

GINNY STERLING



FOREVER

✕ FLYBOYS ✕

FANTASY

FOREVER FANTASY

FLYBOYS



GINNY STERLING

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INTRODUCTION

The speed of heat can kill you, Flyboy!

Andrew ‘*Riptide*’ Carter enjoyed the simple things in life. Sun, sand, and surf... but unfortunately for this So-Cal guy? He was sick of the sand and monotony of his duty station in Ghazni. Craving a little excitement and a change, he was going to jump at the first interesting thing that fell into his lap – including Megan.

What goes TDY, stays TDY - until it's not...

Megan Josephs was obsessive and detailed working in Dr. Briscoe’s office, a Post-It note fiend, and a self-proclaimed ‘caffeine queen with curves’. So when she spotted ‘golden boy’ she did like any other healthy woman – and began fawning, fanning, nearly tripping over herself to say ‘hello’, while admiring the view!

Karma, however, delivered her a front-row seat... literally.

What was she supposed to do now as the single focus of a very determined Flyboy’s undivided attention?

For my husband who makes me laugh...
Sandra, thank you for giving me the personality tips
Abby, you are just the best...
Lissa, I love voice chats on Insta, friend! LOL!
Mom, who calls every single day for an update...
And to all the friends I've made on this journey.



[*Ginny Sterling Newsletter*](#)

(You get a free book!)

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:

- Trust and abandonment issues
- Kissing someone without permission
- Self-Esteem issues
- Mildly crude language and innuendo (... *but no cursing!*)
- A shameless Flyboy
- Childbirth - from a guy's perspective

And as always... a Happily Ever After.



Music Inspiration:

I like to share these songs because sometimes I know how I want a scene to go, but I might need a little mental push. If you aren't familiar with the songs, try listening to them - and then read the book. It might change or add to your experience.

Affirmation by Savage Garden

All In by Lifehouse

Safe and Sound by Capital Cities

Don't Cha by The Pussycat Dolls
Down with the Sickness by Disturbed

CHAPTER 1



MEGAN

Several months ago...



“THIS IS NOT what I signed up for...”

Megan looked at her coworker, rolling her eyes, as she stared at the rag-tag carnival in a Wal-Mart parking lot. There were burnt out bulbs on some of the rides, a few of the awnings had been patched with silver duct tape that stood out against the striped décor, haybales were everywhere... and because of the brief shower last night?

They were... *ripe*.

The scent of soggy, musty hay combined with the thick, pungent smell from the petting zoo was almost too much to bear. She was choking on the combination of rancid grease from the funnel cake stand – and animal poo.

Not a good combo, she mused, and looked at Barbara again.

“Remind me why I let you talk me into this?”

“Because my kids are showing their pig at the 4-H demonstration tent, and you were bored. Remember? ‘*Single and ready to mingle*’ was what you said, along with ‘*Maybe a cowboy is better suited to boyfriend material because jocks are not*,’” Barbara said, tossing words Megan had said in frustration right into her face.

“And all of that is true – *however* – the Goodwill version of the Texas State Fair was not what I had in mind. I feel like I’m going to get something that soap won’t wash off...”

“Anyone ever tell you that you’re a prude?”

“People that bathe – yes.”

“They bathe here... but...”

“Yes?” Megan prompted, wincing as someone bumped into her in the parking lot that was covered with a very, very thin layer of straw. “Please finish that sentence and inform me how I’m wrong.”

“Look,” Barbara grimaced. “I get it – this isn’t your idea of a fun-filled Friday night, but when you have a husband on third-shift and two hyper children enrolled in everything you can get your hands on simply to keep them out of trouble? This is what late-thirties and early-forties parenting looks like from my neck of the woods.”

“Where they play banjos?” Megan retorted and saw her friend’s bitter expression as she pinched her lips together. “Sorry. I just really want some hand sanitizer... and Tylenol.”

“Why don’t you sit down for a few, and I’ll go see if the kids are almost done.”

“I don’t want to ruin this for you – or them...”

“Then come out of your box, try something new, and do something you would never, ever do in a million years...”

“Square dancing?”

“Sure, if you want to walk back over through that crowd...”

Megan looked to the side where Barbara was pointing – and sighed. It was like running the gauntlet through a sea of poverty, not that there was anything wrong with it in the slightest, but she was trying to extract herself from that lifestyle by working like a mad-fiend and taking online classes at night – not return to it.

After her mother ran out on her father, claimed she'd remarried – twice, and then died unexpectedly - that was when the real truth came out. Her mother was... different. She always had been flighty, elusive, non-committal even towards her, making Megan learn how to strategically fish out answers to questions by phrasing them effectively in order to remove any loopholes. She had grown up learning how to navigate that type of slippery lifestyle, until it came to an abrupt halt.

Her mother was unstable – and a pathological liar. She had left her father, technically... but had actually kidnapped Megan. Her real father passed, never seeing her again over the years.

Stepfather-Number-One was never married to her mom...

And neither was Stepfather-Number-Two...

The autopsy on her mom after the car accident had shown high amounts of meth in her system, shocking Megan to the core, because she had no idea that any of this was going on. Then came the letters from banks and creditors about hot checks that were written in other cities... and the list went on and on.

She was evicted from the house that was a *rental* – not a *home* her mother had bought. The car had been a lease, not owned and paid for... it was all just a horrifying mess for Megan to deal with at the tender age of twenty-two. Now, eight years later, she was finally pulling herself out of the mess.

“Yeah, I’m good,” she said simply – and spotted a tent. “I’ll go sit in there.”

“You go for it, and I’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

Megan started towards the tent... and hesitated, looking at the woman eyeing her and waving her forward with a skeptical glare.

“Come here, child... don’t be frightened. I won’t hurt you.”

“Says the mass murderer...?”

To her surprise, the woman smiled indulgently and waved her hands, immediately lowering the lights in the tent, giving it an eerie look.

“Come in, and let’s chat.”

“Um... I think I’ll pass,” Megan began and started to turn, only to hear the woman speak again.

“Barbara would tell you to try something new... something that didn’t have to do with colorful Post-it notes,” the woman said quietly in a voice that held zero emotion, giving Megan goosebumps immediately as she slowly turned to look over her shoulder.

There, sitting at the table, was the woman with her eyes closed and both hands outstretched across the tablecloth, palms upwards and fingers slightly curled in a relaxed position.

“You’ve lost your mother...” she droned on in a hushed voice. “You had your family taken from you...”

“Stop it,” Megan hissed under her breath hotly, feeling tears sting her eyes, feeling like this woman was peering directly into her soul. “I don’t believe in this garbage and...”

“Believe or do not, it matters not to me,” she said quietly. “I’m just a traveler peering through a mist; whether you accept what I see or not is completely up to you.”

“Fortune tellers are a bunch of malarky and garbage... some people think they are possessed or demonic,” Megan whispered, feeling a shiver race down her spine as the woman cracked a single eye, looked at her, and closed it.

“If I were a fortune teller, wouldn’t I be asking for money?” she said simply. “If I were a demon or possessed, wouldn’t I be telling you something evil or insidious... not touching into your past or future?”

“Then what is this? Who are you? What are you?”

“I’m a traveler... and a friend.”

Megan stared at her, unsure what to do or say, yet her feet were not moving and her hands were shaking, feeling very

unsettled.

“Touch my hand and let’s talk for a moment,” the old woman asked softly. “You are already in here and have my attention, so let’s chat.”

Megan started, realizing she had indeed walked into the tent at some point and hesitated. This was completely out of her comfort zone and had to be a good joke that someone was playing. That was it – someone was playing a prank on her, and she was falling right into it.

Rolling her eyes, she sat down in the chair and looked at the woman skeptically – not backing down as the emotionless eyes met hers.

“You are not a believer still... interesting.”

“I believe in God.”

“I do too – but this has nothing to do with Him. He is the Creator. I’m simply getting a peek at the roadmap of your life – and you are coming up on an interchange, my little driver.”

“Excuse me?” Megan blurted out uncomfortably and hesitated. “I should go, this is ridiculous, and...”

“You are twenty-nine,” the woman said softly, closing her eyes again and wiggling her fingertips. “Not yet thirty, alone, and wondering how I know all of this. You haven’t travelled far, yet the one you are destined for will cross oceans to meet you.”

Megan almost laughed... until she realized how spot-on the woman’s words were. How did she know how old she was? How did she know she was alone?

“I don’t understand,” she whispered. “How do you know all of this? I have no one crossing oceans for me...”

“Not yet, but he is coming.”

“Who?”

“Give me your hand,” the woman invited – and this time, Megan did so without hesitation. All of this was too uncanny,

too close to home, and she needed to know more. “Ahhh... interesting.”

“What? What’s *‘interesting’*? What do you see?”

“He hides himself, just like you,” the woman smiled softly, holding her hands, and speaking with her eyes closed, her face completely relaxed. “He will cross the ocean for...”

“Lady, no one is crossing oceans for me...” Megan laughed nervously – and hesitated. “... Right? They are not – *are they?*”

“He will cross the ocean three times. Once will bring you close yet so far away from each other. The second time you will both run from this place and your relationship, only to find things deepening between you... and... I see a child... I’m trying, but it’s hard to see,” the woman frowned, and then leaned forward to grasp Megan’s hands even tighter, squinting and bobbing her head light like she was fighting something unseen.

“And? *And?* A child? Keep going, please...” Megan urged. “What does this man look like? What’s his name? Is he tall? Short? Is he Japanese, Chinese, Egyptian, Greek? Does he have black hair? Is he fair or dark-skinned? Can you tell me if he is short or tall...”

“Those are nothing,” the woman clucked her tongue and looked at her disapprovingly. “I see his light and yours... and a crisp hundred-dollar-bill in my future to keep talking.”

Megan jerked her hands back in horror, embarrassment, and disbelief. She leapt up from the table, backing away, and tried to ignore how badly her hands were shaking. Everything within her was completely unsettled, because of a ruse to swindle her out of money.

“You are a con-artist... and to think I was falling for that load of malarkey!”

The woman smiled sadly and shook her head, before leaning back in her seat, lacing her fingers over her pudgy stomach as she reclined in the chair, watching Megan.

“You want to know more, but yet you do not believe?” the woman began. “How did I know your name, your age, your friend? I see his light and yours... I see so much, yet you still do not trust me.”

“I have a hard time trusting anyone anymore nowadays.”

“Because of your mother?”

Megan swallowed audibly as goosebumps rose along her skin. The woman held out her hands once more, waving her forward, and smiled politely.

“Come, you are an interesting one. Sit down, no charge. I want to see a bit more,” the woman invited and she stared at her, unsure.

“Lady, I don’t have a hundred bucks to blow on stuff like this. I’m alone and...”

“I know you are, but you’ve got me curious too.”

Megan gingerly sat down, mentally kicking herself for falling for this garbage, and knew if she was handed a deed to some land in Arizona – it was going to be fake as the day was long. This had to be garbage she was making up to fleece her... wasn’t it?

The moment her hand touched the fortune teller’s, she felt a rush and couldn’t help the slight gasp that escaped her as the woman chuckled knowingly.

“Your story wants to be heard...”

“This is just a bunch of hooey...”

“He is coming soon and is very lonely,” the woman began, closing her eyes again. “I can see his spark and he’s traveling far...”

“From where?”

“Iraq? Afghanistan? Somewhere over in the Middle East, but he is a traveler... he’s been all over the world and...”

“Got it,” Megan said, being completely suckered in. “Middle Eastern. Dark hair, dark complexion, deep soulful eyes – I’m in.”

The woman only smiled sagely, not bothering to open her eyes as she continued to speak.

“He will travel far in search of adventure and love, but you?” the woman began. “You will not travel but just a few feet when it is time. You will struggle with the meeting and when you get married, he will leave you...”

“Excuse me?” Megan yelped, yanking her hand away for a moment. “He’s going to marry me and leave me? What the heck kind of fortune is this?”

“The truth,” the woman said peevishly, snatching Megan’s hand again, and the strength of the crone surprised her. “Ahhh there’s what I want to see, oh yes...”

“What?”

“There will be three children...” the fortune teller whispered softly, smiling to herself. “I love this part, you know. Seeing the future, seeing the little wisps of light emerge as yours blend. Three flickers of light...”

“I’m going to have three kids?”

“A boy... and two girls, I believe.”

Megan swallowed back tears and fought the urge to sniff indelicately as the woman’s voice, her predictions, really struck a chord in her. She always wanted someone to love her, wanted a family of her own, and desperately wished for that happily-ever-after that seemed to drop right into everyone else’s lap... but never hers.

“When the offer comes, you must accept it. Do you understand?”

“What offer? Where he marries and dumps me? How am I stuck with three kids if he is ditching me? This doesn’t make sense...”

The woman grabbed her wrist hard, squeezing it.

“Oww?! Lay off, Hercules... that smarts!”

“You must accept his offer when it comes. It is key to everything, or it will all fall apart before both of your eyes. Do

you understand me?”

The woman’s fingers were pressing deep into her skin before causing a pinch, but as her face grew more intent and forceful, her nails were starting to dig in. Honestly, seeing the fortune teller’s reaction was scaring the bejesus out of her as she tried to pry the fingers off where they were latched on. The woman kept droning on, her words causing her a flurry of panic.

“You must or it will all end...”

“OWWW!” Megan yelled, yanking at the hand.

“It’s coming! You’ll be scared, but you must take it...”

“What? What’s coming? Can you seriously LET GO?”

“The hands, the struggle, oh my gosh I can see it and it hurts...”

“No – no hurting. I don’t like hurting things... in fact, I really need you to stop hurting *me*, lady.”

“Time is wasting... he is coming... you must take the offer...”

“Okay, okay, I’ll take it – I swear,” Megan yelled, shocked that blood was starting to well up from the woman’s grimy fingernails. “Um, we’re bordering on assault now – let go!”

“Take his hand, Megan... his hand, oh Mother it hurts so much, take his hand please...” the woman said in a garbled voice as foam began to lace her lips, the fingernails were like a clamp piercing her skin, and her pleading words were escalating Megan’s own swamping panic into a full-blown meltdown.

“Stop,” she pleaded tearfully, grabbing a nearby ink pen and shoving it into the small line between her hand and the woman’s – not caring if it was digging into her skin.

She had to get free of this woman who was obviously sick in the head... and body. Foaming spittle was running down both sides of her mouth as her eyes rolled back into her head, making keening sounds of distress as she whispered ‘help’ several times.

Megan had never been so scared in her entire life and started looking over her shoulder, screaming, as she shoved the ink pen at her arm again and again, trying to separate them, flinching at the pain from the ballpoint pen combined with the woman's nails.

“HELP ME!” she yelled in a panic. “HELP ME! SOMEONE CALL AN AMBULANCE AND THE LOONEY BIN...”

Three men rushed into the tent and drew to a stop as the woman finally released the grip on her arm. Megan looked at them gratefully, clenching her wrist to her chest and wept.

“Oh my gosh, you've got to get me out of here. She's crazy! There's foam coming out of her mouth and...”

“What are you talking about?” one man interrupted her warily.

“Who? Who is crazy?” the other one said in a placating voice, holding out his hand gingerly. “It's okay, lady... just put the pen down. We're not going to hurt you.”

“What?” Megan said in disbelief and turned... only to see she was alone in the tent. She looked at her arm and saw blue ink pen marks on her skin, but no blood, no fingernail marks, nothing. Her eyes surveyed the room in horror as she saw that there were no signs that anyone had been here, no lamps, no nothing... except one grimy business card on the table.

Her eyes touched it, and she flew out of her seat, knocking it over, as she literally climbed up and over it... terrified. There, on the business card in the empty tent full of storage totes, bins, and other items covered in tarps, was a single phrase.

Your mother loves you, says 'hello', and is watching you always. Good luck, child – and don't forget to take his hand.

Megan fainted.

CHAPTER 2



RIPTIDE



“SUN, SAND, AND NOTHING BUT *TURF...*” Andrew muttered, drenched in sweat and out of breath. It was hot as Hades out here, and he missed home. The cool breezes off the water, the smell of coconut tanning lotion on the ladies, combined with the sounds of cars honking in the distance. Growing up in Oceanside, he had the best of everything. A nice home, ocean view, a hop-skip-and-a-jump from San Diego... but never imagined going to the Air Force Academy would land him *here*.

So maybe it wasn't the smartest thing to fool around with the Brigadier General's daughter at the man's own awards ceremony where he was receiving a commendation. He'd done it for the thrill, the excitement, and because he was lonely... not for her. Being caught in a broom closet with your uniform pants around your ankles by one very angry Daddy did not bode well for anyone – much less a military man.

It got you a new set of PCS orders – a permanent change of station.

Ghazni, Afghanistan.

“Sheesh, what was her name? Barbie? Bambi? Betty?” he chuckled, rubbing the sweat off his brow, and saw the others having to run laps with him, looking. They were giving him a dirty look and honestly, he understood. If that jerk Reilly

caught him taking a break, they would all have to run more laps.

Picking up the pace, he began to run once again, only to get passed by Paradox, who was sweating but didn't falter in his performance, whereas he felt like he was limp like a pickle who'd been left in a jar too long. Gosh, his arms were wobbly, and this dry heat just sucked the life out of you.

"I'd give anything to be back at Travis Air Force Base in California at this point..."

"Then maybe you should have kept it in your pants, Riptide," Inferno joked, running past him. "Don't you know by now the rules of life? You don't go for Daddy's daughter – especially when he's the big guy in town. Nope, you find yourself a quiet girl that has low self-esteem and needs you desperately... Am I right, Outfield?"

"Nerds need to be heard," Outfield taunted, jogging past him – and not even sweating. *What the heck?* Andrew thought in disbelief, gawking at him.

"Geeks are freaks in the sheets," Inferno crowed happily, tossing both hands up in the air like he was cheering himself, causing several guys to laugh. "Now if you want *heaven*? You get yourself a big girl..."

"Yo – that's rude. How about '*healthy*'..." Paradox snapped. "Some of us like girls who aren't a twig, you know. You guys are a bunch of blithering idiots."

"Fine," Inferno continued, unphased and grinning like a maniac. "Get yourself a *healthy* girl, with *healthy* boobs, and a *healthy* body that is just made for lovin'..."

"Enough, Inferno," Reaper snapped, striding past them with a frustrated look on his face. "It's your mouth that got us into this mess, now shut up! Do us all a favor and quit passing on your little nuggets of knowledge, you walking STD."

"Hey!" Inferno hollered. "I'll have you to know that my junk is very *healthy*... just like I like my girls. Gigantic... huge... the healthiest around!"

All ten men stopped jogging and turned around, holding up their pinkies in unison – Andrew’s own arm was extended fully, holding up his pinky pointedly, while he drew up his other arm, wiggling it playfully, and extended the other pinky as well. There was a ripple of laughter among the men as each of them issued a silent yet direct mocking jab at the man’s private parts that Inferno was bragging upon.

“I love you guys...” Inferno grinned. “Y’all are playin’ with me – aren’t you?”

Andrew laughed, shaking his head as all of them started running once more to complete their laps before dinner.

“Guys? Hey guys? You *were* joking, right? You didn’t mean that... did you?”

Andrew exchanged a glance with Reaper, who was jogging beside him.

“Ignore him,” the man said bluntly. “He could use a little dose of humility.”

“No guy likes to be told they are inferior where it counts.”

“The only one you should ever have to worry about or listen to – should be your wife. So long as she’s happy, does it matter what anyone else implies or jokes about?” Reaper acknowledged, causing Andrew to frown.

“I’m single, and none of us are going to meet someone in this hellhole.”

“If you’re bored, just say the word and I can fix that.”

The man kept running as he slowed down in shock, staring at his back in disbelief – and cringed as he heard Reilly screaming behind him.

“Riptide! I want twenty more laps, slacker... Move it!”

It took everything he had not to roll his eyes or lose his temper as he saw the other guys’ sympathetic looks. He hated that man, the monotony, and everything around him... as Reaper’s words echoed in his mind.

If you’re bored...

He was. Picking up speed, he jogged up to the other pilot and tapped him on the arm with the back of his hand.

“Hey... let’s say that I’m bored,” Andrew half-joked. “What’s that look like? Your wife got a hot younger sister looking for a handsome pilot?”

“No – and don’t you ever touch me again.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“I can make a few phone calls and get you in touch with a friend...”

“A single friend?”

“A friend who knows a few people in my hometown.”

“Is she hot? Big boobs? Long hair, short hair?”

Reaper drew to a halt, shoving his hand in the middle of Andrew’s chest.

“REAPER, HIT THE PAVEMENT – I WANT TWENTY MORE LAPS, SLACKER...”

... And unbelievably, the quiet man ignored him and glared at Andrew.

“If you are serious, I’ll make the calls – but if you are looking for some easy lay, you are on your own. I’m not sticking my neck out for some smart-aleck child in a man’s body.”

“REAPER... THIRTY LAPS...”

The man’s expression tightened as he glared at Andrew.

“I hate that man,” Andrew volunteered in a hushed voice.

“Same,” the man said tightly. “What’s it going to be?”

“REAPER... FORTY LAPS... MOVE IT!”

“What’s it going to be, Riptide?” Reaper said angrily behind gritted teeth, obviously about to lose his cool. “Don’t make me do fifty laps waiting for you to make up your mind, brother.”

“Never mind,” he replied, grabbing the other man’s arm and starting to run... and winced. He expected Reaper to knock him out for touching him again – and saw the guy smirk as he began to jog, pacing along beside him.

“You’re alright, kid,” Reaper chuckled quietly. “Think about it and if you change your mind, let me know. Now, I’ve got a lot of running to do tonight.”

“I’ll keep you company.”

Reaper looked at him in surprise – and nodded.

It was going to be a long, arduous afternoon... with blisters on his feet.



A FEW DAYS LATER, Andrew started as Ricochet jumped to his feet and Copperhead ran past the door, just as someone started screaming for security.

“What the...” he began openly, following Ricochet as two security guards disappeared into the open doorway of Reilly’s office... and heard more screaming.

“I HATE YOUR SMUG ATTITUDE AND HOW YOU THINK YOU ARE BETTER THAN EVERYONE! YOU ARE NOBODY! DO YOU HEAR ME? I WILL HAVE YOUR WINGS FOR THIS STUNT AND YOU WILL NEVER...”

“Sir, Lieutenant Colonel Reilly, you need to remove your hands from First Lieutenant Merrick – now, sir,” one of the security detail began as the door started to close...

Ricochet threw out both of his arms to stop them protectively, catching Sparky in the throat painfully... and Andrew caught the skinny man bodily as he bounced off the other man’s elbow, about to hit the ground. Sparky looked up at him gratefully, gagging and coughing several times, before giving Ricochet a dirty look as Andrew helped the skinny man to his feet.

“Are you okay?” Ricochet asked in a hushed whisper, holding up his finger to his lips as others quickly surrounded him. You could see the curiosity on all their faces as they looked at each other. Things were boring on base, but this?

This was like watching a car crash – and he couldn’t look away.

“What in the world is going on?” Riptide hissed. “Oh man, Colonel Bradford, too? Ohhhh boy, someone’s gonna hang!”

“Maestro’s in there,” Ricochet said grimly.

“Oh no... no, no, no.”

“Sup, fellas,” Paradox said from behind them all, as Sparky turned and burst out laughing. The other pilot was standing there holding a bag of popcorn – chewing and grinning broadly. “Has the show begun?”

“How did you know?” Sparky asked, grinning and reaching for a handful of popcorn.

Paradox shrugged evasively, but there was a glimmer of satisfaction in his face that told him the man knew exactly why security was in there.

“Shhhh!” Ricochet hissed again, interrupting them.

“... Escort Lieutenant Colonel Reilly to his quarters, and I need a report from each of you on what has just transpired.”

All of them stepped to the side, immediately saluting – and not making eye-contact as the security team walked Colonel Reilly down the hallway.

“Merrick, you know you cannot jump two ranks, but dang, son...” Bradford was saying, just before the door shut.

“... And we need to go,” Paradox chimed in quickly, grabbing Sparky’s arm and dragging him into the nearest room. It took literally two seconds and one exchanged glance with Ricochet and Copperhead to follow the other guy’s movement immediately. All three men rushed into the room, gingerly shutting the door behind them. “We don’t want to be caught eavesdropping on Bradford – especially if Reilly is in

trouble. I'm going on vacation, and I'll be darned if I lose my trip out of sheer curiosity."

"What do you think just happened?" Sparky asked, saying what everyone was silently thinking.

"I think we are getting a new leader."

"Reaper?"

"Depends if Bradford actually bumps him two ranks," Ricochet said openly, looking directly at Paradox. "You just made rank – and Reaper got bumped two years ago, but he's still BPZ."

"You think he'll do that with Reaper being 'below promotion zone'?"

"Let's just say that I would prefer if Reilly didn't return."

"I think we are all in agreement on that one..."

Boy, he's not kidding, Andrew thought, pressing his ear up to the doorway and listening for anything. He ended up going to medical to get a 'banana' bag after all those laps a few days ago. He'd been exhausted, dehydrated, and cramping due to excessive salt loss... not to mention the blisters. He still had two killing him on his right foot.

"Reaper would be fantastic, truthfully," Sparky said quietly, getting a sharp, quizzical look from Paradox, his wingman. Honestly, Andrew had to agree. The man was cool, analytical, but actually cared about all of them.

"... But he's not staying. I think he's got a year or two left."

"We can get the dirt from Maestro when he gets out of there..."

"No," Ricochet said quietly. "He's very closed-mouth when he wants to keep his secrets. None of us knew about his son until recently."

"True," Sparky agreed.

Andrew listened to them talk half-heartedly... and then held up his hand to silence everyone, quickly glancing at the

others. He put his finger up to his lips, nodding, and pointed at the door as they all waited.

“... Man, that felt a little too good, and remember – say nothing,” Reaper was speaking to someone, and the four men looked at each other, unmoving. No one wanted to get caught snooping, especially while tensions were high.

There was some nervous laughter from the hallway for a brief moment – and Sparky’s eyes got wide as he mouthed one word to the rest of them.

Maestro.

Whoa boy. If Maestro, Reaper, and Bradford were in that office when Reilly was escorted out by security, something was going down, and it was just a matter of what and when.

“I guess we wait?” Austin whispered in disappointment.

“I guess so,” Ricochet agreed.

“And I guess I’m not in trouble after all,” Paradox volunteered – walking boldly out the doorway with his bag of popcorn, like he didn’t have a care in the world.

Sparky quietly cursed at the brass displayed by his wingman and laughed. Andrew couldn’t help the chuckle that escaped him as Ricochet stood there silently thinking.

That man was awfully bold... even for him.



A FEW WEEKS LATER, the team had a new leader – Reaper.

And Andrew had a new wingman – Scarecrow.

... This wasn’t quite the ‘excitement’ he had been looking for.

CHAPTER 3



MEGAN

Several months later...



SITTING THERE AT THE TABLE, Megan was trying desperately to pay attention to what this guy was saying, and knew this blind date was going badly. Barbara was convinced she needed to be introduced to someone and her boss, Everly, had just gotten married... and no help like she normally was.

Usually, Everly would be the first to say that you didn't have to be in a relationship to feel complete, but not so much anymore. The woman was practically glowing ever since that dark-haired man had come by the office months ago where she practiced pediatrics.

Megan loved working for the woman because she was so down-to-earth and easy to talk to. There wasn't this whole 'I'm the boss' attitude, which made all of them work in unison to get everything and anything done to help her out. She had even been invited to Thanksgiving to the woman's house, since she was alone.

Dr. Briscoe-Wilcox was a gem – period.

This blind date?

... Not so much.

Cody was nice, checked off several boxes in her mind since that fateful day. Dark hair, dark eyes, tanned complexion,

yet there was something about him that just didn't sit right. First off, he didn't come from overseas, and she knew she should just brush off that hallucination from a year ago – but it stuck, and colored everything in her life now.

She had checked herself in for an evaluation by a shrink after the event and had been deemed to be fine. Her general practitioner said that maybe she'd had an 'episode', and to let him know if it happened again. Everly said it could have been sleepwalking, maybe the woman ran away, or perhaps it was an angel talking to her... and Megan really liked the last alternative, begging the woman she considered a friend to keep this a secret between them.

"So do you like kids?" Cody asked, interrupting her thoughts as she smiled wanly and nodded.

"I do like children. I hope to have some eventually when I meet the right person. Children are a big commitment, and I would hope to..."

"I've got seven and would happily give you more children," he interrupted, grinning broadly. "Not that I think you are easy, but you know, when the time is right and you're ready for things to go to the next level," he smiled. "Ya know, 'punch the ol' card'?" – and literally made a fist pump at his side like he was loading a rifle.

Megan's mouth dropped open in shock and horror – right before she laughed nervously.

"You have *seven* children?"

"Yes. They are a bit of a handful, but I got started young and had the occasional mistake..."

"Seven is not a mistake," Megan countered warily, looking at him. Yes, he was good looking, but dang... *seven*?!

"Hey, no judgement – sheesh," he retorted, gesturing at her. "How am I supposed to get to know you unless we talk? I mean, with those hips, I thought for sure..."

"Check, please?" Megan raised her hand, cutting him off immediately.

She was not about to sit here and get criticized by *this* guy.

“And now I know why you are single and had to be set up,” he continued, glaring at her. Megan gave him a saccharine smile without another word, slapping her wallet on the table, and withdrew several bills that should more than cover the meal she was only halfway done eating.

The date was over.

Now.

“Nice to meet you, Cody,” she began her apologies, getting to her feet. “But I forgot I left the linoleum on the floor at the house,” she mocked, not waiting for him to catch the joke or make a comment.

Nope.

She was out.

Ignoring the comments behind her from the pushy man, she was just heartily disgusted with dating, men, and all of it at this moment. Either all the guys around her age were atrocious... or her standards were just way too high.

Was it so wrong to want the fairytale? To have some handsome prince swoop in and rescue you from real life like they did in the Disney stories? Heck, she didn't need to talk to animals and would happily mop floors forever, so long as there was that magical bond between her and Prince Charming.

“Look for the man from the Middle Eastern regions of the world,” she mocked, making a face as she got in her car and drove off. “Take his hand, accept his offer, make lots of babies, get married... oh, he'll absolutely *ditch* you, but you'll still love him. Yeah, what a bunch of freakin' hooey. The only magical thing happening anytime soon is that Everly invited me to her sister-in-law's baby shower.”

... And winced.

She needed to get a gift, something to wear other than scrubs, and probably a box of tissues because babies made her cry... because she was never going to have one at this rate.

“My girl-clock is tick-tocking, but my guy sure isn’t here – and I’d rather wait than be that idiot Cody’s Baby-Mama-Number-Eight,” she muttered to herself, rolling her eyes.

Sighing angrily, she blinked back tears as she drove to Target in Tyler to see if there was a baby registry on file for one Mrs. Destiny Briscoe.



THREE DAYS LATER, Megan stared at the café that was completely packed and full of people in Yonder. There were literally only a few main roads in this small Texas town, several neighborhoods, a teensy post office that probably fed into the main one in Tyler and, of course - Everly’s office... and while she loved how quaint it was?

It was still a miniscule blip on the map.

Half the population of Yonder was probably crammed in Dixie’s Café – or so she thought, swallowing her nervousness. ...And I’m going in there.

Walking up to the front door, there were a few guys standing at the doorway, almost like they were standing guard – and looked her over carefully.

“Who are you with?” a man said bluntly.

“Dr. Briscoe-Wilcox,” she replied, trying to keep a note of confidence in her voice so she didn’t chuck the gift bag in her hand over their heads, watch it crowd surf for a split second, before bolting in the other direction. “She invited me.”

Both men looked at each other – and one actually touched her left hand, moved it slightly, and looked at each other again... before grinning.

“Oh yeah?”

“Single, huh?”

Megan snatched her left wrist back from the man, glaring at him.

“Yup.”

“Oh, this is rich... Ol’ Riptide won’t know what hit him.”

“Remind me not to piss off Maestro’s wife.”

“We both know you’re safe, bro... C’mon in, lady. Everly is over by the counter. This here is Caboose, and I’m Alpo. Nice to meet you...uh...?” he drawled suggestively, asking for her name. Megan lifted an eyebrow, staring him down and smirked, trying to look as arrogant as this duo.

“Not interested,” she said flatly, ignoring their laughter as she squeezed past them to walk inside. She set down her gift bag on the table, directly atop a few other presents, and saw a hand in the air waving happily.

Everly had spotted her.

“Oh thank goodness...” she muttered aloud, making a few apologies as she stepped past people who were looking at her curiously, only to finally reach the woman that hugged her openly.

“You made it!”

“It’s packed in here...”

“It’s not so bad,” Everly smiled and nodded. “It’s getting more crowded every day, but we like it. I’m so glad you are here – and this will be a lot of fun. I promise it will thin out as we start to move around, but right now everyone’s just trying to keep a path clear for the kiddos to play around.”

“Ah,” she said evasively, glancing around, and then noticed that there was a gap where a bunch of children were playing, running around, and having a good time. There were also several chairs and tables lining one side of the wall – and she was going to do her best to make her way in that direction eventually, watching the festivities as a wallflower.

It’s what I do best, she mused, and smiled as a flurry of names was rattled off before her. The whole thing was a little unsettling, because everyone kept looking at her, smiling, or they would glance at her and nod to each other... it was – *weird.*

“Harley, this is Megan from my office. Megan, you’ve met one or two of us over the years. This is Glory, and over here...”

“Ah yes, Mrs. Petersen with the twins,” Megan smiled as a flicker of recognition hit her, reaching to shake the woman’s hand politely – only to practically get knocked to the ground in a bear hug from the vivacious woman.

“Oh my gosh! Everly – we’ve got Meggie-Weggie, too? Oh, honeypot! This is so great and why didn’t you tell me you did this, you sneaky girl. Where’s he at and who’d you get? You know I love secrets and surprises, but ya’ could have told me!” the woman gushed, beaming happily as the others nearby chuckled.

“Um, let’s not go with ‘Meggie-Weggie’... okay?”

“It’s okay,” another woman smiled. “I’m Abbykins.”

“Nice to meet you – but let’s just stick with Megan... especially since it distinctly does *not* rhyme with eggs.”

“Girl, you are shoveling snow in a blizzard with that one,” Harley chuckled. “It’s just easier to smile and go with it.”

“Hey!” Glory pouted. “Megan is my bestie at the office, and always gets me in when I need it.”

“Because we live in Yonder and it’s a small town...?” someone else said pointedly, causing Megan to smile. “Hi, I’m Karen.”

“Melody...”

“Delilah...”

“Marisol... and this is Sophie.”

“Ivy,” another woman chimed in happily, and chuckled. “You do not need to remember everyone’s names the first go-around. It gets much easier as you start to come around more and hang out. I promise. Give it a year, and this will feel like a good ol’ pair of slippers.”

“Uh, sure?” Megan said warily, realizing that this entire group of people was growing by the minute – all female – and

all watching her like they were greeting the turkey the day before Thanksgiving. “Why do I feel like a sacrificial lamb right now?”

“Y’all back off,” Everly chuckled, and winked at the group. “Give my favorite office manager time to breathe – okay? Besides, we are here for Destiny and Killian.”

“Who are actually over there canoodling near the cake, Meggie-Weggie...”

“*Whoaaa boy,*” she muttered under her breath, putting a hand on her forehead, realizing Mrs. Petersen – Glory – was going to call her that from now on. The office staff would have a field day with this one.

“I’m telling you – the nickname sticks, and it’s easier not to fight it,” Abbykins smiled and put a hand on her shoulder knowingly. “I promise it will be okay. This is all pretty overwhelming, but if you relax into the whole process of getting to know everyone and kinda go-with-the-flow. These really are good people – just like Everly.”

Megan nodded uncomfortably, feeling like she was getting the pep-talk right before she was about to be plucked, basted, and sprinkled with seasoning.

“Do you live close,” Abby was smiling. “That’s my man in the distance,” she said, waving at a man, who raised his hand and blew her a kiss. “Everyone calls him Houdini – which was his call sign when he was in the Air Force, serving with Everly’s husband. He’s now an instructor at Flyboys, and I run the optometry office on Main Street.”

This woman, this stranger, was just talking constantly like they’d known each other forever, practically taking her under her wing. Everly was mingling and smiling at others in the room – including her brother that she met on Thanksgiving. She still felt so many eyes on her, and the sea of people that Abbykins was pointing out almost felt smothering.

Did they all know each other?

Why was she even here?

It was like she was the single stranger in a room full of family members – and extremely unsettling, but in the friendliest way possible. No one was threatening or imposing; it was like some secret was being held over her head, and she had no clue what it was.

“Alpo and Caboose were at the doorway, so I assume you met them,” Abbykins was still talking and pointing, moving from person-to-person almost casually. “Thumper is Harley’s husband, and the little girl with the pigtails is Samantha. Dixie’s husband is Romeo – the skinny, dark-haired guy, but I don’t think you’ve met Dixie yet, have you? She’s putting the finishing touches on the cakes for the party and completely stressing-out. As soon as I see her poofy hair, I’ll let you know.”

The woman’s finger glided to the next person.

“That’s Valkyrie, Marisol’s husband – and their kids. Firefly is Melody’s husband, and the tiny girl with the white-blond hair is their little girl, Betsy. He’s funny but has a mouth on him, so take everything he says with a grain of salt. Good heart, runaway mouth,” she repeated, moving to the next person... and unbelievably, moved from laying a hand on Megan’s shoulder to hooking her arm and pulling her forward.

“Ooooh my girl is taking point? I’m so proud of my Abbykins,” Glory exclaimed excitedly behind them. “You got this girl! Go get ‘em!”

“The quiet ones in the far corner talking are Ghost, Handsy, and his wife, Meredith. Let me introduce you,” Abby said, practically dragging her across the room towards them, and still prattling as she looked over her shoulder to see that Destiny and Ricochet were smiling beside a cake, looking at each other with such affection it was heartwarming.

“... And then of course, we have Riptide,” Abbykins was saying as Megan turned back around to see the most gorgeous man that she’d ever laid eyes on was talking to someone, and sprawled in a chair like he was a king sitting on a throne.

Her mouth went dry.

The man was wearing a blue Polo shirt that seemed to complement his tanned, golden skin. His puffed-up, light brown hair seemed to be full of highlights, as streaks of different shades of gold looked like they were painted on his head... and slightly windblown. The man used mousse – or at least it looked like it, because the front was lifted away from his face. It seemed to fit him, softening his chiseled jaw and heavy brows. He was the whole package. The man was breathtaking like some famous model come-to-life, right here in Yonder.

“Um... R-Riptide?” she barely squeaked out in a hoarse voice and then looked at Abby, literally dragging her eyes from him. “Wow, that’s a weird name and...”

“It’s his call sign,” Abby corrected, getting this strange smile on her face. “I’m not sure of his first name because I just met him today. All the guys use their call signs, and you get used to it. Would you like to meet him?”

“Me? No...yes? N-NO!” Megan stammered nervously and looking over her shoulder, just anything to get away from the direction they were walking. The last few guys she’d been on a date with had been complete losers. If she was going to meet some devastatingly gorgeous guy, she wanted to know ahead of time.

There was dieting to be had, serious gym-time, she needed to get her nails done, eyebrows waxed, upper lip, maybe get her teeth whitened since she drank waaaaay too much coffee, and yeah – now, was not a good time!

“Megan?”

“I mean, yeah, I guess I could say ‘hi’ cause ‘hellos’ are safe, aren’t they?” she began, and was shocked that she was actually stammering, blabbing, and completely off her game just being near him. It was like there was a spotlight in the room, and she couldn’t stop gawking at the man.

“No... what am I saying? No. I don’t want to meet anyone else? C-Can I just get a cup of c-coffee? M-Maybe take a s-seat on the opposite s-side of the r-room?” she was getting

even worse, like her tongue was tripping and swelling in her mouth.

The man glanced at her directly, not making eye contact. His eyes glossed past her as he lifted a hand to say ‘hi’ and went back to his conversation... and she made a noise in her throat, looking at Abby in a panic.

“Why are we still walking forward?!”

...And Megan tripped over her own two feet.

She saw everything in slow motion, like the world was coming to a stop. Abby’s eyes widened in alarm as Megan’s arm was pulled from the other woman’s hand who had been guiding her through the room, introducing her to everyone. Several sets of faces turned slowly, eyes widening in shock, and a few arms reached for her... as she came to an abrupt stop.

A padded stop.

A stop directly in someone’s lap.

Oh, gosh nooooo...

“Hi Gorgeous...” a voice said softly – and Megan looked up to stare into a pair of bright blue eyes, gazing at her in wonder. “Is it my birthday?”

“What?”

Her mind was shutting down, her ears were roaring, and her heart had never beat as violently as it was doing right now. She had no clue where her hands were, couldn’t tell if her feet were still attached to her limbs. All she knew was that she was sitting in the warm, firm lap of a man that was the equivalent of Helen of Troy – but the *masculine* version.

Riptide of Troy?

(He)Len of Troy?

If his first name is Troy, I’ll eat my freakin’ socks... she thought numbly, as his thumb touched her chin and tipped her face upwards.

“What’s your name, Beauty?” he whispered intimately, his breath tickling her lips as he leaned his head forward...

He was going to kiss her?

Megan was pretty sure she made a noise in her throat as his lower lip brushed against hers, and she saw him smile as he drew back slightly... and closed the distance between them again. Everything came to a screeching halt as he captured her lips – her heart, her mind, her lungs.

Everything.

Her brain literally flipped the proverbial table – and was finished.

Any iota of thought process or warning checked out the second he kissed her. His warm lips fit just right against hers as his hand cradled the back of her head, his fingers in her hair, pulling her to him. He opened his mouth against hers and she was helpless to resist.

... And oh the stupidest things were slapping together mentally in a massive jumble of chaotic nonsense.

Sugar snap peas made a ‘pfsst’ when you popped the pod, shelling them...

Why are strawberries red and not suntanned?

Socks are fuzzy, but undies are not?

If moo cows say ‘moo’? Do bulls say ‘bull’... or maybe ‘boo’ – a mix of bull and moo? When was the last time she heard a bull make a sound exactly?

... And where exactly did the phrase ‘How Now Brown Cow’ come from anyway?

Clickety-clackity, wickety-wackety – Brain, you must worky-worky...

Giggity!

Megan shivered, trying to pull herself together. It was like just being there, being in that frozen flash of time, was casting a spell over her. Nothing was functioning in her head quite right as the man, *the stranger*, slanted his mouth against hers,

deepening the kiss. She felt his tongue taste hers... and yanked away somehow.

“... No,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Excuse me?” he chuckled arrogantly and she looked at him, meeting his eyes and seeing the confusion there.

“Riptide, let it go, man...” someone said nearby.

“I said ‘no’ and I tripped. I apologize for...” Megan began, struggling to stand up from his lap, except the man was holding her close.

“You can ‘trip’ anytime you want, babe,” he smiled knowingly. “If you want to pretend, go ahead, but your body says differently.”

Her eyes met his again – a little surprised and a little mortified – only to see his lip curl impishly as a dimple appeared on his right cheek.

“You leaned into me too, you know? I know what desire feels and what it looks like. My gosh, just the way you catch your breath is delicious...”

“Jeez Riptide, shut your piehole man...” another man volunteered bluntly.

“The way you kissed me,” the model continued confidently, making Megan’s mouth drop open in awareness. He might be gorgeous on the outside, but the inside sure needed some serious work! “You were practically moaning in my arms and if you’re shy, then we can just...”

“Oh my gosh,” she muttered, scrambling ardently to stand up and get away from him – only to feel another hand grab her upper arm, helping her to her feet, nearly prying her from Riptide’s clutches. She stood up, saw the gorgeous man’s shocked expression as he looked past her to the other man, who had come to her aid.

“Valkyrie – what are you doing man? Bros before hoes... remember?”

Megan saw red.

“Who the heck are you calling a hoe?” she snapped and shoved her finger in his face. “When someone trips, you don’t take that as an invitation, no matter how pretty your face is. You help them up and say ‘hello’ – it’s not a license to touch my uvula with your tongue...”

“What’s a uvula?” someone said behind her amidst nervous laughter as the baby shower was in full swing on one side of the room – and coming to a standstill in her immediate vicinity.

This was a mess, and nightmare fuel.

How could this be happening to her? She never intended to be the center of attention, sure wasn’t comfortable with this arrogant man’s ardor, and while he was beautiful to look at?

She wanted more than just a pretty face.

“... And it’s sure not a sign of possession or ownership, mister!”

“What’s your name?” the man named Riptide asked again coolly, sitting there with a smug smile on his face as he gazed up at her from where she was standing over him, dressing him down.

“Not interested!”

The two men from the door chimed in for her before she could open her mouth – and she looked at them gratefully, before smirking and looking at the man who had just kissed her.

“Not interested,” she chuckled, confirming it, and saw his mouth drop open in shock. Apparently no one had ever turned down the ‘Conceited Kisser’ before her. He started to get up from his seat, and unbelievably – a few of the other men in the room grabbed the mysterious ‘Riptide’ by the shoulders, holding him down in his seat.

“Make way,” Valkyrie snapped – and the sea of people immediately parted.

Megan didn’t even know the real name of the man who’d kissed her, nor was she sure she wanted to. That was about the

most jarring introduction she'd ever experienced – and she *never* kissed on the first date, much less use it as a way to say 'hello'. It was... invasive – even if it was toe-curling. That kiss still crossed a line in her mind, one that she firmly stood behind.

The gall of that man, she thought wildly in disbelief, before speaking aloud to the man that had helped her up, giving him a nod of thanks. "If you'll excuse me..."

... And with that?

Megan left.

CHAPTER 4



RIPTIDE



“WHAT THE HECK, GUYS?”

Andrew exclaimed as he watched in disbelief as the most fun and incredibly exciting moment that he’d just experienced – was literally walking out the door and out of his life. He wanted excitement and spice in his life – and that sexy woman exuded both... in spades! “She’s leaving and I don’t even know her name?!”

A flurry of voices exploded around him as half of them were paying attention to the baby shower – and half of them were focused directly on him... and what just happened.

“Dude, you need to chill...”

“I thought you were smooth with the ladies?”

“That was *not* smooth...”

“Anything but...”

“*It’s my birthday?* Really, Riptide?”

“Can anyone tell me what a *uvula* is?”

“It’s the thing you are always reaching for with Glory...”

“DUDE!” Alpo said shocked and appalled, looking at him like he was meeting him for the first time – and looked horrified. “You were trying to reach her...”

“ALPO!” Thumper barked, interrupting him. “It’s in her mouth – do not finish your thoughts. Just leave it alone and let it go.”

“It’s the dangly thing at the back of your throat, Pookie.”

“Oh... ooohhh,” Alpo grinned – and leaned forward to high-five him. “Good job, buddy. Go for it!” Every set of eyes swung to him – and the other pilot shrugged innocently. “*What?* What’d I say now?”

“Do not,” Armadillo interrupted pointedly, causing him to turn back towards the man he’d been speaking to when a little piece of heaven literally dropped into his lap. “Don’t listen to him – and sure don’t ‘*Go for it*’ when you don’t even know the girl’s name.”

“Which is why y’all need to let me go...” Andrew started again, trying to get up from his seat, only to get pushed back down into it.

“We’re at a baby shower, brother. Ricochet and his wife are celebrating – and you sure don’t need to cause a scene, a distraction, or make some upset girl who obviously isn’t into you cry...”

“She’s into me,” he protested.

“No, it was more of ‘*your tongue was into her*’ – and I think I need a shower after that. I feel dirty just having seen it.”

“Not gonna lie... It was a bit much.”

“I thought it was fine.”

“Of course you did, Alpo.”

The man shrugged – and then grinned at Andrew before giving him thumbs up. He turned slightly and looked at his wife, Glory, nearby. “Hey honey, what’s the name of that new girl?”

“Meggie-Weggie?”

“See? Her name is Meggie... man, that’s a weird name,” Alpo chuckled, before getting interrupted by a blond woman

who shoved right between Alpo and Thumper, who were standing side by side.

“What’d y’all do?!” she hissed in frustration. “Where did Megan go?”

“Megan? Not *Meggie*?”

“No – *not Meggie* – that is your wife’s translation.”

“God, I love that woman...”

“We all do – but answer the question – *where did my Megan go?*”

“Well, ol’ Riptide here was...”

“Oh mannnn,” Andrew sighed in despair and put his head in his hands as he saw the taillights of her car pulling out onto the road. She was gone, and the only lead he had was her name was Megan – that, and the angry woman who was married to Maestro, glaring at all of them, obviously knew her.

“Riptide was *what*...exactly?”

“Trying to take her tonsils out with his tongue!”

“*WHAT?*”

“Shhhh,” Riptide balked, trying to calm everyone down, because they were making a big deal out of what happened, and he was trying to keep from completely freaking out. He needed this woman on his side to find out more about his mysterious Megan.

He had been talking with Armadillo, talking about how frustrated and bored he was overseas, when Fate decided to step in. It was like his every hope, every dream, had landed in his lap.

Literally.

Sure, he’d been completely taken aback and stunned to have some beautiful woman plop down on his lap. The feeling of her soft backside on his thighs, her hands on his shoulders – clinging to him, combined with that succulent cleavage that caught his eye instantly... and those gorgeous hazel eyes that widened in awareness.

Yeah, he was hooked.

... And he had no intention of leaving Yonder without knowing who Megan was, and how to get a hold of her again.



IT WAS several hours later when Andrew made his move.

Some of the pilots that he'd met, got to know, or knew from his time in Ghazni, were starting to dissipate as the evening wore on. The children were getting tired, batches of coffee were made along with margaritas, and things were starting to get a little more relaxed and fun. A few couples were dancing, Romeo ordered three large pizzas to be delivered so Dixie didn't need to fuss with feeding everyone.

Andrew was on a mission.

"Hey," he began easily, taking a seat at the table with Maestro and his wife – only to see both of them look up from their conversation knowingly. This was not going to be as easy as he thought.

Ouch.

"Sup, loverboy..." Maestro drawled, chuckling as his wife elbowed him. "Whatcha up to?"

"I've come to eat crow," he said honestly, and succeeded in making both of them laugh in awareness. "So, who is she?"

"Why?" Everly said openly, leaning forward to cradle her own cup of coffee in her hands and trying to keep from smiling. He could see the corner of her lips twitching, like she was ready to start grinning like the Joker at any time now... and glanced up just as a hand landed on his shoulder, making him wince.

Now what? he mused.

"I hear there was a slight commotion earlier at the baby shower," Ricochet began, swinging his leg over the back of the chair next to him and plopping down inelegantly. "Sooo? Did you really do it?"

Andrew closed his eyes in defeat and heard several people laughing around him. It was going to take everything he had to keep calm, stay cool, and let them have their fun at his expense. He'd certainly dished it out to Sparky when the other guy was talking with his Army girl through the fence in Ghazni – it was his turn to be on the receiving team.

“You should have seen him...”

“He was all up in her face like an anteater...”

“That’s disgusting...”

“This was too!”

“Did he really do that? Kiss her like that?”

“No, but the way they were sucking faces...”

“Oh my gosh, don’t call it that...”

“It’s true – and then Alpo asked what a uvula was...”

“Gracious, no – did he really?”

“I heard she tripped...”

“More like his jeans were the only thing keeping Megan from getting pregnant today...”

“You’d know – wouldn’t you, Maestro...”

“HEY! That was *one time* in the past...”

“Still happened,” Ricochet shrugged, uncaring. “Still gonna tease you, bro.”

“Alright, alright,” Andrew interrupted, feeling extremely frustrated. “Yes, she tripped. Yes, I caught her... and yes – I kissed her. I’m interested. I think she’s incredibly hot and...”

“My Megan? You thought *my* Megan was hot?” Everly smiled, sharing a glance with her husband – who shrugged, looking confused.

Were they blind?

Did they not see the same goddess that he did? My goodness, Megan was breathtakingly beautiful with all those soft brown curls and those stunning hazel eyes that made him

want to dive right in. How could he not fall for her or want to know more?

“Megan is lovely,” he admitted quietly, staring at his coffee cup. “And I hate the fact that she ran away from me or was upset. It wasn’t my finest moment, but nor would I change anything.”

“If she’s upset, why should I tell you anything more about her?” Everly asked and shared a look with her brother, before leaning towards Maestro and whispering something to her husband.

“Because I’d like to say ‘hello’ properly – at a moment where she’s not out of sorts because she fell in my lap – and I’m not stunned, doing what comes naturally when a man sees a beautiful woman.”

“And exactly what is ‘properly’? Can you define that for everyone in the room?” Everly smirked – and he heard a commotion as several chairs were jerked over to their table loudly, all at once.

Romeo, Firefly, Caboose, and Alpo – *all four* – had plopped down in their chairs, huddled up to the table, and were laughing at each other while focusing directly on him. Maestro leaned forward, putting his chin on his knuckles and batted his eyelashes at him mockingly. Ricochet beside him did the same thing as his wife laughed, putting her arm on his back, resting her hand on his shoulder.

“Do tell,” Firefly goaded. “I want to hear *alllll* about how you’re going to say ‘hello’ properly...”

“Without your tongue,” Alpo chimed in quickly.

“Without *touching* her,” Romeo clarified – and bumped knuckles with the other pilot, nodding.

“I just want to watch the fun,” Caboose grinned. “Touch her or don’t – I don’t care enough to have an opinion. I just want to see ya’ squirm, Riptide.”

... All of the men laughed openly at that – and he knew he was going to have to grovel to find out anything else about Megan.

He leaned forward and hung his head silently for a moment. This woman, Megan, might not even give him a chance again – especially if everyone was reacting like this. Oh yes, they were raking him over the coals, but he'd never had a girl actually run from him... and he hadn't even gotten to know her yet. What happened if she blew him off; was he going to eat crow all over again?

Did it even matter?

“I think the first thing I'd do would be to drop my ego and apologize sincerely for crossing a line,” Andrew began, staying very still and looking down at the table, realizing that his coffee was the same color as Megan's hair... and smiled faintly to himself. The silence around them was overwhelming, and he knew they were waiting for him to further throw himself on the pyre.

“If I was asking her out or going on a date, not just kissing her or coming onto her... I'd get her some roses just to see her smile. I haven't even seen her smile yet, and...”

“Enough,” Everly said quietly, causing him to look up – and several groans of frustration.

“What?”

“Why?”

“We were getting to see his man-card punched, Everly... C'mon, please?”

“It's sweet – but I wasn't done hearing how he was going to win over your friend...”

“I think he should kiss her again and let her smack the s...”

“Nope,” Everly interrupted Caboose, who was grinning – and mockingly pretended to zip his lips and shrugged. “Look, I'm not sure I want to hear anymore, and I need to think about this – and what it would do to Megan. I don't want to throw someone I consider a dear friend to the fishes for the nearest hungry *piranha* to gobble her alive. Megan is a sweetheart and deserves the best person out there – *are you it, Riptide?*” she asked bluntly.

Andrew stared at her in humble awareness, realizing that it wasn't him. He wasn't that great of a guy deep down inside, but would certainly try if the chance came... and it obviously wasn't going to be forthcoming tonight.

Nope, Maestro's wife was going to make him stew before telling him 'No'.

"I don't know," he said honestly in a hoarse voice, not holding back. "And you're right. She probably deserves better than some arrogant flyboy who's only in town for two days and then stranded on the other side of the world. I would still like the chance to apologize, and thank her for a lovely moment that will keep me sane for a little while longer," he whispered, looking at Everly and hoping she understood. "That kiss was probably the best thing that happened to me in years... and I can't help but think that."

Everly stood up and looked at her husband.

"It's late, can we go home?"

"Of course, angel," Maestro said immediately, getting to his feet as several of the other guys groaned in awareness. They weren't going to get anything further out of Andrew because it was officially a lost cause at this point. Even Ricochet stood up, patting him on the shoulder, before murmuring '*Sorry buddy*' to him.

He just sat there, deflated and alone.

... And saw Everly look back at him over her shoulder before she spoke.

"Let me think about it tonight, and I'll let you know something tomorrow – come by my office and we'll talk."

"Thank you," Andrew replied, realizing that was as close of a chance as he was going to get tonight, as everyone began to file out of the café.

He glanced at his watch, and heard someone moving a few of the tables back into place. It was really late and would be a long night thinking about that kiss over and over again. Sighing heavily, he got to his feet and nodded to Romeo, who was helping move the tables with his wife.

“Dixie, this was fantastic,” Andrew began politely. “Romeo’s lucky to have someone that can bake like that. The cake was so fluffy and the best I’ve ever had... but why don’t you relax a bit, and we’ll get it. You’ve done enough today.”

Dixie looked at her husband in surprise and nodded, moving instead to go wipe down the countertops and empty the massive coffee maker. Romeo grasped a table and the two men picked it up, putting it into place. By the time they moved the fourth table, Romeo spoke.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

“It’s no biggie,” Andrew offered. “Your wife had to have spent hours cooking and decorating everything...”

“She did – and she’s got a heart of gold. Dixie wanted everything to be perfect for Ricochet and Destiny...”

“It was. She’s amazing.”

“Which is why I’m going to break confidence,” Romeo smiled at his wife in the distance. “Because you made her feel special without being asked – and that means a lot to me.”

“What? It was nothing and...”

“Dixie always puts her all into everything, and she never asks for acknowledgement or help. Sometimes people say, ‘*thank you*’ and sometimes they tell her she did a great job... but rarely do they offer to do something for her just so she can relax – and I really appreciate that you did.”

“Lee, it’s okay... I really don’t mind.”

“No, Dixie – it’s not,” Romeo countered, smiling at her in the distance. “I know what it’s like to feel like the odd-man-out and he’s actually trying. It’s not for us to decide what happens next, and I want to throw the man a ‘bone’...”

Andrew set down the last table and looked at the other man in confusion.

“Everly told you to come by her office tomorrow to talk for a reason – so bring your ‘A-Game’, flyboy... and be ready to grovel again,” Romeo began and met his eyes, sticking out

his hand in friendship. Andrew clasped the other man's hand, shaking it, like they were sealing a deal.

... And Romeo held tight to his hand, glancing at his wife, before looking him straight in the eyes.

“Don't say a word to anyone about you hearing this from me... but Megan works for Everly. She works for the woman and will be at the office. I don't want you to get blindsided or go in empty-handed. Get those roses you mentioned, and be ready to lay it all on the line - got it?”

Andrew swallowed, stunned and grateful.

“Thank you, brother.”

“Anytime.”

CHAPTER 5



MEGAN



“Hi, yes, I’m calling about an outstanding claim that was declined, and I need to speak with a claims adjuster...” Megan said easily into the phone without any hesitation. She had a stack of ‘denied’ claims for this insurance company and it was either a coding issue on their end – or you had to drop the first letter of the policy number. It was always the same things, and she wasn’t about to let this money just sit there...

Plus it would give her something to focus on instead of thinking about those blue eyes. She’d been so frustrated, so hurt, and so out of sorts that she walked in this morning, took one look at her blue highlighters – and threw them all away.

“Megan... psst...”

She waved her hand towards the receptionist distractedly as she continued speaking. “Yes, hello – I’m Megan Josephs, the office manager for Dr. Everly Briscoe-Wilcox out of Yonder, Texas, and I need to speak with someone regarding five claims that I have outstanding over ninety days so we can figure out how to get payment immediately – and I’m sorry – what was your name?” she asked bluntly, meaning business with whoever this person was on the other end of the line.

“Megan... psst... hon, you’ve gotta...”

Megan whirled around to glare at Nancy – only to slowly look upwards to see Riptide standing at the receptionist’s desk

holding a massive bouquet of pink roses. He was speaking in a hushed voice to Everly, and literally plucked one out of the bouquet, handing it to her.

She saw red.

“Why that no-good, lecherous...”

“Miss Josephs?” the voice crackled on the phone – drawing Megan’s attention back to the files before her.

“Yes. I’m here,” she said distractedly, feeling like a knife was in her back and twisting slowly. Everly was married... and that cad probably went around snogging every woman he could get his grabby little hands on. If he was kissing people left and right, what if she had she just been exposed to something? She wasn’t one to casually date, and the idea of catching something from a single brief encounter hit her like a freight train.

“I’m probably going to end up with herpes...” Megan muttered under her breath – and heard laughing on the phone. “Oh shoot,” she apologized instantly. “I am so sorry. I’m doing too many things and slightly distracted. Maybe I should call back in a bit once I get rid of a six-foot-arrogant-pest standing ten feet from me.”

Hanging up quickly, she turned around to see Everly giving her a knowing look – and walked off. Riptide turned towards her and gave her a wary smile.

“Do you have a moment?” he asked politely.

“No. I’m at work.”

“When is your lunch break?”

“When you leave,” she countered openly, and heard a few of the girls in the office chuckling and snickering under their breaths as he frowned.

“You could leave with me – and I’ll have you back here in an hour.”

“I only take a thirty-minute lunch and I brought it – so no, thank you,” she said once more, not giving an inch. If the

cretin was going to be canoodling up to every single woman, then he could have any of them.

“Nancy is single and not dating anyone...” and heard the woman’s embarrassed gasp. “Laura is married, but that obviously hasn’t stopped you since you just gave Everly a rose. In fact, there are six girls in the office, not including me, so feel free to unload and give each of them two – and who knows? Maybe you’ll secure yourself a lunch date or three...” she snapped hotly, feeling all eyes on her in the room, and knew she was making a scene.

... Only to see him smile tenderly.

“Jealous, my Megan?”

“Never – and I’m not yours.”

“I gave Everly the rose and asked if I could speak with you for ten minutes outside... that was all – I promise.”

“Not interested,” she replied simply, crossing her arms and giving him a flat look. They stood there looking at each other, neither looking away, as Nancy hesitated to move back to her station to answer the phone that was now ringing softly. Megan pointed at the other girl, gave him a look as if to say ‘*How about her?*’ ... and was surprised to see his deep frown.

“I’m here for you,” he countered openly, and several heads swung to her for the rebuttal. It was like they were watching a tennis match, volleying statements back and forth as their heads bobbed in both directions with each swing.

“I’m not sure I’m interested,” she retorted.

... Sure enough, the heads swung towards him comically, waiting.

“Please,” he said quietly. “Five minutes and...”

... They swung to the left, back to her.

“You can say what you need to right now, because I have nothing to hide from anyone. They are like family to me and...”

Riptide interrupted, rising to the challenge she was laying down without a second's hesitation.

“Fine – if you want me to say it publicly, so be it. I’ve never been so interested in a woman before in my life, and couldn’t help being stunned when I thought an angel from heaven had literally dropped into my lap. I can’t forget your smell, your taste, and...”

Megan drew her eyes away and glanced at the other girls who were smiling and waving her to ‘go’. Her face was on fire, and he was still spouting off things...

“I want to hold you again, run my hands all over your curves, and pull you to me just so I know how it feels to have you in my arms. I want to know all about you – what makes you laugh, what makes you smile, if you’ll scream or moan when I finally get the chance to make you...”

“WHOAAAA!” she blurted out, her face hotter than the surface of the sun, and staring at him in disbelief. She expected him to be smiling, to look smug, or gloat that he was finally getting to her... yet he looked like he was almost pleading for a chance to speak to her alone.

“Don’t say another word,” she muttered, completely mortified as his words rang in her ears once more. Looking at Beverly sitting nearby, the woman gave her a knowing smile and winked at her – before tapping her watch.

Nodding slightly, she got to her feet and walked out of the locked door that had a keypad on it – only to come face to face with him.

The real deal.

Riptide.

“These are for you,” he said quietly, pointing at the roses.

“I figured.”

“Can we talk outside?”

“I think that would be best.”

He stretched out a hand towards her – and she stared at it, almost like it was a snake ready to bite her. Was this what the fortune teller had meant?

Surely not, she thought, meeting his gaze once more.

“I only have a few minutes,” she began, almost immediately back pedaling because this man was too close, too appealing, and she didn’t want to end up getting hurt. She nervously put her hand in his, hating that she nearly melted at the warmth of his palm, but that stupid fortune teller’s words just kept on in her head.

When the time comes, take his hand...

As they stepped into the sunlight, she winced at the brightness and saw him look up towards the sun, smiling as he sighed.

“I take it you like the sunshine...”

“Love it,” he chuckled. “My mom used to joke and say I was her little lizard...”

“Not a flattering comparison,” she interrupted, pulling her hand from his.

“... Because,” he said gently, obviously trying to finish his sentence and not get frustrated with her snapping at him. “When I was a boy, I used to play in the surf all the time in California as a child... even now, I love being outside in the sun. The heat doesn’t quite get to me unless I’m running laps because I got in trouble.”

“How am I not surprised?”

“Look, I think we started off on the wrong foot,” he smiled easily, and held out his hand towards her, waiting. “I’m Andrew Carter – and my call sign is Riptide. It’s very nice to meet you, Megan...” he drawled pointedly.

“Wrong foot? *Wrong foot?* Seriously?” she replied, looking at him and his hand. “You *kissed* me. I was *off* my feet, and you took advantage of it.”

“Yes, I did – and I apologize. I would like to get to know you so...”

“So you can kiss me again?”

“Is that an invitation?”

“No. It’s not,” she said bluntly, looking away from him. This had to be the most awkward, infuriating, and frustrating greeting between two strangers – only topped by basically making love to her mouth a split second when her orbit collided with his.

“I’d like to get to know you so I can ask you to dinner and try this again,” he said patiently – and waiting with his hand outstretched. “No pressure, no kissing, nothing but companionship.”

He waited... and waited.

She stood there, arms crossed, and waited stubbornly, holding her ground. After a few telltale moments, saw his smile fade – yet his hand remained outstretched.

“Megan, please,” he whispered, and she looked at him.

... Really looked.

Riptide, uh... *Andrew*, was probably the most beautiful man she’d ever met in her life. Even now, with that golden hair, tanned skin, and those bright blue eyes – he was striking, and that was when it hit her. The man probably never had a woman tell him ‘no’ in his life.

He wasn’t possibly interested in her, because she was just another plain girl in the crowd. Brown hair, hazel eyes, and her front teeth had a slight gap that seemed to always want to hang on to spices in food. She was paranoid about checking her front teeth and kept floss picks in her purse. Her backside was healthy, she had a little pooch in front from one too many orange Hostess cupcakes, and to top it all off? She had stretchmarks on every curve of her body – boobs, butt, waist, thighs.

This man was probably 5-7% body fat, was as athletic as they came, looked like a super model, probably surfed since he was from California, and could get any girl in the world... so why her?

Was it because she said ‘No’?

She put her hand in his, shook it slightly, and saw the look of relief in his eyes... and didn't release his hand.

“Megan Josephs,” she said quietly. “Do you surf?”

“Yes – why?” he replied easily.

“5-7% body fat?”

“Um, actually yes. The last time medical checked me, I was at seven percent... but how did you know?” he asked quizzically with a nervous smile on his face. “I love vegetables, a good steak, and pasta... but not big on sweets. I also get in trouble a lot, so I usually run off everything I consume.”

“Nope,” she replied openly – and released his hand, causing his mouth to drop open in shock. “I just had to know if I had you pegged right.”

“And?” he blurted out, not holding back and definitely looking confused.

“I do,” she whispered sadly, not holding back as she met his eyes. “We have nothing in common. You could have anyone, and I have zero interest in getting my feelings hurt or becoming another conquest for you. I realize it probably hurt your ego to be told ‘No’, or rubs you the wrong way when I tell you that *‘I’m not interested’*...”

She saw his brows pinch together and the hurt in his eyes as he met her gaze, swallowing as she didn't hold back.

“I'm not your type,” she continued quietly. “And even if we went on a date, do you really think I want people looking at the two of us – *pitying me*? They are going to think you are taking me out to be kind. Look, I'm not trying to be cruel, and I've dated a few guys, but you and I?” she paused, feeling a pain in her chest. “You and I would never work, because I'm just another box to check off some list you have, to make sure you have a perfect score.”

“Wow,” he whispered painfully. “Thank you for being blunt with me.”

“You’re probably a nice guy,” she shrugged, looking away. “I don’t wish ill for you – I just think you are wasting your time with me.”

They stood there silently, and she was about to walk past him to go back inside when he spoke again. She looked up at him and he stared at her, not holding back.

“You’re right,” he admitted hoarsely. “It does hurt to be told ‘no’ – and you’ve been spot-on about everything so far... except when it comes to you.”

Megan swallowed nervously, hating to leave things like they were, but anything else said would be giving him an out, an excuse, or an inch of ground, when she was putting her foot down firmly.

“You are unlike anyone I’ve ever dated or talked to – and it’s been about two years since I’ve been on a date. I’m not looking for a certain type. I’m looking for someone I could see myself with forever... and while I’m incredibly attracted to you, it could just end up being a pipedream or a fantasy...” he whispered, not moving as he searched her eyes. “But I will never know unless I try to get to know you better. Can you say the same?”

He paused and she felt him touch her hand again, lacing his fingers with hers, as they stood there, shoulder to shoulder, talking.

“Will you know the person you are meant for when you meet him, because if so – you’re lucky. I only wish it was as easy as matching up two faces like some child’s game, but it’s not. I’m looking for a friend, for someone with whom I would have chemistry with, and someone I could see my future in their eyes... and I guess I was wrong.”

There was such pain, such regret in his eyes, that her own stung with tears hearing the loneliness in his voice. He was either an amazing actor that missed his calling... or telling the truth.

“Thank you for hearing me out,” he said softly and smiled wanly. “I appreciate it – and when you meet your guy, I hope

he knows how lucky he is.”

... And then he dropped her hand, immediately digging a set of keys from his pocket – and without thinking, without hesitating or overanalyzing it, she grasped his hand.

His eyes shot to hers.

“Don’t make me regret this,” she whispered, feeling a knot in her throat and realizing that she’d stopped him from leaving. This was a mistake, probably the biggest mistake, yet she was making it anyway and giving in because she was too soft hearted – and always had been. She stared at him fearfully and repeated the words, hoping he understood that this was his one chance. “Do *not* make me regret this...”

“I’ll try my best not to,” he promised. “I’m not here to hurt you. I swear it.”

“No kissing...”

“Nope.”

“I get off of work at five,” she began nervously, feeling her knees practically knocking together. “Dinner, conversation, we’ll take two separate cars, and *that’s it...* agreed?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he said softly, smiling at her. “Thank you, Megan.”

“Thank you for the roses.”

“It was my pleasure. I’ll be here at five sharp.”

She nodded, quickly looking away from him, and slipped back into the office. Hiding behind the wall, she peeked out the glass to watch him leaving as he walked towards a truck in the distance casually... and then stopped in the middle of the parking lot, did a little dance, and jogged the last few feet to the truck before climbing inside. She saw his grinning face as he happily slapped at the steering wheel a few times, put his hand on his forehead, and the avid look of joy was there – stark and humbling to behold – on his face.

He was actually excited to see her later... and yelped as a hand touched her shoulder. Spinning around, she laid her hand over her chest and smiled at Everly.

“I’m not going to ask, nor do I want to know because it’s personal, but I just wanted to let you know whatever you decided... I’m here if you need to talk.”

“Thank you,” she smiled nervously, and felt her cheeks grow warm. “I should get back to work. I’ve got a date at five.”

“Good,” Everly replied gently. “I asked my husband about him last night, and he said he was a fairly decent guy.”

“Your husband knows him?”

“Yup. They were stationed in Afghanistan together before Alex came home. I think Riptide is still stationed over in the Middle East and... Megan? *Megan? Are you okay?*”

Megan sat down hard in one of the chairs in the waiting room. Her head was spinning, as Everly’s words hit her like a ton of bricks. The fortune teller had told her... about him.

Riptide – *Andrew* – was from Afghanistan.

CHAPTER 6



MEGAN



SHE WAS DISTRACTED ALL AFTERNOON, replaying everything repeatedly in her mind, and sometimes the sounds were lapping over one another. She kept hearing Andrew's words, the fortune teller's, things people had said to her over the years about how '*she had a sweet personality*', when she wanted to look more like one of the skinny, pretty girls on television.

That just wasn't going to happen, and while no one would come right out and say it – the implication was there. She was stocky, and the one thing she didn't want to be remembered for was her freakin' personality. That was like saying her earrings still fit from high school when not even her darn shoes did. How was it you put on weight, you gained them in your feet too?

*Will you know the person you are meant for when you meet him,
because if so – you're lucky...*

His words replayed in her mind and the irony was not lost on her. She was luckier than most – and just as cursed. Some crazy lady had put a bug in her mind about an imaginary guy with whom she compared everyone to. No one was good enough, and while she'd been given clues, suggestions, carefully veiled hints as to who it would be... those same things were just as elusive.

I only wish it was as easy as matching up two faces like some child's game, but it's not...

Andrew was right. Life wasn't about finding a match, and everything wasn't sunshine or roses. No, it was about meeting someone, getting to know them, and there was a process... a timeline... to all of it.

I'm looking for a friend, for someone with whom I would have chemistry with, and someone I could see my future in their eyes...

“Aren't we all?” Megan whispered aloud, thinking back over his words as she washed her hands in the sink at work. She was exceedingly nervous, and had no idea what to expect from him.

He wanted chemistry... that kiss they'd shared was like watching a baking soda/vinegar volcano in some child's classroom at school explode and bubble over once the two components were mixed. They certainly had chemistry – or it was a heckuva fluke.

Megan swallowed and looked at her reflection in the mirror. There was nothing extraordinary about the woman before her, except that she wasn't a quitter. It might take her a minute to get on-board with a new idea, but once she was in – it was full-speed ahead.

A knock at the door interrupted her musings.

“Hey Megan, your handsome stud is back for round two...” Nancy chuckled from behind the doorway, and Megan jerked it open, fighting back a nervous giggle.

“He's not my handsome stud...”

“He thinks he is.”

“Now, *that*, I will have a hard time arguing with.”

Walking out of the bathroom, she heard Nancy's whispered ‘*Have fun...*’ behind her as she walked to the office, grabbed her purse, and headed towards the front door where Andrew was waiting.

His face immediately lit up as he saw her – and she couldn't help the nervous smile that touched her lips. This could go so badly... and she was here for it, taking a chance, and diving headfirst into an ocean that she hoped wouldn't beat her against the rocks.

“Hey...” he began simply – and extended his hand, making her shiver in awareness. She put her hand in his, and he opened the front door with his other arm, giving a slight tug to their hands, indicating she should go first. It was awkward... but nice.

He apparently liked holding hands... and she did too.

“I know you mentioned taking two cars,” he began easily, and she immediately tensed, looking at him. “So, I was going to tell you that I'd keep it really simple, if you want to follow me out to Flyboys on the south side of town.”

Oh.

He wasn't trying to get her alone or change the plans, she realized with a breath of relief. Instead, he was honoring her requests and just informing her of where they were both driving to.

“That's a flight school,” she began and hesitated. “There's no restaurant out there that I know of...”

“Trust me?”

It was that softly spoken request and the way his thumb brushed over her knuckles that was her undoing... not to mention his smile was doing things to her brain. He had something planned. That much was obvious, and she wanted to ask more questions, but didn't dare take away from the moment.

He wanted to surprise her... and something in her wanted that to happen.

She nodded.

Getting her keys, she ignored the flutter in her chest as he walked her to her car, and she saw the big truck he'd been

driving earlier next to it. Was that deliberate, or was he stalking her?

Please don't be weird. Please don't be weird. Please don't be weird, she thought, as a litany of that single phrase went through her mind, combined with an instant replay of that fortune teller's fiasco.

She was expecting the worst while hoping for the best, setting the mental 'bar' high for this poor, unsuspecting man. If things had been different, if that old hag hadn't scared her to death a few years ago, she would have been tripping over herself to have this gorgeous guy asking her out.

"I'll lead the way," he said simply – and left her side to get in the truck.

"Just call me Gretel, because here I come - straight into the witch's hut looking for the stove," she muttered under her own breath, starting her car. It only took about five minutes to get to the airfield on the south side of town and as she pulled in, she saw a few cars leaving and swallowed nervously.

There was one car left here... and a plane on the runway.

Turning off the car, she hesitated and saw him walking towards her door as she opened it. She wasn't about to wait for him to open it for her when she was perfectly capable – and curious. She was about to ask what was going on, and heard a voice in the distance as the front door to the building opened up.

"Riptide," a woman hollered, waving, as he immediately took her hand and began pulling her behind him to walk towards her. She recognized her as Harley from the baby shower that she was at briefly, and felt a tinge of embarrassment as she quickly yanked her hand from his. "Riptide, I'm checking the hangar, and here's the keys. Can you tie the Cessna down for me? Jackson made Sloppy Joe's, and Samantha is cutting another tooth. I've got to get home."

"Yep, I've got it, Harley," Andrew acknowledged easily. "Have a nice night."

“Oh – and there’s donuts in the microwave for you for in the morning. We won’t be in until closer to eight.”

“Sounds good.”

“Hi Megan,” Harley said simply and gave a little wave, heading towards the lone car without any fanfare. It was almost like this was a normal thing, leaving someone alone at your business.

Weird, weird people...

Andrew turned to her and smiled, looking nervous.

“What?” she blurted out, not hesitating.

“Want to see the sunset with me?”

“It’s barely five pm... the sun won’t be down for about two or three hours.”

“Two hours and thirty-two minutes,” he corrected, smiling and glanced at his watch, before looking at her again. “And that didn’t answer my question.”

“Sure,” she said flatly, not sure what he was looking for or planning. “Fine. Let’s see the sunset.”

“Perfect. I wanted to make sure and ask.”

“I thought you mentioned dinner?”

“Oh, we’re having dinner too,” he chuckled, putting an arm around her back, resting it on her hip, as he walked her towards the airplane in the distance like this was an everyday thing – and stopped. “Do you need to eat now? Are you starving?”

“Are we heading towards that plane?” she countered in disbelief – and saw his brilliant smile as he gazed at her, nodding. He was taking her to the airplane?

They were going flying?

“I’ll wait,” she replied in breathy excitement and anticipation. One of her goals in life was to do a parachute jump someday when she was brave enough. Travel always seemed like something other people did, but not her. She was

always working, never had enough time, and the fact that he was talking about taking her somewhere was heady. “I’m not exactly dressed for this,” she hesitated. “I’m in scrubs, and I didn’t pack an overnight bag or...”

He stopped and looked at her.

“You wouldn’t ride in the truck with me – but you would go somewhere with me overnight?” he questioned in disbelief, looking at her.

“You’re not getting ‘any’, okay?” she blurted out, laughing and completely mortified, her face was getting extremely hot as she blushed at his flabbergasted expression. “But what is a girl supposed to think when a guy is threatening to fly her around? I’ve never traveled or been anywhere but here, so yeah – I’m a little curious.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he began, nodding. “You are dressed perfectly to me and you don’t need an overnight bag... this time.”

Megan swallowed silently as they walked towards the plane again. He held open the door for her, and she felt completely intimidated as she awkwardly climbed in, stunned by how tiny it felt. It was like sitting in a car, but different. She couldn’t see the runway unless she craned her neck, and the seatbelt dangled beside her. Reaching for it, she immediately buckled, and then realized Andrew wasn’t getting in.

If this was a joke, she was going to maim him.

Her head swiveled around to see him on the other side of the plane, standing on something and holding himself along the wing. From her vantage point, she could see his lower torso and jeans... and that was it, when he hopped down a second later. Her mouth felt like there was cotton inside as she watched him lovingly touch the wing, his eyes focused, as he inspected the plane. It was only moments before the other door opened and he was climbing inside.

The tiny plane went from *small* to *miniscule* immediately. She was not a small girl – and he was a nice-sized guy. He wasn’t some broad, musclebound guy, but he certainly filled

the rest of the open space in the cabin where they were sitting hip-to-hip on the bench seat. He leaned over and shoved a handle down on her door frame, locking the door, and her breath caught as he looked up at her, smiling.

“Gotta keep you safe, right?”

“Yes,” she croaked hoarsely as he put the keys in the ignition and nodded, handing her the set of headphones that was dangling on a hook nearby on the pillar.

“You’ll need these if we are going to talk in the air. It gets kinda loud and will help muffle things,” he explained, handing them to her and putting on his own set. He adjusted his mouthpiece that curved around directly in front of his lips and spoke. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes.”

... And frowned, reaching for her mouthpiece, maneuvering it.

“Can you hear me now?”

“Still a yes...” she quipped, chuckling, and saw his smile.

“Ahhh there you are,” he began. “I can’t hear you unless you keep this really close to your mouth. Sorry if I was getting too personal by putting my hands in your face. Each time you fly, you have to adjust things to each person.”

“It’s fine,” she replied, grateful he was explaining, because this whole thing was a little weird. She’d never seen people wearing headphones in travel magazines and had never flown herself, but was putting her well-being directly in this stranger’s hands for an experience she would never forget.

“So you don’t mind me getting *personal* then...?” he asked softly, giving her a tender smile as his eyes met hers. She didn’t answer – and knew exactly how a deer in headlights felt at that moment... only to hear him chuckle in the headphones. “I’m kidding. Don’t look so nervous. You’re fine.”

Before she could tell him to knock it off because he was making her nervous, he turned and flipped several switches, moving a lever downwards as the plane began rolling.

Everything in her tensed, expecting the world's worst thing to happen... and then suddenly there was a bump – and a sag – as the plane left the ground.

She heard his soft laugh as she stared at everything around her sightlessly, panicked, and felt almost blinded, because she couldn't see a thing in front of her except clouds.

... And felt his hand on her leg, patting her knee.

“Relax,” he urged gently. “Breathe and relax. I promise, I've got you.”

Megan dragged her head sideways slowly like something out of a nightmare, expecting to see the boogeyman or worse beside her from the sheer panic beating at her right now – and her eyes darted past him to see large grassy fields, tiny trees, and buildings in the distance. This was not part of her parachute jumping experience she anticipated and immediately having second thoughts about anything and everything!

“Megan? Megan, I'm sorry... it never dawned on me you might be scared,” he was apologizing and looked upset as he watched her.

“Watch the road!” she blurted out – and then realized there was no road.

... *No road?*

She closed her eyes and began to breathe, drawing in gulps of breath, trying not to panic or freak out – and felt his hand holding hers.

“I've got you – I promise. Breathe with me... in... and out... okay? I'm coming around to land,” his voice crooned gently – and she barked out a single word.

“NO!”

Her eyes met his surprised ones and she laughed nervously, teetering on the edge of a panic attack when she nodded. He had to think she was losing her mind, because everything in her was tense like a rod had been shoved up her spine. Even her right hand was braced against the ceiling of the plane, almost like she was holding it up.

“No, I’ve always wanted to travel,” she began nervously, feeling her mouth runaway from her. “I’m doing this – period! I’ve never had a chance to do this and need to just relax into it, you know? I promised myself that someday I’d be brave enough to jump from a plane – *you know* – do the whole ‘*I’m fifty*’ while pretending that I’m a raindrop for about five seconds in freefall before I yank the ripcord, and...”

His laughter interrupted her – causing her to look at him again.

“It’s a little longer than five seconds before you should pull the ripcord,” he began, looking at her in amazement. “And when you are fifty, I will jump right beside you.”

It was the weirdest, sweetest offer she’d ever heard in her life, almost like he was boldly saying that he intended for them to still be talking in twenty years... and it took her breath away. He was looking forward, angling the plane, and that simple statement was offered so openly, so casually, that she actually half-way believed him.

... And pulled her right hand down from the ceiling, trying to relax. He seemed so comfortable, so at ease, yet providing a stability she didn’t know she needed by simply holding her hand.

“I remember my first flight,” he was speaking and she listened avidly, trying to unwind as the world seemed to grow even smaller each time she looked out the window. She wasn’t scared of heights – she was terrified of dying, and that was why she wanted to jump, as if to thumb her nose to the world and show that she’d made it this far and could do anything.

“That first flight was so bad,” he chuckled. “I’d practiced in simulation so many times, excelled in my classes, and had top marks in my squadron – but that first day flying will stick with me forever.”

“Why?” she asked, unable to help herself... and laid her other hand across the two of theirs where it rested on her leg.

“It’s how I got my call sign,” he admitted, smiling at her. “You’re relaxing – that’s good.”

“What happened?”

“Well, we were going up and I was such a hotshot,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “The biggest know-it-all who needed to be taken down a few pegs obviously, and my instructor was in the plane with me. So we were going up and almost at fifteen thousand feet, when the engine stalled...”

“Oh my gosh...” she whispered, horrified and completely enthralled by his story. He made it obviously, but she couldn’t imagine the horror in that moment that he’d experienced – nor how he had gotten back into the saddle, doing it over again.

“Yup, it was pretty bad,” Andrew admitted, laughing nervously. “I wish I could say that I was cool under pressure or that I landed the plane with no problems – but it wasn’t so elegant as that. I panicked.”

“Oh no,” she chuckled, unable to help herself and laughing with him.

“‘*Oh no*’ is right...” he began, stealing a glance at her, smiling. “It was bad. I was screaming like a little girl, he was slapping the back of my helmet, the plane was about to go into a dive, and I was certain I was going to meet my Maker in less than a minute when we finally collided with the ground.”

“What happened?”

“Well, my instructor started yelling at me, calling me all sorts of things...”

“Like what?” she interrupted, trying not to laugh.

“A crybaby, accused me of needing my mama, and then he said those infamous words I’ll never forget,” he paused, and she saw that beautiful smile as he looked at her. “My instructor told me that I wasn’t about to drag him down like some nasty *riptide*...”

Her eyes widened, matching his smile in awareness.

“... And that I needed to get it together, man-up, and keep from killing myself and him, because I’d handled this exact scenario before on the computer and could do it again,” Andrew paused, looking over his shoulder and checking

around them as he spoke. “He was right. It was a classic move; one I’d done a million times in simulation... but experiencing it was terrifying – just like this.”

“Flying?”

“Meeting the girl of your dreams,” he replied softly, adjusting his hand to lace his fingers with hers as he grew quiet. “I know it was a strange way for us to meet and say ‘hello’ – so I cannot tell you how grateful I am to get a second chance to get to know you better, Megan.”

She stared at his profile in wonder, feeling a part of her soul melt as her heart beat wildly in her chest. Nobody could be this perfect, this right, and this incredible... could they?

“Tell me about yourself,” he said in the silence, interrupting her thoughts. He turned his head slightly and met her eyes. “I want to share my world with you – and that’s why I brought you up,” he began as her heart turned over in awareness. “Do you like pizza?”

... And smiled.

It was such a sweet statement followed by such a completely ordinary one that she couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that escaped her. He was anything but ordinary, and it was incredible to behold.

“I’m an easy guy to get along with,” he began. “I’m sorry I was trying to act all cool and macho in front of you earlier – that’s not really me. I’ve got pizza that is going to be delivered at Flyboys at seven tonight, and thought we could watch the sunset together, talk, and then just have a nice, easy dinner between friends – and you look like you are finally enjoying this. Do you feel better?”

“I do feel better... and yes, pizza sounds great.”

“Good. So, who exactly is Megan Josephs?” he began, surprising her that he remembered her full name, because some of her other dates hadn’t bothered in the past. “Let’s have it all – childhood experiences, favorite foods, flowers, everything.”

His blue eyes held hers as she realized he really wanted to know more about her and meant everything he'd said. He was sharing with her, telling her little bits about himself as a way to open the door of communication between them, hoping she would do the same... and she did.

They talked for what felt like forever. She told him about her childhood, her mother, about starting over, and about her job. It seemed strange telling someone all about your past and who you were – yet he was right there, asking questions, and chatting with her like they were having just any old conversation. The one thing she didn't share was about that fateful day with the fortune teller – that was too personal, too close to home in this moment.

Andrew told her about growing up in Southern California, claimed to be terrible at surfing but enjoyed the water, and how everyone assumed his call sign was because of that... and then suddenly pointed in the distance past her.

“Megan, take a look...” he invited, and she turned to see that the sun was indeed going down on the horizon. The sky was aglow with shades of orange, blue, and faint lavender colors that were slowly darkening as the evening sky almost descending like a curtain over the world. That orange orb was so breathtaking to behold, and she realized it was a gift to see it from this altitude, clear of all the trees, buildings, and development around her on the ground. It was nothing but her, the air, the sun... and Andrew.

She felt his arm around her shoulder, almost in a hug, as she stared at the sun in wonder, not bothering to hold back her smile. She reached up and touched his hand where it lay on her shoulder in a silent show of friendship... and maybe the beginnings of something more.

“This is beautiful...” she whispered softly. “Thank you.”

“Meh,” he replied nonchalantly, and she felt him shrug behind her, realizing he was that close in the small space. “It's a close ‘second’ in my book.”

She turned away from the sight, knowing it would disappear within moments, unable to help herself as she met

his eyes. The entire cabin of the plane seemed to glow in a warm light, as those blue orbs blazed with intensity, were vibrant against his skin. It would take nothing to close the space between them, to lean forward and taste his lips once more... and as her eyes dropped down slightly, she saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed.

“Andrew...” she whispered, speaking his name for the first time aloud, testing it, and his already warm eyes melted.

“So the sunset might not be second, but sixth,” he said hoarsely.

“That’s a big jump.”

“The first five spots just got taken by the way you look at me when you speak my name...”

The unspoken invitation was there and he was so close – but they were up in the air, in no position for distractions, and she barely knew the man. It was only a few hours ago that she was ready to walk away because he’d crossed a line... yet now?

This was magical.

“I can’t...”

“I understand...” he whispered, stopping her. “And I won’t, because I want there to be more to this than just a strong attraction between two people. Plus, we are at 3500 feet, and I would rather not wreck the plane on our first date,” he smiled tenderly. “I’ve already created one disaster, let’s not make it a habit.”

“Do we have to refer to it as a disaster?”

“No, but what would you call it?”

“Putting your best foot forward to knock my socks off.”

“... And did I?”

The hesitant, carefully spoken question was not from a man confident in his position, nor from an arrogant being who knew exactly what he’d done and how she felt. No, this was a

painfully shy request for acknowledgement from an insecure guy, wanting to know if he'd made an impression on his girl.

She shared a soft, silent smile with him as he grinned suddenly.

“I don't think I need to answer – do you?”

“You just did, Megan... and I'm glad - because I will never forget it either.”

... And they hit a bump in the air, causing her a bit of alarm as he looked at her sheepishly.

“Sorry, air pocket. We're safe, but I am awfully distracted,” he admitted, winking at her. “How about I land this thing and we look for the pizza delivery, eh? He's supposed to be here at around seven.”

“It's seven now,” she countered, smiling.

“Yup, definitely landing now.”

CHAPTER 7



MEGAN



MEGAN CLIMBED out of the plane, hating that her knees felt a little wobbly like she'd just gotten off a massive rollercoaster. It had been intense watching him angle the small plane towards the runway... and made her appreciate the skills that he obviously had, despite his story regarding screaming wildly to get his call sign.

Riptide.

That moniker seemed to fit him so well, but not for the reasons that his instructor gave him. Just looking at him made her think of the sun, surf, and ocean... combined with the fact that he said he grew up in California, it was an easy correlation for this Texas girl. He was the epitome of what she thought a surfer dude would look like, and if he uttered '*gnarly*' and wagged his fingers – it wouldn't have been out of place.

She stood nearby, watching him tie down the plane to anchors that she didn't notice on the runway before the massive hangar, just as headlights appeared in the distance. He was hurriedly tying down the plane – and she touched his shoulder, walking forward.

"I'll grab it," she offered.

"Thank you."

"Of course."

She met the driver, who looked to be barely sixteen years old with wide-eyed amazement, she recognized as one she had not too long ago. He looked at the plane nearby and pointed.

“Is that real?”

“Yep. We just landed.”

“Duuude...”

Megan smiled at the awe and innocence on his face. Had she ever been so young or naïve?

“You should come by here during the day. This is a school, and they give flight lessons,” she began, hoping that was completely accurate as his face lit up.

“Thanks, lady – and happy anniversary.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, I thought it was pretty cool that you told me about this place and appreciate the info – plus I think it’s really sweet that y’all are so dorky,” the boy laughed, pointing at the pizza box she now held. “People usually only do corny things like this on a Valentine’s Day, so I assumed it was your anniversary. My parents do dumb things, too.”

“Oh... ah, um, thanks?” she whispered, staring at the pizza box... and looked at the receipt.

Make it a heart shaped pizza, please – and put a big heart in the middle with pepperonis – thanks!

Megan stared and looked over her shoulder in wonder, seeing that Andrew was no longer standing by the plane. The door to the hangar was open, and she saw a dim glow inside. He was so dang sweet, and really trying so hard to impress her... and it was working.

She walked towards the hangar, not sure what to expect, and almost felt like it was cheating to know she was holding a heart-shaped pizza in her hands. This was already the best date she had ever been on, with the hottest guy she’d ever met.

Was she impressed? ... Oh yes.

Was it intimidating? ... Completely.

Once will bring you close yet so far away from each other, she thought silently, replaying that thought in her mind as she stepped up to the door and paused. It felt like she was about to step into another world, another moment, and she heard his voice.

“Everything okay? C’mon in... I hope you like pepperoni pizza?”

His voice was so casual, yet she somehow knew deep down inside that he was still trying, still that same guy that was interested, and still nervous in those few glimpses she got.

Swallowing, she held the pizza before her and entered the building – her eyes noticing the massive plane that seemed to overwhelm the area, along with a few other tiny planes nearby... and as her eyes scanned the massive building, she saw Andrew.

He was standing there, beside a small table covered with a picnic blanket, with a single rose in his hand, waiting. At his feet, the table was surrounded by about ten large candles, all flickering and creating a romantic glow. There were two place settings, a small gift bag on the table as a centerpiece, and folding chairs.

“It’s not a restaurant - but I hope it counts that the attempt is there?” he asked quietly, not looking away. “I can’t cook and I wish I could, or that I was some amazing guy, but...”

“This is wonderful,” she whispered, stunned, and still processing the fact that she was here right now – with him.

“C’mon,” he smiled nervously. “Are you okay if I open the hangar doors? I thought you might like a little breeze, or we could see the stars if I turn off all the lights in the area.”

“That sounds incredible,” she replied faintly, walking towards the table – and him. He stepped towards the wall and pressed a large button, causing chains to move above them as the massive door started to open, lifting bodily from the base upwards in one solid piece.

She set the pizza down on the table, feeling a little awkward at all the attention he was focusing directly on her.

As the door finished opening, he returned back to the table where she waited, and hesitated.

“Should we sit down?”

“Yes, definitely. Let’s eat and we can talk some more...” and Andrew opened the pizza box, flinching and turning his face away.

“What?”

“Well, that’s *not* what I planned,” he was muttering under his breath, and looked so distraught that she couldn’t help but laugh as she moved around the small table to his side to see the disaster before him... and burst out laughing.

There was not some nice, pretty, shapely heart like he’d requested... yet it was a heart shape – a *LIVE* heart. There was a large, awkward, misshapen oblong with two large ‘limbs’ sticking out of it to represent the aorta and veins.

“Well someone’s a med student...” she chuckled, and looked up at him smiling. The center of the pizza did have the cluster of pepperonis like he’d requested in a heart shape, but considering that it was sliced repeatedly and bisected over-and-over again... she didn’t have the heart to tell him just how bad that center cluster of pepperoni looked.

The entire pizza was a debacle despite his sweet attempt.

“Oh my gosh, this was not what I intended – can I just retract the big tip I left them,” he retorted in frustration, looking at her apologetically. “This was supposed to be a bunch of hearts, something romantic, and I really wanted something sweet for you.”

“Andrew,” she interrupted, touching his arm and looking at him. “This is sweet – and you tried. That’s what matters.”

“It looks like a big ol’ burnt sphincter in the middle of the pizza,” he said baldly in disgust, gagging. “How is this even remotely okay? It’s disgusting – times two!”

Megan burst out laughing wildly at his words combined with his reaction, as he physically plucked the offensive

cluster of pepperonis off the pizza, flinging it out the open hangar door into the grass.

“Andrew...” she protested, unable to stop herself from laughing at his reaction – and he met her eyes, joining in and laughing with her. Every time they looked at each other or the pizza, they burst out in laughter once more. It took several moments for them both to calm down as she wiped her eyes, sharing a smile with him. “I think I’ll take the aorta,” she teased, and saw him roll his eyes in awareness. “You can have the butt.”

“No, thank you,” he retorted, letting out a little laugh. “I’m declaring right now that neither of us is eating the center, the butt, out of sheer dignity.”

“Not after you called it *that* – no.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be gross or crass about it, but...”

She laid her hand on his arm, reached over and plucked off the ‘aorta’ out of the cardboard box playfully and took a bite.

“Relax – it was weirdly sweet, and I’m hungry.”

“Me too.”

“Then regardless of the shape... let’s eat.”

He nodded, smiling – and sat down to join her. They both ate a few slices, making light talk, and then she finally drew in her breath, asking the questions she needed to assuage her questions.

“So, you are stationed in the Middle East?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Kabul?”

“Ghazni,” he countered, taking a bite and nodding while he covered his mouth with his hand, speaking. “I’m in Ghazni on some little air base in the middle of nowhere. It’s alright, but it’s tough sometimes too, because there is nothing familiar around. It’s not like we can hop in the Jeep and go grab Jack-In-the-Box or Dominos. You eat on base, you exercise on

base, you live on base... yet you fly over the rest of the world on guard.”

He paused, swallowing, and looked at her openly.

“Sometimes I can’t help but wonder what all is out there, you know? If the whole world hates us for being there, or if someone looks up and thinks, ‘*Wow – they’ll keep us safe*’... silly, I know.”

“No, it’s not. I think it’s a fair question – yet I have no answer,” she whispered. “I couldn’t even begin to imagine what must run through your head sometimes...”

“Loneliness?” he interrupted quietly, not looking at her. “Boredom? Frustration? Isolation? Depression...?” he admitted in a soft voice that sounded so small, so tiny in that moment.

“I understand,” she whispered, reaching over the table to touch his hand as his eyes looked up to meet hers. “Some moments are harder than others. Is that why you asked me out – because you were lonely and needed something to stave off the boredom?”

“At first,” he began, and hesitated.

She really respected the fact that he was being open and honest with her. He could have lied, given her some big spiel about how it was ‘*love at first sight*’... but she wouldn’t have believed it. She wouldn’t have respected him. This, however, spoke to her.

“I came here hoping to find something to interest me – not someone,” he confessed. “I really think you are amazing and would like to see you tomorrow, if that’s an option? I have to fly out sooner than I’d like and hope we could stay in touch, possibly – if you don’t mind.”

“I think I would like that.”

“I want to know all about you – *the real you* – not just that gorgeous woman that landed in my lap, but what your hopes and dreams are. Everything,” he breathed, and held her gaze. “Hold nothing back – and I will do the same. I want you to like *me*, to get to know *me*...”

“Yes,” she began and saw him rise to his feet, watching him as he walked over. He reached into the bag on the table, surprising her, because he didn’t hold back. She saw his hands were shaking and to her shock, a necklace dangled from his fingers.

“Turn...” he urged softly.

“Andrew...”

“Shhh,” he protested faintly. “I am grateful you gave me this chance to spend time with you after our start – and that you are willing to get to know me. There’s something about you that just... well...”

Andrew grew quiet and moved just out of sight. He placed the stone against her throat, fastening it. He moved back before her, angling just a bit and crouching slightly before her, as her eyes stared at him in shock.

He was more romantic than anything she’d ever imagined or had given him credit for. His eyes raised to hers as he smiled shyly.

“It’s a fire opal,” he explained, as she sat there silently in shock. “It reminds me of that spark that I felt when we kissed.”

He didn’t move at all – except to touch her hand, and she remained silent, unsure what to say.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, nor when I can return, but in that time - I thought that perhaps we can talk or I could call you... and this would give us a chance to get to know each other,” he whispered hoarsely, his blue eyes searching hers. “I wanted to leave you with something to remind you that someone very far away is thinking about you...”

“You barely know me,” she breathed, unsure what to say.

“That may be true, but I feel...” he grew quiet – and swallowed. “I feel like this is good, that this is...”

“What?”

“Safe,” he breathed. “That you feel *safe* to me...”

“Safe?” she repeated, unsure what to say to that. That wasn’t exactly how she would describe any of this, but the words she instinctively wanted to say were alarmingly fast - and intense. This all felt like some magical dream, some fantasy, that was too good to be true.

“To start,” he smiled tenderly. “‘*Safe*’ is a gentle and unassuming word to start – isn’t it? I think we would both be concerned if I described it as more this early in the game.”

“That’s true.”

“And *safe* is also my promise to you,” he began, not looking away. “I won’t kiss you again without permission.”

“Oh.”

“You don’t have to look so disappointed,” he teased tenderly, smiling up at her. “If you really feel the need, you can kiss me or just wave me over and...”

“Oh gosh,” she chuckled nervously, her hand drifting upwards to touch the stone that sat cool against her collarbone. Touching the stone, she looked at him and felt almost teary eyed at seeing the rapt emotion written across his face. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“Consider it ‘*hedging my bets*’...”

“Andrew...”

“Have I mentioned I like you saying my name?”

“Do you realize you come on strong – like a tsunami?”

“Just with you – I promise.”

They both stared at each other for several moments, not speaking. Her mind was a jumble of emotions, wondering where this man had come from, and ‘why her’ ran through her head repeatedly. Was this what it felt like to meet someone, *the* one?

Was he the one?

“Come,” he invited softly, getting to his feet and holding out his hand. “Let’s enjoy what little time I have left here in town and just talk for a bit about everything and nothing...”

She put her hand in his without question, feeling drawn forward as if from some unseen force. It was comforting to feel just how well their hands fit together and how warm his palm was... but when he wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her close?

It was everything.

They stood, swaying softly in the moonlight, right there on the runway, with no music. He held her close, cradling her hand on his chest, as they held each other, talking.

It was a night Megan would never forget.

CHAPTER 8



RIPTIDE



OH-MAN-OH-MAN-OH-MAN!

Andrew nearly yelped aloud as Megan’s car pulled out of the parking lot at Flyboys. The second her taillights were out of sight, he literally did three backflips across the runway in excitement... and staggered on the last one, landing on the asphalt on his butt, laughing at himself. He pulled a muscle in his thigh letting out all the nervous energy and thrills coursing through his veins.

She was incredible - and the most intriguing woman he’d ever met! He had never been so attracted to someone, so knocked off balance, and so infatuated... only to be told ‘no’ so bluntly.

Oh man, if he was going fishing with his grandpa – this would have been the tug on the line to hook the fish.

“Reel me in, baby... I’m ready,” he said aloud to the night sky, grinning. It was only a second later that he was leaping up, dusting off a cricket that landed on his hand, and stared at the sky. It had been so enjoyable to just piddle around in the dinky Cessna that had zero power compared to his Falcon... but he didn’t even care. That conversation, seeing that side of Megan, talking and getting to know her?

That was everything.

Was she as interested as he was?

Oh, he knew he was coming on strong – and meant for it to be like that. The need to make an impression with this breathtaking woman was stronger than anything he'd ever felt... including the urge to lose himself in another amazing kiss.

He'd never given a woman a piece of jewelry on the first date, but knowing he was leaving... he wanted to make sure she thought of him at least a few times, and hoped she liked the opal. She didn't say much about the necklace, it was almost like she was frightened of him or what this was – and he sincerely hoped she felt the same.

... And promising not to kiss her until she was ready?

Unheard of!

As a teenager in high school, he'd dated a lot of girls, and when he got to the Academy – the flock of women looking to date a cadet was staggering. Sure it was 'fun', but that's all it was. A mild entertainment. Being around Megan felt like he was waking up from the deepest sleep and opening his eyes for the first time.

Love at first sight...?

Pshawwww – that junk was for girls, but was he interested?

Definitely.

Now he just needed to figure out how to win over his beautiful girl, so she was still available when he returned to Yonder to see her. Staring up at the moon, his mind was racing with ideas as he wanted to make an impact and get creative.

“What am I going to do?”



THAT SINGLE QUESTION kept him tossing and turning most of the night. He lay there in his bunk, the silence echoing in his ears. What did you get a woman to impress her?

He'd already gotten her roses, jewelry, took her to dinner. What else was there that would make an impact and stand out? – And it wasn't just 'standing out' in the crowd... he wanted unforgettable.

“That’s it...” he thought, snapping his fingers and putting a plan into motion.



THE NEXT MORNING Andrew got up and started to put his plan together.

He was grinning like an idiot all morning long, pushing a cart through the aisles at Wal-Mart as he gathered a few supplies to make this all happen. The other pilots were full of ideas, suggestions, and other comments.

“How’d it go, loverboy...?”

“Yeah, we expected to find you two still in the hangar this morning locking lips...”

“Or at least see your bare buns pointing towards the sky...”

“I don’t think he’s that bad, do you?”

“Did you miss things at Destiny’s baby shower? My boy did an upper GI probe...”

“That’s nasty...”

“You never complained before.”

“Enough – I do not want to think of you and Glory doing that,” Harley muttered, putting her hands on her forehead as she let it hang, elbows resting on the table where they were all sitting and hanging around before the next class.

“What about a puppy?” Houdini volunteered. “Abby was in love with Cessna right away... but don’t answer your phone – especially if the dog likes to lick people. Make sure it’s a surprise.”

“Take her flying,” Thumper suggested, winking at his wife.

“I already did that.”

“What about a festival? I think there is a garlic festival in Tyler and...”

“Garlic?” Andrew balked, letting out a horrified laugh. “I want to kiss her again, Romeo – and I want her to kiss me back. I’m *not* taking her to eat garlic.”

“Take her camping...?” Ghost offered, smiling, and Firefly turned, immediately getting in the other man’s face and shaking his finger.

“Nuh-uh, bro. First date,” Firefly stressed, grinning. “We all know you let your girl manscape you...”

“What?!” Andrew yelped, laughing and looking at the man.

“She didn’t ‘manscape’ me – but I’d let her if she wanted to,” Ghost chuckled easily. “I wanted her to trust me, so I let her wax my nose.”

“You got your piggies painted too, right?”

Several of the men were chuckling – along with the women – but the pilot took it all in stride... shrugging.

“Mary loves to have her toes painted, so we stay in on Saturday nights, cuddle, and pamper each other. Sometimes it’s painting her toes, other times it’s putting a conditioning mask on her hair...”

“Ohhh Ghost – you absolutely freakin’ genius! What a sneaky way to get your girl in the shower with you... hey Glory?” Alpo hollered, looking around the room quickly for his wife. “Babe? You wanna condition your hair this weekend?”

“I’m game, Snickerdoodle!” she yelped in excitement, jumping out of her seat, causing a fresh round of laughter among the friends... as Andrew stared at the smiling pilot with a new respect. The man did whatever his girl wanted and was reaping the rewards, it seemed.

Oh yes – that conversation had been very enlightening.

Whistling, Andrew walked down the aisles, browsing through different things... and picking up all sorts of little ideas to spoil her – and treat himself in the meantime.

If this didn't make her think of him or leave a lasting impression, he didn't know what would. Getting in line at the checkout, it was time to start dropping little hints to set the mood, and he couldn't wait to see how things played out.

Andrew grinned – and couldn't stop smiling.



THIRTY MINUTES LATER, leaving the store in Tyler... he pulled up in front of the doctor's office and got out of the car, supplies in hand. He was holding a single pink rose, a prepackaged lunch for her – and the theme for the evening.

Walking inside, he was so thrilled he couldn't stop from lighting up like a live wire seeing Megan standing there talking to a mother holding a sick boy on her hip. Her eyes met his and he saw her hand give a small wave of acknowledgement, making his heart flip over in his chest. Oh yeah, he was laying it all on the line – and he was coming back to his woman as quickly as possible.

As Megan finished talking to the woman, she held up a finger silently telling him to wait as she came around the closed office, exiting the door, to join him.

“What are you doing here?” she whispered quietly, grabbing his elbow and pulling him down the hallway towards one of the empty waiting rooms. “You are going to get me in trouble disturbing me at work and...”

“I brought you lunch,” he interrupted softly. “And I missed you.”

Her eyes met his and he melted at the surprise in her eyes. Had no one done anything kind for his girl before?

“I hope you like California rolls? I love sushi and took a chance that...”

“I do – and this is incredibly sweet.”

“I felt inspired,” he whispered, smiling at her. “I can’t wait to see you later.”

“You know,” she drawled nervously, chuckling shyly as she accepted the rose from him and smelled it. “I’m looking forward to this too.”

“Good,” he nodded. “I won’t keep you long and I know you are busy. There’s a lot of runny noses out there – but I wanted to give you a clue to the surprise for this evening. I hope you feel adventurous.”

“Uh oh,” she chuckled, laughing nervously, and met his eyes as he laughed softly. Gosh, she was the best thing he’d ever laid his eyes upon, and he hoped tonight went off without a hitch. His bags were going to be packed and ready to go so he had no reason to call the evening to an end early. “Should I be worried?”

“Nope,” he said softly. “This evening is all about you – and...” he hesitated, as his eyes landed on the necklace laying at the base of her throat. She’d worn it again today. “Do you like the necklace?”

“It’s gorgeous.”

“No, the necklace,” he replied, flirting and teasing her in a nonchalant voice. “Not the woman – the pendant. The woman is gorgeous, but what did you think of the stone?”

... And was rewarded with her easy laugh as she gave him a shy look.

“It’s perfect,” she admitted, and he was about to tease her again – only to have her put her hand over his mouth. “The stone is perfect, the woman is as flawed as could be, Andrew.”

He tugged it away – and kissed her palm.

“Eye of the beholder...” he taunted intimately. “Now, I promised you a hint, before I got distracted.”

“Is this a game?”

“Maybe,” he hedged. “Maybe not?”

It wasn’t – and he sure hoped she wasn’t looking for one.

“Should I close my eyes?”

“Sure,” he whispered – and the urge to kiss her was exceedingly powerful as he gazed at her, his heart swelling with emotion. Instead of acting on it, he pulled a small votive from his back pocket where he’d tucked it in his jeans pocket, and held it before her nose. “Here’s your hint...”

“What is...oh...?” she began and hesitated, a smile touching her lips. “I smell coconut and vanilla.”

“Yep – and now I need to go.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him questioningly, smirking.

“That’s the only hint I get?”

“That’s it.”

“That’s kinda cruel...”

“Deliciously so,” he agreed, chuckling, as she joined in, sharing a look with him. “Is it bad that I’m enjoying it?”

“I should say ‘yes’...”

“But?”

“No,” she smiled softly. “It’s a lot of attention – but really nice, too.”

“Good – and keep that in mind later when I pick you up.”

“I promise,” Megan smiled. “Oh, and Andrew?”

“Yeah?”

“We’ll just take one car tonight... don’t make me regret it.”

“Never.”

He nodded and slipped out of the examination room – only to come face-to-face with Everly, as Megan bumped into his back.

“Hey Everly...”

“Oh, I shoulda known,” the woman chuckled and looked at Megan, smirking in amusement. “I put four more folders on

your desk.”

“I’ll get them,” she promised, nodding and flushing prettily.

“Bye, babe...” Andrew whispered in a panicked rush, feeling like he’d gotten caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Without a thought – he turned to kiss Megan on the cheek and bolted out of the office, leaving the two shocked women behind him.

CHAPTER 9



MEGAN



SHE LOOKED at Everly’s knowing smile – and then back at the door where Andrew had disappeared unexpectedly, almost as fast as he’d shown up. She hadn’t expected to see him until around five this evening when the office closed... yet he’d come by, teasing and bringing her lunch.

“Soooo?” Everly drawled pointedly, grinning.

“He’s really nice,” she admitted quietly, feeling under the microscope in that moment and not wanting to share much about their relationship, still in its budding infancy. Things were new and she kept waiting for it to fall apart, knowing that if this was who the fortune teller had been talking about... things were going to get worse before they ever got better – maybe.

There was still the thought of being a single mom with three kids someday, knowing he was going to ditch her. Man, that thought hurt – and it was all based off an imaginary prediction from some crazy moment that could not be real. Unfortunately, it fell on ‘fertile soil’ in her mind, and took root immediately. Everything the woman had said stuck with her, clouding everything.

“Can I give you a piece of advice?”

“Sure.”

“Remember that he is his own person too – and while he’ll never change you, you won’t change him either. If this is what you decide that you want, you’ll need to learn to accept each other for all the wonderful bumps, hiccups, and mental bruises, as well as the beautiful moments you share. Just make sure the beautiful moments outweigh the others in the long run,” Everly said quietly, smiling at her. “I don’t have a perfect relationship, and most happy people have hidden issues – but you have to choose to live with them, because living without isn’t an option anymore.”

“We’re just now starting to talk and date,” Megan began, almost in a faint protest. “It’s not like it’s serious or...”

“Then file that bit away for a later date,” she shrugged, before moving to the next doorway where a child was waiting. “It’s just a lesson that I had to learn and sometimes life-lessons aren’t easy ones.”

“True.”

“I’m happy you are getting this chance.”

“Me too,” Megan began – and it was true, she realized, looking at the rose and package of sushi in her hand.

The votive was in her other hand and she sniffed it again, realizing she would associate this smell with him and this moment forever. Every time she smelled vanilla and coconut, she would think of him showing up at her work, smiling and happy, talking with her and teasing her about their date tonight.

... And she loved that.



AS MEGAN FINISHED up at the office, she saw the truck Andrew was using outside and smiled knowingly. Scooping up her purse, she put away the last of her papers and shut off the lights, quickly locking the door behind her. He was already out of the truck and holding open the passenger door as she walked towards him... and stopped.

He was smiling and looked like he was up to something.

“What are you doing?” she asked skeptically, chuckling. “You look guilty.”

“Nah, me? Never,” he brushed off – and then winked at her. “We’re going to make memories and have a little fun this evening.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“Nope. Relax and have a little faith in your man.”

“My man, huh?”

“Oh yes...”

He beamed proudly as she stepped towards him – and he held up a cheap circlet of flowers, moving to put it over her head.

“What’s that?” she jerked back warily, chuckling and looking at him.

“You’re getting lei’d...”

“Uh, no I most certainly am not...” she retorted, bursting out laughing and instantly mortified at where her mind went. She knew what a lei was – but the way he’d said it was definitely a play on words meant very differently, and they both knew it. He wagged his eyebrows at her, grinning mischievously before he let out a soft laugh.

“Sheesh, you’re no fun...”

“Nope. That’s me, ‘No-Fun-Megan’...”

“Trust me,” he reminded her. “Remember I promised no kissing? Well, if things ever go that far between us – I swear there will be a lot of kissing going on at that time. You are safe with me. This evening is all about making memories... and you.”

“Me? Why?”

“Because my girl deserves an evening of magic, to be whisked away, and to be pampered by her guy... and I’m trying to set the scene. So,” he drawled intimately, and grinned. “You ready to get lei’d yet?”

“Do you have to say it like that?” she laughed, sharing a smile.

“Yup.”

“Oh gosh,” she chuckled, her face heating up at the ardent attentions from him, along with the innuendos he was tossing her way. “Fine. You win. I’m ready to get lei’d by you...”

“Really?” he blurted out, his eyes wide in shock and excitement.

“THE FLOWERS?!” she retorted loudly, pointing at them as a reminder – before bursting out laughing at the disappointment that crossed his features. “Andrew, you are too funny.”

“Man, I don’t think this is funny at all – and I should have thought this through a little more,” he muttered under his breath, making her laugh once again. He gently placed the flowers over her head and looped it around her neck, before smiling at her.

“You know, if you decide that...” he began.

“I won’t,” she interrupted, already knowing where he was going – and heard his sigh of despair. He really was quite adorable sometimes, and she was curious at what he had planned up his sleeve.

“You sure?”

“Positive.”

“Alright,” he agreed, nodding. “But let it just be said upfront that you are allowed to change your mind at any point in our relationship.”

“Duly noted,” she chuckled, thoroughly amused and saw him shake his head again as he sighed. Climbing into the truck, he shut the door and looked at her through the open window, hesitating. “No, Andrew,” she chuckled.

“I wasn’t bringing that up again.”

“Sorry, I just thought that...”

“Well, now that you mention it...” he grinned as she laughed knowingly and shook her head at him, volunteering as he walked away to get in the truck with her. “... It’s your loss, you know.”

As he slid into the truck, he looked at her again and opened his mouth.

“No,” she interjected softly, smiling at him. “A relationship, huh?”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied, picking up her hand and kissing the back of her knuckles. “We’re beginning a beautiful relationship.”

“Keyword – *beginning*.”

“Every moment worth remembering has a beginning...”

“And an end,” she finished softly, looking away – only to feel him tug on her hand pointedly as she turned back to meet his eyes.

“How about instead of an end, it’s just put on pause for a bit,” he countered, and she knew he was talking about him leaving. She didn’t want to be the one to drag down the evening before it ever started – and nodded.

“Fine. It will be a pause,” she agreed. “Not an end.”

“Think of it like a circle... and we’ll be waiting for the next loop around when I leave, because I am returning just as quick as I can – and on that note, we should probably go.”

Nodding, she watched as he started the truck and backed out of the parking spot, looking over his shoulder, before meeting her eyes. He hit the brakes and paused, just looking at her.

“What?” she blurted out nervously.

“Nothing,” he began quietly. “I’m just looking at the most beautiful person in the world.”

“Andrew...”

“It’s not one single thing either,” he hesitated. “It’s everything about you. Your smile, your eyes, the way you hold

yourself and how you look at me. It's not just the outside – there is a glow, a light I see in you, that is more gorgeous than anything I've ever seen in my life... and I'm just a little overwhelmed that I'm not only getting this chance once to talk to you – but twice.”

Megan didn't say anything – she couldn't. There was such openness in his expression that it was humbling. He truly believed this, and she was taken aback by the honesty in his gaze.

“Thank you...” he whispered and smiled. “In case I forget to say it, thank you for giving me something to remember over the next few months – because this is it.”

“We have barely begun our evening – and before you say it, ‘NO’ that's not happening,” she reminded him, trying to make light of things and cracking a joke... only to see his soft smile.

“I'm okay with that – and yeah, I don't think I'll ever forget the way you are looking at me right now.”

Megan swallowed nervously as he brought her hand up to his lips again, kissing the back softly, before clearing his throat and setting it down. He put the truck into gear and began to drive... but she couldn't pull her eyes from him as her mind wandered, realizing it was the same for her.

She would never forget how *he* looked at *her* – and would miss him terribly.



IT WAS twenty minutes later that they got to Flyboys – and she turned to him in surprise. While she wasn't opposed to going flying again, he'd been so evasive and hinting at... *wait...*

The lei...

“Are we flying out of town?” she balked, her heart hammering immediately as her mind put two-and-two together. “If we are going to Hawaii, we need to talk, ‘cause I don't have anything or...”

“Whoa,” he chuckled nervously, putting up his hands slightly in front of him. “Hang on... much closer to home. No overnight bag again – but I like that you’ve mentioned it twice. Do you want to go somewhere with me?”

“I don’t know – maybe?” she hesitated, looking at him. “We’re here and I just assumed that with the lei and all the evasiveness, plus it’s a Friday night and I’m off for the weekend that...”

“I wish,” he said softly, interrupting her. “Unfortunately – not today. We’re very limited on time and I just can’t. I would have to leave almost immediately to fly back to Afghanistan.”

“That’s what I had thought, but I was confused.”

“I don’t have a house and sleeping here in one of the bunks they have in the back of the offices for some of us to be able to visit. When Flyboys was originally set up, they had bunkbeds in one room where the founders slept until things got off the ground,” he explained openly, not hiding anything from her. “I wish I had a place of my own to take you, but in the meantime – I’m taking full advantage of the property and doing the best I can to treat you to something different. Please don’t be disappointed.”

“I’m not.”

“If you want to travel later on – I’d be happy to take you,” he offered gingerly, not looking away. “I just need to make a bit more plans to make something like that happen... you know?”

“I don’t know, which is why I’m asking... and now I feel weird,” she admitted, feeling like an idiot and thoroughly confused. “I don’t understand what is going on with the lei and the candle you gave me...” she hesitated, as she saw his smile.

“Relax,” he urged softly. “I promised you something special – and I meant it, but now I’m wondering if I should blindfold you for the surprise.”

“Uh, no.”

He laughed softly, shaking his head.

“I didn’t think you would like that much. Has anyone ever told you that you might have trust issues?” he teased gently. “Although, I’m really glad you are not a pushover, but give me a little bit of credit and try not to panic so much around me. Okay?”

She met his eyes and saw his soft smile, before nodding.

“You stay there – and try not to protest about everything,” he began and started to get out of the truck. Before she could counter, say anything, or ask him to clarify what he meant – he was already shutting the door and walking around the truck to her side. As he opened the door, she practically pounced.

“Now hang on,” she began looking at him – and Andrew scooped her up into his arms, causing her to immediately scramble to hang on so he didn’t drop her.

“Wait! What are you doing? Put me down! You’re going to drop me or tear something vital...” she balked – and heard his soft laughter.

“Don’t make me laugh, babe,” he chuckled. “I’ve got you and I’m not going to tear anything carrying you. Sheesh. You are just a soft, little piece of heaven in my arms and...”

“Are you loco?” she gaped, staring up at him in shock as he began to walk away from the truck, kicking the door shut behind them. He turned slightly and met her eyes, before adjusting slightly. “I’m not a ‘little’ anything... I’m a healthy girl with a big butt.”

“I like your butt,” he admitted softly, winking at her as her mouth dropped open in shock. “And you are little – to me. Now hush, because listening to you run yourself down isn’t going to change how I look at you, but it will frustrate me and ruin the mood I’m going for. Got it?”

She nodded mutely, staring at him in surprise.

“Good girl,” he praised gently, and the corner of his lips curled upwards. “Now, I want you to just go with it – and don’t argue. I’m trying to be creative and romantic... and if this ends up going badly tonight, please be kind about it. I’m trying.”

“I’m not going to be mean about things.”

“But you might argue or fight me on something.”

“Like what?”

“See?” he chuckled softly. “Even now you are wanting an explanation or to quantify something. Relax, let go, let my imagination carry us, and just pretend with me.”

... And he stopped walking there on the runway before the hangar.

“Are you going to pretend and be flexible about this?”

“If I say ‘no’...?” she countered pertly.

“Then we go back to the truck, and we’ll go out to eat at a restaurant,” he said plainly, not looking away from her eyes. “The choice is up to you.”

“If I say ‘yes’...?”

“The choice is yours – but I know what I would pick.”

“You aren’t going to give me any hints, are you?”

“Nope,” he grinned. “It’s trust – or nothing.”

“I don’t think that is how that phrase goes,” she said flatly, looking at him – and then at the hangar, trying to peer through the windows to see if she could see anything... and sighed.

“Hangar,” she said quietly.

“Good,” he smiled, nodding. “Close your eyes and take a deep breath, before letting it out.”

“Why?”

“Megaaaannnn...” he drawled out her name in obvious frustration.

“Fine,” she replied, closing her eyes and doing as he said, before cracking open one eyelid for a second, meeting his smile, and then closing it again.

“Ready?”

“I’m ready,” she agreed – and felt adrenaline race through her at the idea that something was about to happen...

Something *romantic*.

“Now,” he whispered softly to her. “We are in the South Seas and just rode on a prop plane to a deserted island...”

Megan couldn't help the soft smile that touched her lips as she listened to him, completely fascinated and enchanted.

“Above us the skies are a brilliant shade of blue with barely a cloud in them,” he continued, painting a mental picture for her as she felt them walking forward once more. “The ocean surf is gently lapping at a pristine, white beach that is dotted with a few shells and the occasional branch of driftwood. You can see the palm trees arcing over the water, and there is a faint roar of the ocean...”

She heard him pause – and suddenly heard ocean sounds in the distance. Perking up, she almost opened her eyes as her smile widened in awareness, completely mystified by what he had planned or was trying to create for her.

“There's no one around,” he said softly. “It's just us in paradise...”

“I love this,” she breathed, already entranced by whatever this was.

“Now, kick off your shoes...” he urged in a hushed voice – and she did, kicking off her Dansko shoes she wore all the time at work, hearing them hit the ground loudly with two big plops. The clunky clogs weren't sexy in the slightest, but they were truly the most comfortable shoes she'd ever bought and owned four pairs in different colors.

“Now,” he urged softly. “Our cabana is ready, and so is our table.”

“Our table?”

“Yes, ma'am...” he chuckled. “You and I are having dinner at the beach, right after your time at the spa.”

“What?” she nearly yelped in shock – and heard him quickly.

“Don't open your eyes!”

“I’m not,” she promised and hesitated. “What all do you have planned...?”

“Trust me – and keep your eyes closed.”

“Andrew...”

“*Trust me,*” he repeated softly, kissing her temple... and she melted, nodding distractedly. “Now, no more questions. Relax and dream with me.”

“I will...”

“Good.”

A few moments later, she felt something underneath her backside and hesitated, only to hear him chuckle. Yeah, she might have trust issues as he said, and felt her cheeks get hot with embarrassment that he seemed to know her so very well.

“Now, don’t open your eyes yet – and hear me out. You are in the cabana and our evening is just beginning. I’ve got to go get the rest of it set up, and I have a huge favor to ask... a leap of faith, if you will.”

“Should I be concerned?”

“Not at all,” he urged gently. “I’m going to lower the lights, so it might be dark in here, but you’re safe – and it’s just us. There’s a bag of things to your left and I’ll be across the hangar, uncovering a few dishes. Take your time, have a little fun, and stay here until I come for you. I’ve got to get changed...”

“What?”

“Theming, remember?”

“Um... Andrew?”

“Nope. Relax and trust me.”

... And with that, he withdrew his arms from her – and she opened her eyes. Sure enough, she was sitting on a weird table inside of what looked like a tent. She couldn’t see the planes, the hangar, or anything else and hesitated. Sliding off the table, she got to her feet... and hesitated. He said there was a bag of things to her left?

She spotted the bag in the dim lights inside the tent and heard him humming off in the distance – along with the ocean breeze. *He must have a radio playing somewhere*, she mused and emptied the bag, feeling curious... and stared in shock.

There was a modest one-piece swimsuit, a bikini, a sarong, and a pair of board shorts with a tank top – along with a handwritten note.

Choose what makes you comfortable - Andrew

Stunned, she stared at the three selections and looked over her shoulder in awareness. He was setting a tropical scene, trying to create a romantic evening for them, but giving her the chance to feel comfortable near him at the same time – simply content that she would play along with him. As she looked around, searching for more clues, she saw there was nothing else nearby... and hesitated.

He said he was changing too – but into *what*?

Trembling, she picked up each piece, checking the sizes, and felt a little strange at changing clothes not too far away from the man... and then smelled it. She smelled vanilla, coconut, pineapple, and other things she couldn't identify – and smiled.

She had no clue what was planned, but the more that was slowly being revealed – she wanted to be a part of it. Nervously, she picked up the one-piece swimsuit and quickly changed, before yanking on the tank top over it – and tying the sarong around her hips.

This was probably the biggest compromise she'd ever managed, and hoped he wasn't disappointed. Obviously, he wished for the bikini, but that wasn't happening. Folding her clothing, she put the other items back in the bag and hoped he could return them. Putting her things on the table, she set the bag on top, and waited patiently... listening.

Nervously, she saw the lights dim and the interior of the tent grew even darker as she heard his voice.

“How's it going in there?”

“Oh you know, just sitting here in my cabana...” she announced nervously in a loud voice, not sure where he was.

“Are you ready?”

“Maybe?”

In the gap of the tent door, she saw an arm extended – holding a plastic coconut complete with a paper umbrella and a straw... and she laughed in surprise. It was so sweet, so unexpected, and so adorable that she realized he was winning her over by taking baby steps forward, slowly and methodically.

“Your drink is served, miss,” he began easily, and hesitated. “May I come in?”

“Yes. I’m decent.”

“Dang it...” he teased – and smiled at her as he stepped inside. He was wearing a pair of brightly colored, Hawaiian shorts with big flowers all over them and a white tank top. “Now, take a seat back up there on the table and I’ll hand you your drink.”

“You’ve got this all planned out, don’t you?”

“I’m trying,” he admitted easily as she managed to take a seat once more and let her legs dangle over the side. He nudged her back a little more, handed the drink to her, and smiled.

“Pink or red?”

“What?”

“Pink or red?” he repeated, not giving her any clues or hints.

“Pink can be various shades of red and...” she stopped – seeing his look and arched eyebrow as he stood there. “Fine. Red. I like red a lot. Bright, bold red. I’m not much of a pink person, if you want to know the truth.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that, or I wouldn’t have brought you pink roses,” he winced, apologizing... and she laid a hand on his arm immediately, almost trying to comfort him.

“Those I liked,” she began, and saw his look of relief. “I liked them a lot. I do love the color red in clothing and other things – but I think I prefer pink roses because of the soft shades. They are more romantic to me.”

“Good to know.”

“Exactly – you *didn't* know, and we are learning about each other, remember? We try, we make mistakes, and...” she hesitated, meeting his eyes. “We learn to trust, right?”

“Thank you,” he whispered – and surprised her by leaning out of the tent and grabbing a folding chair. He set it down in front of the table where she was sitting – and reached for her foot.

“What are you doing?” she began, pulling away immediately. “Now hang on a second...”

“Are you ticklish?”

“Maybe... but it's been months since I got a pedicure, and you are not touching my feet. Is that why you asked about what color I would like? You're not wanting to paint my toenails are you, because guys don't do that and...”

“Megan,” he blurted out, stopping her in her tracks as they looked at each other. “Drink,” he instructed, smiling. “Imagine, drink, relax, and trust me - *please*. You might not have dated a guy who wanted to wait on you hand and foot – *but this guy does...* and you never know? You might end up liking it. Now, Miss Josephs – are you taking advantage of your spa time in the South Seas, or are you planning on arguing with me all night long?”

She stared at him in disbelief and met his easy smile as he held up a bottle of red sparkly nail polish... and wiggled it playfully.

“A piña colada, a little time pampering my girl, and then a dinner by the ocean,” he invited as a reminder. “And that is all the hints I'm giving you without ruining my fun.”

Swallowing, she felt so weird putting her foot up on his knee as he unscrewed the bottle of nail polish without any hesitation. She reached for the plastic coconut, hoping it was

chock full of booze so she could relax into this, because while it was unsettling?

It was exceedingly nice.

She'd never had anyone reach out or try to pamper her. In fact, the most anyone had done for her was a surprise party at work when Nancy brought in cupcakes, Barbara made a seven-layer dip, and Everly catered in barbecue sandwiches from a nearby restaurant in town.

As she sat there sipping on the piña colada, she couldn't help but smile at the intense concentration on his face as he painted her toenails... frowning intently – and then heard him curse softly, before laughing.

“Okay, maybe this isn't as easy as I thought it would be,” he grumbled, but was still smiling. “You have adorable toes, and I'm afraid that I'm messing them up.”

“Women pay very good money for pedicures for a reason,” she smiled and peered down to see what he'd done – and chuckled. There was nail polish everywhere on her pinky toe where he'd started, but by the time that he was at the fourth toe, it was looking a little better. “That's not half-bad,” she fibbed, looking at him.

He laughed nervously and shook his head.

“It looks like a child did it.”

“A *skilled* child...” she countered – and they looked at each other, and both burst out laughing. He was still cradling her foot in his hand while they smiled in merriment, only to see him nod a few moments later as he screwed back on the lid to the nail polish bottle and got to his feet.

“Can we just agree that I'm not allowed to do that.”

“It's really not so bad... if I close my eyes.”

“Megan,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “That was terrible, and we both know it.”

“But what am I going to do about the other foot?” she teased, smiling at him.

“Book a real pedicure?” he retorted sheepishly, and pointed at her foot. “I don’t think you want me to attempt that one... besides, I’ve got something else planned.”

“Hmm,” she said playfully, smiling at him. “Ask me how I suspected you had more up your sleeve...”

“When it comes to you – always,” he winked easily. “Now, let me put this up and I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here waiting,” she promised. “Just me and Mr. Coconut.”

As he disappeared, she looked down at her toes and chuckled again, because they did look pretty bad. She even had red nail polish on one of the knuckles of her toes. It really didn’t matter, and was more of the thought that counted... and while this was completely unexpected, it meant a lot that he was trying so hard.

... Only to see him walk back in.

“Alright, missy,” he announced softly. “Flip around.”

“Huh?”

She watched as he put a pillow that looked like a big flower towards the end of the table and looked at her expectantly. He set down something behind him just out of sight and moved toward the table, taking the coconut from her and setting it in the chair.

“What’s going on?”

“You are trusting me, remember?”

She met his eyes and saw him waiting patiently. Hesitating, she nodded and awkwardly laid down on her back on the table as he urged her to close her eyes. Doing so, she heard him move away, and then heard the faint sounds of rain nearby, realizing he was playing spa sounds on the speakers and not the ocean sounds anymore.

“Aww,” she whispered. “I guess the ocean is gone...”

“Never,” he countered, changing it back immediately. “If you want something, ask.”

She smiled as she heard the surf and started to relax a bit – only to feel warm hands touch her foot... and hesitated.

“Whoaaa...” she sighed in sheer contentment – and heard his soft laugh.

“Good to know my girl likes her feet rubbed with warm oil. Next time we’ll skip the nail polish,” Andrew began quietly, and she sighed again as he rubbed her ankles, rolling them gently.

“Oh man... that is amazing,” she breathed, smelling the tropical scents and letting herself relax. “When this is done, I really want to know what that smell is so I can buy it for myself.”

“Or you could let your boyfriend supply it and imagine it all over you,” he countered intimately, moving to her other foot.

“You could have just told me you were going to give me a foot massage instead of being so mysterious...”

“Who said it was just your feet?”

Megan opened her eyes in awareness and stared at the ceiling of the tent shrouded in darkness and shadows, feeling his hands rubbing her calves gently... and didn’t fight it. There was something incredible about having someone take care of you, and she was helpless to fight this right now, because it was *that* incredible of an experience.

Closing her eyes, she spoke.

“No funny stuff, buddy...”

“Nope. You have my promise.”

“And I can trust you?”

“If I break that trust you’ll never go out with me again – and I want this more than you know,” he said softly, kneading her calves and the backside of her knee. “I just want to spoil you, make you feel good, and treat you to an evening neither of us will forget.”

“That sounds incredibly dirty...”

“My mind *is* wandering,” he admitted, chuckling softly – and she smiled. “But I think that pampering my girl, showing that you can trust my word, and developing this bond, is more important than what you are imagining I would do... although, I do like that you went there with your mind.”

“It’s not hard when you are rubbing oil all over my legs at the end of a work day.”

“Babe... there’s a nasty joke there that I will leave unspoken,” he said wryly – and both laughed softly in awareness. His hands moved to her hand, caressing and rubbing hers, before kneading her forearm, causing her to sigh again openly.

“A girl could get really used to this...”

“I’m not opposed to doing this again,” he admitted, his voice husky. “I like this more than I imagined. The smells, the feel, just knowing that I’m making you feel good, and you are relaxing at my touch...”

“I think I like your trust exercises...” she admitted, sighing deeply as he kneaded her upper arm and biceps. “Oh man, that’s nice. I pulled staples all afternoon with Nancy and...”

“Shhh,” he whispered. “Relax and just enjoy this.”

Megan had no clue how long she was lying there, or how long Andrew rubbed her arms and lower limbs, only to hear him urge her to turn over – which she did without protest. He obviously loved the sensory aspect of life, focusing on smells, sensations, and touches. He rubbed her shoulders and upper back, before moving back to her arms, and once again her lower legs. She expected him to get handsy, ‘cop a feel’, or try to further things – yet he was a perfect gentleman the entire time.

“How do you feel?” he asked tenderly, his voice a hushed whisper.

“Like a limp noodle...” she admitted, a smile forever trapped on her face.

“Are you hungry?”

“There’s more to this amazing date?” she asked before she could stop herself, remembering that he mentioned dinner.

“Always,” he promised, scooping her up in his arms, and she heard him sigh. “I really like holding you close and the way you cling to me. This is the best evening I’ve had in forever.”

“I feel like I’m the one whose done all the receiving tonight...” and she heard him chuckle again – soft, intimate, with an awareness that spoke to her.

“There is a beauty in both giving and receiving – and trust me – I enjoyed the giving,” he admitted as they stepped out of the tent.

The lights were still low to carry on the theme – and she couldn’t help but laugh as she saw a rectangular blow-up pool in the distance, with a table pulled close to it.

“I had to get creative,” he admitted freely and she looked up at him, realizing just how romantic this guy actually was. “The dang chairs kept floating and the table was flopping about when I tried to put it in the pool, so we are going to do a few quick adjustments before we eat.”

“It’s fine...”

“It’s not fine, because if we were in the islands – we’d be sitting with our feet in the surf having dinner by the ocean.”

“Is the water cold?”

“What fun would that be?” he smiled and winked at her, as she looked back to the pool in shock. *He’d warmed the water?* “I might have cheated a bit, and it’s actually an inflatable hot tub... but hang onto me so you don’t slip because of the oil on those pretty toes.”

He carefully set her down and held onto her for a few moments, before unfolding a chair and putting it in the water. Nodding his head, he held it still while she moved to take a seat, shocked that he went to this length to do this for her. A few moments later, he was lifting the table and putting it in the water, frowning as it still moved slightly... and quickly joined her, taking a seat opposite of hers.

There were two plates there, covered in Saran wrap... and another pink rose beside her place setting.

“I forgot Mr. Coconut in the tent,” he winced, and started to get up – and she stopped him.

“It’s fine,” she began, meeting his eyes. “I would prefer to experience all of this and not get tipsy. Let’s have dinner and lounge around for a bit.”

“Are you sure?”

“This has been so wonderful, Andrew,” she smiled, moving to lace her fingers with his and feeling the oil on his hands. “I don’t think anyone has ever treated me as well as you have.”

“I don’t want you to forget me,” he admitted – and she heard the tremor of fear in his voice, shocking her to her core. This gorgeous guy was afraid she’d forget any of this or him? *Really?* She was just a plain girl in the middle of nowhere and...

Her mouth went dry as she met his gaze – and saw it for the first time. He clearly did not think that she was just a plain anything. He truly believed what he was saying, and was concerned she would not be here when he returned.

“How long will you be gone?”

“Maybe a few months, could be longer...”

“Just checking,” she said softly, trying to be evasive and cool – but failing miserably. She really liked him; more than she ever thought she would admit. It wasn’t that he was just gorgeous or that he was nice, but the way he was treating her, trying to impress her, and being so over-the-top was a heady feeling... and she knew when he left, there would be a vacuum in her life. “I was just trying to see how long I had to wait to see your smile again.”

His eyes met hers and neither said a word. She saw him swallow, felt his thumb gently touch the back of her hand, as they sat there in the silence with the sounds of the ocean around them.

“I’m coming back for you,” he whispered, not holding back.

“I hope so,” she began emotionally, feeling a tremor of fear that this could all be just a distant memory, or some unreal fantasy never to experience again.

“We’ll write, talk, and…”

“I just don’t want to be your temporary entertainment while you are in town. I really think you are nice.”

“You’re not – and I think you are gorgeous,” he began and hesitated, drawing back slightly. “This has been incredibly intense, and I’ve loved every second of it, but I don’t want you to worry, fail to trust me, or doubt where you stand. If I said more, you’d think I was full of garbage. If I made promises I couldn’t keep, you would never trust me.”

“I do have trust issues,” she smiled ruefully.

“I know you do, babe,” he chuckled softly, still holding her hand. “Let’s just say that we are going to have a lovely dinner, lounge around in the water for a bit, talk, and then we’ll see how things grow or evolve between us. Sometimes distance is hard for people dating – and I don’t want to disappoint you or hold you to something that neither of us are ready to touch on.”

“What’s that?”

He simply shook his head, not answering her.

“I think we’ve touched on enough deep subjects for our first two dates – and we can discuss more when I come back. Does that sound fair?”

“It does.”

“Then let’s eat, because this thing is supposed to have bubble jets,” he joked softly, smiling at her… and she laughed.

“The ocean doesn’t have bubble jets, silly.”

“My ocean does,” he retorted playfully, and winked at her. “Then I’ve got to figure out what to do with this thing when I

empty it. Boy, won't Glory be surprised that there's an inflatable hot tub in her hangar."

"You aren't leaving this here," she retorted. "We're using this again."

"Oh, we are?"

"Yup, and after dinner - we'll lounge around for a bit, drain it, and then smuggle it to my house."

"Oh really? So I guess the '*South Seas experience with Riptide*' was acceptable?" he smiled and winked at her.

"Let's just say that I'd give it five stars – and would book this experience again."

"You know what?" he smiled, gazing at her. "I'll have it reassembled this evening wherever you want. I promise."

"Then it's yours to use when you come back – just like my pull-out couch," she offered hesitantly, realizing she was going to reach for this experience, this relationship, with open arms. If this was any inclination of what dating him, being close to him, was like? Fortune teller, gypsy, or figment of her imagination... she was moving forward, because this feeling was something she would never, ever forget.

"I might take you up on that offer," he said softly.

"It's yours and always available."

"Megan..." he began – and she heard something in his voice, combined with the look in his eyes. There was such longing, so much emotion, and such an intensity, that she immediately was responding to the alarms going off in her mind.

"No," she whispered, interrupting him and shaking her head nervously. "Don't say anything else, because I'm trying to meet you halfway, and I don't want to ruin a beautiful night by getting nervous or scared. This is me, responding to all of this, and trying not to retreat into my shell. Let's have dinner and dial it back before either of us says something we regret or ends up hurting the other one."

"I would never hurt you," he promised.

“I know, but this is a lot – and fast.”

“I don’t have much time, and I’m not holding back.”

“But I’m here – I live here and have nothing but time. I can’t just flip it off and on like a switch,” she replied earnestly, hoping he understood. “You might be on a one-way street, but I’m afraid to step off the curb into traffic. I need time. I need space...”

“Then you have it,” he whispered, retreating silently as he pulled his hand from hers. He moved slightly and pulled the wrap off her plate, revealing curry, rice, and fresh fruit. “It’s mango, papaya, and passionfruit. The rice is a coconut rice, and I found a place in Tyler that makes something about as close as I could imagine you’d find over there. I’ve actually never been, so I was guessing.”

“It’s perfect,” she hesitated, her voice faint as she spoke nervously. “Are you upset?”

“No,” he replied, meeting her eyes. “I think you are amazing and I’m not hiding that from you, but if you need more time – what kind of man would I be to say ‘no’?” he began. “Do I want more from you – yes. Do I understand how hard this is... also yes.”

“It’s not that I’m not interested – I am...”

“Megan, I would not expect you to step off the curb into traffic... I just want you to understand that I’m not there ready to mow you down. I’m at your side, holding your hand, waiting for you to cross the street with me.”

She met his eyes, feeling tears sting hers, as she saw his tender smile.

“You are worth waiting for – I promise.”

CHAPTER 10



MEGAN



THEY ATE dinner and made small talk, before he got the chairs and table out of the hot tub – and turned on the bubbles. They sat there together in the water, holding hands, relaxing as time passed much too quickly. Before either of them realized, it was nearly midnight.

“Oh shoot,” he began, hesitating, and glanced at his watch. “I’m going to need to get you home soon if I’m going to set this up for you to use while I’m gone. My ride will be here at four in the morning to take me to the airport and...”

“What time is it?”

“Eleven-forty...”

“Seriously?”

“Yup. Time to hightail-it, Sexy...” he blurted out – and then glanced at her. “Sorry. I meant, ‘*let’s hurry, Megan*’.”

“I think I liked the first round better,” she chuckled, smiling at him. “You know, just because I get nervous doesn’t mean that you can’t push the boundaries or be yourself when you are with me.”

“Oh, thank goodness...” he sagged, relaxing. “Will you please kiss me? I should have never made that promise – and I’m a blithering idiot for doing so.”

Megan laughed easily and smiled, shaking her head.

She gathered up everything and helped breakdown the table, putting away the chairs, while Andrew drained the inflatable hot tub. He grunted as he hauled the hot tub awkwardly into the back of the truck, causing her to look... and stare.

He was kneeling down in the back of the truck bed, hauling the wad of vinyl that was the hot tub he'd selected... and straining, flexing, dragging the material upwards. His muscles were gorgeous, and she wasn't one to ogle a man like that, but he was beautiful.

"You ready to go?" he asked, drawing in his breath and letting it out in exertion. "I hope this continues to drain a little bit on the way to your house."

"You don't have to..."

"Um, stop," he blurted out, looking pained. "I just hauled this up here into the truck, and I could use the mental images of you lounging around in a hot tub... okay?"

She smiled and pretended to zip her lip – as he smiled.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome – Imagine away, my friend."

"Finally," he chuckled, hopping down, and taking the paper bag from her that held her clothing. She was still wearing the swimsuit and had a towel wrapped around her as he opened the passenger side door of the truck. "I'm sorry I've kept you out so late."

"This has been nice – unexpected, but very nice."

"Nice enough to go out with me again when I come back?"

She sat down and accepted the bag from him as he closed the door, meeting his eyes. He leaned on the door frame, smiling softly... waiting. Neither said a thing, waiting for the other to go first, when she realized that he wasn't avoiding answering or pushing her for an answer, but giving her a choice.

“I think so...”

“That means we’re dating.”

“I suppose it does.”

He started to say something – and hesitated, instead choosing to drive silently to her house as she gave directions. She had a small little place she’d bought about four years ago after her apartment was broken into. The house was barely nine hundred square feet – but it was hers. As he pulled up, she looked at his expression as he gazed at the house... and was surprised to see a small smile of approval on his face in the shadows.

“It’s not much, but it’s mine,” she whispered.

“I live out of a footlocker, so let me tell you – from my point of view, this is really nice,” he admitted, smiling. “Can you show me where you want it?”

“The back porch is enclosed, and I think that would be really nice.”

“No mosquitos.”

“Exactly.”

“Lead the way, hon...” he smiled and turned off the truck.

It was about thirty minutes before they had it out of the truck and set up in the corner of her back patio. It was weird to think she was filling up a hot tub after midnight, but she really didn’t like the idea of leaving it out here folded in on itself, in case she ran into problems.

“Leave the hose and let me set this inside,” she began and started inside, almost expecting him to follow her. Instead, he waited on the back porch – until she opened the door, waving him inside.

“You are welcome to come in. It’s nothing fancy and on the small side, but it’s certainly warmer than standing out there in wet swimming trunks.”

“They are almost dry and I should probably be going,” he began – and she hesitated.

This was it.

She wasn't going to see him for an unknown length of time... and hated that. Moments were meant to be remembered, and the last time something had changed her mind, her world, she didn't have any proof of it. *This time would be different*, she vowed silently.

Picking up her phone, she looked at him.

"Can I get a photo of us?" she asked hesitantly, feeling a little self-conscious, and hoped he didn't make a big deal about this.

He nodded quietly and moved to stand beside her as she held up her phone, holding it close, angling it slightly to get both of them in the screen to take the photo.

"Will you email this to me so I can look at you too while I'm gone?"

That simple request spoke volumes as she turned to look at him, her eyes searching his. She was going to miss him and hated that he had to leave. It just didn't seem fair to have such an amazing guy drop into her life, start out on the wrong foot, only to have everything mesh perfectly.

"Of course."

"I'm coming back," he whispered again, almost like he needed to say it aloud just so he could believe it, and he was trying to convince her too. "I promise that I am."

"I believe you," she breathed, touching his cheek. "Or at least I hope you do, because it's not every day that I let someone rub my legs and arms like you did."

"Nobody else better do that either," he chuckled possessively. "You're mine, and I have problems sharing."

– and she melted.

"Andrew..."

His fingers brushed against her cheek softly as he continued to look at her, smiling sadly. He drew in his breath and let it out shakily, hesitating... and stepped back.

“Aren’t you going to kiss me goodbye?” she asked softly.

“No,” he whispered painfully. “I promised you that I wouldn’t and...”

Megan stepped forward closing the distance between them, reaching for him, and tugging his head towards hers without any hesitation. Faster than a flash of light, his arms were curling around her, his hands holding her close, as his mouth slanted across hers possessively. They stood there kissing as she clung to him, needing this fantasy to go on.

As his lips moved to drop soft kisses along her jaw and throat, Megan felt her legs sag in awareness of his body reacting to just their kiss. He seemed to also notice as he stopped suddenly – and hugged her instead.

“I’m going to miss you,” he whispered over her shoulder, cradling her to him. “I promise I’m going to write and call... and probably do a lot of dreaming and fantasizing of where this could go between us.”

“Then don’t fantasize,” she invited, and felt him tense.

“... And I’ve got to leave now,” he replied hoarsely, pulling from her immediately and turning away as he looked over his shoulder. “I’m reaching for more, not just some easy moment between us.”

“It’s not something I’ve ever offered or...” she whispered, mortified that he was turning her down.

“I know,” he interrupted and took her hand in his, curling her arm around his chest in almost a hug as she laid her cheek on his back, and he put her hand over his heart. “I want everything, and I’m willing to wait to make sure things are right between us. This is a lot, it’s intensely fast, and while it feels so right – I’m not taking any chances with us... and if you still feel the same when I return?”

“Yes?” she whispered, listening as she wrapped her other arm around his waist, holding him close as she hugged him from behind.

“Then we’ll have a different conversation... and you’ll have a different last name,” he hesitated, his voice barely

distinguishable in the silence as neither moved. She could hear the water running outside, the sound of his heart beating wildly in time with her own, as his words hit her – and their meaning.

“Then I guess we’ll talk then,” she whispered, and felt him tense for a moment as he nodded. He turned in her arms, placed a tender kiss on her forehead, then between her brows, and dropped one on the tip of her nose, before kissing her gently on the lips.

“I’ll see you soon,” he vowed intimately, pressing his forehead to hers.

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised.

He nodded, closed his eyes, and she saw him swallow... as he turned away and walked out the back door where they’d come inside. She stepped forward, watching him walk to the truck in the streetlight nearby, and saw him wipe his eyes as tears streaked down her own.

This felt like it was over much too soon – and somehow, she knew it was only the beginning of their story.

CHAPTER 11



RIPTIDE



ANDREW BARELY SLEPT at all last night, thinking of Megan and their kiss. He hated to leave so quickly, but the temptation was awfully overwhelming... so much so that he felt his resolve slipping. It would have taken nothing to turn around and take her to bed – but that would have ruined everything. She would never trust him again. He could end up causing more problems like Maestro had, leaving her with a baby. He wouldn't have been here to see her, talk his nervous girl through any doubts or panic after being intimate... and yes.

He needed to leave and be the strong one – which was laughable.

Andrew was the spoiled kid that peeked at his Christmas presents; he snuck snacks before dinner, and was occasionally known to take the car without permission growing up. Even overseas, he'd helped himself to whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted it. So yeah – being the 'strong' one was certainly a change of pace for him.

Thumper offered to drive him to the airport. Andrew sat down in the car with the other pilot, and had the strangest conversation along the way.

“You know,” Thumper began quietly. “Sometimes things have a way of working out if you don't force them.”

“Okaaaay?”

“I’m just saying that if you don’t try so hard then maybe things will fall into your lap when you are both ready.”

Thumper stared ahead at the road – and Andrew stared at the other man in surprise as he continued to speak.

“Harley was someone I knew when I was a teenager and she was always such a pest, so annoying, and then suddenly things were different.”

“I know about the birds and the bees...” Andrew retorted, smirking, and saw the quiet man’s lip lift in a slight smile.

“I’m not the one to teach you either,” Thumper replied quietly. “But I do know that if you give her space, let her come to you, and get to know how her mind works... then when things do change between you, it won’t be just chemistry between you – but a tether to your best friend.”

“I thought Alpo was your best friend?”

“He’s my friend, my brother-in-law, and will always be my wingman. He has my back without fail, and I will always have his. I couldn’t ask for a better person to share a family with... but Harley is my best friend because she knows *me* – the real me that I keep hidden deep down inside.”

Andrew swallowed silently.

“Just like Glory knows Alpo,” Thumper continued. “Those two have an insane bond that I could never understand – nor do I want to – because that’s theirs to share. I love them both, respect them to the core, but when it comes down to things... Harley will always be my first choice. She’s my other half, my shadow, and my soul, because I got to know her on another level and learned what made her tick.”

“Well, considering I was already planning on that Oprah...” he retorted, and heard the other man laugh as he shook his head.

“You’re funny – but not listening either.”

“Dumb it down and spell it out for me then, brother.”

“Use the next few months to write her, ask her about her day, find out what makes her tick... her dreams, wishes, and

fears,” Thumper hesitated, pulling up to the airport departing flights drop-off lane, and looked at him. “And when you return in a few months, because I know you will... be ready to do the right thing again.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to say something smart-alecky again to the man, just needing to brush things off. He couldn't believe he was getting a dating pep talk from one of the guys... and hesitated.

Maybe someone said something – and he *needed* this advice?

“I'm going to marry that woman,” Andrew said quietly.

“I have no doubts, my friend,” Thumper replied openly. “I'm not getting in your business; I just want to give you a few tidbits that Everly and Maestro passed along, because they adore Megan. We all care – and all of us want to see the two of you happy. Please keep this between us, because my wife likes Megan, too.”

“I will.”

“Thank you,” Thumper acknowledged, nodding, and gave that slight smile again. “You know the adage – happy wife, happy life. I really don't want my wife frustrated or upset with me for blabbing secrets... but I know my Harley would love to have Megan join the rest of the girls on their get-togethers once a month. If things fall apart, it would be uncomfortable for everyone.”

“Hmphh...” Andrew scoffed, and then paused. “So what you are saying is lay the groundwork before I step up to the plate to swing?”

“Baseball references... sure, we'll go with that.”

“Outfield is a bad influence on me...”

“Sounds like he's helping you explain it right,” Thumper chuckled. “Just knock it out of the ballpark once you swing – and make sure the bases are loaded, so you can win the game.”

Andrew nodded and got out of the car, grabbing his bag.

“Hey Thumper?” Andrew began, slinging it onto his back. “Thank you – and I appreciate the advice.”

“Of course,” the man replied quietly. “One more piece for you...”

“Yeah?”

“Sleep on the plane, my friend. I’ve had a lot of sleepless nights wondering if I was doing the right thing by Harley – and the fact that you worry is a very good sign things will be okay.”

“Thanks, brother.”

“Safe travels, my friend. You are welcome back anytime.”

“I appreciate it.”

Andrew hefted up his bag again and walked into the airport – leaving his heart here in Tyler.



IT WAS several hours before Andrew landed in Heathrow on this way to Kabul. The second he exited the plane to catch the next one... he paused in the middle of the walkway, looking around him for the first time with awareness. He never paid attention to the vendors, gift shops, or the chaos around him. He was always focused on getting to his next gate or grabbing a meal while he could... but now, not so much.

He looked around with wide eyes, searching for something for Megan... and settled on several little ‘somethings’. When he returned, he would box them up and look up the address to the clinic in Yonder since he didn’t have her home address. Sure, he’d been there, but didn’t think to get it as he was driving away, upset.

Listening to the overhead intercom, he quickly grabbed a Coke at one of the kiosks and a bag of chips, before moving to board the plane that was already allowing people on. Taking his seat, he shoved his bag in the pocket and glanced out the window... smiling for the first time today.



IT WAS ALMOST two days before he had a chance to email Megan or send off her package – and he felt like a heel about that, but with good reason. The exchange was due to get another shipment in so he wanted to pick through the goodies to see if there was anything there that might catch her eye... and he was in dire need of sleep.

“Hey...” Andrew looked up to see Outfield looking at him warily. “Are you okay? You haven’t been yourself since you got back. Usually we all get a dose of that attitude... and you’ve been quiet.”

“Oh the attitude is still there,” he replied, smiling faintly. “I’m just tired.”

“Just wanted to check on you, brother.”

“I’m good – thank you though.”

“Now I know something’s wrong...” Outfield grinned, causing him to chuckle in awareness. “Our Cali-boy never says ‘*thank you*’. He says ‘*move it, loser*’ or some other junk like that and...”

“I met a girl.”

“Ahhh,” Outfield smiled knowingly. “My brother just got married, and it changed him too. He used to be all about the party scene, lived in Las Vegas, and tended bar... but now he’s downright domesticated and living in Michigan with his sugar-mama.”

“Really?”

“Yup. She’s got some fancy job in an ivory tower, and he’s a kept man.”

“Must be nice.”

“That’s what I’m saying...”

The two men laughed as Andrew shook his head knowingly.

“Yeah, Megan would not be happy hearing me say that – but I could definitely see staying close to her or waiting on her hand and foot.”

“Really?”

“What are you ‘girlies’ talking about in here...” Inferno interrupted, walking in from the showers and dropping his towel without an ounce of shame. Both men winced and looked away.

“I swear he does that to get a reaction out of people...”

“Pity?”

“HEY! Enough with the jokes...” Inferno snapped, yanking his underwear on in a rush angrily. “You know, I don’t go mocking you guys.”

“Cause there’s nothing to say,” Andrew retorted – and grinned at Outfield.

“Nope. Shall I get the tape measure again?”

Both men stood up, challenging Inferno as everyone looked on at the trio arguing in the barracks. Andrew unbuckled his belt and Outfield had already dropped his trousers, causing the other guys to whistle and yell out several things, when Reaper walked into the barracks.

... And stopped, raising an eyebrow.

“I don’t want to know, nor do I even care at this point... but please pull your pants up, Outfield, if you are remaining as my wingman. I don’t care to fly with someone who can’t keep themselves in check,” the man said coolly, glaring at them. “Inferno, dress yourself. Copperhead, get your team together while Ricochet is out of town, and I want everyone in briefing within the hour – is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Copperhead snapped, getting to his feet and saluting as Reaper spun around, exiting the room. “You heard the man – up and at ‘em, guys! Inferno – *pants!* It’s not that cold in here...”

“Shuddup Copperhead!” the other man yelled angrily, causing a fresh round of laughter from the team as they all

quickly began changing into their flight suits and heading for the lockers where their gear was stowed in the distance.

Andrew was stepping into his harness and slipping it over his shoulders when he caught Outfield's look.

“What?”

“We're not scheduled for surveillance for two more days...”

“Oh,” he hesitated and nodded. “Lost track of time with all the flights and...”

“Just be careful out there, you know,” Outfield began. “I wouldn't want to have to fly out to Texas to comfort your girl...”

Andrew saw red.

He slammed the other pilot against the lockers, nearly out of control as he looked at the other man. Outfield was a decent looking guy, if someone was looking, and the thought of him comforting Megan or making the ‘moves’ on her was more than he could bear. He could feel the other pilots trying to pull him away, yanking at the harness he'd just slipped on, while Copperhead pulled him away bodily, yanking him down in almost a headlock.

“Cool it, flyboy... breathe...” Copperhead urged quietly. “Calm yourself, friend. He's just talkin' trash like the rest of us do when we are bored.”

“I'm fine,” Andrew growled, looking at Outfield, who was grinning and standing there. “She wouldn't look twice at him anyhow, because while he might have it on the outside – he's missing everything that would hold a girl's attention,” he spat hotly. “... A personality.”

“Ouch, that almost hurt,” Outfield teased.

Copperhead released him, straightening up and looking at the other man.

“Hang on – I got this...” Inferno blurted out, jumping between the two of them. “Shut your pie hole, get your gear,

and get your buns into the briefing room, or you'll be polishing Reaper's shoes... got it?"

"That's not half bad, you know..." Scarecrow muttered loudly, causing several of them to laugh.

"I like the part about polishing Reaper's shoes," Copperhead chuckled and shoved at Andrew's shoulder. "Don't let him bother you – he's not worth it."

"Hey!" Outfield protested.

"Why do you think he's paired with Reaper?" Copperhead continued – and winked at Andrew with his back to the other man. "Reaper hates babysitting and knew it would be like that with that one. I heard that Ricochet offered to take one for the team, but Reaper wouldn't let him – and now he's stuck."

"I have feelings you know... and I'm standing right here?!"

"How's it feel?" Inferno sassed – and held up his pinky in remembrance of that day they had all been running laps and mocked him. "Hmm? Hmm? You don't like it quite so much now, do you?"

"Enough... and let's get to work," Andrew snapped, channeling his frustration and exhaustion to the business at hand.

He was *definitely* emailing his girl tonight – and taking Thumper's advice.

CHAPTER 12



MEGAN



EARLY MONDAY MORNING, Megan arrived at the office and immediately headed for the coffee pot. She was in a foul mood and hadn't slept at all last night. Every time she closed her eyes, she saw Andrew's smile and dreamed about holding him close, followed by a mental lashing about how this was crazy and all happening much too fast.

... And she'd literally offered herself up on a platter – and he'd said no. Embarrassed, mortified, and *'pathetically desperate'* did not begin to sum up how she was feeling right now. The first nice, gorgeous guy that showed her some attention – she nose-dived into the deep-end like some cheap floozy... and he turned her down.

Not just fast...

Crazy fast!

“Thank goodness he's actually a decent guy...” she muttered under her breath. She knew he was interested, could tell it with every fiber of her being, but the man had actually said ‘no’ and then alluded to marriage- blowing her mind.

Megan jumped when something touched the back of her arm.

“Who's decent?” Everly smiled. “You sure are jumpy today. Is there a problem?”

“Nope.”

“Have a nice weekend?”

“The best...” she sighed openly, knowing she wasn’t going to be able to hide much from her friend, and heard Everly laugh knowingly.

“My husband says he’s a pretty okay guy too, you know. Apparently Riptide has a mouth on him and a bit of a sarcastic temperament – but I’m willing to bet you never saw any of that, and probably never will.”

“He was a perfect gentleman,” Megan admitted shyly, and looked away.

“I’m glad. Just be patient and give yourself time. Enjoy the pursuit, the game that comes with dating, because it’s beautiful and the building blocks of your relationship.”

Megan nodded simply, looking away to hide her thoughts regarding how things went last evening when she’d lobbed herself at Andrew like the town tramp. She grabbed another stirrer for her coffee, before moving away to her office. She needed to keep her mind busy and try to bury it down for a bit so she could focus. Thinking and daydreaming about him would do nothing but cause frustration in her mind, because he was halfway around the globe and...

She stared as she loaded her computer – and her email.

There was an email from Andrew.

Stunned, she glanced around to make sure no one else was nearby as she double-clicked on it... and smiled.

Dearest Megan,

I completely forgot to get your address when I was there – and your phone number, but I was smart enough to grab your business card that first day when I brought the roses to you. Thank goodness I had enough sense to put it in my wallet. Could you send me both so I’m not bugging you at work?

I’m back on base and missing you terribly. I keep thinking about your smile, the way you sighed when I

was massaging your limbs... and I really miss that smell and touch with every fiber of my being. I'd like to send you more of that lotion to you back home, and dream of you lying there with it slathered all over. Is that terrible of me?

How was your day?

Tell me about a few likes and dislikes you have – please? Let's take this time to get to know each other a little better – and I'm already checking the calendar for my next chance to come back to see you.

Could you email me our picture? I'd like to print it out here and keep it in my locker.

I miss you,

Andrew



DRAWING IN A DEEP BREATH, she blinked several times and tried to compose herself. Andrew was so dang sweet – and surprising. She assumed he had her address because he'd come over, but never actually gave it to him. She also had thought that one of the other guys at Flyboys had extracted her info from Everly, since he never asked.

Taking a big sip of her coffee, she heard Nancy and Barbara entering the front door as Everly greeted them. It would be busy in no time fast, and she wanted to have something waiting in Andrew's inbox when he checked it next.

Dear Andrew,

I was very surprised and touched to get your email – and don't worry. This is a private email, and my computer is not shared with anyone at the office. I'll attach my personal email and my home address at the bottom. I'm glad you reached out and honestly – I didn't sleep so well.

I miss your smile, too.

Every time I closed my eyes, I could see your smile and practically hear you laughing in my head. While our date was more 'touchy' than I ever expected, I'll honestly admit I loved it. I'm really sorry I threw myself at you, and didn't mean to make things uncomfortable between us.

My day is just now starting... and so much better when I got an email from you. I'm taking a few minutes before I dive in to think of you and drink my coffee.

Likes – I'm a very simple person. I like the idea of home – and things that make you feel safe and welcome. Blankets, candles, warm scents, comfortable throw pillows, heavy lasagnas that you slice like a loaf of bread, or Mexican food that is filling. I love to watch historical docu-dramas and romantic comedies... but I also like watching HGTV to get ideas for my little house. I ordered some tablets to keep the spa in good condition so it doesn't get icky... because that is something I do not like.

Dislikes – comments made to illicit shame or degrade someone. I don't like mean people, because life is hard enough as it is. I'm big on being up front with someone. Once you lose trust, it's hard to get it back. I would rather someone tell me something I'm not going to like, than for them to lie.

... And I'm going to have to go. The front door just opened and I think there is a patient at the desk. I'm so glad you wrote – and I will try to write a little something more later.

Yours truly,

Megan



LATER THAT DAY, she shared a look with Barbara as a child shrieked from the waiting room repeatedly. Nancy was trying to talk to both the mother and child, attempting to calm them.

She checked her email once again, for the millionth time today, and let out her breath.

He wasn't going to email before she left for the day.

As she got to her feet to go check the mail in the community box outside of the building, just to extract herself from the crying child and to get some sunshine... a man walked into the office carrying a bouquet.

Megan swallowed and felt her heart hammer.

“Can I help you?”

“I'm looking for Dr. Everly Briscoe-Wilcox.”

“Ah,” she said quietly, feeling a wave of disappointment hit her like a ton of bricks, and sighed. “I can sign for it.”

She scribbled her name on the clipboard and handed it back, before accepting the bouquet and walking back to Everly's office. She put it on the desk and hesitated, bending to smell one of the pale pink roses and thinking of Andrew once more.

“Oh hey – lady? Are you still there?”

She heard the man's voice and walked quickly back towards the desk.

“Just a moment...”

Rounding the corner, Megan drew to a stop – and stared. The delivery guy stood there with a massive bouquet of roses as he shrugged nonchalantly.

“I couldn't carry both in at once, and I guess I should have said something. Can you sign for this one too?”

“Who is it for?”

“Some lady named Megan Josephs...” he muttered, handing her the clipboard and putting the vase on the counter. Megan stared and barely scrawled her name on the paper, having no clue if she signed in one box or several, as she handed it back to him distractedly.

The bouquet was stunning... and everything. When Andrew first brought her flowers, it had been a lovely cluster of big pink roses – but this? This bouquet was staggering in size. There had to be two dozen roses in various shades of pink and red, with a big red ribbon bow tied around a glass vase that was supposed to mimic cut crystal.

Plucking the envelope from the pic sticking out, she slid the card out and held her breath.

I love learning who you are – tell me more... Andrew

A tearful laugh slipped from her as she covered her mouth with her hand to keep from sobbing or laughing aloud. This was the sweetest thing he could have done, and reached her deeply. It wasn't a sappy love note, or something suggestive and intimate... it was him taking action, showing that he was listening to her – and it was important to him.

As she looked up from the card that she held in her hands to gaze at the roses again... she met several sets of eyes watching her – the entire office staff. Nancy, Barbara, Everly, Laura, and Jill, were looking at her with awareness, understanding, and happiness for her.

“Wow. Your guy sent roses again?”

“I want a guy that does that...”

“He really likes you,” Barbara whispered, smiling. “And I think you like him.”

“I do...” Megan admitted tearfully. “He’s so incredibly nice.”

“I’m so glad things are going so well for you both,” Everly replied, smiling at her. “Just be patient when things get tough, because it’s hard to be apart.”

“Where’s he at?”

“Afghanistan,” Megan and Everly said in unison, looking at each other as Everly spoke again. “But I have a feeling he’ll be back soon.”



OVER THE NEXT FEW WEEKS, there were so many emails exchanged, and it was almost like Andrew tried to have a little something delivered every other day. It was almost a silent reminder from him that he was out there, waiting to return to her.

The first package had been a box full of British trinkets and chocolates. He'd sent a few candy bars that were full of some weird honeycomb texture on the inside. There was a coffee mug that was made of china – and she laughed at the scrollwork on the side that said, 'My Queen'. It was incredibly romantic, and sweet of him.

One day she received a pull-apart calendar for her desk that looked like nothing, but as you plucked off each day – it was supposed to eventually reveal a cherry blossom tree at the end of a year. Another delivery was a variety of glitter ink pens, and Post-it notes with hearts all over them.

This morning was a box on her front porch from Amazon that surprised and delighted her. Inside was all sorts of salt scrubs, moisturizers, and face mask by Kopari... and the wave of warm coconut scent from inside made her catch her breath as she withdrew the gift card in the box.

He'd sent it, just like he said he would.

I wish I was there... Andrew

She closed her eyes and pressed the card to her chest, drawing in her breath as she remembered their date. The feeling of him massaging her limbs, caressing and drawing his fingers against her skin, and the sense of security knowing he was doing his best to make her comfortable. Oh yes, those moments stuck in her mind.

It was like he knew just how to reach right into her soul. Something within him touched her mentally and emotionally, reassuring her silently that he was not a threat... far, far from a threat.

He was... a joy, a comfort, a treasure to her soul – and she was falling for him.

"I wish you were here too," she whispered softly.

CHAPTER 13



RIPTIDE



IT'S BEEN A MONTH, Andrew thought despondently, and sighed.

He missed Megan terribly and ordered a tiny package of the lotion with the same scent just so he could put a tiny bit on his hands before he went to bed, praying for sweet dreams of her. Getting up from his bunk, he immediately went to the exchange to see if he could buy a calling card, and was frustrated because the last two times he'd been there – they were sold out.

Making his way into the small shop, he saw the shelves, bins, and displays that had been picked over, and paused. Glancing at the register, he saw that even the packs of cigarettes were getting low... and sighed. They were going to still be out of calling cards and he knew it deep in his gut.

“Hey Moore – got any calling cards?”

“Nope. Fresh out...”

Andrew nodded, feeling a stab of disappointment once again as he turned to browse the shelves, looking for anything to give him a bit of entertainment... or something sweet to send to his Megan – and paused in front of the small glass case that held several bits of jewelry.

There was a pair of heart-shaped diamond earrings that stood out to him, and he hesitated, afraid to mail something

like that without calling her or getting a tracking number... but in the corner was something else, something he didn't expect to catch his eye.

An engagement ring.

It wasn't a simple round stone, nor was it traditional yellow gold, but perhaps that was why it caught his eye. Sure, there a few really glittery things in the case, and there was never much movement here unless some guy was going home to surprise his girl. Usually at Valentine's Day or Christmas this thing was empty. They would put other junk inside to fill the display – but today it was stuffed with about twenty different pieces of jewelry, under lock and key.

"I need to see that, Moore."

"Oh really?" the other guy grinned and shook his head. "You've got yourself a girl back home too, huh? A couple of the Army guys come in here and look around – and a few of you guys, too. Everyone's got this twisted idea of..."

"Moore?" Andrew interrupted pointedly. "The ring?"

"Does she know what a prissy jerk you can be, Riptide?"

"I'm never that with her – but do you want to see my next level of frustration if you think I'm being '*prissy*' now?"

The man rolled his eyes and unlocked the case, handing Andrew the ring. He stared at it and swallowed, feeling his heart beat wildly in his chest, because he could see it on Megan's hand.

His mark, his ring, his promise to her.

It was breathtaking. There was a large round center stone, surrounded with marquis-cut diamonds forming a cluster around the ring, almost like a flower or halo. The band was white gold... and exquisite – just like his girl.

"I'll take it," he began hoarsely, reaching for his wallet – and felt someone slap his hand, knocking his wallet onto the floor.

"What the heck do you wanna do something like *that* for?!" Inferno blurted out in disbelief. "You know what that

looks like, right?”

Andrew bent over to pick up his wallet and chuckled, seeing the disbelief and horror on the other man’s face. Without a word, he turned back to Moore and handed him his debit card.

“You’re gonna ask your chick to marry you?” the other pilot continued, causing Moore to laugh as he muttered ‘*told ya*’...

“I want to be prepared for the next time I go home – just in case.”

“Mannnn *stop*, just stop kidding yourself. That’s like saying you are going to buy an ark in case the seas rise again. It might not happen in your lifetime, and there is no reason to let perfectly good driftwood rot when someone else could be using the wood to make a fire.”

“First off – we are very different people, Inferno.”

“No, we aren’t,” the man sputtered indignantly. “We are two peas in a pod, and I’ve seen you work a bar looking for chicks. All you gotta do is smile, crook a finger, and they come flocking to that surfer-boy costume God gave you...”

“And I’m choosing Megan,” Andrew replied simply, accepting the box and receipt before nodding politely to the clerk. “I’m done working a bar to meet a woman – and let me tell you, it was eye-opening to realize that the type of girl I want in my life will not be found in a place like *that*.”

“Whaddya mean?”

“I mean, if you want someone decent, you are going to have to be a better man and start looking in places you wouldn’t normally search. Go home and visit your brother - check out a coffee shop, local library, or grocery store...”

“What?! I am not going to find Mrs. Inferno in a grocery store... because I *ain’t* lookin’ for her either!” The man stressed the slang, accentuated by his southern drawl pointedly, moving his head dramatically. It was almost comical to see how much he was against getting married.

“No, you’ll probably find her in a police detention cell,” Andrew muttered, chuckling as he shoved the ring in his pocket and looked at the other man, whose mouth dropped open in horror.

“You shut your dirty mouth...”

“Well?”

“Well *nothing!*”

“I’m serious,” Andrew smiled, feeling more confident about his purchase, and treasuring the way it felt having the ring sitting in his pocket. He couldn’t wait to see Megan’s face when he popped the question. “Go someplace you never would visit, take a look around for the one woman who doesn’t need you...”

“That makes no sense, ya’ smug jerk.”

“You don’t want her to need you,” Andrew stressed, realizing it was true. “You want her to want you.”

“That’s the same thing, moron!” Inferno snapped, throwing his hands in the air in sheer aggravation and walking away. “I swear, why do I even listen to you?”

“Because you know I’m right...” Andrew called out from behind him, grinning. As he turned back to Moore to say ‘bye’ – he saw the other man watching him. “What?”

“That was some really good advice you gave him,” Moore began, and hesitated. “It fell on deaf ears, but it was good advice.”

“Thanks.”

“Here...” the clerk said simply – and withdrew a single calling card. “I was saving it in case of an emergency. You know, new baby at home, death in the family, kiddo broke an arm... but you can buy it.”

Andrew stared at the card and looked at the man, feeling bereft.

“You don’t know how bad I want that card and to hear my girl’s voice,” he began, his voice hoarse with desperation as he

looked at Moore. “But I’ve got to be able to sleep at night, too. Save it for someone with an actual emergency.”

“You sure?”

“Calling my girl because I miss her might be tough – but I couldn’t handle the guilt if I kept someone from calling home in a time of need. Save the gift card for someone else.”

“And that is why you and Inferno are very different guys,” Moore said quietly, nodding. “Congratulations, brother – for whenever you decide to pop the question to your girl. She’s getting a half-decent guy.”

“Thanks.”



THAT EVENING, Andrew was laying in his bunk reading a magazine and trying to keep from pulling out the engagement ring to fawn over it again. He’d already peeked at it twice, picturing Megan’s slim fingers and the nervous way she would smile or laugh at him. Maybe he would offer to paint her nails, just to make her giggle... and then slip the ring on her finger then.

... And felt something hit him in the chest.

Yanking the magazine down, he expected someone to be laughing or goofing off, chucking stuff around the room like a bunch of children – but it was dead-silent. Every set of eyes was on him, and his commanding officer was standing beside his bunk, arms crossed and one eyebrow lifted coolly.

“Sir?” he croaked nervously, and glanced around. “Did I miss an alert?”

“Team,” Reaper said quietly, not looking away from Andrew. “One of our mottos here is that we take care of each other – and you’ll find that is still true when you leave this base, or the Air Force in general. You’ll see a veteran out in public, shake their hand, thank them for their service, or offer to buy them a cup of coffee... just because it’s the right thing to do.”

Andrew swallowed, not sure where this was going.

“And today – that happened,” Reaper said simply, looking at the rest of the team pointedly. “Today, Riptide passed on a chance to call home so one of you could get the last calling card in case of an emergency. He gave up his chance *for you*. This is exactly what I mean when I tell you all to have each other’s backs. It’s not just the life-or-death situations that create a family between strangers and friends, but the little things that you do *unselfishly* because it’s the *right* thing to do... and it doesn’t go unnoticed, brother.”

Reaper dug out his wallet – and extended one of the prized calling cards towards him.

“Scarecrow needed that card today unfortunately, and just caught a flight out of here to go home. You *gave* him that chance to make a terrible phone call no one expects to make... so Riptide – go make a different sort of phone call – *on me*.”

“... *What?*”

He stared at Reaper in disbelief and shock, seeing a slight lift at the corner of the stone-cold guy’s mouth, realizing he was smiling... and heard the ripple of awareness around them in the barracks.

“My own squadron leader always pushed for us to have each other’s backs – and I want you to know that I have yours, because you showed today that you would have any of ours. Take it,” Reaper offered again – extending the card once more.

“Are you sure?”

“Yup.”

“But...”

“I’ll email my wife and explain – go call your girl.”

“Sir, I’ll politely decline,” Andrew replied, feeling sick to his stomach. “I don’t want you to miss out on a chance to call your wife.”

“And that is the reason I’m offering it – go. The communications room is empty right now.”

He stood up, not caring that he was in a white tank top and boxer shorts, tossing his magazine onto his bunk as he accepted the calling card – and shook the other man’s hand.

“Thank you, sir,” he whispered gratefully.

“Thank you for a valuable reminder that I hope everyone takes to heart. Moore told me what you did, and I meant it – *thank you*,” Reaper said in a hushed voice for his ears alone. “... And put some pants on, Riptide.”

“Yes, sir,” he grinned.

Andrew ignored the laughter around him as he jerked on his pants in record time, nearly falling over, and bolted out of the room. He raced down the hallway with bare feet, glancing at his watch. It was going to be ‘lights out’ in less than twenty minutes. Entering the room, he plopped down into a chair and hesitated... mentally calculating the time difference between here and Texas.

It was nearly nine in the morning there – and Megan would be at work.

Swallowing nervously, he called her cell phone number and waited for her to pick up. On the third ring, she answered, and he let out his breath.

“Hello?”

“Hey Megan...” he began and cleared his throat, feeling a wave of emotion roll over him painfully as he closed his eyes. Gosh, he missed his girl.

“Andrew! Oh my gosh, you called? I wasn’t sure if you would or...”

“Honey, we have to use calling cards, and I’ve got about nine minutes or so to talk,” he interrupted carefully, hating to cut her off. “So let’s make this count, okay?”

“As you wish,” she replied easily as her voice dropped intimately in a playful manner, flirting with him. “What are you wearing, flyboy?”

Andrew burst out laughing in sheer delight as his heart skipped a beat. This woman was perfect for him in so many

ways!

“I adore you,” he chuckled easily – not caring if it was too soon or slipped out. In this moment, he could have cheerfully screamed it from the rooftops, how much he cared for this incredible woman. “And I’m wearing trousers, a tank top, and briefs.”

“Oooh,” she teased playfully. “Sounds like things are getting serious – should I be worried, or just go with it?”

“Definitely go with it...”

“Perfect,” she whispered softly. “I’m wearing blue scrubs and...”

“Oh yeah, baby...” he muttered hotly, playing around with her in return. “What else do you have on?”

“Black cotton tube socks.”

“Things are getting nasty now...” he chuckled in sheer delight, and heard her amused laugh, picturing her smile. “I can see it now in my head.”

“I never imagined we’d be talking about this.”

“Maybe we should talk about other things?”

“Like what?”

“Like perhaps what you sleep in...?”

“I don’t think so,” she laughed once more, and he pinched his eyes closed even tighter, trying to picture the way her cheeks would turn pink. “But I will give you this one...”

“Oh?”

“I got the coconut lotion in the mail...”

“Oh yeah?”

“I put it on every night before I climb into bed...”

“*Oh sweet merciful heavens...*” he breathed raggedly, his body clenching in awareness as his brain started sparking with a series of imagined images like the finale at a fireworks display on the Fourth of July. Pillows, sheets, tanned skin, her smile... just everything.

“When are you coming back?” she asked simply, not commenting on his reaction, but steering the conversation in a whole different direction. “I miss you.”

“I miss you too – and I put in for time off next month.”

“Okay, let me know if you get it and we’ll...”

“My heart,” Andrew interrupted softly, his voice full of regret as he heard the timer counting down. “The phone call is going to cut off in less than twenty seconds.”

“I’m so glad you called.”

“Me too.”

“We’ll take more photos when you come home...”

“*Home* – I like that you said that and...”

... The phone line went dead.

“Megan?” he said hoarsely, tears choking him as he realized that brief phone call was already over. He sighed heavily, feeling such a weight on his chest, as he opened his eyes and cleared his throat, trying not to cry. He sniffed a few times, wiped his eyes, put the receiver back down on the cradle as he sat there. “... I love you.”

CHAPTER 14



MEGAN



My Megan,

I got the approval to come home in a few weeks and hope you don't mind the short notice. I'd like to see you as much as possible, so this is me asking you out a minimum of eight times over a four-day period.

Love,

Andrew

SHE LAUGHED SOFTLY, touched sincerely by the way he was putting himself out there bravely and not holding back. She noticed that after their phone call, he signed every email as 'love'... and she was doing the same now. If this wasn't love, it was sure close enough for her.

Cracking her knuckles, she quickly hit reply.

Dearest Andrew,

You're on! It sounds like you are definitely staying with me in order to accommodate that many dates – and I can't wait. I'll fluff the couch cushions immediately, and get some new sheets for you. I want my guest comfy, so he wants to stay.

Have I mentioned that I'm a half-decent cook?

I thought maybe we could have a nice dinner at home – a little wine, a bit of candlelight, then maybe some time cuddling or kissing?

Let me know your flight information and I'll pick you up.

Love,

Megan

She looked up, clicking send, as Everly walked into the doorway, looking at her strangely.

“Hey... is everything okay?”

“Are you related to Cajun?”

“Who?”

“Deacon Josephs – his call sign is Cajun. The surname ‘Josephs’ isn’t exactly that common in this town... or maybe it is and it’s just a coincidence,” Everly shrugged and hesitated once more. “So – are you? He was just at Flyboys, and my husband said he was heading out again shortly to go back home.”

“I think he’s a distant cousin or something... maybe?” Megan admitted. “I’ve never met the guy, but I think my mother had said something about her brother having a son – but that could have been a lie, too.”

“Aren’t you curious about meeting him then?”

“A bit,” she began, hesitating. “You’ve got to understand that growing up, my mom dragged me everywhere, and I wasn’t close to any family. If he’s actually related to me – then he’s a stranger. If he isn’t, then that’s just uncomfortable and weird for both of us.”

“Good point.”

“Yeah, I mean, I hate to be that way... but there’s a lot of baggage to wade through, and some of it I really don’t want to relive for the occasional ‘Hi’ between strangers that might share a blood relative,” and she winced. “I don’t mean that to sound quite so cold as it came out.”

“I understand. I mean, it’s weird because I’m very close to my brother... but then again – I don’t exactly reach out to anyone else in my family.”

“Same,” Megan admitted quietly. “Sometimes it’s just easier staying away from the drama or re-hashing the past. I’ve tried not to look backwards my entire life, but rather stepping forward with a purpose... and...” her voice trailed off as she grew quiet, looking at her boss and friend.

“I understand and agree,” Everly replied. “The past is the past, mistakes have to be forgotten, and all you have is the ‘Now’ and the future. I keep my eyes focused there, so I don’t doubt important aspects of my life.”

“Exactly.”

“And I never, ever, let it cloud my direction,” Everly continued, “because wallowing in the past, rehashing something you cannot change, only brings a sort of pain that some people can never understand.”

... And Megan knew the woman was talking about her husband.

Everly adored Alex with every fiber of her being – but she also knew that he had a child with someone else. The woman’s capacity to understand and forgive was humbling, because Megan could not say that she could do the same. She’d met the little boy, knew his mother Mallory, and saw how all of them interacted together... and while that weird love triangle wasn’t her thing?

It obviously worked for them.

“Let it go and look forward.”

“Agreed.”

“And if we run into Cajun one day at Flyboys – then it will be meeting as a friend,” Megan replied, hoping the other woman understood. “I can’t embrace a stranger as a long-lost cousin, when I simply don’t know them at all – nor do I think Andrew would appreciate me hugging all over a strange man.”

“I can tell you what Alex would say,” Everly chuckled. “They are all four-letter words, followed by a ‘*What do you think you are doing?*’ ...”

“Right?!” Megan blurted out, smiling at the other woman. “I can’t see Andrew being okay with that either. He might not be the domineering and possessive type to bang on his chest or make a scene - but I sure am.”

“I’m glad you found someone.”

“I’m glad we kinda found each other,” Megan corrected easily. “And on that note – I need to leave work early on a few days next month.”

“He’s coming into town?”

“Yup.”

“No problem.”

“Thanks, Everly.”



A FEW WEEKS LATER, Megan was standing at the airport in baggage claim, her heart thrumming with excitement and waiting impatiently for Andrew to appear in the distance. She had this all planned, and was going to knock his socks off because she missed him terribly – and turn around was fair play. On the last visit, he’d drawn her out of her shell... well, now he was going to deal with what he’d unleashed.

Me, she thought, smiling happily.

She spotted Andrew in the distance and adjusted her dress slightly, primping, and wished he would take a look upwards instead of talking with some skinny, dark-haired guy who was holding hands with a woman. Another man was shamelessly sprinting towards a woman, grabbing her as she met him halfway, throwing herself into his arms.

Megan nearly stomped in frustration – only to see Andrew finally turn slightly to watch where he was going... and she saw his mouth drop open in surprise as he drew to a stop.

That's right, flyboy... come home to mama, she nearly purred aloud, admiring how handsome he looked right now.

The couple he'd been talking to stopped walking, looked at Andrew... then pointed towards the couple standing in front of her, kissing and hugging amidst their own reunion, before spotting her.

"Budddyyyyy..." Megan heard the man drawl loudly, chuckling. "You stud?! Keepin' secrets, eh, Riptide?"

Andrew didn't respond – except to stare at her.

Megan knew she looked good, and had done this deliberately for him. She hoped every siren in his head was going haywire, because hers was trumpeting in union like a brass symphony. That was her man – and he was home.

She'd worn a Hawaiian print dress along with his necklace he'd given her – and bright red heels to match the flowers on her gown. This morning, getting ready, she'd slathered the delightful lotion all over, and knew it was on his mind just by the determined walk he had towards her. The rose had been a last-minute addition to silently say she cared... and he looked like he was all for it, and didn't hesitate.

Andrew drew her into his arms, hugging her, and breathing in her scent.

"I have just died and gone to heaven," he sighed, melting instantly in her arms as she smiled happily, her eyes closed, hugging him. "I've missed you so much."

"I've missed you too."

"My goodness you are... oh gosh. Megan, you look incredible," he breathed against her neck, kissing the spot behind her ear. "Let's get out of here so we can say hello a little better."

"Oh yeah?"

He laughed softly against her throat, nuzzling that spot behind her ear as he sighed once more, before pulling away. He moved to hold her hand, and they walked out of the airport towards the parking lot, without a word to anyone else.

As they got close to her car, he pulled her back towards him and kissed her deeply. Holding him close, feeling him there, a part of her world, was a heady sensation indeed. He broke the kiss and stood there, his jaw clenching and a frown touching his forehead as he remained completely still.

“What’s wrong?”

“Have you ever realized just how much you were missing something in your life...?” he whispered, causing a smile to touch her face as she melted back into his arms, hugging him.

“We aren’t even at the house yet...”

“I don’t have to be,” he said softly, kissing the top of her head. “Home is right here, where you are.”

“Are you hungry?” she asked, trying to distract him and the way she was reacting to just seeing the interest in his gaze.

“Is that a loaded question?” he chuckled softly, brushing his nose against hers tenderly as they smiled at each other.

“For food,” she clarified, and loved the way he looked at her. Andrew never made her feel frumpy, overweight, or like she wasn’t enough. He always looked at her like she was the best thing he’d ever laid eyes upon – and now was no different. She knew she looked good in this fitted dress and heels, but seeing it reflected in his eyes was heady. “I made a roast with all the trimmings, and some coconut cookie bars for you to snack on.”

“Alright – that’s it,” he blurted out, pulling away from her and throwing his bag onto the ground with such vehemence that it shocked her. She stared at him in disbelief, stunned, as he literally tore open the duffle bag in the midst of a fit of frustration. “I’m so done with fooling around and...”

“Um, excuse me?” she blurted out, shocked.

“You heard me...”

“Yeah, I’m not sure I’m talking to the same person that was here two seconds ago. Is there a problem with rump roast, or...”

“Oh heavens,” he nearly wailed in frustration. “Jeezy peets! She even said rump... and I cannot find it. Where is that blasted thing!”

“Have you lost your mind?”

“Yes – and it’s obviously in my pants, because I cannot focus on anything right now.”

“What are you looking for?”

“Stuff, okay? ...And I keep thinking of rumps, bumps, and all sorts of lady-lumps... wasn’t that a song? I’m about to start having a conniption fit if I don’t find – *AH HA!*”

Megan blinked, completely off-center, trying to process the gibberish he was saying, followed by the loud ‘ah-ha’ that had others looking at them in the parking lot as they walked by... combined with the fact that he was now on his knees.

“What are you doing?”

“You, hopefully...” he blurted out candidly – and she heard several people around them laughing at the obnoxious comment he’d just said aloud. Her face was flushed, blushing in awareness of what he’d just said, and that candid smile was on his face as he stared up at her in adoration from where he was kneeling. “Look, I don’t have some glamorous speech or fancy things to say – I just know your hand needs to be in mine and I want to change *Josephs* to *Carter* faster than either of us can blink an eye.”

Her mouth dropped open as she looked at him.

“I love you and I know this is completely weird, freakishly fast, but...”

“Yes,” she interrupted, staring at him, not hesitating in the slightest.

“Just to clarify,” Andrew said nervously, looking at her and chuckling. “You said ‘yes’ about changing your name and marrying me, right?”

“I did,” she admitted. “But you do have me second-guessing things, because you are still on your knees and not moving.”

“I’m afraid they’ll collapse under me.”

“Then we have a problem, because getting married involves walking down the aisle – unless you want to go to the courthouse while you are here in town?”

“How about now?”

“Now?”

“Yup. The nowest-now that ever ‘now-ed’ – that kind of now.”

“You do English gooder – eh?”

“Words are hard,” he agreed, laughing together with her as she gazed at him in disbelief, reaching for her hand.

Take his hand when he offers it...

Megan took a step forward, feeling her limbs tremble with awareness as he pressed a kiss to her ring finger before opening the box in his hands. She heard a faint clang, a softly spoken curse, followed by a panicked giggle as he straightened up and smiled at her – with tears in his eyes.

The emotion there was more than anything she’d ever seen in her life – and it was directed towards her.

“I dropped the ring,” he admitted, chuckling as he sniffed emotionally. “I’m a mess and butchering this, but it’s only because I never dreamed of anything so perfect in my life.”

“Me? Wait – you dropped the ring?” she laughed in disbelief, feeling herself become overwhelmed at the rawness of this moment they were sharing.

“You,” he breathed, sliding the ring slowly onto her finger before bringing her knuckles to his lips again. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I’ve missed you too...”

“Trust me, let me love you, and we can run away together... just us, a little bit at a time. We’ll go to the South Seas, Hawaii, or wherever you want,” he chuckled, smiling up

at her in wonder. “We can play, laugh, and cuddle together, while I get to rub those pretty limbs...”

“I already said ‘yes’...” she chuckled nervously. “Or at least I thought I did aloud.”

“You did? Oh yeah – you did, didn’t you?”

“I did – I said ‘yes’...”

“Oh man, can we go then? I’ve got a rock under my kneecap, and I’m scared to death you’ll change your mind once you find out how truly dorky I can really be.”

Megan laughed as he got to his feet – and instead of kissing her, he grabbed her elbow and began pulling her towards the driver’s side door. Both looked at each other and laughed nervously, before she started pulling away.

“Alright, alright...” she retorted, not upset in the slightest, but thoroughly amused at the rush he was in. “Get in the car and let’s go.”

“To the courthouse,” he blurted out – confirming things.

“We’ll go to the courthouse, but I really should go home and put on something nice if we are actually getting married. I mean, this is pretty, but...”

“Babe, you look like a million bucks, and if things get any hotter? I’m going to disgrace myself in my pants like some little boy during puberty,” he uttered, causing her to look at him in surprise – as she burst out laughing at his pained expression.

Putting the key in the ignition, she smiled.



AS THEY GOT to the courthouse, she smiled at him in awareness as they climbed the steps together, holding hands. He was on the phone with his mother, explaining what was going on.

“Ma, I swear you are going to love her, and I’m bringing my girl to meet you when I can – but not this visit,” he

adlibbed quickly, glancing at Megan. “This visit is all about us.”

... And winced.

“Yes, ma’am,” Andrew said contritely – and handed her the phone as they stood before the doorway, waiting to enter. “She wants to talk to you... and I promise she’s really nice – just protective, and thinks that I have a few screws loose.”

Megan looked at him owlishly before gingerly accepting the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello – is this Megan?”

“Yes ma’am. It’s nice to speak with...”

“Oh, cut the bull-hockey...”

“*Excuse me?*”

“You heard me, girl. That’s my baby boy, and I expect you to treat him nicely. Now, I’ll be wanting to meet you so I can see if you are acceptable for him, and I also expect...”

“Now hang on a second,” Megan blurted out, and ignored Andrew’s eyes widening in alarm. “If we are going to have this sort of conversation when we are just saying hello for the first time – then I’m dropping the boxing gloves too, lady.”

“Oh mercy...” Andrew whispered painfully – and she ignored him.

“I didn’t even get your name, and you say ‘hello’ like *this?*” Megan retorted in frustration. “He’s a grown man and not some little boy – and I think I know how I am going to treat him, because it’s how I’d like to be treated in return, so you don’t have to worry about that. If we are laying ground rules, then let’s have a few – shall we?”

Megan paused, holding up her finger as Andrew reached for the phone.

“First off – I expect you to drop this ‘*dragon-mother-in-law*’ act and treat me civilly, because your son picked *me*... not you.”

“Wait... Megan, lemme have the...” Andrew began again – and she turned away as he was reaching over her shoulder for the phone, glaring at him hotly.

He dropped her into this with barely any warning, and if they were going to have a relationship, then he needed to know just who he was marrying. She wasn't some vapid, foolish girl to be pushed around.

She could shove back, too.

“Secondly – you and I are going to meet and become good friends, because I don't have anyone else in my life. I believe in family and if you're going to be part of mine, we've got to change things. So, lady, tuck it all deep down inside and at least give me a chance to deserve any of this vitriol you are spewing in my direction,” Megan continued, not letting up. “And third – I want the same things for Andrew as you do... to make him happy and feel loved.”

She paused finally, and heard the woman chuckle on the phone.

“My name is Megan Josephs *Carter*... what's yours?” she said quietly in a pointed voice, using Andrew's last name as her own.

“Emma – Vitriol, huh? I like that. Well-educated apparently, too. Very nice indeed. I think I'm going to like you a lot, Megan.”

“I know you are, Emma... and I can't wait to meet you in person.”

“You tell my favorite knucklehead to send you my way, and we'll go shopping, have lunch, and walk on the beach.”

“I would sincerely love that,” Megan smiled softly, realizing that the woman was just being protective about her only child – and she would be the same way if it was her baby, no matter the age. “Would you like to speak to Andrew again?”

“Yes, please.”

She handed the phone back to Andrew and saw his expression as he held it up to his ears – and sagged in relief.

“Ma, I told you she’s amazing. Yes, ma’am... yes, ma’am. I promise. I love you too...”

A second later he pulled the phone away from his ear and looked at her with a new level of respect and admiration. A smile tugged at his lips as he slipped his hand into hers once more and nodded, before leaning close to kiss her on the cheek.

“Remind me not to make you mad... you’re a firecracker, my love.”

“Will do,” she chuckled softly, and heard his own join in as they began to move forward once more, heading inside.

They walked through security, her heels clacking on the flooring as they made their way towards one of the doors after asking for directions at the information desk nearby. It was almost comical at how normal this all seemed, she thought wildly, as she withdrew her driver’s license from her wallet for the clerk and signed the marriage license, watching Andrew do the same.

“Alright, you two head through those doors and I’ll file this. They’ll call you up when it’s time,” the clerk said, leaning forward and pointing down the hallway. “We normally do this in the courtroom, but they are doing family hearings today, so you get the arch with flowers in another office. Second door on the right, okay?”

Moments later, they walked into a nearly empty small room, and saw two other couples waiting. They stood there, holding hands, and kept looking at each other silently... almost as if neither knew what to say in this moment. She was getting married to a guy whose lap she’d fallen directly into, never imagining he would be the best thing that ever happened to her.

This felt so surreal.

“Are you nervous?” he whispered softly.

“No. Are you?”

“No – and that surprises me.”

“Why?”

“Because both of our lives change from here on,” Andrew smiled, bringing her hand up to his lips and kissing it once more. “Neither of us is alone again, we’ll have each other, and experience everything we can as a couple – and friends.”

“What if you get to where you can’t stand me?”

“I don’t think that is going to happen...”

“What if it does?”

“Then we go to our corners and think about what life would be like without the other person – and come to our senses,” Andrew whispered – and she stared at him in awareness. “I know what my life was like without you there, and I don’t want to ever go back to it. Things were dull, lifeless, and I felt lost... so I would rather have you mad, frustrated, or annoyed – then to not have you a part of my world at all.”

She stared at him, feeling tears sting her eyes.

“You mean that, don’t you?”

“I do,” he paused and smiled. “We are going to push each other’s buttons eventually, but at the end of the day... you are my life, my partner, and my everything. My heart will always search for yours – and come home.”

“Josephs and Carter?” a voice called out – startling them both.

“Here,” Megan replied, and saw Andrew’s smile widen in awareness as they stepped forward together quickly. They entered another small room that had an arch covered with plastic, waxy leaves. It was almost like they were waltzing the way that Andrew led her under the arch so easily, gliding her into place at his side. He slipped her other hand into his and gazed at her adoringly.

“Are you ready, Mrs. Carter?” he murmured tenderly.

“I am...”

The two of them gazed at each other and held hands the entire time as they listened to the clerk speaking quietly, obviously reading from a book without any inflection in his voice. It was all so bland, so garishly thrown together... yet she wouldn't have it any other way.

They were here – focused on each other.

It was a beautiful moment that the two of them were sharing, with nothing detracting from the love they shared. They could have been exchanging their vows in some fancy cathedral. She could have worn a massive wedding dress, carrying a bouquet that would put the Rose Bowl Parade to shame... yet none of that mattered.

... Just Andrew.

“I do...” he whispered tenderly, bringing her hand up to his lips once more as his glassy eyes held hers. “With everything in me – I do.”

She made a small noise as she wept/laughed at once, unable to fight the smile on her face as they shared a look. The clerk was talking about love, understanding, asking her if she would love, honor, and cherish him...

“I do,” she repeated emotionally, seeing the love in Andrew's eyes. “I do and I cannot imagine ever doing anything to tarnish the way you look at me.”

“I love you,” he whispered – and she realized it was the second time that he'd said those words to her. The first time had been so panicked and scattered, in such a rush, that she assumed he had no clue as to what he was saying, but this time – there was no mistaking it.

Andrew was looking directly at her, speaking to her very soul, as he shared his feelings. His hands were holding hers, they were exchanging their vows and promising forever... and he was openly confessing his love to her.

“I now pronounce you man and wife – you may kiss your bride, Mr. Carter,” the clerk interrupted her thoughts, as her husband stepped forward.

Andrew drew her into his arms and she went willingly, sliding her arms around his shoulders with a comfort and ease like this was something she'd done repeatedly since the dawn of time.

“I love you,” he whispered, just as his lips touched hers, catching any words on her tongue before she could speak any of them. He held her close, kissing her tenderly, and cradling her to him like she was infinitely precious, before breaking their embrace slightly. He chuckled softly and kissed the tip of her nose, before rubbing his own against it in an eskimo kiss.

“I’m going to need you two to step to the side,” the clerk interrupted, tapping her on the arm pointedly. “We’ve got a few other weddings to complete.”

“Let’s go home,” she whispered to Andrew – and saw his expression melt in awareness and understanding.

CHAPTER 15



MEGAN



CHEMISTRY between them had never been a problem, but now Megan was actually getting a little nervous. It was one thing to be overcome in the moment, but it was a whole ‘nother to be sitting at a stop light, humming nervously, and trying not to wonder just exactly what was going to happen in detail.

Even Andrew seemed to be fidgeting. He was popping his knuckles, biting his nails, and kept looking around at the other buildings, or pointing out the occasional car to make small talk.

“My friend in high school drove an Outback...”

“I used to have one, but it needed a lot of work so I traded it in for this car.”

“It’s a nice car.”

“Thanks.”

“I like the color.”

“Me too.”

... And then they would both get quiet, before sitting at another stop light on the way out of Tyler towards Yonder, where she lived.

“I told Everly that I needed to leave work early a few times this week,” she volunteered, and saw him nod distractedly.

“I told Sparky that I’d come by to say ‘hello’ at Flyboys – and figured I’d go while you were at work.”

“Good.”

“Yep. Good.”

“We’ll need to take some time to do paperwork and add you to my accounts...”

“Same. I’ll need to get a power of attorney while I’m in town this week so if you need anything, you can get it handled...”

“Are you nervous?”

“Big time,” he admitted, and glanced at her just as she was pulling into the driveway. “I’m sweating buckets over here, and it’s not a pretty sight. So much for playing it cool, huh?”

“Same. My stomach is churning right now...”

Both looked at each other as Megan shut off the car – and laughed nervously in awareness as they just sat there.

“I know I shouldn’t be nervous...”

“We’ve kissed and held each other close several times now...”

“But this feels different,” she interrupted, and saw his nod of agreement.

“I don’t want to do something wrong – or mess things up by being eager or excited.”

“I’m scared that you are going to be disappointed,” she admitted.

“Why on earth would I be disappointed?”

“Because I’m not some svelte supermodel or...”

“Megan,” he interrupted gently, touching her hand where it sat on the bench of the car seat in between them. “I love you... and I don’t want a supermodel. I want my curvy girl who looks at me like I’ve hung the moon.”

“I just...”

“What are you worried about?”

“You know - stretch marks, rolls, the ability to pinch an inch – or two...?”

... And to her disbelief, Andrew smiled easily.

“Big surprise, hon – guys like a girl they can hang onto,” he grinned, looking her up and down. “I want a *woman* in my bed, not something I feel like I might break the first time things get a little intense between us. I’ve got stretch marks, too. I want all those curves and soft spots on you – and cannot wait to see all of you in your beautiful glory.”

Megan felt her heart flip wildly in her chest at the raw honesty in his expression – and leaned forward, waving her hand in his face.

“Do we need to get your eyes checked?” – and he laughed loudly, shaking his head and smiling at her... before he opened the car door pointedly.

Megan hesitated and met his gaze as he walked slowly around the car, staring her down through the windshield. That confident walk, his heated gaze, and the sudden flare of awareness, made her catch her breath as he opened her car door.

“Hi...” she said breathlessly.

“Hi yourself,” he replied, leaning down to unbuckle her seatbelt before pulling her to him – and out of the car. “Gosh, you smell good...”

She nodded mutely, seeing the heat in his eyes.

“Keys?”

... She handed them over – and he fidgeted for a second, flipping through them, and held up one.

“Yes,” she whispered hoarsely.

“Good,” he began – and scooped her over his shoulder bodily, like she was nothing. This wasn’t exactly graceful, but the power and dominance that he was exuding was making her bones melt. This was a man, carrying his woman off to his

‘cave’ to make her his... and she nearly preened in primal satisfaction as it slammed home in her mind.

As he carried her inside, she saw him close the door and heard her keys land on the end table next to the sofa. She felt him grab one of her heels, pulling off her shoe and letting it drop as he walked down the hallway with her still on his shoulder.

... And he dropped her other shoe, the sound of it loud in the silence of the house. With each step, the level of awareness escalated within her, almost like a cat was toying with its favorite mouse.

Her.

Megan could smell the pot roast that was in the crockpot and knew it would be quite a while before it was ready, giving them plenty of time to be alone. It was a relief that she’d taken time to clean the house spotlessly in preparation of his arrival, because she wanted to make a good impression. She’d washed everything – even the baseboards, nervously wanting to show that she had a nice place... and knew now the real reason.

She wanted to show she could provide a home.

Maybe life was all about the basics after all, she mused. A home, family, friends, and food... she had the shelter down pat, but the rest was going to follow in no particular order, starting now.

Andrew set her down on her feet and gazed at her. There was no mistaking the look in his eyes... and she was here for it.

“Do you want me to turn off the lights?”

“No... um, maybe?”

“Are you going to be nervous?”

“Of course,” she uttered openly, chuckling. “I’m kind of new to any of this, and I’m guessing you aren’t.”

“I’m not,” he said quietly and hesitated. “But I really wish I was at this moment, coming to you with a clean slate.”

“No offense, but I just really hope you know what you’re doing, because I have a very v-vague idea of how this will go...” she stammered – and nearly swooned as a very confident, self-assured look crossed his face.

“I know *exactly* what I’m doing... and just *how* to do it for you,” he breathed, smiling at her.

Whoa mercy...

“Um, that’s good,” she rasped, restraining the urge to fan her face with her hands. My goodness, just hearing his arrogant claims was making her warm, but only because she had no doubts he could back that statement up.

“It will be, my love,” he promised tenderly. “Now, lights off or on? I want you to be able to relax with me and...”

“Well, then don’t ask me questions like that,” she sputtered as he slid a hand around her waist, drawing her close to him. “Oh gosh, I can smell your cologne and hear my heart beating – can you hear it? I think I’m nervous, and where exactly did that confident girl disappear off to? She really needs to high-tail it back here...”

“Megan?” he interrupted huskily.

“Yes?” she squeaked out.

“I love you,” he breathed, leaning down to barely touch her lips with his own as he continued speaking softly, intimately, to her. “I love you... and plan on making love with you, my bride.”

She clung to him, her legs no longer supporting herself as he slowly drew down the zipper on the back of her dress, a faint noise drowned out by her heart slamming against her chest.

“Andrew...” her voice didn’t sound like her own and she heard the difference, recognizing it, as he lifted slightly away and looked at her. She stared into his beloved blue eyes, seeing all of her hopes and dreams waiting in those depths... and swallowed.

It didn't make a difference how he appeared, what she looked like, or what features either of them had. The stretch marks she was nervous about, the infernal roll just over the band of her bra, the way she hated how her thighs jiggled... none of it mattered in the slightest at this moment.

His soul was there, lingering in his eyes... and reaching for hers. She didn't see his blond hair, his muscles, his smile – *just him* – and knew it was the same for the man before her. He saw the *real* her. The years would age them, but *this* would always be there.

A wondrous, faint smile touched her lips as she saw his own awareness wash over him as they stood there before each other, letting everything go. It wasn't possible to shrug off the body, your shell, but in that moment... she saw him. His beautiful light, shining brightly in his eyes, so breathtakingly warm and gentle.

“Hi...” he whispered, as if he was acknowledging the same thing that was hitting her like a ton of bricks in that moment, recognizing the gossamer tethers between them snapping into place, binding them for all time.

“Hi...” she breathed, feeling tears of wonder and raw joy sting her eyes. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

“Lights on,” she replied softly, chuckling nervously, and saw his beloved smile. “I want to see your eyes.”

“Good,” he uttered hoarsely. “Because I really need to see your smile.”

Both stepped forward, embracing each other.

CHAPTER 16



MEGAN



MEGAN LAY THERE BESIDE ANDREW, feeling his hand caress her shoulder, holding her close. She had never experienced anything so beautiful, so blatantly powerful, as it was to make love with the right person. It was the most intimate moments two people could share – and she got to share that with her dream guy.

Andrew spoke to her, cradling her to him, as he slowly touched her... centering everything on making sure she was with him mentally and emotionally the entire time. And as he'd drawn her forth, her soul cascading and soaring with his – she'd wept at the glorious beauty of it... and he joined her.

Nothing was like those scenes in the movies or on television – there was no anger, no aggressiveness, no screams of passion... but instead, there were shared sensations, guttural requests drawn straight from the soul, and an emotional warmth that no one could ever imagine.

A wary part of her expected teasing about her tears, how she'd clung to him, or what would come next. Would he be done with her, slap her on the butt, and move on with his life, just like the fortune teller had predicted would happen eventually?

Yet, he still held her close.

“You’re awfully quiet, and I wish I could read your mind,” Andrew whispered softly in the silence, smoothing her hair before going back to tracing his fingers along her shoulder.

“I’m kind of glad that you can’t,” she admitted – and felt him tense.

“Did I hurt you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine – and no. You didn’t hurt me. That was incredible... and beautiful, and just so...” her voice died away, realizing that words were failing her. Nothing could describe just how breathtaking it was to find something so perfect.

“Then what’s on your mind, because believe it or not – I’m a little insecure when it comes to you,” he whispered softly, causing her to look up at him in surprise.

He was laying there on her pillow, his thick hair completely mussed, and a lock was curled on his forehead, as he gazed at her with this sleepy expression. The shadows on his chin seemed to only highlight the faint cleft that was there, making her reach up to trace the line. He playfully grasped her hand and nipped at her finger, making her smile.

“Much better,” he praised softly. “I live for your smiles... now tell me what’s going on in that mind of yours. Share with me.”

“I should probably make us a plate...”

“Megan?” he began, stopping her as she started to move away from him – and she met his eyes. He was holding her hand and sitting up in the bed they’d just shared, looking concerned. “Talk to me... please.”

“It’s nothing.”

“We just made love for the first time and got married a few hours ago – so to me, whatever is dimming that smile, it’s not *nothing* to me...”

Megan sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him worriedly.

“You’re going to think I’m crazy...”

“I promise, I won’t...”

“Andrew...”

“Megan, did I ever tell you how I nearly drowned?” he began – and she stared at him in disbelief.

“What?”

“It’s true,” he nodded. “I’ve done some really dumb things in my life, and looking back thought, ‘*I must have been insane*’ but at the time, I was perfectly lucid – but without a lick of sense in my head. Sometimes, it’s what’s going on in your heart and in your mind, at a specific moment, when things seem crystal clear.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, I desperately wanted to be able to stand on a surfboard and kept having ear infections as a boy – so I decided that I needed to be heavier to hang on a little more...”

“Oh no...”

“Right? I thought my mother would bury me when she found that I’d tied my dad’s scuba weights to my ankles and slipped some of them in my wetsuit...”

“Oh you didn’t – did you?”

“Yup – and at the time I thought it was ingenious,” Andrew chuckled, shaking his head. “I was on the board, coasting over the crest of a wave, and moving into a standing position when I slipped – and sank straight down.”

“What did you do?”

“Considering I was a whopping ninety pounds at the time with zero muscle – I panicked,” he explained openly, smiling at her. “I shucked off everything I could under water and got to shore as quick as possible – naked as a jaybird,” he laughed. “Picture it – mom had me by the ear and I was trying desperately to hide myself while being marched back up to the house, the entire time being threatened with a wooden spoon to tan my hide... my currently *very exposed* hide.”

“Your poor mother...”

“What about poor me?!” he grinned. “Now, talk to me, Megan – and let me tell you that there is nothing that cannot be said between us. You are stuck with my dumb self, and I’m going to apologize now if it turns out to be hereditary.”

They shared a smile... and she took a deep breath, looking away and staring at their hands, feeling exceedingly self-conscious.

“I was just wondering what came next for us,” she began, her voice quiet. “I mean, this feels like the end of a race... and I don’t know what’s next.”

“Does it have to be the end of a race – or could we be standing at the starting line together?”

She met his eyes and saw his warm smile as he waited for her to answer. Adjusting her hand slightly, she clenched his hand in her own as she began to unburden her mind.

“A few years ago, I was at some festival, and one of my coworkers went to check on her kids... and somehow I ended up in a tent talking with a woman – a fortune teller.”

“Crystal ball and everything?” he smiled encouragingly – and she grew quiet, dropping her eyes once more.

“No,” she admitted. “No crystal ball... but she held my hand and began to speak, hitting the nail on the head several times regarding my past, who I was, and why she was here.”

“And it freaked you out,” he acknowledged softly, ducking his head slightly as he tried to catch her line of vision – and succeeded. She met his gaze, and saw his smile fade as she continued to speak.

“She told me a man would cross the ocean for me,” she breathed tearfully. “A man from the Middle East would come, sweep me off my feet, and change my life... before leaving me alone.”

“What?” he blurted out, his smile fading in shock.

“And then there you were,” she continued, not holding back. “You were there, so sweet and kind, so incredible... and she told me of our children, to take your hand when you

offered it, and that after our third child you would abandon me.”

“Megan,” he whispered, releasing her hands and cupping her face to look at him. “I am not going to abandon you – or our children, if we are lucky enough to have them. I’m not that kind of guy. I believe in family and want to stick around for a long time, raising them and teaching them not to do dumb things,” he chuckled, trying to lighten the mood as she stared at him. “Megan, you’ve got to believe me...”

“And what if some other woman falls into your lap?”

“Then she needs to get off of me, because I’m crazy in love with my wife,” he countered firmly. “If this bothers you so much – then let’s break the mold and have only one child... or a dozen, but I am here at your side. Yours,” he promised again, clutching her hand and bringing it to his lips.

“Maybe not a dozen...” she smiled tearfully.

“Maybe not,” he acknowledged tenderly, cradling her cheek in his hand as he brushed his thumb across her lower lip. “I’m selfish and would like to have you all to myself for a while.”

“You don’t think I’m crazy for believing in what she’d said?”

“Do you think I’m crazy for falling head-over-heels in love with a woman I’ve only met a few times?”

“Maybe...” Megan hesitated, and smiled at him. “But she’s one lucky girl.”

“He’s one lucky guy,” he countered softly. “And whatever comes next, we’ll tackle it together, because I’m here for the long run. I’m not going anywhere when my home is right here in these arms.”

She didn’t say anything for several moments and then looked at him, her eyes searching his.

“Are you sure... about me?”

“The moment I kissed you, Megan – my heart and soul were home.”

CHAPTER 17



MEGAN



BEING MARRIED to Andrew and having him in her life was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. He was always so gentle and caring, always held her hand, and more playful than she'd ever imagined. The man had a wildness to him that seemed to flourish the more they talked and were around each other. He was her every dream, her every wish, her most beloved fantasy come to life.

... And she couldn't wipe the permanent smile from her face as a result of it.

The girls at the office had a field day with her marriage announcement and seeing Andrew dropping her off at work. He was taking her car for the day so he could go see his friends at Flyboys while she was here.

"Ohhh girl," Barbara smiled knowingly, winking at her. "That is a very happy looking man!"

"The bride looks pretty happy too!" Nancy cheered, hugging her.

"Sooo?" Laura began pointedly. "Is the saying true about a guy's hands?"

"Y'all stop," Everly interrupted, walking in the door. "I do not want to know about any old wives' tales, nor do I think it's healthy for any of us to be prying personal information out of

each other. What happens between a man and wife – should stay that way,” and hesitated. “Congratulations, Megan.”

“Thank you.”

“You should have said something so we could have thrown you a shower or...”

“It was a last-minute thing yesterday.”

“Yesterday, huh? Sounds like it was a ‘*first*-minute’ not ‘last-minute’ event,” Everly smiled. “Do you mind if I share the news with the girls?”

“Not at all. Andrew is at Flyboys right now, stopping by to have coffee and say hello to the other pilots.”

“Perfect.”

“Let’s get the doors open, shall we? I think I saw Mrs. Perryman in the parking lot with her station wagon full of kiddos,” Everly smiled at them and nodded, moving to put her stethoscope around her neck as she shrugged on her white coat, checking the pockets absently – which immediately sent several of the staff to doing the same thing.

... And at Everly’s pointed look – they all laughed at each other.

“C’mon ladies – coffee’s on me.”



ABOUT AN HOUR LATER, Megan was on the phone with a claims adjuster and heard her phone go off. Glancing at it, she nearly sighed with delight as she saw a few photos had been texted to her. The first was one from Andrew, showing him and another guy laughing, their arms looped over their shoulders – as another man walked behind them, making a face.

He looked so happy, so outgoing...

ding

Blinking, she rattled off the policy number and group ID once more regarding the claim she was calling on... and saw a

text message from an unknown phone number.

It was another picture of Andrew. This time he was standing there looking upwards at the sky, as a plane was taking off behind him. He looked breathtaking in his black leather jacket and light blue shirt... but who was this from?

ding

Congratulations, Mrs. Riptide!

I can't believe the dweeb actually got hitched...

She's nice too – Everly just adores her.

And now Everly is putting her phone on SILENT because she has patients...

(Hi Megan – welcome to the family!)

MEGGIE-WEGGIE!

Oh mercy... here we go...

Who is this?

That's not a roll call, ladies! The slew of phones beeping will sound like a traffic jam – so do not reply.

Megan – this is Marisol, Valkyrie's wife. Riptide will pick you up – but you are coming back here for a wedding reception, my friend. We'll see you this evening.

Dixie just needs to know if you want vanilla or chocolate – Dix, hon, Aeron is giving Romeo the cash for the cake. Please take it this time. No freebies, we love you.

Love you, Dixie...

SMOOCHES!

XOXO – can I place an order for a baby shower cake?

Emily – you tramp! You and X-Ray are having another baby?

Well, I was going to ask for one too, but I'm not up to being called a 'tramp' right now, because I haven't stopped crying since I watched the news this morning with Jax.

Mary? You too?

IT'S IN THE WATER – RUUUNNNNN!

Please do not encourage Glory y'all...

Pshaw... woman, my 'plumbing' is gone – remember?

I'm worried about you, girls (I'm looking at you Delilah – after four babies you'd think you knew how they were made.)

Oh, I know...



Gosh, I love my wife...

I love you too, Cody.

Bwahahaha!

Sarge?! Really?

... Why does nobody listen when I say, 'do not reply'. Megan, put your phone on silent so it's not beeping constantly, because it will only get worse. Prepare for a true Flyboys welcome tonight.

Welcome to the family!

Love ya' already, Mrs. Riptide!

WooHoo!

... Wait everybody!

If we have two Riptides – can I holler 'tidal wave' when they show up?

Sure, Glory... sure.

I love that pink-haired woman.

She's got a heart of gold.

Me too, girl... me too.



Megan laughed, remembering those smiling, happy faces that had tried to draw her in at Destiny's baby shower – and realized that her original thought about them all being close was 'spot on'. They were a weirdly assembled family and welcoming her with open arms, wanting to celebrate with them.

She texted Andrew.

I love the photo of my sexy guy...

Your sexy guy loves YOU.

I have bad news...

Uh oh. What's wrong?

Remember we said we were going to take a dip in the hot tub tonight?

About tonight...

Have I mentioned how much I love you?

Megan chuckled knowingly, and could practically picture his smile on the other end of the phone. She imagined him standing there in the sunlight, typing away.

We have a wedding reception with your friends.

We have a wedding reception with OUR friends at Flyboys.

So, no hot tub later?

Oh, there will be time in the hot tub later...

You promise?

I swear it.

I've got plans for that hot tub... and my delectable wife.

Delectable, huh?

You'll see...

Chuckling, she texted a picture of herself to him, realizing she wanted a lot more photos of them together to hang onto these memories they were making while he was here in town.

My point is made – thank you.

Delectable wife means a very happy life.

I love you, silly.

I love you more... see you soon!



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Andrew was waiting in the parking lot and leaning against her car while talking to Everly's husband, Alex. She saw him bend down and scoop up Everly's stepson, Caleb, before depositing him onto his shoulders... and every hormone within her sighed in happiness.

Her husband was going to be one sexy daddy someday.

"Ah good – Alex is here, and we've got Caleb," Everly said from behind her, smiling as she pushed open the doorway and tugged Megan forward. "C'mon, *Mrs. Riptide*..." she teased, winking at her. "I saw all the text messages, and

everyone runs this gauntlet at some point or another. You'll be fine, and they all mean well."

"Gauntlet? What do you mean 'gauntlet'?"

Megan saw Andrew pull the little boy off his shoulders as he handed him to Alex, before raising a hand to wave at her.

"C'mon Mrs. Riptide," Alex hollered loudly. "The fajitas are already on the grill, and Thumper waits for no man – or woman – except his wife and daughter. If we want to eat, we need to be there when it's ready."

"That's not true – and don't scare her like that, Alex."

"It's sorta true," Alex grumbled, before kissing Everly on the cheek. "I got a microwave hot dog last time, remember?"

"I do remember," Everly said cajolingly, patting him on the cheek and kissing his puckered lips. "You whined and ate three of them."

"They were fairly good."

"I wike hot doggies, Daddy..."

"I know you do, Caleb."

Megan and Andrew exchanged a smile as she immediately moved to his side, reaching for his hand and felt his fingers lace with hers. Alex and Everly looked down at their hands, smiled at each other... and Alex turned to them, making a face.

"Awww..."

"Can it, Maestro," Andrew chuckled and drew her hand upwards, kissing it. "Let's go, hon. The faster we dive in..."

"The faster we get out and go home."

Andrew winked at her knowingly, and she felt herself blushing in awareness, setting off another round of playful 'Awws' from the couple nearby.



... THAT SET OF 'Awws' was the tip of the iceberg.

Little did Megan realize that the proverbial iceberg was the entire Flyboys staff and their families. Oh sure she had briefly been in a room with all of them before meeting Andrew – and yes, she met Alex, Ricochet, and Paradox over Thanksgiving when Everly had invited her over.

... But this?

Nothing could have prepared her for *this*.

As they parked the cars, she saw one man standing with his back to them, tending to the smoking grill in the distance – while another woman, Harley, exited the building carrying two bowls to a card table that was set up nearby. There were a ton of empty chairs around a metal industrial barrel that had flames licking the top.

They got out of the car and heard Maestro’s choked laugh as he tried to hide his face from his wife. Caleb was chatting up a storm and Everly was looking around – before walking off towards Harley. Megan looked at her husband, and before she could ask any questions, she heard Andrew’s softly spoken ‘*uh oh*’... and that was the only warning she had.

The hangar doors where they had their date night opened – and the music was blaring. There, rattling the rafters of the hangar and echoing was *Don’t Cha* by the *Pussycat Dolls* – and the team was strutting their stuff, singing, and moving with the music.

Megan’s eyes widened in shock as Andrew roared in laughter, snorting and slapping his leg as he bent over, hysterical at the display unfolding before her eyes. She knew the faces but was still learning the names. Two men walked out with running shorts on... and nothing else – rapping the words to the song as they sang.

Caleb screamed, “Das my daddy...” – and sure enough, Paradox was one of the men rapping with the skinny guy, Sparky, who had arrived at the airport with Andrew two days ago.

Several of the women – Abby, Glory, a very pregnant Delilah, and a few others were doing a dance routine that

they'd obviously practiced at the last minute, because they were not in sync. At one point, six of the women who were facing Andrew and Megan – all jumped to the left, while one jumped to the right before quickly turning... and everything was falling apart there.

... But nooooo.

That was not enough!

Paradox and Sparky were singing the chorus and *grinding* on Andrew – who was hysterically laughing, kept jerking his leg away from each offender, and looked utterly embarrassed, glancing at her helplessly.

“C’mon now, Riptide... don’t cha?” Sparky grinned, bumping knuckles with Paradox, who was smiling almost as widely. “We know you are a freak like the rest of us – and Mrs. Riptide...”

“Nope,” Andrew blurted out protectively. “You leave my wife out of this...”

“Mrs. Riptide should know what a mess she married into...”

“Mess?” a woman smiled, coming over and extending her hand to Megan. “It’s the best ‘*mess*’ ever. They call me ‘Sarge’, but my name is Giselle. C’mon hon – and let the *freaks* have some fun.”

Giselle took her arm and pulled her towards the chairs in the distance as she glanced over her shoulder, hearing the music start again... only to see all of the men were dancing and laughing, patting Andrew on the back, and it looked like a gang of friends had been suddenly reunited after years apart. That wasn’t the case – but obviously they were all close.

... And she loved it.

“My husband is the skinny one with dark hair, goes by Sparky, and his best friend and wingman is Paradox,” Giselle was explaining. “The cowboy in the boots, shorts, and tank top is the pregnant lady’s husband. Hey Delilah – are you okay? I saw you getting your jam on, girlie! You move good for eight months along.”

“Loosening the ligaments...”

“More like ‘*wanting to deliver early*’...”

“That too.”

“Meggie-Weggie!” came a voice out of nowhere just as a body collided with her side, hugging her tightly. “I’m so happy our little Riptide snagged his girl...”

“Uh, *shagged*... you pronounced that incorrectly.”

“Do you blame her?”

“Do you blame *him*? She’s adorable!”

“Not in the slightest... her – not him.”

“I’m confused.”

“So are half of us.”

“We’re talking about Riptide being hot, right?”

“Nope. Too pretty for me – I like them a bit more masculine...”

“My Hunter is beautiful with the prettiest eyes. Besides Harley, you like ’em moody, broody, and *attitooooody*...” Glory announced happily and drawling out the last made-up word pointedly.

“That’s your brother-in-law and I think he heard you,” Harley chimed in, smiling and winking at Megan. “Welcome to our family, hon.”

“I am not attitude-ey... and I thought you wanted me to help your husband hang the new microwave over the stove this weekend?”

“I do, Thumpy-poo-bear... you are my favorite brother-in-law ever!”

“Oh, good gravy,” the man muttered, walking off laughing as several of the ladies joined in.

“He’s your *only* brother-in-law, Glory!”

Megan was hugged a few more times, before being shuffled off towards a chair and handed a margarita. The

women were all taking their seats and she looked up, searching for Andrew, and saw him down by the hangar looking at one of the airplanes, talking with his friends.

“This is a safe one,” Abby whispered knowingly, tapping her glass. “Don’t take them from Glory – she puts wayyy too much tequila in them if you are feeling overwhelmed.”

“Truth,” Sophie exclaimed, pointedly. “Absolutely the truth. It’s safest to stick with the cans of soda in the cooler.”

“It’s ‘cause I don’t have to worry about being preggo like you girlies,” Glory smiled, flopping down in a lawn chair and hooking her leg over one arm. “Sooo? We want the dirt on ol’ Riptide. Is he romantic? Does he bring you breakfast in bed? Sophie has that market cornered – I think. I know Marisol said that Valkyrie is a cuddler, which I *cannot* see. It would be like hugging a sequoia, and probably just as warm...”

“Glory!”

“What?!” the woman balked. “You go hug him then. I’m just trying to be nice and friendly – and he gets this weird look on his face, before walking off. I swear I get a bigger response out of the light pole at the corner than him – and I’m being nice. I try not to get nervous because I know Valkyrie, and you know what happens when I get nervous...”

“You can’t stop talking,” three women said in unison.

“See?” Glory beamed – and Megan chuckled nervously. “Sooo?”

“What?” Megan replied warily, looking at her.

“Got any dirt you wanna share?” Glory began and hesitated. “Oh shoot – kids! Hey, Madison... Michael... do not play over there...” the woman bolted out of her seat and ran for the two children carrying spoons and plastic pails.

“Don’t give an inch,” Sophie said quietly. “She’ll take a mile, and your alone time needs to stay private between you both. Just because her husband has zero shame and it’s rubbing off on her, doesn’t mean that you have to give us a tell-all book.”

“Was the dancing her husband’s idea?” Megan smiled, feeling a little more comfortable – only to see Giselle raise her hand, guiltily.

“Nope. That would be my husband’s idea. See, when they were in Afghanistan together, Riptide was giving Austin – well, Sparky – a hard time about us dating and talking, but I think that maybe it was because he was missing you. Anyhoo, when Sparky found out that Riptide got married and... *THANK YOU, EVERLY...*” she hollered distractedly, directly over Megan’s shoulder.

“Anytime, Giselle!” came Everly’s voice in the distance.

“Like I was saying,” Giselle started again. “Sorry, shiny object – right?”

“Sure.”

“So when we got the text message from Everly about you two getting married, my husband was all over it. He immediately got the guys together and started planning a joke on him. Well, when it involved a dance routine – several of us joined in, because it was just too good to pass up.”

Giselle looked at her and shrugged sheepishly.

“And I love the Pussycat Dolls... so sorry – but not sorry?”

The woman looked past her again – and immediately slapped her hand backwards, tapping the curly haired woman beside her – who in turn looked shocked, and immediately reached to her right, tapping the next woman...

By the time the fourth woman was staring behind Megan, she was getting goosebumps and turned around quickly.

“What is...?”

Her words died off as she stared in disbelief at the scene before her – and heard Thumper muttering something under his breath nearby.

Several of the men had their hands up on the top wing of the airplane, while two others stood behind them. She stared in

disbelief and heard someone whisper, while another woman let out a muffled giggle.

“Oh my gosh, someone please record this...”

“Where’s my phone, dang it...”

“I got it – Ryan is going to die laughing...” Sophie uttered in a choked voice as one guy kicked Andrew’s feet apart as he looked over his shoulder warily. They were pointing, talking, and discussing something serious, because they were all focusing on what one guy was saying.

“I cannot believe he’s teaching them all how to...”

“I swear her husband is shameless...”

“You are sooo welcome, ladies...”

“Seriously, Glory? I cannot believe that my twin is actually a hoe...”

“A dead-sexy one-woman hoe...”

Just as Megan glanced away – she saw Giselle’s mouth drop open and whipped her head around in a panic.

“Oh!”

“Oh my...”

Megan saw the man grasp Andrew by the hips – and her husband leapt up into the air so fast it was startling. The look on Andrew’s face was priceless. He immediately began slapping the other man’s hands away, causing them all to laugh... just as Paradox pointed in their direction.

... And whatever had been going on – was over.

Andrew slapped at the man’s hands once more, before walking off in a hurry. Sparky followed him a few feet, making mocking kissy faces towards Andrew’s back.

“Oh yes – my Ryan will eat this video up...” Sophie crowed in delight, chuckling. “Those guys are always goofing off and fooling around when they get together. I used to think it was just Firefly – but I’m pretty sure it’s all of them feeding off one another.”

“They are a mess indeed...”

“They are the best,” Sophie smiled, meeting Megan’s eyes knowingly.



AFTER THAT DISPLAY, things seemed to calm down quite a bit. The children were laughing, playing, and dancing nearby to the radio that Sparky had brought for their impromptu dance number, while everyone began to sit around talking. It was a beautiful evening between friends – and a cake was revealed a few moments later.

“I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to make anything fancy...” Dixie was smiling and explaining as she removed the cover off of a large cake plate, waving Megan and Andrew over. “But we did want you to be able to celebrate with us.”

Megan looked at the cake and saw Andrew’s proud smile – immediately turning to hug the surprised woman. This was the sweetest thing that any of them could have done... giving them the gift of friendship and supporting this craziness she was swimming in.

The cake was breathtaking in its simplicity, too. There were massive swirls, a few pink roses, along with sweeping boughs of icing along the side, and it looked to be dusted in a fine, silvery sugar.

The children’s eyes were massive as they gathered near the table, eying the cake like a tiger stalking its prey.

“Can I have cake?” Caleb asked openly, and she heard a few groans in the distance along with a few hushed ‘*shhh*’s’ from nearby.

“Of course,” Megan said softly, feeling emotional as she felt Andrew take her hand in his. “We’re going to cut it and everyone will get cake... okay?”

She looked up at him, saw his gentle smile... and he guided her to the impromptu wedding cake as they quickly cut the first slice together. Dixie was standing nearby and moved

to help them serve the children before everyone began meandering towards the table for their servings.

Andrew pinched off a piece of cake about the size of a walnut and fed it to her... and she gently bit the tip of his finger. His eyes widened slightly in awareness, and he made a goofy little giggle of delight before he could stop himself.

It wasn't very often that she surprised him, and it felt good. She was practically beaming with satisfaction as she gave him a bite – and noticed he did the same, mimicking her, before turning slightly away distractedly.

“Thank you everyone for this... and we're going home,” he announced, tugging her behind him.

“Wait... we are? Already?”

“My man...!” Sparky jeered happily, jumping up and pumping his hands in the air gleefully as Paradox laughed aloud beside him. Several of the guys were smiling and nodding, while the women simply waved in understanding.

“Remember what I told you,” Alpo hollered, getting to his feet. “It's all in the hips, bro...”

“SIT DOWN, HUNTER,” Harley snapped, causing a fresh round of laughter.

“I'll save part of the cake for you!” Dixie hollered happily, waving as Andrew opened the car door for her.

Megan sat down and watched as her husband ran around the front of the car, sliding into the seat smoothly. He glanced at her, hesitated, and put the key in the ignition... and waited.

“If you want to stay then we can, but...”

“No,” she breathed in understanding and comprehension. “You're here for a few more days – and I would rather be alone.”

“Oh, thank goodness...” he chuckled, turning the key, and flashed her an easy smile. “Me too.”



THE COUPLE GOT to the house, and both raced inside. Megan immediately went for their bedroom to go change and was surprised that Andrew didn't follow her. She still had the bikini that he'd bought months ago that she'd passed over when he set up that South Seas evening for them... and decided to put it on, wanting to surprise him again.

As she tied the back, she glanced in the mirror and hesitated. Oh yes, there was no way she could have worn this for him back then. The skimpy triangles did not cover enough flesh – or she simply had more than the manufacturer of the swimsuit intended for. The bottom was actually pretty adorable. It tied on the side and the bowties dangled sweetly on each hip, with a little sparkly heart directly on the back along the seam. This was definitely not for the public... but for her husband?

That was different.

Walking out of their room, she grabbed two towels from the bathroom and hesitated. “Andrew?” she called out, seeing the back door was ajar and could hear the spa running. Peering around the corner, she saw him in the hot tub pouring a glass of wine for her... and smiled.

“Hey there, lovely lady...” he murmured appreciatively, holding a glass out towards her. “I thought I would surprise you.”

“You always seem to...” she chuckled, dropping the towels, and was grateful the porch light was off or she might have chickened-out because of the bikini. She felt very exposed right now and was grateful for the glass of wine. Taking a brief sip, she stepped into the hot tub and sighed loudly at the temperature.

“If this thing pops... we've got to get another one,” she breathed, sinking down into the water and letting the warmth wash over her. “I love this hot tub, and have used it several times since you've left.”

“Good. I'm glad... and I really like the bikini.”

“Thank you for that too.”

“I wasn’t telling you that so you could say ‘thank you’ but simply commenting on the prettiest work of art in the universe,” he replied huskily giving her a look. “Art should be appreciated – and I really do.”

Whether it was the silly words, the heat from the water, or the emotion in his gaze, she chuckled shyly and sighed once more.

“Come here,” he invited, tugging at her waist. “Sit beside me, we’re not strangers...”

“No, we’re not,” she laughed again softly, taking another sip. “Where’s your wine?”

“Right here,” he began, reaching for a glass nearby.

Both sat there silently, her back leaning against his chest and staring at the silent evening around them. There was a dog barking in the distance, and she could hear the occasional rustling of something nearby... a rabbit or a squirrel, perhaps. Nothing really mattered in this moment, but this small slice of heaven.

She felt him kiss her shoulder and immediately angled her neck, allowing him to kiss her throat, closing her eyes and smiling.

“I know what spaghetti noodles feel like now,” she whispered languidly. “I love this...”

“I know you do, darling...” he breathed, kissing her ear softly. “I love this too.”

“Those children were so adorable tonight. Did you see how excited their little eyes were at seeing the cake?”

... And felt him pause.

“I mean, I’m not suggesting that we start trying right now, but someday I’d like to see what our...”

“I’ll give you a baby, Megan,” he interrupted hoarsely, causing her to look at him at the ragged emotion in his voice. She met his eyes and saw him looking at her with so much longing that she swallowed silently, not saying a word. “I don’t want to pressure you or for you to feel scared of what we

have – and I know that gypsy, crone, or fortune teller really frightened you, but if you want a baby? Megan, I would love to have a little piece of each of us to spoil for years to come. Something so beautiful as a child would tie us together even more.”

“And if you leave?” she whispered painfully.

“I have to,” he replied. “It’s my job, and someday I’ll be closer – but hopefully when I get to select orders again, we can look at them together.”

“The nearest air base is Shreveport – isn’t it?”

“I think so... but that is a two-hour drive, and I would do it every chance I got so you could stay here in your home – or you could join me wherever I went.”

“I love my life here...”

“I would never ask you to change it...”

“Why are we talking about babies?” she gave a soft, nervous laugh, trying to brush off the subject that was opening all sorts of difficult discussions they probably should have already hashed out. “Let’s exist in the now.”

“You know we’ll have to talk about this someday.”

“Someday when you won’t leave,” she countered and saw him flinch. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that you were...”

“I know,” he began, and hesitated. “But it doesn’t change that it’s the truth. I have to leave and return to Afghanistan.”

“And we’ll start to look forward to the next visit.”

“Exactly.”

“But until then?” she smiled, trying not to ruin the mood between them. “Until then we can talk, dream, and wonder where we will be in a year, or five years, down the road as a couple.”

“Forever,” he corrected lovingly, kissing the side of her throat once more. “I am not thinking in days, months, or years. I want you for mine... forever.”

“And a child... or three of them?”

This time he didn't hesitate as he looked at her once more.

“That's part of creating our forever,” Andrew murmured. “You, me, our memories, our legacy, a love our children and grandchildren will talk about...” he said softly, lifting his hand from the water and pushing back a piece of her hair from her face as he stared at her. “I do want children someday, and I know you are scared... but whether it's one, two, three, or ten of them – I don't care.”

“Ten?” she laughed, rolling her eyes. “You and these big families...”

“I was an only kid,” he chuckled. “The idea of having a bunch of screaming little Meggie-Weggie's...”

“Oh boy,” she laughed openly.

“... Or baby Drews running around is mighty appealing,” he smiled tenderly. “But nothing is worth risking our relationship. I can't have you doubting me, waiting for the bomb to drop, when there's no reason to. I'm here. I love you. I want to be with you – and that is all I can give right now.”

She didn't say anything as she looked at him, her mind racing. He was right. It was unfair for her to hold this irrational fear of something that might never come to pass over his head, affecting everything. She had to trust him at some point, or it could erode at the very foundations they were building together.

“I know – and you're right.”

“What?” he said playfully, cupping his ear and pretending not to hear her.

“I said you are right,” she repeatedly, chuckling. “You're right, okay? I said it and I'm not scared to say it again. You. Are. Right.”

He winked at her and reached for his glass again, taking another sip.

“Trust your man,” he teased glibly, before setting his glass back down nearby as she rolled her eyes.

“I know, it’s just scary sometimes too. That old woman was so right about so many things...”

“But the future isn’t set in stone. Nothing is guaranteed.”

“No, you are right about that too,” she said quietly, thinking of her mother and the security she once thought she had growing up. It had been eye-opening to realize just how unstable her life truly was, and now that she had her feet beneath her, she was truly afraid that it would all fall apart again. “It just takes so much out of you to pull yourself up from nothing...”

“And no one is asking you to now.”

“But you are asking me to trust you.”

“I am... someday,” he said softly. “We’ve already come leaps and bounds, let’s settle into these new roles first and grow comfortable before we shake things up. Okay?”

“Okay,” she nodded, taking another sip of her wine – only to see him reach for the bottle, moving to pour more in her cup. She shook her head and laughed softly. “No, thank you.”

“Fair enough. I just want you to enjoy your moments with me.”

“You know,” she said taking a sip and polishing off her glass before setting it down beside the hot tub. “You are always surprising me, Andrew.”

“Oh?”

“Yup,” she smiled, settling her back against his chest and shoulder once more and looking up at him. “You surprise me all the time – what you say, how you think, what you do. I was really bowled over when you orchestrated that whole ‘South Seas’ date at Flyboys.”

“Mad skills, baby...” he chuckled softly, kissing her shoulder once more before nipping at her skin.

“My man has mad skills alright,” she teased, closing her eyes and melting at his touch. “I have no idea how you got the wine, the glasses, turned on the jets, and changed so quickly. Did you wear your swimsuit under your jeans to Flyboys?”

“Surprise...” he chuckled, breathing against her skin – as she burst out laughing loudly in the darkness with a sudden realization that he wasn’t wearing one after all.

“Andrew!”

“Shhh...” he laughed, pulling her into his lap and kissing her. “We might not be making a baby tonight – but we sure can practice, my beloved bride.”

CHAPTER 18



RIPTIDE

Nearly three days later...



ANDREW SIGHED DESPONDENTLY and closed his eyes, desperately trying to hold back the tears. Megan was so strong, so vibrant, and unfortunately – so far away from him. As he walked down the familiar hallways towards his barracks, he expected someone to say ‘hello’ or comment on how his trip was – and surprisingly enough, he wanted to share.

He’d never been a person to kiss and tell – but the urge to brag about his incredible wife was there... and he looked up to see both Reaper and Ricochet standing by the door.

“Congratulations,” the man said simply, staring him down with those cool eyes that seemed to see everything. Ricochet was right behind him, and Andrew could see the sympathy and understanding in his friend’s eyes.

“Thank you, sir.”

“We know how you are feeling right now,” Ricochet began, and Andrew felt something crumble slightly inside – only to see Reaper reach out and grab him by the shoulder.

“Stop,” Reaper said in a quiet yet firm voice to Andrew. “You can’t go down that mental path. Go have your meltdown in the showers and get it out of your system, but *clear your head*, brother. We’ve all been there. If you ever want to go

home again, you've got to bury it deep within you and keep your head in the game."

"Are you *threatening* me?"

"No," Reaper chuckled. "You won't get a warning if you are in danger from me, Riptide. I'm giving you a bit of advice someone once gave me. Emotions are dangerous in our field, and you need to keep a clear head on you."

Andrew nodded – and felt Reaper shake him slightly, causing him to look at the two of them again.

"Get it out of your system," the man urged firmly. "Write an email, call her, cry in your bunk, have a meltdown in the shower, heck – I used to get blitzed on another pilot's homemade hooch that he had stowed away in his footlocker..."

"What?" Andrew chuckled, looking up at the guy and seeing a man for the first time – not just his commander... but a genuine person who experienced the same things he was going through right now.

"You probably met Caboose this weekend at Flyboys," Reaper smirked. "He's amazing and gives some great advice – makes even better hooch when you are desperate. When you are feeling low, and even if you don't want to hear it at the time, the advice still comes, because it's needed to keep you in the right lane. Breathe. It's going to be okay. I promise."

"Write your girl," Ricochet urged. "Hit the gym or do something to keep it off your mind. Just remember, while it might not feel like it right now – you are luckier than any of those guys in there, because you have someone waiting for you at home."

He swallowed, realizing it was true.

"Thank you," Andrew began quietly, and felt Reaper pat him on the shoulder, before throwing him against the wall. His dufflebag fell onto the ground and he heard Ricochet's wild laughter surrounding him, just as Reaper kicked his feet apart, causing a shot of instant panic and confusion within him.

Was he being arrested? Frisked? Andrew thought wildly, before hearing the echo of laughter. Two men were laughing... both Reaper and Ricochet. He stood there with his cheek and chest pressed to the wall, managing to look back over his shoulder, only to see two grinning faces watching him.

“I saw the video... and Alpo was right – it’s in the hips.”

“Oh my gosh...” Andrew bucked, flinging himself sideways as he stumbled, before staring at the duo. “What video? What are you guys talking about?”

“My wife sent me a video of Alpo trying to teach you all his self-proclaimed ‘Petersen Maneuver’... sheesh! I’ve known that guy for years, but he gets wilder the older he gets – but his trick actually works. You should try that move when you get home, if you haven’t already.”

Andrew perked up and hesitated.

“It works like he said it does?”

Ricochet and Reaper looked at each other – and hesitated. Reaper actually rubbed the back of his neck and looked a little embarrassed while Ricochet grinned.

“Like a charm,” Ricochet bragged. “Destiny would kill me for telling anyone about it – but yeah.”

“Sophie too,” Reaper admitted. “And I’ll deny that I ever said that.”

“Well, I’ll be...” Andrew gaped in shock.

“You’ll be *happy* – try it.”

“Can I take leave again?” he blurted out immediately.

“No?” Reaper balked, laughing as he walked off. “Fill out a request just like the rest of us – myself included.”

Ricochet was still grinning and clapped Andrew on the back.

“And we aren’t talking about this – just like the girls don’t talk... and let me assure you that they most certainly *do*,” Ricochet looked at him, walking him to his bag as he spoke.

“Destiny told me that they hold nothing back on their Saturday get togethers, which is why Dixie started closing the café early. They talk about babies, shopping, their husbands, work, and sex – in no particular order. So, if you thought you had a secret and your wife goes for coffee with the girls? ... Ya’ don’t have a secret for very long, brother – and I mean that happily,” he chuckled, shaking his head. “Those girls are a close-knit group. Every female at Flyboys knows anything and everything – and they cover for each other all the time. You might be stuck here, but your wife will *never* be alone back home.”

Andrew hesitated, a little surprised... and relieved. He wanted Megan to have friends and to have a life outside of him. He was there so little – and she had such a beautiful personality that it made him feel good to think of her hanging out with the girls - laughing, talking, and holding babies.

“I’m glad.”

“Yep – get your head on straight and don’t worry. She was fine without you before... she’ll be fine now. I promise.”

Except, that thought alone was a little unsettling. He really wanted something to draw her closer to him, to bring about that trust that he would never hurt her or leave... and he knew deep down inside that it was there within her.

“Yeah, your right,” Andrew began – but even to him, the words sounded weak and hollow... and made an abrupt turn.

“Where you going?”

“To send my wife an email,” he tossed over his shoulder, darting into the communications room and dragging his duffle bag behind him as he plopped down indelicately in a chair. Unlocking the screen, he logged in and began to type... hoping it didn’t sound as desperate or pathetic as he felt.

Beloved,

Leaving this morning was the hardest thing I’ve done in a while. I will miss my sweet girl’s head on my shoulder in the evenings. I know you have worries and doubts – and I wish I could alleviate them but only time

will tell, proving to you that I'm all-in when it comes to us.

Let's take a honeymoon on my next visit – let me whisk you away to California. You can meet my mom, I'll take you to Disney, and we can walk on the beach until it's dark... and make love in the surf under the stars.

I miss you so much – and so grateful you fell into my lap.

Love always,

Andrew

He clicked send... and sagged, putting his face down in his hands. Everything in him wanted to be with her. it didn't matter if they weren't doing anything special or romantic – he just wanted to breathe the same air and feel her presence nearby. While he loved being intimate with her, seeing her expressive face during those moments where he held her close... there was nothing quite so wonderful as sitting on the couch together and cuddling in a big ol' bear hug.

It was those moments that stuck with him... and those moments he would give up everything for. This was so incredibly hard leaving her – and for the first time in his life, he considered leaving the Air Force.

That single thought stuck in his mind, festering.

CHAPTER 19



MEGAN

Two months later...



MEGAN WAS on the phone with Andrew's mother, Emma, discussing their upcoming plans during his next visit. She was actually getting ready to buy their tickets this weekend once she got paid, wanting to surprise him. He'd given her the dates – and she found a flight from Tyler that had an inbound flight from Kabul arriving two hours before they would depart. It was incredible timing, and she was so excited.

“No, I think this will be perfect...” she chuckled, hearing Emma's excited voice.

“I'm so glad you two are coming out sooner rather than later. There's this lovely restaurant that overlooks the water that is one of my favorites – and I'll need to get the guest room ready, but...”

Megan heard a beep and hesitated.

It was nearly eleven at night and she had been pushing off this phone call due to the time zone differences between her and Emma. She made it a point to call weekly – if not for just a few moments to say ‘hello’ because it would mean a lot to Andrew, and she genuinely liked the woman.

“Hey Emma, can you hang on a second? Someone's beeping in on the other line...”

“Sure.”

“Hello?”

“M-Megan...?”

It was Andrew – and something was wrong. She heard it in his voice immediately and swung her legs over, sitting up immediately in bed where she’d been relaxing.

“Honey, what’s wrong...”

“My leave was just cancelled,” he hesitated, and she felt a stab of pain in her chest, closing her eyes in disappointment for something completely out of her control. “I’m so sorry, babe... but it’s bad.”

“What’s happening?”

“I can’t say a whole lot and I need you to tell my mom not to panic if it’s on the news ...”

“Andrew – are you safe?” Megan interrupted, feeling terror grip her heart and realizing he was near tears. She could hear the thick tremor to his voice, the overwhelming emotions in her sweet, loving man.

“Can you hear me?” he whispered silently. “I’m supposed to be changing and filing a report, but the whole base is on alert – and we are going dark. No email, no calls, someone might be listening now. Megan, listen to me - I’m safe, but Outfield went down, honey. We took fire and his plane was hit and...”

... And the phone line went dead.

“Andrew? Andrew!” she yelped, trying not to panic and nearly throwing up with the strain and terror racing through her. “Oh my gosh, breathe... breathe... the line has gone dead before when his calling card ended. It’s okay. He said he’s safe. You’ve gotta believe him... and...”

She paused – immediately scrambling for the remote control beside the bed, flipping on the news as her heart thudded wildly, waiting and looking.

Her phone rang back.

“Andrew?” she blurted into the phone – and heard his mother chuckle.

“Wrong Carter there, young’un. Did Andrew call you and that’s why you didn’t click back over? I was wondering what was going on.”

“Emma,” Megan began – and heard her voice crack. “Somethings going on overseas and Andrew said the base was going ‘dark’ – whatever that means?”

“Someone’s hurt, dead, or missing during a mission or exercise,” his mother said quietly. “Did Andrew say what happened?”

“He tried before the line went dead.”

“The last time it was really quick when they cut communications. They try to notify the families first before word gets out. Everyone panics and gossips about their thoughts on what happened.”

“He said a plane went down,” she whispered painfully. “He said he was okay, but someone named Outfield was shot down. I don’t know if he made it or what happened.”

“That poor man...”

“That poor family...” Megan said – and felt her phone vibrate in her hand, putting his mom on speaker and looking at the screen.

Just heard from Reaper, team – we’ve got one down tonight and they are searching for him.

Keep him in your prayers this evening...

Active-Duty headcount – Riptide, Ricochet, Inferno, Scarecrow, Copperhead, Banshee, Cavalier, Panic, Teflon, Bubbles, Salt, and Jester are all accounted for.

“I just got a text message...” Megan interrupted whatever Emma was saying a moment ago, not even listening.

“What does it say?”

Oh thank you, Jesus... Ricochet is okay?

Yes – no details but yes, Destiny.

Megan – Riptide is fine.

Sarah – Copperhead is fine.

“That a plane went down and they are giving off call signs of those accounted for in the squadron. I don’t recognize some of them, but there’s a bunch of text messages coming through now. Can I call you in the morning if I hear anything else?”

“Please do.”

Who da’ fudgecicles is BUBBLES? A newbie...?

I’d beat him up for just that stupid call sign.

I bet he’s gassy...

Nope, that was our Vapor.

HEY!

Do they let anyone in with any name now?
Sheesh...

No kidding.

Leftovers...

Right? Main course is in Yonder now...

My yummy beary-boo-boo...

Goodnight, weirdos – putting my phone on silent now. Thanks for the update, Thumper. Let us know if you hear anything else... and no more comments, team. Keep this text thread open in case of emergency.

'Night Valkyrie...

'Night John-boy...

Melody – get a hold of your husband, please?

Yes, please Melody – roll over and grab your husband. 😊

GOODNIGHT FIREFLY – NO MORE TEXTS.

(ya' big moody grump) 😞

Thumper, you didn't mention Outfield...?

He's missing, Destiny.

Unaccounted for...

Oh nooo...

Yup – say a prayer and let's keep this thread open, Team. I'll update you if I hear anything, but I am not expecting to. The base is on alert and going silent. No emails, for those of you who are new to our family. It's for safety reasons.

Thank you

Staring at the phone, she cradled it to her chest for a moment – grateful that Andrew had a chance to call if just for a moment... and said a prayer for the unknown man that was either dead, injured, or missing out there. It was so hard only knowing part of what was going on, but she knew probably just as much as Thumper did.

Looking at her phone once more, she texted Andrew's mother.

Waiting on more word on what is happening – let me know if you see anything on the news and I'll call tomorrow.

Clicking send, her phone rang not a second later.

“Hello?”

“Hey – it's Everly,” the woman said quietly. “How are you doing?”

“I'm a mess...” she whispered openly, feeling herself mentally collapsing. “I don't know what to think or do – and I'm scared.”

“I know – and that's why I wanted to call. You need to relax and breathe, because Riptide would move heaven and earth to call you...”

“He did call... and the phonecall died.”

“I knew it,” Everly laughed softly. “That man is obsessed with you – and I'm happy for you both. Destiny just called me in a panic because my brother was talking to her when it went down. Don't let this ruin that bubble of love and happiness you are in... okay? It will be alright.”

Megan made a weird noise, barely holding back a scared sob as she tried not to panic or fret.

“Listen to me,” Everly began. “This is part of being an active-duty wife. Your airman is overseas, worried sick about you and your feelings, plus trying to deal with whatever is

going on over there. If you are a mess, I guarantee he is too... but that doesn't change things. He's got a duty and a job to perform, so I'm sure they are all getting a big ol' peptalk... and then searching for Outfield."

"I've never dealt with anything like this before..."

"No, I know – which is why I wanted to check on you. Alex is right beside me telling me it's going to be fine," Megan heard someone talking behind Everly, prompting her. "Alex said this is normal procedure when something is going on, and communication won't return until after they have some hard facts – or reach his family."

"Oh mercy..."

"You need to keep busy – and keep yourself distracted. How about you come over for dinner tomorrow night? Alex is going to coerce Thumper into grilling this weekend again."

"... This weekend? It's Tuesday. Do you think it's going to take that long to hear something?"

"It might..." Everly replied quietly. "It might take longer. We don't know. It depends on what happened."

"Oh."

Megan sat there numbly for a moment, unsure what to say or do.

"Do you have any whiskey or booze?"

"I have some peppermint schnapps that I used for a recipe at Christmastime..."

"Okay – here's what you are going to do," Everly ordered. "You go make yourself a hot cocoa, dose it liberally with the schnapps, and knock yourself out so you sleep tonight. Doctor's orders. You are not going to give that overactive imagination a chance to fester or give yourself an ulcer – you got me?"

Megan let out a tearful – yet grateful laugh.

"Thank you – and yes, doctor."

“Good girl,” Everly praised gently. “Now, set several alarms for work in the morning in case you cannot sleep, have yourself a good cry for as long as it takes to heat the water, leave the television off tonight, and get completely schnoekered on peppermint... okay? And I don’t say that very often, Mrs. Carter.”

“I promise, I will.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Will do.”

CHAPTER 20



RIPTIDE



ANDREW WAS IN SHOCK – and he knew it.

Never in his wildest dreams did he think that one of the team would actually get shot down from the sky. Sure, he'd heard about it, trained for it, had heard the whispers about a plane that went down a few years ago with another pilot... but *seeing* it, *living* through it, was a whole different matter.

The whole squadron was shaken, and it had only taken seconds. He would never forget the voices that kept replaying in his head and the panic in them. Reaper had flown with them today and was closeted away speaking with a counselor right now about what had happened. The man barely said five words to them as they stood there on the runway after exiting their planes.

“Pararescue takes over from here,” Reaper said hoarsely.

“Reaper, hey, are you...” Ricochet began as Panic did an about face, jogging to the edge of the runway and threw up. Inferno collapsed, hitting his knees, before folding his body, pressing his forehead to the ground – weeping.

“I can’t do this again, man...” Inferno sobbed. “I can’t...”

“Shut him up,” Panic snapped angrily, spitting in the grass before heaving again.

“I can’t... It was empty, dude. Greene’s casket was empty! Do you remember that?”

Andrew was feeling wobbly, like his knees wouldn’t hold him as he stared at the other faces that looked just as shell-shocked.

His wingman, *Reaper’s* wingman, was shot down.

“He ejected,” Reaper croaked – not looking at any of them. ““I need to report in, give my statement, and speak with someone. If you are troubled... Ricochet, get him to the offices in building two. There’s a chaplain or counselors waiting for anyone who will need them.””

There was a special kind of pain knowing you let down your partner – but this had to be hitting the other man *hard*. Reaper was one of the last that was here when Greene was shot down – Inferno and Panic were the other two. Panic was a solitary man who didn’t say much to anyone... but Inferno?

Inferno was an absolute mess.

Outfield’s plane almost took out Inferno’s as he lost altitude and rolled limply to the side before going into a nosedive towards one of the mountains. It was in that second that Outfield had ejected, nearly bouncing off of Inferno’s Falcon when all hell broke loose.

The entire scene kept replaying in Andrew’s head – over and over again.

“Mayday! Mayday! I’m hit...”

“Where’d that come from?”

“I’ve got surface-to-air...”

“Where? Where?!”

“Engine one is gone... crap – engine two...”

“What’s going on, Outfield? Status report!”

“I’m going down – and I’m hit bad...”

“I’ve got another launch inbound...”

“I’m pegged! Where’s he at?”

“I don’t see anything...”

“My sensors are screaming...”

“BANK LEFT! BANK LEFT!”

“Where is it?”

“YOUR *OTHER* LEFT, RIPTIDE...”

Andrew had already been rolling the plane to his right when he realized his error – seeing Cavalier’s helmet turn towards him, pointing as he snarled hotly.

“... LEFT?!”

“We’re all gonna get killed out here...”

“Shut up, Banshee...” Reaper was hollering in the coms, taking control of the situation and belting out orders. “Inferno – MOVE! Climb five thousand feet and clear the air if we have a parachute deployed. I really don’t need you sucking him into your turbines...”

Inferno cursed wildly – not caring who was listening.

Andrew was correcting his flight trajectory and trying not to show how shaken he was as the powerful Falcon hit the ground and exploded beneath them. He was trembling and his eyes kept darting to the photo he had printed out of him and Megan taped to a small square on the instrument panel.

“Ricochet, take your entire wing and bank right...”

“SIR!”

“Teflon, hang back and watch my tail,” Reaper said bluntly. “I’m descending and looking for...”

“Reaper...”

“Not now, Ricochet!”

“I’ve got chute deployment, north... northeast in a two o’clock position, sir!” Ricochet interrupted, despite his orders from Reaper. It was coming very close to anarchy, and if there was a place for them to land - they might have had one or two attempt it.

... He was pretty sure one of them would have been Inferno – and the other would have been Reaper.

“Where’d those missiles come from...?”

“That same direction Outfield is landing,” Cavalier interrupted. “I recommend we return to base.”

“Agreed.”

“Oh man... *we’re gonna leave him?*”

“Inferno – your orders are to return your aircraft to base, do you understand? Outfield, if you can hear me – you are inbound toward hostiles... do you copy? Outfield?”

“What if he’s knocked out?”

“What if he’s dead?”

“Shut up – and Bubbles is a stupid call sign, newbie!”

There was nervous laughter in the radio as everyone was exceedingly close to breaking, both mentally and emotionally. He couldn’t imagine the carnage if they *hadn’t* been trained for this very situation. If he looked at the facts, removed emotion from it, they were doing the right thing by returning to base.

They could not help Outfield. It was up to him now – and Lady Luck. There were so many things out of their control that it wasn’t funny in the slightest. First off, Outfield needed to be conscious and in one piece.

They wore rigging harnesses around their body to help hold them to their seat as they ejected. The number of sheer explosives under their rear-ends was staggering – and without the harness to hold their legs into place carefully, they could snap a femur, dislocate a joint, fracture a pelvis... all of it. Any severe massive surge of pain could cause a person to grow light-headed or pass out.

Outfield also said he was hit ‘badly’ – but did that mean he was injured? There was also the problem of zero communication now. His helmet was no longer connected to power or the plane – all they had was a marker of where he went down.

There was nowhere to land and some rebel was shooting missiles... period.

End of story.

They needed help and it would not be forthcoming from any of the pilots on surveillance at this time. No, they needed to head back and get recon or paratroopers to drop in for a search and rescue.

... Hopefully the 'rescue' portion.

"Fall back everyone – now," Ricochet snapped, "Your commanding officer gave you an order."



STANDING THERE, Andrew shook his head, realizing that they were all disbanding and heading towards the lockers. Reaper was already speaking with some of the higher-ups, recanting what had just happened. *I bet there is a ton of people to answer to about this*, he thought numbly... and hesitated.

The base would go on lockdown.

Andrew sprinted in his gear, carrying his helmet as it jangled wildly around him, making a break for the communications room. He already had a calling card purchased and was planning to use it Saturday to talk about plane tickets with Megan. His leave had been approved... but he was pretty certain it was about to get cancelled in record time. No one left the base on lockdown.

Sliding into one of the cubbies, he put his helmet down on the table and unzipped his flight suit, stripping out of it halfway, not caring who saw him. If they cut the lines or locked down the system, he would have no way to reach Megan and didn't want her to be scared.

He dialed her number quickly, ignoring the way his hands were trembling and his eyes kept darting to the doorframe. Any second they would be locking things down and he didn't want some vague news story to be the way she found out something was going on.

“C’monnnn,” he groaned in frustration at the third ring, and heard her pick up finally. There were people jogging down the hallway and the commotion was getting louder. Yep. Word was spreading fast.

“Hello?”

“M-Megan...?”

“Honey, what’s wrong...”

“My leave was just cancelled,” he hesitated. “I’m so sorry, babe... but it’s bad.”

“What’s happening?”

“I can’t say a whole lot and I need you to tell my mom not to panic if it’s on the news ...”

“Andrew – are you safe?” Megan interrupted, her sweet voice sounding panicked, and people were yelling in the hallways now.

“Can you hear me?” Andrew whispered silently. “I’m supposed to be changing and filing a report, but the whole base is on alert – and we are going dark. No email, no calls, someone might be listening now. Megan, listen to me - I’m safe, but Outfield went down, honey. We took fire and his plane was hit and...”

... And the phone line went dead.

“Lieutenant Carter,” one of the military police was standing at the doorway with Reaper. “We are going to need you to step away from the desk and exit the room immediately. The base is on lockdown until further notice.”

“Riptide, come with me please...” Reaper said quietly – and Andrew wasn’t about to argue. He did not want to be put in holding for someone to ask him who he was talking to. He stood slowly and picked up his helmet, not looking away from Reaper as the MP locked the door behind them.

“Walk,” Reaper said simply – and Andrew fell in line beside him.

“Am I in trouble?”

“Did you get a hold of your wife?”

“Yes, sir,” he said quietly, swallowing back a lump as he realized that he was condemning himself in that moment by being honest and truthful with a man he truly respected.

“Good,” Reaper said simply, and barely looked at him. “I just got busted talking to Sophie, and Ricochet was mid-sentence to his wife before they cut the lines. My wife is going to notify Thumper so he can update everyone and answer any questions.”

“Oh thank God...” Andrew sagged, realizing that would include updating Megan so he didn’t have to worry. They were lines of communication, and she would be in on it instead of excluded, left to draw her own conclusions from the media.

“Never alone, brother... and never forget that,” Reaper said quietly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me – I really need to unload mentally to a counselor before I’m sick to my stomach... and then probably get checked for an ulcer by medical. Inferno is right – I can’t do this again, and I pray to God that Outfield is okay.”

“Me too.”



ANDREW SPENT the next several hours trying to keep busy... and those hours turned into days. Time seemed to slow down, and there was a miasma that hung over everything, affecting everyone. The chaplain hosted an impromptu movie night on base, but nothing was improving morale. He must have visited the chapel at least ten times – seeing several familiar faces there, each praying silently for some word of their friend.

It was almost three days before Outfield was found.

CHAPTER 21



MEGAN



IT HAD BEEN ALMOST a week since she'd heard from Andrew – and each day that passed was killing her slowly. The uncertainty, the lack of information, her mind coming up with all of these terrible possibilities, was the worst form of torture.

A part of her wondered if she had misunderstood the fortune teller. Perhaps she'd heard incorrectly, or the woman had recounted it to her wrong. What if there was no baby, no children, and him leaving her was like this – leaving permanently.

“I've got to keep myself together...” she whispered painfully, getting up from her seat to do something, anything, to stay busy. The house was freakin' spotless. You could literally eat off the floor. She had washed all the throw rugs, removed the cushions from the couch and laundered them, stripped the bedding and rearranged the bedroom. The fire alarm batteries were changed, any lightbulbs that were out were suddenly replaced. Even the ceiling fan blades were vacuumed, wiped, then polished with Pledge to make them shine.

... And if she didn't hear something soon?

The yard was next on her 'hitlist'... in fact, she was going to Home Depot this evening to get mulch, bulbs, ant killer, weed and feed, or anything else she could possibly think of.

She hadn't used the hot tub in the last week because sitting in it alone, wondering where Andrew was or if he was in the middle of a fight, was too painful.

She had cried a river of tears, feeling so empty and lost right now without word. There was an update every single day from the team – and unfortunately, it was the same thing.

Any word?

Negative... if anyone gets a message or phone call – please share.

So each night, Megan sat there alone in their bed, cradling a cup of hot cocoa to her chest – sometimes with liquor and sometimes without – but always staring at the television sightlessly, lost in her own endless nightmares. She had no clue what a pilot did, except that they flew airplanes... and one pilot had been shot down – so that wasn't exactly 'safe' anymore in her mind. Andrew was in a warzone, out of touch, and possibly in danger... and it was eating her alive.

Hours later, after the bathroom now had a new paint color on a focus wall that matched her new towels and shower curtain... tonight was going to be much of the same thing again. Megan made her hot cocoa, hesitated, and then dumped a splash of the peppermint schnapps in the brown liquid, before stirring it.

She was a mess and needed to sleep without any nightmares or dreams. Was any of this healthy – not in the slightest, but she had to be able to function and get through until word came.

Valkyrie and his wife Marisol had everyone over to their house one evening, with four crockpots of chili lining the counter, bags of Fritos, shredded cheese, chopped onions, jalapeños... the works... but the house was eerily silent and somber. No one was joking around like usual.

Megan could tell everyone was on pins and needles waiting for word – just like her. Melody was practically green around the gills and her husband, Firefly, would not leave her

side. His own expression was pale and pinched. Everyone was concerned for their friends overseas, but none said a word or discussed their fears.

Climbing into bed, she gingerly took a sip of her hot cocoa, wincing at the pungent taste of the alcohol as it burned its way down her throat. As she took another sip, her cell phone rang – and she nearly choked, spilling the hot fluid down the front of her nightgown. She set her cup down, sloshing the contents over the edge, and answered her phone.

“Hello?” she practically yelped after seeing ‘Unavailable’ on the caller ID. “Hello? Andrew? Is that you?”

“Hey Sexy...”

His beloved voice was so sweet – and she was so overwhelmed that she burst out crying almost immediately. It was such a relief to hear him, to know that he was okay, that it was overwhelming.

“I guess this means you missed me?” he asked tenderly, his own voice emotional. “Because I sure noticed the emptiness in my world without you, so do me a favor - and never leave me, okay?”

“Deal,” she wept, hiccupping noisily. “What’s going on?”

“They found Outfield and he’s in medical right now.”

“Is he okay?”

“He will be – how are you doing?”

“I’ve been a mess, but the house is spotless.”

“It was spotless before, hon...” he chuckled softly. “They are going to be looking at the leave requests that were cancelled, so I might be able to come home with not much notice.”

“I don’t care – just c’mon home where you belong.”

“Oh man, that sounds so good.”

“I’ll call your mom after we hang up...”

“Thank you.”

“And I want to talk when you come home, Andrew.”

“Uh oh,” she heard him say – and smiled. “Is this a ‘good talk’ or a ‘bad talk’ that we’ll be having?”

“Good talk,” she promised, and heard his sign of relief.

“Whew. You really know how to make me nervous, hon... oh shoot. My calling card is counting down.”

“But you *are* safe...?” she questioned, needing to verify that it was true.

“I’m safe, sweetheart. I’ll email you later. We’ve got a line in here.”

“Okay. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

As he hung up the phone, Megan quickly texted the team – her heart so much lighter. Andrew was okay and this whole week had been an eye-opening struggle for her. Not only had she been lonely and worried about her husband, but it also made her realize just how precious and fleeting that having someone you love in your life could be.

Riptide just called – Outfield was found alive!

Best news ever – thanks, Megan!

Dialing his mother, Megan broke the news to her as well... and was touched that she had the same reaction. Emma broke down crying as well, scared for her little boy who was a grown man now. She couldn’t imagine that fear, that anxiety, nor the love that grew to encompass a mother’s heart.

... But she wanted to.



IT WAS ALMOST a week later when Megan got another phone call from Andrew. He had written every day, just a little something to say ‘hello’ – and had gone back to his usual mode of operation just to make his presence felt. Today she

had received a crossword book from Amazon, along with a bag of nothing but pink and red M&M's.

“Hello?” Megan began, already feeling that swift joy that came with knowing she was about to get ten minutes of him focusing directly on her. She loved how he would flirt and tease, making her feel important.

“Hey Sexy...” Andrew began huskily, and she heard that adorable chuckle. “I’m getting a look from Copperhead sitting across from me in the communications room. I’m not talking to you, Big Red – so cool your jets.”

“Very funny,” she smiled. “You’re all mine, mister...”

“Yes, I am.”

“What are you up to tonight – or well, I guess it’s morning there, huh?”

“Yup. I have a briefing in about twenty minutes, which gives me just enough time to get a little caffeine, flirt with my girl for a bit, and dream of something sweet.”

“I’m both, right – the dream and your girl?”

“Oh yeah you are...” he murmured – and she laughed softly.

“You’re in rare form today.”

“I am,” he agreed. “Are you curious as to why?”

“Sure, I’ll bite.”

“Well, I have plans...”

“Oh?”

“See, I’m flying home on Friday and...”

“What?”

“I’ll forward you my ticket – and let’s book another flight together. Let’s take our honeymoon. I promised my girl Disney and a little time in the surf under the stars.”

“Uh, you promised your girl that we were going to make love in the surf under those stars, mister...” she corrected

playfully, knowing he was probably trying to keep things between them, if he had an audience.

“I’m trying to spare Copperhead’s feelings right now,” he laughed openly. “See, if I would have said that I plan on sanding my knees until they are raw in the moonlight, making love to my wife on the beach...”

... And Megan burst out laughing as she heard another voice in the background.

“*RIPTIDE*...?! That’s raunchy. Really, bro? I do not need that visual image - and now I feel the urge to scratch my eyes out. Thanks a lot.”

“See? I was trying to be nice,” Andrew chuckled playfully as the man was still grumbling. She loved her husband’s focused attentions, and how he didn’t bother to hide how infatuated he was when it came to her.

“I’ll go purchase you some kneepads,” she promised. “I wouldn’t want you to get sore or hurt your knees, because then there might not be a second time, husband...”

“Oh gosh, I freakin’ love you, Megan...”

The intensity of his voice nearly made her gloat with joy. Oh, she *knew* her man, and just how to push his buttons. If she was a betting woman, he was probably sitting there with his eyes shut, hanging his head, and picturing things right now with his vivid imagination. He was the most romantic person, and always coming up with ideas to make her feel like she was number one in his book.

“Dang it... my calling card is already counting down.”

“I figured it was getting close.”

“I’ll send you my flight information right now – and I’ll buy our tickets out to Mom’s house, if you’ll give her the heads up that we’ll need the guest room.”

“I talk to her every week.”

“You do? Oh man, you are amazing...”

“Don’t you forget it either,” she chuckled knowingly. “I love you, Andrew.”

“Love you too.”

Just before the call disconnected, she heard several voices in the background mocking him playfully – and their laughter, including his own.

“Wuv you too, Riptide...”

“Mmm Kisses!”

“Love you, baby...”

“Smoochy-coochy-cooooo...!”

“Shut up, fellas...” Andrew laughed before the line went dead – and she couldn’t wipe the smile from her face.

He was coming to visit.

CHAPTER 22



MEGAN



MEGAN ROLLED her suitcase behind her as she entered the airport, glancing at her watch nervously. Andrew should be landing any minute now, and their flight would be taking off in about an hour. She was running behind, and it felt like the whole day she was in a hurry – everything was taking so long, and moving in slow motion. Traffic was a mess, and she was just now getting in the ticketing line to turn in her bags.

... And her phone beeped. Sure enough, Andrew was on the ground and texting her now.

I just landed, sweetheart – when I get off the plane, I'm heading to the restroom and will meet you at our gate.

Um, I'm still at ticketing.

You are?

Yup – there's a line, and then I've got to go through security.

Oh.

Well, I'm not leaving without you – period. If we miss it, we'll rebook the flight.

I'm sorry, Andrew

Don't be - I'll head towards security so we can walk/run together.

Megan smiled, looking at her phone as he texted her a photo of him. She did the same, and felt a tap on her shoulder.

“Y'all are too cute,” a woman volunteered, smiling at her. “Boyfriend?”

“No,” Megan said proudly. “Husband. He's coming home from Afghanistan and...”

“Coming home? He's a soldier?” the woman interrupted looking at her – and then began to talk loudly around Megan. “Hey! Her soldier is on one of the planes and she's way back here – I know some of you are or were armed forces... Y'all need to let her move up in the line.”

“Whoa... wait, he's an airman – a pilot in the Air Force,” Megan protested nervously, seeing several heads turn to look at her. “I wasn't asking to move up. I can wait and if we miss our flight...” and the woman cut her off again.

“I don't care what branch he's in,” she retorted, looking at her, and Megan felt about two inches tall. “If he's serving and Active Duty – he's waited long enough to see you. Am I right people?”

... And the line parted, several of them waiving her forward.

Megan stared at them, unsure if she should move up and take advantage of this unexpected blessing... only to hear ‘NEXT’ as a hand pushed her from behind.

“Go,” the woman smiled, urging her forward. “My husband was once Active Duty too – and there is no better feeling in the world than getting a chance to look in their eyes.”

“Thank you,” Megan breathed, feeling tears sting her eyes at the unexpected kindness and generosity that these people were showing. “I don’t know what to say...”

“Go check in – and enjoy your time together.”

“What’s your name?”

“Daisy Minter,” she smiled. “My husband was in the Army and is currently parking the car.”

“Thank you, Daisy,” Megan whispered, hugging the stranger immediately. “I really appreciate this more than you know.”

“Next to the counter please – let’s keep the line moving!” one of the staff at the counter hollered, waiving briskly.

“Go,” the woman chuckled. “And don’t get teary-eyed, or you’ll make me cry, too.”

Megan nodded, hugging the woman once more, before pulling her bag forward. She was shocked that someone was kind enough to do something like this combined with the fact that all these other strangers just did the same thing, stepping back and allowing her to move to the front of the line.

“Thank you...” she said openly, looking back over her shoulder at everyone, touched. She showed her driver’s license, checked her bag, and moved towards the security checkpoint. “Thank you so much, and I really appreciate it.”

“We take care of our own,” the woman smiled, waving, as a dark-haired man walked forward, sliding an arm around her waist.

Megan waved at them again – before turning, and caught a glimpse of Andrew waiting just behind the ropes at security. She immediately headed for him as he stood next to the security officer. Andrew immediately leaned over the rope, hugging her tightly. He looked so good in his uniform – and so tired – that she immediately hugged him again before kissing him softly.

“Baby, go get in line,” Andrew urged softly. “I’ll wait here for you.”

She nodded tearfully, not wanting to let go of him... and saw the security officer step forward, opening one of the other walk-through sensors.

“Desert Storm,” the guard said quietly in a hushed voice. “Thank you for your service, lieutenant.”

The three exchanged a look, and Megan didn’t hesitate this time. She slid through the security panel and was given a thumbs up by the other officer – just seconds before Andrew was there, kissing her.

“Oh gosh, hon... I missed you,” he whispered, hugging her tightly.

Megan pinched her eyes closed, breathing in his scent, and just needing to hold him close. She was so nervous that this was a dream, that she would open her eyes and he would be gone. His job was dangerous, he was on the other side of the world, and she had nothing but memories... which brought her to utter the words she never imagined she’d say – especially now – in the middle of the airport.

“I stopped my birth control,” she breathed – and felt him stiffen in surprise.

“Pardon me?” he blurted out in shock, pulling back and looking at her.

“I want us to start trying, Andrew.”

Megan nervously reached for him – and saw him close his eyes, swallowing hard, before crossing himself.

“Lord, if You are testing me, I’m about to bomb this one, Big Guy...” he muttered under his breath – and opened his eyes to look at her.

“Do you want to have this conversation in private?” he began hoarsely, staring at her with so much heat in his eyes that it made her smile. “We should get to our gate and...”

“And what?”

“Talk.”

“I think I’ve made my decision,” she began as he clasped her hand, walking in the direction of the terminal gates. They went past several and turned towards gate 15 in the distance – yet he was exceedingly quiet... almost too quiet. “I mean, if you don’t want to have a baby yet – I understand, but...”

Andrew shoved open the doorway to one of the Family Restrooms – causing Megan’s eyes to shoot wide open in alarm as he dragged her inside. He threw the deadbolt and looked at her.

“What are we doing in here?”

“Using the facilities,” he said quietly, lowering his voice, but there was a certain edge to it.

“If you’ve gotta go to the bathroom, I’ll just...” she began, and he cut her off.

“Megan, I’m not waiting until tonight when we are finally alone,” he rasped emotionally. “Not when you just said the sweetest thing to me.”

“That you have to go to the bathroom?”

“No,” he smiled softly. “That you want my baby.”

The wonder in his words, the love in his eyes, and the desire she saw in his face made her knees weak. Her hand drifted upwards, tracing the shell of his ear as she stared into his breathtaking eyes that shone with so much need, love, and desire that it was staggering.

“I do, Andrew...”

“I really don’t want to tell our child someday that they were made in a bathroom, so let’s pretend this is just a practice run...” he chuckled softly as her mouth dropped open.

“Wait – what? We’re not...” she sputtered.

“We sure are,” he invited, turning her around and kissing her cheek before whispering in her ear as he nudged her feet apart. She looked over her shoulder to meet his eyes, realizing she was now in the same stance that he’d been in at Flyboys when he had his hands on the plane.

“You’re serious?” she uttered, her voice barely a whisper.

“Your every wish is my desire,” he breathed intimately, feeling him curl an arm around her stomach. “We’ve got twenty minutes before our flight begins to board... and I hear this is all in the hips.”

“Oh mercy,” she whimpered as he captured her lips.



AN HOUR LATER, they were both sitting in the plane... and kept looking at each other, chuckling and giggling softly, unable to wipe the smiles from either of their faces.

“You sure are proud of yourself, aren’t you?” she asked openly, trying to keep her voice down as she struggled not to laugh aloud or draw more attention to themselves.

Andrew was sitting all slumped down in the seat, looking supremely satisfied, and she would not have been surprised at all to see him beat on his chest.

“Yeah, I really am...” he grinned, winking at her.

Megan rolled her eyes, feeling her face heat up – as if that was even more possible. She hadn’t stopped blushing since they’d exited the bathroom and did the ‘walk of shame’.

There had been a woman with a stroller outside the door, talking with a young boy, when they emerged. She took one look at Megan – and her mouth dropped open in dawning comprehension. Megan ducked her head and immediately headed for their gate... but her husband was shameless.

“Do *not* get the egg salad sandwiches...” he said loudly, putting a hand on his stomach, grinning, before he started tucking in his uniform shirt into his pants unabashedly. “Whoa, that was something!”

Andrew’s face was flushed, and his eyes were dancing like a child’s on Christmas morning. It was not hard to imagine what had happened – and several people around them started laughing at his antics. “Boy, I feel *sooo... much... better!*” he drawled emphatically.

“Andrew!” she hissed, trying to hush him up.

“Dang, I really needed that, Megan – and you did too,” he blurted out, causing her to gape at her husband, who was smiling politely to the little boy. “My wife had the egg salad sandwiches also, little buddy. Stick with peanut butter and jelly.”

Her beloved Andrew had been grinning ever since – and if she was honest with herself – she was too. He was a complete and shameless mess, but he was *her* mess, and she loved him terribly.

She saw him slide a sideways look at her on the plane, and adored that singular expression on his face. He was so happy to just be there with her, close to her, that it made her heart turn over in her chest.

“Hi...” he whispered playfully. “Come here often?”

“You are going to be uncontrollable, aren’t you?”

“I’ve gotta get it out of my system before my mama sees me...”

“So it wasn’t the ‘egg salad’ after all?”

“Nope,” he replied glibly, popping his lips, emphasizing the single word.

“I think she knows what you do with your wife,” Megan retorted in a hushed voice. “I think half of the people on this plane now know, too.”

“I bet they’re jealous of me then,” he whispered, leaning over to nuzzle her nose with his own. “Cause you are the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Did you bump your head?”

“Nope - but I sure ‘bumped’ you though...” – and winked at her.

“Oh my gosh,” she blurted out, laughing nervously and looking around to see if anyone had heard him. “Would you just stop?”

“Yeah,” he smiled tenderly. “Anything you want, anytime. All you need to do is say the word.”

She met his eyes – and melted. He was just almost too much, yet perfect in so many ways. Looking into his eyes had to be one of her most favorite things to do, because he was so expressive, so open with her, but if he was talking to anyone else – he shut down. There was a macho, arrogant coolness that he donned like he would a jacket protectively to keep him warm.

“Maybe you don’t have to stop,” she whispered, touching his face and running her thumb across his lower lip. “How about we just dial it back a notch – and when we are alone?”

“Yes?” he said huskily, his meaning clear.

“You can say or do whatever you want...”

“No rules, just a blank check from my sexy wife?”

“Let’s just say that I haven’t been disappointed so far.”

“I’m so glad you married me,” he uttered, closing his eyes and turning his head slightly, kissing her palm. “Just when I think I couldn’t love you anymore – you go and prove me wrong.”

“That’s what clever women do to their husbands,” she teased softly, touched by his words.

“And I married the best of them the moment I got the chance to,” he began and smiled. “You know, in a weird way, I’m glad you had that experience with the fortune teller.”

“You are?”

“Yes – because it forced you to wait for me,” he affirmed, nodding slightly before kissing her hand once more. “You are such an incredible woman that I’m positive someone would have snatched you up long before I ever arrived on the scene.”

“Actually,” she whispered, staring at him. “I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Why?”

“Because my soul was waiting for yours - and always will.”

Andrew looked at her, reaching forward and sinking his hand in her hair, cradling her head and pulling her to him. He barely uttered ‘*Love you*’ before kissing her deeply.

He always made comments or said that ‘she was his home’... and understood those words so much more now. This love, this relationship that they shared, was more than either had imagined, running deeper and burning brighter every time they saw each other. He was just exactly what she needed... without knowing that she did.

Her husband made her laugh, smile, made her feel important, and treated her so good – because he respected and valued what this was. It wasn’t just the incredible kisses, those breathtaking moments in bed, and treasuring what a sweet guy he was to have around. No, in the silence that had separated them when the base was on lockdown, there had been a void in her soul that rocked her to the core.

That was why she’d stopped her birth control.

Not because she was just so excited to have morning sickness, couldn’t wait to see if the fortune turned out to be true and he ditched her, or dealing with hours of labor during childbirth. She *needed* him – or at least a part of him near her. Andrew’s soul, his light, was as necessary as the air she breathed - and in his kiss, she found her place – her home.

“I love you too,” she whispered, kissing him again.

CHAPTER 23



RIPTIDE



GETTING OFF THE PLANE, Andrew automatically reached for Megan’s hand beside him and took a deep breath... and hesitated. The scents, the sights, the smells were familiar, comforting to him, but something was different now, and he could feel it.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he began distractedly, and turned to look at her as they walked through the crowds towards baggage claim... and felt his soul sigh. California would always have a special place in him – but his heart and soul had found a new home in a pair of bright, hazel eyes. “I’m just excited to show you around a few places – and get you alone again.”

“You are shameless...” Megan chuckled and looked away shyly, which only made him want to play with her a little more. He dropped her hand and instead wrapped an arm around her waist, pulling her to his side, before nuzzling her hair.

“Completely,” he whispered loudly, nipping at her ear. “You’ve created a monster...”

“Me?”

“It’s gotta be someone’s fault,” he chuckled tenderly. “Do I really need to admit the truth that we both know already?”

“That you are completely out of control?”

“I have some modesty...”

“You don’t have a single bone of modesty in you,” she laughed, but still turned her cheek up to him as he moved to kiss her and said something utterly filthy in her ear, just to see those beloved eyes widen in shock.

“You need your mouth washed out...” Megan sputtered, turning bright red once more. Gosh, he adored the way she blushed.

“You love me, and you know it.”

“I said to dial it down – not turn it up,” she chuckled, looking around. “What if someone heard you? Your mom is picking us up, and I better not ever hear our child say what you just did.”

“Will you be mad if I give our boy a high-five for being a chip off the ol’ block?”

“Yes – yes, I will Andrew...”

“Aww, honey...”

“Shhh,” Megan chuckled as he leaned down to share a few more thoughts running around his head, and heard her bark of embarrassed laughter. “Alright, now please stop for a few.”

“Yes ma’am,” he smiled tenderly, dropping a kiss on her temple before lowering his arm to take her hand in his again. “You make me crazy, you know.”

“I think you probably were beforehand too – but you just feel like you can let it out now.”

“I’m still holding back,” he countered, grinning.

“Heaven help me...”

They shared a look and he nearly purred in awareness, imagining in one single instant of having her alone and to himself once more – just as he heard his mother’s voice.

“Oh Andrew! Andrew and Megan? Yoo-hoo!” – and saw Megan’s face light up as he turned away from her to see his

mother there, waving happily and holding a small bouquet of red, white, and blue balloons.

He beamed widely, feeling so much joy at seeing his mom welcoming Megan as she hugged her immediately. He didn't hesitate; he grabbed his two most favorite people in the whole world in his arms, hugging them tightly, and heard his mother's tearful laugh.

"When did you get so tall, my little lizard?" his mother chuckled tearfully, pinching his cheek, and heard Megan's laugh.

"Hey Ma..."

"Oh my goodness, you've grown – and what's that scruff on your chin?"

"Ma, I haven't stopped in about eighteen hours – maybe twenty, so no – I haven't shaved," he chuckled. "Besides, Megan likes me with a little scruff. I told her that I needed to shave, but she said to grow it out like a pharaoh and put little beads in my beard..."

Megan's eyes got wide as she started laughing at his blatant teasing – only to see his mother turn around to look at her in amazement and horror.

"You told him *what?*"

"Ma, I'm kidding... sheesh. I'm old enough to do what I want and... *OW?!*" he yelped as his mother reached up, grabbing his ear and twisting it.

"Don't give me that, Andrew Riley Carter. I am your mother and brought you into this world – and I can take you out, too. Don't you ever tell me you're too old to listen to your mama, young man... I'll still get a spatula and chase you down for sassing me, even when you're sixty and I'm ninety – got it?"

"Yes ma'am," he began contritely, wincing. "Uh Megan, a little help?"

"I kinda like your mom's parenting style – and I'm watching a pro in action, taking notes for later on."

“What? You are?” His mother exclaimed, finally releasing his ear as she turned to look at Megan. “Are we going to be discussing grandbabies in the near future? Oh goodness, my son finally did something right and married UP in this world! Come here, Megan, and you walk with me,” his mother crooned – leaving him standing there with his mouth open in shock.

Megan looked over her shoulder at him – and gave him a sly, sexy wink.

“The view’s better from back here anyhow...” Andrew called out, staring at his wife’s rear end, trying not to feel a little left out. He loved that Megan and his mom were growing close – because family was everything to him. It would have been terrible if they didn’t get along, not when he’d found ‘the one’ he wanted to be with forever, to build his life with.

... And they would have their own family soon enough.

Smiling, he followed them.



AS THEY PULLED up to his childhood home, Andrew couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped him. While so many things changed, a lot stayed the same, too. His mom still had the pale pink paint on the exterior of the house, with succulents cascading over window boxes intermixed with flowers.

As a destructive little hellion, he used to pluck those little green ‘pearls’ from the strands of her ‘Hens-and-chicks’ plants, pretending they were grenades for his action figures when he would play Army with the other kids down the road. *He always played Army, nobody ever played Air Force – yet here he was...* he chuckled again, shaking his head.

“Andrew, can you get the bags?” his mother commanded like she was the queen. “I’m going to take Megan inside, get some chamomile tea started, and dig out the photo albums.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’ll help him,” Megan protested, immediately moving towards him – and Andrew stopped her.

“Go,” he smiled. “She loves you and never pulls out those albums for anyone else. I’ve got it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“I kinda wanted to see *you* this trip,” she teased in a hushed voice, looking at him pointedly as his heart flipped over in his chest. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek, whispering silently.

“Oh you’re going to see lots of me this trip,” he promised, and was delighted to hear her own intimate laugh that he treasured so much. Gosh, he loved how her mind worked hand-in-hand with his.

“Promise?”

“I guarantee it. We’re both going to be tired at eight o’clock, okay?”

Megan winked, smirking at him knowingly, and turned back towards his mother who was waiting at the door for her. Turning back to the car, he lifted his bag and tossed it onto his shoulder, before plucking her suitcase out of the trunk. As he walked inside, he met his wife’s eyes... and saw her look him up and down.

Andrew swallowed, feeling a bolt of lightning straight to his heart. Yeah, that stupid fortune teller was so wrong in so many ways – he was never, ever leaving this woman. They’d have to pry his cold, dead hand from hers, because he was never letting go.

When he said ‘forever’ – he meant it.

“Megan, I’m going to unpack our things in the guest room. Ma, I know you’re having tea, but can I have a soda or coffee? I’m soooo tired,” he drawled, and saw his wife’s pleased smile.

“Coffee does sound good, doesn’t it?” Megan chimed in, and he could have laughed at the way she was trying to be so casual about things. Meeting her smile, he nodded and winked

at her, before moving to the room they would be staying in for three days.

He dropped his bag on the wood floor and withdrew a few things, putting them in one of the drawers, before opening her suitcase... and groaned aloud. Inside, laying gingerly on top, was this sheer, pale pink creation that made his mouth water and his hands clench as he gingerly touched the satiny seam – before closing the top.

Weakly he sat down on the bed... and slid to his knees, folding his fingers together.

Thank You, he thought emotionally. *I never thought I'd marry my best friend – and I am truly grateful for this chance to make her happy.*



HE SPENT the next few hours talking with his mom and Megan, while they all sat on the old wicker chairs he used to hate as a boy. Now, he realized just how comfortable and inviting they were – and even Megan commented on them.

“Andrew, I think we should get a set of these for the back porch – don’t you? I love these wicker chairs, and mine even rocks. Throw on a few cute cushions and we could have coffee in the mornings together when you are home.”

“I love that idea, honey.”

“These were a gift from Andrew’s father years ago,” Emma began quietly. “He knew I loved watching the ocean, and one of the first things we bought for the house was these chairs.”

“They are really nice.”

“I always thought so. It was our thing, you know? When Andrew was a boy and would be watching cartoons or going to bed, we used to come sit out here together – just to exist in the same space.”

“I know what you mean,” Megan said, looking at Andrew.

“We love to sit outside together too,” he said carefully, fighting back a smile. The last time they had sat out back together, it had been in the hot tub – minus his swimming trunks. Gosh, Megan had laughed and laughed at his lack of inhibition, but that really wasn’t why he did it. He acted like an idiot sometimes just to see her smile, that sweet blush, or share these knowing looks with her, because he knew just what she was thinking.

“Yup,” she smiled softly. “We have a glass of wine together in the night air, and just relax.”

“*Relaxing* is my favorite past time,” Andrew smiled at her – and patted his knee, reaching for her foot. It was nothing and everything to him to rub her ankles. He just loved touching her, making her feel good, and this connection. His wife’s smile widened as he continued. “Yup, I love *relaxing* with her every chance I get.”

“I know,” Megan chuckled – and sure enough, her cheeks were turning pink.

He was about to say something else – when he felt something thwack the back of his head... and looked at his mom in shock. She was smiling and holding a rolled-up magazine.

“I swear you are just like your father,” his mom chuckled. “You didn’t come from a cabbage patch, you know. If you want to be alone with your wife, you don’t have to pretend or use code words. Just go, Andrew.”

“Uh, ah, well...” he strangled out nervously, not sure what to say. “I, uh, well I was going to take Megan for a walk along the beach in just a few minutes.”

“Uh-huh,” his mother smirked, staring him down as she stood up. To his horror, his mom leaned forward, pinched his cheeks, and gave him a smile that gave him goosebumps instantly.

“*Whuuut*,” he tried to utter, not knowing what was going on – nor why she was still pinching his cheeks.

“Just like your father,” she smiled. “And stay away from the pier – that can get embarrassing.”

“Oh gosh,” Megan blurted out, chuckling as he started to glance at her – only to have his mom jerk his head back towards her, looking him dead in the eyes.

“Guess where you were made,” his mom chuckled, knowing she was getting at him. Why was it mothers had this uncanny ability to read your mind or know just how to push your buttons? “The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree – and I don’t want to have to bail you out like I did your dad when he was arrested for public indecency.”

As her words hit him, his eyes widened in horror as he stared at his mother and felt his stomach roll. *No way!* Surely his sweet mother, who looked so prim and proper, wearing her polyester pants and smocked apron top... did not... would not have done what she was implying.

Could she?

Was she saying what he thought she was saying?

“Think about that, son – and watch for seashells.”

“*Awwwnwoooooo*,” he whimpered as she still pinched his cheeks, leaning forward to kiss his forehead as he struggled to get away. He glanced at Megan, who was laughing so hard she was wiping her eyes. “*Awwwnwo-no-noessss*.”

She finally released him, and he stared at her in shock.

“Eww?” he blurted out, looking at her and shivering bodily. “Ma, you are pulling my leg – and that’s not funny.”

... And his mom shrugged.

She *shrugged*.

“Don’t tell me stuff like *that?!*” Andrew blurted out. “You and Dad... did not... *out there?*” he yelped, pointing at the beach in the distance. “I don’t feel so good.”

“It’s very romantic,” she said simply, and shrugged again. “Lock the door when you come in – and wash the sand off of your feet... and wherever else.”

His mouth dropped open in shock.

“Have a good night,” his mother said simply – and winked at Megan. “Night, Sweetie. We’ll go for lunch and do a little shopping tomorrow.”

“Goodnight Emma,” his wife replied, grinning and laughing at his obvious discomfort at the whole conversation. “Thank you again for having us.”

“Just seeing my boy’s face again was worth it – even if he looks like he’ll be ill. I swear, Andrew. I might be older, but I’m not dead, you know – and your father was quite a lusty fellow,” his mother volunteered – and he shivered again bodily, closing his eyes and swallowing back bile at the thought of his mom and dad being intimate.

He heard the two women in his life laughing – and heard the door close, leaving him there with Megan.

“She’s right you know.”

“Oh, don’t even say that,” he grumbled. “My mom just claimed to have had sex with my ‘lusty father’ on the beach – where I was going to try to fool around with you. I’m a little nauseated right now, so excuse me if that kinda kills the ardor.”

“That’s a shame,” his wife said, getting to her feet. “I mean, just think of the stories we’d tell our children – and how they would react.”

“I’m not doing *that* to my child – ever.”

“Since when did you become a prude?”

“Me? I’m not a prude.”

“You made love to me in an airport bathroom and then implied you had diarrhea from egg salad sandwiches,” she said flatly, staring at him. “Don’t you think that would scar our children?”

“That’s not the same...”

“It’s not?” she interrupted him pointedly. “I think it’s sweet that your parents loved each other and were affectionate.”

“Being *affectionate* is hugging someone.”

“I’m sure they hugged out there too, buster.”

“Megan, you aren’t helping things...”

“So, are you saying that we’re not going to walk on the beach in the moonlight, alone under the stars?” she said innocently in a husky voice that made his heart skip a beat. “I bet I can make you forget all of that...”

“The second my knees hit the sand, I’m going to have PTSD flashbacks of what my mother just decided to relay to her adult son,” he muttered openly, and heard Megan’s soft chuckle.

“This will be so romantic,” she invited. “And I’ve been dreaming of this ever since you suggested it.”

“Oh yeah?” he perked up, as a smile touched his face. *She had been dreaming of them making love on the beach?* Perhaps he *was* feeling a little better – and it would be awfully romantic to create a memory they could share alone.

“Very romantic...” Megan repeated, smiling knowingly. “Like something from a wish or fairytale – and I’m such a lucky girl. I’ve married my very own Prince Charming.”

He held out his hand to her the second he saw the dreamy look in her beautiful eyes. How could he ever say ‘no’ or deny her anything?

“Let me show you the stars, my love...” he promised.

CHAPTER 24



MEGAN



CALIFORNIA WAS everything she could have wanted and more!

They spent each day with his mother – and the nights were theirs alone. They had lunch at the pier, went shopping in all the little boutiques, looking at everything from trinkets to baby items, and it was so wonderful. The sun was warm, there was always a breeze off the water, and for a girl who had never traveled – this was incredible.

Disney was more than she ever expected! They spent one day at Disneyland with his mother, and while she worried it would not be enough time to see everything, it was more than enough. The lines, the crowds, the sights and sounds, it was sensory overload at its finest. There were mouse-ears everywhere, printed on everything. She loved the fairytale theming, the creative treats, and just getting a chance to be a kid with Andrew... but everything came with a price.

Blisters.

One day was enough, because she had a few painful blisters on her feet from the sandals that she thought would be comfortable to wear. After walking nearly seven miles according to the pedometer on Andrew's watch, circling the parks, standing and waiting in line... she was done. If they had bought two days' worth of tickets, she couldn't have returned today, even if she wanted to.

Frankly, Megan was amazed at the stamina that Emma had. The woman never stopped. She was part of a speed walking group of ladies, interacted with a book club at a local bookstore, and did yoga on the beach every weekend. The trip took a lot out of Megan; she felt like the anchor or party-pooper of the entire day... and said as much as she was trudging up to the house at the end of the day – completely wiped out.

“I am so sorry,” she began, yawning loudly. “I’m just beat, and need to doctor my ankles and toes.”

“Shhh my love,” Andrew urged, and swept her up into his arms. “I’ve got you, and Mom is getting the door. How about I make you some tea – and I’ll get the ointment and Band-Aids for your pretty feet.”

“Have I ever told you that I think you have a foot fetish?”

“I promise I don’t – but I do have a ‘Megan one’...” he chuckled, kissing the tip of her nose. “I sincerely love you and cannot get enough attention sometimes. I just like to be in the same room, breathe your air, or touching your skin.”

“You sick, *sick* man...” she teased, smiling softly, and laid her exhausted head on his shoulder, before wrapping her arms around him. “I love you.”

“I love you too, honey.”

He carried her inside and put her down on the sofa.

“I’m sorry, Emma,” Megan began immediately, feeling guilty. This was their last evening here in town, and they would be flying out tomorrow. It just felt wrong to go lay down in their room or whine about having the best time of your life – especially when you wouldn’t change a thing.

“Why are you apologizing?” Emma smiled tenderly, coming to sit by her on the couch. “I couldn’t ask for a better way to spend the day than with my son and my daughter-in-law. Today was wonderful – and I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Emma took her hand in hers – and Megan smiled, realizing that they were just alike. Andrew was always holding her

hand. It was a silent way to show you cared, supported, and cherished someone... and it meant a lot. When she thought back to all those blind dates, one-off dinners that fizzled, and attempts to talk to someone – none of them ever held her hand like Andrew did.

He craved her touch just as much as she wanted his.

“I’ve really had the best time,” she began, nodding. “I hope you’ll come visit us too, in Texas.”

“I would love that,” Emma smiled – and hugged her. “Now, I don’t know about you, but I’m overly full of sugar and absolutely beat. I think I’m going to go soak in a hot bath and turn in early. It might help if you did the same.”

“Ma,” Andrew began quickly. “I agree. You should go rest... and I think I’m going to make Megan some hot tea. Would you like a cup?”

“No, thank you. Goodnight you two – and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Goodnight, Emma.”

“G’night, Ma – love you.”

“Love you too, my little lizard.”

Megan chuckled at the nickname as he kissed his mother on the cheek dutifully when she got to her feet. As Emma walked out of the room, Andrew unexpectedly scooped her up again.

“What are you...” she began, and he interrupted her.

“I only have you to myself for another day or so,” he said quietly. “Let me spoil you – and I know you’re sore. You are going to soak in a bath, have some chamomile tea, and then I’m going to doctor those feet.”

“No,” she protested faintly – even if it was tempting to let him completely spoil her. He was right, this was their last few days together before he had to fly back to Afghanistan. “I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll be fine because you are going to indulge your needy husband and let him pamper you,” he countered, setting her on the bed. She watched Andrew silently as he walked into the bathroom and started the water, and a moment later, he returned to her.

“You’re going to rest tonight and let me handle everything,” he said distractedly, pulling out a t-shirt from his drawer. “After the last few days, tonight is going to be all about comfort.”

He set down his Air Force t-shirt beside her and smiled.

“Now, let’s get you into the tub.”

“Are you sure?”

He made a face, rolled his eyes, and then smiled at her.

“Let’s see,” he began and held up his hand, counting off his fingers. “The most incredible week I’ve had in a while, making love to my wife repeatedly, she wants my baby, she gets along with my mom, she indulges my every whim and asks for nothing in return, and loves me... yeah, I’m sure.”

Megan was so tired that she felt her lip wobble slightly, just overcome with emotion and exhaustion.

“It’s barely eight o’clock though... and...” – Andrew knelt before her.

“Megan, I’m tired too,” he smiled tenderly. “I want to hold you close, and sometimes making love isn’t in the act, honey. Sometimes creating that love is just holding you in my arms, rubbing your back, and treasuring the way you feel snuggled up to my side.”

He touched her cheek, meeting her eyes.

“Let’s hold each other this evening and rest.”

“I think I’d really like that,” she whispered tearfully, like she was revealing some deep dark secret. “I’m really beat.”

“I know you are, darling. Now, let me help you get undressed – and you can soak for a bit.”

Minutes later, Megan was relaxing back in the bathtub amidst bubbles that smelled like vanilla and brown sugar. Closing her eyes, she let the warmth seep into her, realizing this really was the best part of life – having a partner who simply wanted to be near her.

... And felt sad.

When they got home, Andrew was flying out the next morning. Her life of solitude would resume, and it was so hard not to let it color everything. Sometimes she wished she could fly out to his location to be close to him, but from everything he'd told her, she knew it would be dangerous. They didn't talk a whole lot about his commitments to the Air Force, because it was just a part of him.

He was thirty-one and she knew most people were in for twenty years or longer, or so she assumed. This meant the only chance she had to be closer to him was if he someday became stationed here in the United States. She would have to leave her job, sell her house that had been her only bit of stability for the last eight years, and basically start over again from scratch... which was terrifying.

It was just a lot to think about, and overwhelming sometimes – and being exhausted was not the time to focus on it. She already felt like she was emotionally splintering right now and about to cry just for the heck of it.

As she heard the bedroom door open and close, she heard Andrew's voice.

“How are you doing?”

“Just sitting here,” she replied, and silently thought *‘I’m trying not to have a breakdown...’*

“Perfect.”

After a few minutes, she heard him moving around in the room and assumed he was packing when she heard the drawers opening, along with her suitcase. It wasn't until she heard his cell phone ring, that she truly was curious what was going on... and began eavesdropping.

“Hey... yeah, I’m... Oh man, that’s a relief. No, I really appreciate that. Yeah. No, we’re going to. Uh-huh... uh-huh... I can do that, but only if you have the room for me,” Andrew’s voice was quiet, almost like he was trying not to be overheard.

What was he talking about?

“No, I’m glad you called, and this means a lot to me,” he continued, and she was getting more and more curious as to what was going on. “I haven’t said anything because I’m not sure what she’ll say. It’s a big change, and would alter everything.”

What? Was he planning on leaving her already? What did he mean ‘if you have room for me?’ she thought painfully, getting out of the bath quickly.

“Shoot - I gotta go. Let me call you later when I’m alone.”

Hold up! she seized mentally, feeling her temper flare. *He’s hiding something from me – and it’s big! Well, if he thinks he married a simpering, easy-going woman, he’s wrong.*

“Andrew?” she said bluntly, yanking open the bathroom door and standing there with a towel wrapped around her... only to see him slam his cell phone shut with a click right before he shoved it into the pocket of his jeans, looking guilty. “Who was that?”

“Who?”

“Who called you, Andrew?”

“That? Oh, it was nothing.”

She stared at him, feeling something terrible take over within her. He was lying to her and being evasive about something – and that was not going to sit well at all.

“You’ve asked me to trust you repeatedly – and I have, but you are going to need to trust me too,” she said firmly, hating the way her voice wavered. “I’m going to need your phone – or an answer of who that was... right now.”

Andrew sighed and walked to the side of the bed closest to her, withdrawing his phone. He held it out between them, pressed the number and put it on speaker.

“Are you ready so soon, buddy?”

Megan’s eyes shot up to Andrew’s as a man’s voice on speaker filled the room. Andrew was looking at her, not holding back, and spoke.

“I am,” he said quietly, his eyes searching hers. “I’ll get my official discharge date when I return and email you – but yes. I’d like the position, and let’s move forward with looking for an airplane. Megan has my power of attorney and access to my accounts, if you need a deposit on a good one. I’d like to see it before signing the papers though.”

Her mouth dropped open in shock and she put out a hand, bracing herself on the door frame.

... *Andrew was leaving the Air Force?*

“Of course.”

“Thank you, Thumper. I really appreciate the job offer.”

“Welcome aboard, Flyboy... just let me know when you are flying back, so we can set up your insurance and start scheduling flights for you.”

“Will do.”

He closed the phone, not looking away from her.

“I was intending to talk to you first, but I have nothing to hide from you, ever. Everything I say or do is for us, our home, our family, and our lives together. I would never jeopardize any of that, Megan,” he said quietly. “I need you to trust me.”

“I do trust you – but that sounded so secretive, so sneaky, that I instantly worried if...” and grew quiet, realizing just how condemning her next words would be. “I worried that you were planning on leaving me and the fortune teller was wrong.”

“She was wrong,” he said softly, throwing the phone on the bed and pulling her forward, hugging her. “I’m never leaving you, and the thought of doing so in a few days to return to Afghanistan is making me sick to my stomach. My home is here, in my arms, and I’m tired of being gone.”

“I’m so sorry, Andrew,” she whispered, cradling his head to her and stroking his hair. “I do trust you, but I get so scared sometimes.”

“I know you do – but I’m here for you. You can talk to me if you are scared, because I have those same fears.”

She hesitated and looked at him as he angled his head upwards.

“You think I don’t worry about some local guy hitting on you while I’m gone? That maybe you would get sick of us being apart? Everything in me feels like this is a dream – and I’m scared to do something to cause it all to fall apart,” he admitted openly. “I wanted to talk to you first, to see what your thoughts were on the whole idea, and we’ve been so busy that I never had the chance to.”

“I thought you loved the Air Force,” she questioned, stunned.

“Turns out that I love *you* a little more,” he teased, chuckling quietly before smiling at her. “I want to come home to my hot wife and make lots of babies, hold her in my arms, and spoil her rotten. Does any of that sound like it’s going to be a problem?”

Megan felt tears sting her eyes as she stared at his smile.

“I love you,” he repeated softly, “Never wonder or doubt it. I would give up everything to see your smile every single day – and never look back.”

“I love you too,” she breathed, and moved to kiss him tenderly. She pressed the softest kiss against his lips and heard him sigh happily, just before she shivered... and he laughed.

“Let’s get you into my shirt and under the covers,” he smiled. “I love that pink sheer thing, but you need something a bit comfier right now. I bet your tea is getting cold, too.”

She nodded and smiled shyly at him, reaching for his t-shirt. Andrew got up to get a Tupperware container that had Band-Aids, ointment, and other items inside. She jerked on the baggy shirt and slipped into the bed, as he turned to sit on the edge.

It was all just so domestic, so cozy, and so unbelievable that she could have him at her side every single day.

“Are you sure about coming home?” she asked nervously, and saw him look up, before nodding.

“I’ve been thinking about it since my last visit, if you really want to know,” he began, and reached under the blanket, fishing out one of her feet. She spotted two blisters right away as she listened to him speak while putting Neosporin on it. “I’ve always kept my nose down, focused, and tried to find little bits of excitement to keep me from getting bored. I had a high school teacher that used to say, ‘*Eyes on your own paper!*’ - so long as I didn’t look up, the Air Force was enough... you know?”

He put a Band-Aid on her foot – and spoke again as he looked at her.

“But when you landed in my lap?” he smiled tenderly at her. “I looked up, Megan. I looked up into a pair of hazel eyes that swallowed me whole... and suddenly I wanted a different kind of excitement in my life, one that would never fade, but only grow over time.”

He lifted her foot and kissed the tip of her toe playfully – causing her to laugh nervously as she tried to pull her foot away.

“You are utterly thrilling to me, and I am hopelessly addicted to you – to us.”

She met his smile and held out her arms towards him.

“Then come home,” she said simply - and saw his smile widen as he quickly put down the container onto the floor beside the bed. He tugged her ankle, pulling her down in the bed, and crawled upwards to her, before flopping down beside her, gathering her in his arms. He kissed her temple as she melted against him, burying her face against the base of his throat, breathing him in.

“I love you,” she whispered and felt him kiss her hair, before pressing his cheek against her head.

“And I love you – always and forever.”

CHAPTER 25



RIPTIDE



SAYING goodbye to Megan had been brutal... yet almost welcoming in a weird way. This would be the very last time he ever had to part from her, and he intended to discuss his departure from the Air Force once he got back. In the meantime, he was planning on socking as much money away as possible in order to help things along until he got on his feet.

Thumper had pulled him aside at Flyboys, offering him the position, and had been quite candid in the conversation between them.

“You know you have options – even if they seem scary,” Thumper had begun out of the blue as he was showing him around the hangar. “We’re getting ready to break ground for a lot with more tie-downs, and putting in another hangar to store our planes. We’re getting a little cramped.”

“I wondered...”

“My wife is trying to start another branch that won’t be as much of a school, but rather focusing on charter flights in southwest Texas – giving us a stopping point for fuel that we can control.”

“She’s smart.”

“Harley is brilliant,” Thumper corrected, smirking. “And ambitious – just like her brother. Both are always looking forward, except she’s looking where she’s walking, whereas Alpo is just at a full sprint, expecting the ground to be there.”

“This is some setup you have,” Andrew began quietly, looking around. “I never imagined you’d do so well... no offense.”

“We’ll have a spot for an extra plane...” – and his words hung in the air between them as Andrew looked at the other man who was watching him.

“You’ll make money overseas with the hazardous duty pay and benefits,” Thumper said bluntly. “But there is a lot to be said for being able to control your schedule, have dinner with your wife every evening, and being able to tuck your children in.”

Andrew swallowed in dawning comprehension.

“You won’t get rich here,” the other pilot chuckled in awareness. “But you will have a lot more freedom – and as an employee, you can store your plane here for free. You supply your plane, we’ll supply your students. It’s that simple.”

“I don’t have a plane.”

“...Yet,” Thumper interjected, and nodded. “We’re always on the lookout, and it would take nothing to get you going once you have something. If you need a starter, you can use one of the Cessnas until you get your feet under you.”

“I need to think about this... and talk to Megan.”

“Of course,” Thumper agreed. “I’m just putting out a possibility for you. It doesn’t work for everyone. You might want something with a bit more stability, like working for Delta or American – you might even want to do charter flights, which is only as needed. Vapor opted to stay in the Air Force and took a spot at another base in the States. You have a lot of avenues, but I know I wouldn’t make a decision without talking to my better half either.”

Only for Armadillo to walk in at that moment with Romeo, both standing at the doorway of the hangar.

“So?” Romeo began with an easy smile on his face. “Is he in?”

“C’mon now, Riptide,” Armadillo grinned. “It ain’t so bad, but it is a whole different rodeo.”

“Do you ever miss Ghazni... or flying a Falcon?” Andrew asked nervously, feeling like this was all too good to be true. First Megan, then how beautiful their life was when they were together, the fact that they were trying for a baby already - and now this?

All three men looked at each other silently, before looking at him.

“Not in the slightest,” Romeo said grimly.

“Nope,” Thumper agreed.

“I’d rather pop a squat in a den of angry rattlesnakes than to watch someone go down in flames again,” Armadillo said bluntly, shocking Andrew, and causing the other guys to laugh. “That’s Texan for a ‘HECK NO’ vote from me, brother. I would never go back – not after seeing Delilah pregnant, delivering our babies, or holding her close every night. My family is first, and always will be.”

“You have a gift with words,” Romeo chuckled, slapping Armadillo on the shoulder.

... And Andrew sighed, shaking his head at the memories as he walked back into the base, dropping his things on his bunk and unpacking. He felt several sets of eyes on him – which seemed almost to be standard protocol when someone came back from vacation lately, and glanced up.

“So how was your trip?” Scarecrow asked bluntly, not holding back. The man was lying in his bunk, chewing on a stick of beef jerky, and watching him. “Is that place in Yonder as nice as what I’ve heard whispered? I mean, no one really comes out and says anything, but I know people are starting to talk about when Reaper leaves to go back home.”

“I forgot about that,” Andrew admitted and hesitated. There had been some talks between the guys on whether or not Reaper would sign on again since he had taken over after

Reilly. Most were laying odds that he would go home, since his family was there waiting.

“Are you wanting command?”

“Me? No. I’m not ready, nor close enough in rank.”

“Panic and Inferno are the only two that have been here the longest – and no offense to either? I’m not sure I want either of those knuckleheads in command.”

“What about Ricochet or Copperhead?”

“Ricochet has the rank to move upwards thanks to Reaper, but I don’t think he’s going to be a ‘lifer’ either. Copperhead – no. Definitely not.”

“Why do you say that?”

“You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“He went and married some chick with four kids,” Scarecrow whispered in a hushed voice, looking stunned. “Four kids? I thought the guy had a screw loose, but there must be several – can you imagine? Four freakin’ kids...”

“I’d like four someday,” Andrew admitted, and saw the other guy’s eyes widen in horror.

“Seriously? Not me – I don’t think I ever want to get married or have kids. I mean, there’s the whining, crying, the diapers, and they are nothing but a bunch of snot-running petri dishes with legs.”

Andrew gaped in shock before chuckling.

“Tell me how you really feel, Scarecrow.”

“I feel single,” the man said bluntly, biting into his beef jerky again and chewing thoughtfully. “I feel really single, and would like to keep it that way.”

“With opinions like that – you just might, brother.”

The other man grunted and Andrew looked up, noticing a few empty bunks for the first time.

“Where’s Inferno and Outfield?”

“Flew out this morning to Texas – which is why I was asking you about it. Everyone seems to be going there... and coming back hitched. Hence the reason I’m not going,” Scarecrow shrugged. “Here, I’m safe from whatever’s in the water over there.”

“Nothing’s in the water...”

“We’ll see about that.”



TWO DAYS LATER, Andrew was at the computer, emailing Megan and doing a little digging around on his own.

Hey Sexy,

I’m back on base and missing you terribly. I couldn’t sleep last night because I didn’t have my girl curled at my side. How are you holding up? I never meant to make you cry when I left... and while I hated leaving, there’s a comfort in knowing I’m going to do my best to make this the last time I ever have to.

I’ve asked to speak with Reaper and supposed to meet with him tomorrow. I’m nervous, but not because I’m doubting my decisions... but rather curious what he’ll say. The guy has always had my back and commands respect, even if he comes off as being aloof.

As soon as I have my departure date, I’ll let you know my flight home. It will take some time to get my papers in order... I think. I’m ready though, and I can’t wait to take our next steps together.

I love you,

Andrew

Clicking on the other window he had open, Andrew continued reading up on what departing the military was like. He was reading up on benefits, change of status, what to do next, how long it would take to get his DD-214 or unemployment. He wasn’t sure he could even collect

unemployment in the meantime, since he technically had an offer from Flyboys for a position.

... And heard a commotion in the hallway as Bubbles leaned into the doorframe and looked at him.

“Reaper’s called a meeting. He wants us in briefing right away.”

“Is something wrong?”

“Not sure.”

Logging out, Andrew got to his feet and followed the other airmen towards the briefing room. He saw several of the seats were already filled and took one toward the back, trying to keep off the radar, and feeling almost like he had a spotlight on him.

He wasn’t staying – and almost didn’t feel like he belonged there, or was one of them anymore. It wasn’t because of anything anyone did or said – but his own mindset. He was ‘*checked-out*’ mentally, and not in the right frame of mind.

My eyes are not on my paper... because my paper blew away, he thought silently, and fought back a smile, thinking of his Megan.

... And saw Reaper walk in, dropping two folders on the desk at the front of the room loudly, before leaning against the table.

“*Men*,” he said simply in greeting – and sat there for the longest time, before a few of them started to fidget slightly. “As you know, I’ve been here for quite a while... and that is the last time I will address you as such.”

Whoaaaaa boy, Andrew thought automatically, and there was a ripple of awareness around the room.

“... And have heard the whispers around me. I assure you that when I make my decision, make my plans, you all will know as soon as I am able to share – but in the meantime?” Reaper paused knowingly. “It’s just gossip – and I don’t like people sowing seeds of discourse when it’s already tough out here. Many of us have homes, families, and friends overseas –

so there is no reason to feed into that. I'm an open book, so ask."

Cavalier's hand raised immediately.

"Yes?"

"Sir, I'd like to speak with you after the meeting," Cavalier began, and saw several men roll their eyes or hang their heads in awareness. The man was ambitious – and he was obviously interested in discussing taking Reaper's position.

"I figured," Reaper chuckled easily, surprising them all. "We've had a few new faces arrive recently, and a few changes in status for some of you personally," he said – looking directly at Andrew. "But we have one more addition to our team..."

Every head swung to the side as Reaper walked over and opened the door.

"Team, I'd like to introduce you to..."

Andrew was surprised to see a woman walk into the room – and nearly laughed as he saw several shocked expressions as she openly cut off Reaper in mid-sentence.

"Afternoon, fellas..." she said simply, standing there with her hand on her hip. "I'd like to introduce myself. I'm Captain Stephanie Ely – but you may all address me as Piranha."

"You're a girl," Cavalier blurted out, shooting to his feet in horror. "Sir, begging your pardon, but I'm not taking orders from a girl who's small enough I could bench press, and..."

The woman looked at Cavalier coolly, took a step forward, and put a finger on his chest where his rank was attached with Velcro to his coveralls. You could have heard a pin drop in the room... and Reaper made a small sound in the distance, covering his mouth as he stood there silently.

Andrew realized the man was laughing – and turned back to Cavalier, as Piranha circled the man.

"You have a problem, airman?"

"I do..." Cavalier said bluntly, not backing down.

“Captain, huh?” she said simply, pointing at his rank again.

“Yes. Duh. We’re the same rank...”

“Good,” she smirked – and before anyone could say a thing or react, Piranha drew back and punched the man... hard. Andrew winced as he heard the hollow pop of the other man’s nose and his grunt of pain as he collapsed in his chair, holding it and looking at her in shock.

“Let me tell you right now, don’t mistake me for being some weak, apron-wearing, fragile woman. I’ve worked hard to make rank, and you’ll do well to learn it.”

A couple of guys chuckled nervously as she leaned forward towards Cavalier who was sitting there, holding his nose, and glaring at her.

“I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty, captain...” she whispered, and then straightened up, speaking over his head. “And I earned my call sign for a reason. Anyone else got a problem with me being a girl?”

“No, sir,” everyone said in unison.

“Meeting adjourned,” Reaper chuckled. “Cavalier, get to medical and get that taken care of. Piranha, a moment – if you will? The rest of you, we’ll be meeting at oh-700 tomorrow morning, in here.”

Andrew got to his feet along with everyone else... except Scarecrow – who turned and looked at him.

“You okay?”

“I’m in so much trouble,” the other pilot whispered, looking utterly horrified at whatever was going through his head. He kept glancing between Andrew and the new captain that just made her presence known. The man was pale with sweat dotting his brow, as he looked at Andrew again. “Help me, ‘cause I’m not ready for *any* of this.”

“Ready for *what* exactly?”

“I think I’m in love.”



THREE DAYS LATER, Andrew knocked on the door frame of Reaper's office and saw him speaking with Ricochet. The two looked up, and Andrew had almost turned around when he heard Reaper's voice.

"C'mon in. We were just discussing you."

Andrew turned slowly and put on an easy smile, trying to hide the fact that he was really nervous about being the subject of anyone's conversation – much less right before he was going to leave them all.

"Have a seat," Reaper instructed, pointing to the seat farthest from the door. He walked around Ricochet's seat and took the empty one... only to see the other pilot lean over and shut the door.

Uh oh...

"What did you want to discuss?" Reaper said simply, cutting all the niceties and getting to the heart of the matter. "I know you requested to speak with me, but I could not get away from a few meetings that cropped up unexpectedly."

"Well, sir... I'd like to discuss my career with the Air Force," he began, and saw the two men share a look.

"Funny, we were just discussing that too."

There was something in Ricochet's voice that instantly put him on edge. If Andrew wasn't nervous before – he certainly was now. It never was good to have your commanding officer and squadron leader focused on you, discussing you in private – especially before you were about to drop a bombshell.

"Oh yeah?" he choked out as his voice cracked, looking between the two men... and then spotted his personnel folder on the desk. Reaper laid a hand down slowly on the folder and picked it up, turning it over, before lacing his fingers under his chin, looking pensive. "Um, what were you discussing?"

"Your tenure and rank..."

“You were?! Oh, um, really? Hmm, I guess great minds think alike – eh?”

He was going to need a shower at this rate. His deodorant was failing him, and there was a distinct patch of moisture on his upper lip.

“Shall we start... or did you want to begin first, lieutenant?”

Lieutenant... not Riptide.

Alarms started firing in his brain, and he felt his intestines rumble painfully. Sitting there, he wondered what was in that file – and what had put him under the microscope. He wasn’t a saint by any means, and had done quite a few screw-ups in the past before really settling down somewhat. It wasn’t until now that he even cared, but nothing could affect his relationship with Megan.

“Why don’t you go f-first?” Andrew invited, hating the way his voice broke again. He was thirty-one, soon to be thirty-two, and sounded like a pre-pubescent boy at this moment.

“Let’s see,” Reaper drawled, opening the folder. “Graduated bottom of your class at the Academy...”

“Huh, the bottom – eh?” Ricochet interjected in a grim voice.

“Then there was a brigadier general’s daughter...”

Reaper looked up from the folder, just as Ricochet swatted him on the shoulder and whispered, “You stud. Hope she was worth it.”

“No,” Riptide balked, feeling light-headed and sick. “Not at all, and I don’t even remember her name. It was a stupid move on my part.”

“Yes, it was,” Reaper agreed quietly, flipping through another page. “A reprimand for conduct unbecoming an officer - *three times*,” he said, looking up at him and giving a slow whistle of appreciation before his eyes widened in shock.

“Another incident regarding destruction of government property...”

“Whoa!” Riptide balked immediately. “*Now wait a second?! Did they put that in there? That’s not even funny, guys. They said that if I did community service that it wasn’t going to have...*” – and stopped, as he saw both men were trying not to laugh.

“We’re just screwing with you,” Ricochet guffawed, slapping him on the shoulder again. “Congratulations again on your wedding.”

“You are?” he said weakly. “Oh man, I don’t feel so hot.”

“No puking,” Reaper said firmly – handing him a trash bin, and Andrew accepted it.

“Y’all, that wasn’t funny...”

“Oh, it was hysterical,” Reaper replied quickly before Ricochet could. “You were singing like a canary, too. So, you did community service for something? Anything you want to share with your friends?”

“It’s not in there?”

“No – just a wild guess.”

“Y’all weren’t talking about me?” Andrew stared at the two of them.

“Oh we were,” Reaper volunteered – and held out a hand toward Ricochet.

“Hold your darn horses,” Ricochet snapped at Reaper, leaned forward, and slapped the other man’s hand away, frowning, before looking back at Andrew. “Whatcha need, Riptide?”

“I’m not renewing my contract and need to know my date...”

“To go home,” Reaper said in unison with Andrew, and looked back at Ricochet, holding out his hand. “Pay up.”

“Dang it...”

“I’m telling you, the pull of that wedding ring is awfully strong.”

“So is making sure you never have to worry about money ever again when your wife has done nothing but struggle her whole life,” Ricochet snapped, and slapped a twenty-dollar bill in Reaper’s outstretched hand. The man was smirking, and his dark eyes were creased from the rare smile that touched his face. “Don’t you dare tell Destiny I bet you.”

“Y’all laid bets on... me?” Andrew said weakly in disbelief.

“If I wasn’t under contract, I’d be home with Sophie and Ben...”

“If I ever hit the lotto – I’m off like a prom dress...”

“Really?” Andrew whispered, looking at the two of them in shock. He thought they were both dedicated and driven, ‘lifers’, or career men who would end up being one of those older men working in Washington D.C. or something someday.

“Yup. I’ve got my date circled on the calendar,” Reaper admitted.

“Same.”

“What’s my date?”

“Where’s my formal letter of resignation?” Reaper countered – and Andrew hesitated. “I’m kidding. This poor guy is a nervous wreck. Do I scare you or something?”

“Let’s go with ‘Something’ – and I’ll go type one up now.”

“Friday,” Reaper smiled. “Your date is this Friday, believe it or not. I thought you would have been in my office a week ago. So go book your flight home, tell your wife, and get me that resignation letter.”

“Really?” he breathed in surprise. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Reaper replied, and looked at Ricochet. “And we both like smoked brisket. When we get home – I

expect to have a cookout so I can meet both of your wives and introduce you to Sophie.”

“And cornbread pudding,” Ricochet added, causing Reaper to roll his eyes. “There’s nothing better than a good cornbread pudding made from scratch.”

“Yeah, there is: brisket.”

“I would be happy to have you both over,” Andrew admitted, realizing they were just normal, everyday guys like him. “I’ll bring a smoker to Flyboys and we can light the bonfires.”

“Now you’re talking...”

“Keep this between us for a few more days, please,” Ricochet began and hesitated, looking at Reaper. “We’ve got a few grumbles in the squadron, and one or two are not happy about Piranha – *at all.*”

“That was a heckuva an entrance...” Reaper admitted. “I couldn’t exactly bust her that easily either. They were both equal rank so he couldn’t say that a superior officer hit him, plus – and I can’t believe I’m going to say this – she’s a woman,” his voice was really quiet when he said that, like someone was listening or he was concerned about voicing that. “It emasculates Cavalier to say a woman broke his nose, she could file a harassment claim, it could be an entire mess... and while I’m not one to let something go?” he paused. “I’m letting *this* go for now – and she can obviously handle herself, or she’ll hand him his trousers.”

“I can’t wait for the day,” Ricochet chuckled. “The man’s a little arrogant, and reminds me a bit too much of Vapor and Paradox combined.”

“Heaven help me... but I guess it could be worse?”

“How?”

“He could act like Inferno.”

All three men exchanged a look – and burst out laughing in a shared, silent understanding. Inferno was a wild child, and you never knew what he was going to say or do next... you just

knew whatever the man set his mind to, things were about to get interesting!

“Go,” Reaper and Ricochet said in unison, before sharing a smirk.

You don't have to tell me twice, Andrew thought wildly and left the room quickly, almost running into Bubbles.

“Hey Riptide, is it time for P.T.?” the man smiled easily. “You were in Reaper’s office? Is everything okay?”

“Yes,” Andrew began distractedly, and then glanced back at the guy. He was simply too nice, and sincerely glad that wasn’t his wingman. If he had to have someone at his side, he wanted that person to have a bit of pent-up issues so when he snapped, he would take down the bad guy.

Bubbles... was ‘bubbly’. The man looked like he would cheerfully adopt every stray in any neighborhood, regardless if they had rabies or parvo. He was easy-going, nothing bothered him, and...

Andrew hesitated, realizing where he’d run into someone like that before – at Flyboys. Ghost was upbeat and chipper about everything... and then he looked at Bubbles.

Something was different.

The man was always smiling, always being positive about random stupid things, but it didn’t meet his eyes. The man’s face might be smiling, but his eyes said differently. This man had seen the pit of hell and clawed his way out... and the smile that was overtly cheery, suddenly looked more like a grimace.

“Are you okay?” Andrew asked, the question drawn from him before he could stop himself.

“Of course,” Bubbles replied in that cheery tone. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

... But there it was – the dead, broken, ravaged look of a very damaged man who was way too close to the point of no return.

“Just a question,” he began, and hesitated. “You know, you should get away and visit some friends a couple of us have back in Texas. No cost to stay there, free food, friendship, you’ll have access to a plane if you want to putter around the skies. They would welcome you right in and everyone needs a change of scenery sometimes.”

The man let out a ragged sigh and looked away, hiding his expression.

“You might be right,” Bubbles said quietly. “Let me think about it.”

“The offer stands – and I’m flying out on Friday. We could make the haul and chat, if you want. I don’t think they would deny you leave, if you asked... in fact, I could put in a good word.”

“I’ll think about it,” – and walked off.

Andrew stood there for a moment... and walked back into Reaper’s office a second time, before going to email Megan and book his flight.

CHAPTER 26



MEGAN



“WHAT?”

Megan stared up from the floor where she lay, surrounded by several concerned faces.

“You fainted,” Everly blurted out in a panic. “How’s your head? What’s going on? Did you eat breakfast? How many fingers am I holding up? Are you on medication? Are you diabetic? Low blood pressure? Anything? Do you have a history of fainting spells? Are you pregnant?”

She lay there, her mind reeling, as the words came flying *at* her, but nothing was clicking. Taking inventory of her body, she expected to have a headache or blood pooling somewhere like in the movies when you had a head wound. It would go right along with how her day started. It had been a heckuva morning... in fact, one for the record books.

First, she awoke and there was an email from Andrew that he was coming home – *in three days*. Secondly, she had an email from Deacon Josephs – Cajun – requesting to meet her for lunch so they could talk. If that wasn’t enough excitement and anxiety, then the ‘fun’ continued with a flat tire, her coffee maker not turning on, and her pants splitting at the seam the second she sat down in her car?

Hearing the words ‘*Are you pregnant?*’ certainly tipped the scales.

“It’s been a morning,” she repeated numbly, looking at Everly and grabbing her hand in a silent plea. “I need to think.”

“Everyone out,” Everly ordered simply – and got up from where she was kneeling beside Megan, shutting the door. “Spill it.”

“I can’t be pregnant already,” Megan whispered.

“First off, yes you can... and if you aren’t pregnant, then I’m going to recommend we take you to the emergency room. I’m a little freaked out to have a friend be talking one minute and then just drop.”

“I feel better.”

“Because you are lying prone...” Everly quipped. “When’s the last time you had your period?”

“Well...” and hesitated, frowning. “I just stopped my pill about a month ago, so I haven’t even gone through a cycle yet and...”

Everly held up her hand, smirking, stopping Megan immediately.

“That’s not what I asked you – nor are you the physician, my friend. It most certainly can if your timing was right. I mean, that is why they say ‘*it can only take one time*’...”

“It’s been two months,” Megan whispered. “I thought it was because of the hormone fluctuations.”

“Could be.”

“You think I’m pregnant?”

“Sore boobs? Nausea? Any vomiting?”

“My chest is,” Megan hesitated, smiling nervously as it began to hit her. “I thought it was the change in hormones.”

“You might be spot on there,” Everly chuckled. “Why don’t we run to the store after work, get a test, and some prenatal vitamins? Then, if it’s positive, we’ll set you up with Mallory or Shelby over at the clinic for everything to be official, start getting things covered with your insurance, and

you can ask as many questions as you want. I handle things after they come out of your uterus... not before.” Everly grinned – and hugged her. “I’m so happy for you and Riptide.”

“He’s going to b-be...” Megan looked at her in dawning awareness that she and Andrew were going to have a baby – and promptly burst out crying.

“Awww, honey...”

“I’m so flippin’ happy,” she wailed, and laughed as the exam room door opened and an outstretched arm shoved a box of Kleenexes into the room, tossing it onto the floor near where she lay. It was like a soldier lobbing a grenade into a precarious situation.

“You are *definitely* pregnant... and I’m pretty sure I’m not alone in thinking that. Now, dry your tears, breathe, and I’m going to text Mallory. I think we can skip the home test and just go for the concrete-stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Bloodwork.”

Megan made a face and leaned away, shaking her head.

“Oh, I hate needles. I cry when they swab my arm...”

Everly’s mouth dropped open in shock, just before she laughed in disbelief.

“Are you kidding me? You work in the medical field.”

“I’m serious. It’s a big phobia of mine and...”

“Um, you are going to be getting acquainted really well with needles over the next several months, so time to put on your big-girl-britches and get over that phobia really fast,” Everly prompted. “Besides, it will be worth it all in the end.”



THAT EVENING, Everly, Megan, and unexpectedly several of the girls were waiting in the parking lot at Shelby’s OB/GYN clinic that closed ten minutes ago – and they waved her in the door.

Within seconds, Megan was pulled into a room... and before she could blink, cry, yelp, or warn anyone – it was over. Everly had her hands on either side of her face, saying ‘*Look at me! Look at me!*’ several times – while Shelby held her arm and Mallory went right after her with a needle, smiling proudly as she swapped out vial after vial from the tiny little tube sticking out of her arm. Megan was turning her head against Everly’s hands, stunned that they were already drawing her blood, when Mallory smiled knowingly.

“Sometimes in the E.R., you have to be really quick and efficient when you’ve got a ‘wild’ one. I’ve been called into a room more than once to help a nurse who couldn’t get a vein – and you can just call me Tyler’s Best Vampire, ‘cause I’m gonna get your blood before you have a chance to fight me off...”

“I didn’t even feel it,” Megan said gratefully.

“I’d say it was all in the wrist, but it’s not,” Mallory winked. “It’s a skill. I might burn scrambled eggs – but this – I’ve got this hands-down.”

“Can you be the only person that draws my blood?”

“Perks of being nearly family,” the doctor said gently, smiling and nodding. “Make sure you ask for me or Shelby every time – nothing against the other girls because they are amazing, but if it helps you relax, we’ll just do it.”

“You don’t mind?”

“Less stress for *you*, equates to less stress for *me*,” Mallory chuckled. “Or at least that is what Joshua says.” As she finished up, put a cotton ball on her arm and taped it down deftly, she handed her a cup.

“Go to the bathroom, girl – because I’m hungry, and we are all going for Mexican food. I’m craving some cheese enchiladas. Joshua and Caleb were going flying this evening to show him the ‘moos’ over at the Baird farm.”

“You could always reach out to Toni... and I could go for enchiladas, too,” Karen said easily, shrugging. “I’m sure she wouldn’t mind.”

“Who?”

“Toni Baird,” Karen reiterated. “I grew up with her and went to high school with the girl. She’s a bit bold, but if we can handle Glory...”

“Hey!”

“And we love you,” Karen finished, grinning. “Toni’s family has owned that farm for ages.”

“I might take you up on that, but if I know Caleb – it’s baby moos this week, and it will be something else next week. Last week we had to have tomatoes at every meal,” Mallory sighed. “Poor Joshua hates tomatoes.”

“Oh no.”

“He ate them though,” Mallory shrugged – and looked at Megan. “Why aren’t you in the bathroom already?”

Ten minutes later, all eight women were hugging her... and then promptly running out the door for dinner. Megan had her first appointment scheduled in a month for a routine visit and her first sonogram.



FRIDAY, Andrew’s flight was arriving late, and she was so excited to see him. It was crazy to think that he was coming home and not leaving again. This was not what she anticipated, and so very welcome. He was choosing to be at her side, through it all, and made the decision on his own without her pushing him. It meant the world to her, and she hoped he never regretted it.

They would soon have so much in their lives that it might feel slightly overwhelming, but she also couldn’t wait to tell him about the baby. Some of the girls said it was too early to tell everyone – and a few said to tell him now, because this wasn’t something she was going to experience alone.

He was going to be a father.

Megan was sitting on the bench in baggage claim, waiting on his flight to arrive. It had been delayed due to a storm and

should be landing any time now. Andrew had texted from Athens, Greece during one of his layovers... and it was so hard not to blab the news to him.

Hey Sexy, just landed in Athens. I've got about twenty minutes until my next flight.

That's not long at all...

Nope. Not cool. We had to sit on the runway for a bit in Kabul.

We?

Well, you are on the move – and that's all that matters.

Exactly. We just sprinted to our gate and grabbing a snack. I've got another pilot flying in with me – do you mind that I said we'd give him a ride to Flyboys?

Of course not. I don't mind at all.

Thanks!

I can't wait to see you

I can't wait to see you too – oh man, they are loading us up already. So much for my snack and twenty minutes of texting. I'm ready to be home.

I'm ready to have you here. Just get something on the plane, my love.

Will do.

XOXO – see you soon!

Love you!

Andrew texted a picture of him smiling – and there behind him, was another guy making a goofy face and giving him ‘rabbit ears’ by sticking up his fingers behind Andrew’s head.

She laughed, realizing that was just how the guys acted here... and exactly how they all had once been while stationed overseas. Some personalities were wilder than others, some a lot more stoic, and some were just exuberant, like Firefly, Alpo, or Sparky.

Pressing her nervous hands in her lap, she looked up as several tired people were starting to descend the walkway towards baggage claim. It was nearly ten o'clock at night and while this was a bit late for her... she was off of work the next few days.

Getting to her feet, she couldn't help the smile on her face as she saw Andrew's beloved eyes... and he literally began jogging forward, through the maze of people, throwing his arms around her seconds later as he picked her up, hugging her close. It was only a moment before he kissed her in welcome and sighed with happiness.

“Gosh, I’ve missed you,” he breathed, leaning forward to kiss her again.

“I’ve missed you too.”

... And saw him look back over his shoulder, not letting go of her.

“Hey Bubbles,” Andrew hollered, grinning. “Come meet my wife, Megan.”

“Did you say, Bubbles?”

“Yup,” he chuckled knowingly. “Have I mentioned that all of our call signs come from either screw ups, embarrassing moments, or distinctive traits – on and off the ground.”

“Bubbles? Really?”

“I’ll explain later...” he whispered under his breath as a man walked and extended his hand towards her.

“Mrs. Carter,” he began politely. “I really appreciate the ride.”

“And I really appreciate *you* keeping my Andrew company on the plane,” she replied easily, shaking his hand. “I’m sure it makes a long flight bearable to have a friend nearby to talk to.”

“Of course,” the man smiled widely. “Derek Thorne – but everyone calls me by my call sign, Bubbles.”

“She’ll call you Bubbles too, flyboy,” Andrew interrupted bluntly, causing the two of them to laugh easily as they exchanged a glance.

“I don’t think you have anything to worry about,” Megan soothed, laying a hand on her husband’s chest. “No offense, Bubbles.”

“None taken. I don’t dally around anyhow – and certainly not with a friend’s wife. I’m just here to relax, unwind, make a few new friends, getting a little peace and quiet.”

“Then you’ve come to the right place,” Megan began, and Andrew nodded. “Shall we head out?”

“Let’s do,” Andrew said enthusiastically, rubbing his stomach. “I’ve got a hankering for some egg salad sandwiches...” he said casually, and winked at her. Megan burst out laughing at the silent joke as her face got warm with embarrassment.

“I think I’ve missed something,” Bubbles said easily, smiling at the two of them. “And it’s not hard to see what. Congratulations on your marriage, you two... and I’m happy for you.”

“Do you have someone special back home?” Megan asked simply, and saw the man’s face fall. “We can find you someone if you are interested? Glory just loves playing matchmaker and...”

“No!”

The man snapped, nearly shouting the word at her – and Megan’s mouth dropped open in shock and Andrew drew up protectively, looking at the other man. Her husband put himself between the two of them, almost like he was protecting her.

... *But from what?*

“Not now... *and not ever*, brother,” Andrew said firmly, staring at the man dead in his eyes. “That’s my *wife*, and no one talks to her like that. If meeting someone or getting set up is a trigger or you’ve got something going on... so be it. My wife does not deserve any of that, and if you yell at her again, it will be the last audible sound you make.”

“Andrew!” she hissed in disbelief, looking around quickly.

“*That’s my wife...*” he repeated, and saw Bubbles look past her husband to her.

“I apologize, Mrs. Carter,” Bubbles said quietly. “I would prefer not to be set up with someone, so if you’ve a matchmaker among you – keep her far from me... please.”

“Thank you,” Andrew said quietly, and held out his hand to the other man as Megan watched the whole interaction – and melting.

She had never seen him so protective, so assertive when it came to her and his words just made her tummy clench with happiness. He was protecting his family – even though he didn’t know about the baby – and would not let anyone talk to her angrily.

Gosh, that was incredibly hot... she thought wildly, unable to take her eyes off of Andrew.

“I’m sorry I pressed a button,” she said evasively, before tugging on Andrew’s arm to get him to walk to the car. The faster they got Bubbles to Flyboys – the faster they could go home, and she could surprise him. She must have pictured his reaction a thousand times in the last three days... and it was finally time. “See? We’re good. Right, Bubbles?”

“Yes ma’am.”

The car ride out to Flyboys was full of simple conversations about little things. Something was on Andrew's mind, as that protective stance was still there with him. He had one arm draped over the back of her car seat, which made her wonder if something else was going on with the stranger in the back of the vehicle.

Pulling up to Flyboys – she saw Thumper was standing there, yawning, in a pair of sweatpants and a blue Flyboys t-shirt. He waved easily as she pulled up and Andrew got out of the car with Bubbles, turning to her.

“Wait here.”

Nodding, she watched the duo walk up to the other man and introduced him. The trio talked for a few moments before Thumper extended his hand, shaking the visitor's hand, and led him into the building. Andrew was already on his way back to the car.

“Is everything okay?” she asked candidly.

“Yes,” Andrew said quietly, before giving her a quick smile as she pulled out of the parking lot, heading towards the house. “I'm just really glad I'm not him. Some of what he confided on the way here I don't feel like I can share, but that man has problems... and I don't envy him.”

“Is he going to be alright?”

“Yes. I don't think he realizes just how much he needs this vacation – and I hope he can relax and enjoy his time here in town. He needs some fresh air, a new outlook, and something to look forward to.”

She felt Andrew touch her fingers on the seat – and smiled.

“Just like you,” he said quietly. “I am looking forward to waking up next to you every morning. I'm so glad I have you in my life, Megan...”

“Same,” she said thickly, trying desperately not to cry at his sweet, tender words. “I've got a surprise for you at the house.”

“A little negligée for your beloved husband?”

“I do have a new nightgown, but no,” she laughed easily.

“You want an egg salad sandwich?”

“Would you quit?!” she chuckled, shaking her head. “I swear you have a one-track mind...”

“Very,” he agreed quickly, grinning at her and acting so adorable. He was flirting with her, tracing the shell of her ear, and trying to get her interested in what would happen behind closed doors when they were alone. *Uh, hello -newsflash...?* She was completely interested, yet wanted to share the news first. “My one-track mind is full of potholes, too.”

“I don’t even want to know what you consider a ‘pothole’ – do I?”

“Probably not...”

They shared a look as she put the car into park and turned it off.

“Wanna hit the hot tub tonight, babe?” he invited suggestively.

“I can’t...”

“Oh hon,” he protested in disbelief, looking at her in surprise. “Why didn’t you tell me it was broken? I would have ordered another for you right away.”

“I’ll be fine and it’s not the end of the world,” she said evasively. “Let’s go inside. I’ll get your surprise for you.”

“Gimme some hints please - let’s use our senses and I’ll guess my surprise,” he prompted, getting out of the car and getting his bag, before smiling at her. “Is it something I can *touch?*”

“Nope,” she smiled. “Maybe eventually... but no.”

“Can I *taste* it?”

“Definitely not...”

“Smell?”

Megan laughed nervously and put the key in the deadbolt, turning it quickly, because he was guessing rapidly, trying to

‘eke’ out what her surprise was before actually unveiling it.

“Mercy, I hope it never begins to smell...” she muttered appalled, and couldn’t imagine what was wrong if she started to have a scent from her placenta or uterus. That was nightmare fuel almost immediately.

“Can I *hear* it?” he asked in frustration.

“Eventually you might hear a little something...”

“Can I *see* it – or were you pulling my chain with one of the other questions?” he asked skeptically, and smiled at her with one eyebrow lifted almost sardonically as he stepped inside, dropping his bag onto the entryway floor and sighing. “Man, it’s good to be home.”

“Stay here and I’ll get your surprise.”

“Should I shut my eyes?”

“Oooh,” she taunted. “That’s a really good idea. I like the way you think. Yes, shut your eyes and get comfortable. I’ll be back in two seconds with your surprise.”

“Alright!” he yelped enthusiastically, rubbing his hands together as she walked off to keep from laughing at him. He obviously thought she was going to put something sexy on for him – and boy was he about to be shocked.

Running into the bedroom, she shut the door behind her and immediately changed into the cotton nightgown she’d bought at the store. It was so unappealing, so frumpy, and so blatantly obvious that it was a maternity gown, she’d grabbed immediately. The t-shirt was knee-length with a big red circle across the midsection that said ‘*Coming Soon to a Crib near You*’...

Megan yanked a few tissues from the Kleenex box on the dresser and took a deep breath, before opening the door silently. She cried at everything now - commercials, denied claims, etc.

“Are you ready...?” she drawled, and heard his soft laugh.

“Oh yeah I am, Sexy... come show your man his ‘*surprise*,’” he said huskily as she padded down the hallway

silently in her socks, fighting laughter, because she knew he was expecting something else.

... *Significantly something else*, she thought, putting her hand over her mouth to keep from giggling at the sight of him.

Andrew had stripped down completely except for his boxer shorts. He was plopped down on the couch, legs spread akimbo in front of him with his fingers laced behind his head, his eyes closed - and the smile on his face was everything.

She moved to stand in front of him, putting a hand on his knee to steady herself as she stepped over his outstretched leg... and saw him shiver in anticipation, almost laughing again in awareness that she had him completely fooled.

“Are you ready...?” she taunted softly.

“Oh gosh yes, Megan... this teasing me is killing me, hon – but don’t stop.”

“Then open your eyes, Flyboy,” she invited tenderly – and felt tears sting her eyes as she realized he was going to lose his mind when it hit him.

Andrew opened his eyes and met hers – and hesitated. His expression changed slightly from a wide grin... to confusion... to sheer amazement as his eyes landed on her midsection.

“*MEGAN!*” he balked, scrambling up from where he’d been laying sprawled out across the couch, reaching for her belly with his hands. He laid them flat on her stomach and looked up at her, his face full of wonder as his beautiful eyes glistened. “We’re gonna have a baby? Am I reading this right? You’re pregnant?”

“Yes,” she laughed tearfully, stroking and touching his temple tenderly. “We’re going to have a baby. I’m barely pregnant and just tested positive a few days ago – so I really am trying to be as careful as possible.”

“Oh gosh,” he balked, paling, and pulled her to the couch, urging her to sit beside him. “Can I get you anything? Are you hungry? Thirsty? Do you need some crackers or 7-Up? Are you nauseous... taking vitamins... are you...?”

Megan interrupted, touching his cheek.

“I’m healthy as could be,” she promised, teary-eyed. “I just get emotional easily, and my chest is sore. I passed out once, but...”

“*WHAT?* Are you alright? I won’t touch ‘em!” he balked immediately, holding up his hands. “I swear.”

“Um,” she began, flushing. “I hope you do, because I love you... and I’ve really missed my husband.”

“I missed you too, but I don’t want to do anything that could harm our baby or...”

“Andrew,” she laughed softly. “I’m going to be pregnant for nine months – and then recovering for another four to eight weeks after the birth. So, during all that time, I’m really hoping you can find it in you to ‘touch’ me at some point.”

“Are you mad – or scared?”

“Are you leaving me or changing your mind about a baby?”

“Never!” he said vehemently, and dropped to his knees on the floor, laying his head in her lap. “I’m never leaving either of you again. Even if we have a bushel of children and you tell me to get out – I’m still not going, Megan.”

“I would never do that... and we aren’t having a bushel of children.”

“Seven?” he teased, lifting his head.

“One?” she countered, smiling.

“Fourteen?”

“You’re going up?” she balked and shook her head. “Let’s start with one and see how things go.”

“One little angel from heaven,” he breathed, leaning forward to kiss her flat tummy through the t-shirt. “A piece of my heart – and a piece of yours, mixed so sweetly together. I am so excited to meet our little one.”

“I hope it has your eyes,” she whispered lovingly, touching his hair once more before tracing his eyebrows. “I love your eyes so very much, and the way you look at me.”

“I hope our baby has your gentle soul,” he whispered emotionally. “You are everything to me.”

“Same.”

“And I can touch you? It’s okay?”

“Egg salad sandwich time, husband,” she said huskily, and saw his eyes widen.

“Don’t tease, woman. That’s cruel...”

“Who’s teasing?”

Andrew sputtered for a moment, before scooping her up from the couch and carrying her straight back to their bedroom without any hesitation. As he kicked the door shut, he looked at her and smiled.

“I’ve been dreaming of those imaginary sandwiches like you wouldn’t believe, my love...” he murmured as he leaned forward to kiss her.

“Me too,” she uttered. “Now let’s get cookin’, mister...”

CHAPTER 27



RIPTIDE

Eight months later...



ANDREW NEVER IMAGINED life could be so blessedly wonderful, nor that he could be so happy doing something so mundane as working eight-to-five. Life was good and if he wasn't doing flights, he spent his down time volunteering at Flyboys... and surprisingly at the local high school.

One of the things that got him into the Academy was swimming and running track. While the town of Yonder didn't have a local pool... nor a swim team, they did have a small track team. Track was being taught by a very overwhelmed gym teacher who handled everything – football, baseball, track, etc.

It was kinda nice to help out and give to the community without getting in trouble for it first, he thought – and shook his head. I must be getting mature in my 'old' age.

... But the main reason he did all of this was two-fold: Megan – and his family.

He didn't want to be away from her any more than necessary, needing something to fill his downtime while she worked or enjoyed being around her friends. She was very close with some of the wives at Flyboys, and when she would come home from a girl's night out or their Saturday meetups – she was always so happy to see him.

The second reason was to be a part of the community for his child's sake. He wanted the Carter family to be known, welcomed, and to have every door open to his child later on. Growing up as a 'problem kid' had made things tough on him and looking back now, he knew he got the letters of recommendation from his principal because the man probably never thought he'd make it.

Andrew made it – graduated – excelled – and soared in the Air Force, only coming down from his mountain when he saw paradise in Megan's eyes. Leaving the Air Force was never on his radar, but it also felt better than anything he ever expected. There were no regrets, no doubts, and life was truly beautiful in a way he never...

"Riptide!" a voice hollered from the doorway at Flyboys where he was lost in thought, watching a student go through the preflight checks on a Cessna nearby. Alpo was jogging out to him, while Harley was waving from the doorway in almost a panic.

"What's going on?" Andrew blurted out, reaching for his cell phone in his pocket and wondering why it didn't go off. "Is it Megan?"

"Yup! Let's go, bro..." Alpo grinned. "I'll drive you, and Everly is taking Megan to the hospital right now. We're gonna meet them at the Labor & Delivery center. Romeo is going to finish up your day for you."

The two men jogged over towards the small car, and Andrew immediately hopped in the passenger side... and frowned.

"Hey my little bunny-rabbit," Alpo was saying to his wife as she was jogging towards them. "I'll be back shortly for us to go pick up the kids at Delilah's – but see if Harley will drive you just in case. Megan's going into labor..."

"Uh, can we go?" Andrew hollered pointedly.

"... And my boy might need someone to talk him down off the ceiling," Alpo chuckled, before kissing his wife and sliding into the car. Glory was backing away, waving and laughing

easily. Romeo was in the distance, also waving and saying something to Glory.

Everyone thought this was funny... except him.

He was a wreck.

Megan had thought to ‘prep’ the both of them for what to expect in the waiting room by watching labor and delivery videos online. She seemed really excited and thrilled to have this information at her fingertips, because she wasn’t sure what to expect. Every time they got together with the team, she was always asking different questions.

“What’s a contraction feel like?”

“When do you lose your mucus plug?” – this one grossed him out.

“How will I know that I’m going into labor?”

... And the list of questions went on and on.

The first video played in front of them like a train wreck you couldn’t look away from – so while being prepared and aware of what they could expect seemed like the best idea?

This was the worst idea his wife had ever come up with.

Andrew stared in shock - curling up bodily, wincing, and clutching the ‘family jewels’ like *he* was the one about to have the baby. Megan was staring at the screen with her mouth agape soundlessly as the woman on the computer had her feet up in stirrups, grunting, and... the baby’s head crowned.

The woman’s lower region was carefully filmed at an angle for decency, but you could still see some of what was happening. Her ‘area’ ‘morphed’ into something out of a nightmare as the biggest head in the world emerged, covered in ‘stuff’...

“What is *that*...?” he balked – and saw Megan was sobbing at the sight of the baby crowning. “Honey... I’m sure it’s not like...”

“Oh Andrew, it’s so *beautiful*,” Megan wept openly – and they ended up watching eight videos, her crying pathetically at

each one, and his testicles had crawled up inside of him so far they would never descend again.

Having a baby wasn't for the faint of heart!

"I can't wait to have our baby!" she wailed in sheer joy as he stared at her and slammed the computer closed. He'd reached his limit... and now it was here.

Megan was in labor.

He was going to have to watch those horror stories unfold before him in real life with no pause button, no skip, and no covering his eyes. If he screamed, fainted, or clutched himself in the delivery room after her nether regions expanded enough to let a semi-truck pass through them – she would never forgive him.

"Breathe," Alpo chuckled easily. "And whatever is going through your head right now – multiply it by ten."

"WHAAAAT?"

"Ow, man! That was my eardrum, you know."

"Multiply it by ten? ...Oh man, I might pass out."

"You wouldn't be alone – Valkyrie did."

"Oh my gosh... oh my gosh... oh my gosh..."

His heart was slamming in his chest as those images from the videos that once had made him feel lightheaded, were now flashing before his eyes. He wasn't sure how he was going to handle Megan in pain for hours, and knew it was part of having children, *buuuut*... they had very differing opinions of this process. He'd insisted she use some medication to help with the discomfort – and she told him 'no' repeatedly.

"Look," Alpo hesitated, glancing at him as he drove. "You are going to be okay, and Megan is going to have nature take over. Women can do this, and there is a definite reason we're not equipped with the same stuff."

"I can't handle her hurting..."

"Dude, I'm telling you – she knew what she was getting into when she said she wanted to have a baby."

“They don’t look like what’s on the formula bottles...”

“Nope,” Alpo chuckled. “Not for a few weeks at least, but you will be amazed and overwhelmed at just how beautiful you think that puffed up, fluid covered, mottled face is the first time you see it. When it’s yours, it’s so different.”

“Different *how*?”

“They handed me the twins and my brain stopped functioning because I couldn’t handle that much happiness in my soul,” Alpo said emotionally. “I was so excited to see them both, that Glory was okay, and that I was now a dad that when the kids peed on me... I was thrilled.”

“They *peed* on you?”

This was getting worse and worse, he thought fearfully.

“I still have the scrub top,” he bragged, grinning – and Andrew stared at him in shock. Obviously when the baby arrived and you got to hold it for the first time, some sort of weird psychosis takes you over and you do stupid things, he realized.

“Look, just a bit of advice from someone who won’t hold back or sugar coat it for you...”

Andrew looked at him, feeling his stomach curl painfully that he was about to get more bad news thrown in his direction.

“You need to focus on being there for her and push everything else down,” Alpo coached firmly. “She needs you, and is going to say or do some crazy things – but you need to support her, nod, and say ‘yes’ to everything, because she’s not in the same frame of mind as ‘Megan-twelve-hours-ago’ would have been.”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s going to be going into Mom-Mode and will be solely focused on getting through her labor and delivering her child. So if she wants ice, go get it. If she’s hot, uncover her and start fanning with a piece of paper. If she wants to walk

the halls, walk with her and hold your wife's hand... and when the baby is coming finally?"

"Y-Yes?" Andrew croaked aloud, staring.

"Hang on tight, because you both are in for the ride of a lifetime," Alpo smiled and slapped him on the knee. "I'm so happy for you – but are we getting out of the car or what, dude?"

"Huh?"

Sure enough, they were sitting in the parking lot of the hospital.

Andrew cursed and bolted out of the car, hearing Alpo's laughter behind him as a few other friends pulled up a second later.

"Where's he going?"

"First baby," Valkyrie chuckled, hollering behind him. "Don't pass out!" as Andrew ran – and skidded – into the delivery center.

"Hi – I'm looking for Megan Carter... about five-foot-six and yea-big around," he blurted out, and saw the receptionist grinning.

"Sir, they are all 'yea-big' around when they come here," she smiled easily and waved him over to the desk. Moments later, he had a plastic bracelet on his wrist, had forgotten his wallet on the desk and had to go back for it, and was being led through some automatic doors down a hallway.

... And heard a moan nearby.

... Another was whimpering.

... Another voice was groaning aloud saying, 'Jesus, take the wheel...'

NIGHTMARE. FUEL.

Andrew adjusted himself as things started to crawl upwards once more and knew he was close to fainting. This was his worst nightmare coming to life before his eyes and he felt like he was in the middle of an unknown world where

everything around you was coming to inflict pain on his wife – and he had to sit there and watch it... for A DAY.

The receptionist drew to a halt in front of a hospital room door and his heart was hammering so loudly, it sounded like the opening strains of ‘Down with the Sickness’ he heard on the radio this morning on the way to work... and about to start screaming like the lead singer!

“It’s going to be fine, Mr. Carter. Deep breaths, okay?” the receptionist urged, smiled, and opened the doorway to the room – and Andrew’s brain seized up in shock, anticipating the worst... and fell flat.

Megan was sitting on the hospital bed with all sorts of machines around her, smiling happily.

“Hey honey!” she beamed, waving at him in sheer delight.

“What’s going on?”

“I’m in labor...”

“But you’re... s-smiling?” he stammered, pointing at her. “And sitting. Where’s the stirrups and stuff?”

“I guess it comes later,” she shrugged and smiled at him. “Everyone is so nice, and they told me that I was at the beginning stages. My water broke, which is why I’m in here and not waiting at home.”

“They were going to send you *home*?” he gaped, shocked.

“I’m not dilated far enough to be admitted.”

“But you’re okay?”

“I’m a little hungry, but no. I’m fine. Some cramping and discomfort, but I’m charging through it like a trooper according to the nurse.”

“I’ll get you something...”

“Are you okay? You look really pale.”

“I’m a little nervous and need some coffee,” he said, trying to downplay his emotions right now. Maybe he did need some

coffee, because it would make him feel a little more prepped for this.

“Mmm,” she began, nodding. “They showed me where everything is but I’m kinda stuck walking around with this contraption...” she said, pointing to the I.V. stand. “If you walk out of the room and make a left – there’s a coffee station at the end of the hall. Could you maybe get me some Jell-O from the desk?”

“Sure thing, babe. You need anything else?”

“A whopping dose of patience,” she chuckled. “I’m ready to get this moving along so we can meet our baby.”

“Me too,” he said weakly.



HOURS LATER, it was a very different Megan – and he understood what Alpo had been trying to tell him. In the year they’d been married, she had never snapped at him... but she did now.

She was hurting, frowning intensely with each contraction, couldn’t sleep because she couldn’t get comfortable, and was getting on edge.

“If one more person decides to come in here and shove their mitt up my hoo-haa to examine me, only to tell me ‘*I’m gonna be a while...*’. It’s going to be ugly, Andrew, and you might see a whole new side of me.”

He was silent.

Eerily silent - like an animal sensing very real danger.

‘*Anything you say can be used against you in a court of law...*’ his brain volunteered. Andrew was already seeing a new side of Megan – and it was a little unnerving. His sweet wife was barking out orders, insisting on walking the hallways, asking him to get ice, telling him not to touch her, and then breaking down crying because he wasn’t touching her. Even now, he felt at a loss, and knew it was nothing compared to what she was going through.

Twenty minutes later, Megan was standing there in the hallway as a contraction rolled over her again, holding her stomach, glaring at him as she huffed and puffed through the pain, and clutching the I.V. post like a lifeline... before standing back upwards a few minutes later, a changeling.

She smiled at him.

“Whooooo! That was a good one,” she beamed. “Let’s head back to the room and tell them to check me again. I think we’re making progress... wait... nope, here’s another,” she blurted out and curled herself bodily, clutching her stomach, giving him the *You-Did-This-To-Me* stare once again.

Yeah, maybe they would have just the one kid, he thought numbly as a nurse walked past them. He flagged her down quickly.

“We’re heading back to the room. Can we get someone to check her again to see how we’re progressing?”

“Of course, Mr. Carter.”

He gathered Megan in his arms, trying to walk her slowly back to the room as she was glaring at him, huffing, and moving along, still clutching her stomach, and stopping every few feet.

“C’mon, honey... I’ve got you,” he whispered. “You are doing so good and I’m so proud of you right now. You’ve got this, and our baby is the luckiest child to have you as a mommy...”

He was whispering all sorts of gibberish distractedly, just focused on getting her back to the room and up in the hospital bed. It seemed crazy to walk her up and down the aisles, but the staff said it would help things progress along – so they had.

Now he was regretting it.

Megan was laboring, clutching his hand, as the doctor walked in. He almost warned the man about his wife’s threat and then realized this was going to happen regardless. It was a little unsettling to see people coming and going, looking up her hospital gown at a place he just absolutely adored – and knew it was all in a clinical manner... but *still*.

“Well, well, well...” the doctor said simply. “Today’s your lucky day, Mrs. Carter. You are dilated to a ten. Your doctor is walking from another delivery and scrubbing up right now.”

As if on cue, Mallory, Paradox’s wife, walked in.

“Hey girl,” the woman said easily, smiling at Megan. “Hey Riptide,” she threw in like he was a sidenote, as she grabbed a stool and rolled in-between Megan’s legs. “I hear you are ready to rock-and-roll, hon?”

Megan nodded, letting out a sob – and Andrew felt his heart breaking at the sound of desperation in his wife. She was hurting... because of him.

“You’ve got this,” he whispered, kissing her on the top of her head as she nodded, making weird little noises.

“Shhhh,” Mallory coached. “You are doing great but I need you to breathe, okay? I’m going to check to see how far in the canal the baby is when this contraction subsides slightly...”

Moments later, Mallory smiled.

“Alright, it’s time to start pushing. I want you to push but not strain, okay? I know it’s tough, but we’re going to be anywhere from ten minutes to a few hours – and I don’t want you worn out. Do you hear me? Nod, if you understand. Push, but don’t strain yet...”

Andrew watched in fascination, unaware of time passing, and completely humbled by his wife. Megan was a trooper, soldiering on, fighting and crawling her way along to deliver their child... and he almost felt like he was on the sidelines. She was focused singularly, staring at Mallory with unseeing eyes, as she clenched his fist, bearing down.

“Alright... I see the head crowning,” Mallory said without looking up. “I want you to give me one or two hard pushes – bear down with everything you’ve got Megan, because the baby is coming right now. Riptide – get ready!”

“*For what?*” he blurted out, completely out of sorts.

“To see your child – and to cut the cord,” Mallory replied, tossing up a distracted smile from her seat at the end of the bed Megan was laboring on. “Alright, gimme a good one, Megan!”

Andrew felt her clutch his hand, wincing at the strength he didn’t realize his wife had, as she bore down and let out this noise straight from her core just as he saw the top of the baby’s head start to emerge... and broke.

His brain literally broke.

“Oh my gosh, Megan... honey, I see the baby...” and had no clue as to what else he said aloud. His entire being was focused on her and their child, holding her, his hand on her back helping her, as she clenched his hand hard enough to snap it off – and it was all a blur.

“Oh gosh!” Megan blurted out desperately before bearing down again – and the smallest little being slipped from her body... and Andrew began sobbing at the miracle before him.

“It’s a boy!” Mallory announced, holding up the baby for them to see.

Andrew thought his legs would collapse as he stared at his son, seeing that angry face working silently, before letting out a squawk of protest followed by a shriek of dismay that was piercing. He looked at Megan, who was also struck with amazement, staring at the baby, and sobbing wildly.

The baby was laid on Megan’s chest and they looked at each other. His hands were shaking and both of his wife’s were trembling visibly as she touched the baby covered in amniotic fluid who was making his presence known, those sweet little legs and arms flailing in a fit of temper.

“Oh my gosh... Andrew,” Megan wept, glancing at him with so much love in her eyes that it was staggering, right before she was looking at their son again. Both of them were touching the baby in fascination – and were a little scared, too.

They were responsible for this tiny creature now... his *son*.

“Riptide – let’s go!”

It was almost surreal for him, like Invasion of the Body Snatchers or something, as he glided forward and took the scissors handed to him, as Mallory took the baby from Megan again. Before he knew it, he was cutting the cord. Gone was every squeamish bone in his body and Alpo was right, that mottled face, the weird substances, those puffed little eyes, and streaks of blood on the crown of his head was more beautiful than any sight he'd ever seen.

The nurse took his son from Mallory and rubbed him down with what looked to be almost violence, shocking him to the core, before swaddling him into a snug bundle... and thrust the baby into his arms.

“Watch the neck,” the nurse said. “He’s fragile, papa...”

... And Andrew started crying again – hearing those words.

He couldn't stop staring at the beloved face that was now quiet and working a teensy pacifier. The little eyes cracked open slightly, before closing again...

He loved Megan with every fiber of his being, but this little fella put all of that to shame. In that second, he knew what it meant to say *'I would die for someone'*... because he would. He would protect, nurture, and love their son with everything.

“Megan,” he sobbed, looking for his wife and immediately bringing their boy to her. “Look how beautiful he is,” he whispered, seeing her shiny eyes as she gazed at him.

“He looks just like you...” she said – and he laughed.

“If you say so, love. I was thinking he looked more like you,” he laughed easily, just elated with everything. “Let me see if I can hand him to you.”

It took a few awkward tries, but he finally handed the bundle to Megan, lying it against her once more as his heart swelled with emotion once again.

“I'm going to stop crying at some point,” he laughed at himself and heard her chuckle, seeing that beloved smile.

This was the Megan he knew and loved.

All of the pain, discomfort, and struggles were forgotten in this instant. *It was just a mother and child meeting each other, recognizing each other, and bonding like all the videos said – and this was more beautiful than anything*, he thought, staring at them with so much love in his soul.

... And then she looked up at him, reaching and taking his hand.

She was so pale, with ruddy marks on her cheeks. Her forehead was covered in sweat and there were teeth impressions on her lower lip where she'd bit down to keep from yelling... and had never looked more breathtakingly beautiful in that split second.

"I want a dozen, Andrew," she said simply – and his heart turned over in his chest. Her soul, her heart, her very being was there, shining at him, and he was humbled. His knees buckled as he clung to the side of her bed to keep from collapsing as he gazed at his beloved wife.

She was his every wish, his every fantasy, come to life.

"I never could tell you no," he said hoarsely, moving to lift a lock of her wet hair from her forehead. "You just say the word, my love, and I'll make it happen."

EPILOGUE



MEGAN

Twenty years later...

California



MEGAN'S HEART was slamming in her chest wildly while every neuron in her brain was firing with self-preservation instincts. This was the wildest and stupidest thing she'd ever done... and she'd done a lot over the years.

Time had passed faster than the blink of an eye – and they were celebrating their twentieth wedding anniversary by jumping out of a perfectly good airplane together. Andrew had secretly planned this for her, together with their six children, and were all celebrating for an entire week together, despite their busy lives.

Her eldest son, Drew, had just come back on leave from the Air Force Academy, following in his father's footsteps. Laurie was graduating high school this year. Emmaline, named for her grandmother, was valedictorian of her class. Jacob was playing baseball and a miniature version of Andrew in so many ways, including those brilliant blue eyes. Faith and Hope, the twins, were a mess. Those two were a trial... and thank goodness for Andrew, because he seemed to be able to read the children's minds when they were up to something. He claimed it was because he was a hellion when he was a child

and understood... but each one was a miracle, each so different, and each undeniably the best parts of each of them.

Emma was on the ground with the children, who were waiting impatiently to go to Disney tomorrow during this visit to see grandma. There had been several grumbles of frustration around the dinner table last night regarding having to wait instead of going to the amusement park... but Megan knew why they were jumping first.

She was chickening out – fast!

The door to the side of the plane opened and the wind was buffeting her about like she was a sheet hanging on the line in the backyard. All the passengers were slowly moving forward, leaping out the open doorway of the plane, one at a time – and she looked at Andrew in a panic.

No words were necessary in that singular gaze shared between them. She was terrified, excited, and overwhelmed all at once... and saw the same feelings reflected in his eyes – along with that supportive, soft smile she adored.

He held out his hand to her.

Megan didn't hesitate.

She put her hand in his... and jumped with him, at her side.



AFTERWORD

Y'all – I have never giggled so much in my life as I did writing this story. My sweet friend, Sandra, and I were chatting online – and she said the funniest thing to me, so I had to go with it! Poor Riptide... he really had to eat 'crow' and work to get Megan to trust him, but once their relationship started to fall into place?

It was a thing of beauty!

Did you notice Cody from Flirt's Battalion? Boy, Faith (Mrs. Justin) dodged a bullet with that creep... just sayin'...

I always try to make each character different – different mindsets, different temperments, different quirks... and Riptide & Megan were definitely 'touchy-feely' in this book. Always holding hands, reaching for each other, and just needing to be connected. I liked showing the emotional outpouring without all the 'spicy bits' because just reading this and Riptide joking about the 'egg salad sandwiches' – we all know it's there.

... And his mom, Emma – I can only imagine that was where Riptide got his wild side, despite what his mother said. Gracious, if it was both parents, the poor man was doomed.

The fortune teller was a weird, slightly different twist. I see the signs all over in different towns, different areas of the country – and when I was traveling last summer, I had seen a sign for one in Little Rock... and I knew, I just KNEW, we were gonna have to throw that into a story.

Now, if you are my loyal readers and followers (and because I love you all!) you are getting the first sneak peek at the newest Flyboys coming later this fall/winter. I really love this series, how each tale is so different, and hope to continue it for a while longer.

... Now, if you aren't on Facebook or didn't see what was coming later this summer – be sure to check out the previews following this page.

We're gonna meet some real HOTSHOTS.



XOXO,

Ginny

P.S. If you liked the book, please leave a review - *muah!*

FOREVER FEMININE



Follow my lead, Flyboy...

Captain Stephanie ‘*Piranha*’ Ely had fought for every commendation and honor that she’d received her entire life – and wasn’t about to let anyone take that from her. She volunteered for this assignment, knowing it would guarantee a spot in command... and had no clue just how much resolve it was actually going to take – especially when it came to Scarecrow.

Copy that – I’m on your tail...

Joey ‘*Scarecrow*’ Charlton didn’t have a care in the world. No commitments, no strings attached back home, and zero drive to do anything else. Eat, sleep, and fly... that was his mantra – or at least it was until Stephanie walked in the room.

Can two complete opposites find a middle ground that is stable enough to build a relationship on... or will the desert sands swirling around them destroy it all?

FOREVER FOXY



I've got lock and taking the shot...

Lance '*Cavalier*' Grant was a driven man, pushing himself to succeed... until a wrench was thrown into those plans. Now, on a vacation he was coerced into taking, he was tackling another problem causing an even bigger tangle within his carefully built web – Jennifer.

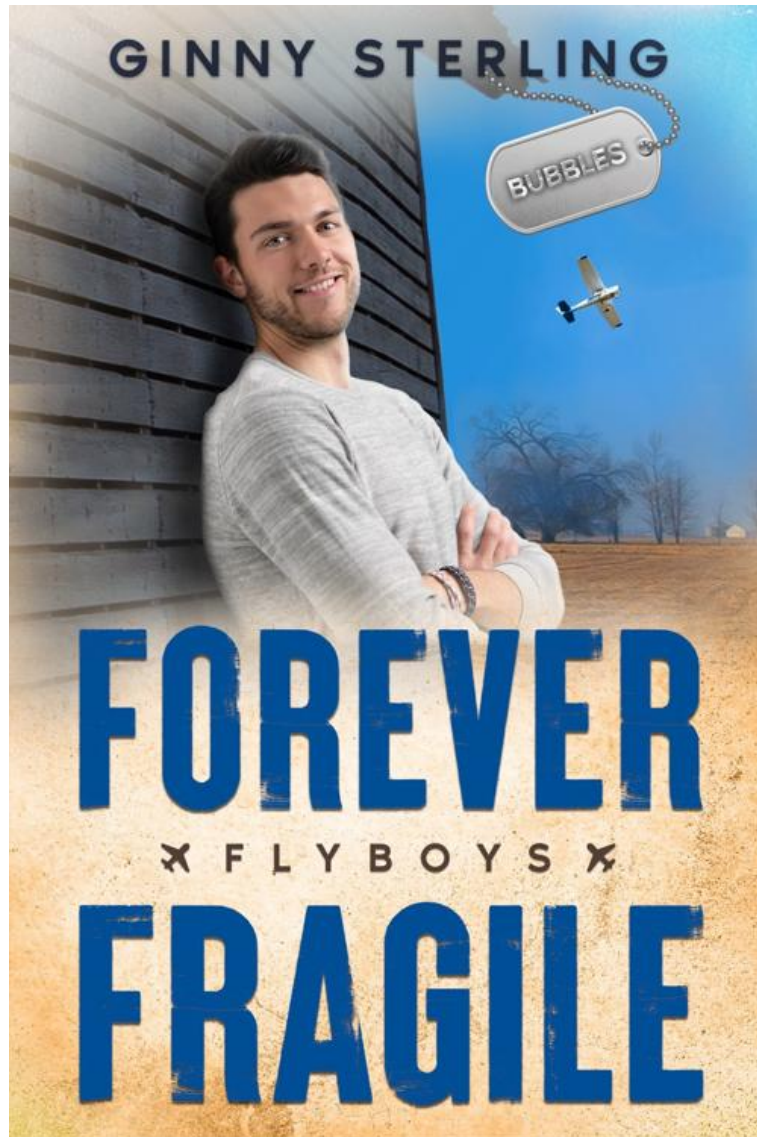
Alter your trajectory, Flyboy...

Jeni Malone had no clue that her little side job delivering pizzas would put her in the crosshairs of a very intense pilot. It was obvious Lance disliked her, but why on earth did he volunteer to be her date?

When using a charade to cover up your deepest fears, sometimes it becomes hard to tell what is real and what is fake.

... And what happens when that line blurs ever so sweetly?

FOREVER FRAGILE



Study your trajectory before entering in a hot zone, flyboy!

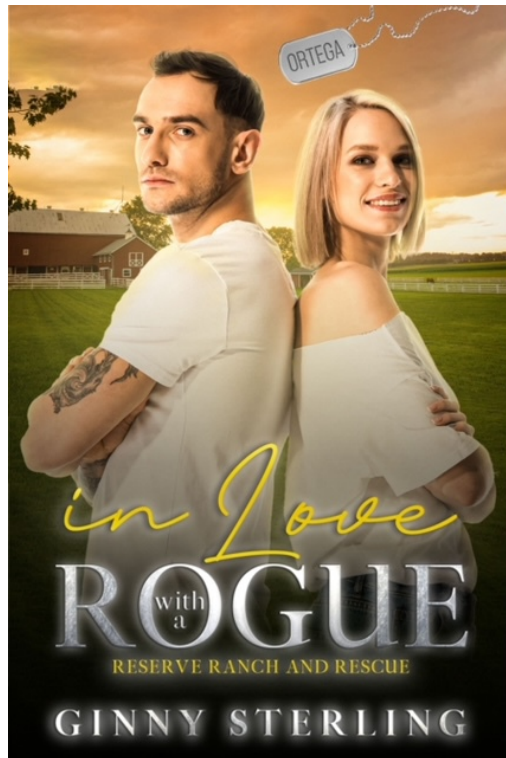
Derek ‘*Bubbles*’ Thorne had a horrible secret that haunted him. Volunteering for orders to Ghazni was supposed to be a way to hide and escape, until a hand of friendship offered a chance at salvation. Now, he was literally running from the farmer’s daughter who lived down the road from Flyboys.

Prepare for the fight of your life...

Toni Baird didn’t have a shy bone in her body. Growing up on a small-town farm, everyone knew everything about your family... including the flight school that bordered her property. But when her inheritance hinged on some wild condition, she was pretty sure her life was about to fall apart before her eyes.

Could Derek’s secret be the ultimate deal-breaker, even for her? Or could she hurdle the massive leap of faith it would take, trusting him?

IN LOVE WITH THE ROGUE



Where all roads end...

Jake Ortega wanted what the other guys on his team in Ghazni had – an easy relationship that just fell in his lap. Everyone knew about the stupid ‘Romeo Curse’ floating around on the base. You take a pen pal, end up with a wife in record time... sunshine, rainbows, care packages, and random trips back to the States with someone who loves you. Yep. He could handle a dose of that, but Fate had other ideas.

A new world begins...

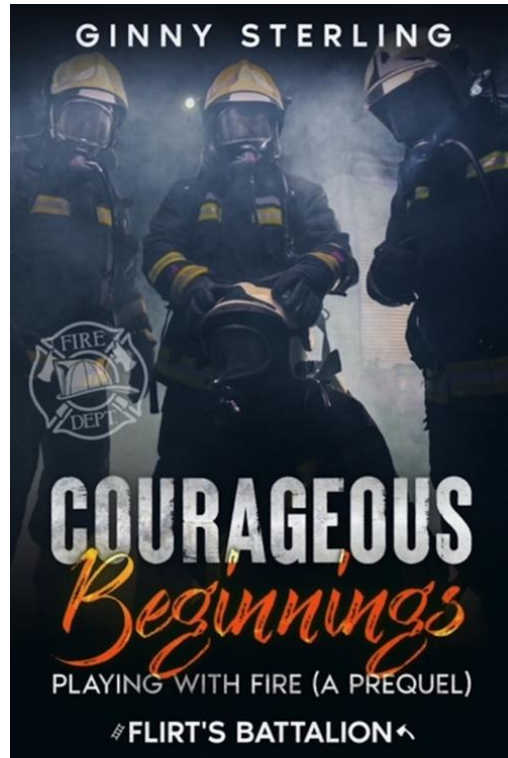
Lena Bow had no idea what to make of the strange request, but hey? If it cut her expenses in half, and put a roof over her head, then perhaps she could finally get a break. All she *needed* was a chance, but what she *got* was completely different. Macho, arrogant, and stubborn, Jake certainly had a clearly defined idea of how this partnership was going to go between the two of them... and *clearly* he was wrong. If up was down and left was right - did that mean ‘*Go Away*’ meant ‘*Stay Forever*’?

HOTSHOTS

GINNY STERLING



HOTSHOTS takes you on a thrilling global adventure with fearless pilots - and the women who adore them. Emotions run high as daring souls embark on relationships they never imagined amidst the skies.



[Flirt's Battalion Sweet Romance Series](#)

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

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