

GINNY STERLING



*Remember*

**ALWAYS**



HEALING HEARTS



# REMEMBER ALWAYS

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# INTRODUCTION

Ian Selkirk was a flirt and the target of the team when it came to pranks. He loved a good joke as much as the next person, so when he received an emotional letter via email, he thought for sure this was just another trick... and laid on the charm!

June Peyton couldn't believe the sweetness and sunny disposition of this unknown soldier who'd actually replied. When she'd been asked to write Ian by her friend, she assumed this was just another ploy by her family to introduce her to 'a respectable man'... but now she wasn't so sure.

The gifts, the handwritten songs, and the romantic poems were enough to make any woman swoon, much less a lonely widow picking herself up out of the gutter, step by step.

When the truth comes out... and it's not some practical joke?

What happens next?



These standalone sweet, clean romances follow a team of soldiers that were once stationed in Afghanistan, bound by friendship. They can be read alone but if you read them together, their stories are so much richer.

*To those of you who loved our playful soldiers: Luka, Cooper, Hody, Clark, and Perry... hang on to your seats, clutch your pearls, and get ready to have Selkirk steal your heart!*

*This is our guy, ladies!*

*WOOOHOOOO!*



*Ginny Sterling Newsletter*

*Healing Hearts Sweet Romance Facebook Group*

# PREFACE

Trigger warning... because you know me. I would rather err on the side of caution for anyone that could be bothered by content. This book has a few episodes that deal with:

- mild battle scene from MC point of view
- mildly crude language or innuendo (*He's a wild one - but no cursing!*)
- healing from loss of a spouse
- meddling parents (*Yes, that can be a trigger for some - LOL*)

And as always... a Happily Ever After.





## JUNE

“MOM, SERIOUSLY I AM FINE.”

June protested over the phone again, her eyes scrolling over the MLS listings casually as she searched for a home. It wasn't like she could actually afford it thanks to her husband, who had lied blatantly to her face over the years before dying of a drug overdose two years ago.

No, right now she was staying in a small two-bedroom mobile home that she had bought for herself in order to save money. She didn't have anyone to impress, would not tell her parents or her brother about her living conditions, and kept her mouth shut around town, utilizing a P.O. Box to keep her 'image' firmly in place.

See – Miss June Peyton was a successful real estate agent in the great state of Texas... and broke as dirt.

She worked her rear-end off paying off funeral expenses, a plethora of mysterious credit card bills that came in her name that Mark had opened secretly in order to fund his drug habit. You could round that financial nightmare off with an overpriced and fancy SUV to cart around clients all over town. The clothes, the shoes, the perfectly coiffed hair and nails, all was to maintain a professional image to get better clients.

Better clients, meant pricier houses... which meant bigger commission checks, but no job was too small, and she would

tackle anything.

Including today's client.

A teacher and a pilot out at Flyboys were looking to purchase their first home. They were currently in an apartment, no car payment, no credit card bills, but there was a large loan on an airplane... which was a first for her. Both had excellent credit scores and were already preapproved for a house, it was just a matter of finding the right place and making a move.

Gathering up her purse and her things, she was about to leave when her computer dinged.

Sitting back down, she clicked on her email notification just in case the couple had to cancel... and saw it was a government email address. Her brother was in the Air Force, and she had a special place in her heart for military folks. VA loans could be tough to maneuver, but that never stopped her from tackling one.

Clicking on it, she casually began to read... and her smile faded.

*Hello Miss June Peyton – the pen pal guru...*

*I wanted to take a moment to introduce myself. I'm your new pen pal – surprise! My buddies call me 'Selkirk' (last name/Army/tough-guy stuff), but the ladies...?*

*The ladies love an accent and call me Ian – so 'Hi!'*

*Now, I hope you are sitting? Prep yourself for amazement and wonders galore as I share a few facts about myself – and hope you'll do the same. Once you hear everything about me? It will be hard to resist, I know... but I promise, I'm completely charming and oh-so friendly.*

*Blond, Irish-American, shameless flirt and goofball, huge fan of college basketball, can't tan*

*worth a flip, and might as well be a ginger with the freckles that I have on my nose and shoulders...*

*What about you, my sweet June?*

*Let's kindle this friendship and see where it gets us.*

*Your friend,*

*Ian*

June barked out a sharp dry laugh and looked around to see if someone was playing a prank on her.

What in the world was going on? Had her brother put her up to this, or did her parents reach out to someone to ‘*arrange a nice boy to talk to her*’ like she was a teenager once more?

Ever since her parents found out about Mark’s cause of death, it’d been like a neon badge of shame was placed on her chest that she couldn’t shake. Whenever she saw her parents, it always ended up with the same questions repeatedly.

*How did you not know?*

*Weren't there any signs?*

*If you were nicer to Mark, he might not have been so unhappy in your marriage, Junie...*

*If you were more approachable, maybe he could have talked to you?*

Her parents acted like *she* was the reason her husband couldn’t kick his drug habit – and everything they said was already ricocheting like a ping pong ball in her mind on a daily basis. Joshua, her brother and Mark’s friend, never said a word – he just insisted that they take a few moments to talk if she ever wanted to. She felt guilty, wondering if she missed the signs, or should have realized something sooner.

She just thought Mark was hanging out with his friends or going to have a drink with the boys. He always came home happier than he left, never really seemed to argue, and seemed happy on the outside. It was the hidden signs that she never shared with anyone, only found when she had to move out of their apartment.

The ripped-up credit card bills, the dirty needles, the air freshener everywhere – which she now knew was to cover the smells, along with the apology notes that were never delivered to her, found stuffed in a drawer, that broke her heart.

Mark had been sick and didn't know how to ask for help... and she took that hard.

Even her brother, Joshua, had no idea that Mark was still using drugs. Joshua had confronted his friend back in high school and had been told by Mark that he quit. The lies had obviously compounded. It explained the lost jobs, the living paycheck to paycheck, and why he insisted on keeping the checkbook himself. He wanted control so he could use anything extra in their account for his next hit, his next high...

Hitting reply, seething that someone had passed along her email address without her knowledge, June began to type.

*Hello Mr. Selkirk,*

*I apologize that there may be some miscommunication, but I have never had a pen pal... nor am I sure how to communicate with one. I know it's just letters between two people – but the idea never crossed my mind. I'm busy. The idea of just sitting down and casually writing a letter seems... odd and a waste of my time.*

*College basketball is good, I suppose? – But that isn't a basis for suddenly striking up a friendship with a perfect stranger. I've seen the news, and have no wish to be a statistic.*

*I need a lot more information from you – including, how did you get my email address?*

*I mean, seriously, who are you?*

*Sincerely,*

*June*

June clicked send and got up from her computer, shaking her head in disbelief and confusion. Once she got to the car,

she was going to call her mother to see if she had arranged this whole fiasco like the last one.

Last time, her parents had invited June over for dinner on Saturday night and she had a showing already scheduled, passing on the invitation. She also happened to ‘blab’ that she was going to stop by *Sticks*, a sushi restaurant in Tyler that she loved dearly, to pick up dinner before heading home.

She’d closed a deal and wanted to celebrate... only to have some man show up, claiming to be her ‘*blind date from Mary Ellen*’.

Her mother.

Her mother always tried to fix her up, pair her with someone, or give her pep-talks so she would ‘*get out and meet a nice boy*’. Why did she have to meet a ‘nice boy’? Why wasn’t it enough to just be ‘*okay*’ anymore?

Sliding into her beautiful Mercedes-Benz AMG GLE class vehicle, she sighed in sheer luxury. The white leather and sleek black exterior were ridiculously expensive, but oh-so nice to drive. The dash had a strip of grey burl wood, and it was spotless.

Starting it up, she called her mom.

“Hey Sweetie, are you in the car?”

“Yup. On my way over to Yonder to meet with a client.”

“Knock ’em dead, baby,” her mother cheered and then paused. “Is something wrong?”

“You tell me...”

“Junie, let’s not play these trivial mental games like Joshua does. I mean, do the two of you have to be so similar sometimes? I swear you are more like your father every day. Being married to him is like playing chess in my mind on a daily basis. Sometimes an apple is just an apple... you know?”

“Fine. We’ll do this your way. Did you set me up again?”

“Set you up with what?”

“You know...”

“Actually, Junie, no I don’t. What happened? I haven’t done anything, not since the last time when you blew up and wouldn’t talk to me for three days.”

“Because that wasn’t funny, Mom...” she snapped. “Do you know how freaked out I was having some pencil-necked geek following me around, spouting off all these facts ‘*because he knew all about me from my parents*’ and was already falling for me? Mom – I don’t need someone in my life. I’m content with being alone, and really don’t want the drama that comes with being in a relationship.”

“Junie – I said I was sorry about Mario...”

“Oh, cheese-on-a-cracker, Ma! That dweeb’s name was *Mario*? Tell me he wasn’t a plumber...” June chuckled in disbelief, fighting the urge to slap her forehead.

“He was the guy your daddy hired to snake the drains in the kitchen sink.”

June laughed openly, turning onto Main Street and into Yonder... marveling at the small town and how quaint this suburb was out here in the middle of nowhere.

“So did you set me up again?”

“No – but you need someone in your life.”

“Mom, I think I’m a pretty good judge of what I need in my own life.”

“Junie, pumpkin,” her mother said emotionally. “You’ve got so much to give someone, and didn’t deserve what happened. No beautiful, smart, young woman should be widowed at twenty-five. You need a husband that adores you, children all around you, and a love that lasts a lifetime... I want that for my baby girl.”

Her mother’s plea didn’t go unheard.

June struggled to swallow back the pain that those gently said facts caused – because they were true. She had always imagined having a home, having children, the white picket fence, a little Yorkie puppy to flop around in her lap, imagining laughter and love so brilliant that it was like

basking in the sunshine... only to bury those emotions on that muggy April morning long ago.

“Mother, that was what *you* wanted,” she croaked, trying to be strong and afraid to open herself up to wishing for more. “I’m not you – and I love you for caring so much, but I’m content.”

“*Content* isn’t *happy*...” her mother stressed.

“But it will do,” June replied, trying not to sound caustic as she pulled into a parking lot and turned off her car. “I’m here and I need to go. So, you didn’t give my email address to anyone to set me up on some weird pen pal program?”

“A pen pal? Noooo... *oh no*...”

June closed her eyes and braced herself.

“... Oh Junie. I did. I am *sooo* sorry. I gave your email address to a woman that had a friend looking for a house almost a year ago, honey. She was a teacher at one of the elementary schools in Tyler, and was in the middle of mailing a bunch of care packages to soldiers overseas. Her friend was a police officer and just married one of those Flyboys we are always hearing about in Yonder. Well, we got to talking, and she said she was always looking for people to correspond with the troops to keep up morale. You were in the dumps at the time, so I gave her your business card and told her you could use a boost. That’s it. I swear, honey. I don’t even remember the woman’s name. I think it was Lola, or Lulu, or maybe...”

“Mom, it’s fine,” June breathed heavily. “I know you mean well, but just leave any personal stuff to me... okay? I *was* in a bad place mentally a year ago, but I’m much better. I can shake this guy and tell him to bug off.”

“Or you could give him a chance?”

“Mommmm...” she growled in warning.

“I’m just saying that if someone else needs a morale boost, maybe they are in a tough spot like you were? Not everyone is as strong mentally as you are – and it might do you some good to hear this person out, be a friend, and see what happens.”

June looked up to see the couple coming out of the apartment, waving at her.

“We’ll see, Mom. I have to go. My clients are coming to the car, and I need to say ‘Hello’...” she rushed out, putting on a polite smile. “Love you, Ma.”

“Love you too, Junie.”

She disconnected the phone, got out of the car, and extended her hand politely in a handshake.

“It’s so wonderful to meet you both,” she smiled brightly, stepping into her business role with her carefully crafted intro, designed to put people at ease and get them to open up. “I’m June Peyton – and I see you’ve already got the princess in your story – so how about we discover your dream cottage... or fairytale castle, eh? I have a few questions for you, and we’ll get started with navigating the lay of the land for your new little kingdom.”

The couple looked at each other – and smiled.

*Works like a charm, every time,* she mused, and fought the urge to grin, knowing that this handsome couple was bought in.

*Hook, line, and sinker.*



## SELKIRK

IAN SAT AT THE COMPUTER, thinking.

He was staring at the screen, re-reading the email from June for the tenth time, and pensive. Something was ‘*off*,’ and it was hard to read a person when you couldn’t see their face or hear their tone of voice. His elbows were planted on the desk, his fingers laced before him, and his two index fingers were beating an alternating pattern on his lips as he pursed them.

Her email sounded almost terse... but it didn’t make sense. Why would you be short with someone if you wanted a pen pal? You wouldn’t be... which meant he was reading it wrong.

She wanted more information about him, so he would give it. He loved charming the ladies – and this was just another girl to win over, a puzzle to unlock, a challenge to win.

... And Ian loved a challenge.

Cracking his knuckles, he popped his neck side to side, and pursed his lips again, typing. His aunt used to call him a ‘*wily little cuss*’ and a ‘*mischievous scamp*’ when he was a boy.

“Aunt Darcy, you had no idea...” he muttered, grinning at the clues Miss June Peyton had given him unwittingly.

She had replied to his email with a business signature attached to the bottom of the email.

His pen pal was a real estate agent in Tyler, Texas. Real estate agents have licenses that could be looked up online, website profiles, and won awards – which made it easy to find her.

And Ian certainly looked! He didn't want to come off as a creep or a stalker, but he was a curious guy, and wanted to know what he was getting into.

June Peyton was gorgeous and had a large online social media presence. There was over thirty pages with her name plastered everywhere. She had won awards, attended conferences, spoke at real estate symposiums, and even participated in charities. The woman dressed like a dream, looking straight out of a magazine... and rang Ian's bell like it was a gong.

“Wowzers...” he muttered, shaking his head distractedly, before going back to typing.

*Sweet June,*

*You want to know all about me already? You sure move fast, my dear. I like a woman who knows her mind and isn't afraid to take chances.*

*I'm a Cancer, a water sign, a lover that is a true home body, and a midnight crooner. I love to sing, eat, and cuddle... not necessarily in that order.*

*My favorite singers are the classics, like Sinatra, or Tony Bennett, or even Bing Crosby. My favorite foods are the adventurous ones. I like trying stuff that is new to me. Sushi, Takoyaki, Huitlacoche tacos, alligator, rattlesnake, possum (do not recommend), etc. If it's something I've never had – I give it a shot because life is about living, right?*

*...And the cuddling? Well, that really doesn't need explaining – does it?*

*College basketball is exciting and fun – and would be a great first date. We could have dinner, a beer, and watch the excitement together.*

*While writing letters is not exactly a normal way to pick up a girl? I do adore the idea of getting to know how your mind works... and you can get to know me without having to worry about restraining all those 'burgeoning desires' you feel when you first see me.*

*I'm a catch, I know... but I don't put out on the first date, so we'll have to become friends first – at least for my sake.*

*Don't worry about being a statistic. I have nothing to hide and on the other side of the world from you. Feel free to look me up or call my family.*

*I'm the youngest of four boys. My mother will happily talk your ear off and whip out all the baby albums for you. When you see the naked baby picture of me in a pom-pom ski cap and boots? Try not to laugh. It was exceedingly cold out – and I was only two.*

*I'm thirty-two now... and in a much warmer climate.*

*\*wink\**

*I get the computer once a week (Wednesdays), so it might be a few days before you hear back from me. Don't panic – your friend is right here, waiting patiently to know all the details about you.*

*We'll chat soon!*

*Ian*

*P.S. - Mr. Selkirk is my daddy... unless you want to call me 'Daddy' – but I thought we'd at least go on one or two dates first.*

*Give me a little time, I'm shy.*

Ian was grinning and laughing as he clicked send – and opened up another tab on the computer after printing her email so he could have her address in hand. He was going to the

exchange on base next to send her a little surprise to work his angle with this lovely girl.

Glancing up at the clock, he cursed under his breath and realized he had five minutes left before it was the next guy's turn to get on the internet. Quickly placing an order, he logged off the computer and stood up. Grabbing his printout with June's address, he gave a mocking salute to the next guy, tapping his fingers off his brow.

“Talbot... “

“Sup, Selkirk...”

“Have a good little *‘chitty-chat’* with your pen pal, my *bestest* buddy,” Ian taunted, grinning and wiggling his fingers at the guy who was always picking and teasing him.

“Dork,” Talbot laughed, plopping down into the computer chair comfortably.

Still smiling, Ian walked off whistling to himself, feeling extremely satisfied with his email, the fact that he was trying to surprise her, exceedingly proud of how driven and dedicated she was, and realized that maybe this *‘Romeo curse’* that was whispered among the troops might not be so bad.

Browsing the exchange, he found a shelf full of local goodies that had been brought in. There were a few guys already there, picking through things to send back home, and more were walking in.

Reaching over, he plucked a scarf off one of the shelves – immediately spotting the hot pink shades and thinking of his own little Barbie doll online. Yeah, she'd definitely wear a scarf, probably knotted once at her neck like some fifties pin-up.

He closed his eyes for a moment, composing himself, as he thought of other things that came with fifties pin-up girls. Corsets, busty bras, stockings, red lipstick, crinoline skirts, dressy pumps that made those shapely legs look soooo good.

“Man, I was born in the wrong era,” he muttered, and folded the silky scarf gently to keep it from getting destroyed by his grubby, calloused hands.

Looking in another case, he spotted a hand-held mirror that screamed ‘classy’ yet modern. It was a twisted metal and copper-looking creation with leaves all around the face of it. He could see a woman holding it up, patting her hair, or putting on lipstick, and immediately felt something shift inside of him.

“I’m gonna take that,” Ian blurted out to the clerk walking past him. “Do you have bubble wrap, so it doesn’t get busted in shipping?”

“Yeah – and the box it came in too, ya’ pretty dandy.”

“Shut up, Lewis... it’s not for me, but for my girl.”

“Ahh yes,” the clerk grinned. “Another has fallen, huh?”

“Not necessarily.”

“Romeo squad,” Lewis chuckled. “Give it time. You boys are making a name for yourselves. Did you hear that one of the Zoomies was talking to Logan at the fence a month or so ago?”

“No way – really?”

“Yup. That’s the rumor I heard...”

“I doubt it,” Ian muttered, shaking his head. “I wouldn’t be caught spreading that one either. Logan’s got a temper and I do my best to stay away from having it directed at me.”

“Smart man,” a voice said behind him – and Ian froze, meeting Lewis’ eyes and seeing the answer in the other man’s face before he turned.

“Afternoon, Captain Logan.”

“Selkirk,” he said coolly, watching him with these cold eyes that seemed to look right through you. “I do have a temper when it comes to certain things... such as disrespect or not following orders.”

“Both of which are not happening, sir,” Ian replied, feeling a sinking sensation inside, knowing by the end of this conversation he was gonna be running laps in the heat or cleaning latrines. It was never a great thing to have your

commanding officer sneak up on you – especially when you were talking about him.

“Whatcha doing?” Logan asked in a matter-of-fact voice.

“I... ah... well, honestly?”

“Preferred,” Logan interrupted, crossing his arms.

“I was sending my pen pal a package,” he admitted, hearing a few cat calls and whistles from the other men inside the exchange – and really didn’t care. He held the captain’s gaze and continued talking, not backing down. “I was buying June that mirror and picked out a scarf for her. This looks like a feminine present, doesn’t it? I’m from a family of all boys, and...”

“Selkirk?”

“Yes, captain?”

“Relax and pay for your junk. It’s pretty, and I sent my wife a purple scarf last week when the order came in. Your girl should like it.”

The captain actually cracked a slight smile, causing Ian to back away warily. Yeah, they weren’t besties by any means, and it was odd to see this man who’d screamed at him several times before being... *nice*.

“Thank you, sir,” he simply said, and saw Lewis look at him with wide eyes as if silently saying ‘*What the heck?*’ with that look alone.

“Lewis, I need that box and the bubble wrap,” Ian reminded him, because it sure was quiet in the exchange now as he was paying. Gathering his things, he headed to the small window down the way to mail the package. Standing there, he carefully slid the mirror into the box that had a piece of Styrofoam in it, wrapped it in bubble wrap. He used the scarf to ‘gift wrap’ it before putting it inside of another mailing box. It wasn’t a great packing job, and he hoped it made it to June in one piece... only to see Logan walking up to the counter – and tossed down something that clunked on the table.

“Drop one in,” Captain Logan ordered. “That’s my wife’s favorite candy, and your girl might like it too, Selkirk.”

“What is it?” he asked, picking up the thing that looked like a white brick with nuts in it. It was about the size of a deck of playing cards and cut into four pieces.

“Some pistachio nougat thing that is honey and rose flavored.”

“Oh, ah... thanks?”

“Girls like gifts... and candy,” Logan offered. “If you don’t know what to send them, then candy is usually a safe bet. Keep writing and encourage the others to do so, Selkirk.”

“Sir? Can I ask a weird question that I probably will regret?”

“Sure,” Logan chuckled, sealing his package to his wife and looking at him. “Ask away.”

“Why are you being... nice?” Ian hedged, and looked at the man’s surprised face. “I don’t mean it rudely, but you’ve really reamed me for talking back, and...”

“Selkirk,” Logan began quietly. “Work is work. Right now, we’re just two guys mailing packages back home, okay? I’m a normal person who is responsible for a lot of guys, and I have a job to do. If you want to send your girl something different, something from Afghanistan, I thought maybe you’d like one – but if you don’t? It’s okay. I’ll just put that chewy nougat stuff into Juliet’s box.”

“No... um, thank you. I’d like to send it to June and see what she thinks.”

“I’m just trying to keep everyone afloat right now, because I know it’s been a tough month or two. That’s why I told you to encourage the others to write their pen pals, because you talk to everyone - and they respond. Whereas with me? They freak out when I’m trying to be nice away from the office,” Logan smirked, and Ian’s mouth dropped open. “I’m kidding – relax, okay?”

Ian nodded and hesitated.

“Can we get beer here? It would be really cool to hang out and have a beer, you know? An ice breaker – and the guys would like it.”

“Nope. No beer – and I don’t think me getting drunk would go over well for anyone. It would only make my job harder... and no one wants a meaner version of myself. Do they?”

“Gotcha. We’ll skip the beer. Good call, sir.”

Logan laughed easily, and Ian found himself chuckling as he glanced at the other man nervously – especially when he patted him on the shoulder.

“You’re alright, Selkirk,” Logan uttered quietly. “No matter what Mitchell says about you.”

“Wait... *what?*” Ian sputtered. “What does Mitchell say about me? Captain Logan? Captain? What’s Mitchell telling people about me... Captain? *Captain??*”

Ian stood there as the other man walked off, whistling a filthy little ditty he recognized from basic training several years ago – surprising him once more as he processed the last ten minutes in his mind.



**JUNE**

SHOCKED, she read Ian's email several times... and was unsure if she should laugh or cry. Did he not pick up on the subtle hints she was giving him? What kind of 'clod' actually told a strange woman '*What a catch he was,*' insinuated they were going to go on a date, before claiming that he was *shy*? And in the very same email, implied at the size of...

She shook her head and didn't even finish the thought.

This man was anything *but* shy!

Ian Selkirk was outrageous, persistent, weird, and... funny. She liked a guy with humor, and really didn't want to like this stranger. No, it was a lot easier to push him away, say 'no' repeatedly, and keep things politely distant, or close that 'door' altogether.

... Maybe he just didn't realize that?

She could use a friend – *but that was it.*

There was no way she was traveling down the rabbit hole of a relationship ever again, because it hurt too much to lose someone. It was painful enough to realize that your partner couldn't talk to you, couldn't trust you enough to open up, couldn't lean on you to help them through their addiction... and she would never admit to anyone how much it hurt, nor the betrayal that left a sting in her soul.

Hitting reply, she began to type and hesitated, because this was opening up to a perfect stranger. He needed to either go away – or...

*What?*

*What do you want June?*

Cracking her knuckles, she buckled down and launched into a reply.

*Dear Ian,*

*See? I left off the Mr. Selkirk – and will never ever address you as ‘Daddy’.*

*Perhaps you are right, and you do need to know a little more about me – if we are to continue to write each other... or decide to finally buzz off? I never intended for a pen pal, but laughed at a few spots in your last email, definitely starting my day out with a smile.*

*Congratulations. You’ve done something most haven’t been able to since my husband died. My husband passed away from a drug overdose at the age of twenty-seven... and I never saw it coming. There were no signs, no indication that he was using; either that, or I was too stupid to notice.*

*You keep implying a date to a basketball game, referring to what’s in your pants, and commenting about how irresistible you are?*

**COMPLETE TURN OFF, BUDDY.**

*I’m not looking for a relationship – nor are you my type. I don’t go for the brash, arrogant, egotistical men who think women are just standing around waiting to fawn all over them. If we’re going to write each other, it has to be with the understanding that whatever is said, is between two FRIENDS – that’s it.*

*I’m a very busy woman who doesn’t have time to indulge in romantic fantasies. I’m a real estate agent,*

*read entirely too much, like to crochet during my down time, and really a very boring person deep down inside.*

*I do not have a wild streak in me – and sushi is about as crazy as my food choices get... and my selection of ‘crazy or egotistical’ men is zilch.*

*Zilch – get it?*

*Try to cool your ardor, pen pal. I’m not your girl.*

*June*

*P.S. You do NOT have a shy bone in your body.*

Clicking send, she looked up as a delivery driver walked into the office – carrying a massive bouquet of long-stemmed, pale-pink roses. There had to be two dozen there, and half of them were still curled into tight buds.

June looked over to see Amanda preening and fought the urge to roll her eyes. The woman was newly married, and the couple was sickeningly sweet, making kissy noises on the phone and whispering cutesy comments when they thought no one could hear them.

Going back to her search, she looked up as a shadow blocked the sunlight streaming in on her desk... only to come face-to-face with the bouquet and Donna’s stunned expression.

“Yes?” June said bluntly, not moving.

“This is for you.”

“That’s not even funny, Donna.”

“I’m not joking.”

“Are they from a client?” June asked as the other woman set down the massive cluster and smelled them.

“They’re not really perfumed much, but it’s awfully lovely just the same.”

“Can you double check the card?” Amanda said sweetly from her desk. “Just to be sure?”

June plucked the card out of the bouquet and opened it, swallowing hard as she stared in disbelief.

*Thank you for giving me something to look forward to. I needed it ~ Ian.*

“No,” she began hoarsely. “These are for me.”

“But you aren’t dating anyone and...” Amanda’s voice trailed off, as June looked up at her slowly.

“Just because I’m a widow and I’m choosing not to date right now, doesn’t mean that someone cannot send me flowers – and newsflash? Not everyone is after you, Amanda.”

She didn’t mean it to come off so nasty, but the woman was quite annoying, and the fact that she was so sure no one could have sent the roses to her was just irritating. Leaning in, she took a deep breath and breathed in the soft hint of perfume, still reeling.

This was not a cheap bouquet – and she would have flipped if they were bright red roses, the color of love. Instead, these were soft, unassuming, and actually pretty perfect.

Sitting down, she sent another email to Ian, knowing she wouldn’t be able to concentrate until she said, ‘Thank you’.

*Dear Ian,*

*I’m not sure why you sent the roses – but thank you. They are stunning, and too much.*

*Sincerely,*

*June*



THE FOLLOWING MONDAY, June walked into the office with her lunch, intending to eat at her desk while she searched again for houses for her clients. It was a tough market, and

right now everything was going exceedingly quick, resulting in a lot of frustration.

Looking up, she stopped in her tracks, and there beside her roses that were still blooming, was a vase of purple tulips. The heavy flowers were draped over the glass edge, and greenery helped keep them looking full.

Picking up the card off the plastic pic, she withdrew it and read.

*Have a great week – I'll email you Wednesday.*

*Yours truly,*

*Ian*

“Spill it,” Amanda said bluntly. “Who’s the guy?”

“A friend.”

“Those are not gifts from ‘friends’ – or at least not any I’ve known. Friends hang out and you are always here, working. I don’t think I’ve seen one friend come in here asking for you.”

“Amanda,” June said evenly. “What I do during my spare time is my own, and perhaps if you would put as much dedication into your clients as you do getting into my business, then maybe...”

“My point exactly,” Amanda interrupted. “You’ve got an attitude, and no one normal would want to be around that.”

“Maybe my friend isn’t normal?” June replied, cracking a smile... because it was kinda true. Ian wasn’t some normal guy, and was turning out to be a very hard to understand man. Why did he send her flowers again?

Taking a seat, she pulled out her peanut butter and jelly sandwich, carefully smoothing a paper towel over her lap in case she dropped something, and leaned forward. Taking a bite, she opened up her email and saw Ian had written her – twice!

*Sweetest June,*

*The roses are because I appreciate you – and I wanted you to think of me.*

*In fact, I want you to start each week with me on your mind. I'm determined to make you smile, laugh, and work my way into your circle of friends. You've never met anyone like me - and never will again.*

*Yours,*

*Ian*

Chuckling, she chewed nervously, realizing the truth of his bold proclamation, and ignoring how it made her feel. No, this was all such a bad idea, and he was coming on way too strong.

Clicking on the other email that he had replied to, she nearly choked.

*Oooh Meeeeeow, my sweet June!*

*My adorable kitten has claws and likes to scratch! Feel free to be yourself, because I will take your spitting and hissing – before turning it into purring and curling up against me.*

*I'm sorry to hear you are widowed, and the conditions that your husband left you under. How long ago did he pass away? Death leaves an emptiness that no one understands, and it's hard to be strong.*

*... Which means you need me even more than ever before!*

*Arch your back, puff that fur my little kitty, and growl all you want... it doesn't change that I'm the best man you'll ever meet. So, before you click reply and holler at me online?*

*Remember, deep down inside, I'm really a nice guy that is trying hard to impress you. Take a minute, breathe, put down whatever you are going to throw at*

*the computer... and check your mailbox in about a week.*

*That's all the hint you get from me, my sweet Minx!*

*Yours truly,*

*Ian*

*P.S. I can't wait to read Wednesday's email. Feel free to address it as 'Dear Daddy' or 'My Favorite Man'. You could even use 'My Amazing Soldier'... because I'm all of that - and a bag of chips.*

June stared at the email in disbelief, blinked several times, and shut her laptop – backing away from it. She got up to get a cup of coffee, looked over her shoulder as if the computer was a threat and following her, before pouring a cup.

He was wild, outrageous, pushy, and a shameless flirt, completely knocking her off-kilter. Nobody ever talked to her like that – not even Mark!

It was... strangely *refreshing*.

If she pushed too hard, people took it the wrong way. When she snapped at her parents for setting her up, her mother had cried, and she felt bad for weeks – but this stranger?

This confounding man who rankled her nerves and made her boil at the arrogant, assumptive attitude was really a lot to swallow. This man was taunting her for *more*, trying to draw her out, and teasing her curiosity... as if he knew she would 'bite'.

*Check my mail in a week? Start my week out thinking of him... by sending her flowers? Was he planning on doing that every Monday? No way... guys did not do that – did they?* she thought in disbelief, before turning her head to look back at her desk to see the two vases standing there, saying 'Hello' silently.

*Drat!*

His plan was working.

He was hard to ignore... and hard to stay mad at.

My goodness, the man had no filter on his mouth, and it was like he thrived on shocking her or pushing her to interact with him. No, she wasn't replying yet, and needed to think.



**SELKIRK**

It was almost a month before he heard from June again – and he was biding his time. Patience was not his strong suit and his mouth usually ran away from him, but he was persistent when he wanted something... and he wanted to know more about her.

Instead of letting it bother him, he continued his mental assault on her, knowing eventually she would get mad enough to talk to him... or actually reach her.

Four weeks ago, the flowers he sent were hyacinth.

Three weeks ago, it was peonies.

Two weeks ago, it was a gardenia plant that had been weirdly configured into a bonsai shape. It was different, novel, original... and he was trying to get a response from her.

Two days ago, Ian sent her a dozen pale purple roses with a note that called her out plainly.

*The ol' silent treatment – eh, pen pal?'*

Ian was hoping to goad a response from her, good or otherwise. In fact, he'd ordered something for her that he knew would absolutely cause her to either blow up, or respond. He hated the silence, and desperately wanted to hear back from June.

The feisty woman intrigued him, and he was looking for someone who wasn't afraid to push buttons, laugh, or smile with him... but maybe this was all wrong?

It didn't *feel* wrong... it felt good.

Ian hoped he did the same thing for her that she was doing for him. Maybe this *was* the stupid 'Romeo curse' that he was afflicted with – or perhaps he was just ready for a different fight in his life than what was going on in Afghanistan.

Like today.

Ian was bringing up the rear of a patrol squad and hating this unbearable heat. He was in a mood because he wanted to talk to June, get away, or find a way to reach her, and seemed to be struggling.

“What the heck do girls want anyhow?” he muttered, as Peña looked over his shoulder at him, laughing.

“Got it bad, Romeo?”

“It's ridiculous. I mean, I thought girls wanted attention...”

“Not your kind.”

“*Not your kind,*” Ian mimicked, making a face at Collins, and continued. “This place is nothing but a bunch of sand and rocks. My sweet girl is so classy, cool, and elegant...”

Ian sighed heavily, closing his eyes for a moment dreamily as he pictured her from one of the symposium photos that he found online. That fitted jacket, pinched waist, flared skirt, and shiny black pumps. Gosh, he loved that she wore dresses.

“What's she doing with you then?”

Ian made a face again, waving his hands mockingly at his side, and acting childishly... which only made 'Doc' laugh. The Army medic was in the middle of the line, and he was glad it wasn't Minors. Beck was sure a sight more pleasant to deal with – even if she threatened you with dull needles when you acted up during treatment.

“Girls want to be romanced,” Beck said, laughing. “We want to know a guy is listening, paying attention, and focusing

on you.”

“Oh, I’m fully focused on her...”

“Not getting in her pants, Selkirk,” Peña retorted.

“She’s a lady. A *real* lady with dresses, pumps, stockings... oh gosh, the stockings,” Ian groaned, and the entire team began laughing as they marched.

Yeah, he had it bad for June.

“Have you sent her flowers?”

“Six times.”

“She doesn’t like you, dude...”

“Can it, would you?”

“What about something special?” Beck asked.

“Like what? I sent her a few trinkets and...”

“What about something she likes, something that shows you notice her, or you appreciate her...”

“Oh, I appreciate her alright!”

“Her stockings that you were just grunting about?”

“Why don’t you send her something classy – and not stockings!” Beck finished quickly. “Maybe a perfume or some fancy gloves, if she’s that classy?”

“Now that’s an idea...” Ian admitted, realizing that Beck might be onto something.

“If she’s got a favorite brand, you could always send her something from there? Like my mother loves her Coach purse – but doesn’t need another one, because she’s picky about the size and color. So my dad gets her an umbrella from the store to match for Christmas instead. My sister will get a keychain from there, my brother gets a scarf, my other brother gets her some perfume from there, and then my oldest...”

“How many Becks are in the bushel?”

“Funny, Selkirk,” she said, laughing. “There’s a lot of us, and I’m just trying to give out ideas.”

“I appreciate them.”

“No, you don’t,” Talbot chimed in, teasing him.

“Yeah, I do – because they aren’t *your* ideas. And why is it so blasted hot out today? I’m gonna have grill marks on my hide...”

“It’s a little muggy...”

“It’s a freakin’ sauna in this litterbox. Can we please go home now, papa? I’ll be good,” Ian chirped mockingly, and heard everyone laugh again. “I’ll do my homework and clean my room. I promise.”

“Yeah, we’re about done here today. Let’s head out.”

It was another mile back to the truck in this heat and by the time Ian took his seat, his feet were throbbing, his back was covered in sweat under his pack, and his helmet felt like a cast iron skillet fresh out of the oven. Plopping down heavily on a bench in the truck, he let out his breath, and was grateful for the small amount of stifling shade.

A bottle of water was shoved at him – and he glanced up to see Beck was handing them out to everyone. Accepting it, he gulped down almost half gratefully, before speaking up as everyone took their seats.

“So, are you coming on the next one too, Doc?” Ian asked, because it was nice to be treated politely – and Minors had never handed them water to make sure they were okay.

“She’s not as mouthy as Minors, and a sure lot prettier.”

“Minors *is* mean,” Ian said bluntly, shaking his water bottle pointedly as he raised an eyebrow.

“Because you told him that ‘having your back’ meant he was going to be called your ‘golf caddy’ for the afternoon when you put a ‘hole in one’, Selkirk.”

“Hey! I put a hole in one... just before he put a hole in me!” Ian joked, grinning as he finished his water bottle.

That day had been awful – and much like today. He had been so dehydrated and felt so dizzy, that he’d asked Minors,

who was the only one not carrying anything at the time, to take his bag. When the man smarted off, so did Ian... right before a rebel jumped out of an alley, aiming at him.

Just as Ian was about to ask for another bottle of water? Morrison's dog yelped loudly, and Ian was suddenly airborne. He didn't even have time to think as he was violently ejected from the truck like a bad swan dive.

It all happened so fast he didn't even have time to brace himself or roll with it... as a piece of metal hit him – hard. A car door imbedded in the sand not a foot from his head with a mind-numbing ‘thump’ that rattled his teeth. He lay there, gasping painfully, trying to get his breath back and shaking his head to clear the ringing in his ears as he realized the truck had exploded.

Ian scrambled several times to get to his feet and felt the world lurch sideways, almost making him vomit there in the sand. Something hit his head hard – but as he tried to focus on the truck that was now laying on its side. He saw the chaos, and heard the sound of shouts... staggering forward, and trying not to drop from the vertigo washing over him.

He saw Keyes and Beck hunkered down behind something, as others were pulling themselves from the wreckage. He saw a body in the distance sticking out, half-buried under the truck, and nearly vomited again.

Someone was dead.

“MORRISON! WE'VE GOT HOSTILES COMING IN HOT,” Keyes screamed out as Ian shook his head again, trying to clear it as the other man swung up his rifle – aiming. They were going to die out here if he didn't pull his weight to help protect their squad. Staggering forward, he drew his gun and was trying to calm the hysteria that he saw on Morrison, Beck, and Keyes' faces.

“You don't have to all surrender at once, you know...” Ian hollered in a sing-song voice, waving at the men in the distance running towards them with rifles, shovels, and homemade Molotov cocktails.

“One at a time,” Ian continued, trying to keep from fear seizing all of them as he wiped the blood off his face. There looked to be almost a hundred men preparing to rush them, and three men with one medic were not going to be able to stave them off. “You can surrender *one at a time*... it’s probably better that way, too!”

“Let me see you,” Beck ordered – rising upwards to her feet.

*She was going to get herself killed*, he thought wildly.

“It’s just a scratch. I’m fine... and get down!”

Ian shoved her hand away and grabbed her by the pack, before yanking her bodily down behind the truck. He looked up again and frowned.

It was about to get messy.

A medic was the only thing that could keep them alive if one of them got injured. If he was about to get shot or worse... he wanted someone with medical skills to aid him!

Peña limped over to them.

“Where’s Turner and Collins?”

“Peña? You okay, buddy?”

“I don’t know...”

Ian, Keyes, and Peña swung their rifles up in unison... as the insurgents and rebels began rushing at them; gun shots began to make contact with the hull of the truck, and chaos reigned.

*Dang it*, Ian thought wretchedly, his teeth jarring as he shot his firearm repeatedly. *I just want to talk to June, and I want her to like me...*



HOURS LATER, Ian’s face was streaked with sweat. There was debris from his rifle leaving a smoky haze on his skin, and

exhaustion beat at him... but he wasn't passing up his chance to order more flowers for his girl – or say 'hello'.

He plopped down heavily in the computer chair and stared at the screen for a moment, before logging in.

*Please let there be a response*, he thought silently, and closed his eyes briefly in gratitude and relief as he saw June's name pop up.

Clicking on it, he began to read.

*Dear Ian,*

*I'll admit I don't know what to make of you – but you don't stop trying, do you? I have six vases of every shape, size, color... and somehow, I know that there will be another one on Monday - which that thought alone is making me smile and giving me something to look forward to.*

*I received your box... the gift.*

*The scarf is beautiful, and pink is my favorite color. I have a terrible sweet tooth, and rarely indulge because the clothing I like doesn't really allow for any wiggle room on the fitted seams. The mirror you sent was breathtaking... and reminds me of something a Hollywood Starlet would use at her dressing table.*

*I always thought I should have been born in another era, and wonder sometimes why people do or act the way they do. I guess I'm old-fashioned, which is part of the reason I'm struggling with this.*

*Something in me says I'm supposed to finish my days mourning my husband's death... but I'm angry and feel guilty about it. I shouldn't be blabbing this all to you, but no one understands. I need to get it off my chest, because it's eating me alive. For two years I've tried to understand why my husband, my spouse, didn't feel like he could tell me he had a drug problem... and realized that I'm not a good person. I'm the reason why he didn't say anything.*

*Let me stress that: I'm not a good person, Ian.*

*You are wasting your time and money on someone who doesn't deserve the kind words, the attention, the flowers. You make me laugh, but that energy needs to be focused elsewhere.*

*I need to stay in my lane, keep focused on the next task, the next sale, the next project, speech, award, or whatever... because I've got nothing else. I feel so pathetically empty with nothing left to give.*

*I appreciate the smiles you have given me – even when I wanted to shake you, throttle you, slap your outrageous mouth, or throw the computer (the temptation was there a few times).*

*Let Monday's flower delivery be the last one as we say 'goodbye'... okay? I don't need any more vases – nor another ruined life on my hands.*

*I'm sorry,*

*June*

Ian sighed heavily and put his face in his hands, feeling so tired and lost right now, wondering how he could open that doorway again with the woman that fascinated him. He sat there for several moments, before swallowing down that pain of rejection, determined to double-down on his efforts.

*My little Minx,*

*I hear what you are saying – but assigning guilt for another person's actions will not solve anything or change what happened. Do you think the world expects a woman in her twenties to be alone for the next sixty years or so? Would your husband want you to never smile, laugh, find love, or hold your own child someday?*

*I could joke around, make so many innuendos or comments – but I think you need to hear from the rarely seen serious side of me... and that man is aching*



*right now. 'Serious Ian' is not as much fun – but he's brutally honest.*

*As someone who witnessed the best and worst of humanity today – I'm just emotionally raw right now. I have to believe that if your marriage was so beautiful that it deserved such dedication? Then a husband who truly loved you for all the joy you brought him - should want more for you.*

*I may brag a lot, pretend to be all macho, but this is your pen pal talking to his best friend – and telling you not to give up on living.*

*I know that your work gives you purpose, but it's those quiet hours of the night when you wonder 'what if' that are the hardest to get through... or at least for me they are.*

*Just hang on and don't give up on me. I kinda need to know that I'm reaching you, and even negative attention is still attention.*

*Breathe, my friend.*

*Just because you are ready to retreat doesn't mean that I am ready to let you go.*

*This is me, holding up the lamp in the dark mental cave where we seem to be trapped or stuck inside of. Take my hand, take the lamp, take whatever you want from me... but don't put out the light, because it's the only thing holding that suffocating darkness back.*

*Ian*

*P.S. I knew the flowers would make you smile – and I'm really glad you told me.*

Placing several more orders for flowers deliberately, he also doubled-down, took Beck's advice, and indulged in purchasing something unexpected for her. Getting up, Ian was on a mission to reach June, and determined more than ever.

Other people would say this was ridiculous, strange, stalker-like, or that he should take a hint... but the dreamer in him wanted to believe in that Romeo curse – that he was lucky enough to have his lady-love fall into his lap, and believed in fate.

Maybe he was just a romantic fool... but that *fool* was about to knock it out of the ballpark, if he had any say at all.

**JUNE**

SHE SAT down at her desk Thursday morning, feeling a wave of desolation wash over her as she knew that Ian probably got her email. She hoped he understood what she was trying to tell him... and honestly didn't expect him to write back.

Instead of clicking on it, she swallowed back the pain at seeing his name there in her email when she opened it. He would probably be angry, say something shocking, or simply agree and end their correspondence. It would be the end... and she couldn't even bring herself to open the email.

Feeling her eyes sting and a lump in her throat, she grabbed a cup of coffee and checked her voicemail.

"Hi June, this is Karen Sorensen. Jace and I were talking about the farmhouse again and we'd like to see it one more time. Give me a call when you get this... Thanks."

June jotted down the note and deleted the voicemail, listening to the next one.

"Hi June, this is..." the voice went on and on for several minutes, as she scribbled down notes. Three-bedroom house, at least three bathrooms, but a three car garage was necessary, the voice rambled, and she finally deleted the voicemail after jotting down the number... only to hear music.

She moved to delete the voicemail... and hesitated.

***"C'mon girl! Do you believe in love...?"***

The voice started emphatically, and she burst out laughing in shock as she recognized the song from Madonna as a man's voice started singing loudly with enthusiasm.

*Ian! ... This had to be Ian!*

Nobody else was wild enough to do something so crazy...

Disbelieving, she couldn't fight the grin on her face as he belted out the song, word for word, chorus and everything... and found herself humming happily as several of her coworkers stared at her in surprise. When the song was almost over, she heard him clear his throat on the recording and listened, fascinated.

"Minx, I'm hoping you've guessed it's me by now, and if not? Then my crushed ego doesn't want to know how many other handsome fellas you have singing to you," he said openly, drawing her in.

"Don't give up, okay? I want to continue this friendship, and I'm going to still send the flowers because it makes *me* happy to send them to you. I'm so glad you like the scarf. I want to send you more things and share some joy... and if you don't like Madonna? I've got a list of songs that I'd be happy to serenade you with."

His lighthearted chuckle made her melt and laugh softly as she remained frozen, her phone held to her head.

"I meant what I said in my email... and if you'd give me your cell number or home address? I'll start plying you with goodies of a different sort. I just don't feel right sending satin sheets, lingerie, or body butter to your work."

She laughed uncomfortably, eyes widening in disbelief at his words, as she heard him speak again.

"I'm kidding... sorta. My timer on my calling card is counting down, and I hope this voicemail made you smile. Listen to it one more time and picture some incredibly sexy soldier singing and dancing in a small room about the size of a broom closet, knowing there are five other soldiers waiting in a line outside of the door," she heard him laugh again,

realizing that he had no shame, and thrived on having a good time or being goofy.

“Now, I’m gonna go do the ‘Walk of Shame’ past them, listen to their critique of my wonderful singing – and go mail my special girl something pretty to make her smile again. Have a great day, Minx, and we’ll talk soon. Bye.”

Stunned, her mind whirling, June replayed the recording once more, and listened in fascination to this crazy man... who was starting to reach her.

Opening her email, she ignored the trembling of her fingertips and double-clicked on his name. As she began to read, she felt her eyes tear up and turned away, unable to read anymore without starting to cry. Instead, she printed the email, folded it up, and shoved it in her purse to read when she was alone later.

She needed a distraction, needed to focus... and needed her head examined because of what she was thinking and feeling right now.

Grabbing her purse, her notes, and her list of phone calls to return – she headed out to her car, hopping inside, and welcoming the distraction.



HOURS LATER, June was ordering her brother one of his favorite cookies to be shipped to him... and ordered a second one for Ian.

She knew from experience that it would take a few days to get there, and always tucked an icepack under the plastic cellophane tray that she wrapped in bubble wrap. The smaller boxes seemed to get to Joshua faster than the larger ones – and hoped it was the same for Ian.

... Which made her hesitate.

*Did he know her brother?*

It had been a while since she had emailed him, and he'd just surprised her recently at Thanksgiving for a brief visit. Maybe she would reach out to Joshua to see what he could find out about Ian.

Mailing the cookies right away, June stopped once more... for a very different purpose. She wanted to surprise Ian with something else, not just a cookie, but rather like he'd done for her with the scarf and the mirror.

Browsing around the store, she picked up several bags of candies, packaged nuts, and paused... staring at a shirt in disbelief, laughing. This would fit Ian's personality to a 'T' – and picked it up immediately. She continued browsing, deciding to make not just the one care package but two or three of them... along with another one for her brother.

Just being out, gathering little goodies and things to make Ian smile, made her feel good, and was strangely satisfying. She didn't want to admit that the idea of making her pen pal happy was weirdly more thrilling than closing the deal on a client she never thought she'd land.

As she checked out, boxed up everything, stopping by the post office to mail it... she recognized that this was quite out of the ordinary for her. She wasn't one to spend frivolous amounts of cash on something that couldn't be used to further her career – nor did she want to admit at how driven she was since Mark's death.

It was horrifyingly eye-opening to realize that you had to make it on your own, when before it was always the two of them, working as a team.

Getting back to her car, she picked up drive-thru nachos and immediately retreated to her home, wanting to read the rest of Ian's letter, and knowing it was going to be too much for her.

She wasn't a fool. The first paragraph told her she wasn't going to like what he said, and her eyes started burning when she began the second one, seeing Mark's name... that is when she had stopped.

Walking into her place, she plopped down on the loveseat and undid the belt on her skirt so she could breathe... and dragged out the paper, preparing herself.

... And cried.

Massive, sobbing tears tore through her as she realized that this man was saying the same things that she was afraid to hope for - and felt so guilty about. Mark chose to keep his addiction to himself, excluding her, and it wasn't her fault he overdosed.

... It also wasn't something to feel ashamed or guilty about, to want happiness in her own life.

She opened her laptop and began typing, replying to Ian's email, and ignored the tears on her cheeks.

*Dear Ian,*

*I appreciate your words – and they are so hard to swallow right now. I know that it's true, it's right, but that guilt I feel is going to have to be something I come to terms with. It's not a light switch to turn off and on.*

*You said you saw the 'best and worst of people' today? What happened? Let me be someone to listen to you, if you need someone to talk to – after all, I guess I need to pull my weight as a pen pal in this friendship... don't I?*

*Work does give me a purpose – and I'll be honest? It's enabled me to hide my grief, hoping time would dull some of it. It's hard to realize that guilt is the strongest emotion I feel right now when I think of Mark and it keeps me from living because I know he can't. The quiet hours are the worst, because that is when my mind is loudest.*

*I'm scared to admit it, but you are reaching me, even though I feel like I'm drowning sometimes. Don't let go, and keep pushing no matter how hard I fight, because I don't want to be alone anymore.*

*I need a friend.*

*I'm not giving up – I can't.*

*June*



**SELKIRK**

*Tyler, Texas*

*THIS WAS PROBABLY A BAAAAAD IDEA*, Ian mused, as he walked down the ramp towards baggage claim with Morrison. Surprising her might be a really bad, impulsive, idea on his part... but it was a little late now.

He was here.

The other soldier was flying to Tyler to visit his new wife after his last visit, which only served to reinforce Ian's thoughts regarding pen pals, the 'curse', fate, and the whole 'shebang'.

In fact, he not only 'double-downed' on his beliefs.

He tripled.

Ian bought a ticket to Tyler so he could talk to June – and if she ignored him, he was going to hire her and buy a place. It was insanely crazy on so many levels, but there was no fighting this anymore.

He needed to meet her.

“Madison, this is one of the soldiers in my barracks – Ian Selkirk. Selkirk, this is my wife and my son,” Morrison whispered openly, as Ian saw the little boy was asleep on the woman's shoulder. He gave a slight bow to be polite to her.

“Hello,” he said kindly, keeping his voice low.

“Do you have a ride?” Morrison asked bluntly, and Ian fought back a smile. The other soldier was already preparing to ‘ditch’ him – and that was fine. He didn’t want to be a third wheel, and wanted to look around in case it took him actually buying a place to get June to talk to him.

“Yeah, I’ve got it. I’m staying at a place not far from the airport, and going to see June tomorrow.”

“Good luck, my friend.”

“Have a great *visit*,” Ian grinned, winking at Morrison baldly, knowing his friend was about to lose himself in his wife’s arms...

“Stop embarrassing me or making me look bad in front of my wife. You know better,” Morrison snapped in a hushed whisper, shoving Ian bodily, causing him to laugh aloud, disturbing the little boy’s rest... who immediately settled back down with a heavy sigh.

“Goodnight y’all...” Ian chuckled, hefting up his bag and looking at the rental car counter in the distance.

“See ya, Selkirk.”

Walking towards the counter, he was in a rental vehicle twenty minutes later and exploring Tyler, Texas... and making plans for his little Minx.

**JUNE**

*My little Minx,*

*I'm so relieved to get your email and see your words. If you are okay with me pestering the dickens out of you? I'm here – always.*

*Give me a chance to be your friend, let's see where this goes, and you'll never shake me. Nor will I give you a reason to regret it.*

*Yours truly,*

*Ian*



JUNE READ his email and felt a flutter of awareness, but not fear. Just having this communication with him was giving her something to look forward to, and she needed that sense of ‘hope’ that came with each email, or on each Monday morning when her delivery arrived.

The driver was now teasing her about the flowers, wondering what bouquet it would be next week. Amanda was green with envy and snapping at her new husband, wanting to

know why she hadn't gotten any flowers since they'd married... and June just felt alive.

In fact, she received a small package today at the office that surprised her. Ian had sent her that scarf, but that came in a very weathered, beat-up, stamped package... but this was from Amazon, which explained why it came so fast instead of taking 2-3 weeks.

Opening the box, she hesitated and smiled. Inside was two small packages that surprised her at how feminine a gift it was. There was a bottle of perfume called Gucci Bloom that smelled heavenly of flowers, and she sprayed it lightly on her wrists immediately, nearly purring in happiness.

Looking at the other package, she sighed openly and stared at a shockingly red tube of expensive matte lipstick. She had always loved deep red lipsticks... but Mark had preferred a dusky rose color. Both were intimate, feminine gifts designed to make her feel good about herself – and both utterly perfect.

Getting up from her desk, she walked to the bathroom to remove the pink lipstick and don the bright red with excitement. As she looked at her reflection, she wiped the other away and took a deep breath. Applying it, she couldn't help the infectious smile that touched her face.

“Perfect,” she whispered aloud to the woman in the mirror, and closed her eyes.

Having a pen pal, a friend, that was so sweet and caring was just incredible, and what she needed. She didn't need some bossy, clingy, or possessive man always hovering about. Having Ian in her life was enough, and already pushed the boundaries she'd set up for herself.

As she walked out of the bathroom, feeling a boost of confidence from the bright red lipstick... it immediately faded as Donna and Amanda stared at her.

“What? Too much? Is it too red?”

“Oh, it's gorgeous on you...” Donna volunteered.

“Yup,” Amanda said, giving her this smarmy smile that immediately set her on edge. “I think your guy will like it –

and I'm assuming it's from him."

"Yes, it's from my friend."

"Friend, huh?" Amanda chuckled and turned away, looking back at the file she was working on and the documents that were all over her desk. Just the way the woman acted set her on edge.

"Did something happen?"

"You had a delivery."

"It's not Monday."

"No, it's not..." Amanda chuckled again, shaking her head. "I thought you told Donna your pen pal was in Afghanistan?"

"He is..." and her voice trailed off as her eyes searched her desk, before freezing. There on her desk, lay a turquoise box that she recognized.

Tiffany's.

There was a large Tiffany's box sitting on her desk atop of the papers and folders she had waiting. The vibrant color practically glowed against the silver lettering, almost like a beacon.

*... Or a red flag.*

"He's in Afghanistan," June whispered openly, looking at the two women. "Right?"

"I thought that was what you said."

"Who brought that... that box here?"

"A guy..."

"What guy?!" she barked in alarm, feeling a spasm of anxiety take hold as her eyes searched the windows at the front of the office, looking to the parking lot for any signs of a man nearby.

"Some tall guy that came in asking for you."

"Why didn't he wait?"

“Cause ‘*Greedy*’ over here told him you had left for the day with a client to show houses, and offered to help him.”

“AMANDA!” she snapped angrily, shocked the other woman would try to take her client right out from under her nose.

“He said ‘No’ and that he would wait for you.”

“Wait – where?” she replied. “Where did he say he would wait, and when would he be back?”

“He didn’t say.”

“But he’s gone?”

“Yes.”

“He’s not supposed to be here,” June said openly, feeling overwhelmed right now, and knowing she wasn’t prepared to deal with some charming man pressing her for more.

As she walked over to the turquoise box, her hands shook nervously as she opened it slowly. Inside was a sterling silver, graduated, ball necklace. It was classy looking, and reminded her almost of a pearl necklace, except metal.

There was no note, no comment, no nothing...

“What did this guy look like?” June whispered, feeling suddenly unsure of herself and completely taken aback.

“Meh, he was cute.”

“I thought he was handsome.”

“No – what did he look like?” June snapped, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. “You said he was tall? Is he stocky? Thin? Musclebound? Short hair? Balding? Blue eyes? Nice smile?”

“I thought this was your friend?”

“I’ve never even met the guy...”

“You haven’t? And he’s been getting you flowers... and Tiffany’s?”

“I need to get out of here,” June whispered nervously, slamming the necklace box shut and shoving it into her purse.

“I’ll work from home today and will call you later, Donna.”

“What about your clients?”

“Just give them my cell number and tell them I’m in the field.”

“Do we need to call the police if that guy comes back?”

“I don’t know,” June whispered honestly, feeling suddenly unsure of herself or what Ian being here meant.

Walking out to her car quickly, she had her key in her hand and darted inside, locking the doors immediately. Putting her hand on her forehead and one on her stomach, trying to calm down, she took several deep breaths, before pulling out onto the main road nearby.

No, she was going to go hide for a while, and just handle what she could away from the office.

## **SELKIRK**

“OHHH MAAANNN,” Ian muttered aloud, watching the panicked woman dart out of the office and climb into some sleek SUV that screamed money. That was his little minx – and she looked completely freaked out.

“Bad idea, Selkirk! Bad, bad idea...”

He had walked into the office, intending to say ‘hello’ and ask her to join him for coffee... when the other woman in the office cornered him. She told him that June had left for the day, which he knew was a lie, and claimed that June was married... he also knew that was a lie.

She was widowed – *wasn't she?*

His curiosity was getting the better of him as he steeled the fluttering twinge of pain in his chest. He had thought June was single all this time and was falling for her, but if she was married? Had lied to him? He was about to get his heart broken in the worst way possible.

In order to get away from the other realtor that worked in June's office, who was currently making his skin crawl... he'd left and said he would return. He hadn't even started his car yet when June came running – literally.

... And now he was following her, like some stalker creep out of a horror movie?



“Oh my gosh Ian, you seriously need your head examined if you think this is the smart thing to do...?”

The car glided into the other lane of the road and turned on its turn signal, and Ian did the same. The road turned into a two-lane country road before there was a sign ahead.

Ashbury Park.

*A park?* he mused, wondering if she was cutting through some children’s park or national park... only to hesitate as the sleek SUV pulled into a trailer park.

She kept slowly driving and then slowed down – prompting Ian to make a right immediately, parking in front of some other mobile home where people were staring out the window at him.

He waved.

As June drove forward again, he hesitated and just watched her get towards the end of the lane and turned left. Once out of sight, he backed up and immediately drove down the bumpy road, through the neighborhood, and saw that it dead-ended into a ‘T’.

... And there, in the distance, was a carport at the very end of the road, complete with latticework covered in flowers, designed to hide the luxury vehicle. He watched June pull a plastic trash can up to the mobile home, like she’d done it a million times...

*What in the world was going on?*

His starlet, his pin-up girl, his precious pen pal that wowed him so thoroughly and drove some expensive vehicle that was probably more expensive than that mobile home... lived here?

Turning around, he drove back out of the neighborhood and realized that he needed to come up with a plan. He wasn’t a stalker, a weirdo, but rather wanted to reach his girl and have her talk to him. Gosh, she was so stinking gorgeous, it took his breath away.

Yeah, this was definitely going to require some ingenious recon work behind enemy lines.

Hours later, he realized that he might have the solution.



THIS WAS either the most brilliant plan he'd ever come up with – or the most ignorant one... and both descriptions applied to him fully. He was one *brilliant ignoramus* who was about to get the police called on him by a very scared woman.

“Shhh...” he whispered audibly, and parked in front of the other mobile home in order to not be seen. Putting his plan into motion, the first step would require a silent set up... and a miracle.

He was no fool.

Very carefully, he constructed most of his surprise in the parking lot of Home Depot, before darting over to the Wal-Mart next door to finish the remainder of it... only to get distracted in the parking lot by a family, before moving to pick up the remainder of things.

If one bit of his plan failed, if something fell through the cracks, he was going to be explaining to the Army why he was detained in Texas.

“Oh gosh,” he gulped, and looked up at the deepening orange and purples of the vibrant sunset. “If you are actually listening, just remember? I’ve never asked for anything before... but I’m freakin’ *begging* for this favor, please? Do me a solid, Big Guy.”

He held his breath as he pulled forward, honked his horn, and then bolted into place for this charade to begin.

**JUNE**

LOOKING up at the car horn, she rolled her eyes and realized the neighbors were having people over again. That was what she liked about being at the very end of the road, that she only had neighbors on one side.

Her email to Ian had not been responded to as of yet – and maybe she was a little harsh. It was one single sentence and nothing else needed to be said... until he replied.

*WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING  
COMING HERE?*

Sitting at the table, she continued making notes, sending out emails to potential customers, and using her phone to make cold-calls.

“Hello, my name is June Peyton of ReMax and...”

*\*click\**

Ughhhh, hang-ups were almost as fun as the ones that bit your head off. People could be so rude sometimes and... hesitated. She heard a noise outside and called Donna’s cell phone.

“Hello?”

“Donna – it’s June. Hey, did he ever come back?”

“No. We never saw him again. Why? Did you hear from him, or see him?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Are you coming in tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure yet. I’m waiting for an email back from him or to see how tonight goes.”

“What do you think...”

“I’m not sure,” she cut off the other woman, not really wanting to speculate or go through multiple scenarios with her. After Mark died, Donna had made a list of reasons that maybe she didn’t know about Mark’s addiction.

That did not help things in the slightest – even if the older woman was trying to be helpful... supposedly.

Hearing another noise outside, she turned off the kitchen lights where she was sitting, and moved towards the window... only to freeze.

There, in the small front yard in front of her mobile home, was something she would never ever forget. There were two chairs set up – with a sheet between them, stapled to what looked like two broom handles driven into the ground creating a ‘wall’. A man with blond hair sat there in a lawn chair, while another lawn chair sat on the opposite side... and he was holding a bouquet of red roses.

There was a cardboard sign on a pair of stakes that had runny spray paint on it that was barely legible... and said ‘The Dating Game’ – next to a picnic blanket complete with a tray laden with food.

... And he waved.

He saw her.

Instead of moving, she watched as he simply sat back in the lawn chair and relaxed, like he wasn’t going anywhere. Hesitating, she opened the front door and locked the screen door.

“Why are you here?” June said bluntly.

“Hello, little Minx. It’s a pleasure to finally meet you.”

She paused as he stood up and held out the roses to her – and June shook her head, only for him to sit back down and pull out a piece of paper.

“Guess you don’t want to go through this list of questions then?” Ian said simply... and waited.

*Curse him*, she thought, knowing that she was going to take the bait. She had no idea what was on that slip of paper unless he was trying to recreate the Dating Game or play Twenty Questions... and saw something wiggle by the picnic blanket in the fading light, hesitating again.

*Something moved!*

Now she was good and hooked like a bear caught in a trap. Unable to fight it, she unlocked the door and stepped outside... curious.

“Oh – and you should absolutely come meet Gigi, my new girlfriend,” he chuckled, and she saw red. The man was horrid and obnoxious... and handsome.

“C’mere Gigi... come see Daddy,” he crooned, and the thing that wiggled, suddenly jumped out from under the blanket and wobbled precociously towards him, jumping up and down at his ankles – and she froze.

“Ian, is that...” she hissed in disbelief, staring at a bundle of fur with two little black eyes. “Is that a Yorkie?”

“A baby Tea Cup Yorkie, and I just happened across this sweet little girl as they were walking into the shelter with her – she’s a tiny thing and...”

June was drawn forward, looking at the little scraggly brown and tanned mop that needed a trim as the puppy turned to look at her. Kneeling down, Gigi gave a little bark and ran over, trying to climb up her skirt... and sliding down the material, causing June to laugh nervously.

She looked up at Ian and saw him leaning forward, watching her with a softness to his gaze.

“She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” he said gently. “I couldn’t leave her there, no matter what. It’s not in me, my friend.”

“What made you name her Gigi?” she asked, not commenting on his words and cradling the puppy to her chest. The tiny animal was so happy, she was writhing and licking at June wildly, trying to love on her.

“That’s actually one of the questions for *The Dating Game* – if you are one of the contestants?” he grinned at her mischievously, and held up the folded piece of paper. “Does this mean you are interested?”

“Where’s the rest of the contestants?” she retorted glibly, lifting an eyebrow.

“That’s a great question – and also on the list.”

June couldn’t help it... she laughed as he chuckled easily with her. She remained where she was, kneeling before him where she’d scooped up the puppy, and met his smile.

“You’re no good, are you?”

“I’m the best there is,” he replied playfully, his eyes dancing.

“And you have this whole thing planned out?”

“The entire evening for our first date.”

“A date, huh?”

“Are you asking me out?” he said innocently.

“I think we both know better...”

“Did you like your necklace?” Ian asked softly, his voice tender and gentle as he continued smiling at her. “I saw it and thought it matched the classy girl I had in my mind.”

“You are spoiling me,” she admitted bluntly and raised an eyebrow at him. “We’re still only friends – and that’s it.”

“Then we don’t need these,” he replied, tucking the questions back into his shirt pocket as she gritted her teeth. “Are you hungry?”

“I thought you wanted to play a game?”

“It’s a *dating game* and we’re *only friends*, remember?”

“Oh my gosh, you are infuriating.”

“I’ll grow on you, I promise.”

They stared at each other, like two enemies facing off at high-noon in an old western. She honestly was trying to pick her next move, like some chess game, and thinking of all the ways he could pivot or corner her. She knew he wanted there to be more between them, because everything he said or did was as a man interested in a woman...

“Why me?” she whispered softly.

“It’s on this sheet of paper,” he replied patiently, his eyes dancing. “The only question I have for you is would you be more comfortable sitting in the chair with the sheet blocking my view and giving you a measure of comfort or isolation... or would you like to lounge on the picnic blanket like friends, snack on the tray of goodies that I picked up, let Gigi play around us, and I will answer every question in your curious heart.”

She hesitated and pursed her lips, looking at him.

“You really don’t play fair.”

“When I want to win this badly?” he replied softly. “Never. I give it everything I’ve got.”

“Let me see those questions and I’ll tell you...”

“Nope,” he interrupted arrogantly. “You decide now. Friends on the picnic blanket, or strangers in the chairs.”

She reached up and plucked the questions from his shirt pocket with a raised eyebrow, and saw his smile spread.

“Blanket, *my friend*...”

“Fantastic,” he chuckled. “I’m starving, and I picked up an amazing tray of food to snack on. Do you like strawberries?”

“I’m allergic,” she replied automatically – and saw his face fall immediately as he looked at her in surprise.

“Gotcha,” she crowed softly, smiling at him. “Two can play this mental game, Ian.”

Instead of getting upset or laughing, he gave her a look with an expression that made her toes curl at the intensity in his eyes. He held out his hand towards her, helping her up from where she was kneeling... and walked her over to the picnic blanket.

June allowed him to assist her as she knelt, her skirt fluffing around her with the layered slip, tucking her feet under her as she kicked off her heels. She set Gigi down – who automatically climbed back onto her lap, letting out a small yip and licking her hand.

Ian lay on his side on the opposite side of the cellophane tray between them, propping his head on his hand as he gazed at her.

“Shall we begin, my sweet Minx?”

... And June swallowed, because she wasn't sure he was talking about the game of questions anymore. Taking a deep breath, she desperately searched for anything to lighten the tension between them as she unfolded the paper, recognizing her hands were trembling.

“Are you nervous?”

“I have zero to be nervous about,” she quipped confidently in a lofty tone that made him chuckle easily – and without skipping a beat, he lifted up his torso by clenching his abdomen to pull the lid off the tray, before leaning back down and relaxing once more.

She gulped audibly.

His drab green t-shirt did nothing to hide the fact that something exceedingly nice clenched and tightened, forming a nice muscular ridge along his abdominal wall and oblique muscles... only to see his eyes meet hers.

“See something you like...?” he murmured, as his lips twitched. “On the tray, of course.”

“You're annoying.”



“I am,” he said simply, not looking away.

“Women do not like annoying men.”

“You should tell me what women *do* like then...” he invited, and her brows pinched together, knowing he’d cornered her.

*Back up, retreat, and then forge ahead again, dummy...* she thought to herself as she looked at the paper, clearing her throat. “Question number one – Where are you from?”

“The planet Earth,” he replied easily – and she wadded up the paper into her lap in sheer frustration before hearing his merry laugh. “I’m kidding. I’m sorry. It was just too easy, and you should have seen your face. I’m from Skokie, Illinois... just outside of Chicago. My parents relocated to Gray’s Lake after they retired, and my brothers are still dotted around the area in different places – Kenosha, Gurnee, Waukegan, and I’m now residing on base in Ghazni, Afghanistan... And you?”

“What do you mean ‘me’? We’re here.”

“Did you grow up here? Is this your childhood home?”

“Oh,” she replied and hesitated. “I grew up on the north side of Tyler, and my parents still live there. I moved out to the southwest side when I married Mark. We had a nice, fancy apartment... but when he died,” she drew in a breath.

“You needed to make a change,” he said quietly – and she nodded. “Any other family in the area?”

“No, but I was going to ask you if the Air Force base is close to you?”

“Next door. Why?”

“My older brother is stationed out there. He’s a pilot.”

“Interesting,” Ian replied. “They usually keep us pretty separated, so I probably don’t know him – but if you wanted me to take something back to him when I leave? I would be more than happy to find a way to get it to him.”

“Really?” she asked, surprised, and petted Gigi to keep from reaching over to move a lock of blond hair off his forehead.

“Of course. That’s what a friend, or amazing boyfriend, would do.”

“...And you had to ruin it,” she retorted, hearing his laugh again and marveling at it. He really didn’t mind her smart mouth at all. “Next question. If you could travel anywhere in the world, where would you go?”

“Here,” he smiled softly. “And you?”

“Lake Tahoe,” she admitted. “I’ve always wanted to see the clear blue waters, go up to the top of the mountain, have hot cocoa overlooking the snow... and to this Texas girl? That would be amazing.”

“I would love to take you there,” he offered gently. “There are usually cabins you can rent right off the lake, so you could have your coffee overlooking the water at sunrise... and maybe we could have a glass of wine in the evening together.”

“As friends,” she reminded him pointedly.

“Of course.”

“Question number three... ah, wait a second,” she hesitated, squinting and re-reading it, before rolling her eyes at him. “Really, Ian?”

“All very important questions – and I’ll answer all, remember?”

“Fine,” she retorted, laughing softly. “Where are you ticklish?”

“Oh my,” he replied, plastering this surprised look on his face as his eyes danced. “Are you planning on tickling me, Minx?”

“I didn’t write these questions, remember?”

“Darn...” he smiled. “I’m extremely ticklish on my lips, my ears, and my thighs. What about you?”

June cleared her throat and blinked, feeling her face flush wildly as she knew this man was out maneuvering her left and right. He was having her ask questions that he obviously wanted to know the answers to.

That wretch!

“You’re a real piece of work...” she muttered under her breath, leaning forward and plucking a large strawberry from the stem off the plate – and saw Ian open his mouth obligingly.

She leaned forward and saw his eyes widen in surprise – only to swerve right past him and take a massive bite, nearly to the stem, and chewing with her mouth overly full as she glared at him.

He sat up, crossed his legs, and smiled at her openly – before leaning towards her, over the tray between them.

“Keep it up and do whatever you want,” he whispered softly. “This is just foreplay to me... and I love all of it.”

June choked and coughed indelicately from behind her hand, trying to strangle down the overly large bite of strawberry, as Ian picked up a pouch of wet puppy food – and dug out a small silicone bowl.

“Let’s give my other pretty girl a snack too,” he offered, giving her a sly look before pouring the food into the bowl. “C’mon sweet girl, let me be good to you...”

His lips twitched as he plucked Gigi off her lap and put her down near the bowl, nudging her head so she knew to eat.

“Sometimes when they are being stubborn or don’t know that something delicious is right there waiting, you have to give them a little nudge...”

“Uh huh,” she replied flatly, as Ian picked up another strawberry and swirled it in the chocolate sauce, before holding it before her. “Want one?”

“Nope. I’m done.”

“Now you’re just being stubborn,” he frowned.

“Yes. Yes, I am.”

“I can deal with stubborn ladies,” he smiled tightly and leaned towards her, nearly pushing the strawberry against her lips, causing her to turn her head and burst out laughing as she leaned back.

“Ian... stop that...”

“No, the phrase is ‘*Ian, give me everything you’ve got*’...”

“That’s not the phrase,” she sputtered, laughing as he tried to tap her lip with the strawberry again – and began chuckling with her – only to succeed. The strawberry touched her lip, smearing the chocolate on there, but instead of him feeding it to her, he sat back and took a huge bite, closing his eyes in sheer happiness.

“Best strawberry I’ve ever tasted... and so dang sweet.”

As he opened his eyes, chewing the strawberry obnoxiously, winking at her playfully, knowing darn well what he was doing... and she stared at him in disbelief and wonder. He was so infuriating, fun to be around, driving her nuts with the way his mind worked, and... it was enchanting.

She didn’t want to like him, barely wanted to be friends with someone that pushed her buttons, but it was like he just knew and understood her on a level no one else had.

“What?” he smiled, reaching for another strawberry. “No comments, my sweet Minx?”

He swirled it playfully in the chocolate – and then in the small bucket of white stuff, before holding it up between them.

“Do you like marshmallow fluff?”

“No.”

“What a shame it’s on there now, eh?” he said softly – and held the strawberry out towards her, smiling. “I guess if you don’t want this one...”

June called his bluff and leaned forward, moving to take the strawberry from him, only to have him silently move it away, watching her with an intensity that made her heart skip a beat.

“Indulge me, my friend...” he breathed softly. “Pretend we’ve known each other for years, and we’re just sitting on a blanket overlooking the lake in Tahoe.”

“So, we’re pretending to be friends?”

“If it makes you feel better.”

“Ian, that’s all we *can* be.”

“Then that’s fine,” he said simply, accepting her conditions. “Lean forward, close your eyes, and open your mouth, *my friend*.”

She hesitated.

“Let me have this, please...?”

Feeling her cheeks grow warm, she leaned forward and closed her eyes, slightly parting her lips. Time seemed to stand still as she heard his intake of breath and smelled the chocolate-marshmallow-strawberry combination, heady, under her nose.

She felt him tentatively touch the fruit to her lower lip before pulling it away slightly, causing her to laugh nervously. She licked her lip where the chocolate sat and felt him touch it again quickly, chuckling softly as he teased her.

“Ian, this is crazy.”

“Part of the game,” he replied quietly. “We’ll get back to the questions in a moment... and here comes the strawberry.”

She waited and felt the chocolate touch her lip again – only for it to be pulled away as she laughed... and felt something warm close to her face as she jerked open her eyes and met his.

“No...” she said hoarsely, not moving.

*He had tried to kiss her!*

“Alright,” he replied, his own voice thick with emotion. “You said ‘No’ and I will honor that. You will always be able to trust me. Bite?”

He moved back only slightly, and held the strawberry steady against her lips – as she bit it, not looking away from him.

“I still think you’re weird,” she whispered, and saw his gentle smile – before he turned the strawberry and took a bite of it himself.

“Because I *am* weird, Minx, and you find it entertaining, even if you don’t want to enjoy this. I’m okay with you having silent little wishes tucked deep down inside.”

“Your ego is going to get you in trouble,” she whispered.

“Probably one day...” he grinned, agreeing easily, “but not to-day.”

His smile was infectious, and his beautiful blue eyes crinkled at the corners gently in the faint sunset, as he met her eyes unapologetically – not retreating back from her.

“Want me to leave – or shall we use these few days I’m in town to get to know each other in friendship?” he asked boldly. “I think there’s a few more questions on that paper, or you are welcome to ad-lib.”

June didn’t move either, not backing down as Gigi climbed into her lap once more.

“Question number four,” she murmured, not looking away from him. “Why me?”

Ian didn’t look away from her as his eyes searched hers.

“Why not?” he said simply.

“No,” she whispered, not backing down and holding his gaze. “I want a real answer, Ian. Why me? Why are you this pushy? Why are you trying so hard with a woman you don’t know and met by sheer chance?”

“You want the real answer?”

“Don’t hold back...”

“Why you?” he said hoarsely, swallowing audibly as his eyes searched hers, revealing a vulnerable side to him that shocked her. He was scared to open up, but doing so because

she requested it. “Because I’m a romantic at heart, and believe in fate with every ounce of my being. I could have gotten any name when they were handing them out, but something made me pick your email – leading me to you. I believe heavily in God and Divine Guidance... and I think with everything in me that I was being led to meet you, now, when you needed me most – and I need you, June.”

His voice trailed off as he looked at her.

She could hear Gigi shuffling around, sniffing at the tray of fruit between them, and the crickets were starting to chirp in the shadows, but in her mind she was replaying his words repeatedly, feeling tears sting her eyes.

Ian was indeed a romantic... and she was lost, unsure how to proceed.

“If you need space or if it’s too much,” Ian whispered softly, not backing away from where he sat, poised inches from her after sharing the strawberry. “If you need time to realize that I could be good for you? I do understand. I know you loved your husband and miss him. I accept that, but I don’t accept someone so lovely as you fading away from a chance at happiness.”

“That’s not your decision,” she whispered tearfully, hearing the pain in her voice and seeing it in his eyes.

“You’re right,” he admitted. “It’s your decision, but I’ve got a couple of days to make you realize that you’ll miss me when I leave.”

“I’m wondering if you should leave now,” she said in a shaky voice. “I never intended any of this to happen, and the questions probably need to stop.”

“If that’s your choice – but will you have dinner with me tomorrow night after you get off of work?”

She opened her mouth – only for him to continue.

“*Please?* We can have sushi, if you like?”

Nodding, she smiled nervously at him.

“I’ll go,” she began and hesitated. “But take it easy on the charm, okay? You are a lot to handle, and I need to focus on us becoming friends.”

“So, slowly woo you to win your heart? I can certainly do that,” he smiled tenderly at her, his eyes relaxing slightly as he dipped his head, trying to hold her gaze that looked away. “We can pretend we are teenagers and hold hands, or...”

“Ian, let’s see how this goes,” she chuckled nervously. “I need to slip back into my comfort zone, and that means you backing off slightly.”

“You know you have the cutest little divot on the tip of your nose that is enchanting?” he grinned. “Can I leave the lawn chairs here – and maybe we can sit together again tomorrow evening?”

“I’d like that,” she smiled nervously. “Do you want me to put Gigi in a carrier for you or something?”

“Me?” he chuckled. “My precious Minx, that’s our baby girl. I can’t take her back to Ghazni with me, and was hoping you could keep her.”

“Me?” she laughed. “You got me a dog without asking if I could take her? I mean, she’s adorable and so sweet, but I don’t have a leash or a little tote... or even puppy food. How? Why? Ian, you should ask people...”

“Honey,” he smiled as his lips twitched. “There’s never a good time for us to have children. There’s always a bill, the timing is wrong, or...”

“This is not a child, Ian!” she laughed outrageously, and saw his smile spread wider as he tried his best to look shocked.

“Aww Gigi, baby - Cover your ears, precious. Mommy is just mad at Daddy. She wants us to go shopping together, hold hands, and get you some pretty puppy stuff.”

“Oh my gosh...” she smiled shyly at him, realizing he was absolutely incorrigible. He was calling her ‘Mommy,’ claiming the dog was their child? He was ridiculous and whatever he was doing, whatever spell this was, it was



certainly working. His smile, combined with the puppy licking his chin – oh yes. It was enchanting. “She’s adorable.”

“She’s got your eyes,” he grinned. “Let me pick this up, and we’ll call it a night.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Are you going to run from me tomorrow?”

“Are you going to hunt me down and follow me again?”

“Yes,” he said unabashedly. “I haven’t given up, and thoroughly enjoy our banter. You aren’t going to ditch me that easily... especially now that we have a little one in our lives.”

“You did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

“Possibly,” he smiled tenderly. “Forgive me?”

“We’ll see how Gigi behaves tonight.”

**JUNE**

SHE WAS GOING to kill Ian... slowly.

Gigi was awfully sweet – but a holy terror. She had to let her out to use the restroom every few minutes for almost an hour before she realized that the small puppy was playing with her.

Then, she cried because she couldn't get on the bed with June. Caving, she stacked a few items alongside her bed so the dog could climb up... only for Gigi to realize she was afraid of heights.

She also took it upon herself to play with the contents of her bathroom trashcan, scattering it everywhere, along with leaving multiple... *multiple*... 'surprises' in the living room when she got up.

Gigi was sitting there, tongue lolling, tail wagging, and watching her with a happy, 'Look what I did for you!' expression on her shaggy face.

"You are getting a haircut," June muttered under her breath, "And a baby gate... and Ian is getting a talking-to."



AN HOUR LATER, June fed Gigi and managed to drag her TV console across the kitchen entry, so that way it would confine the puppy to the linoleum floor in case of more accidents. She would be safe, secure, had food and water, until she got to take a lunch to let her out, or was able to run past the house to check on her. Having a puppy was really like having a child to take care of! She needed love, attention, care, and feeding... and then came the ‘diapers’.

“Mercy...” she muttered, glancing at her watch and realizing that the afternoon flew past her.

Wrapping up her day, putting away her files and making a few last phone calls – she grabbed her purse and moved to stand up, only to see her phone was ringing once more. Instinctively, she answered it.

“June Peyton, Re-max. What can I do for you?”

“Well, you could leave in the next ten minutes, because you have a very impatient hot date waiting to whisk you away.”

“Hot date? I’m meeting a friend.”

“Can’t I be both?”

“You shouldn’t be...”

“Live dangerously, Minx...”

“You were living dangerously this morning when I saw a tiny terror covered in fur and my destroyed house,” she warned openly and chuckled. “It was a good thing we were apart...”

“WAIT,” Ian interrupted quickly. “You mean I left and there was a chance we could have been together last night? Oh mannn... I’m gonna cry.”

“What? Oh! Ohhhh... No, Ian,” she laughed nervously. “It’s a figure of speech.”

“Tonight then?” he said hopefully in a sheepish voice that had her laughing even more as he flirted and teased her.

“Noooo...” she drawled. “The longer I talk to you on the phone, the longer it takes me to leave work.”

“Byeeeeee! Meet you at the house so we can let our Gigi out first.”

“Good idea,” she laughed at his rushed voice, but he’d already hung up the phone. The man only seemed to have two speeds – normal and rushed.



PULLING UP TO THE HOUSE, June saw the little rental car he was borrowing parked up front, and noticed Ian was standing in the yard looking at her place. She felt a sense of shame and realized that no one came over to her house... for a reason.

She went to her parents’, met her brother there or at a restaurant, because she didn’t want the questions, the comments, or the analysis that was obviously going in Ian’s mind right now.

Mobile home parks had a reputation and a stigma, as if they weren’t as good – but you know what? A home was... a home. She had enough images that she had to maintain already.

“Is there a problem?” she asked in greeting – only to see him turn, his frown melted away as he smiled at her.

“Only opportunities, Minx.”

“Such as...” she drawled, feeling slightly defensive and saw his smile widen a little more.

“Such as a friend helping his prickly girl figure out a way to make it easier for Gigi to get to the yard, so our puppy doesn’t destroy your home – and I want to apologize. I didn’t even think about it until I was lying in bed at the hotel...”

“Yeah, we were going to talk about that mess you dumped on me,” she muttered and sighed. It was really hard to be mad at someone who realized their own mistakes, took ownership, and was being quite charming about it.

“Forgive me?” he asked gently, reaching for her hand. His thumb brushed against her knuckles as she was drawn into his open expression as he gazed at her like she was the best thing he’d ever seen in his whole life... and pulled her hand away.

“Let me get Gigi, so we can go.”

“Retreating,” he acknowledged, chuckling. “Fair enough. Am I allowed in, or should I wait here?”

“Depends on if she poo’d everywhere and destroyed my kitchen, or...” June hesitated and turned to see Ian right behind her, looking down.

“Do I have something on the back of my dress?”

“Just a gorgeous shape,” he volunteered, grinning at her. “I missed you.”

Her mouth dropped open in surprise – and she snapped it shut, quickly turning and putting the key in the door without another word. As she opened the side door to the mobile home, she heard Gigi’s excited panting that someone was visiting and grimaced.

Poo – again.

“Nope,” she muttered, and put a hand on Ian’s chest, stopping him from entering. “She’s destroyed my floor, and you aren’t...”

He scooped her up into his arms in one quick move before stepping inside and setting her quickly on top of the TV console, spinning her around so her legs were dangling towards the living room – not the kitchen.

“I love those sexy pumps on you, and want them to stay nice. It thrills me to no-end that you dress like a really classy lady,” he began, immediately yanking several paper towels off the roll as she stared at him in shock as he let Gigi out. “My girl is not picking up... *stuff* ...ever.”

“Ian, I’m quite capable...” she began as he bent over and moved about the kitchen, watching him flex and turn.

“I know you are capable, but this is my fault. Those delicate hands shouldn’t be tainted. I adore the fact that you

are soft, sweet, and so feminine... and me? I'm just a grunt. I'm tanned, filthy, work hard, and my palms are callused badly. I guess it makes me sexist, but I want my girl to stay... delicate – like the flower she is.”

June stared at him, his words rolling over her as he finished cleaning the last spot... then looked under her sink to yank out some cleaner and wiped the floors like it was nothing. He stood a moment later, washed his hands, and looked at her pointedly.

“Does it make me sexist?” he asked. “Am I wrong in thinking in such an old-fashioned way, or...” his voice trailed off.

“What?”

“You sure are beautiful,” he breathed and smiled. “I guess I was distracted or trying so hard to do the right thing that I never really took a second to appreciate how lovely you look today.”

June swallowed.

“That was probably too forward of me, wasn't it? I suppose friends don't say or do those types of things, but it just kinda hit me,” he admitted and walked over to her, extending a hand. “May I help you down?”

She nodded – and marveled at the way he held out his hand to her.

June put her fingers on his, and it reminded her of a famous actress having help stepping from a limousine to walk the red carpet. Her fingers were bent over his, in a very formal way – yet not. It was designed to aid, not a caress or more... and it surprised her at how delicately he treated her.

He treated her like *his* flower... and she wasn't sure how to react.

A part of her wanted to balk, yell, scream, or tell him to leave her alone so she could wallow in this self-inflicted isolation, but another part of her recognized just how different he was from Mark.

... And Mark was gone.

Not removing her hand from his, she swallowed and met Ian's beautiful blue eyes as she slid off the console, putting her feet on the floor... and realized something was changing within her. The bitter anger and guilt that she felt was slowly fading, being replaced with something else. A curiosity and sense of wonder.

"Could I ask you a question?" she whispered, looking up at him.

"Yes, you can kiss me," he replied immediately.... Causing her to start as an uncomfortable laugh escaped her.

"Nooo..." she drawled nervously, and saw his infectious smile.

"I'm teasing," he whispered, bringing her fingers to his lips, kissing them gently and arching an eyebrow. "Unless you want to?"

"I was going to ask you a serious question, but not quite sure how to say it," she hedged, and started to pull her hand away from his – only for him to hold fast to her fingers. She chuckled nervously and met his warm gaze.

"Just ask," he said softly. "Don't worry about propriety, just put it out there and talk to me."

"Could *you* talk to me?" she asked, repeating the words and realizing just how important it was to her, but afraid as well, because it was opening herself up. Mark had kept his secrets, and that was what had hurt her so much, the fact that he couldn't reach out to her, or there was some unknown wall between them.

She felt her throat tighten at the understanding in his gaze, right before he brushed his lips against her knuckles once more.

"Have I *ever* had a problem telling you what I was thinking, my precious Minx?" he asked intimately, his voice aching sweet as his breath brushed over the skin of her fingers. "I know I'm a lot to handle, but that's because when it comes to the idea of us – my filter is broken. I'm struggling to

hold back, because I don't want to damage what this is with my enthusiasm.”

She choked out a tearful laugh, appreciating his words so much, and realized that everything he was saying was true.

Ian was like a runaway freight train, blasting through everything... only she was afraid to be a part of the wreckage left behind.

“If I have something bothering me, I will probably blab uncomfortably about it to the point that you might want to tell me to hush,” he smiled tenderly. “I enjoy getting you riled up, crave our moments like this, and thrive on our bickering. Don't ever hold back from sharing what's on your mind, because rest assured? I will share what's on my mind easily enough.”

“Thank you,” she breathed.

“Don't thank me yet,” he winked. “I'm not ready to step back yet, and I've got you in the perfect spot.”

“Oh?”

“Yep, the console and wall are to your back – and I've got a heckuva view of your front. That's an incredibly beautiful cleavage...”

Her eyes widened measurably along with his smile, causing his eyes to crinkle more at the corners, right before he laughed softly under his breath.

“Is my sweet kitten speechless?” he asked softly, and adjusted his grip slightly on her fingertips, moving to drop a kiss on her wrist... breathing deeply and closing his eyes. “Oh goodness, you smell divine, June.”

The longing in his voice, combined with his words, made her heart stagger wildly at this outrageous man. He always had something to say, some way of garnering attention, and thrived on shocking her to her core.

“Gigi...” she blurted out nervously. “The puppy is outside.”

“Oh shoot...”



Ian dropped her hand, quickly opening the back door – only to see the pup sitting there patiently at the door, immediately wagging her tail. He scooped her up, kissing on her fur and nuzzling the little animal, before smiling at her.

“Why don’t we head out, June... so I don’t get myself into trouble by telling you what else is on my mind right now, in this very moment.”

She didn’t need a second warning or invitation.

Grabbing her keys off the counter where she’d tossed them, she quickly petted Gigi and moved to walk out the back door... where Ian quickly followed.

**JUNE**

THIS WAS PROBABLY the strangest and most relaxed date June had ever been on with someone... and one for the record books. They went to the pet store first to pick up all sorts of things to care for Gigi. He bought a crate with puppy pads so she didn't have free reign of the house at night. They got a set of puppy stairs, along with a teensy pink rhinestone collar.

They were now sitting at the counter of the sushi restaurant together, relaxing. Her sides ached from laughing with Ian, and she was thoroughly enjoying their time together.

“Our girl will look like a million bucks with that much bling around her neck,” Ian chuckled, digging out the pink collar and holding it up between two fingers. “Speaking of? How did Gigi do last night?”

“She cried, whimpered, barked, and whined all night,” she admitted, smiling at him as she took a sip of her hot green tea. “Oh, and she has a fear of heights.”

“Because she's barely five inches tall. It's a far fall for that little furball.”

“She won't even try it,” she chuckled. “She walked up to the edge of my bed and cowered in fear.”

“Ahhh,” he replied, and then leaned towards her. “I'd do the same if I was in your bed – but that's only because I don't ever want to leave it.”

“You’re never gonna be there,” she laughed.

“Never say never, Minx...” he teased, nuzzling her temple affectionately with his nose and catching her by surprise. “Miracles happen every day.”

“It would take one,” she countered.

“Good thing I’m a believer...”

“I suppose so,” she retorted, turning slightly and smiling easily at him, where he was leaning close. “This is nice.”

“Yeah, I’m liking this, and we should do a sushi date whenever I’m in town.”

“Twisting my arm, huh?”

“I love the stuff, too.”

“Are you planning on visiting often?”

“Will you miss me when I’m gone?”

“I’m sure your family misses you.”

“You neatly sidestepped my question...”

“Yes,” she chuckled softly, feeling shy as she realized he hadn’t moved away from her yet. He was still leaning close, his arm on the back of her chair, and... it was cozy between them. “Yes, I did.”

“Do you know what you want?” he asked softly, causing her eyes to shoot up and meet his as he smiled. “Sushi. Do you know what roll you want, my friend?”

“Oh... OH!” she grimaced, and leaned away pointedly. “You are distracting me, and in my space.”

“Because you smell incredible and I want to bury my face against you, but figured that would be crossing a line with my bestest buddy...” he laughed softly, backing away from her and leaning back in his seat, before glancing at the menu as the waitress walked up to greet them.

“Hello. Do you know what you want?” she asked politely.

“Funny. I was just asking my friend that very same question,” he replied, grinning at June – and winked at her. “I

know what I want really badly, and can't wait to dive into..."

"What?" June asked, wondering just how far his brash temperament would extend in public.

"I just love the idea of sinking my teeth into..." he paused and looked at the menu innocently. His eyes met hers over the top of the menu. "Ahh... yes. There we go. Perfect. All that soft pink flesh that tastes so divine? I love the sweetness, that flavor, and just thinking about it haunts my dreams," he whispered huskily.

Her mouth dropped open and she made a noise in her throat, before realizing she should have known better than to ask him that.

Ian obviously had zero shame. He was a voracious flirt with no boundaries – and just when she was about to say something? He looked up to the waitress innocently, handing her the menu.

"I'll have the salmon roll, please," he said simply, looking at June pertly. "What are you wanting to eat, my delectable little Minx?"

"The same," she choked out, utterly mortified.

"Oooh, kinky," Ian whispered under his breath, winking at her.

"Except..." she drawled and continued, not looking away from him. "Take the biggest cleaver you've got, chop it up into a paste, and then deep fry it until its unrecognizable."

Ian burst out laughing in sheer delight.

"Excuse me?" the waitress questioned.

"Just a salmon roll – oh, and an order of gyoza, please."

As the waitress walked away, June kicked Ian in the shin, making him laugh once more as he wiped his eyes... unable to stop smiling. There was such blissful joy written across his face that she realized despite being horrifically embarrassed?

She would never forget this date – or him.

“You should come with a warning sign. I swear,” she muttered.

“Slippery when wet?” he volunteered as she hissed his name, swatting him on the shoulder.

Ian burst out laughing again obnoxiously, burying his face against her shoulder where she sat next to him, laughing uncontrollably. He really was enjoying all of this banter between them, even if it was crossing so many lines of etiquette.

He was crude, outrageous, and... adorably charming.

She should have shoved him away, gotten up and left, or any number of things... but instead, she sat there as a small chuckle escaped her, treasuring the feeling of him being close to her, and them both laughing in amusement.



FIFTEEN MINUTE LATER, they were deep in conversation that she felt much more comfortable with. Their plates had arrived, and Ian picked up the chopsticks with practiced ease, taking a bite.

“So, tell me all about Tyler,” he said simply. “Is it a big city? Are there suburbs? Is there a specific part of town you like better than others?”

“I like the area,” she began, picking up a slice with her own chopsticks. “It’s a large town, but still has that small-town appeal. The schools aren’t overcrowded, there are parks and spaces of open land, while the convenience of shopping districts are...”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa...” he said, putting up a hand. “Drop the realtor act and tell me what June Peyton likes. What’s your favorite area of town, and tell me all about that.”

“Sorry,” she began sheepishly, realizing that she’d slipped into her role easily without even realizing it. “I guess it would be the Azalea District.”

“Tell me about that,” he encouraged, taking another bite.

“Oh gosh,” she smiled wistfully. “Where to start? I guess without sounding too much like a realtor, the Azalea District earned its name from all the flowering bushes everywhere, but it’s much more than that.”

“Tell me everything...”

“Ian, it’s so beautiful,” she breathed, putting her chopsticks down and resting her head on her hand as she stared off into space. “There’s so many historic houses that have been renovated, red-brick roads that just make you feel like you’ve stepped into another world, and even walking bridges that extend over drainage ditches and culverts, like something out of a fairytale.”

“It sounds lovely.”

“It is,” she smiled distractedly. “There are antebellum mansions, carriage houses that have been converted, sweeping Tudor-style homes, along with a few ‘castles’...”

“Castles?”

“Well, they aren’t, but I call them that,” she smiled nervously. “I use it in my spiel that I give new clients.”

“I want to hear your spiel,” Ian invited, smiling easily. “Let’s have it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Let’s say a new couple walks up to you and says ‘I want to buy a house’ – how do you start off? What’s your spiel?”

“Oh, um, stick out your hand,” she ordered – and he did so.

She moved to shake it, putting her hand in his, and slipped into her role that she’d done a thousand times. This was something she practiced in the mirror, used with clients, and how she introduced herself at symposiums or speaking events.

“Hello! I’m June Peyton – and I see you’ve already got the princess in your story – so let’s discover your dream cottage... or perhaps a fairytale castle right here in Tyler, Texas? I have a

few questions for you so we can get to know each other a little better, because a home should accommodate your needs. We'll get started with navigating the lay of the land for your new little kingdom right away."

She started to remove her hand from his – and he held it.

"Sold," he said openly, not looking away from her and smiling proudly. "I'd buy a place in the Azalea District from you just off of that speech alone."

"It's not that easy," she smiled, pulling her hand away.

"Why not?"

"Because they are expensive homes and don't come available that often," she replied, picking up her chopsticks and taking another bite.

"Is that why you don't live there?" he asked simply – and she glanced at him sharply, expecting to see some sort of judgement or immediate rebuttal... only to see open curiosity.

"I don't live there because I can't afford it on my salary alone, and just finished paying off Mark's funeral expenses. We were young and never thought something like that would happen, you know? No credit built, not much of a savings to speak of, and then he was just gone. A house doesn't get me impressions with my clients, but how I look, how I dress, what car I drive actually does. I just needed a safe place to rest my head and hide from the world – and I have it now."

"I see," he said quietly. "It must be nice to have a place to call home."

She looked at him, surprised that the laughing man was suddenly gone, and replaced with barren expression that was painful to see... right before he gave her a quick smile, hiding the desolation immediately.

"Tell me more and let's dream together," he invited as they continued to eat – moving to pluck a gyoza off her plate, and smiling impishly.

**JUNE**

AS THEY FINISHED EATING, they walked back to her car... and Ian took her hand.

She could have pulled away, but didn't. Just seeing that lost, lonely look on his face that he kept hidden away did something to her. She wondered if he was hiding stuff deep down inside like Mark had once, and maybe she was just smarter now and knew to look for it?

Driving silently, Ian was looking through the windows at the town around them and hesitated.

"How far is the Azalea District? Could we drive through it?"

"Now?"

"Why not?"

"Because it's sunset and..."

"Do they close the roads or something?"

"No, but..."

"What does it hurt to look? Besides, we could park and walk down the street if you said there were paths and walking bridges."

She looked at him in surprise.

"You really want to go, don't you?"



“I’m curious.”

She nodded, flipping on her turn signal.

“It’s not too far,” she admitted, and minutes later she pointed. “This is the entrance to the area. It’s just a cluster of different roads in one area, and...”

“Do you have a favorite place?”

“Not really. I’m partial to the old-world styles and there’s so many of them, you know? I just...”

“Can we see that one?”

“People live here and...”

“It says ‘For Sale’,” he countered quickly. “Park the car, June.”

“What?!” she yelped, immediately darting into a parking spot nearby, before putting her vehicle in park and looking around.

“There’s one for sale and...”

“Ian, this is not how being a realtor works. You have to make appointments, contact people, make arrangements, and there might be a family living there. You can’t just park and go right on in.”

“Okay. So, let’s park and walk around the neighborhood for a bit.”

“You want to walk around?” she asked flatly. “I don’t get it.”

“What’s to ‘get’?” he retorted. “This area is pretty. I ate too much and would love to stroll along a historic boulevard with my sweet girl-whose-a-friend-not-girlfriend.”

He opened the door before she had a chance to say anything, and walked around to the driver’s side door, pulling on the handle.

“We’ve both said that we feel like we were from a different era, so let’s indulge. Would you do me the honor of taking a brief stroll?” And unbelievably?

Ian extended his arm, waiting.

She turned slightly, putting one patent leather pump on the brick pavers, and delicately extended her other leg, before standing up and taking his arm. She saw the pride and admiration written all over his face as his warm gaze watched her with interest.

“Shall we?”

“Sure.”

He slowly walked her down to the stop sign silently – and then crossed the brick road pointedly, walking back towards the house in the distance with the sign half hidden by a massive flowering bush in front. She started to tug at his arm and heard his laughter.

“C’mon... or I’m going to start calling you ‘*Chicken*’ instead of ‘*Minx*’,” he teased.

“Ian, this is *not* how you look at houses.”

“We’re window shopping, hon...”

“Window shopping? For what?!” she screeched nervously – only to have him stop as children went riding past on bicycles, obviously in a hurry to head home.

“June Peyton,” he began with a heavy sigh, his eyes dancing. “Are you going to reach out to the realtor to see if we can view the house, or am I going to call your competitor and start peering in the windows?”

“Ian, you need your head examined.”

“Is that a ‘No’?” he asked, chuckling, and lifted an eyebrow.

“No,” she muttered and dug her phone out of her dress pocket. “I swear, you big, overgrown, pushy, bully...”

A few moments later, as they stood there before the sign at the end of the driveway, she dialed a number and heard a voice.

“Kathryn? Hey, how are you?” she began easily, trying to sound professional as she glared at Ian. “Yes. I know it’s

getting late, but I've got an issue. I have a client that is in town for a very limited time frame, and he's asking to see the house you have listed on College Street in the District."

She listened as the other woman rambled on, giving her the spiel regarding how the '*owners loved the home*', '*hated to move*', '*very particular on appointments*' ... and then she heard those magical words.

"...They are already in Seattle waiting to sell this house so they can close on their new one," and June turned away from Ian, letting the powerhouse within her take over.

"Yes, my client is extremely interested and already preapproved for his loan. The house is in the right location, right neighborhood, and he loved the essence of the home from the street. He wants to see it immediately, and is quite adamant on it. I know your clients are concerned about it going to a good owner, but rest assured – if he bites, it would be."

"You bet your sweet, shapely..." Ian muttered behind her – and she threw out a hand behind her to silence him.

"The house is empty," Kathryn said hesitantly. "I normally like to be there when it's shown..."

"I can call you the moment we leave. Ten minutes, Kathryn. I'll give you the scoop on what he says so we can close this deal, okay?" June promised, already thinking of ways to back out. Needs more space, not enough bedrooms, too big, too small, wanted a pool, etc...

"Alright. I'll make my notes and talk to you soon."

"Perfect. I'll get the lockbox and call you in a few."

Hanging up the phone, she whirled around on Ian and put her finger in his face.

"Do not make me do this again," she snarled in a hushed voice – only for him to lean forward and kiss her fingertip.

"Thank you," he said softly, completely disarming her. "Let's go daydream."

“This is ridiculous, and I don’t know why on earth...” she grumbled, digging in her purse for her key box to get inside the lockbox to fish out the front door key. Digging it out, she quickly opened it, inserting the key in the door, while still muttering hotly. “... I let you talk me into all these foolish things. You aren’t buying a house, and I’m certainly not. This is just being nosy, and crossing so many lines right now it’s not even...”

Her voice trailed off as she opened the front door and stared in awe.

“Oh wow...” Ian volunteered in a soft voice, over her shoulder.

“Realtor...?” she called out and hesitated, waiting for an answer – just in case there was a maid, cleaner, or anyone else here showing the house.

Silence.

“Indulge me,” she heard, and felt Ian scoop her up into his arms, stepping into the house as she looked at him in disbelief. It was not lost on her what he was doing... carrying her over the threshold, just like a groom.

June immediately wiggled to get down and heard him laugh as he set her down on the pristine wood floors. She kicked off her heels and sank downwards to her bare feet encased in stockings... only to see Ian’s smile widen.

“Awww.”

“Hush!”

“It’s cute.”

“Your timer is going.”

He grinned and took her hand in his – and she didn’t pull away. Instead, she let herself slip into this fantasy he’d talked her into, pretending they were looking at the place, and imagining what would never be.

The house was breathtaking.

As she entered, there was a small office to the right and a formal dining room to the left, with an entryway that passed under a 'bridge' for the upper floor. It emptied into a formal dining room that was full of windows overlooking a courtyard, like something out of a dream.

"Oh look," he smiled, teasing her. "A doggie door for Gigi."

"I'm sure this place has everything," she retorted, but her eyes were touching all the elements that caught her attention. Cornices, the wrought iron twisted railings, carved kitchen cabinets against the dark granite countertops.

*This was so incredibly beautiful,* she mused, and swallowed silently as they moved about the house. There was a large washroom with a built-in pantry just off the kitchen, complete with cubbies for a mudroom.

Again, spectacular.

As they circled back around, she felt Ian's eyes on her as she looked into the master bedroom. Tray ceilings, two closets, and a strange circular nook that caught her attention, realizing this was the brick 'turret' she'd seen from the street that made it look like a castle.

Pulling away from him, she walked over and stared in disbelief at the hand-painted storks on the wooden walls, implying it was a nook for a nursery. She drew in a shaky breath, closing her eyes, and could practically hear the echoes of someone once softly singing to a baby in this room.

Ian put his hand on her shoulder silently, and she nodded, thinking he was asking her to move on. Instead, he stopped her.

"June?" his voice was achingly gentle as she looked up at him. His eyes met hers and she felt a sting in the back of her throat, unable to voice what was going through her mind.

She would never have any of this.

No moments holding a baby, no home full of love or laughter, no children racing around or shouting, and no one to

look at her... like Ian was right now, unless she came to terms with her past and opened herself up to a future someday.

“I am here for you... always,” he said softly, moving his hand slowly upwards to cradle her cheek. “Now, ten years from now, or in fifty years – I am here, if you need to talk, scream, shout, or cry wretchedly to someone you can trust...?”

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she interrupted tearfully, staring at him, putting her hand on his wrist where he was touching her cheek with his thumb. “I’m not ready.”

“Then we won’t,” he murmured, his eyes holding hers. “It’s that simple.”

“Is it?”

“It can be,” he offered and moved to her side, slipping his arm around her waist in a comforting manner. “Let’s finish the tour of the upper floors and then go see our furry girl.”

The upper floors were obviously children’s rooms. The entire house had been filled with love at one point. Two of the bedrooms shared a bathroom that had a bright, primary colored theme to it. There was a play area opposite of the ‘bridge’ that went over the entryway... and silently, in her mind, she could see mischievous children dropping their action figures down to the floor below.

Yes, this was a house to be lived in...

“Let’s go,” she said simply, feeling wretched.

“Alright,” he agreed quietly, and she felt his eyes on her again. “Do you mind me asking if you had a favorite spot? What do you think of it overall?”

“It’s lovely.”

“And your favorite spot?”

“We should go,” she countered and pulled away – only for him to move and stand right in front of her, his eyes concerned and curious. “I told the other realtor ten minutes, and I’m pretty sure that is up.”

“We can talk as we walk...”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“I think there might be, but you’re scared – and maybe that was how Mark felt about his addiction?” he said softly, looking at her as she drew back, emotionally struck. There was a painful fury that tore through her as she stared at him, her throat closing off and tears welling up immediately.

“Gimme everything you’ve got, my sweet Minx,” Ian said openly, reaching out to touch her cheek and she shoved his hand away.

“Don’t you dare psycho-analyze me or comment on...” she began, and then drew up as a ragged sob tore through her. “How dare you!”

“What’s your favorite room?” he pushed and reached for her again.

“Leave me alone...”

“Nope,” he said, drawing her close, and June immediately began to struggle. “It’s one word. You can tell me anything – and I’m supposed to be able to talk to you, remember?”

“So, you are going to throw my words in my face?”

“Just say it,” he pressed. “Say it, and let’s get it all out here, together.”

She stared at him and felt something splinter within her as she looked in his eyes, feeling herself falling apart – and desperately waiting for some unknown strength within her to yank everything back together... and it wasn’t happening.

“Talk to me, love...” he breathed softly, touching her cheek. “I know where I could see you,” he murmured, his voice aching gently as he traced the shell of her ear with his fingertip.

“Ian...” she protested, shivering slightly, but not moving.

“I know you are scared, but you aren’t scared of me. You’re scared of opening up and letting me in – but I’m already working my way into your world... and it’s where I desperately want to be,” he said tenderly, his fingertip now tracing her jawline in a caress as she shivered again.

“We should go,” she whispered, needing to compose herself. “I need a tissue and...”

“I’ve got a shirt sleeve,” he offered – and she laughed tearfully at him. It was just so classic a response from this carefree man... and an icebreaker. He smiled wryly at her. “It’s clean.”

“I’m sure it is,” she smirked, wiping her eyes with her hands.

“What room?” he prompted in a hushed voice, those beautiful lips curling at the edges.

“You cannot give up, can you?”

“Not when I’m picturing you there... in my head,” he admitted, not holding back. “I’m imagining you in a floor length robe in the early hours of the morning, rocking a baby in your arms, and singing softly...”

She stared up at him in disbelief and amazement, as her eyes filled with tears once more.

“Tell me,” he urged softly – and she broke, unable to fight this anymore.

“If I open myself up to having a future,” she sobbed painfully, her chest aching and hiccupping in the process, knowing she had to look an utter mess right now – yet it poured forward uncontrollably.

“To even dream of having a family or children, then that becomes a terrifying version of me - admitting that death is as final as I imagined it was. I feel like I’m saying goodbye to that stupid naïve girl who didn’t see the signs, that a part of me is in Mark’s grave, dead, because I’m not same person anymore... and it hurts to let go.”

Ian drew her into his arms, holding her close and smoothing her hair as the words just kept pouring from her, like a volcano expelling magma and leveling a path in its wake.

“If I even admit to wanting more in my life, that fear that I’m not good enough becomes real and tangible again,” she



sobbed painfully, clenching at his t-shirt as she buried her face against his shoulder. “I buried that fear because I *was* good enough to marry Mark... but that dumb girl that came from nothing? Found substance and confidence, making something of herself, and it was all destroyed... in a single hit of crack in some rundown apartment in another town,” she hiccupped and drew in a shaky breath that turned into a sob. “And I was such an idiot that I just didn’t know.”

“Shhh,” Ian whispered, kissing the top of her head and holding her as she cried painfully. “That girl is a fierce queen...regal, insanely confident, and incredibly sexy.”

She laughed tearfully against him, refusing to look up.

“And that beautiful queen? She hung onto all those fears, silent dreams, and ambitions because she needed to be strong enough to wait for her champion,” he murmured, leaning back and turning her face up towards him.

His eyes held hers unflinchingly.

“I’m not perfect by any means – but I am, and will always be, your friend,” he promised, his voice echoing in the silent house. “Someday, when you’re ready? We’ll celebrate your victory together.”

“I thought...”

“What?”

“I thought you were pushing me to... that you wanted, ah...”

“Yeah, I do,” he laughed softly, kissing the top of her hair once more. “I’m a red-blooded man who loves looking at his girl, of course I want more from you – but only if you feel it, too.”

June didn’t answer for several moments, just holding him there and treasuring the feeling of his arms around her. He kept smoothing his hand up and down her back, laying his cheek against her head, and holding her close... and she needed this so much.

“What is your favorite room?” she asked.

“The bedroom,” he answered simply in a hushed whisper. “Oh - and the entryway.”

That surprised her and she smiled.

“Why the entryway?”

“Because I got to carry you over the threshold and pretend that you were mine for a moment,” he admitted in a hushed voice, laying his cheek against her head once more. “I don’t think I will ever forget that.”

“Ian,” she breathed, pulling back slightly and looking up at him... and saw his upturned, shy smile.

“What? Guys can dream and have fantasies, too. Not everything I dream about has to be dirty, you know... just like eighty percent of it.”

“Ian!” she laughed, wiping her eyes.

“Okay, okay. You caught me. It’s closer to eighty-five percent,” he smiled, and touched her face. “I sure like that smile a lot better than those crocodile tears, my little Minx.”

“You are a good man, my friend,” she breathed openly. “Thank you for listening.”

“Thank you for sharing – and I’m not that good of a guy. You make me want to be better. I’m trying, but I still have a long way to go.”

“You’re alright in my book.”

“Now, can I blow your mind and you can scream at me again?”

“Sure,” she chuckled nervously, “But I don’t think I’ll scream at you.”

“Okay,” he began, taking a deep breath and looking at her. “I want to put an offer in on this house if you can see yourself here... with me.”

June stared at him – and then stuck her finger in her ear, wiggling it. She held up her hand, opened her mouth, put her hand down, turned around... and then turned back to him, pointing a finger, before putting her hand down again.

“Can you repeat that?” she finally asked, staring at him in disbelief.

“Do you like the house?” he repeated, grinning happily. “It’s that simple. Do you like it, and could you see yourself here with me?”

She hesitated – and her phone rang.

“The realtor. I forgot to call her, and we should have just left.”

“Go ahead and answer it.”

“I’m not sure I should.”

“Tell her we are in discussions about the house now, and doing another walk through.”

“But we aren’t.”

“Answer the phone, June.”

She slid her thumb across the screen and stared at him as he put his hands into his pockets and stood there, waiting.

“Hello?” she began and hesitated. “No, we are still here and he’s considering an offer. Yes. I know it’s late. Why don’t I email you in the morning with the results after he talks it over with the other person – okay. Yes, goodnight.”

She hung up the phone and stared at him.

“Well, ‘other person’ – what do you think?” he smiled. “It’s awfully big for just me, and I would hate for it to sit empty while I’m gone.”

“Is this why we are here?”

“Maybe?”

“But you don’t even know me, and I just got half your shirt wet crying over another man,” she exclaimed, holding out her hand in disbelief and pointing at her face. “I know my makeup is ruined, you’ve been patting my head like I’m two... so now my hair is a mess, and...”

“All that’s left is your clothing to muss up,” he grinned and rubbed his hands together happily, causing her to bust out

laughing in disbelief.

“Are you insane?”

“Maybe? I’ve never been tested – *oh wait* – I think the military does test you, but then they send you to boot camp and maannn, that’s tough. Maybe I ‘cracked’ there?”

“Ian...”

“Let’s flip for it,” he interrupted, smiling at her.

“Flip... *for a house?*” she practically shouted in disbelief, slapping her hand on her forehead. “We’re *not* having this conversation.”

“Fine, I’ll ask that other girl to be my realtor...”

“You’ll do no such thing,” she growled vehemently, glaring at him, as he held his hands up in surrender.

“Let’s leave it to chance,” he offered, smiling. “I’m a huge believer in destiny and fate... and I’ve told you that. So, let’s take a chance.”

“By flipping a coin?”

“Yeah, I forgot my pockets are empty and I don’t have a coin, but I’ve got an even better idea.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll kiss you – and if you feel nothing? Then I won’t buy the house,” he shrugged easily and looked at her. “But if you do feel something? And I mean, really feel it down to those pretty little toes? We’re buying this house and getting engaged.”

“WHAT?!”

“I didn’t stutter, Minx,” he grinned. “I’m putting my cards out on the table – that currently isn’t here – and telling you this would be a perfect place for us. One kiss. I either leave you alone or Gigi gets her doggy door and you get to fix up our home however you want while I’m overseas, until I can walk you down the aisle,” he hesitated. “I mentioned I’m catholic, right? We’re doing this in a church - properly.”

“You want to get married in a church properly – but you are talking about buying some expensive house on a whim?”

“Yup,” he said arrogantly, leaning back on his heels.

“You’re mentally messed up,” she retorted, feeling her heart hammer wildly in her chest as she stared at him.

“In so many ways,” he admitted, and held out his hand. “Come with me to the alcove again.”

She stared at his palm, then looked at his face, and that tender smile.

“You can trust me. Gimme everything you’ve got – and it’s literally sixty seconds of your time in a place we both adored.”

She put her hand in his as he pulled her towards the bedroom – flipping several light switches until the alcove glowed warmly. He walked her over, held both of her hands in his and looked at her with such warmth, such unrestrained emotions, that it was staggering to behold.

“June Peyton,” he breathed, his voice trembling. “Will you do me the honor of putting up with me... and seal the deal with a kiss?”

She stared into his eyes, saw the nervousness in his gaze, and felt his rough hands in hers, realizing he was offering her the world if she would take a chance on him.

He was offering to buy her this beautiful house, hinted at seeing her holding a baby someday, and talked about a long engagement... which would give her time to acclimate to the idea or back out, but this was serious.

Buying a house was serious.

... And Ian was anything but that.

She would be the serious one between them, and he threw himself headlong into things all based off of ‘fate’ or ‘destiny’... but he had been unflappable at being a friend. He reached for her, made her feel special, and treated her like a princess when he was with her – and even when they were apart. The flowers, the gifts, the emails and voicemail.

“June?” he whispered nervously, swallowing. “Do you have a Tic-Tac or some breath mints for me? Maybe chewing gum?”

... And she laughed.

He was crazy... but made her happier than she had been in years within these last two days.

“Is that a ‘good laugh’ – or a ‘temporary insanity’ laugh?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“One kiss, huh?” she asked, fighting back a smile. “One single kiss will decide things?”

“Yes ma’am,” he said simply, dropping her hand and breathing into his own hand to check his breath, before taking her hand in his once more. “I’m ready.”

“You sure?” she chuckled.

“Oh yeah,” he replied confidently. “One kiss.”

“One single kiss.”

“It’s gonna be a helluva kiss,” he promised, grinning.

“I bet,” she retorted, matching his smile.

“Ready?”

“Probably not, but...” her voice trailed off as Ian stepped forward, drawing her left hand upwards and kissing the inside of her wrist. He closed his eyes and breathed deep, as she stared at the intense pleasure on his face, raw and unrestrained.

She didn’t move as he slowly caressed his lips down the inside of her arm, blazing a trail that shot a lightning bolt of desire down her spine, and she could not turn away from the sight of him.

“I love how soft you are,” he breathed against her skin. “The feel and the smell of your skin is incredible...”

His arm slipped around her waist, pulling her close as she arched backwards, not prepared in the slightest for the sensations ricocheting through her, nor the arduous attentions of the soldier before her.

Ian literally drew in his breath at the base of her Peter Pan shirt collar that was buttoned to her throat, and gave it a small caress with the tip of his nose before kissing her skin. She wondered if he could feel the thready beat of her heart fluttering wildly as he scraped his teeth against her throat before moving to her jaw... and hovering over her lips.

“Always...” he breathed erratically, pausing for a moment before leaning forward to kiss her. As his lips brushed hers, she heard him draw in his breath once more as if this was too much sensation for him, too.

It made her feel good to know she affected him in the same way... and felt him deepen the kiss as her arms curled around his neck of their own accord. He made a small sound and tightened his arms slightly as they stood there, locked in an embrace, for ages...

Her knees were Jell-O. She was pretty sure her shoes would not go back on her feet due to the permanent curl that now afflicted her toes - thanks to that heady, intense kiss that he had absolutely delivered on!

As the kiss broke, he gave her such a lazy, satisfied smile.

“That was practice,” he whispered.

“No, that was your shot,” she replied shakily.

“Nahh,” he smiled tenderly. “That was just a practice run.”

“What?”

He leaned close and she felt his breath touch her ear.

“You’re still standing, so I obviously failed... besides, that wasn’t where I intended to kiss you anyhow.”

She drew back and stared at him wide-eyed.

“It might be closer to ninety-nine percent of my thoughts are dirty,” he murmured, only to see his supremely satisfied masculine smile. “So, when do you think we can close on our house?”

**SELKIRK**

GOD HELP CAPTAIN LOGAN, because he was gonna kiss that man when he got back to Ghazni for giving him June's email address and putting him on this team – curse or no curse!

Standing there, he couldn't help but stare at her in amazement. If their kiss didn't faze June or she said 'no' to buying the house or marrying him after that earth-shattering kiss? He wasn't sure what he would do.

He could barely think right now, was pretty sure his knees wouldn't hold his weight much longer the way they were knocking and wobbling, and all of his brain cells were starved for blood, because it was certainly pooled in his britches like some randy teenager looking at a dirty magazine for the first time.

My goodness, June was everything he could have ever dreamed about, wished for, or prayed would drop into his life... and he wasn't going to ever let her go.

Her phone rang again and he raised an eyebrow, looking at her, holding his breath. She hadn't said another word since he asked when they could close on the house... and watched as she answered her phone, her expression giving nothing away.

That was his girl – always classy, always the professional.

“Hello? Yes, we are just leaving. No,” she answered and looked away from him. “I understand. Of course. No, I'll



make sure the lights are off and lock it up. Thank you for letting my client look at it,” and hesitated, before looking at him. “I’ll send you the offer letter in the morning. Yes, he really likes the place, and we need to discuss the next steps. Can you send over the appraisal and...”

Her voice continued as everything in him just melted in awareness.

*She wasn't saying 'No'?!*

Ian sank weakly to the floor in relief and stared up at her, smiling. She rolled her eyes and looked away from him. That wasn't going to do, because he wanted all her attention on him.

He stretched out a leg and nudged her skirt upwards, knowing it would draw her focus. Just seeing the layered slip that gave her dresses that beautiful fluffiness that he adored made his heart skip a beat, and he nudged it higher out of curiosity and excitement... catching a glimpse of her stocking where it stopped on her thigh, held up by a garter.

He nearly swallowed his tongue, just as June turned to glare at him – swatting at his boot in annoyance.

“Oh, sweet mother Mary...” he uttered, as his elbows gave and he fell backwards, bumping his head on the wall as she hung up the phone, glaring at him.

“Don't make me call her back,” she growled.

“After seeing those stockings – I'm yours. Whatever you want? Take it...” he said openly, staring at her with disbelief and avid interest.

“You shouldn't have been looking!” she hissed. “Haven't you ever heard of boundaries?”

“How can I not look?!”

“By just *not looking*... my goodness, are you two years old or something?”

“No two-year-old should be having thoughts like mine right now,” he retorted, still feeling dumbfounded as he rubbed

the back of his head – and smiled sheepishly at her. “So we’re buying a house, huh?”

“Hush,” she muttered.

“You meant to say ‘Yes’...”

“Ian...”

“I’m teasing you, June,” he smiled and patted the carpet next to him. “Do you want to dream a little more – or practice another kiss?”

... And was rewarded by the softest smile he’d ever seen on her face. Gosh, she was the most enchanting creature he’d ever met, and he was seriously falling in love.

“No, Ian. We probably need to call it a night and meet at the office in the morning to do the offer letter. I need to get you with a lender so we can fill out the loan application and...”

*We?* he smiled in recognition.

She was actually going along with this whole weird and crazy idea of his. Apparently, she wanted to make sure her name was on the deed with his – and that suited him just fine.

“Will you have lunch with me tomorrow?” he asked quickly, knowing her mind was going much faster than his right now – and desperately wanting to see her as much as he could while he was here in town.

“I’d like that.”

“If you trust me, I can let Gigi out for you or take her for a walk while you are working, and...”

“I’d like that too,” she chuckled, looking a little nervous. “I want you to know that this is officially the craziest thing I have ever done, and if you make me regret buying this house? I’ll...” she paused and shook her head, giving him a wry look. “Let’s just say it will be bad, because I’ll have to plot out your torture.”

“I know it’s crazy, but I truly believe that this is the right thing to do... and I can see us here, can’t you? How often do

these homes come available? How long has this one been on the market? I'm telling you, my sweet Minx – have a little faith. We were meant to meet, to be here, to drive down this street... and you are going to fall for me," he smiled openly, looking up at her from where he sat on the carpet.

She knelt down before him, and he couldn't help but glance at her gorgeous legs before meeting her eyes again. Her skirts were pooled around her, those prim pumps locked in place like some pristine or regal princess. Everything about her screamed classy... and he adored it – and her.

June looked him dead in the eyes silently, before speaking.

"I'm really starting to wonder if you might actually be right in some weird, warped way."



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, Ian got up and put together his plans. He had one full day left with her before he was flying out. He had scheduled himself to get back a little early because of the arrival window – knowing he was going to need to sleep. The last time he flew home, he had arrived at four in the morning and had to report at seven. That day had been completely miserable.

Using the hotel scratch pad, he made a list of things that he wanted to accomplish today, and then realized that he needed to reach out to his parents. They would be devastated to learn he was in the States and hadn't called... and next time he came home he would need to get a cell phone or something, because communication was going to be at the top of his list of things to do. Having a cell phone back at the barracks meant arguing with the other guys for the plug to charge it – and with zero reception - why bother?

He dug out one of his calling cards from his wallet – and called his mother. Maybe it was paranoia, but those phone cards were such a hot commodity that he always kept one

hidden behind his military I.D. for emergencies... and would need to replace this one.

“Hey Ma? Hey – it’s Ian,” he began quickly, as he heard his mother answer.

“Ian! Oh, my goodness... Charlie? Honey! Ian is calling!” she yelled, and he laughed easily.

“Hey son, what brought this on – are you coming for a visit? How are you doing?” his dad rushed and he smiled, realizing that he couldn’t wait for them to meet June.

“Hi Dad,” he beamed. “Actually, don’t be mad – okay? I took a few days leave to come visit a friend here in Texas, and...”

“Texas? What for? Why didn’t you come home? You’ve got friends here and...”

“Dad,” he interrupted, knowing that this ten-minute calling card would be up much too soon. “I’ve met the best woman, and she lives here...”

“Ahhhh... now it makes sense.”

“What’s he saying, Charlie?”

“Ian’s got a girlfriend - now hang on, because I’m trying to listen,” his father hissed, and then cleared his throat. “So your girlfriend lives in Texas?”

“Dad,” he began and felt his throat tighten. “She’s amazing and it’s serious,” he admitted hoarsely, feeling his heart hammer wildly. “I hope it is. She’s beautiful, classy, oh-so smart, and just makes me feel like I could do anything, you know? I love the way she smiles at me, how she looks at me... and she’s the one.”

“I’m glad, Ian. I’m so glad,” His father chuckled easily. “When do we get to meet this girl?”

“I’m flying back to Ghazni tomorrow and I’ll try to see what I can do, but it might be a few months or longer...”

“When’s your re-enlistment? Are you coming back to the States? Is she going to go to where your stationed? Have you

two talked about the future? Should I prep your mama for grandbabies...”

Ian laughed as his mother let out a shriek in the background.

“No Dad, well... I have a fur-baby that June is taking care of when I fly out. So, technically, Mom’s first grandchild is a tiny Yorkie that thinks she’s a sixty-pound Rottweiler - and her name is Gigi.”

“Are ya’ coming home, Ian?” his father pressed, and he sighed, knowing he’d skirted around that question for a reason.

“My re-enlistment is coming up, but we haven’t discussed it. I need to see what my options are, see what orders are coming up, and what we’re looking at. I’m thirty-two, and in six years I can get a pension... but six years feels like forever at this moment.”

“Six years will fly by though, son.”

“Maybe? Or it will feel like an eternity,” Ian admitted. “I need to see what the next several months feels like, what orders are there, and talk to June... because her input is everything.”

“You love her?”

“Oh man, Dad,” Ian sighed, laughing softly. “You have no idea.”

“Well, tell your girl that we can’t wait to meet her someday – and if she needs anything at all to call. Give her our information, okay?”

“Will do, Dad – and give Mom a big kiss for me.”

“I will, right after she smacks me for hogging the phone.”

Ian laughed and said his ‘goodbyes’ before hanging up. Glancing at the clock, he ripped off his notepad and smiled.

*Time to go...* he mused.

**JUNE**

JUNE ARRIVED at the office in a hurry, ready to start the day. She had the offer letter filled out for the house, pulled the history on the deed, was looking up comparisons, and getting her ‘ducks’ in a row before Ian arrived. She told him to be here early, but didn’t give him a set time... and honestly didn’t know how to get a hold of him or what hotel he was staying at – which made all of this feel even more insane.

She could not afford a house like this one, but if she sold her place, it would cover the down payment. Perhaps they would hold the house on contingency, and she could put her name on the deed instead of both of them. It was a little alarming to think that she was doing something so crazy as to commit to buying a place with someone like Ian – someone who would act so very strangely, so very odd, and pushed her buttons just like... Joshua.

Her brother was annoyingly irritating sometimes. When she argued with him, Joshua would get mad or tell her to calm down – which was like throwing water on a grease fire. They could pick on each other, goad the other person, but when it came to family? Joshua was relentless in protecting the people within his circle... making her wonder what he would think of Ian.

Ian was similar, but different. He would taunt her, bait her, tried to corner or push her... but it would also be quickly

followed by this satisfied smile, and he'd tell her to 'give him everything'. It was like he thrived on being the one that she could let her innermost thoughts show to – and said as much.

Clicking on another screen, she emailed her brother.

*Dear Joshua,*

*I think I need a reality check and I know you are the one to give it. So here's the entire thing, and I need an unbiased opinion – and really don't want to unload to Mom or Dad, because they will just tell me to do what they want. You know they've tried to set me up in the past after Mark's death... and well, they did it again – sort of.*

*I met a guy – a pen pal of mine that was unexpectedly arranged and conveniently forgotten by Mom, hence the reason I don't want to say anything to them... and he's nice.*

*He's truly nice.*

*I didn't want to like him, but Joshua... I can't help it. He's so different from Mark, and I think I needed different. He makes me want to tear my hair out sometimes, makes me laugh uncontrollably, and holds me when I cry. He's the sweetest and most romantic guy – who might have a few screws loose.*

*I swear, he makes me shake my head sometimes. Do you know he sends me flowers to work every Monday morning, because he wants me to start my week with a smile and thinking of him?*

*And last night, we looked at a house together.*

*A house?!*

*As in, being grown-ups, commitment, promising the next thirty years to be friends, talk, and give this a chance... and I'm going to do it. We're putting an offer in. He's simply amazing, wildly perfect, and borderline insane... and I think I'm falling for him.*

*Am I crazy?*

*I mean, he's in the Army – stationed out there near you – and I know that means he'll be gone as much as you are from home... but I can handle that.*

*I've never been clingy and value my space – but there is just something so infinitely wonderful about knowing you have someone in your life that is just for you – and I think I'm ready.*

*Okay – enough mushy stuff.*

*Do your brotherly thing and tell me I'm nuts. Maybe next time you come home, we can have coffee together at my home.*

*Be safe.*

*Love,*

*June*

Looking up as the bell on the door chimed, she saw Ian walk in, carrying a bag and two cups of coffee. He met her eyes and walked past the front desk, completely ignoring Donna and Amanda, heading straight for her... and she fought back a sigh.

She adored his one-track mind and the way he looked at her.

“Good morning,” he said simply, and unexpectedly leaned forward to kiss her on the cheek. He paused and whispered softly in her ear. “I can't get you out of my mind.”

Backing away, he smiled at her and she flushed, feeling her heart skip a beat in awareness, remembering that toe-curling kiss.

“So? What do we do first?” he began, plopping down in a chair in front of her desk, and leaned forward eagerly. “I've never done this before and well, this is your specialty – so I trust you to make the best decisions for us. Coffee?”

“Yes please,” she said, flustered, and sat down gingerly.



“Give me your realtor voo-doo-hoo-doo stuff and let’s chat. Do you need fingerprints, do you want a donut, should we be meeting at the bank? What happens after I said ‘Yes, let’s buy that place’.”

“You’re buying a house?” Amanda chimed in, obviously listening to them – and bless his heart, Ian chimed in immediately.

“Private conversation between us, lady,” Ian blurted out, and his eyes widened in disbelief as he hooked a thumb pointed in Amanda’s direction. “Does she always do that – creep on your conversations? Can you get one of those divider thingies so it’s not so obvious? I feel like we are being ogled right now.”

“Ian,” June chuckled nervously and smiled at him, not chastising him in the slightest, because he quite handily put the other woman in her place.

Amanda harrumphed and sat down, ignoring them, and picked up a phone call.

“I wasn’t sure what you liked and I was hungry, so I brought donuts for breakfast,” Ian said softly, smiling at her. “You look lovely this morning. You’re practically radiating joy, and I hope I had something to do with it?”

“You don’t let up, do you?”

“When it comes to you – never,” he acknowledged – and winked at her.

“We should get serious and talk...”

“We are completely serious,” he replied, not backing down. “We are very serious, and we’re having a conversation, which involves talking. So, what are we getting ‘serious-ier’ about?”

She laughed and shook her head.

“Are you making up words?”

“Maybe?”

“The house,” she began, trying to get him back on track. “I was looking up ‘comps’ in the area, and most of the houses sold for three-to-four-hundred thousand in that neighborhood, which is extremely high. The land is appraising at ninety thousand, and I think if we put in an offer at what they are asking, we are overpaying. The house has sat empty for thirty days, and I’m not sure why.”

“Because it’s meant to be ours,” he said in a matter-of-fact voice, pulling out a donut and taking a bite. “Don’t roll your eyes, Minx. I told you last night that we were meant to be there. So, let’s talk numbers.”

“Fine,” she retorted. “I spoke with a lender this morning, and if we put down a down-payment of three percent, then we can finance the balance on a thirty-year conventional loan, unless your VA loan is available. VA financing is an option for the homeowner, but they are wanting to close quickly, and there’s different inspections...”

“Wait a second,” Ian said, coughing slightly. “Loan? Lender? Thirty-years? Hang on... we need to talk about this a little more in-depth, I see.”

June felt this sinking sensation in her as he stared at her in disbelief, looking completely shocked. Did he think that they were just going to move in or that this was all pretend? She swallowed back her nausea and took a deep breath.

“I suppose we should,” she began. “I drew up an offer letter for what I thought was a fair price for the property, and I’ve already filled out my portion for the financing so we can start the process to get an approval.”

“How much do you think we should offer?” he asked in a hushed voice, looking at her. “What’s the fair price to you?”

“I thought we should offer three-hundred-and twenty-five thousand dollars – but on a contingency that my place sells. That can be our down-payment, so we don’t have to scrape together the three percent down.”

“You would do that? You would sell your place and put everything in on this house – *with me?*”

“I kinda thought we were talking seriously about it – yes.”

“June, why do we need a lender, honey?”

She felt sick.

“Ian, the lender is who you go through when you buy a house. They do all the financing, all the paperwork, the loan documents, and such,” she whispered, and hated that Amanda was probably eavesdropping again. “I’ve run my credit report already with the lender and while I’ve got a balance on my car loan and my score is decent – my debts from the funeral expenses are still on there, but current. I can explain that away to a mortgage company, and...”

“We’re serious about the house, right?” Ian said softly, looking at her with an expression she had not seen before.

“Yes – I thought so.”

“I’m thirty-two,” he began, and she sat there confused, listening. “I’ve been in the Army since I was eighteen, and while I’m not a four-star general or anything fancy? ...I don’t have any bills.”

“Okay?”

“I don’t have any bills, June,” he repeated softly, his lips turning upwards. “I want our house and I want all of this. I want us with every fiber of my being. I want you ranting at me for rough-housing with the kids inside while you are working. I want us to walk the neighborhood together trick-or-treating, and I want to put up Christmas lights. Do you get what I’m saying?” he whispered intently, holding her gaze with such an intensity that she felt tears sting her eyes – and nodded.

“I really want the picture you keep painting for me,” she breathed thickly, trying to hold back her fears. “That’s why I wanted to put everything from my place into the house. The payments will be high, but I think it’s manageable...”

“June,” Ian began again, and sighed heavily – making her heart sink. “Give me your hand – please.”

She reached over the desk, careful not to mess up the paperwork she’d be preparing all morning long, and took his

hand.

“Other one too,” he smiled – and she obliged.

They were sitting there, at her desk, the documents and papers all over beneath their elbows as his half-eaten donut sat on a napkin before him. Their cups were just out of the way, and she stared at him as he held her hands, savoring the warmth and recognizing the calluses on his thumb and fingers, knowing he worked hard for a living.

“I want you to know how much I truly appreciate what you are saying, but I don’t think you are getting what I want out of this,” Ian said quietly, not holding back. “I want *you*. I want to provide for you, to take care of you, to give you time to fall for me, and let me hold you close. I want our place and all of the memories I can see us making...”

“You said that – which is why we are doing all of this,” she interrupted, and he cut her off, shaking his head.

“I’ve been in the Army for fourteen years,” he smiled. “I’ve never bought a car, had a credit card, taken extravagant trips, or spent much money.”

“Ohhhh...” she whispered in understanding. He didn’t have anything in his name, which meant he had no credit established. Yeah, that might be a problem with a lender. “I see. Okay. I’m glad you told me, and we can work with that. On the loan we’ll just put my name first and add you on there so we can build...”

“June,” he chided, giving her hands a little shake, and laughing. “Hon, for *fourteen years* I have made a few thousand a month and *never spent a dime*. I don’t want a loan hanging over our heads – I want to *buy* the darn house.”

Her eyes widened and he grinned.

“Now you get it,” he teased. “Sell your place and tuck that money aside for children someday, or keep it in an account for yourself. I’m not filthy rich, but I can manage to pay for our home outright, and still have a nice nest egg for emergencies. I’m not afraid of hard work and like my job, plus with you working, then we can put back again, you know?”

“Are you sure?” she whispered in disbelief, stunned and humbled that he was talking about building a future with them as a couple – *comfortably*.

“I want to do a *cash* offer,” he murmured, looking at her. “I want to set our lives up in a way that we don’t have the same struggles that other couples have. I’m enough to handle – and I know it. People fight about money, sex, and the kids... and I don’t want to fight with you – ever.” He gave her a knowing look. “Let’s just focus on two of the three, okay?”

His words touched her – as outrageous as they were. She was doing the mental calculations of what he was saying, and what a difference it would be to realize that they wouldn’t have some massive mortgage hanging over their heads.

“As long as we choose each other, all the rest can fall to the wayside,” he said softly. “I’m choosing *you*. This is me, betting half of everything I own or have, on the fact that we’re gonna be happy together for a very long time.”

She choked out a tearful laugh at the truth of his words and how strange they were.

“I’m serious,” Ian smiled tenderly. “So, let’s do the paperwork for the cash offer, do the wire transfer or whatever we need to do. Can we tell the other realtor that we need an answer fast so I can get the money moving, and then let’s round off our day properly? I want to kiss you again this evening in our house.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckle sweetly.

“I should get started,” she breathed, staring at this amazing man.



TWO HOURS LATER, she was on the phone with the realtor and Ian was on the phone with his bank; they were both talking in

separate conversations, totally different, but both driven to accomplish the same goal.

“Ian, if it’s cash, we can close in three weeks.”

“I can’t be back in three weeks,” he countered, covering the mouthpiece of the phone. “Can I sign today, and you make sure the contract is good?”

She nodded, biting her lip, and was humbled that he was putting that much faith in her. As the day wore on, she was still making arrangements for the house to be inspected and other details, when Ian stood up.

“Hon, let me have your keys. I’m going to go let Gigi out and will be back.”

She nodded, dug out her keys, and marveled at the ease between them as he leaned forward to kiss her softly. Smiling, she realized that she really could get used to this, and wondered if they just needed to get everything out of their system – her system. She had fought against this so much, resisted his attentions because she was afraid, but now that they had seemed to just let everything out... she felt better, unburdened, almost free.

Watching him leave to go let out the puppy, she couldn’t help but admire what an amazing person he was – both on the inside and the outside. Oh, he was completely ornery at times, a huge flirt, obnoxiously wonderful, and stubborn as could be... but that was paired with a devilish smile, eyes that let his soul shine through, and a glow that seemed to resonate with her.

Mark would always be a part of her – but the swamping guilt, the bitterness and regret, weren’t there anymore. Instead, there was a sad understanding that something had been off between them, that they couldn’t share or talk about something that was obviously personal to him. She had railed at Ian, sobbed, screamed and fought him... yet he was still there, always there.

Looking at her computer while she was on hold, she saw her brother had emailed a reply.

*June-bug,*

*You're nuts (you said to tell you that) – but marry him.*

*Hang onto that one.*

*He sounds like he is very good to you and I'm glad. You deserve that. Mark was my friend and I know you were devastated, but at some point? You have to live again. Mom and Dad just want you to be happy – and me too.*

*This guy is in the Army... and here? What's his name? I want to meet him immediately. If he breaks your heart, I need to know who's face I will need to rearrange.*

*Maybe we can have that coffee and I could tell you about my own mess I've got going right now. In person, not in an email. Just keep this between us, because I don't need any help making a bigger disaster of things.*

*We'll talk soon.*

*Joshua*



HOURS LATER, Ian had not returned yet, and she was starting to get antsy. Every inspection was scheduled, she had all the documents put together and highlighted in places for Ian to sign, the owners had already accepted the cash offer and the wire transfer had already begun... and it looked like the closing would take place in three weeks. She even had a power of attorney form drawn up and waiting to be notarized, in case there was a last-minute issue at closing.

Hearing the bell on the door, she looked up and saw Ian had returned.

“Hey, I was wondering if something had happened,” she began nervously.

“Traffic,” he replied simply, and walked to her side. “How’s it going?”

“I just need you to sign some stuff, and we wait.”

“Can you leave a little early today?”

“Actually – yes. After we get everything signed, I’m free. I don’t have anything else planned out for this afternoon and... is something wrong?”

“Not at all.”

“Okay, well you’re being awfully quiet and evasive.”

“No. I just need to pack and wanted to spend time with you before I have to leave – and well, I’ve got a few more things I want to get done today.”

Nodding, she opened the manila envelope that held the documents for the house and saw him drag in a deep breath, before leaning over her... and shut it.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly, looking in his eyes.

“No,” he admitted quietly. “It’s already hitting me that I’m leaving tomorrow, and I am not ready to say goodbye to you yet. I should have delayed my flight. I called the airline to see if I could, and any other seats would have me arriving too late for my next scheduled shift, so I’m stuck.”

“Oh Ian,” she breathed, touched that he would consider doing something like that. The back of his fingers stroked her cheek, and he smiled sadly.

“I hate that I just found you and have to leave already.”

“Let’s make what time we have left count,” she offered. “Don’t say ‘goodbye’ when we have half the day left.”

“You’re right,” he nodded, and moved to open the folder, picking up a pen.

“Ian?” she began, and he looked at her again. “If you have any fears or doubts at all – don’t sign. Let’s talk first.”



“Did you sign it?”

“Yes,” she whispered, and saw him scratch his name just above hers on the first highlighted yellow blank, just before he leaned to kiss her softly.

“There’s the first signature,” he murmured, signed in another spot, and kissed her again. “The second...” and kissed her once more. “The third...”

He punctuated each signature with a quick, soft kiss that had her smiling and laughing gently at this remarkably sweet man who left her reeling at every interaction.

“... And the final one,” he smiled, leaning over to kiss her – hesitated – and then pulled back slightly. “I think that last kiss should be a special one, don’t you?”

“I agree.”

“Then come with me,” he asked, his eyes searching hers, and she nodded.

**JUNE**

AS THEY WALKED to the car, he immediately tugged her towards his car without a word – and she acquiesced without argument. Something was on Ian’s mind, and she couldn’t imagine what it was, but that same unsettling expression was there in his beautiful blue eyes as well... and it bothered her.

This wasn’t like him.

Parking on the street, she watched as he put money in the meter and opened her door within moments. That was weird. He had the coins ready to go, she thought... and saw he looked even more erratic.

“Ian, you can talk to me if something’s wrong...” she began, seeing him turn and give her a nervous smile as he clasped her hand in his.

“Wrong? No. I’m just crossing my ‘T’ and trying to dot a whole lotta ‘I’s...”

Giving a little tug, he started down the sidewalk downtown and walked past several little shops, a few that caught her attention, because of the adorable window displays, and one had flyers of houses for sale in the glass. What a clever idea, she mused, and felt Ian turn as he started climbing the steps to an old building.

“Where are we...”

“Shhhh... we’re sneaking in.”

“Ian! You can’t keep sneaking into all these...” she began, and grew silent as he slipped into a large wooden door, and her eyes landed on the vaulted ceiling. Soaring rafters, engraved wood, and beautiful beams crisscrossed the expanse of the... church, she realized.

“What are we doing in a church? And why aren’t you on fire?”

He started laughing nervously and put her hand on his arm, patting it.

“Oh look? An aisle?!... and we’re walking, we’re talking, we’re not going to kill Ian in a church right now, because you were warned ahead of time. Remember, I said we were going to do this right?”

“Do... *this*?”

He stopped in the middle of the aisle, smiling nervously at her, and hesitated. Just his nervousness was making her feel jittery. This wasn’t him. He was normally confident, outgoing, and...

Her eyes widened as she looked at him in wonder.

“Now, before you say ‘No’ or get mad at me? Hear me out,” he stammered. “I promised I’d walk you down the aisle, and it dawned on me that I’m going back to a warzone. I’ve had shrapnel dug out of my hide and dodged a bullet or two – literally. I want to make you happy, to see you smile, and to know that you are safe or taken care of before I leave... and I want you to have my name.”

“Ian...”

“If something happens to me, you’ll automatically get everything,” he said softly, his arm trembling as they stood there beside each other in the middle of the empty church. “The house, my money, a payment from Uncle Sam, and...”

“Can you quit talking about death for a moment, so I don’t run out of here screaming,” she said angrily. “I buried one husband, and I’m not about to entertain the idea of marrying someone who’s so negative or poking at my biggest trigger

button. You are not going to die – do you hear me? You are going to go, do your duty, and then come home...”

“Home,” he smiled at her tearfully as he swallowed.

“Home to me,” she whispered, seeing the yearning in his gaze.

“I don’t mean to be negative,” he replied quietly. “It’s just bad sometimes and...”

“Then you *need to be careful*,” she stressed. “Do not freak me out before you leave – got it, mister?”

He playfully tugged her forward a few steps and then burst out laughing softly. She met his smile and then felt him tug her closer to the altar, just as a priest walked out.

“I promised to do this properly,” he smiled at her, and turned to the man of the cloth waiting there. “Father Holmes, this is my girl that I was telling you about when you took my confession. I really appreciate how strange all of this is – and your understanding about the rush.”

“Young man, like I told you before... something told me to be here today and to be patient. I never expected any of this, and I am quite wonderfully surprised.”

“Isn’t she lovely?”

“Not that, young man,” the priest chuckled easily. “I’m surprised you asked me to marry the two of you when I expected to be delivered a miracle or some other divine intervention – but not this.”

“Father Holmes,” Ian replied, with such emotion in his voice that June looked up at him. “Sir, I know you don’t realize this... but she *is* my miracle. It’s a miracle she talked to me, a miracle that she is here now, and a miracle that a simple man can care so much for someone so quickly.”

Ian turned to look at her.

“Will you marry me, June?”

She stared at him, and her lips parted in amazement at what she saw in his eyes. There, in those brilliant blue eyes,

she saw his heart.

He loved her – even if he hadn't said the words.

He told her repeatedly in his actions from the very beginning, coming on so intensely. The flowers, the gifts, the picnic where he was trying to coax her out to speak with him, the dog, the house, everything. He *loved* her, and was sincerely afraid that he was pushing her too hard... finally hitting that breaking point.

“I'm asking you for everything, Minx,” he breathed tearfully, his voice hoarse. “I can take it – but I can't take knowing you are disappointed, mad, or upset when I fly out of here. We can wait for anything else until you are ready, but this is purely selfish of me. I want to know that I'm fighting to come home to my wife, my home, my heart.”

“Yes,” she whispered tearfully, her eyes searching his. “I'll take your name, but this *is* awfully quick between us. I may need more time to acclimate to...”

“Take as long as you need,” he volunteered, “but just take *me* as your own.”

“I will,” she smiled. “... And ‘I do’.”

“Oh – and one other favor?” Ian smiled tearfully, bringing her hands up to his lips and kissing both tenderly. “We can wait as long as you need for everything else, but when it finally happens?”

“Yes?”

“I'm praying that my ‘Lady in the streets’ will *please, please, please* be a ‘freak in the sheets’,” he chuckled tearfully, smiling widely at her as she laughed.

The priest looked at the two of them like they were insane.

“Pretty please - with whatever you want on top? Whipped cream? Cherries?”

“Ian, stop...” she ordered, still nervously laughing, and turned to the priest in apology. “I am so very sorry, Father, but if you could please do the honors for us? We'll get out of here.”

“That boy needs to say a few more Hail Mary’s, young lady,” the priest retorted, as his lips twitched in amusement.

“I promise I will,” Ian volunteered easily – and winked at her. “I’m really good at them, Father.”

“I have no doubt, young man.”

June listened as the priest recited the words between them, and marveled at Ian as he repeated back his vows carefully... and surprisingly? He didn’t ad-lib or tease her at all. This was obviously something he took seriously and took to heart, touching her deeply.

As she recited her vows, she recognized a wave of remembrance from her first wedding, but also recognized how different it was too. There was no giddy, girlish nervousness, but rather a warm, welcoming sensation deep within her soul. Being married to someone that she could easily consider her best friend, someone she could see herself laughing and spending time with years from now, was comforting during a pivotal moment that she had once been so afraid of.

If she was scared or upset, she knew Ian would listen. He was the one person she could trust to take all her paranoia in stride – and help her work through it. He was promising her forever, playing the long ‘game’, and found herself looking forward to it, because of his unflinching confidence that this was right between them.

He believed – and she needed to learn from him, accept from him, and grow in her own self-assured faith that had been shaken so brutally over the years. This was going to be alright and meant to be... or they would work at it together.

“I do,” she whispered, feeling her very soul smile as she looked at him, only to see that impish smile.

“Of course, you do,” he whispered playfully. “I told you I was a catch.”

“So you are,” she chuckled tearfully.

“And maybe I’ve caught your attention, Mrs. June Selkirk,” he murmured proudly.

“Yes, you might have,” she replied... realizing it might be true as he drew her into his arms, pausing right before he kissed her. His lips were so close, she could feel the warmth of them, and opened her eyes lazily to see him waiting.

“I promise you will never regret saying ‘hello’, replying to that email, or giving me a chance. I will be anything you need in this world, so long as you give me a chance.”

“I’m going to hold you to that... husband.”

“That sounds so good,” he chuckled tenderly as he finally kissed her. His lips held hers as he crushed her close in his arms, needing to hold her tight. There was a simmering ferocity to this kiss, much different than any of the others, as if he was afraid everything would disappear or slip through his fingers... and she understood that fear.

A tear streamed down her cheek as she put her hand on the back of his head, holding him close and urging him silently to just kiss her... realizing he was right. He was going back to a warzone, and knew that it would be her turn to step up, to show him she loved him, from halfway across the world.

He withdrew slowly and sniffled, before letting out a soft laugh and wiping his eyes as he looked at her. She adored the fact that this meant as much to him as it did her. It was in his nature to laugh, tease, or taunt... but in this moment? He knew the importance of the sacrament of marriage – and was humbled by their promise to each other.

“Now what happens next, Father?” he asked, and looked at the priest – who smiled tenderly at the duo. “Is something wrong?”

“I was just thinking that you might be right, Mr. Selkirk. Love is a miracle, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir,” Ian smiled shyly at her, reaching for her hand. “It truly is.”



TWENTY MINUTES LATER, papers in her hand that would need to be filed with the courthouse, June was walking with Ian out to the car as he was cutting up, happier than ever before, and it showed. He was smiling, swinging her hand with his, and talking aimlessly about everything and anything.

“It’s such a pretty afternoon, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she smiled, chuckling, as he joined in, laughing.

“I don’t care what people think of me, you know? I want them to see that we’re happy. I’m thrilled right down to my britches that we’re gonna tackle this together, Mrs. Selkirk. I’ve got my own private cheerleader in my life, and she absolutely rocks my world with a single smile.”

“Ian...” she laughed softly.

“SHE MARRIED ME!” he hollered, skipping around and jogging backwards slightly on the way back to the car. “Y’ALL? I CAN’T BELIEVE MY GIRL MARRIED ME... AND I’M SO HAPPY!”

She didn’t want to detract from his obvious euphoria... and honestly was completely amazed at how ecstatic he was about having the ceremony performed. Maybe that was because he had never been married before?

Marriage was full of compromise, hard work, and literally combining two households into one – but this man acted like he’d won the lottery, which made it hard to dampen his boyish enthusiasm.

“Can we get drive-thru on the way home?” he smiled. “Are you hungry? I’m hungry. I bet our Gigi is starving, poor little ragamuffin. Let’s go home, eat, talk, and just spend some time together as a couple. We can cuddle, spoon, or fork...”

June burst out laughing outrageously at his play on words and the crass implication – only to see his lazy grin.

“There will be no utensils of any kind, Mr. Selkirk,” she chuckled, blushing nervously. “I know we got married, but Ian, I really am not sure if I’m ready to...”



“I’m teasing you,” Ian came to a stop beside the car and smiled at her. “You might not know this about me, but I’m a half-decent kinda guy. I know we are still getting to know each other, and this has been a lot. Maybe I’m a fool or a romantic sort... but when it’s time for us to be intimate, to share of ourselves? There won’t be any question or hesitation that it’s the right time.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, looking into his eyes and treasuring the feeling of him caressing the back of his knuckles against her cheek tenderly. “I really appreciate that.”

“Just spend time with me,” he murmured. “Talk to me, let’s hold hands and cuddle watching television, and just be together. While I love the idea of taking you to bed and find you incredibly attractive...”

She looked around nervously at his words to see if anyone was listening.

“I find it more attractive to reach the real *you* – and have you fall head-over-heels in love with me,” he breathed, leaning down to kiss her gently. “Let’s go home.”



WITHOUT ASKING, Ian checked out of the hotel and grabbed his bag, tossing it in the car. Then, he went through a drive-thru, ordering three massive hamburgers with bacon and extra cheese before flying out tomorrow – and she understood.

He was trying to get in all the ‘home’ he could before leaving. She was so shocked at his boldness, his sense of urgency, that she just sat there. What did you say to someone before they were going off to the battlefield, feeling completely unsure what to say. After all – she married him, and had barely scratched the surface of knowing who he was on the inside.

He probably thought all of this was normal and perfectly okay. He was prepping for a long flight back to a place very

different from the United States, but a part of her wondered if this was to him just another day.

*Was it?* she mused nervously.

He claimed it was okay to wait, but now he was basically inserting himself into her life - deciding on what he wanted for dinner, what they were going to do, and where they were going... and to be honest?

It was a little unnerving.

Especially when they walked into the door of her place. He set down his bag, scooped up Gigi, who was a bundle of energy, panting and wagging her tail like a possessed little creature, while Ian crooned to her.

“That’s my girl. Who’s my poochie? You’re my poochie! My sweet little poochie-coochie-coo...” he said in a baby voice to the puppy that was licking his face.

The big, tough soldier was completely unmanned by a Teacup Yorkie puppy.

She laughed softly behind the duo, causing Ian to smile openly at her.

“Your puppy mama is jealous that I’m cuddling you, isn’t she?” he whispered to Gigi, kissing her fur several times, before putting their bag of food on the counter. He moved the console like it weighed nothing, allowing Gigi access to the rest of the house without asking. “There, so both my pretty girls don’t have to struggle with that console blocking your entry. Do you need anything? Can I get you anything?”

“This is my home,” she began and hesitated, feeling abruptly rude as his smile faltered. He was trying, and had no idea how to do any of this either between them. “I can get it. Do you want some iced tea or water?”

“June,” he started and hesitated, before speaking openly in a very quiet voice. “I know this is your place and I’m not trying to be pushy, but I’m also trying not to panic. I’m not ready to leave yet. There are so many comforts that you miss over there, you know? I just want to wallow in a little happiness for a few hours before I have to leave.”

“I figured,” she murmured.

“You’re probably going to see the worst of me – and if you can handle all that? Then I think we’ll be okay,” he smiled shyly. “I thought about dragging you back to our house, wanting to kiss you again, but I don’t want to ruin anything between us. I just really want to eat a greasy hamburger or two, watch some television while cuddling with my new bride, play with our puppy, and sleep in some really cold air-conditioning... speaking of? Do you have extra sheets? I’d like to take the couch, if that’s okay with you?”

“Oh! Um, yeah... I do.”

“Perfect,” he smiled nervously. “Relax. You are safe. I’m not going to rabidly attack you like some nefarious sex-fiend who can’t wait. Trust me, while I’m thrilled at the idea – the last thing I want to do is leave here and have bad feelings between us. I’d rather hold you close, talk, and have you miss me, than to have a few moments of heaven in your arms... which is why we aren’t going by the house. You are too tempting, my beloved Minx.”

She looked at him in amazement.

That was probably the most incredible thing he could have said or offered, because she wasn’t ready for any of this yet. The marriage was a bond between friends on paper, or so she told herself, but had conveniently pushed this part aside in her mind.

“Thank you.”

“You’re *soooo* not welcome,” he beamed – and winked at her. “Now, if you change your mind and want to get your freak on? Say the word, and I’m game.”

“Oh my gosh,” she muttered, looking away and chuckling nervously as he laughed boisterously – and Gigi barked several times, chiming in.

Twenty minutes later, at Ian’s insistence, they had both changed in order to get comfortable. He donned his running shorts and a t-shirt... and she had changed into her pajamas with a robe over the top for decency’s sake. He had plopped

down in the middle of the couch, putting two iced teas on the coffee table that had seen better days, and was waiting on her to eat his burger.

Turning on the television, they ate silently... and she fed part of her meal to Gigi – while Ian scarfed down the other two burgers in almost a horrifying manner before leaning back with a heavy sigh, putting his hand on his stomach.

“Ohhh, I’m gonna regret that later,” he muttered, making a little moan of distress. “So good – and so deliciously greasy.”

“Do you need some Tums or something?”

“Nope. It’s sitting like a lump in my gullet,” he admitted, smiling at her. “Sit back with me, and let’s watch a movie or something.”

Hesitantly, she sat beside him and he urged her to his side... where she curled instinctively.

“That’s nice,” he breathed, kissing the top of her head as she sat there pensively thinking, realizing it was indeed wonderful to be held once again, to have someone that was so outgoing, so easy to get along with, that she felt she could be free to say or do anything. “I just want to sit like this and hold you for tonight.”

And he did.

**SELKIRK**

THEY SAT on the couch for hours, until June fell asleep at Ian's side.

She briefly stirred as he scooped her up into his arms and carried her into her bedroom. Everything about his new bride was so dainty, and he stared at the sight of the pink woven coverlet, lace eyelet throw pillow, and the wildly feminine touches to her bedroom. He would give anything to crawl into bed with her and make love for hours on end... but now wasn't the time.

Instead, he laid her down in her bed and pulled the covers over her, before kissing her forehead gently to tuck her in. It was strangely wonderful to hear her soft sigh of contentment, and knew he would never, ever forget the softness of her relaxed expression. He kissed her fingertips, before setting them down on her hand on her abdomen... and moved to kiss her cheek, as if he couldn't get enough of her.

"I'll wait forever for this chance I've been given," he breathed softly. "I love you."

Standing up, he pulled the door to and spread the sheets out onto her small couch, frowning. It was gonna be a tight squeeze and he might have slept better at the hotel for one more night instead of being so insistent on being here, in her presence. As he lay down, curling onto his side in order to fit his length on the couch... he patted the cushion beside him.

“C’mon Gigi, let’s let our girl sleep,” he whispered as the little dog jumped at him – and he scooped her up, putting her on his side. Gigi climbed around for a few moments before settling to rest on his head, making Ian laugh softly. “Just don’t use the potty, okay?”

Gigi licked his ear and Ian shut his eyes... hating that a tear ran down his cheek.

He was going to miss this so much.



EARLY THE NEXT MORNING, his watch started vibrating, alerting him it was time to go. Ian let Gigi out to do her business... and quickly dressed in his uniform. He made his way to June’s bedroom silently and sat down on the side of the bed, causing her to stir only slightly.

Brushing her hair back from her face, he leaned down to kiss her, and felt her wake.

“Ian?” she whispered groggily. “What time is it?”

“Four,” he murmured. “I’m heading out, and going to lock the door behind me. I want you to go back to sleep, Minx, and dream of me.”

“You’re leaving?” she pushed up to a seated position, rubbing her eyes sleepily.

*Bless her sweet, beautiful heart,* he thought wildly, his own skipping a beat. She looked so out of it, so upset in that moment, that he could have jumped for joy.

“I have to go and will be back in Ghazni in about fifteen hours or so. I’ll try to email or call as soon as I can, okay? I left some info on my parents on the counter, so if you need anything and...”

“Kiss me,” she interrupted huskily – and she didn’t have to ask twice.

Ian immediately pulled her into his arms, kissing her desperately and craving the taste of her, committing it to memory, as he fought the urge to scream in denial at how unfair it was to finally have her reaching for him... and he had to go.

“Shhh...” he said hoarsely, brushing back her hair once more, his eyes scanning over her, taking in everything. Her eyes were tearing up and her lip was wobbling, making his own heart clench painfully in awareness. “Get some rest, sweetheart, okay?”

“I’ll walk you to...”

“No, June,” he countered firmly, his throat constricting with a raw ache of awareness. “I want to remember you lying here in bed – not crying at the doorway when I leave. I need this sweet image of you in my memories... not the other. I want to dream of you, just like this, my beautiful bride.”

“Be safe,” she said tearfully, touching his cheek. “Don’t you dare make me a widow again.”

“Never gonna happen, Minx,” he choked out, and felt embarrassed by the sadness that was going to unman him before this goddess. He felt like he was about ready to sob painfully, and needed to get away from her. “Sleep... for me, okay? Get some rest and email me later.”

“I will,” she promised thickly.

“We’ll talk soon,” he sniffed and rose to his feet, turning from her.

Without another word, Ian closed the door behind him and swallowed painfully at hearing the muffled sob behind it. He picked up his bag in a quick manner, as if he was running away.

Yanking the console across the kitchen opening for June – he vowed he was going to order her a baby gate off of Amazon and send it to her. She could use it in the new house for Gigi too.

Opening the back door, he let Gigi in – and scooped her up as she licked his nose, before putting her back down. He

turned the lock on the knob and pulled it closed, walking briskly to the rental car in the distance.

He nearly vomited from the pain within his soul as he started the car, leaving his wife behind.



RETURNING to Ghazni late that evening, Ian dropped his bag onto his bunk and didn't say a word to anyone. He was still numb and reeling at the last several days. Talbot was gone on leave... Peña was lying there in his bunk, looking deep in thought, while several of the others ignored him. Keyes was the only one staring in silent disbelief at the ring on his left hand.

Ian met his eyes, gave a quick nod, and looked at the package from June that was sitting on his bunk. The box and he must have crossed in passing when he left for his visit.

Quietly, he turned away... putting the box on his footlocker. It had sat here already for a few days, one more couldn't hurt anything – not like the pain of loss that he was feeling right now. He was truly worried that opening it might cause him to break emotionally.

Collapsing onto his bunk, he curled up painfully as his stomach protested violently once more.



## **SELKIRK**

TWO DAYS LATER, Ian was eating something bland in the commissary that was supposed to resemble pizza, but looked more like a slice of cardboard with a bit of cheese sprinkled on it. The green beans were mush, and his ‘fruit crumble’ was more like diced fruit that had been thickened with some granola crunch sprinkled on top.

It sure wasn’t his triple cheeseburger... nor sushi with his wife.

“Hey Selkirk?” Muldoon hollered, rushing into the lunchroom. “You’ve got some Zoomie at the fence asking for you by name. What’d you do? Sleep with his sister? The dude looks super angry and he’s a big fella...”

Ian swallowed and got to his feet. It was time to meet his brother-in-law... face-to-face.

Leaving half of his tray, he gulped down some water quickly and headed out into the scalding sun. There were waves of heat radiating off the sand in the distance, and he could hear the clatter of trucks moving around on base, combined with the sounds of the jets somewhere nearby.

“Ian Selkirk?” a man said stonily, standing there in a flight suit and glaring at him. His arms were crossed over his chest, legs akimbo, as he stood there with this uppity, regal look on his face... and Ian nearly smiled.

That ‘regal’ look nearly mirrored June’s.

“I am – and you must be Joshua,” he said openly, extending his hand and trying to fit his palm through the fence to shake this man’s hand – but it wouldn’t fit. Instead, he lifted it upwards awkwardly and waved. “It’s nice to meet June’s brother.”

“Spill it,” the man said simply, unmoving. “I hear that you are sending my sister flowers, that you got married, and...”

“Your sister is the best person I’ve ever met. I hope I can make her happy and fill in a few vacant spots left in her heart. She’s an absolute sweetheart, and deserves all the happiness in the world. She probably deserves much better than me, too... if I’m being honest.”

“Yeah, but why you?”

“What do you mean – why me?”

“Why would June remarry someone...” his voice trailed off, and he gave Ian a hard look. “You aren’t her type.”

*Ahhh...* Ian realized that this man had been friends with her former husband, and was exceedingly protective of his sister. June was an extremely private person, and sometimes it was like pulling teeth to get her to talk... maybe it was a family trait? His own family was very outgoing, rambunctious, and wild.

“I’m not her normal type, no,” Ian admitted, smiling. “But I’m the man that makes her smile, adores her laughter, and craves the way we talk about anything, or nothing at all. She’s my best friend, and I just want her to be happy – so I go out of my way to make her so. I might not be her ‘type,’ but I’m the last guy she’s ever going to need. I can promise you that...”

“You married her in the church?” Joshua asked quietly, still watching him.

“Yes. I’m Catholic, and my parents would have had my hide if I didn’t. I wanted our marriage blessed by the church, and...”

Joshua grunted and dropped his stance, lowering his crossed arms... looking at him.

“June’s really happy?”

“Very,” Ian replied. “At least, I hope so. I always wonder if I could make her happier by doing something else to surprise her – but she seems truly happy.”

“Did you actually buy her a house?” Joshua said quietly, lifting an eyebrow in an appraising manner. “I thought I read that wrong in her email, but...”

“I’m very opinionated, stubborn, and a little bit sexist... okay, maybe a lot,” Ian admitted unflinchingly, grinning. “I want to take care of my wife, would love to have a family someday with her, and I don’t want to see her struggle. We both want a haven, a home, a place to hide where we can be ourselves... and as a macho, sexist jerk? I want to give it to her.”

“Let’s not go with ‘jerk’,” Joshua replied, the corner of his lip twitching in a slight smile. “Let’s just say that we are speaking the same language, and I understand the urge to provide only a little too well right now. Just be good to her. She’s been through so much alone, and suffered.”

“Not anymore,” Ian promised.

“Well, sort of... eh? I mean, we are here and...”

“Yeah, that might be in the works, too.”

“I see that we’re a lot alike then... *brother*,” Joshua said quietly, nodding.

“That we are,” Ian replied, smiling. “I look forward to the day that I can actually shake your hand. Maybe someday we can have dinner, all of us under one roof... *brother*.”

“I’d like that.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Paradox! You’re up, buddy. Let’s go...” a voice called out from the distance. “C’mon! Reaper is looking for you.”

“Duty calls,” Joshua smirked, lifting a hand. “We’ll talk again, I’m sure.”

“Take care and be safe.”

“You, too.”

Ian watched the other man turn and jog off towards the jets in the distance... before saluting to two people on the ground and climbing up into the cockpit. He stood there, marveling at the exchange between them, watching as the man slowly glided the large plane forward towards the runway.

He couldn’t wait to email or call June and inform her that he’d just met her brother.



*My precious little Minx,*

*I met your brother, Joshua, today – and I really like the guy! I hope you don’t mind, but I extended an invitation to him that maybe someday we could all have dinner together in our place. We seemed to get along, and I am big on family being close. I should take you to meet my own someday, but I’m not ready for you to run away screaming. See, I’m the calm one... and the baby of the group. My brothers are much wilder, if you can imagine it.*

*I miss you so much.*

*It probably sounds completely sappy, but I loved holding you close in my arms on the couch, and wanted to beat on my chest how good it made me feel to carry you into your room in my arms. You’ve got such a gentleness to your beloved face that makes me melt on the inside, and I could watch you sleep for hours. (Don’t worry – I didn’t. I know that crosses the ‘creepy’ line in the sand)*

*How’s our girl, Gigi?*

*I ordered a baby gate from Amazon for you that should be delivered in a few days. It's one that has a small swinging door on it, so you don't get those pretty skirts hung up on it, nor your hose... that's all for your husband to snag, not the furniture.*

*\*wink, wink, nudge, nudge\**

*There might be something special coming for you, too. (Well, for me... but for you)*

*Let me know if you need anything, my heart.*

*Ian*

HE CLICKED send and then emailed his parents.

*Mom and Dad – my most understanding and forgiving parents a child could wish for?*

*I want you to both sit down and take a deep breath before you continue reading. We need to arrange for a trip, a vacation... because I either want to come visit with June – or I want you to come to Texas and meet my wife.*

*June and I got married – and I am head-over-heels, crazy in love with my girl.*

*I love you both,*

*Ian*

As he finished signing the letter – he realized that he didn't have any photos of the two of them to send to his parents... and the only photos he had of her were from her real estate website. He had no photos of her true self slipping past that cool, demure mask.

“I want to see her smile so much,” he breathed openly, closing his eyes.

*My sweet bride,*

*We need to take photos next time I am there – I miss your smile terribly.*

*Love,*

*Ian*



SEVERAL DAYS LATER, Peña threw a small box onto Ian's bunk... and he scrambled to catch it, looking surprised. June had mentioned she was going to mail him something, but this had to have been sent over a week ago for it to get here that fast. Could she have mailed him something a few days after he'd left?

Not hesitating, he gave the little box a shake – and frowned.

It was awfully lightweight and quiet, whatever it was. Maybe she packed some cotton candy, or there was a bunch of peanuts in the box?

Carefully, he flipped open his knife and sliced the tape as he heard the other guys teasing Keyes about the box he'd received. Glancing up, he saw the bewildered look on Keyes' face... and the grim, jealous expression on Peña's.

Shaking his head, chuckling, Ian thanked his lucky stars that his relationship with June went so smoothly, and wondered idly how Talbot was doing on his trip. Both he and Morrison had returned married... and if Talbot did the same? It would be three-for-three...

As he sliced through the tape, he folded his knife absently and shoved it back in his pocket. Reaching into the box, he expected to feel tissue paper or packing peanuts... but not this.

*... Never this.*

Stunned and bewildered, Ian withdrew a pair of pale pink satin panties.

“What the...” he gasped openly, his mouth working several times in shock as he stared in shock – before checking the return address again in disbelief.

Sure enough, the package was from June.

The tiny scrap of fabric had a delicate bow on the front and a tiny, enchanting ruffle along the elastic of the hip, that made his mouth water in awareness. His beautiful new bride had mailed him... *her panties?*

“WOOOOWEEEE!” one of the guys yelled out, laughing. “Look at ol’ Selkirk?! Our boy is doing something right!”

“My wife...” Ian rasped in shock, looking up at the smiling faces laughing at his obviously stunned expression. June was going to bring him to tears or unman him by doing things like this to shock him – because it worked. His hands were trembling as he stared at the panties, and then he looked up at the other guys again.

“Is there a letter?” Peña asked bluntly, still frowning... which wasn’t like the guy in the slightest.

Ian didn’t dare set down the gift. He was afraid that he’d have to maim someone if they touched his sweet girl’s panties, and felt a wildly possessive streak wash through him. He looped the satin over his wrist and bunched them in his palm, before peeking inside... and sure enough, there was a piece of paper.

Withdrawing it, he swallowed and read.

*Thought I would give you something to  
look forward to and fight for... be safe.*

*~ June*

He drew in a shaky breath and closed his eyes, hearing laughter all around him as he brought the small piece of paper with delicate handwriting to his lips, pressing a kiss to it, and wishing it was his wife instead.

She was incredible.

Feeling overwhelmed, unsure what to say or do – or even how to respond, he was pretty positive he couldn't put together a coherent sentence right now as he imagined those panties on her. He'd practically begged her to be wild, a freak, when they finally consummated their marriage... but was this her way of sharing that she indeed had a wild streak hidden deep down inside?

Ian felt a hand pat him on the shoulder, looking up to see Morrison's understanding gaze.

"I'm happy for you, brother," the man said simply, a smile on his face.

"I love her so much," Ian croaked quietly, not caring if the other guys made fun of him or not.

He was the lucky one that had his wife mail him satin panties – and well, they could all just go suck a rotten egg. He wouldn't change any of the last few minutes for the world, but it was scary at how intense he felt for his girl.

"I feel like I've been clobbered with a ton of bricks... in the best way possible."

"That's pretty accurate," Morrison laughed openly, taking a seat on his bunk as his dog, Trigger, jumped in his lap like some fifty-pound baby. The dog rolled her head against the soldier's chest as if to say 'Pet me'... and his buddy did.

Ian looked at the duo – and then back at his hand clutching the precious gift from his wife, knowing he was going to sleep with that scrap of underwear hidden beneath his pillow every night from here on out. His world, his dreams and wishes, and even his future, were coming sharply into focus with a stunning clarity, like a hunter focusing on a target.

He would do anything to make his wife smile at him, to make her love him, and to make sure she never regretted a moment at his side. If he wasn't head-over-heels in love with her already?

This sweet, unexpected glimpse of his bride was earthshattering and encompassing. Oh, he'd certainly hit the



jackpot marrying her... and wasn't about to let another minute slip past him.

He was going home.

**SELKIRK**

IAN KEPT his head down the last few weeks and focused on trying to make sure that June felt special. He looked forward to calling his girl, sharing a few laughs with her, and falling even deeper in love with his amazing being that he'd crossed paths with. He slept with her gift under his pillow every single night, and stuffed it under the straps of his helmet, beneath the protective shield, just so he felt she was close.

The guys knew it too.

They gave him a few envious glances. Peña seemed to be getting more and more annoyed... and even Keyes, the man that thrived on rules and regulations, seemed to be lost. Pendergast was getting more and more vocal about wanting a pen pal, annoying Captain Logan to no end. Mitchell was almost congenial since his last visit back home. It was the weirdest thing, how they were all settling into their settings... or at least the ones that had embraced what it was to have a new pen pal.

Mitchell had married, and so had Morrison. In fact, Ian was talking in hushed tones with Morrison, away from the others.

"I'm gonna go talk to Logan," Ian whispered. "I'm trying to figure out how to broach the subject, because I heard through the grapevine that he gets really angry – loses his

cookies. I've had the man yell at me before, so I'd rather not run laps in the heat or have to clean the floors."

"Logan isn't so bad," Morrison began, and hesitated. "But I've got to talk to him too."

"Both of us?"

"Yeah. It's not going to go so well if both of us fail to renew our enlistments."

"Whoever goes second will get totally reamed by Captain Crotchety..." Ian muttered, and winced as several of the others in the barracks started laughing. Talbot was chuckling openly after having just run laps yesterday, and Mitchell sat there quietly, smirking.

"You know," Mitchell began. "Everyone is entitled to have a bad day – and there's a lot riding on that man's shoulders."

"Agreed," Keyes chimed in quietly. "I think if I was responsible for almost two hundred soldiers, having to answer to others, writing eulogy letters to families when we kick it, trying to keep up morale, and dealing with a bunch of rejects like us...? Yeah, I think Logan's entitled to have a bad day."

"Quiet, ya' big suck-up. Do you need Chapstick for all the butt-kissing you do?"

"Don't be a hater. Keyes is a good guy – and he's right..."

"Logan is responsible for almost two hundred men – yes," Mitchell began, and looked at Keyes. "Someday I am going to be taking that man's place, and hope I am half the leader he is. You grow, you learn, and you adapt, by learning how to handle a smaller group first... such as this one."

No one said a word – including Keyes. He just sat there and swallowed stoically.

Ian turned back to Morrison.

"I think we should both go at once and talk to Logan at once."

"I agree. Don't give him time to get worked up. Drop the bomb and run."

“Exactly.”

“Should we do it today? Not give him time for word to get around or prep for it?”

“Yep.”

Both Ian and Morrison stood up, shaking hands in silent solidarity... and hesitated as Mitchell stood up, looking at both men.

“Be open and honest with Captain Logan,” Mitchell said quietly. “He appreciates someone shooting straight with him and explaining why you are giving up your careers. Remember, no one understands why you’d do something like this until you are in that same position, same mindset.”

“Will do.”

Ian walked out of the barracks with Morrison beside him, both men on a mission. They walked across the sand, out into the blistering heat, and he took a deep breath to steady his nerves... and then smiled.

He was more nervous meeting June for the first time – and if he could do that? He could absolutely face Captain Logan’s wrath. It’s for a limited time, whereas his beloved June was his world, his forever. Going home to her never sounded so good, and he imagined what it would be like to wake up with June, to bring her coffee in bed, hold her hands, slip his arms around her and hug her when she was least expecting it... and toss up those gorgeous skirts to see those incredible stockings.

“What’s the first thing you want to do when you get home?” he asked Morrison curiously, wondering if he was the only guy so obsessed with his wife or if this was just ‘part of it’. Mitchell never talked about his wife and neither did Morrison, but he sure did. Ian blabbed about how wonderful his wife was, made no bones about how he felt about his girl, and seriously couldn’t get enough of his bride.

“Actually,” Morrison chuckled. “I want to hold my wife’s hand, hug my new son, and truthfully? I want to go to the courthouse.”

“I thought you were already married?”

“I am – but she’s got a nasty court case coming up, and I want to be at her side,” Morrison said quietly as they walked up to the building. “I want to be there to support her, to be Madison’s partner, and I think I want to show solidarity... adopting her boy as my own.”

He opened the door and allowed Morrison to go inside first – but the other man paused.

“And you? What’s the first thing you want to do?”

“Hug my wife,” Ian admitted, smiling openly. “I want to see her smile, hear her laugh, and just breathe her air.”

“I’ve got it just as bad, my friend,” Morrison laughed softly, and shook his head.

As they stepped inside, Morrison was at the desk signing in... and Ian went immediately to the small table in the distance that held a coffee pot with several Styrofoam cups. He filled three immediately and carried them in a triangle fashion, squished between his two hands.

“Morrison?” Captain Logan said, walking out of the office, and hesitated spotting Ian. “Selkirk? To what do I owe this honor?”

“We decided to come bend your ear and share a cup of coffee,” Ian volunteered brightly. “No beer, but coffee is safe... right?”

“Can we come in?” Morrison asked, and Logan nodded, stepping back and holding out his arm.

“C’mon in fellas.”

As Morrison and Logan sat down, Ian gingerly set down the three cups of coffee – taking one for himself. All three men were sitting there silently, sipping on the steaming, obviously strong cups of dark coffee... as Logan raised an eyebrow.

“Sooo?” Logan began.

“So,” Morrison hedged, and glanced at Ian, who smiled impishly.

“So,” Ian paused – and then chuckled easily, shaking his head. “So, so, so... yeah, I’m not re-enlisting, and need to know my date to go home. Other than that? How’s your day going? And your wife? How did she enjoy those candies you sent her? My, my it’s awfully sunny outside, but I think we are supposed to have a cool front tomorrow. It’s only gonna be ‘blistering’ instead of ‘broiling’. Morrison, do you think it’s gonna be ‘blistering’ tomorrow?”

“Definitely gonna be ‘blistering’ tomorrow with no rain in sight anytime soon, but that’s the desert-life, you know? You sent your wife candy? What kind? Maybe I should bring Madison some when I go home – oh, and I’ll need my departure date too,” Morrison finished, taking a big sip of the coffee while Logan sat there, staring at them in disbelief.

The two men glanced at each other quickly, before both took another sip... and Logan set down his cup without a word. Neither moved, and several uncomfortable moments passed.

“Did I mention I got married?” Ian blurted out, and saw Logan roll his eyes, causing Morrison’s to widen in surprise.

“Tell me it wasn’t your pen pal?”

“It was – and he married his pen pal too,” Ian volunteered, garnering a swift look of betrayal from Morrison that caused Logan to chuckle. “Yep. We are both happily married. Did you know, Mitchell is happily married to his pen pal too?”

“God help us if he ever gets captured,” Morrison muttered. “Sings like an off-key canary.”

“Tweet, tweet,” Ian chuckled, and Logan laughed aloud at the two of them, before looking at them hard.

“Do either of you know a woman named Lily or a man named Griffin?”

“Who in the world is this Lily person?” Morrison muttered openly in confusion. “My wife asked me the same question. She wanted to know if I knew someone named Lily. I don’t know anyone by that name...”

“And you?”

“I don’t know someone named Lily.”

“Both of you don’t?” Logan said skeptically. “Do either of you have a job lined up with Griffin?”

“No, I don’t,” Ian said, and looked at Morrison. “Do you?”

“I don’t know these people, but I’m wondering if I should,” Morrison chuckled nervously.

Logan sighed heavily and logged into his computer, writing down something on a sticky note... before handing it to Morrison – and then did the same, handing it to Ian.

“Griffin was a soldier that was my right hand, my best friend, and is now a police chief in Tyler, Texas. He’s a great guy, but his wife has an uncanny knack of pairing up my soldiers with pen pals... and every single one of them ended up getting married - before requesting to go home.”

“Really?”

“Yup,” Logan chuckled. “And all five of the emails that I handed out were from Lily, so I’m kinda not too surprised. Disappointed, but I understand and...”

“Wait,” Ian interrupted, looking at Morrison. “Your buddy is in Tyler?”

“Heck, two-thirds of the guys that have passed through my squad in the last three years live there. We take care of our own, and if you two need a job – that is Griffin’s phone number. I would rather you stay here, but I can’t blame either of you, because of my own wife wants to look for a place there.”

“My wife is a realtor,” Ian volunteered proudly. “And we are closing on our own home on Friday. I’m sure June would love to help – because yeah, we do take care of our brothers.”

“This Friday?”

“Yeah. I feel bad because she’s alone, and...”

“Does she need help?”

Ian’s mouth dropped open in surprise – and then he smiled.

“Yeah, she needs help... and I can give you June’s email or phone number. She’s incredible at what she does, and relentless until she finds the right place.”

“Hold tight...” Logan said immediately, and picked up the phone off his desk, then stood up and yanked out his wallet. Ian immediately retrieved a calling card from his own wallet in recognition – handing it to the captain.

Logan smirked, nodded, and dialed.

“Hey John, it’s Dash... Look, I have a huge favor to ask, and time is short. It’s Thursday night there, isn’t it? Yeah. No, Jules and I are still looking at it soon – I promise. Something came up and I have a huge favor to ask. Are you off work tomorrow, or can you gather up a few guys to help move someone?”

“I need character witnesses for a court date,” Morrison volunteered quickly.

“And character witnesses for an upcoming court date, that I’ll obviously need to get more information on apparently,” Captain Logan said, lifting an eyebrow. “Yes. Yes, one of my soldiers is here in my office and his wife is moving her entire house by herself tomorrow... No, I know that’s a lot of work, which is why I’m calling you.”

Ian listened, fascinated, as the two men spoke for a few more minutes – before Captain Logan looked at both of them.

“Morrison – I need that date. Selkirk, I need your wife’s name and address, so we don’t scare her to death... yeah, Griffin. I’ll email it to you, buddy – and thank you.”



**JUNE**

SHE WAS EXHAUSTED... and hopelessly alone.

Her parents had flown out of town for a fishing trip her father had wanted to go on badly. They had booked the non-refundable excursion almost six months ago. It was non-refundable and despite their protests, she urged them to go, claiming she'd already packed everything and hired movers.

Movers were not hired.

Her brother was in Afghanistan – and so was Ian. Neither would be helping her move boxes or furniture, and while she had connections for discount moving companies, part of her balked at the expense and the invasion of privacy that came with it. She didn't want a bunch of people going through her things – or knowing where she lived... alone.

She was completely alone... and had said as much to Ian, hitting reply to his beloved email.

*Dearest Ian,*

*I'm sorry I didn't think to send you with any photos – and I feel guilty about that. You are so right. We need photos of us smiling, laughing, or cutting up together... because I desperately miss your smile too. I don't think I have laughed since you've left.*

*Monday's flowers were roses again – deep, red, brilliant buds that took my breath away. I donated all the other vases, but I might keep this one. Believe it or not, there is a large 'S' on the front of the vase that seems so special considering my new last name... eh? If you didn't plan that – then it's a miracle. I think I might try my hand at planting some red roses in the back yard so I can see them at any time. They are truly my favorite... so thank you.*

*Speaking of the house – I close Friday afternoon and get the keys.*

*I'm not going to lie, it hit me this afternoon about the move. I'm packing and boxing things, but cannot figure out how to get some of it over to the new place. I've got a U-Haul reserved, but I might have to see if I can bribe a couple of neighbors to help me load the furniture on the truck. I can't do it alone, and the cost of movers is ridiculous. I'll figure it out, because I did it once before when I moved in here after Mark died. You just forget how much JUNK you have until you are boxing it up.*

*I had to take Gigi to the vet yesterday... sigh... you know she eats everything?! She found something on the floor and swallowed it before I could get to her (and I keep it spotless!). I rushed her to the animal ER clinic, and they did x-rays, induced vomiting, and found it was a Tic-Tac.*

*A Tic-Tac.*

*Four hundred dollars later, one guilty puppy-mommy, and a very tired furball... we are home, and the house I thought I kept spotless? I am now roaming at her level (on my hands and knees) searching for stuff. In fact, on my final walkthrough today? I was doing the same thing before I brought Miss Gigi over.*

*It might be a hot-minute before you hear from me because of the move... be patient, Handsome. Oh, and*

*I mailed you something a few days ago... so don't laugh.*

*Yours always,*

*June*

Sitting on the floor beside Gigi, she smiled wanly.

“It’s gonna be alright,” she whispered, scooping up the puppy and kissing it repeatedly like Ian used to do. “Yes, I miss your daddy too – so here’s a bunch of kisses from him.”

The puppy barked several times, waved her head around happily trying to lick her, while her whole bottom torso shook from tail-wagging-excitement.

“I know, sweet girl,” she crooned softly, and stared at the boxes surrounding her. “We’ll figure this out and have it all set up next time he comes home. He’s such a good man and I adore him... I really want to make this work somehow.”

She swallowed nervously, taking a quick photo of her and Gigi – and emailing it to Ian.

“I wish sometimes I could have as much faith as he does, believing everything is going to be just fine... it’s just hard and scary to let it go, you know? Miss Gigi, everything has been so rough up to this point, that it’s hard to believe I can have something as beautiful as Ian in my life... and I want to believe it so much,” she whispered tearfully, hugging and kissing the puppy again. “Dear God, I really want to let myself believe that this is it – that this is going to be alright to let myself love Ian... because I am falling more and more in love with that crazy man.”



FRIDAY MORNING FINALLY ROLLED AROUND, and June was at her desk when two packages arrived from Ian. There was a massive box that was extremely long and wide, clearly marked with the term ‘Baby Gate’ on the front, that set Amanda’s

tongue wagging almost immediately – and June rolled her eyes. The woman just needed any excuse to latch onto something, and it was pitiful. Hopefully she would find her own happiness someday with that new husband of hers... and quit eavesdropping into her life.

The second box was unmarked.

Sliding a small blade across the tape, she opened it up and saw a glossy gift box inside with hot pink ribbon across it... again, unmarked.

Removing the gift card, she smiled.

*I dream of that view all the time.*

*Love,*

*Ian*

Curious and hands trembling, she tugged on the ribbon and lifted the lid... as her breath caught as a flood of memories swarmed her.

She could see in her mind his laughing and smiling face as he gazed up at her with adoration from the floor of the master bedroom. They had been together in the alcove talking about the house while she was on the phone with the other realtor. He'd nudged her skirt upwards, and she had swatted at his foot – but obviously that glimpse had made an impression on him.

Inside the box was a pair of expensive stockings embroidered with pink bows at the back of the ankle, and a pink line that ran down the back of the leg.

Her heart hammered in her chest because this was a decadent, obviously intimate gift from a husband to his wife... and she loved it.

“Oh Ian,” she said softly under her breath. “Which of us is actually a minx after all?”

**JUNE**

HOURS LATER, gathering up the paperwork and the keys, June couldn't help but smile at the realization that she and Ian were now homeowners of a beautiful place that would be excellent to raise a family.

There were so many treasures to discover in the house that was almost seventy years old. She found a dumbwaiter in the kitchen during her final walkthrough... and had no idea there was a pool in the backyard. It had been nearly dark when she and Ian had viewed it originally and during the walkthrough, she had walked around the entire building... only to discover a small in-ground pool that was landscaped beautifully around it.

Driving home, she was going to start hauling boxes over tonight and move the little stuff before getting the U-Haul, and...

June turned on the street and hesitated, staring in disbelief and frustration, as she realized the neighbors were obviously having a party. There were about twelve cars sitting out there, blocking the road and parked directly in front of her place, the neighbor across the way, the mobile home beside her, as well as in the grass where the road ended.

Mrs. Richmond a few doors down was the type to call the police, and she grimaced. It was going to be a very interesting

evening full of blue and red flashing lights in the very near future.

As she pulled forward, the throng of men and women parted, allowing her in – only to have one of them flag her down.

“I just need to get into my driveway,” June began.

“Are you June Selkirk?” the man said, grinning at several others that came walking up to her car. She instinctively locked the doors and met his gaze. “Good girl – cautious. I like it, and it will make your husband feel better about being gone.”

“Can I help you?” she said loftily, and hesitated as she saw Mr. Martinez – whom she was showing properties to currently. “What is going on, Mr. Martinez?”

“Well, your husband has some friends in a few places...”

“We’re all retired Army – and we take care of our own...”

“We’re here to help you move, Mrs. Selkirk...”

“You got everything boxed up? We brought the muscle!”

“Cooper, please... the only thing you brought is your mouth.”

“Don’t be a hater, Hody. Just because you’re getting a ‘Dad-bod’...”

“I beg your pardon, shrimp?”

“Who are you calling ‘shrimp’?”

“You, Shrimp!”

“Just cause you’re an overgrown ogre, Wilkes, that doesn’t mean that...”

“GUYS!” The man shouted hotly over his shoulder, and then smiled as others kept rattling off comments in the distance, bickering like a bunch of brothers fighting in the yard. “Your husband, Ian Selkirk, went to speak to his captain – who is my best friend – and the man I used to work for while I was stationed in Ghazni. All of these men worked with

Captain Logan, and some worked with your husband. Word gets around and to quote Minter – ‘We do take care of our own’, Mrs. Selkirk.”

“What?” June asked tearfully, staring in disbelief at this blessing that Ian had arranged from halfway across the world. “I don’t... *what? Really?*”

“We’re here to help you get moved in, ma’am. My wife, Lily, is the woman that gave your email to Captain Logan, and we’re very happy for you both. Consider it a wedding present or a housewarming present from a *very* extended family that you have in town,” the man smiled.

“I don’t even *know* you people... and my neighbor will call the cops if we don’t clear the street.”

The man smiled – and flashed a badge.

“I promise, it will be okay,” he replied in amusement. “I’ll tell the chief that we’ll move quickly, and clear the road.”

“You won’t get in trouble? I just... yes,” she breathed, stunned and grasping at this opportunity that Ian had arranged to help her. He had once told her to give him a chance and he would do what he could – obviously he meant it. Her heart was thumping wildly at this blessing her husband had managed to somehow deliver. “Help would be so welcome and so wonderful. I just...”

“Mrs. Selkirk,” the man chuckled. “I *am* the new chief of police – John Griffin. Now, do you want to unlock the door to your place so we can get started?”



HOURS LATER, she was standing within the walls of their new home and staring in disbelief as her entire life was surrounding her. Boxes were put in different rooms, her couch and things were in the cozy living room, her bed was set up, her dresser containing her clothing moved in one piece, carried by two men... it was all just simply shocking to see what all these

people had done for her, with zero incentive other than the fact that her husband was an active-duty soldier... like they once were.

She was surrounded by smiling faces, so many names, children wanting to touch the puppy, and mothers keeping them out of the backyard for fear of the pool. Everyone laughed when Gigi wasn't big enough to climb the first step by herself to follow the children upstairs... it was all so beautiful, so wonderful, and so overwhelming.

"Alright," a man announced, coming out of the office area, smiling and dusting his hands. "The important stuff is done."

"It's *been* done, dweeb-that-I-love," another guy quipped, causing several people to laugh.

"Coop, her husband's still active duty and overseas. The important stuff is her router and modem so she can email her fella."

"Hear, hear," every woman in the room agreed in unison, causing several of the guys to laugh.

"To us, we have different priorities..."

"Big screen television..."

"The bed. Numero Uno is the bed."

"The baby's bed, you mean..."

"Of course, dumplin'. I meant, Luke's bed. I swear."

"Psst... Leia, no he didn't."

"I'm not dumb. I know that."

"Hush up, Luka. She knows what bed I meant."

"Geez, Jason... can you stop now?"

"Stopping."

"The kitchen has to be set up so I can feed the little ones."

"And her biggest, whiniest one..."

"That'd be me," the police chief grinned, raising his hand and then patting his middle.



“I can’t thank you all enough,” June said softly in amazement. “You saved me a thousand dollars from having to rent that U-Haul, struggling to move it all, and... and... I am truly grateful. If there is anything I can do to repay you...”

“Help the next person when called upon,” Lily said, standing next to her husband. “We have a text thread we don’t use very often because it gets quite hectic, but I would like to get your cell number in case someone needs something. We do cook-out every once in a while – and you are welcome to join us.”

“I’d like that,” June admitted. “Maybe when Ian is in town, we can have all of you over and have a true housewarming party.”

“You hear that?”

“PARRRTAYYY...”

“Shhh... Michael’s asleep.”

“So is Luke...”

“All of the children are nodding off...”

“And,” Lily smiled at her husband, John, “On that note? We are leaving to let you get settled and collapse in a boneless heap. If you need any help, need anything at all, just shout.”

“Thank you again,” June replied as she thanked each of them, giving out her cell number and business cards, while they walked out the door. “Mr. Martinez, check your email – I sent you three listings that I think will work for you and Laura.”

“Will do,” the man smiled, nodding, and shook her hand. “Thank you, June. We’ll talk soon.”

No sooner than she closed the front door, her cell phone rang.

“June Selkirk, realtor. How can I help you?”

“Ohhhhmygosh... That sounds so good,” Ian gushed on the phone, laughing happily. “I swear that is the best sound

I've ever heard, and do you know just how much I love you? I FREAKIN' LOVE MY WIFE... June, oh mercy, June..."

She laughed softly and hesitated as his voice trailed off, shaking.

"I'm really partial to my new name, husband."

"Darn straight," he said emotionally, and she paused. "Because it's beautiful and meant to be, Minx. You hear me? Any doubts you have – chuck 'em – because I love you more than life itself, and I swear I am going to make you happy."

"Ian, honey, what brought..."

"Aww, you called me 'honey'?"

"Ian, what is going on that is causing all of this – because I should be the one yelping in excitement. I cannot believe you arranged for your friends to come help me move. Everything is out of the other place and in our new home. I'm just stunned that you are simply so incredible and good to me, you know?"

"Good."

"June – thank *you* for being amazing... and my gift. I'm just floored – and so incredibly grateful to have you in my life."

"Oh!" she smiled knowingly, blushing wildly. "I just wanted to give you a reason to keep safe, and something for you to look forward to back home."

"On that note? Can we talk for a second?"

"Yes?"

"My re-enlistment is up in a few months, and I thought maybe, if you wouldn't mind? That we could talk about me coming home. I want to spend every day with you, for us to have a family someday, and... I'm not trying to push you, June. We can wait – but I really want to be close to you, and it's hard to have a relationship through email. I want to hold my wife."

"Yes," she replied, closing her eyes against the emotions sweeping through her.

She was so tired of being alone, and wanted to laugh again with him. All the wildness, the outrageous comments, just his flair for life... she wanted to bask in it. The idea of taking children trick-or-treating, opening Christmas presents, a Thanksgiving with their families, or him sitting on the floor teaching a toddler to walk, just made something visceral within her flare to life.

“Are you sure?” she whispered nervously, knowing his entire life would change... for her.

“Baby, I’ll plant the roses for you just so you don’t get scratched,” he promised softly. “I’ll find a job when I get home... or get two jobs, if I have to. I just really want us to have a chance to start - and I want you to be able to get to know me better. I want you to fall in love with *me* someday.”

“Yes. I want everything, and you mentioned a family...?” her voice trailed off, but even she could hear the want in her voice.

“Say the word and I’ll make it happen,” he rasped hoarsely. “When you are ready, just say the word, my love. I’m in no rush, but...”

“Ian, I *want* to,” she whispered softly, and heard his intake of breath. “I love how you make me smile, how you make me laugh. I want to know what it’s like with you when we are alone and...”

“Honestly? I have a confession to make,” Ian hesitated and she heard his nervous laugh, treasuring it. “I talk a lot of smack, but man-o-man... it’s gonna be awful the first couple of times. I’m not going to sugarcoat it, but it’s gonna be really bad, so let me just apologize now to you.”

“Why do you say that?” June was already laughing at his words; her heart was warm within her chest and bursting with love. She adored the way he made her laugh and created this light-hearted aura around him, making her just feel wonderful. “You’ve been bragging about yourself all this time and...”

“I may have exaggerated,” he whispered in a hushed breath. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes?”

“Oh good, because I don’t want to say this more than once...”

“What’s going on, Ian?” she laughed softly, curious at how disjointed and muffled his voice was – and how he was trying to keep from being overheard. He obviously had his hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. “Ian?”

“June, I waited,” he whispered.

“What do you mean ‘*you waited*’? Waited for what? You waited for... a family or... OOHFFF,” she breathed in dawning awareness, transfixed by this sudden confession from him. “Oh Ian – you waited for... *that*?”

“Yeah. It’s special, you know? I mean, at least I *want* it to be special, and it means a lot to me. I’m probably the biggest moron out there in the entire universe... but I take my promises, my faith, my ethics very strictly. You’ll never have to worry about me doing you wrong, because it’s just not in me,” he stammered softly, his voice breaking slightly with emotion as she closed her eyes in wonder, offering up a silent ‘Thank you’.

“I love that you think like this,” she admitted openly. “And I want to love *you*. Come home.”

“You’re sure? I mean, it’s okay if you change your mind or...”

“Ian?”

“Yeah?”

“Come home and let me show you how beautiful things will be between us, husband,” she breathed tearfully, already knowing deep within her heart that she had truly been blessed to have a second chance to love someone. Mark would always be there within her heart, but it was so very different. The love she felt for him was deep, innocent, and beautiful... but for Ian?

It was heady, powerful, and overwhelming.

“As you wish,” Ian breathed thickly in the receiver, and groaned. “Stupid calling card is counting down already, and...”

“It’s okay. We’ll have all the time in the world soon.”

“Yeah, we will. I love you so much, and we’ll figure this out together. I promise.”

“I love you too,” she said softly, feeling so strange to utter the words that she hadn’t said in years aloud finally, to a man she never expected to meet – and couldn’t imagine a life without him. “Be safe and let me know when you’re coming home.”

“Will do, Minx...” he whispered, and then the call disconnected.

She sat there silently, staring at the walls of the house and hearing Gigi walking around, investigating her new place... and it hit her. The walls were silent. There was no laughter, no echoing moments of memories. Everything was a blank slate just waiting to be filled, and it was just an empty house, not a home.

Months and years from now, she would feel much differently. There would be memories, lazy evenings cuddling and watching television. Those days were on the horizon where they would relax here together, dreaming of a future of their making. There could be early mornings waking up close to Ian, rising to make breakfast together, and talking... and someday?

Someday there would be the sound of children.

This house would transform into a Home... because of Ian.

**JUNE**

*Three months later...*

“WHOOOOOOOOO LIVES in a cute house so far from me?” Ian sang openly, playfully mimicking the sound of the SpongeBob SquarePants song.

“Your wife, Sel-kirk!” she chanted obligingly – making him chuckle that she was playing along with him.

She adored his little giggle that he would sometimes let slip, and pictured his affectionate grin that was probably plastered all over his handsome face.

“Lonely, adventurous, and passionate is she...” he sang again.

“Your wife, Sel-kirk!”

“My wife, Mrs. Selkirk...” he laughed happily, unable to continue singing as they both cracked up laughing together. “Hi my beloved Minx. How are you doing, hon?”

“Better now that you called,” she quipped easily. “How’s my favorite person in the whole wide world?”

“Better now that you called,” he parroted tenderly. “I seriously miss you, and not sure how much more abuse those sweet little pink panties can take. I keep shoving them in my helmet so you are with me, then back under my pillow they

go... although, Talbot did say something that bothered me, and I know he was trying to be funny.”

“What did he say?”

“He said that if something happened – he was going to stretch them wide over my head, and...”

“Oh goodness...” she burst out laughing.

“... And actually threatened to leave my poor body with ladies’ panties on my head,” he finished, outraged. “Can you imagine that? All I do for that man, and he’s gonna make me look bad if my goose gets cooked? Sheesh... is there no dignity? No honor among soldiers? Doesn’t he understand that I *need* these things with me?”

“Ian,” June cracked up, laughing wildly. “Honey, you do not *need* them with you – but yes, there should be dignity at the end. Just try not to get your ‘goose cooked’ near Talbot okay? Stay near Peña or...”

“Peña is wicked jealous,” Ian muttered. “He threatened to jerk them up my legs and over my pants. The man is not right – and that’s a lot, even coming from me.”

June was laughing so hard she was crying now.

She missed him so much and couldn’t wait for him to return. He said he was still waiting on a release date and she was biding her time, preparing what she could around the house. She hung a few pictures that she’d had at her other place, set up her office area, and was slowly making the master bedroom a haven for the two of them to someday hideaway.

“Aww, Minx...” he uttered thickly. “I’m trying. I really am, and the second I get the release – *poof* – I’ll be there. I promise.”

“I know. I’m just ready to hug you, see your smile, and miss you so much...”

“I’m a catch, remember?”

“I do remember – and you are,” she said tenderly, wiping her eyes. “Just try not to play so hard to get. Let me catch you

a few times in the near future.”

“Will do, my love. You sound like you are in the car? Are you headed out to show a house? Ohhh mercy, I’m not on speaker am I? Are you alone in the car, or did a bunch of other people hear about my favorite lucky charm? Psst... that would be your panties, sweet girl.”

“Ian,” she laughed nervously. “I am in the car and thankfully – I’m alone. I’m actually headed to my parents’ house. My brother flew into town, and we’re meeting his fiancée over dinner – and her son. Apparently Joshua is going to tackle becoming a stepfather.”

“I think he’ll be amazing,” Ian volunteered. “I’ve talked to him a couple of times for brief stints, trying to get to know my brother-in-law a little better in this weird world we both exist in... and well, June. I really like the guy.”

“He’s pretty amazing for a pesky brother.”

“True,” Ian laughed easily. “I’ve got three of them that you’ll need to meet someday.”

“I wish you were able to be here with me.”

“I wish I could go too. I would love to shake his hand and meet your parents.”

“They will love you,” she promised.

“Soon,” he hedged. “As soon as I get home, we’ll take some time for ourselves, and then meet the in-laws together. I love you dearly, just be patient okay?”

“I am. I promise,” she murmured as she pulled up into the driveway, and saw her brother standing in the yard with a boy in his arms, waving at her. “I’m here, and Joshua is waiting.”

“My calling card was already counting down. I just didn’t want to interrupt the conversation. I’ve got about twenty seconds.”

“Just long enough to say ‘I love you’....”

“I love you too, my sweet Minx...”



And the line went dead in that telltale, eerie sound that she was growing to hate. Sighing heavily, she got out of the car and wiped her eyes once more, before plastering on a welcoming smile.

“Everything okay?” Joshua said observantly.

“Yep,” she smiled tightly. “I was just on the phone with Ian, and we’re both ready for him to come back home. Who’s this handsome fella?” she asked, holding out her hands towards the boy.

“This is Caleb, my best buddy.”

“Joshuwaaa is my copilot...” he beamed, leaning forward and hugging her tightly around the neck. “What sur name?”

“My name is June, but your copilot calls me Junebug.”

“Ur my Joonbug, too,” he smiled shyly, before burying his cheek against her shoulder as she hugged him.

“I’m so happy to meet you, Caleb,” she murmured, kissing his forehead and hugging him back as she looked at Joshua. “You look so happy – and I’m glad.”

“C’mon inside and meet my girl...” her brother invited, smiling openly at June... making her realize just how miserable and silent he had been the last several years.

June almost didn’t recognize this relaxed and smiling man before her, compared to the bitter, sedate one that she had kept in touch with. As she walked inside, there was a dark-haired woman on the other side of the living room sitting with her parents... and June marveled as her expression lit up with unfettered joy the moment her brother walked in the room, bringing tears to her eyes once more.

That look, that singular look of joy on the woman’s face, was how Ian made her feel, wholly in her soul. Her entire world came alive the moment his aura brushed against hers. They could talk on the phone, be in the same room, or do nothing at all... and she recognized her better half – making her miss him all the more.

*Come home*, June thought painfully, swallowing the lump in her throat as she met her soon-to-be sister-in-law.

Later that night, June slept in her bed and cried herself to sleep. It was wonderful and so very hard to see how happy they were... and knowing that her own happiness was just out of reach, praying that Ian's time in Afghanistan would to an end soon.



*THREE DAYS LATER...*

JUNE PULLED into the brick paver driveway of their home and was utterly exhausted. Her newest client was a taskmaster, and she had been all over God's green earth showing house after house. The woman knew exactly what she wanted and made no bones about it. Sometimes she would pull up to the house and was immediately told 'No'... other times, they toured the house, walked the property, then toured it again.

Her shoes were rubbing a blister on her Achille's heel, and there was a sore spot on both pinky toes from walking so much. These shoes were made for looks, not long treks in the grass to walk a property line...

Getting out of the car, she yanked off her shoes and carried them, before stepping inside and shutting the door. Yanking off her lanyard that she'd looped over her head in exhaustion on the last showing, she padded silently towards the bedroom... only to have her fierce guard dog come bounding through the doggie door, barking angrily.

"Who are you fussin' at, Terminator?" June hissed at the dog, scooping her up and dropping her shoes onto the wooden floor noisily. "Yeah? Oh yeah? Are you going to lick me to death?"

Gigi was losing her mind, lapping at any exposed skin on her jaw and hands, her entire body twitching and wagging

happily with unrestrained enthusiasm.

“Your Mommy hurts,” she whispered, kissing the dog. “How about we go swim for a bit, have some spiked hot cocoa, and...” she saw the phone was blinking on the kitchen counter. Pressing the button, she listened.

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*“Hey Minx, it’s me. I tried calling your phone, but it wouldn’t go through. I don’t know if you were out of range or not, but I wanted to let you know that I’ll be home late tomorrow night. I’m trying to arrange my flights now. As soon as I land, I’ll call you. I love you and can’t wait to see you, darling...”*

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“You hear that?” June breathed tearfully. “Mommy is definitely having a spiked hot cocoa to relax, because Daddy is coming home finally. I need to unwind and sleep.”

Opening a tiny can of wet dog food, she fed Gigi and put a mug of hot water in the microwave for herself.

Disappearing into her bedroom, she shucked off her garments and changed into her swimsuit. It was one of her favorites, and had never worn before now. She hated bikinis because of how much it exposed, but here? At home? No one would see her, and it was decidedly more comfortable, considering it was hidden behind the privacy fence that had honeysuckle vines along the top trellises.

Picking up a towel, she hummed and returned to the kitchen to see Gigi had dog food all over her whiskers like a little piggy... and muttered as much under her breath, before wiping her muzzle.

Making her hot cocoa, she put a tablespoon of chocolate liqueur inside that she kept for those moments where she needed to unwind before breaking. Today wasn’t one of those days, and truthfully? She was really relieved that she hadn’t felt like that in so long... but rather, this was sheer indulgence, because her wait was coming to an end – and she needed a bit of something to relax after a long day.

“C’mon Miss Gigi,” she invited in a high-pitched voice. “Let’s go outside...”

June emerged onto the stone patio and sighed happily. She could smell the honeysuckle floating on the air, felt the warm breeze caressing her skin, and saw the sun was deepening in the sky, turning a vibrant, deep hue of blue, like the ocean. Carefully padding along on the hot pavers, she winced and moved to the grass in order to save her feet from more abuse.

Getting to the pool in the back corner, she stepped into the water and sighed happily. This was one of her favorite things to do in the evening. She felt weightless, carefree, like Eve in paradise. There was a magnolia tree that arched over the pool that would occasionally drop a large, waxy leaf that resembled a fairy boat from another world... but was just as easy to clean up too. The way the alcove was tucked away gave it a feeling of escape.

Sighing happily, she stepped down into the water and set her hot cocoa on the edge of the pool away from Gigi – who was making little noises from the steps. She had bought her little furball a small foam boogie board that was the puppy’s perch in the pool.

Miss Gigi was not fond of swimming. She liked to float around and be included, but swimming was not her thing. Laughing softly, she pushed the boogie board towards the puppy... and sure enough, Gigi hopped on, sitting happily as she floated along.

“I am so ready for Ian to come home,” she whispered aloud, laying on her back and floating as she stared up at the night sky. Closing her eyes, she listened to the peace around her for some time, allowing her mind to wander.

Hearing a small bark, she cracked open one eye and saw Gigi staring at the fence angrily. The neighbor had a dachshund that irritated the fire out of her sweet dog... and the two-pound ‘Terminator’ would absolutely destroy the other animal if she ever got the chance.

“What?” June laughed softly, nudging the boogie board to the side of the pool. “Go get her, Killer...” she taunted quietly, before standing and taking a sip of her cooling hot cocoa – only to see the side gate open.

Ian was standing there, looking utterly exhausted... and shocked.

“Hey!” June called out happily, looking for her towel so she could get out of the pool. “I got your voicemail and it said you would be...”

“Stay where you are!” Ian blurted out, and yanked his boots off – tossing them towards the back door... grinning wildly. He yanked his uniform shirt off over his head, dislodging his cap that landed in the grass – and bolted for the pool.

June barely had time to realize that he was jumping in – with everything else on him. His pants, his socks, and whatever was in his pockets. Gigi yelped in annoyance as she was splashed by the sudden onslaught of water that doused her, before shaking it off... and June laughed openly at her husband’s wild antics.

This was definitely some greeting!

Pushing back her wet hair from her face, she stood there in the pool and set down her cup of cocoa quickly as Ian stood up. His dog tags lay against his tanned chest that was covered in freckles, making her remember his first email commenting on it.

“Hey Minx...” he breathed lovingly, smiling at her.

“Hey yourself, Handsome...” she replied, as he reached for her and she stepped into his arms eagerly, kissing him happily. He broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to hers.

“I’ve missed you something fierce...”

“I guess so,” she laughed softly. “You jumped in with your uniform pants on. You didn’t have anything that could get ruined by the water, did you?”

“My wallet,” he smiled, moving to kiss her again. “It was sooo worth it.”

They stood there for several moments, just kissing, holding each other, and needing this closeness between them when he finally spoke, hugging her tightly.

“I had no idea we had a pool,” he said softly, kissing her shoulder. “And you are super-hot in that get up, woman. My goodness, all that creamy skin? I might have a new favorite good luck charm.”

“You cannot have my swimsuit, Ian,” June laughed knowingly, looking at him and meeting his smile. “Where’s your wallet? Let’s get it out so it can dry.”

He stepped back and yanked off a wet sock, tossing it in the grass as his dog tags clanked noisily against each other. Without looking away, giving her that adorable mischievous grin... he removed the other sock, also landing in the grass.

“Neither of your socks was your wallet...” she began quietly, and smiled as he reached for the button of his pants.

“Guess I should try again?”

“Maybe so, my love...” she murmured invitingly, knowing exactly where this was leading, and saw the warmth within his loving gaze turn into an inferno of desire.

“J-June?” he rasped emotionally, and she saw a tremor race through him visibly as he drew in several shaky breaths, his hands trembling as he gazed at her. He swallowed audibly, his eyes searching hers... and she loved that about him. There was so much emotion, yet he was waiting for her to be ready for him, to give their relationship a chance. “I love you so much and I...”

Ian always put her first, and was wanting to take a moment to check to see how she was doing. Her beloved wild man was very careful when it came to her emotions or feelings – and so close to perfect for her that it was staggering. She had loved Mark... but Ian?

Ian was her *everything*.

He was her soulmate, her partner, her very joy and reason for breathing.

“Welcome home, soldier...” she breathed, reaching for the tie on her swimsuit.



HOURS LATER, June lay there in the bed, and heard Gigi whining on Ian's side.

“Shhh... ya' little rugrat. You're gonna wake my precious Sleeping Beauty up,” he whispered softly, moving a tiny bit as she heard the dog panting happily as her collar jingled slightly. “Shh... Miss Helicopter-butt,” he teased softly. “That tail is lethal.”

He was such a sweetheart to the puppy... and to her.

Being with Ian was everything she could have ever imagined. They talked way too much as they touched and held each other; the wonder on his face was something she would never forget – including the way his voice broke as he made love to her.

“Whoa man... have I been missing out or what?” he'd uttered openly in amazement – causing the two of them to share a laugh before things turned serious between them.

No, these precious moments between them just cemented the bond that she already knew was there between them, brilliant and tangible.

June rolled over and met his tender gaze in the shadows, marveling as a soft smile touched his face. She was so grateful in that moment for the moonlight streaming into her bedroom through the skylight above, and this singular memory would be one etched in her heart for all time.

“Hey, Minx... did I wake you up?”

“No,” she smiled softly. “But Miss Helicopter-butt did...” as the two of them shared a soft laugh as he held open his arms, silently inviting her to cuddle with him. She slid over and put her head on his shoulder, so she could look at him.

“I love you,” he breathed tenderly, touching a finger from her forehead down to her temple. “You are truly a miracle to me... and I will be forever grateful for your heart.”

“I had no idea you were such a romantic charmer.”

“I warned you long ago in my first email...”

“So you did,” she smiled, as he kissed her brow. “Are you tired? Hungry? When did you get into town?”

“Yes, yes, and not soon enough?” he smiled playfully, chuckling softly once more. “You know, I think that is the one thing that I adore about you.”

“What’s that?”

“That somehow, somehow, we just flow together,” he murmured, still touching her brow and tracing her cheekbone, like he couldn’t get enough of her. “I make jokes and you laugh, we talk about anything, and you are right there with me, and if I do something crazy... you humor me. I love that you accept me as I am, because we just fit together in more ways than one.”

She chuckled softly and saw his smile widen.

“See? Another coarse joke and you got it...”

“Because my beloved husband has a one-track mind now that he’s home...”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Ian said playfully, rolling over and pinning her. “Forget the food and sleep. I think I want to hold my miracle close again.”

She looked up at him, marveling at his engaging smile as his dog tags hung between them... only to see him hesitate. He propped himself up on one arm, and she couldn’t help but admire the way his bicep flexed as he pulled his dog tags over his head, dropping them on the nightstand close by noisily.

“No more?” she whispered curiously. “I was getting used to seeing them on you.”

“They’ve been a part of me since I was eighteen... but I’m ready to put them away. I’m thinking I would rather have a few little ones playing and hanging off my neck, my wife’s smiles every day for the rest of my life, while enjoying the daily grind of civilian life... if that’s okay with you?”



She blinked tearfully, staring up at him as she touched his beloved cheek.

“I love you so much, Mrs. Selkirk. Bear with me a second while I get poetic for a moment,” he joked softly, but there was something in his expression that kept her from commenting as she listened, fascinated. “Words seem to not be enough for what I feel in my chest when I look at you. There’s no life without the sunlight, the moon has existed for ages even though it’s been through a storm that left its scars... and yet they both still exist, forever, unchanging, simply beautiful in this ethereal way that is indescribable – and that is what is housed within me - for you,” he breathed emotionally in a whispered voice, his eyes holding hers.

“This feeling is timeless, endless, and I am so blessedly grateful to have this chance when I know I could have run you off so many times. You are my other half,” he whispered, emotionally. “You are everything soft, gentle, beautiful, and loving... I am humbled to be here at your side months ago, now, and always, my sweet wife.”

“Ian...” she breathed tenderly as he leaned down to kiss her, silencing the words that were not needed between them, as he wrapped his arms around her.

“I will love you always, Minx...” he uttered raggedly, kissing her again.

“Always, Ian.”

**SELKIRK**

*Six months later...*

IAN FELT like a brand-new cadet fresh out of boot camp, and knew he was grinning like an idiot as he was being assigned his partner for the next several months that he was on patrol as a police officer. Walking into the station, he recognized several faces that were getting ready to head out for the day... and they all circled around the chief.

This was the man that had hired him – the one that Captain Logan told he and Morrison to contact. Ian saw Morrison was walking over to join them in a rush.

*Shoot!* he thought wildly. *He was going to be late on the first day that he got assigned to a beat? No, thank you.*

“Glad you could join us, Officer Selkirk...” Griffin smirked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Even a broken clock is right twice a day, sir,” he blurted out, saluting... and then saw Griffin’s knowing look, realizing that he was standing at attention, just like a soldier, out of habit.

“Whoa boy...”

“Luka-number-two...”

“I’m not that bad...”

“Your mouth and that sense of humor is...”

“Man o’ days... Selkirk sounds just like Cooper – doesn’t he?”

“So long as he doesn’t kiss the chief.”

“Nobody is kissing me but my wife,” Griffin interrupted, and then looked at Ian steadily and speaking. “Lawson... I believe you know Selkirk?”

Ian looked over to see his new partner step forward, smiling knowingly.

Matt Lawson had been one of the soldiers that had fallen in love with his pen pal, leaving not long after his arrival in Ghazni. The man was quiet, easy going, and dedicated to protecting the team or completing the mission. He was grateful to have someone so steady and cool under pressure at his side... because Ian was feeling anything *but* cool right now.

“Dude... really?” Ian blurted out, extending his hand, as several of the guys laughed openly at his reaction. “Awesome. How’s it going, brother? How’s the wife and boy? Awww, heck man! Am I ever glad to see you!”

“Sup, Selkirk,” Lawson grinned, pumping his hand a few times before yanking him over and hugging him. “Tired of the sand and heat?”

“You know it!” Ian laughed, feeling several hands pat him on the shoulders as he realized that he hadn’t left his Army days behind at all. He just found their new location. He was still among friends as he looked at each of their faces, some he recognized and some he didn’t.

Still belonging.

Still part of a team, his family, his brothers.



THAT EVENING, walking into the house, he couldn’t contain his joy.

“Junie? Hey June? Honey? You are never gonna guess what...” his voice trailed off as he stared at his wife nearby, and angled his head slightly to the side in confusion.

June was wearing... *pants?*

She always wore dresses, skirts, even had these adorable frilly aprons she would tie around her waist when she was cooking. His pin-up girl, his beautiful bride, never wore pants.

“Do these look stupid, Ian?” she asked tearfully, looking at him.

“Nawwww honey. You’ve got a sexy bum and look great in anything,” he volunteered, and hesitated. “They are different, and you look adorable – but what’s going on?”

“Well, see, I have a slight issue that is letting me experiment with a few things. I can wear larger dresses that have no waist, but they are hard to find and exceedingly expensive... or I can try to incorporate some of these in the next few months,” June explained, and he stared at her in awareness as he sank to his knees.

“Are those... baby-belly-pants?” he said hoarsely, reaching out a trembling hand to lift the front of her shirt to expose a large panel of elastic material. “Oh sweetheart, those are about the sexiest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Ya’ think?” she laughed nervously. “I feel so weird, because they are so loose and not fitted.”

“Oh, gracious yeah... better than stockings.”

“Now I know you are lying,” she laughed, rolling her eyes as he got to his feet and hugged her, lifting her feet off the floor slightly. “I’m so happy, Ian. I just got out of the doctor’s office, and immediately went hunting for a few things. I found a few diaper covers that have ruffles on them, and a teddy bear that thumps like it has a heartbeat.”

“That’s weird...”

“Right?” she laughed, tightening her arms around his neck and hugging him again. “It’s supposed to be soothing to the baby and remind them of being in the womb.”

“Can I be near it?”

“Oh my gosh...” she laughed outrageously, throwing back her head in delight while he held her close, leaning forward to kiss her throat. “That’s how we got here.”

“Stretchy pants... super... sexy...” he whispered, kissing her throat and jaw between each word.

“That uniform is pretty hot yourself, Officer Selkirk.”

“Comes with handcuffs, baby...” he joked, hesitating as he realized it was actually true and not just a joke after all, before laughing. “Perk of the job, I suppose.”

“You should tell me all about your day, and then we’ll talk about the baby,” she encouraged lovingly, but he was having none of it as he realized just how stretchy that front panel was.

“Nope,” he whispered, picking her up into his arms. “Stretchy pants are coming off...”

“Promises, promises,” she teased softly, reaching to brush back his hair. “Do you know what a nursing bra looks like?”

Ian whimpered as all sort of images ran through his mind, and his knees almost buckled.

“Hush till we are closer to the bed, wife.”

“Aye, aye, husband...” June laughed throatily in that sexy hoarse way that haunted his dreams as he set her down on the bed, putting his hand on her flat stomach.

“We’re gonna have a baby?” he asked again, almost as if it was too much for his mind as he looked at her, feeling a lump in his throat.

“Are you happy?” she asked nervously.

“Oh Minx... just when I thought I couldn’t be any happier than I was? You go and shatter through the finish line, showing me that this is just the beginning of the race. I’m all in, my heart, and I cannot wait to hold our miracle.”

His hand moved from her stomach to cup her cheek.

“But for now... I’m going to hold my other miracle close and show her how grateful I am for your love,” he promised, as he leaned down to kiss her.

# EPILOGUE

## JUNE

*Forty years later...*

“HEY MINX. How are you feeling, my love?”

“Sore,” June admitted, looking at Ian and smiling.

He was standing there holding a bouquet of red roses in his hand, and looked as handsome as the day she had come home from work to find him sitting in the yard, wanting to play the ‘Dating Game’ just to talk to her.

Her entire world had changed in that moment... for the better.

“You just missed Ashley,” she told him and smiled. “She and her husband are flying to Finland for vacation in a month, and wanted to come by to check on me. I cannot believe I broke my stupid ankle stepping off the curb.”

“It happens,” he said simply, setting down the roses and reaching up to touch her hair. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt worse.”

“Just my pride... and a bruised cheek.”

“Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

“Start with the ankle, buster, and if you succeed, then absolutely you can kiss my bum,” she smirked, and saw his wide smile touch his face as it creased his eyes. “I missed you last night,” she admitted openly in a tender voice.

“I missed you,” he replied hoarsely. “Home is not the same when you aren’t there. It’s just four walls and... you’ve got to be careful.”

“I know, Ian. Trust me – I never intended to break my ankle, that’s for darn sure. Do you know it’s humiliating to be in here? They poke, prod, and touch all the time without asking. I mean, I could be sound asleep, and suddenly someone is in my room, touching my...”

“Typical Saturday night, Minx,” Ian joked, and she rolled her eyes.

“They are getting my blood pressure,” she retorted glibly, and then smiled softly. “But it does sound like a really good evening between us, doesn’t it?”

“I’m a charmer,” he teased softly.

“Always have been.”

Ian stepped back and looked at the hospital bed, frowning. He wiggled the arm of it, and managed to slide it downwards, before climbing into bed beside her.

“What are you doing?” June laughed softly, glancing at the door.

“It makes it hard to feel you up if there’s a bar between us, wife,” he joked intimately, and pressed his forehead to hers. “Happy anniversary, my heart and soul.”

“Happy anniversary, you sweet man,” she breathed, feeling a lump in her throat.

There had been so many beautiful moments over the years between them. Flashes of Ian running around the house with the kids pulling on his neck, trying to take him down. Moments of them all swimming out back together, splashing around. The way he cried proudly walking Ashley down the aisle – and Kristen – and Bethany – and Madeline...

Ian had wept each time he got to hold one of their beautiful babies in his arms in the delivery room, looking at her with so much love it was staggering... but there was something indescribable as he’d been gifted his son, their last child they



would have together, before starting a different chapter in their lives.

He was a Cub Scout pack leader, learned how to braid the girls' hair, was the guinea pig when they wanted to paint his toes, and even suffered through several attempts of eyeshadow. More than once she had come home to find the children all around him, laughing wildly, and Ian's beloved face was covered in blush, eyeshadow, and red lipstick.

Her wild man never cared – he was all about the family... and always had been.

“Did I tell you that in a hospital gown – there's no panties?” she smiled tenderly, touching his cheek, as he leaned forward slightly to kiss her cheek affectionately. “Loosey-goosey underneath this gown, you randy old goat...”

“You sweet tease,” he hissed tenderly, smiling impishly at her. “You just wait until I take you home tonight. All sorts of *baaaaaad* stuff will be happening in our bedroom, wife.”

They both laughed as he literally bleated out the word ‘bad’ playfully, sharing a knowing glance. That fire hadn't faded between them, and they were always holding, touching, or stealing kisses as much as ever over the years.

“Promises, promises,” she teased, and leaned forward to kiss him.

“Always, my love,” he smiled. “Always.”

## AFTERWORD

I can honestly say that I have never laughed so much, cried so emotionally, or had to censor myself so much with a book. Our boy Selkirk is a WILD CHILD. I literally messaged one of my friends and had to ask if a phrase was too much... and it was.

There's just something about a group of guys that speaks to me. You get the alpha male, the macho guy, the funny one, the crude fella, and the shy guy... then there is always the one with secrets.

I adore delving into their personalities and never quite know how they are going to develop. I knew I wanted Selkirk to be funny, outrageous, and 'unfiltered' when it came to his thoughts and his mouth... and absolutely adored the charmer we ended up with.

Well see him again in Paradox's book – I'm sure.

And June?

I wanted her to be the exact opposite of Ian.

Where he was wild and outrageous, I wanted her to be lady-like and sedate. He's a weirdo, and she's a exceedingly polished. He wears camo - she's in dresses. I thought it would be a lot of fun to combine the two... and it was.

I hope you enjoyed their romance as much as I did – Talbot is next and turning out to be just as wonderful of a hero, with a twist (naturally)...

---

With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls...

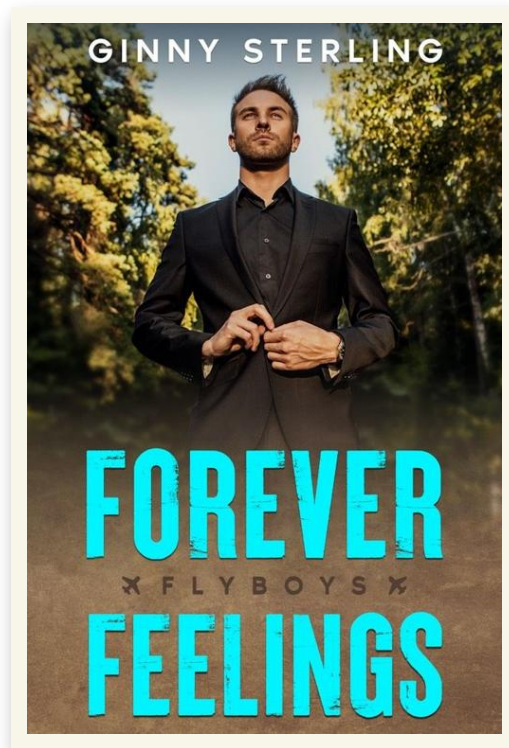
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*Hint, hint...*

XOXO,

Ginny

## FLYBOYS



### FLYBOYS

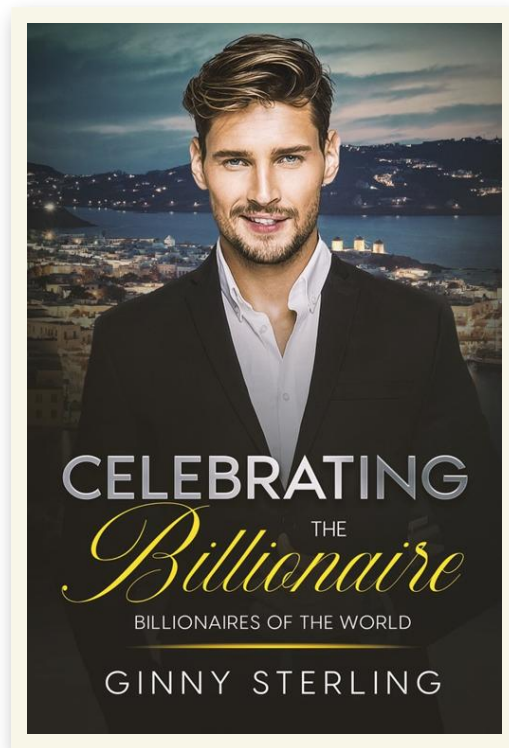
*Trust your gauges and bet on the unexpected!*

Joshua 'Paradox' Parr had no intention of taking his wingman's cast-aside friend out on some date as a favor. He wasn't 'stepdad material' nor was he like the other love-struck members of the squadron.

There was something about Mallory that confused the stealthy pilot, making him curious.

... And curiosity could be a dangerous thing!

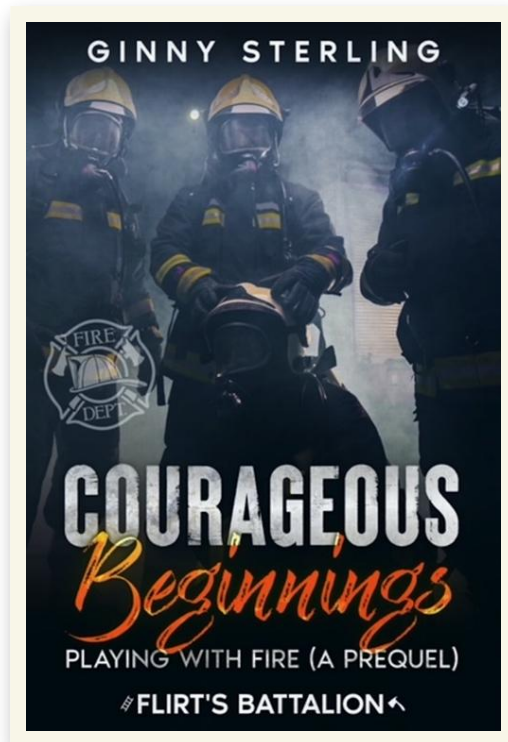
## BILLIONAIRES OF THE WORLD



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Ember Creek, Texas

“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?* he wondered silently.

“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.

“Noooo,” 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.

# 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](mailto:GinnySterlingBooks@gmail.com)

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