderful things seemed to be with Kyle since his release from the hospital. He was attentive, loving, supportive, and kind... including encouraging her to open the café in the strangest, yet sweetest of ways.

“I think you should have a Christmas event, invite the town to sing carols, have coffee, hot cocoa, and show off what you have here – announcing a grand opening date,” he told her as they tried several samples of cakes, cookies, and goodies that Dixie had offered for her to try.

Reyna really liked the woman upon meeting her, and listened fascinated as she came to run her bakery in Yonder. Her husband was one of the instructors over at the flight school in town called Flyboys. They had met through her sister, on a blind date... that went a little off the rails.

“I threw him out of my bakery,” Dixie admitted smiling, causing Reyna to laugh at the woman, instantly understanding.

“I *purchased* my boyfriend, so I understand,” Reyna admitted. “He was a firefighter offering his time for charity – and I was the winning bidder of a date.”

“See? Quirky starts are the best, aren’t they?”

“Yes, they are...”

“Well, help yourself – and text me the ones you like. We’ll figure this out. At Flyboys and at the Merrick Bed & Breakfast up the road, we refer

customers to each other, passing off business cards... so there is no reason we can't do the same for each other," Dixie offered happily.

"That would be wonderful," Reyna grinned. "Thank you."

She shook her head at the memory from earlier in the morning and looked at Kyle again, a little nervous.

Everything was in place now, so there was no reason not to open. She had her foodservice license and the place had passed inspection; the permits were issued, and everything was a go... except for Reyna.

She was nervous and a little antsy, because it would pull away from her time spent with Kyle – and she was really treasuring these moments.

"Do you think we can do it in such short notice?"

"I know we can," he smiled supportively. "I can hand out flyers since I'm on light duty for the time being – and I can try to sweet talk Mrs. Kendall to hand them out at the bingo halls. Besides, the guys would love to come by the café or get something to eat. Maybe Dixie can make some bite sized things that aren't too expensive and..."

"I really can't afford to do that, and need this café to succeed."

"You aren't alone," Kyle said tenderly, laying a hand on hers. "I want you to enjoy the fruits of our labor and would be happy to help."

"I could never ask that of you..." she sputtered nervously.

"I know," he smiled. "And that's why I'm offering."

"I can't..."

"Don't make me go around you," he grinned knowingly. "Do this – please. Let me help with what I can for your opening, and let's make the '*Far Away Café*' something to remember. We can string up Christmas lights, tinsel, and use candy canes for stirrers..."

"Are you sure?"

"You've got the marketing stuff already made – and the business cards," he countered, pressing her. "You've got this, Reyna. What are you waiting for?"

She hesitated.

"What's wrong? You are waiting, aren't you?" he asked in amazement, slightly curious. "You were so excited and driven about this... so what is holding you back?"

"I don't want to take help from you, and I've had so many changes in the last few months, that I'm afraid something will go wrong – causing another change... one that I won't be able to handle, you know?"

“You’ve dealt with a lot,” he agreed easily, holding her hand and caressing it with his thumb. “You’ve moved your mother, fixed up the café and cleaned out her house, adopted Vent Cat, been stuck with a frustrating boyfriend - who nearly got himself killed recently and...”

Kyle hesitated and looked at her.

“Are you worried about us?”

“Nawww,” she protested much too hard and waved her hand, pulling away and giving off this fake smile as she made a face. “We’re good, and why would having a boyfriend affect the café? I mean, working alone, I would be putting in long hours – but I would do that anyhow to make sure it was a success and...”

“Reyna,” Kyle said softly, coming to her side. “Talk to me...”

He knelt there, beside her, his eyes full of warmth, understanding, and love... so much so that she dragged in a shaky breath, shuddering openly, before speaking.

“I’m terrified...” she whispered nervously. “I never expected to care this much, and I’m afraid that if we aren’t spending time together? Then I can’t see you and make sure you are safe.”

“I’m always safe,” he replied – only to laugh as she gave him a flat deadpan stare before arching an eyebrow at him. “Okay, so maybe this last time was an exception, but normally I am very cautious and safe. We partner up for a reason...”

“You’re not endearing yourself at all, because I met your partner... and Austin is a complete goofball,” she interrupted bluntly.

“He’s a great guy and cracks jokes to keep things lighthearted so we don’t all panic, because we have an extremely intense job that we take pride in doing well,” Kyle said softly, looking at her with understanding and tenderness. “No one wants to see someone injured, die, or recover a body in front of a family member who made it out of the fire alive... we need that humor, those crazy jokes, and corny stunts to keep our sanity in the midst of it.”

“I understand that, but...”

“But what, sweetheart?” he replied tenderly, taking her hand and laying it against his cheek. “I would do anything for you – you just need to ask it. If you don’t want to do a soft opening at Christmas... pick another date and let me help you.”

“The date doesn’t change things,” she admitted, looking away from the

love in his gaze as he smiled at her. “I would still worry about you and this place, working all sort of hours to make it right.”

“I know.”

“I don’t want to take away from us, our time together,” she admitted.

“I know that, too,” he murmured, turning to kiss her palm softly.

“So, what do I do?” she replied quietly, closing her eyes and taking a deep breath to try to calm herself, because she had been torturing herself mentally about this very thing the last few nights when it had dawned on her.

She couldn’t hire help to staff the café yet, and she would need to make a certain number of sales per day to hit her goal... and even had it broken down to dollars per hour.

No, she couldn’t afford to pay someone – yet.

... And how long was that ‘yet’ going to end up taking?

She had no idea.

“You could let your fiancé help run the café so you could let our little Yam out to play, take a break, or spend some time with me... here,” Kyle said softly in such a tender voice that it took her a moment to process what it was that he had uttered aloud.

Reyna slowly opened her eyes and looked at him, disbelieving – and pulled her hand away.

“That’s not funny, Kyle...”

“I’m not joking,” he sputtered, laughing. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

“Yes,” she retorted mulishly. “You are laughing at me and that’s cruel. I’m sitting here, freaking out and trying to piece all of this in my head, while you are making sick jokes about us getting married...”

“Why’s it ‘sick’?”

“Because it’s cruel.”

“Why? Because you don’t want to marry me?”

“I never said that!”

“Then you do want to marry me?”

“Good gracious, yes!”

“Then why are we hollering at each other?”

“I have no idea!”

Both grew silent as he grinned at her, moving to itch his cast on his arm... and pulled out a ring from the hard plaster over his palm.

“I had it tucked in there for safe keeping...” he smiled, his expression so full of love and warmth that she was at a loss for words. “I was going to ask

you this morning, but you seemed so worried about something, that I chickened-out...”

“You were?” she choked out softly in disbelief.

“Yeah, see... it’s funny,” Kyle began, sinking to the floor beside her once again. “I’m crazy about you and can’t get you out of my mind. I picture you smiling, working behind the counter, see Yam crawling up your arm while we are sitting on the couch watching television, or find myself admiring the way your eyes light up when you look at me... and I can’t imagine my life without you, Reyna Mattingly.”

Stunned, she watched him take hold of her hand, using his left hand that had the cast on it as he tried to manage to hold it before him, using his right hand to slip a diamond ring onto her finger.

Kyle cleared his throat and she saw the pride, love, and tears in his eyes as he gazed at her, before taking a deep breath.

“Betty Jean,” he began – and Reyna felt a smile bloom in her soul as she realized what he was doing. He was switching out their names just like her mother had when they visited the nursing home. “Will you marry me, Joe, before your father fills my wretched hide with a muzzle full of lead?”

She laughed tearfully and heard him join in as he gazed at her with so much emotion.

“This is crazy, you know,” she began, feeling so loved and treasured, knowing that he would do anything to make her feel special – and she loved him all the more for it. “We’ve known each other for three weeks...”

“You are the best Christmas present that a boy could ask for – and I’ve been a very good boy,” he teased, grinning. “Marry me, Reyna... I love you and will always be good to you – and our sweet little Yam.”

“You’re serious,” she began, in wonder and disbelief. “You want to do this? To be a part of this chaos I’m going to try to tackle? There will be visits with my mother, possibly more vent cats in the future... and...”

“I’m in,” Kyle interrupted tenderly, gazing up at her. “I never imagined how much I could love coffee, sundaes as Joe, or vent cats... but I ‘Yam’ wildly in love with everything that you bring to the table – and want so much more of it with you as my wife.”

“You do? You are?” she whispered tearfully, realizing that her whole world was falling into place in the most beautiful way imaginable – and she would have a partner to share in the happiness, the hard work, and unknown joys that were sure to come as they figured this all out, together.

“I ‘yam’...” Kyle chuckled tearfully.

She slid down out of the chair and threw her arms around his neck, sobbing, hugging, and kissing him with emphatic emotion before hugging him again – and tackling him to the floor, there in the middle of the café.

“I ‘yam’ too...”



KYLE HELD ONTO HIS PROMISE, pressing and encouraging Reyna in every way possible. He got everyone at the firehouse to help pass out flyers – including the chief, who was standing at the stop sign at the corner of Main Street, soliciting every single car that passed.

Dixie was making peppermint cake balls for the event. She also handed out flyers as well, only charging the cost of the goods to make the desserts in exchange for attending the event – along with passing out business cards.

‘Joe’ told her mother about how he was engaged to ‘Betty-Jean’ – and invited the entire nursing home to the café for Christmas carols and cocoa, and Bob was invited to bring a bingo card to hang on the wall to display.

Kyle then promptly introduced Reyna to Mrs. Kendall, who was sitting across the table from Bob, playing bingo with her newfound friend. The older woman was winking at Kyle playfully in a manner that caused Reyna’s eyes to nearly pop out of her head – only to hear Kyle inviting Mrs. Kendall as well to the cafe.

“I want you to meet my soon-to-be wife,” Kyle said boldly, and Reyna felt his hand tremble slightly as he held hers tightly. “Reyna, Mrs. Kendall has a bad habit of falling a lot and prefers that I be the firefighter to help her up.”

“He’s a brawny, strapping young lad...” the woman volunteered happily. “Isn’t he ladies? I mean, look at those pretty eyes, that sweet smile, and those muscles... and wait till he walks off? Those saucy little buns...”

“Oh gracious,” Reyna laughed as Kyle blushed wildly, taking it all in stride.

“Now Mrs. Kendall... you need to behave, and we’ve talked about this.”

“‘*Look and don’t touch*’...” the older woman muttered in annoyance, rolling her eyes. “I know. I know – and I’m not touching anymore.”

“She was touching?” Reyna whispered.

“Yeah, it was really bad there for a while ...” Kyle hissed back quietly. “Mrs. Kendall, I wanted you to meet my soon-to-be wife, because I didn’t want Reyna to misunderstand that we are just friends and help each other, right?”

“I’ve told you to repeatedly ‘*help yourself*’, but my sweet Kyle shoots me down every single time,” the older woman said, rubbing her décolletage – winking at Kyle. “You ain’t married *yet*, young man... and even if you were? You can still admire the menu, even if you aren’t hungry enough to order.”

Mrs. Kendall clicked her teeth at him, biting at the air, emphatically. Reyna barked out a laugh, before slapping a hand over her mouth as Kyle looked at her wildly.

“Do *not* encourage her,” he gritted out between his teeth. “Please.”

“She’s right,” Reyna said, causing Kyle to slap his forehead in disbelief.

“Smart girl...” Mrs. Kendall grinned, pointing. “I like her.”

“He’s on the menu for about another two months – and then he’s distinctly *off* the menu,” Reyna said sweetly in a very firm tone. “In two months, there is no touching, no invitations, no harassing my husband, and no more propositions... am I clear?”

“Two months?” Kyle leaned towards her, whispering. “Really?”

“I changed my mind,” Mrs. Kendall glared at Reyna, before turning to Kyle and addressing him, completely ignoring her. “I actually *don’t* like her. I thought I told *you* to be the rascal, ‘the chaser’ in the relationship? If you wanted a domineering woman, you should have said something, Kyle. I’d have told you to take me to bed right then and there! We could have skipped this whole song and dance...”

“Enough!” he choked out in alarm. “Mrs. Kendall, you are... *kind*, but I am in love with Reyna and...”

“And you are old enough to be his grandma, woman,” Reyna said bluntly, grinning at the woman.

“Physically – yes,” Mrs. Kendall said with a dramatic sigh. “Mentally? Not in the slightest... so be gentle with my frail body, my sweet Kyle,” she pleaded, batting her eyes at him, before zeroing in on Reyna at his side, and then looking at Kyle again.

“Once you take a dip in these roaring waters, you’ll never swim in that stagnant pond ever again...” Mrs. Kendall purred – and Reyna burst out guffawing wildly, wiping her eyes as she cried with laughter.

The older woman glared at her again, unscrewed the top of her bingo

dauber, and looked at Kyle once more.

“I don’t like her – at all. You could do better, young man.”

“I love her,” Kyle smiled at Reyna, who was still sputtering with laughter, unable to stop. “There’s no one else better for me than my soulmate.”

“No more coffee for you then,” Mrs. Kendall quipped in annoyance.

“Are you sure? I was coming to enjoy our quick coffee breaks.”

“Not if you are marrying that *creature*...” Mrs. Kendall said, extending her hand daintily and pointing a dauber at Reyna as if she was some heathen.

“Who are you going to have coffee with? ... And who will you get to pick you up off the floor and carry you in their strong arms? I thought you liked me coming by? Who are you going to ask for now?”

“You just send that pretty little chief in my direction - he’ll do nicely,” Mrs. Kendall announced. “I don’t like that Chase-boy. He’s too sassy. I think Austin would give *me* a disease, and not the other way around! Yes, Chief Reese Carpenter will do nicely. He can order me about and handle a real woman - and I do love me some Reese’s pieces. That tough exterior and soft sweetness on the inside? Mmmm yessss...”

“Oh mercy...” Kyle sputtered with embarrassment and understanding of what the other men were going to be facing.

Reyna was sobbing with laughter, holding her sides, as she grabbed a napkin, wiping her face at the vivid sexual innuendos the wrinkled old woman was spouting out, thinking of the stoic man whom she’d met at the hospital when Kyle was there.

The nursing home employee stopped calling the bingo numbers, waiting for silence so they could continue, resulting in them getting several angry looks and glares, and there was a whisper of discontent among the players that was getting progressively louder... and Reyna couldn’t stop laughing.

This was getting funnier and funnier by the moment!

“That boy, Justin, is much too serious... and I like a wild, playful, boy-toy... Ohhh! What about that Pennington kid? What’s his name? Andrew? Alastair?” Mrs. Kendall continued on, snapping her fingers as Bob reached across the table and stamped her bingo card with his dauber to get her attention – only to have her slap at his hand.

“Back off, ya’ old fart,” Mrs. Kendall growled. “We are having a serious conversation about men.”

“Andy,” Kyle volunteered, barely choking out the word – before accepting a napkin from Reyna to wipe his eyes, too.

Reyna hadn't met Andy yet, but from what she'd been told by Kyle – the man was playful, outrageous, and enjoyed every facet of life. He was easy-going, made-up names for things, and was cracking as many jokes as Austin was... but in a different manner.

Austin was a complete playboy – whereas Andy was just a big kid at heart.

“Yes, yes,” Mrs. Kendall said, dismissing the two of them like they were annoying. “Bring me my sweet Reese’s pieces, or my boy-toy Andy, the next time I have an emergency. You are officially dumped, Mr. Kyle Rimes – all because of that atrocious hyena that has cackled at me for five minutes straight. Now, please do give all my love to my new beaus, Andy and Reese.”

“Oh, I certainly will...” Kyle choked out, grabbing Reyna by the arm and pulling her out of the cafeteria, where the bingo game was commencing now that it was quiet once again.

As they walked out into the hallway of the nursing home, Reyna grinned wildly and met Kyle’s laughing eyes... as he stepped over to kiss her wildly in the middle of the hallway, pulling her into his arms for anyone to see.

“You saved me,” he chuckled softly the moment the kiss ended.

“Poor Chief Carpenter and Andy,” Reyna whispered conspiratorially, as they both laughed again, trying to smother it, as several angry ‘shushes’ were thrown their way loudly.

“Two months, huh?” Kyle smiled at her tenderly. “A February wedding?”

“Why not marry the man I love during a month that celebrates it?”

“I love the way you think,” he replied, taking her hand in his as they quickly left the nursing home, before Mrs. Kendall could change her mind about ‘her sweet Kyle’ that she just ‘dumped’.

Reyna smiled.

Three days later, people were streaming into the café that was nearly bursting at the seams. They had gotten several strands of Christmas lights, yards and yards of tinsel to hang in the windows, and everything was so warm and welcoming.

The mayor, along with a few of the firefighters, as well as Dixie's husband, were singing Christmas carols in the corner of the café... and Reyna suspected it was to stay out of the throng of people.

There was hot apple cider, hot cocoa, and of course coffee available for free to anyone walking by – and this seemed to be quite a success! She had refilled her business card holder four times – and Dixie had run out of business cards as well.

The woman was a joy and always smiling, making her so glad that Kyle had referred her for baked goods. The cakeballs were a smash hit, dipped in bright red and green chocolate, sprinkled with crushed candy canes.

Apparently, several of Dixie's friends had come by as well, stopping to say 'hello'. It was just a beautiful evening among friends, creating new ones, and celebrating together.

The van for the nursing home pulled up, allowing several residents to share in the event – and Reyna braced herself for 'Round two' of Mrs. Kendall... only to see that the woman had her eyes zeroed in on Chief Carpenter. Mrs. Kendall made a beeline for him – and she fought back a laugh at the pained smile on his face.

Her mother exited from the small van with a look of wonder and rapt adoration on her face as she gazed at the building that had once belonged to her parents so long ago.

“Hey Mom...” Reyna smiled. “It’s me, Betty Jean.”

“Reyna, this is...” her mother began softly, her weathered eyes tearing up – causing her own eyes to sting with emotion as she realized that her mother wasn’t lost in her memories today, but recognized her.

“Mom, isn’t this wonderful?” she began thickly, smiling at Kyle, who walked up holding a hot apple cider for her. “I’d like you to meet Kyle Rimes, my fiancé.”

“Mrs. Mattingly,” Kyle said dutifully, smiling at Reyna in silent understanding. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“You are going to marry my daughter?” her mother whispered in surprise, staring at him with wide-eyed wonder.

“I was going to ask you for her hand, but I was overcome with a bad case of nerves,” he replied, smiling at Reyna over her mother’s head, and gently took her arm.

“Why don’t we get you seated at a table – and maybe we can get to know each other since I have to be careful with my bad arm. Do you think you can humor me for a bit? Maybe we can convince Reyna to sing a Christmas carol or two?”

“She used to love to sing...” her mother began as he walked her inside, holding the hot apple cider, before nodding at Reyna. “Did you know my little girl was in a play and had a solo singing part?”

“No,” Kyle smiled indulgently. “You’ll have to tell me all about it.”

“She was so beautiful on stage, holding a parasol over her shoulder and twirling it while she sang. I think Reyna was in the fourth grade or so... I don’t remember. It’s a blur,” her mother said apologetically.

“Don’t worry about it. I can’t remember what I had for dinner last night,” Kyle teased, winking at her and smiling at Reyna knowingly – before he mouthed to her *‘it’s okay’*...

Kyle knew she was going to be busy saying hello to everyone, working the room, and making sure no one ran out of anything – and this was his way of helping where he could. He wanted to make sure her mother was taken care of, so she didn’t worry.

“He’s a good man,” Dixie said quietly, suddenly appearing at her side.

“He’s the best man,” Reyna admitted thickly, her voice full of emotion. “And I’m lucky enough to marry him.”

“Do you need a wedding cake or any help? We’ve got several friends in the area that have gotten really good at throwing together weddings in a short

amount of time.”

Reyna turned and smiled at her new friend, nodding.

“Actually, I think I am going to need a cake and possibly a little help.”

EPILOGUE

*Two months later...
Valentine's Day*

REYNA SMILED and stared in disbelief at the wonder that the entire team had worked overnight. It was surprising to think that this day was finally here – but she was more than ready for them to start their lives together officially as one.

Kyle had spent this last weekend helping finish up a few loose ends as his cast was cut off Friday, giving him instant relief from the itching, sweating, and the annoyance of having it present all the time.

They were going to be having the small ceremony at the fire station – and the reception at the café... which was closed for the next few days.

The station was decorated beautifully, and there were three rows of chairs for the small event – along with a playpen to hold a couple of children in a contained area for the brief moment in time.

Dixie and her husband were at the café, setting up the wedding cake, and would be coming by soon. Kyle went to pick up her mother, and was using it as an excuse to give her time to get ready without worrying about being seen.

Turns out that his crew was extremely superstitious – which made her nervous about her dress.

Kyle informed her a few days ago that there were unspoken rules the team had, because they believed things could bring about bad luck. You never said ‘goodbye’ before heading out to a fire – you always promised to

'come back'.

You never cleaned your helmet, only the visor.

After a run, you always put your suspenders over your boots and your helmet has to be facing a certain way on the shelf... and you never, ever wore someone else's helmet.

That was a huge 'NO' for the team – and she worried she might be rocking the 'boat' a little too much.

Reyna had always had in mind that she didn't want to be married in a white dress. She wanted something that would be just her, memorable and something that would mark the occasion, a memento that could be passed down that wasn't white satin like every other wedding dress you found in some bridal shop.

... And her dress was certainly original!

She had changed in the restroom and heard the announcements overhead, remembering this was an active fire station – despite Kyle being off work. His team was on their 'off' schedule and he had to return to duty in seventy-two hours, hence the reason the café was closed. It was the other team being called up for response to an emergency – not Kyle's team.

They were going to celebrate their wedding, at home.

There were white flowers besides each row of chairs – and a small table covered with a white tablecloth. Their fire truck, engine forty-seven, was pulled out in front of the station with its lights on and no siren going, as if to alert the world that they were there and ready.

"Reyna?" she heard Kyle knock and jumped slightly, looking at her reflection in the mirror again nervously.

"Don't come in," she replied, her voice warbling with emotion and fear.

"I'm not, but I did want to take a moment for us before we walked into the engine bay before everyone and said our vows," Kyle said, and she saw the door open slightly – just seconds before his hand stuck out into the air, waiting.

"I needed to hold your hand and I'm a little nervous," he began – and she felt her nose sting with unshed tears as she recognized that sweetness within him.

How had she ever thought that 'nice' was a bad thing?

Reyna stood back behind, just out of sight, and reached out her arm, linking her fingers with his as she placed her other hand on the wooden door.

"Is it wrong that I feel stronger when I hold your hand?"

“No,” she whispered openly. “I do, too – and I’m really glad we are taking a moment for ourselves. I’m extremely nervous as well – and afraid I might have messed up something.”

“You couldn’t do anything wrong today – and I hope you know that.”

“Hold my beer,” she teased.

“Is it too early to drink?” he said playfully, chuckling softly. “Because I could use something to help me relax, too.”

“Maybe we should have eloped?”

“It’s not too late.”

“Kyle...”

“What?” he chuckled. “My knees are knocking, and it might sound like one of those weird rattle drums kids used to play with...”

“A *what*?”

“A rattle drum. Don’t tell me you’ve never had one as a kid? You know, it’s a little drum on a stick that has two hard beads on strings, and you spin it really fast, so it makes a ‘*rap, rap, rap*’ sound?”

“Ohhh geez, Kyle,” Reyna laughed nervously. “Your knees will not sound like that if we make a run for it now.”

They both stood there for several moments, and could hear people talking in the distance as another announcement sounded overhead, causing Reyna to remember that the other truck had left.

“You don’t have to get that, do you?”

“I’m not,” he sputtered indignantly. “I’m marrying my soulmate today.”

“I did something terrible,” she confessed softly. “Well, maybe two or three terrible things.”

Kyle gave her hand a slight squeeze from where it was extended in the room, holding hers.

“I doubt you did something that badly...”

“No, I really did,” she admitted. “Austin was back here being annoying and preventing me from changing – so I told him that ‘*waxing a countertop*’ was actually the newest slang for picking up women. That when you ‘*waxed a countertop*’ you intended to make a girl feel incredibly special, like everything was brand new... and he said he was going to use that line ‘*with the chicks*’,” Reyna hesitated. “Austin’s going to end up clobbered by some irate woman, or look incredibly stupid.”

Kyle laughed softly.

“That’s not so bad, and Austin can handle himself – besides? It wouldn’t

be the first time he said some lame pick-up line towards a woman, nor would it be the first time he ever struck out. I've seen him in action, and it's pretty bad occasionally."

"Maybe we can tell him later?"

"If it makes you feel better – yes," Kyle agreed. "Now, what else are you worried about?"

"I invited Mrs. Kendall," she hissed softly, and heard his laugh again.

"I already knew about that because she made a beeline for Andy – and I quote – '*her sweet Reese's pieces*'..." Kyle choked out laughing. "She already found Carpenter three times, and I think he's run out of places to hide. Andy hasn't left the bathroom since she arrived."

"Oh no..." she whispered painfully in awareness. "I just thought it might help solidify that she needed to leave you alone and quit harassing you."

"It did just that, my love," Kyle replied tenderly. "She hasn't looked at me twice and is telling everyone that she's a special guest of '*Hyena's*'. I think she's deliberately butchering your name because she's miffed at us laughing at her."

"She can call me '*Hyena*' – so long as you call me '*yours*'..." she whispered, smiling, and feeling a little better.

"Any other nefarious things I should know about, my lovely little '*Hyena*'?" he teased tenderly – and then hesitated before she could say anything.

"Are you two ready?" the pastor's voice said nearby as Kyle released her hand, pulling away.

"Reyna, are you ready?" Kyle asked softly, holding the door propped open about two inches so he could talk to her.

"As ready as I'm going to be," she mumbled, glancing at her reflection once again nervously. "There's no going back now."

"Can you give us a moment?" Kyle began – and Reyna pushed the door closed, locking it, because she knew in that moment he was going to try to come in to see what was wrong.

To her disbelief and horror, she felt the door budge as Kyle pushed it open bodily and entered the bathroom, covering his face.

"You aren't supposed to be in here," she squeaked out in a hiss.

"The lock's been broken since Chase started here. No one knows to this day what he shoved in there, but it's busted pretty badly. It turns but won't engage the tumblers inside..."

“You mean anyone could have walked in?”

“If you aren’t ready to marry me – then I would rather we talk in here than out there, where everyone starts eavesdropping to find out what happened and what went wrong.”

“Nothing wrong except that I’m an impulsive idiot.”

“Because you are marrying me?”

“Nooo!” she exclaimed in disbelief. “It’s because of my dress... DON’T LOOK!”

Kyle sighed heavily, before chuckling.

“Honey, how am I supposed to tell you to relax if I can’t see you? I’m sure your dress is fine... unless it’s black. Black on a wedding day is supposed to be bad luck or I read that somewhere, I think. Maybe Austin said it? I don’t know. It could have been Chase?”

“It’s not black... thank goodness,” she muttered nervously.

“Can I look?”

“No.”

“Do you still want to marry me?”

“More than anything, Kyle,” she replied honestly. “I just don’t want to embarrass you before your team.”

“You could never do that,” he promised and immediately stuck out his hands, moving blindly towards the door, before exiting without looking at her, his eyes pinched shut. “I’ll be waiting for my wife at the altar... when you are ready.”

“Kyle?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Would it be weird if we walked together? I mean, I know I’m supposed to walk up the aisle to the altar to say our vows... but could we just do this together instead?”

“I would be honored to walk beside you now – and for the rest of our lives,” he said tenderly, holding out his right arm. “My eyes are closed so you can come out.”

Reyna slowly opened the door a little further and slipped out into the hallway, taking his arm.

“How are you going to see if your eyes are pinched shut?”

“You’ll have to lead me – or you can let me look at you now,” he replied easily. “It’s your choice, and I will be happy with anything you choose, so long as I am yours and you are mine within the next hour.”

She hesitated and touched his face, turning him slightly towards her – and then stopped. She was about to invite him to take a peek, but she wanted to make this a moment he would never forget either... and that happened with suspense and anticipation building.

“I’ll lead you,” she replied softly.

“Then I’m yours,” he murmured, trusting her implicitly.

She was touched by the knowledge that he would do, give, or enable her to have anything she wanted... and that he could believe in them so very much that whatever she was hesitating in telling or showing him?

Kyle simply didn’t care - he just wanted her.

As they walked out of the hallway, she heard several murmurs and glanced up at Kyle to see if he was peeking. Instead, he wore a slight smile on his lips as they walked forward slowly, together, up the aisle.

She met several curious sets of eyes, several tearful ones, and several excited faces of their friends and coworkers.

None with shock, hesitation, or concern.

The whispers, the sighs of understanding, and a few comments slipped through that she tuned out, but apparently Kyle caught, as she heard him chuckle slightly as they came to a stop before the pastor - who was smiling at them.

Reyna stepped in front of him, releasing his arm, to take his hands in hers as he stood there obligingly with his eyes closed and smiling... waiting.

“I ‘yam’ so in love you,” she whispered softly.

“I ‘yam’ in love with you, too,” he said tenderly, smiling at the inside joke they shared. “And I am so grateful to finally be here with you in this moment.”

“Open your eyes,” she urged tearfully.

He stood there for a few moments, as if he was trying to savor this experience as well, because it was a once in a lifetime moment for them both. They would never have this reveal ever again, and she couldn’t wait to see his breathtakingly beautiful eyes as he saw her for the first time as his bride.

She was so proud of him.

Proud of who he was and what he was able to do for a living, how he pushed her to accomplish her own goals, yet somehow managed to make everyone he met feel special through it all, like her mother and Mrs. Kendall.

He was just all of this and more - in one wonderful package that was just so stinkin’ *nice*... so much so that she’d fallen madly in love with the

incredible man before her.

Those tawny lashes lifted, and his beautiful hazel eyes widened as he stared at her in a mix of shock, wonder, and disbelief... before it melted into so much love that it brought tears to her eyes – and his.

He choked back a sob, covering his face with his hands, as a tearful laugh escaped her – only to have him pull her into his arms, hugging her as he cried, completely overwhelmed.

Reyna had taken so much care to select the perfect gown – and then modified it. She had found a white sheath gown that fit her incredibly without any pearls, sequins, or beads all over it... and promptly dyed it red.

A bright, romantic, bluish-red that made her think of Valentine's Day.

Purchasing dozens of white gossamer scarves, she cleared out every shelf that had them for sale in the area, no matter the size. It took her several days, working late into the night, to carefully dye each one in various shades of red, orange, yellow, and a few remaining ones were left white... to match her veil that was tinged orange along the bottom.

She had painstakingly pinned each scarf to the waist of her dress, moving them around, to get the effect she wanted, before sewing them into place and covering her stitches with a black belt that had 'Mr. and Mrs. Rimes' embroidered on the back, with a buckle she'd borrowed from the chief that looked like a hat emblem.

"You like it?" she whispered softly, stroking the back of his hair with her hand as she held him. "I wanted to show you how proud I was of being your wife – and how much I love my firefighter."

Kyle released her, pulling back only slightly as he gazed at her with so much love, pride, and joy that it was humbling. His cheeks were wet from tears, and he couldn't stop smiling, as he quickly wiped them away.

"I seriously don't deserve you," he whispered openly.

"I think the same thing every time I look at you," she replied tenderly, reaching up to touch his cheek.

"Will you marry me?"

"Always," she said tearfully, beaming at him.

He clasped her hand in his, bringing it to his lips and kissing her knuckles before turning towards the pastor. Reyna stood there at his side proudly, resisting the urge to look at him again in his dress uniform that fit him so beautifully.

His trim, gorgeous, black uniform was part of the inspiration for her dress

– everything on him was a badge of honor... and she wanted to be one as well, on his arm and at his side, as she took his name for her own.

Forever.

Standing there beside him, the pastor began to speak to the crowd, discussing what marriage meant, true love, and devotion... his words a blur as Reyna only had eyes for Kyle, meeting his gaze several times as she nearly tuned out what was being said around her – only to have Kyle suddenly turn to her, taking both hands in his.

“When I first met you, I was incredibly intimidated and a little alarmed, because I had just been sold off like a slab of meat to a butcher...”

“Prime Holstein, too! – ma’ boy is my favorite heifer!” Austin jeered, standing up and thumping his chest twice before giving Kyle a peace sign and kissing his fingertips. “Love ya, man!”

Several people were chuckling, including Kyle and Reyna as he made a peace sign, kissed his fingertips, and held it up to Austin in the air as a sign of camaraderie.

“A bull... you dork!” Chase hissed loudly, tugging on Austin’s suit jacket, trying to get him to sit down. “A heifer is a girl moo-cow - a bull is a male moo-cow.”

“Oh,” Austin replied, looking dejected, and flopped down in his chair. “Never mind, please continue.”

“I love you,” Kyle grinned at Reyna. “Two seconds...”

She laughed, realizing how close the two friends were – and saw Kyle run down the aisle as Austin leapt up, climbing bodily over a few chairs, Chase, Justin, and Andy... only to hug each other in the aisle.

“Bros with the hose...” Austin clapped him on the back, grinning happily.

“Bros with the hose - always...” Kyle laughed, hugging him again. “Love ya, man.”

“Love ya, too... now get up there, because your girl is seriously hot!” Austin hissed loudly, winking at Reyna. “Like legit on fire, you know? I mean, wow... that dress looks like what we nearly had to fish you out of.”

“She’s mine – and I’m going,” Kyle said proudly – and raced back to Reyna’s side as she laughed.

This was about the strangest, yet most wonderful wedding she could have wished for. Relaxed, full of laughter and love, and shared with the people they cared about most.

“Sorry – it’s a guy thing.”

“Don’t be,” she smiled at him openly as they took their places.

Kyle cleared his throat, tried to look serious, and then chuckled again.

“Where was I?”

“Slab of meat,” Chief Carpenter called out, cupping his hand beside his mouth and yelling from his seat, causing several people to laugh all over again as Kyle grinned at Reyna.

“Oh yeah...” Kyle began again, his eyes dancing. “I can’t think of a stranger way to meet your soulmate – or marry her – and I wouldn’t change a moment we’ve shared since I’ve met you. The phone call in the middle of the night, sitting on the floor together fishing for vent-kittens, or having you give me a sponge bath that Austin hasn’t quit whining about yet...”

“I had smoke inhalation too, you know...”

“Oh goodness,” Justin muttered aloud, before shaking his head and laughing quietly beside Chase – who thumped Austin on the ear.

“Ow! Ya big doofus, that hurts.”

“Would you hush so our brother can marry the girl of his dreams?”

“You’re talking too...”

“No one talks as much as you, Austin!”

“No one talks as much as you, Austin,” he mocked, making a face in a whispered high-pitched voice, rolling his eyes... only to see several people had turned to look at the firefighters that were sitting together.

“I’m done,” Austin volunteered. “Kyle, would you hurry up with your vows?”

“Working on it, brother...” Kyle grinned, turning to Reyna again.

“I ‘yam’ madly in love with you and have been from the moment you yelled at me about the blue paint on the walls. I love that wild sparkle in your eyes, how you need a few minutes to focus on fixing things, and most of all? I love that you turn to me, and we talk through it together. You are my rock, my inspiration, and I can’t wait to see what the next fifty years looks like, making you smile.”

The pastor smiled indulgently at Kyle, before turning to Reyna.

“I never told you that I was heading to a meeting that morning, already running late, and took one look at you up there on the podium... and you were mine,” Reyna whispered. “I saw you and couldn’t help myself.”

Kyle swallowed, his eyes full of emotion as everything just poured out of her like a dam had burst forth, needing to share everything so he knew the depth of what had grown between them.

“I’ve never been so happy or laughed so much as when I’m with you,” she whispered, staring at him and feeling her eyes water as tears threatened. “I love our moments together, whether we are cleaning the café, replacing a toilet, or I’m trying to unman you as we climb up the fire escape...”

Kyle immediately burst out laughing, his face flushing bright red along his cheekbones at the memory.

“You are my hero in every way,” she breathed, not holding back as the first tear cascaded down her cheek, unable to look away from the love in his eyes. “You save me in so many ways – both big and small. You rush in with little hesitation, fight my imaginary monsters, and soothe my nerves when sometimes those monsters are more real than I ever realized. I love how you stepped into an unknown role with all the care and consideration that a true knight in shining armor would have... Joe,” she sniffed tearfully, remembering that moment, and saw Kyle’s own eyes were shining brightly with emotion.

“She knows his name isn’t Joe, right?” Andy whispered loudly, leaning across Chase to look at Justin.

“Shaddup, Andy...” Justin muttered.

“Man, that’s an important question...” Austin hesitated looking at Andy in support, both looking alarmed for a moment, causing Reyna and Kyle to smile at each other as she opened her mouth to continue speaking... and burst out laughing as Kyle’s friends kept talking.

“It’s probably code for something,” Andy announced.

“Like the yam thingie? Because either my buddy has a horrific lisp now or he keeps talking about yams and sweet potatoes,” Austin hissed back at the other firefighter.

“A lisp?” Kyle chuckled, looking at Reyna and laughing as she shrugged.

“Shhhh, you two!” Chase hissed again, holding up his hand and threatening to thump them both again.

Everyone grew quiet again – and Reyna turned back to Kyle, smiling.

“I ‘yam’...”

“SEE?” Austin hissed.

“SHHHH!!” Chase grunted, reaching over Justin and putting a hand bodily over the other man’s mouth. “Please continue – I’m sorry.”

Several people in the crowd were laughing now at the uncontrollable team of friends, brothers, and coworkers – and Reyna was really glad to have met them all and was pledging herself to become a part of Kyle’s world.

“I ‘*yam*’ so in love with you and can’t wait to see what the next fifty years brings us as we travel this road together, hand in hand, knowing my best friend is at my side.”

“I love you,” Kyle uttered again softly.

“And I you,” she replied, stepping forward into his arms and kissing him despite the fact that it wasn’t time in the ceremony. No, to her, this was the most perfect, beautiful wedding they could have ever had... because it was completely original and theirs.

Kyle kissed her passionately, bending her backwards as the entire row that held the firemen shot to their feet, whooping and hollering loudly as their chairs fell backwards. Kyle broke the kiss, holding her in place, and smiling against her lips before speaking.

“You are in for a wild ride as the wife of a firefighter, Mrs. Rimes.”

“I knew the dangers,” she grinned, playfully. “Just make sure it’s worth it.”

“Every moment and every second, my love...”

Kyle stood her up – only to end up tackled by his friends, who immediately lifted him up onto their shoulders in excitement... and pulled Reyna forward. She was tugged from person to person, being hugged and kissed on the cheek.

Chase, Andy, Chief Carpenter, Austin... and then found herself facing Kyle again, who was cracking up laughing, and his hair was disheveled now. Several of their friends in the crowd had also gotten to their feet to congratulate the new couple – much to the pastor’s dismay.

“I guess I pronounce you man and wife,” he began and shrugged, holding up his hands beside his shoulders. “You’ve already kissed her – along with everyone else, so I guess you can put a ring on her finger when you are ready? This is the weirdest wedding I’ve ever seen... and I’ve seen a lot of them!”

Reyna turned and hugged the pastor, laying a kiss on his cheek and smiling as she thanked him – only to be tugged into Kyle’s arms again as he spun her around playfully.

“Let’s get some music in here!” Andy hollered, causing several of the men to whoop with sheer delight as loud music suddenly filled the air.

This was now her life, her world, and she realized just how wonderful she fit in – because these men had found a way to keep the stress from getting to them, by living life to the fullest... and she planned to do the same.

“Let’s party!” Reyna called out, taking Kyle’s hand as he walked towards her mother where she was sitting. “Mama, come dance with us!”

“C’mon, Mama Mattingly,” Kyle cheered. “Let’s celebrate as a family.”

“You are a weird young man,” her mother intoned – but she smiled and got up slowly, bobbing to the wild music that carried in the air.

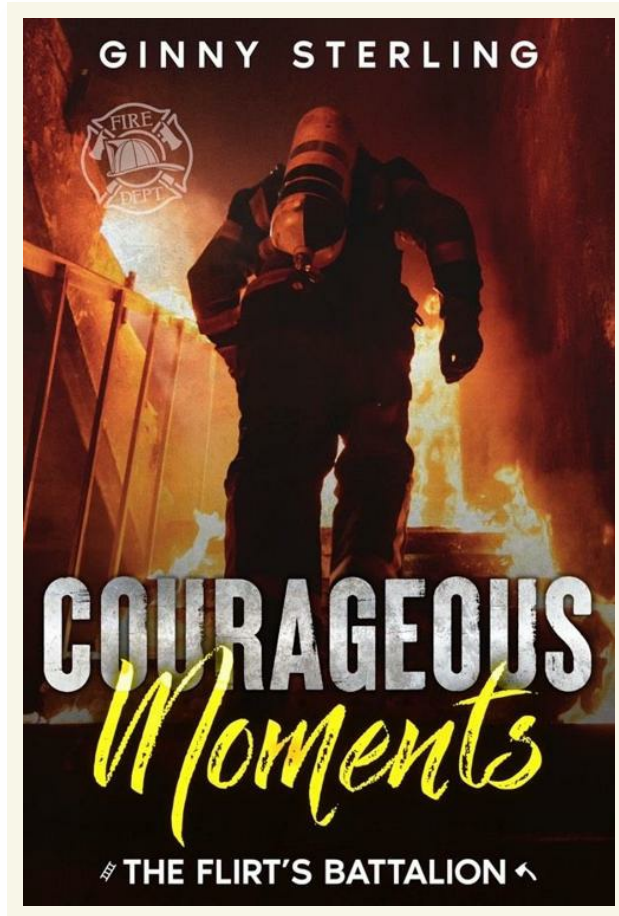
“He’s *my* weird man – and he’s perfect for me!”

Reyna and Kyle shared a knowing smile.

“Cool,” they said in unison.

MEET THE TEAM!

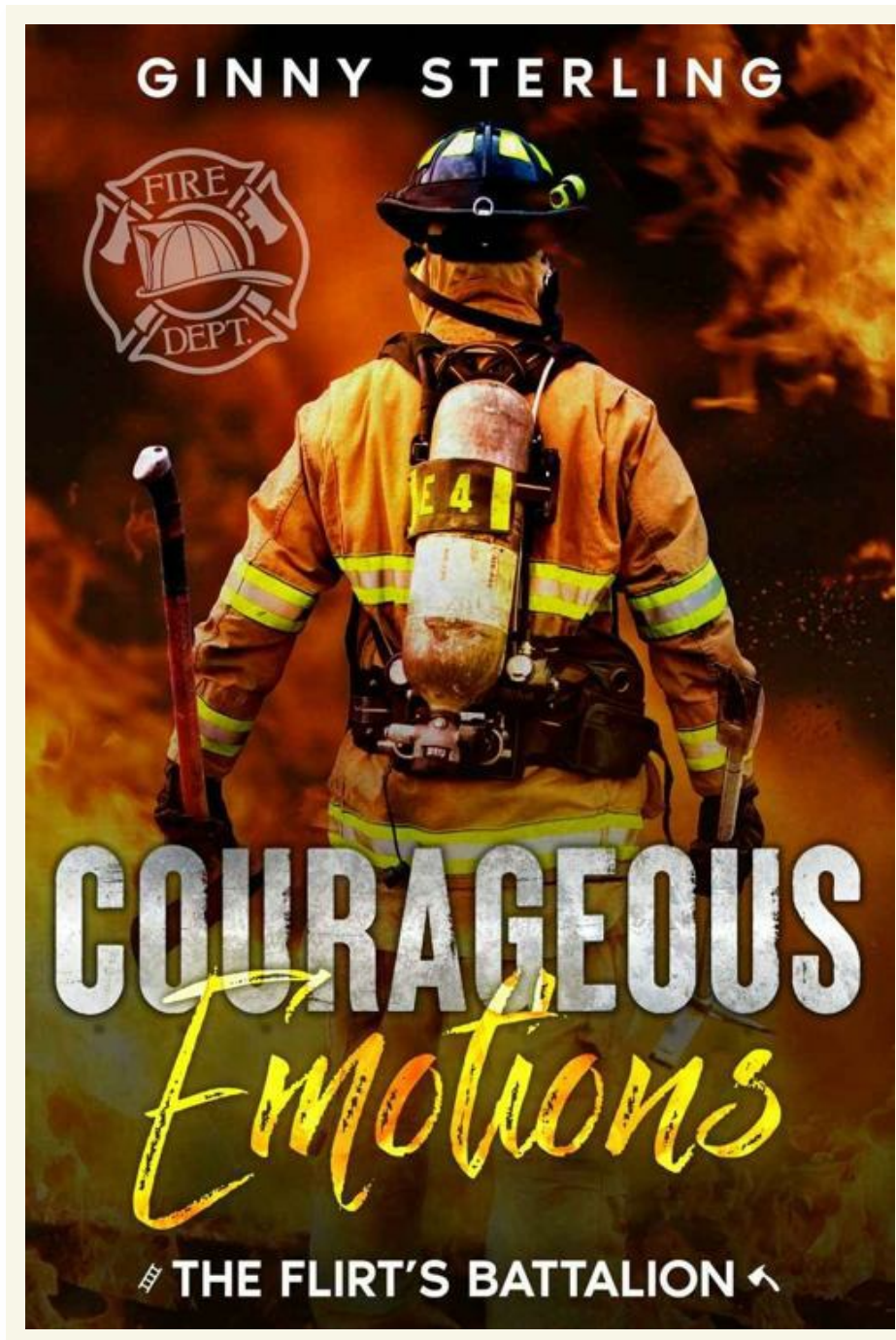
The *Flirt's* Battalion
A new series coming in 2023



Introducing an adventurous, daring team of fearless, gritty men who battle uncontrollable blazes. Equipped with an indomitable code of valor and a ferocity matched by the inferno of emotions within them, as they find their soulmates.

Meet the crew of smokejumpers, firefighters, and rugged hotshots of Ember Creek, Texas... where the lifeblood of hope, the comfort of warm laughter, reckless loves, and breathtaking happily-ever-afters ignite with only a spark!

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[Courageous Emotions - Chase Marks](#)

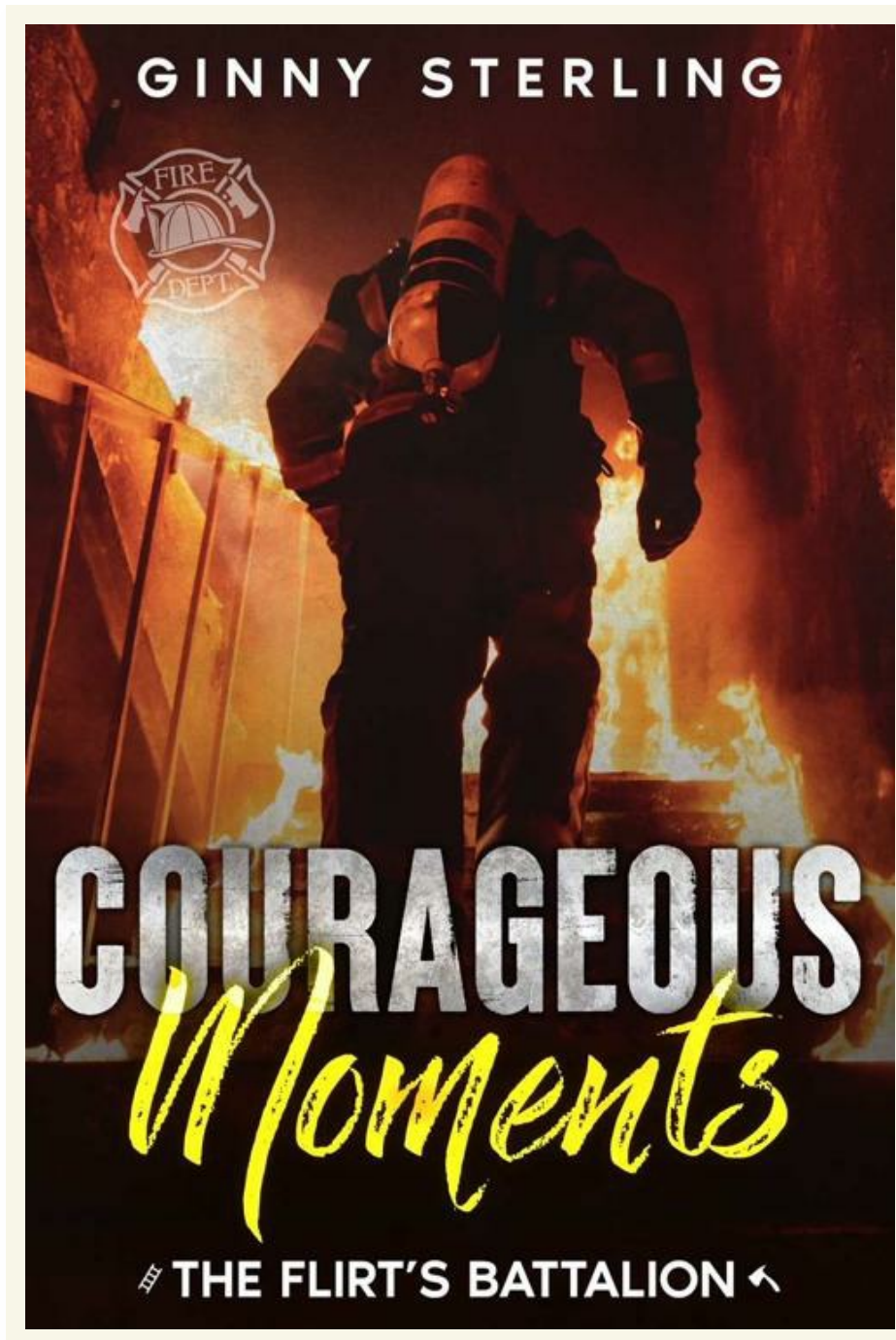
Chase Marks was anything but a normal guy. Plucky, a high-spirited personality, combined with an assured swagger that would melt any woman. This firefighter and single-dad would gallantly run into danger without a second thought... until he was face-to-face with his neighbor, Beth.

Bethel Estes was painfully shy, overweight, and about as homely as a woman could be – or so she felt. She was keenly aware of the handsome firefighter next door, and that she wasn't his type in the

slightest.

When he knocks on her door in the middle of the night, pleading for help to watch his son - how could she say no?

... And how would he react if she asked him out on a date?



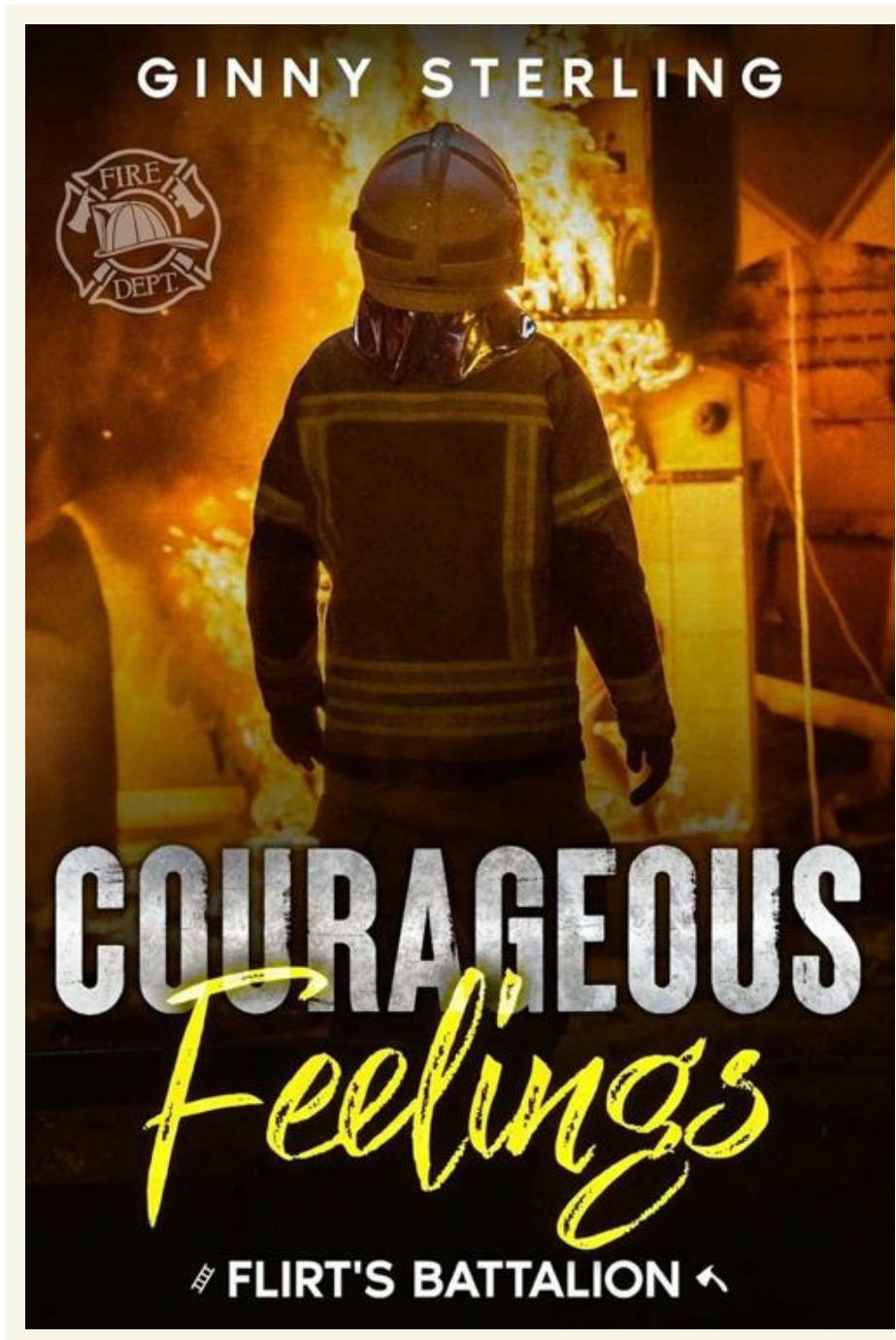
[Courageous Moments - Austin Olivera's Story](#)

Austin Olivera took pride in being a firefighter, a flirt, and a playboy. He enjoyed the dating game... and then dumping a clingy woman. Playing the field helped hide a bitterness deep in his soul that flared to life the moment the curvy woman brushed him off like a pesky gnat!

Sabine Montfort knew the man was toying with her! He was flirting and smiling... and she was the third woman he'd migrated towards, working the café looking for his entertainment. She wasn't about

to have her heart broken by the biggest tease she'd ever met, and Austin certainly wasn't her type!

Why was the musclebound guy trying so hard to get her attention – and what would happen if she agreed to his shockingly outrageous proposition?



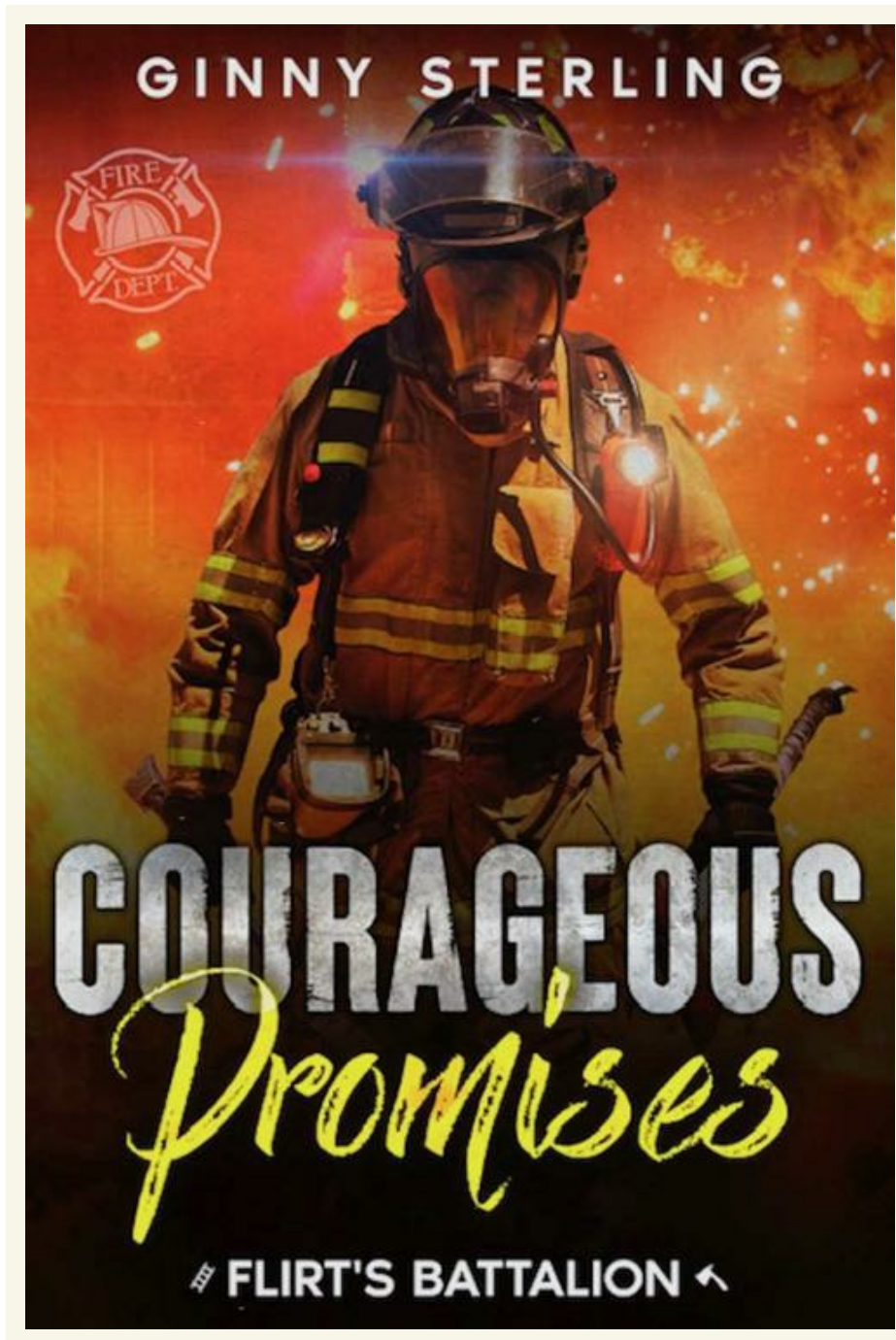
[Courageous Feelings - Justin Dailey](#)

Engineer Justin 'Buck' Dailey was running from his chaotic life since his nightmarish divorce. Life was now about keeping the team safe, saving lives, and keeping his momentum focused on business. This firefighter would fly through traffic, rush into fires, or rescue any kitty cat from a tree... but never imagined he would need to give first-aid to a mysterious woman in the woods.

Horrified, Faith Clover stared at the arrow sticking out of her thigh and couldn't believe the gorgeous man that came to her aid... carrying a compound bow. Hunting was an escape from annoying men for

her, a chance to avoid the gossips in town, only to be carried off like some damsel in distress through the woods.

She needed to forget her unexpected avenging angel... and couldn't seem to do it. Why did Justin look as alarmed as her – *so why did he kiss her?*



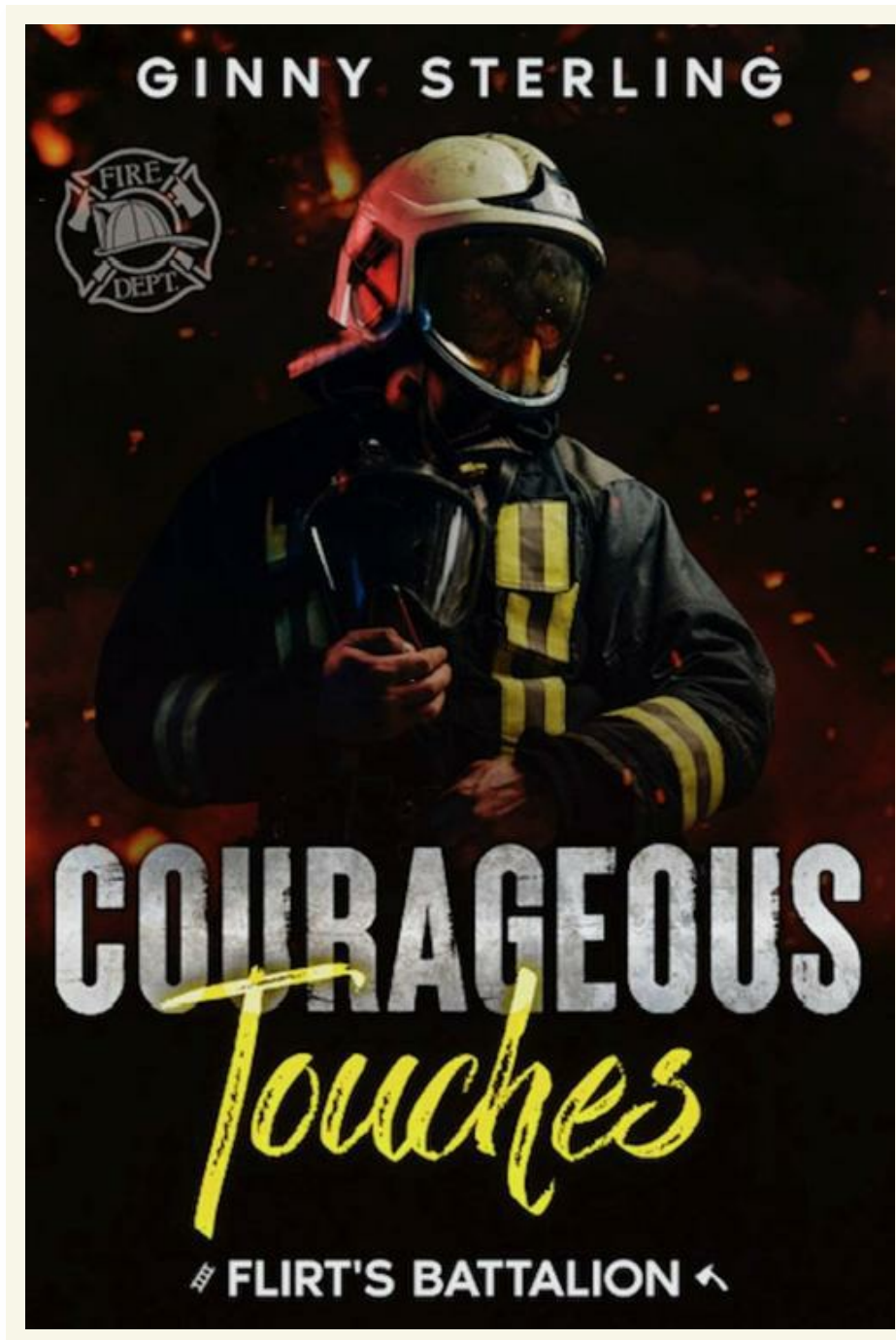
Courageous Promises

Andy Pennington believed in living life to the fullest, playing and joking around, taking chances, and fighting for every second, every feeling. In this job, you never knew when you would take your last breath, until he came face to face with that terrifying moment – and her.

Sorcha Garland was a painful realist. She didn't believe in luck, second chances, or karma. Every single thing that happens in your life results from carefully decided elements – and she'd just made a critical error.

That mistake, that careless moment, would effectively trap her and the handsome fireman in a vortex of hope, desperation, and unbridled fear that neither of them expected nor could resist.

... Or could they?

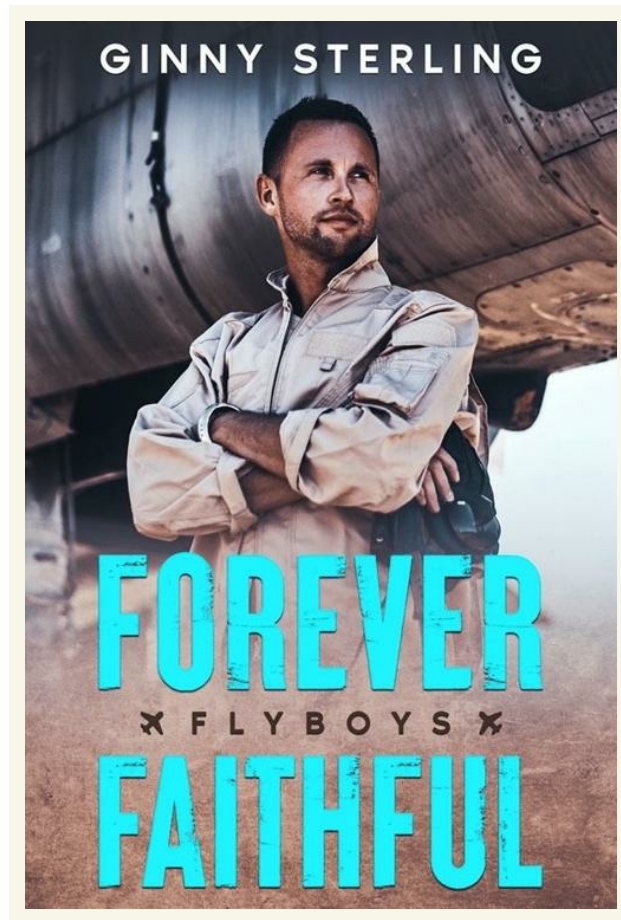


[Fire Chief Reese Carpenter](#)... leader, teacher, mentor, and goofball. Someone had to be the *'adult'* in this group of firefighters. He always keeps his team under control and on track, but when everything falls apart before his eyes... he's suddenly looking to Eileen for help.

Paramedic Eileen Ballantine had heard rumors about the mysterious fire chief, but the man before her certainly wasn't what she expected. In the thick of it all, there's no room for error. So why was he cutting jokes and trying to get her attention?

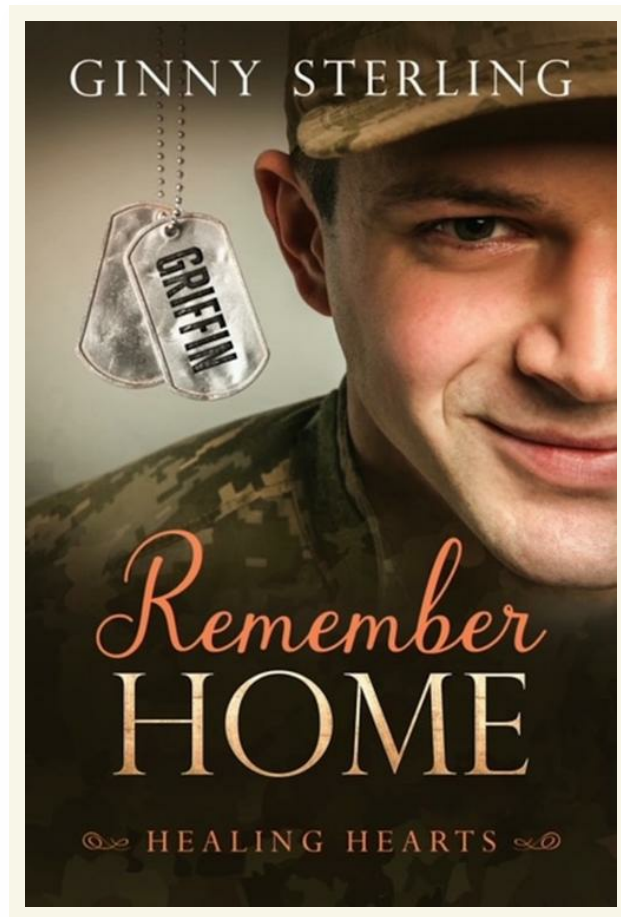
She had a job to do.

The last person Eileen wanted to be saving was Reese, but when he suddenly breaks rank and takes off running into the fiery building? What's she supposed to do now, with all these thoughts and feelings that were exploding inside of her?



[Flyboys](#) are a group of men who thrive on adrenaline, toy with playboy reputations, and a bunch of self-proclaimed misfits. This sweet romantic series is full of soaring emotions, sweeping intense moments, and loyal friendships that unite the most unlikely characters into an unforgettable love story.

[Healing Hearts Series](#)



If you love heartwarming, tough guys who fall in love unexpectedly – this is the series for you! These standalone sweet, clean romances follow a team of soldiers that were once stationed in Afghanistan, bound by friendship. Opposites attract, soulmates find each other at their lowest points, and friends become lovers across the miles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ginny Sterling is a Texas transplant living in Kentucky. She spends her free time (Ha!) writing, quilting, and spending time with her husband and two children. Ginny can be reached on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) or via email at GinnySterlingBooks@gmail.com

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