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Acknowledgments:

I want to thank my family for supporting me through all the years I have stuck my noise in lined paper and in my laptop. They'd inspired me, encouraged me, and also tolerated me through the many times I would asked *"How do you spell this?"*. I'm sure if my family were reading this right now they'd probably laugh, or cry, or even both in the best way possible.

I first found my passion for writing when I was in 6th grade. My teacher assigned my classmates and I to write a short story about us and one other person in the world. My teacher asked us *"What would happen if everyone was gone except to two people? How would you survive? Would you drive? What would you eat?"*. And like many other girls, I wrote about me and my middle school crush! And the worst part, I LET MY CRUSH READ IT! And he liked it!? So did my teacher. I got an A, hahaha.

As I was writing I soon realized I never wanted to stop. So I didn't. I have a lot of amazing book ideas. And so many that are unfinished, by the way. This book, **Friendly Strays**, was not that book from years ago. But it's still one of mine. So thanks to my 6th grade teacher and my family, I have finally reached my dream goal. And it's placed right in your hands. Have fun, everyone.

Summary:

Kyle Hernandez, age 18, and **June Kingsley**, age 14, come from homes where love was once a promise—but quickly turned into silence, violence, and heartbreak. For Kyle, life with an alcoholic father and an absent mother taught him to endure pain in silence. For June, everything changed when her mother remarried a controlling, jobless man and turned her back on the daughter she once adored. In different corners of their hometown that never felt safe, both Kyle and June finally reached a breaking point.

But fate had other plans.

A chance meeting between two souls battered by the past sparks an unspoken connection—quiet, raw, and real. With barely enough money in their pockets and nothing but hope in their hearts, they make a bold decision: to run away and leave their broken pasts behind. Together.

Life isn't easy. The world doesn't hand them anything. But Kyle and June refuse to give up. Through sleepless nights, shared dreams, and small victories, they fight for a better future—a life filled with love, healing, and second chances. And through it all, they discover that sometimes, the family you choose means more than the one you're born into.

This is their story—a story of **survival**, **resilience**, and the kind of **love** that grows stronger through every storm.

Chapter 1: Kyle's Exit

Kyle didn't even bother closing the door behind him.

The front screen hung crooked off its hinges anyway, and the main door never locked right. Not that it mattered — nothing in that house ever did. His breath came out fast, tight, like it was trying to run faster than his legs. The cold slapped his face, a stinging kind of freedom, but it wasn't enough to drown out the sound of his dad yelling from somewhere inside.

He didn't look back.
He couldn't.

The street was empty, a few busted street lights flickering overhead like they were watching him go. His backpack dug into his shoulder, heavy with everything he could carry — a couple changes of clothes, his Switch, a charger, a water bottle, and the envelope of cash he'd been hiding under the floorboard in his closet since last year.

\$1,237.48.
A year's worth of hoarding lunch money, side gigs, and lies.

His hands were shaking. Not from the cold. Just... shaking.

He kept walking, fast, like if he stopped even for a second, something would pull him back. His dad's voice echoed in his skull. Slurred. Loud. Mean. That same damn rant.

"You think you're better than me, huh? Always hiding in your damn room like some little bitch."

Kyle clenched his teeth. Shut it out. He had to.
The warehouse was about 30 minutes away, near the edge of the industrial zone—forgotten by the city and everyone in it.

His stomach twisted as he turned down alleyways he knew all too well. The streets looked different at night. Bigger. Hungrier.

A car drove by slowly. Kyle ducked behind a dumpster. Just in case.
His fingers trembled around the straps of his bag.

This was real.
He was gone.
No more second chances. No going back.

The warehouse smelled like rust, oil, and old rain. Kyle climbed through the loose metal panel he'd pushed out weeks ago, flashlight held between his teeth. The beam landed on the mattress he dragged in here last month—stained, half-sunk in the middle, but his.

He dropped the bag beside it and sat down hard.
Finally.
Silence.

But his mind wouldn't shut up.
His mom's voice came next—quiet, soft, distant.

“Don't start with your dad, Kyle. You know how he gets when he drinks... I'm sorry, I just can't deal with this right now.”

She never could.

Kyle pulled his knees up to his chest, hoodie stretched over his legs, and stared at the dark corner of the room where broken crates made weird shapes on the wall.

He'd been here six months now. Off and on. Back then, it was a backup plan. Now it was *home*.

Some nights, he found leftover food in dumpsters behind cafés. Some nights, he didn't eat. A few times, he got lucky with people tossing out stuff that wasn't spoiled. He had a routine: don't be seen. Don't get caught. Don't trust no one.

He still had his Switch. Still played it, sometimes, when he couldn't sleep. It was stupid, but... when the world outside felt like it was going to swallow him whole, pressing start on a dumb pixelated game made him feel *something*.

Like maybe he still existed.

Kyle laid back, arm over his eyes.
The concrete was cold.
He didn't cry. He never did anymore.

But something in his chest felt like it was breaking open. Quietly. Slowly.

He was free.
He was alone.
And he was terrified.

Chapter 2: June's Breaking Point

The house never felt like home once her dad died.

It used to be quiet in a good way—soft TV sounds from the living room, the smell of garlic and onions when her dad cooked dinner, the way his voice always lowered when he talked to her like she was someone worth listening to. Now, the silence between the yelling was worse than the yelling itself.

June sat on the edge of her bed, hoodie zipped up to her chin, hands tucked into the sleeves like she could fold herself smaller. Her duffle bag was half-packed, but she hadn't touched it in hours. She just sat there, listening to the TV blaring in the living room, her mom's laugh—that fake, stretched-out laugh she only used around *him*—and the creak of the couch when her step-dad shifted his weight again.

He was always *there*.
Loud. Crude. Gross.

He scratched his balls in front of her like it was nothing. Would walk around shirtless with his belly hanging out, beer in one hand, remote in the other, shouting for her mom to “come sit on his lap.”

It made June's skin crawl.
He wasn't abusive—not in the obvious way. He never hit her. He barely talked to her. But he stared too long. He touched her mom too much. He made every room feel *wrong*.

And her mom let him.

“June, don't be dramatic,” her mom had said the first time she tried to talk about it. “He's just affectionate. He's not doing anything wrong.”

June wanted to scream. She wanted to grab her mom's shoulders and *shake* her. But instead she just nodded, swallowed her words, and shrank into the background.

For months, she counted the days until she'd be old enough to get out. Four more years. Maybe three if she could graduate early. She took a part-time job at a Starbucks, made coffee and swept up after school, saved every dollar in a tin box behind the dresser.

But it wasn't enough.
Because it kept getting worse.

Her step-dad never lifted a finger around the house. Plates piled in the sink. Food wrappers littered the floor. He ate *everything*. She'd come home to find the leftovers she packed for lunch *gone*—and him laughing, “You didn't write your name on it.”

Her mom stopped noticing. Or maybe she didn't care.

They were loud at night. Always. And they didn't care that their moans carried down the hall into her room. Her mom would cry out in pleasure and beg for more. June would lay in bed, covering her ears, trying to pretend she was elsewhere. Sometimes she'd listen to music. Sometimes she'd just stare at the ceiling and hope she could disappear.

One night, it was too much.

She walked out of her room and found the kitchen a mess. Dirty pans, crumbs all over the table, sauce on the counter. Her step-dad sat in his usual spot, drinking straight from a bottle of cheap vodka, half-watching some game show.

"Do you ever *do* anything?" June snapped.

He raised an eyebrow like he didn't hear her right. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She didn't back down. "You don't work. You don't clean. You just sit here, mooching off my mom like a parasite. You're disgusting."

He laughed. Laughed.

And from the hallway, her mom's voice came, sharp and defensive: "June! That's enough!"

"No," June said, tears rising fast. "You don't see it. You chose him over *me*. You let him ruin this house. You let him fuck you in front of me!" her voice cracked, "—you let him take everything, and you just stand there and let it happen."

Her mom didn't answer right away.

Didn't move.

Didn't look at her.

"I love him," she said finally, coldly.

And that was it.

That was the end.

June zipped up her duffle bag without looking back. Packed what she could—old clothes, toothbrush, the tin box of cash, a picture of her dad. She didn't cry. Didn't slam the door. She just walked out into the dark like she'd always meant to.

The street was colder than she expected. The wind bit at her face, but at least it was *real*.

Every step felt numb, like walking through water. Her heart beat so fast she thought it might snap something inside her chest. She didn't know where she was going. She didn't care.

All she knew was this:
She was done being ignored.
Done being unloved in her own home.
Done waiting to be saved.

And somewhere out there—anywhere but here—had to be better.

Chapter 3: Cold Streets, New Faces

June's breath came out in short clouds as she walked. The air stung her cheeks, and her fingers were already going numb, even stuffed deep in her jacket pockets.

She'd been walking for hours. She didn't know where she was anymore — blocks from home, neighborhoods she'd only seen through car windows. Nothing looked familiar. Every streetlight buzzed with that sick yellow hue, and every car that passed made her tense, like someone might yell her name from the window.

But no one did.
No one ever did.

Her legs ached. Her stomach growled. But she wasn't going back. No matter how scared she was, she wasn't going to walk through that front door again and pretend things could still be okay.

She passed a gas station, its lights too bright. The worker behind the counter looked like he was half-asleep, and June kept walking, head down, arms tight around herself like armor.

Then she saw him.

A boy, maybe older than her by a few years, sitting on the edge of a loading dock behind a row of shuttered shops. Hoodie pulled up, backpack beside him, hands shoved into the sleeves of his coat. He looked like he'd been sitting there for a while.

She would've walked past. Should've. But something in the way he stared up at the sky—blank, like he wasn't really looking at anything—made her stop.

"You okay?" she asked, instantly regretting it.

He blinked and looked at her, surprised. "You talk to strangers a lot?"

June shrugged. "Not usually. But you looked... I don't know. Like me."

The corner of his mouth twitched. Not a smile, exactly. But not a no. "Yeah? What's that mean?"

She shifted her weight. "Like someone who doesn't want to go home."

Silence stretched between them. Long. Not uncomfortable. Just real.

"I don't have a home to go back to," he said finally. "Not anymore."

June hesitated, then sat down beside him on the cold concrete. "Me either."

He glanced at her sideways. "Name's Kyle."

“June.”

They didn’t say anything else for a while. They just sat—two strangers with nowhere to go—sharing the same quiet, shivering night.

Eventually, Kyle broke it. “You from around here?”

“Unfortunately.”

He snorted. “Same. God, I hate this town. Feels like it’s choking me. Everyone’s stuck, everyone’s fake, and no one sees you unless they want something from you.”

June nodded slowly. “I used to think it was just my house. But it’s not. It’s the whole place. The air feels heavy. Like... even the sky’s tired of this town.”

Kyle looked at her like she’d said something he’d thought but never said out loud. “Exactly. It’s like... you grow up here thinking maybe you’ll matter. Then you realize no one gives a fuck. Not your family. Not your teachers. Not your neighbors. No one.”

June pulled her knees to her chest. “I just want to disappear from this place. Start over somewhere new. Somewhere that doesn’t make me feel like I’m suffocating.”

“Yeah,” Kyle said. “Me too.”

The wind picked up, whistling between the buildings. Kyle rubbed his hands together. “You got a place to crash tonight?”

She shook her head. “Not really.”

“I got a spot,” he offered. “It’s not nice. But it’s warm. Safer than out here.”

She hesitated. But something in his voice—calm, tired, honest—told her she could trust him. At least enough for one night.

“Okay,” she said. “Lead the way.”

The warehouse looked like it was being eaten up by time—rust on the edges, windows boarded up, graffiti crawling over the walls. Kyle climbed through a loose panel and held it open for her.

Inside, it was cold, but not as bitter as the street. There was an old mattress in the corner, a crate used as a table, and a couple of blankets folded neatly.

June turned to him, grateful. “Thanks. For this.”

He shrugged like it was nothing. But when she looked down, she noticed something.

His shoes.

They were beaten to hell—the soles peeling, fabric frayed, one lace tied together in a knot. She blinked, realizing he'd been walking around in those all winter.

“Hey,” she said, fishing in her bag. “You like black sneakers?”

Kyle raised an eyebrow. “Uh... yeah?”

“Cool. Let's go get you some.”

He looked at her like she'd lost her mind. “What?”

“You let me stay here. It's the least I can do.”

“You don't have to—”

“I want to,” she interrupted. “I got cash. I've been saving. And honestly? I'm tired of being the only one who ever gives a damn.”

He hesitated. Then smiled, small but real.

“...Okay.”

And just like that, for the first time in a long time, neither of them felt completely alone.

Chapter 4: The Idea

The sun was just starting to rise, pale and pink, warming the edges of the cold streets. June walked beside Kyle, her hands stuffed in her coat pockets, the air still biting her nose. They hadn't spoken much since they left the warehouse. Just the quiet sound of their footsteps echoing off the buildings, like neither of them wanted to break the stillness of the morning.

But then June peeked up at him and smiled. "So... what's your favorite color?"

Kyle blinked. "Huh?"

She shrugged. "Figured we should get to know each other if I'm gonna buy you shoes. Seems fair."

He smirked. "Alright. Red. You?"

"Pink."

Kyle chuckled. "I can see that. You give pink energy."

June squinted at him. "Is that a compliment or are you making fun of me?"

"It's a compliment," he said quickly, grinning.

They crossed an empty intersection, the walk light blinking lazily overhead.

"How tall are you?" she asked, glancing up at him again.

"Six-two."

June's eyes widened. "Six-two?! Are you serious?"

He laughed. "Dead serious."

"Dude, I look like a child next to you. I'm five foot even."

He looked down at her, amused. "That's... actually kind of adorable."

She wrinkled her nose. "Ugh. That word."

"But it fits."

June tried to pout but couldn't hide the smile tugging at her mouth. "Whatever. Next question. Favorite food?"

They both answered at the same time: "Asian."

Their eyes met, surprised, and they laughed.

"Okay, that's weird," June said.

Kyle nodded. "We're on a roll."

"Favorite season?"

"Winter," Kyle said.

"Shut up," June gasped. "Mine too!"

He looked impressed. "You like the cold?"

"No," she said with a grin. "I like the feeling of being warm *in* the cold. Big difference."

Kyle tilted his head. "That's deep."

They kept walking, light slowly painting the city in gold and gray.

"So how old are you, anyway?" June asked casually.

Kyle hesitated for a second. "Eighteen. Just turned eighteen two months ago."

June raised her eyebrows. "Oh wow. Happy late birthday. I'm... fourteen."

Kyle stopped walking. Just froze.

June took another step before realizing he wasn't beside her anymore. She turned around.

"What?"

He stared at her. "Fourteen?"

She nodded slowly. "Yeah."

He didn't say anything at first. She could see his brain working behind his eyes, struggling with something.

"I didn't think you were that young," he muttered.

June frowned. "Is that a problem?"

Kyle looked away, jaw tight. He wasn't sure if he should turn around and leave her behind, pretending they never met. This was dangerous. For both of them.

But then he looked at her again—the way her shoulders curled in, how guarded her expression had gotten, like she was bracing for him to walk away too.

“...You're pretty cool for a fourteen-year-old,” he said finally.

She smiled. “You're not so bad for an old man.”

They reached the shoe store just as the clerk was flipping the sign to “OPEN.” It was warm inside, and Kyle hesitated at the door, like he didn't belong there.

June dragged him in.

“Pick something you like,” she said.

He eyed the racks like they were made of gold. “Are you sure?”

“Very.”

He ended up picking out a sleek pair of black sneakers with red trim. They fit perfectly. June whistled. “Damn, look at you. You clean up nice.”

Kyle blushed but grinned anyway. “Thanks, June. Seriously.”

By the time they stepped back out into the street, the world was fully awake. Cars passed. Shops opened. People moved with purpose. It felt strange to be part of it again—like they were pretending to be normal.

They stopped at a cheap pizza joint, bought a large box with extra cheese and two cold sodas. Back at the warehouse, they sat cross-legged on the mattress, their breath still visible in the cold air.

It was the weirdest breakfast either of them ever had.

“So,” June said, biting into a slice, “how much money have you got saved?”

Kyle took a sip of soda. “About eight hundred bucks. You?”

“Two thousand,” June replied proudly. “Been working weekends and holidays for the past three years.”

“Damn.”

They ate in silence for a few moments, then June wiped her mouth with her sleeve and looked at him.

"I'm serious about getting out of here," she said.

Kyle looked up.

"I mean, what if we just... got on a train?" she said. "No plan. Just... gone. Let it take us as far as it'll go. Start fresh somewhere new. Somewhere that doesn't suck."

She chuckled at her own words, but Kyle wasn't laughing. He was staring at her, his blue eyes going dark, serious.

"...Why not?" he said softly.

June blinked. "Wait... I was just joking."

Kyle leaned forward, voice low. "We've both got money. We've both got nothing tying us here. What's stopping us?"

She opened her mouth, then closed it.

He wasn't playing.

And for the first time ever, neither was she.

Chapter 5: A Leap of Faith

"Okay but seriously," June said, her eyes lighting up with something close to wonder. "If we pull our money together, that's nearly three grand. We could actually *go* somewhere. Like, really go."

Kyle nodded slowly, chewing his last bite of pizza. "We could get a place, even a super cheap one. Work some part-time jobs. Figure it out from there."

June grinned, wiping her hands on her jeans. "So we're doing it?"

Kyle leaned back against the cold wall, his gaze steady. "Yeah. We're doing it."

They didn't waste anymore time. Within minutes, they were packing everything they had—June's duffle bag, Kyle's backpack, jackets zipped, hearts pounding. The warehouse that had been Kyle's reluctant shelter for months was left behind with nothing but a glance. It didn't feel like home. Not anymore.

The city's been awake as they walked, the sun climbing higher. Cars passed, buses rumbled by, but they kept walking, the train station a half-hour away on foot.

About fifteen minutes in, Kyle froze mid-step. June followed his gaze—and saw it.

A dark green sedan parked at a gas station across the street.

Kyle's face went pale. "That's my dad's car."

Before June could respond, Kyle grabbed her hand and pulled her into the narrow mouth of an alleyway. His grip was tight. Protective. Her heart raced.

He kept them pressed close to the brick wall, his breathing sharp. June didn't say a word. She could feel his pulse through his hand, like thunder.

Only when the car drove off—without noticing them—did Kyle let out a long breath and loosen his hold. He looked down and suddenly realized how close he was to her. June blinked up at him.

"Sorry," he mumbled, stepping back. "I didn't mean to grab you like that."

June shook her head. "It's okay. You were scared. I get it."

Kyle nodded. "I just... I can't let him see me. I can't go back."

June's voice was soft. "You're not going back. We're going forward."

He managed a small smile, and they walked the rest of the way in silence, side by side, not touching, but somehow closer than they'd ever been.

When they got to the train station, Kyle stared at the large electronic board displaying departures. Then he pointed.

"That one. Vancouver. Canada."

June didn't even blink. "Cool. Let's do it."

They bought their tickets separately, with cash. June's hands trembled when she handed over the bills, but her voice was steady. Kyle stood close behind, eyes scanning the terminal like a watchdog.

They boarded without a word. Found a two-seat window spot near the back. June slid into the window seat, but Kyle looked hesitant.

"You want the window?" she asked.

He hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah. I like watching the world pass."

She smiled and switched spots.

As the train lurched forward, Kyle reached into his backpack and pulled out his Switch. He glanced at June. "You into games?"

She shook her head. "Not really. But I love watching people play. It's like... comfort TV, but in real life."

So he played. Something colorful, fast-paced. She watched. Asked questions. Laughed when he messed up. They passed the hours like that.

Eight hours in, June's head slowly drooped to the side—and landed on Kyle's shoulder.

He stiffened at first, unsure. His heart skipped. He looked down at her.

She was fast asleep.

Kyle hesitated only a second before shifting, gently, and wrapping his arm around her. She sighed softly, like she belonged there. Like this was safe.

He kept watching over her for a long time. Until his own eyes began to droop, and finally, his head rested on hers.

Two runaways. Two strangers. Two souls daring to hope again.

And the train kept going.

Chapter 6: A Day In The Train

The steady rhythm of the train rolling along the tracks was like a lullaby. June stirred first, her eyes fluttering open to soft morning light seeping through the window. For a second, she didn't move, her brain still catching up. Then she registered the warmth around her.

Kyle's arm was still draped over her shoulders, his hand resting lightly on her arm. Her head was tucked beneath his chin, the rise and fall of his chest slow and even.

She blinked up at him. He was still asleep.

Her first instinct was to pull away, to shuffle back to her seat and pretend it hadn't happened—but something stopped her. He looked so peaceful, almost like a different person from the one she'd met on the streets. No tension in his face, no worry behind his eyelids. Just... calm.

So she stayed. Just for a little longer.

Thirty minutes passed. June stayed perfectly still, watching the changing landscapes blur past the window.

Finally, Kyle stirred. His eyes opened slowly and locked with hers.

His entire body jolted. "Oh—shit. Sorry. I didn't—"

June held up a hand, trying not to laugh. "It's okay. You were asleep."

Kyle's cheeks flushed red. He looked away, trying to untangle his arm without seeming too desperate. But neither of them moved right away.

Eventually, June shifted back to her seat, stretching her arms overhead with a yawn. "I'm starving. Be right back."

Kyle watched her go, a weird empty feeling creeping in at the absence of her warmth, her skin.

Seven minutes later, she returned holding two corndogs wrapped in napkins, two small bags of Cheez-Its, and two bottles of orange juice tucked under her arms.

Kyle raised an eyebrow. "Corndogs? For breakfast?"

June shrugged with a grin. "Hey, it was either this or stale muffins. Snack bar's not exactly a gourmet buffet."

He took the food from her hands and chuckled. "Guess we're doing this the classy way."

They ate quietly, the corndogs surprisingly good for something reheated in a microwave behind a counter. The scenery outside had shifted to dense pine forests and distant mountains. It was breathtaking.

Neither of them said much—just exchanged glances and shared the occasional smile as the train continued its journey.

After eating, June took her duffle bag and went to the small bathroom to change and freshen up. When she returned, Kyle got up and did the same.

They didn't say much, but the silence was comfortable now, a mutual understanding between them building like bricks slowly stacked into place.

An hour passed like that—then a voice crackled over the intercom.

“Ladies and gentlemen, we will be arriving in Vancouver in approximately ten minutes. Please gather your belongings and prepare to exit the train at your scheduled stop.”

June turned to Kyle, eyes wide.

He met her gaze, and for a moment, they both just sat there.

This was real.

They were almost there.

And their new chapter was about to begin.

Chapter 7: Under Roof & Job Hunting

The train hissed to a stop, its wheels grinding softly against the track as it pulled into the Vancouver station. The moment June and Kyle stepped off, the sunlight greeted them with a golden warmth. It was breezy, crisp, and surprisingly clear for the time of year. They blinked into the light, squinting as their bodies adjusted from the dim train car to the open air.

They both stretched out their limbs, arms overhead and shoulders rolling back with satisfying cracks.

"Feels like we just stepped into a different world," June said, watching people bustle around the platform.

Kyle nodded. "A better one."

June shifted her duffle bag to her other shoulder. "So... where are we staying, mystery man?"

Kyle smirked. "Already got that covered. I booked us a non-smoking room with two queen beds last night while you were sleeping."

June blinked, then gave him a dramatic thumbs-up. "Okay, I'll take it back. You *are* useful."

He grinned. "Took you long enough."

They walked through the busy city streets, navigating the unfamiliar place with a mix of awe and urgency. The motel wasn't far—just a few blocks from the station. It was modest but clean, a red and white sign buzzing softly above the office door.

The clerk handed them their key cards for Room #17, and soon they were inside, dumping their bags and collapsing onto the beds.

"We made it," June said softly, lying flat on her back and staring at the ceiling.

"Yeah," Kyle replied, leaning against the headboard. "Now we just have to survive."

After a quick rest, they looked through his phone and started searching for jobs.

"I've always been good with my hands," Kyle said. "Cars, plumbing, electrical—you name it. I'm gonna look for something in that area. Part-time or whatever pays."

June nodded. "I used to work part-time as a waitress... and a barista for a bit. I'll see if any cafés or diners are hiring."

Hours passed as they filled out applications, scrolled through job boards, and sent in resumes using library Wi-Fi. Later that evening, Kyle took a break and signed up for food stamps. Being eighteen with no income made him eligible, though it would take about a week to hear back.

That night, hunger gnawed at them again. They decided to walk to the convenience store a couple blocks down from the motel. The street was dimly lit, and the sidewalks were mostly empty—except for a few shady figures loitering near corners and storefronts.

June instinctively stepped closer to Kyle, and without a word, he put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her in protectively.

She didn't say anything, but the gesture made her feel safer than she had in a long time.

They made it into the store quickly, grabbing bottled waters, some instant noodles, chips, and a couple microwavable burritos. They paid and left fast, ignoring the lingering stares from outside.

Back at the motel, they locked the door behind them and finally relaxed.

As they heated up their food and cracked open water bottles, June flopped down onto her bed. "So," she said, "how many places did you apply to today?"

"Five," Kyle replied, opening his burrito wrapper. "One garage, two hardware stores, a handyman company, and some plumbing gig that said 'no experience necessary.'"

"Nice," June said. "I hit up three cafés, a diner, and a bookstore that said they might need help."

They ate quietly, their bodies exhausted but their spirits buzzing just a little. For the first time in a long time, they had a peaceful roof over their heads, warm food in their hands, and a spark of something they hadn't felt in a while: hope.

Chapter 8: Apartment Hunting, Staying Low Key

Two weeks had passed since Kyle and June stepped off that train and into their new life. Vancouver had felt like a fresh start, full of potential and hope, but reality settled in fast. The motel room, comfortable as it was, was slowly becoming a luxury they couldn't afford to hold onto. So they stretched out their stay for as long as possible, but eventually, most nights were spent on the streets—or in a tree in a park that June found oddly cozy.

The days were a blur of job hunting, apartment visits, and surviving. They grew used to waking up with sore backs, brushing off leaves or street dust, and moving before anyone asked questions. June still managed to smile each morning, even when Kyle knew she barely slept. Her strength surprised him daily.

Kyle's food stamp application had finally been approved, and they were about to receive \$290 worth of food per month. That alone lifted a huge weight off their shoulders. They made a plan to stretch it out carefully, only buying groceries they could carry or store. Snacks, sandwiches, and bottles of water became their norm.

Job leads came and went. Kyle kept applying to anything involving repairs—cars, plumbing, maintenance. He even fixed a broken vending machine for free just to impress a shop owner. June stuck to cafés and diners, flashing that winning smile and explaining she had "some experience" working weekends back home. It was harder for her. She looked too young.

One morning, while they sat in the grass near the riverbank washing socks and shirts with soap Kyle got from a shelter, June looked up at him, water dripping from her fingertips.

"My birthday's next week," she said casually.

Kyle blinked. "Yeah? How old you turning?"

"Fifteen," she said, grinning. "I know, right? I'm ancient."

He laughed softly. "You've been through more than most thirty-year-olds."

"I know what I want for my birthday," she added.

Kyle raised a brow. "Lemme guess. Pink sneakers with glitter lightning bolts?"

June smirked. "Close. But no. I just want *one* of us to get a job. Just one. Doesn't even have to be mine. I just want to feel like this... this whole running-away thing was worth it."

Kyle looked down at the soapy shirt in his hands, guilt tugging at him. He wanted that too—for her more than himself.

They talked in hushed tones whenever they were near others. June's age was a risk they couldn't take. They knew if someone asked too many questions, if someone *really* looked at her ID—or noticed she didn't have one—she'd be taken away in seconds by CPS. Separated from him. Kyle didn't know what would happen then, and he didn't want to find out.

So he did what he had to. Kyle went to the shelters alone when it was time to do laundry or grab supplies. June stayed behind, out of sight, wrapped in an oversized hoodie and a baseball cap.

Every apartment they toured felt just out of reach. Too expensive. Too strict on age or employment. Too many questions. But they kept looking. Kept trying. Because the alternative—going back—was never going to be an option.

The days blurred together, but the hope? That stayed alive, flickering inside both of them, a little brighter each day.

Chapter 9: A Stray, Some Food, New Hope

The air was cool and quiet that early morning, just past 7 a.m., when Kyle's phone suddenly buzzed. The ringtone jolted both him and June awake from where they lay bundled up beneath a pile of donated blankets under the tree at their usual park. Groggy and unsure of what to expect, Kyle answered.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is this Kyle Hernandez?"

"Yeah—speaking."

"This is Eric from Coast City Plumbing. You applied a while back? We've got a part-time spot open—one of our guys called out today. If you can get here in the next hour, we'll give you a shot. You in?"

Kyle sat up straight, adrenaline firing through him. "Yes, absolutely. I'm in. I'll be there."

June, rubbing her eyes, sat up beside him. "What's going on?"

Kyle turned to her, a wide grin spreading across his face. "I got the job."

June's eyes lit up with instant joy. "Wait—you mean right now?"

He nodded. "Yeah. They need someone today."

She squealed and hugged him tight. "Kyle! That's my birthday wish! You just made it come true!"

Just down the street was a small bike shop. Without hesitating, June grabbed some of her cash and pulled Kyle inside. Ten minutes later, Kyle was the owner of a sleek, black bicycle with red racing stripes. It was fast, sturdy, and loud in all the right ways.

June stood on the sidewalk, hands on her hips like a proud manager. "Go get 'em, plumber boy."

Kyle grinned. "I won't let you down. See you later, and please stay face."

And with that, he pedaled away, weaving through the early morning traffic of Vancouver.

By the second day on the job, Kyle was already elbow-deep in pipes, learning the ropes fast. On his lunch break, while walking down an alley shortcut near a client's house, he spotted something curled under a dumpster—a small, skinny dog, white with gray patches, shivering.

Her eyes looked up at him, cautious but hopeful.

Kyle crouched down. “Hey there, girl...”

He dug into his wallet and jogged to the nearest corner store. A few minutes later, he returned with a 10-pack of hotdogs and peeled a couple open. The dog gobbled them up with soft whines and gentle tail wags, then nuzzled his leg.

“I know that look,” Kyle murmured, scratching behind her ears. “You’re just like me....and June.”

He left the rest of the hotdogs by the dumpster and promised her he’d be back tomorrow.

That night, under a sky full of stars and distant city noise, Kyle took June out for her birthday. They chose a sushi restaurant tucked between a laundromat and a bookstore. It was quiet and cozy, the smell of soy sauce and miso soup filling the air.

They laughed between bites, trying things they couldn’t even pronounce. June couldn’t stop smiling.

“I can’t remember the last time I had a birthday that felt like an actual birthday,” she said, wiping rice off her cheek.

Kyle raised his chopsticks. “To new beginnings.”

She clinked her chopsticks against his and nodded. “To new beginnings.”

Bellies full and hearts a little lighter, they made their way back to a motel, hands occasionally brushing. That night, tucked into their beds, they both slept better than they had in a long time—because for the first time, the future didn’t feel so far away.

Chapter 10: The Calls & Another Dollar

It was a day like no other.

The morning breeze was light, almost sweet, brushing against June's cheeks as she woke up under a tree in the park, wrapped in a shared blanket with Kyle. The city was waking up—slow, rhythmic, and indifferent. They'd gotten used to the inconsistency of their sleeping arrangements: a motel room one night, a park bench the next. They didn't mind too much anymore. They were tougher now. Stronger.

Things were slowly looking up.

Or so they thought.

Kyle was checking his phone, like he did every morning. Mostly for job responses, directions, or just to check the time. But this time, his thumb froze over the screen.

Five missed calls.

Three texts.

From his mom.

His breath hitched. It had been almost a full year. Not a word. Not a text. Not a single "Are you okay?" until now. His hand tightened around the phone.

June sat up groggily and peeked over. "Everything good?"

Kyle didn't answer right away. He just stared at the name glowing on his screen. Mom.

"I don't get it," he said quietly. "Now she decides to care?"

June scooted closer. "You gonna text her back?"

He didn't say anything. Just stared a moment longer before locking the screen and shoving the phone into his pocket.

They went about their day like normal. Got some free breakfast at a nearby shelter. Washed up in the bathroom. Walked the streets, checking job listings.

Around lunchtime, the shared phone buzzed again.

June picked it up. "Hello?"

It was a woman's voice—soft but firm. She was calling about a waitress job June had applied for two weeks ago. They needed someone to start right away.

June's eyes lit up like fireworks.

"YES! Yes, I'm available!" she nearly shouted.

Kyle watched her bounce on her toes while confirming the address and shift start time. As soon as she hung up, she turned to him, beaming.

"I got a job, Kyle! I'm gonna be working!"

He grinned. "Hell yeah you are. Look at us."

They high-fived like it was the biggest win in the world. And maybe, for them, it was.

That night, they sat in the motel room they were lucky to snag with a little of June's cash. Kyle sat by the window, staring at his phone again. The texts from his mom were still there.

"Kyle, please talk to me."

"We miss you."

"Just let me know you're okay."

He scoffed quietly. Where was this energy when he was locked in his room trying to drown out his dad's shouting? When his arm bruised for no reason? When he cried in the bathroom because he didn't know how else to feel?

Finally, he texted back.

"I'm fine. But I want nothing to do with you or him. You had your chance to care."

He stared at the screen for a few more minutes. Then, with a long breath, he stood up.

"I'm done with this phone," he said. "Too many ghosts."

The next day, they went to a nearby electronics store and bought two cheap phones. One for him. One for June.

"You're gonna need your own now," he told her, handing her the box. "You're a working woman and all."

June grinned. "Aw, does this mean I get to ignore your calls now?"

“Only if you do it nicely.”

They laughed. They teased. They shared orange sodas and cheap microwave burritos back at the motel. But in the quiet space after the laughter faded, Kyle still couldn't shake the chill running down his spine.

Why now?

Why did his mom want to talk after all this time?

He didn't know. And maybe he never would.

But at least now, they were both a little more ready.

And they weren't facing any of it alone.

Chapter 11: Our Own

A week had passed since Kyle received his first paycheck—\$860. It might not have seemed like much to most people, but to Kyle and June, it felt like striking gold. It was the proof they needed that all the pain, sacrifice, and nights under the stars hadn't been for nothing. They could finally begin building something.

Two weeks later, after long hours of searching, budgeting, and hopeful planning, they managed to find a cheap, rundown apartment on the edge of the city. It wasn't much—just a small one-bedroom, one-bathroom unit with peeling wallpaper and a creaky floor—but it was theirs. It was warm. It had a lock. And more than anything, it was a space they could call home.

With their combined savings, they paid three months of rent upfront. It gave them breathing room, and a sense of security they hadn't had in a long time. They moved in with nothing but their worn backpacks and Kyle's scratched-up bike. The apartment was mostly empty, echoing every step and sound, but it was theirs—and that made all the difference.

After a long, honest discussion, June insisted that Kyle take the bedroom. He was working the longer shifts, and his back was always aching. She told him she didn't need much space anyway, and turned the corner of the living room into her own cozy little area. With some fabric from the thrift store and a couple of string lights, she made it feel like home.

They didn't have a couch, or a table, or even chairs—but they had two cheap full-sized mattresses they'd bought from a secondhand shop, blankets from the shelter, and the fire in their hearts to make it work. They scraped together a few bathroom essentials and picked up some basic kitchenware from a free community center.

Kyle, never one to rest for too long, soon landed a second part-time job—this time as a mechanic. His hours were long and exhausting, splitting time between plumbing jobs and the garage, but the sense of purpose kept him going. Every dollar meant more food, more stability, and the chance to keep June safe. He liked the work too—fixing engines, tuning up old cars, getting his hands greasy. It kept his mind focused and his heart steady.

June's job at the café kept her busy too. She started making friends with a few regulars and coworkers, and her confidence grew each day. The customers loved her bright smile and warm energy. At night, she came home smelling like coffee and vanilla syrup, tired but satisfied.

And in the middle of it all was a dog. The same stray Kyle had fed with hot dogs weeks before had kept following him home. She was white with soft grey patches, eyes full of cautious hope. Over time, she started hanging around the apartment, waiting by the steps until Kyle or June returned. They called her Patches.

After another heartfelt conversation—the kind that had become so natural between them—they decided to officially adopt her. June found an old bowl, and Kyle bought a small bag of dog food

with the last of his tip money. They gave Patches a bath in the tub, wrapped her in a towel, and let her curl up on a folded blanket next to June's mattress.

Their little apartment might have been barebones, but it was filled with something no amount of money could buy—warmth, trust, laughter, and hope.

They weren't just surviving anymore. They were building a life.

And it was just the beginning.

Chapter 12: The Lake, New Clothes

Things were finally starting to fall into place. After months of uncertainty and barely scraping by, June walked out of the diner one crisp morning with her very first paycheck in hand—\$750. She couldn't stop smiling, and Kyle, waiting for her with Patches leashed beside him, grinned just as wide when she waved the envelope in the air like a trophy.

The first thing they did was something they'd both talked about for a while—new clothes. It wasn't just a luxury, it was a necessity. They were running on worn-out everything: socks with holes, shirts that didn't fit right anymore, jackets that barely held out the cold. So they hit a few secondhand shops and discount stores, stretching every dollar carefully but intentionally.

They started with the essentials—new underwear, bras, socks. June held up a soft hoodie in a soft shade of pastel pink and smiled like it was the best thing she'd ever seen. Kyle picked up a plain red t-shirt and a worn leather jacket that made him feel like himself again. They tried on jeans that actually fit, picked out shoes that weren't falling apart, and left with two bags each full of fresh, clean fabric.

It wasn't about looking good—it was about *feeling* like people again. When you're clean and clothed in something new, something you chose, it makes you stand a little taller. It gives you dignity.

To celebrate, they planned a day off together. A real day off. No job hunting, no washing clothes in rivers, no worries about where to sleep. Just them, Patches, and a lake they'd heard about from a kind barista June had chatted with during one of her diner shifts.

The sky was clear that day, the sun warm and kind. They packed a few snacks, borrowed a couple of towels from the shelter they used to visit, and rode Kyle's bike with June balancing awkwardly on the back while Patches trotted along beside them.

The lake was more beautiful than they imagined. Tucked away behind some tall trees and wildflowers, the water shimmered like glass. They took turns swimming while the other kept an eye on their stuff and Patches, who barked and pawed at the shore like she wanted to join them.

June screamed when Kyle splashed her, then tackled him back into the water. They laughed until their sides hurt, the kind of laughter that makes you forget all the hard stuff for just a little while.

After drying off in the sun, they laid on the grass, side by side, staring up at the clouds while Patches napped curled between them.

"This is the happiest I have felt in years," June whispered.

Kyle looked over at her. "Same here."

Two months passed after that day, and things only got better. June had kept working the late-night shifts at the diner, but with some encouragement from Kyle, she applied for a second part-time job—and landed it. She was now a barista at the very same coffee shop that recommended the lake.

She loved it there. The customers, the smell of roasted beans, even the early mornings. It felt like a new chapter, another layer of independence.

They still didn't have much, but they had each other, a loyal dog, and a routine that finally didn't feel like a fight to survive.

And more than anything, they had hope.

Chapter 13: Saving Up

It was nearing midnight, and the apartment was still except for the soft hum of the old fridge and the occasional stir of Patches shifting in her sleep by the front door. The city outside was quiet for once—no sirens, no shouting, just the distant buzz of traffic.

Kyle lay on his mattress, eyes wide open, his body screaming for sleep, but sleep just wouldn't come.

His neck throbbed, and his lower back pulsed with a dull ache from weeks of non-stop labor. Between fixing cars during the day and crawling under sinks or inside walls for plumbing work in the evenings, his body had taken a hit. He tried turning to his side, then his back, then curling up slightly—but nothing helped.

In the soft darkness, he sighed.

June, still half awake in her makeshift bed in the living room, heard him. She waited a moment, hoping he might settle, but the tossing didn't stop. With a quiet yawn and sleepy steps, she padded toward the bedroom.

Kyle looked up when she pushed the door open slowly.

"You okay?" she whispered.

He tried to shrug it off. "Yeah... just tired. But my back and neck are killing me. Been like this for a few days."

June frowned softly and didn't hesitate. "Sit up."

Kyle blinked at her, confused. "What?"

"Sit up, dummy. Back toward me."

Too tired to argue, he did. June climbed onto the mattress behind him and placed her hands gently on his shoulders. When she started massaging, his body instantly loosened.

"Holy crap..." he muttered, almost melting under her fingers.

She smiled, even though he couldn't see it. "Yeah, you're all knots. No wonder you can't sleep."

The room fell into a soft quiet, only filled with the sound of June's hands working and Kyle's breathing slowing. There was something so strangely comforting about it—intimate but innocent.

After a few minutes, June spoke, her voice quiet but certain.

“We should start saving up... for a car.”

Kyle tilted his head slightly. “A car, huh?”

“Yeah,” she said, digging her thumb gently into a tight spot in his shoulder. “Something small and cheap, nothing fancy. But it’d help us get around better. Get groceries easier, go see places, jobs would be easier to get to...”

Kyle thought about it. She was right. A car would give them more freedom, more reach, more safety.

“I like that idea,” he said softly. “We’ll make it happen.”

June smiled again. “Also... we should get Patches a proper collar. With a tag and everything. She’s family now.”

Kyle chuckled lightly, a soft sound from deep in his chest. “She really is.”

They shifted a bit, and without even thinking about it, Kyle reached back and gently pulled June’s legs around, letting them rest in his lap. With a kind of unspoken understanding, he began massaging her feet—calloused, tired, but small and warm.

Neither of them said anything about it. It just felt natural. They were two kids who had nothing, and yet right now they had each other, and they had comfort. Real, healing comfort.

“I never thought I’d be here,” Kyle murmured.

“Where?” June asked quietly.

“Alive. Safe. In a room with someone who cares.”

June leaned forward just a little, resting her chin on his shoulder. “Me neither.”

They stayed that way for a while, exchanging care in the form of small touches, in silence that spoke volumes. They weren’t just surviving anymore—they were healing. And dreaming.

Together.

Chapter 14: 3am Breakfast

After the quiet, soul-healing moment they shared massaging away the tension of their long days, the silence was broken by an unexpected growl—Kyle's stomach. June looked up and blinked.

"You hungry?" she asked.

Kyle gave her a sheepish smile. "Starving."

June laughed softly and stood, offering him a hand. "Let's make breakfast."

He glanced at the clock on the microwave when they walked into the kitchen—3:02 a.m.

They didn't care.

Under the warm kitchen light, the little apartment came alive. Kyle pulled out the pancake mix while June washed strawberries at the sink. They moved around each other easily, intuitively, like they had been doing this for years.

Patches trotted into the kitchen, her tail wagging, ears perked up, excited by the smells and the gentle energy filling the room.

The music was soft, something lo-fi and mellow playing from Kyle's phone on the counter. It was just enough to hum along with. June flipped pancakes like a pro while Kyle manned the eggs, bacon, and sausage. They laughed when Kyle almost dropped a sausage link and then danced around the kitchen just to be silly.

Plates filled with warm food were finally set at the little folding table by the window—pancakes stacked high, butter melting down the sides, strawberries carefully sliced and layered on top. Bacon crisp, eggs fluffy, and cold glasses of milk sweating slightly in the early morning air.

They sat across from each other, still laughing a little between bites, Patches laying down at their feet with her head resting over Kyle's foot like she belonged there.

Then, in a moment so simple and so sweet, June leaned over the table and kissed Kyle on the cheek.

It wasn't dramatic. It wasn't forced. It just *was*.

Kyle's heart skipped.

For a second, he didn't move, didn't breathe. His eyes met hers, and there was something behind them—soft, warm, curious. She looked at him like he made her feel safe. Like he made her feel wanted.

He smiled. He couldn't help it.

But inside, a war brewed.

She was 15 now, yes, but still too young. And he knew that. He knew the law, the risks, the complications. But he also knew he cared about her in ways he couldn't deny. Deep down, he *wanted* her. Not just romantically—he wanted her around. Wanted her to be okay. To feel loved.

He wouldn't touch her. Not yet. But he would wait. And protect her until the world stopped spinning.

They finished their breakfast slowly, lingering in the warmth of the moment. Once the dishes were cleaned and the stove was wiped down, they said their quiet goodnights.

"Sweet dreams, Junie," Kyle murmured, ruffling her hair lightly.

"Goodnight, Ky," she whispered back, her eyes still holding that same glimmer.

He shut the door to his room and laid down on his mattress, arms folded behind his head, staring at the ceiling. The soft press of her kiss still tingled on his cheek.

And for the first time in a long while, he fell asleep with a smile.

Chapter 15: 4 Months Later

Four months passed in what felt like a blink of an eye, and while life wasn't exactly thrilling every day, it was steady—and that was more than enough for Kyle and June.

With both of them working two part-time jobs, they'd finally saved enough to buy their very first car together. It was old, small, and more than a little beat-up, with chipped blue paint and a trunk that didn't always close right. But it ran (most of the time), and it was *theirs*.

Kyle named it "Kate."

"It looks more like a Greg," June joked when he first said the name, but she didn't fight him on it. "Kate" stuck.

Sure, it broke down every now and then—okay, *a lot*—but Kyle was quick to fix it, using the same stubborn determination that got them to Vancouver in the first place. And having a car changed everything. Commutes became easier, grocery runs took half the time, and late-night drives with Patches in the backseat, her tongue flapping out the window, became a new favorite activity.

With summer approaching, the weather had warmed, and windows were always rolled down. They'd often just drive aimlessly, letting the breeze hit their faces and the music fill the car. Sometimes they talked. Sometimes they didn't. But the comfort was always there.

And now, Kyle's 19th birthday was just two months away.

Almost a full year since they ran away together.

June had been thinking about it a lot—what she could do to make his birthday special. He'd done so much for her... it only felt right to give him something good in return. She thought maybe she could take him on an Asian food tour—hopping between sushi joints, noodle spots, Korean BBQs, and boba tea cafés. He loved Asian food almost as much as she did. But she wanted to be sure it was something he'd enjoy.

One night, as they sat in the car parked by a lake, windows cracked, Patches curled up in the back seat, June broke the silence.

"So," she started, nudging him with her elbow, "your birthday's in two months. Got any wild wishes this year?"

Kyle raised a brow, smirking. "Like, *magical unicorn* wishes? Or actual plans?"

"Real-ish ones," she laughed. "Although if unicorns are involved, I'm not against it."

He thought for a second, looking out over the water, then said, "Honestly? I wanna go go-karting in ninja costumes."

June blinked. "What?"

"You said fun and random. That's fun and random." He grinned at her. "Just imagine it. Me in full black stealth gear, drifting around a corner like I'm in *Fast & Furious: Hidden Temple Edition*."

June burst into laughter. "Okay, okay—so ninja go-karting is on the list. Anything else?"

He shrugged, still smiling. "As long as you're with me on my birthday, I'm honestly ok."

Chapter 16: Coffee Beans & Scented Candles

It was mid-July now, and Kyle's 19th birthday was just around the corner.

June had been quietly working on a list in her notebook for weeks now—filled with doodles, ideas, gift thoughts, and even backup plans. She wanted this birthday to be special. Kyle deserved more than just a cake and a card—he deserved memories, laughter, and a day that felt like he mattered.

Meanwhile, life was still moving in its quiet rhythm. That morning, Kyle, June, and Patches headed out to the local dog park. It was sunny, warm, and breezy—the kind of day that felt like it was made for smiling.

Patches ran ahead of them as soon as the leash came off, tail wagging and ears bouncing, immediately chasing after a golden retriever and making a friend like she always did.

Kyle and June strolled toward a bench under the shade of a big maple tree and sat side by side, watching the dogs play.

“She’s really in her element here,” Kyle said, his eyes following Patches with a soft grin.

“Right? She’s totally the queen of this park now,” June giggled, bumping her shoulder with his. “Okay, so... horror movie night. What are we watching tonight? I vote zombies. Something gross and chaotic.”

Kyle chuckled. “You *always* vote zombies. I was thinking haunted house vibes. Like, creaky floorboards and ghosts throwing furniture.”

June gasped dramatically. “You just want an excuse to pretend you’re not scared.”

He raised a brow, smug. “Me? Scared? Never.”

They both laughed, the kind of easy laughter that only came from knowing someone through their best and worst moments. After about an hour, they whistled for Patches, who trotted back over with her tongue hanging out and tail still wagging like crazy. The three of them walked together down the shaded sidewalk, letting the sun sink lower behind them.

Then, out of the blue, Kyle slowed down and turned toward June with a look in his eye—the kind he got when he had one of his *wild ideas*.

“You love scented candles,” he began.

June glanced over, curious. “Yeah?”

“I love coffee,” he added.

She nodded slowly. “Uh-huh?”

“And you love coffee. And I secretly love candles.” He grinned, and she laughed. “So... what if we made our *own* business?”

June blinked. “Wait—like, a real business?”

“Yeah! We could call it *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*. It’s like... the perfect mash-up of us. Warm, cozy, a little chaotic—but it smells amazing.”

She smiled big now, eyes lighting up. “Kyle, that’s actually... kind of genius?”

“I mean, think about it,” he said, getting more animated. “You walk into a little shop, smell fresh coffee brewing *and* warm peach candles burning? Maybe we hand-pour the candles, have a coffee bar on the side, even sell dog treats for pups like Patches!”

“Oh my god, and the candles could have names like ‘Midnight Espresso’ or ‘Dog Park Sunrise’ or—wait—‘Haunted Roast’ for spooky season!” June was practically bouncing now.

Kyle laughed, watching her come alive with the idea. “See? You’re already better at naming things than me.”

They spent the rest of the walk dreaming up scents, branding, what the shop would look like, where they’d open it someday, and if they’d paint the walls red or pink. (They agreed on warm tones with twinkly fairy lights.) By the time they got home, their silly, spontaneous idea had started to feel less like a dream and more like a possibility.

It was still just talk. But talk was the beginning of everything.

And sometimes, the best things in life started with an idea shared during a walk with someone you love—and a very happy dog.

Chapter 17: The Plans

It had only been a week since that dreamy dog-park walk, and June hadn't stopped thinking about *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*. The idea felt like a seed taking root in her heart. Quietly, in the soft hours before bed or during slow afternoons, June began sketching.

She used the back of her notebook—the one that held birthday plans and budgeting lists—and started drawing out little floor plans and storefronts. Some were neat, others chaotic, and a few had coffee cups doodled in the corners with steam swirling up into hearts. She pictured warm amber lighting, shelves lined with handmade candles, and a tiny cozy nook in the back with big leather armchairs and a record player softly spinning.

In one sketch, a little chalkboard sign stood out front:

"Welcome to Coffee Beans & Scented Candles – sniff around, and stay a while."

In another, there was a mini section titled **"Pup Corner"** with jars of dog treats, a doggie water bowl with "Patches" engraved on it, and even a little polaroid wall for dog customers. She didn't show Kyle the sketches yet—she wanted it to be a surprise.

But June wasn't only thinking about their future business—she was still hard at work planning Kyle's upcoming 19th birthday.

She had made a new list titled: **"Kyle's Big Day–Operation Chaos & Coffee"**, and scribbled in her bubbly handwriting were all the things she wanted to do:

- Surprise him with breakfast in bed (his favorite: eggs, bacon, toast, and iced coffee with extra sugar)
- Let him sleep in with no alarms
- Give him the red hoodie she secretly bought him last week
- Go to that little bookstore downtown he's been dying to check out
- Take him out to eat at three different Asian restaurants ("food tour style!" she wrote in all caps)
- End the night with a horror movie marathon with him and Patches

And then, at the bottom of the list, she scribbled one last chaotic plan:

"Go-karting—but only if he wears that ridiculous black ninja outfit he joked about."

She could already hear his laugh when she reminds him of it.

Meanwhile, back at their little apartment, the sun poured in through the window onto the mattress in Kyle's room.

Patches lay curled up in the middle of it, legs stretched out like a queen. Her tail twitched occasionally in her sleep, a tiny bark escaping now and then as if she were dreaming of running through the park again. The place was quiet, peaceful. The sound of the fridge humming in the kitchen, the occasional car outside—but mostly just the soft sighs of a dog in a deep, happy nap.

The mattress still smelled like them—warm, familiar, safe. Patches, in her own doggy way, knew this was home now. And even though Kyle and June were both at work, she never felt alone. She knew they'd be back soon.

Later that evening, June pulled out her notebook again, flipping past the birthday list to her store sketches. She ran her fingers along the pencil lines, imagining the space, the way it might smell like coffee and cinnamon candles, the sound of Kyle laughing behind the counter, Patches sleeping under the register.

Plans were forming. Dreams were shaping. And even if it was still just ink and pencil for now, June believed with her whole heart—they'd make it real.

Chapter 18: Your Special Day!

August finally rolled around, and with it came Kyle's 19th birthday. June had been planning this day for weeks, carefully guarding every surprise and checking off her list with excited determination. Today wasn't just a birthday—it was a celebration of everything they'd made it through together.

The morning sun trickled through the curtains, but the apartment was quiet. No alarms, no rushing. Just soft golden light and the sound of sizzling from the tiny kitchen.

June was on a mission.

She tiptoed through the apartment in socks, wearing Kyle's old oversized hoodie as she prepared breakfast. Eggs—sunny side up, just how he liked them—two crispy strips of bacon, buttered toast, and his favorite iced coffee with extra sugar and a splash of cream. She even added a tiny red candle to one piece of toast, lighting it just before walking it into his room.

Kyle was still snoring when she crept in, tray in hand and Patches trailing behind her with a happy tail wag. "Morning, birthday boy," she whispered with a grin.

Kyle blinked sleepily, then grinned wide as he sat up, rubbing his eyes. "You made breakfast?"

"I made *your* breakfast," she said proudly, setting the tray in his lap. "Happy 19th, Ky."

He looked at her like she'd just handed him the moon. "You're the best, Junnie."

After breakfast June told him to close his eyes. "No peeking."

"Okay, okay," he laughed.

She came back holding a small gift bag with tissue paper sticking out the top. Inside: a soft, brand-new red hoodie—the exact one he'd been staring at through a shop window two weeks ago.

"No way," he said, pulling it out. "You remembered?"

"Of course I did," she smiled. "Try it on."

He tossed it over his shoulders and zipped it up, pulling the hood over his messy blonde hair. "Perfect fit."

Next on the list: the bookstore. It was small, quiet, with wood-paneled shelves and the smell of old pages. Kyle wandered the aisles, eyes wide with excitement while June followed him like a happy shadow.

He found a rare book on vintage motorcycles and another about classic horror films. June insisted on buying both.

"Junnie, you don't have to—"

"Shut up, it's your day," she smirked.

Afterwards, it was time for the epic *Asian food tour*. Their first stop was a ramen shop where they slurped noodles and made faces at each other from across the table. Then dumplings and bubble tea at a Taiwanese place. Finally, a tiny Korean BBQ where Kyle grilled meat with a goofy grin on his face.

By the end of it, they were stuffed and leaning on each other as they waddled back to the car.

"That was *amazing*," Kyle said, patting his stomach.

"Told you," June beamed. "Only the best for you."

That night, with fairy lights glowing in the apartment and Patches curled up at their feet, June popped in the first horror movie—Kyle's pick. They sat close, sharing popcorn and yelling at the screen when the characters made dumb decisions.

At one point, June leaned her head on his shoulder. "You happy?"

"So much," he whispered. "You made today perfect."

Just before bed, June got up and grabbed her notebook. She hadn't shown anyone these pages yet—not even Kyle.

"One last birthday surprise," she said, handing it to him.

He flipped through the sketches slowly. Each page showed more of their dream shop—*Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*. The layout, the colors, the shelves, the Pup Corner, even a drawing of him behind the counter and June lighting a candle.

"You really drew all this?"

She nodded. "Every page is a piece of our dream."

Kyle looked up at her with glassy eyes. "This is... everything. Thank you, Junnie."

They didn't say anything else. They didn't have to. Dreams felt real now.

And Kyle knew—this was just the beginning.

Chapter 19: Big Dreams Start Small

Ever since June showed Kyle the sketches for *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*, it had become their new favorite topic. Almost every evening, they'd lie on their mattresses—Patches curled up at Kyle's feet—and talk about what their dream store would smell like, look like, feel like.

Kyle would tap the edge of the sketchbook and say, "We could hang fairy lights all around the windows."

And June would reply with a grin, "And offer cinnamon coffee every Saturday morning." They were building a dream, page by page, thought by thought.

Kyle checked his little stash of savings in the envelope he kept tucked under his bed. He counted each bill slowly: **\$1,700**.

June had her money in an envelope too, and hers added up to **\$1,320**.

Not nearly enough to open a store. But it was something. A starting point.

So they pushed themselves harder.

The next four months blurred by in a whirlwind of early mornings and late-night shifts. Kyle picked up extra hours at both the garage and his plumbing job. June juggled the diner and the coffee shop like a pro, flashing her bright smile even on the sleepiest of days.

By the time **December** rolled around, Kyle had **\$4,826**, and June had **\$3,604**.

Together: **\$8,430**. Still not enough for a storefront, but enough to make the dream feel more real than ever.

Back in earlier October a warm blur of laughter and love had passed when June turned **16**. Kyle had made her pancakes in the shape of hearts that morning, even though most of them came out a little weird. They didn't care. It was perfect.

Now it was **Christmas Eve**. Kyle wanted to make it special. Home-cooked meal, a warm evening in, and maybe even dancing barefoot in the kitchen. They planned it all out.

But life, as usual, had other plans.

First, when they got to the grocery store, half the items were out of stock. No green beans, no pie crusts, and they forgot to buy Christmas lights.

Then their car "Kate", broke down—again—this time with a pitiful wheeze that made Kyle groan and rest his head on the steering wheel.

"No big deal," June said. "We can just walk back."

Except halfway through the walk, a snowstorm rolled in. Thick, cold flakes fell faster than they could blink, and soon their cheeks were red, their fingers frozen, and they were trudging through a full-on blizzard.

"Please tell me you have the apartment key," Kyle asked, already knowing the answer.

June's silence said it all.

They had left it in the car. The one now stranded 15 minutes away, sitting useless in the snow.

"And did we buy dog food for Patches?" Kyle asked after a long moment.

June gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Nope."

They both looked at each other, then burst into tired, breathy laughter right there in the snow.

They were cold, sore, and definitely not having the magical holiday they had imagined—but none of that mattered.

When they finally got back into the apartment after trekking back to the car, their noses red and Patches overjoyed to see them, Kyle made scrambled eggs with whatever was left in the fridge. June lit a half-used cinnamon candle. They sat on the floor, wrapped in blankets, and shared warm food with their happy dog curled between them.

"We're totally going to laugh about this one day," Kyle said through a mouthful of eggs.

June leaned her head against his shoulder and smiled. "I already am."

After eating they exchanged little gifts. Kyle got June a beautifully knitted pink sweater.

"Oh Kyle, thank you! I love it!" She gave him a hug then quickly put it on.

June got Kyle stylish red leather gloves that looked like they'd last up to 10 years. "June... they're perfect. Just what I needed."

And they, together, got Patches a brand-new dog bed! It was different dark shades of blues and greys. as soon as it got placed on the floor Patches couldn't stop getting excited. Her cute little tail thumping on the dog bed once she was testing it out. They were simple gifts, yes, but they meant much more. Something straight from each of their hearts.

"Merry Christmas, Ky."

"Merry Christmas, Junnie."

Chapter 20: Caught A Cold

The New Year crept in slowly, the kind of quiet celebration only Kyle, June, and Patches could have together. Wrapped in layers, they sat by the window of their tiny apartment, watching the snowfall glisten under the city lights. The apartment was dimly lit with a few candles June had found on clearance, and a single string of twinkling lights blinked above their window.

They had mugs of warm coffee in hand—Kyle had brewed it himself with fresh ground beans, something he was slowly learning to master—and a notebook open between them on the floor.

They titled the top of the page in June's curly handwriting: **"Goals for the New Year."**

Kyle grinned. "Alright, first one: a new car. One that doesn't cough every time we turn the key."

"And a better apartment," June added, tapping her pen. "One with two bedrooms, so I can finally have walls."

They both laughed.

"Next," Kyle said, his tone growing softer, "Let's aim for... \$25,000 saved. For Coffee Beans & Scented Candles."

June's eyes sparkled. "That's the big one."

"And," Kyle added with a shy little smirk, "Disneyland. Just because."

"Yes!" June grinned, writing it down with excitement. "We'll eat every churro and ride every ride."

Their New Year Goals:

1. A new and reliable car
2. A better apartment with two bedrooms
3. \$25,000 saved for their dream business: Coffee Beans & Scented Candles
4. A trip to Disneyland, just the two of them and maybe Patches in a tiny Mickey hat

As the clock ticked toward midnight, they curled into the warmth of their shared blanket, Patches asleep between them. When the countdown on Kyle's phone buzzed out the last seconds of the year, they didn't cheer or shout. They just looked at each other.

And when the clock struck twelve, Kyle gently tugged June closer by the blanket and leaned in to give her a soft kiss on the nose.

She looked up at him, cheeks flushed pink—not just from the cold.

Were they friends? Sure. Roommates? Technically. But deep down, they both knew they were more than that. They were just waiting—giving each other space, time, and safety.

As the New Year started to settle into routine, June picked up a new hobby: learning how to make homemade scented candles. Their apartment smelled like dragonfruit and green apples most days, sometimes citrus or cinnamon, and once, a disastrous blend of peppermint and coffee that made Patches sneeze.

Kyle, in the meantime, started researching how to make good coffee from scratch. He experimented with beans, water temperatures, and milk frothing. He even labeled his jars with handwritten tags. One morning, June took a sip of his latest brew and said, “Okay, this one’s magic.”

Things were moving. Slowly, steadily.

But then, in early January, Kyle caught a cold. Not just a sniffle, but a full-on, stay-in-bed, can’t-breathe kind of cold.

He tried to toughen it out, of course. “I’m fine,” he croaked one morning, eyes half-shut and nose red. “Just allergies.”

June wasn’t buying it. She called in sick to both jobs and spent the next two days taking care of him. She made him hot soup with too much garlic, kept his tea warm, put cool cloths on his forehead, and read aloud to him from a dog-eared horror novel they’d been working through together.

Patches, ever so the nurse, refused to leave his side.

On the second night, Kyle mumbled through his sore throat, “Thanks, Junnie. You didn’t have to stay.”

June brushed the hair off his forehead. “I wanted to.”

He smiled, weak but full of gratitude. “You’re my favorite person.”

“You’re mine too.”

She stayed up just to make sure his fever broke, curled up on a chair by his mattress, candlelight flickering soft across the walls. Their dream was still far away, but this moment—this quiet, caring, sleepy little world—felt like the start of something beautiful.

Chapter 21: Starting A Little Business

It had been a week since Kyle finally shook off his cold. With his strength back, he and June dove full-force into their goals again. They weren't just talking about dreams anymore—they were living them, one step at a time.

June had been on a creative streak. In just a week, she poured and perfected over **fifty** different scented candles—lavender vanilla, toasted marshmallow, lemon honey, cinnamon apple, peach tea, and so many more. Their tiny apartment smelled like a cozy dream.

Meanwhile, Kyle was becoming a coffee artist. He learned how to roast beans, use a French press, brew pour-over, and even practiced foam art. He tested every brew on June, who happily played taste-tester and gave brutally honest reviews. “Too bitter,” she’d say, or “This one tastes like hugs.”

They decided to start selling their creations at craft fairs and flea markets on the weekends. It was small, but it felt big. Like planting a seed for the future.

That Saturday, they set up their little booth under a shady blue canopy at the local flea market. June arranged her candles in a rainbow-like pattern across the table. Kyle brewed fresh coffee in the corner and offered free samples. A little sign in front read: **"Coffee Beans & Scented Candles – Small Business, Big Hearts."**

Then came three new faces.

Three people around their age strolled up, curious and grinning. There were two tall guys and one girl who was just a little taller than June. They were full of energy and jokes, and before long, Kyle and June found themselves in the middle of a cheerful conversation.

The first guy had short black hair and kind eyes. “I’m **Evan**, 22,” he said, soft-spoken but always smiling.

The second guy had messy light brown hair and an awkward charm. “I’m **Troy**, I’m 20. OH SORRY!!! I didn't mean to spill some of your coffee, man!”

The girl had long, wavy blonde hair, bright eyes, and the kind of voice that couldn't be ignored. “I’m **Casie**, 19. And yes, I *do* want to smell every single candle here.”

They were all different, but their chemistry was obvious. Friends who had each other's backs, the kind of people you could laugh with until your stomach hurt.

They hung out at the booth for hours. Evan helped them carry some boxes. Troy made June laugh with his failed attempts at latte art using air. Casie gave June tips on Instagram marketing.

For the first time in a long time, Kyle and June felt like they weren't alone.

Still, June felt nervous. She was only **16**, and though she carried herself with maturity and strength, she knew it might raise questions. So, for her safety—and Kyle’s—she didn’t mention her age. They didn’t ask, which was a huge relief.

By the end of the day, after sales and smiles and shared stories, they all exchanged numbers. Before leaving, Casie grinned and shouted over her shoulder, “We’re doing a BBQ at the park next weekend! You two *have* to come!”

Kyle and June agreed without hesitation. Their hearts were full.

They hadn’t just made sales that day—they had made their **first real friends** since moving here over a year ago.

And it felt like the beginning of something really, really good.

Chapter 22: Puppies! And BBQs!

Thanks to their side gig at craft fairs and flea markets, Kyle and June were now making about **\$300 each weekend**. For them, it was absolutely life-changing. It meant groceries without worry, but Kyle still had his food stamps that came in every month. Little extra toward their savings goals, rent, and finally—some breathing room.

But in the middle of the week, things took an unexpected turn.

June had just come home from a long double shift. Her feet ached, and she was about to collapse onto her mattress when she heard an odd sound—whining. Patches was curled up in her dog bed, breathing heavily and looking distressed.

"What's wrong, girl?" June asked, instantly alert and crouching by her side.

Then came a faint, high-pitched cry. A tiny squeak. June's eyes widened.

"Was that... a puppy?"

Twenty frantic minutes later, June sat beside Patches, phone in hand, as the last of **six tiny puppies** was born. Two girls. Four boys. All wriggly, warm, and squeaking for their mama.

She snapped a photo and texted Kyle:

June: "OMG! Patches was pregnant this whole time?! Look at her puppies!!! When are you coming home???"

Kyle didn't even finish his shift—he raced home, heart pounding with a mix of excitement and panic.

The only time they could think this might've happened was **months ago at the dog park**. They hadn't realized. Neither of them had ever been through something like this.

The next few days were a whirlwind. They bought pee pads, puppy formula (just in case), soft blankets, and a whole bunch of puppy toys so the little ones wouldn't chew up the apartment. June spent hours researching how to care for newborn pups. Kyle built a makeshift puppy pen out of cardboard boxes and zip ties.

Their tiny apartment was now a full-blown puppy nursery.

Soon, the weekend rolled around—and with it, the BBQ at the park. They didn't trust leaving Patches and the pups alone, so they packed everyone up, making sure the puppies were warm and cozy in a large tote bag lined with soft towels.

When they arrived, **Evan, Troy, and Casie** lit up at the sight of them.

Evan stood at the grill, calm and focused.
Troy immediately tripped over a pinecone.
Casie was arranging cold drinks in a giant cooler filled with ice.

But the moment they spotted Patches...

“Oh my god, a dog!”

GASP

“AND PUPPIES!?” Casie squealed, dropping a soda can.

The trio swarmed them in sheer joy. The puppies were passed around with gentle hands and excited giggles. Everyone took turns snuggling the babies, while Patches proudly strutted around the park like the doggy queen she was.

The BBQ was filled with laughter, happy barking, and chaotic joy. Kyle grilled alongside Evan, June chatted with Casie about candle scents, and Troy—true to form—popped open a soda that immediately sprayed all over his face, prompting everyone to burst out laughing.

They were building something special. A life full of tiny miracles, big dreams, and beautiful, unexpected moments.

And now, they had puppies. Yike.

Chapter 23: 2 Week Notice

The puppies had brought chaos and joy into their tiny apartment, and both Kyle and June knew one of them had to be home more to keep the little furballs from chewing through every piece of what little they owned. So, after some discussion (and watching one of the pups drag Kyle's sock into the bathroom for the third time), June decided to give her two-week notice at the coffee shop. She'd keep her job at the diner, but this way she could stay home during the mornings and take care of their rapidly growing puppy family.

It was now **February 1st**, and life was feeling full. When they weren't working or cleaning up after the puppies, Kyle and June were spending time with Evan, Troy, and Casie. They'd quickly become inseparable, often laughing until their stomachs hurt. Casie had even made a group chat for the five of them and named it "**Chatty Baddys.**" Every time the name popped up on their phones, it made them laugh.

One afternoon, while Troy was sharing one of his usual chaotic ideas, he pitched a group vacation.

Troy: "We should go somewhere fun. Like mini-vacation fun!"

June's eyes lit up.

June: "What about Disneyland? It's on mine and Kyle's New Year's list!"

The group chat *exploded* with excited replies. Evan suggested they go after Valentine's Day so it would be cheaper and less packed. Everyone agreed. The group set a goal—each person had to save **at least \$1,000** for the trip.

In the middle of all that planning, Kyle was working his second job at the auto shop, wiping oil off his hands and humming to himself, when a delivery guy showed up.

"You Kyle?"

"Uh, yeah?"

The man handed him a small red card with a tiny daisy taped to it. Kyle blinked, confused and curious. As soon as the guy left, he opened it.

[Hi Kyle,

I hope you like the little flower. I was hoping you'd want to be my Valentine. It's our first year celebrating it together, so why not?

Text me when you finish reading this and let me know your answer.

—Junnie 🌻 }

Kyle grinned like an idiot, his cheeks turning red despite the grease on them. He took a picture of the card, sent it to her with a message:

Kyle: "You had me at *"Hi Kyle."* Of course I'll be your Valentine. You really think I'd say no to the girl who makes life feel like magic?"

Back at the apartment, June saw the message and melted.

That weekend at the flea market, they made over **\$400**, their best haul yet. They celebrated with Chinese takeout and apple cider, their go-to treat for small victories.

Word was starting to spread about their little side business. June kept crafting scented candle after scented candle, experimenting with scents like Vanilla Chai, Rosewood Forest, and Cinnamon Sugar Toast. People were loving them.

Even Evan, Troy, and Casie had bought their favorites and raved about them to their families. Kyle's coffee blends were a hit, too. Evan's dad even asked if Kyle shipped his coffee grounds. It was small, sure—but it felt like the beginning of something much, much bigger.

And in the middle of it all, Kyle and June looked around their cozy, slightly chaotic home—puppies tumbling over each other, candles drying on the counter, and the scent of fresh coffee always lingering in the air—and realized something beautiful:

They were building a life. One step, one scent, one sip at a time.

Chapter 24: Valentine's Day

It was the morning of February 14th, and Kyle and June had their little car packed to the brim with deliveries for Evan's, Troy's, and Casie's family members. Each small cardboard box was tied neatly with twine, labeled, and carefully stacked. Inside each one was either a scented candle, a bag of Kyle's freshly ground coffee, or both. The car smelled like warm vanilla, citrus spice, and roasted espresso—a chaotic blend that somehow just worked.

June double-checked the list in her hands. "Okay, we've got six for Casie's aunt, two for Troy's cousin, four for Evan's sister... and one big combo box for Evan's mom."

Kyle nodded, adjusting his seatbelt. "Let's get it."

Each scented candle June already had made was priced at \$10, while custom-made candles were \$20. For Kyle's coffee: \$5 for a small bag, \$10 for a medium, and \$20 for a large. Their pricing was fair and their quality spoke for itself.

By the end of their delivery run, as Kyle drove down the freeway with the sunset stretching across the sky, June was counting bills in the passenger seat.

"\$200... \$250... \$400... \$900... \$1,400!" She shouted, turning to him wide-eyed. "WHAT!? KYLE!"

Kyle nearly swerved. "Wait—what?! Seriously?!"

June just grinned and held up the stack of cash. "I told you we were good at this."

That night, Valentine's Day really began.

Kyle had taken the entire day off just for June. She wore a black dress covered in tiny pink hearts, her hair in a half-up, half-down style, and paired it with pink sneakers laced in black. Kyle went with crisp white pants, a rose-red button-up, and clean white shoes. They didn't match, but somehow, they complimented each other perfectly.

They started with strawberry ice cream from a small corner shop, then headed to the skating rink. June slipped and slid, laughing the whole time, while Kyle managed to stay on his feet—barely.

Lunch was sushi at Kyle's favorite little spot, followed by exchanging roses—June gave him a red one, and he gave her a pink one. There was no hand-holding, no stolen kisses in public. They were careful. June was still a minor, and they knew what lines could not be crossed. But the warmth in their glances and how close they sat together said more than enough.

Later, they found a photo booth and spent nearly twenty minutes taking silly, sweet, and sentimental pictures. June clutched the printed strips in her hands like it was a treasure.

They capped the day with a local comedy show, laughing so hard their stomachs hurt, and finally found a quiet hill to sit on and watch the Valentine's Day fireworks. Other couples dotted the grass, hands intertwined, kisses shared, and although Kyle and June kept their space, the way they leaned into each other said everything.

After the show, they drove back home to their shared apartment, a little sleepy and still buzzing with happiness.

Only to walk into complete puppy chaos.

The puppies were everywhere—chasing tails, tripping over themselves, barking in adorable chaos. One was trying to tug on a sock, another was halfway in their laundry basket, and a third was zooming back and forth across the hallway. Patches, proud dog mama, was snoring in her dog bed while one of her pups tugged gently at her ear.

June giggled as she set her rose on the kitchen counter. "Home sweet home."

Kyle grinned, scooping up one of the puppies and letting it lick his cheek. "Yup. Couldn't ask for anything better."

Chapter 25: Disney Planning!

The group chat—**Chatty Baddys**—was going off every hour with texts and memes about their upcoming Disneyland trip. It was just five days away, scheduled perfectly on a Wednesday when crowds would be light. Everyone was buzzing with excitement, sending countdown gifs and talking about what rides they couldn't wait to go on. Casie was determined to take the front seat on Space Mountain. Troy was planning on buying those Mickey Mouse ice creams first thing. Evan sent a message that simply said: "*Mickey ears or nothing.*"

Meanwhile, Kyle and June were still clocking in at their weekday jobs, working hard and stacking up their paychecks. Between Kyle's hands getting greasy from engine repairs and June balancing trays of food at the diner, they were exhausted—but motivated. Every dollar meant more saved for their dreams.

Their little business was thriving too. Thanks to the constant support from Evan, Troy, and Casie, word was spreading fast. Kyle and June's weekend flea market table had grown into something of a local favorite.

June now had **200** different scented candles, neatly arranged by fragrance families—floral, fruity, herbal, earthy, and cozy warm ones that smelled like cookies or vanilla lattes. Her creativity was blooming.

Kyle wasn't far behind. He now had **80 bags** of fresh coffee grounds in each size: small, medium, and large. Every blend was named after little inside jokes or moments they'd shared—like "Snowy Walk" (a warm cinnamon roast) and "Puppy Pile" (a soft caramel-hazelnut mix).

This weekend at the flea market, Kyle and June had help. Evan manned the folding table, Troy tried juggling candles (bad idea), and Casie brought snacks and joked with customers. But something shifted in June's mood when she noticed Casie getting a little too flirty with Kyle.

Casie leaned on the table, twirling her hair. "So, Kyle, what would you name a candle that smelled like *me*? Something unforgettable, right?"

Kyle laughed nervously, cheeks turning red. "Uh... probably something spicy. Like... I don't know. Chili pepper and—uh—champagne?"

Troy snorted soda through his nose. Evan just grinned and kept handing out free sample cards.

June kept her smile, but inside her stomach did a weird flip. She didn't *hate* Casie. In fact, she liked her. But this? This little scene right here? Yeah, June did *not* like it. Not one bit.

She rearranged the candles a little more aggressively than needed, trying to ignore the sting in her chest. Kyle was still blushing, poor guy. He probably had no idea what to say. But that didn't stop June from shooting him a subtle side-eye when he nervously chuckled at Casie's joke.

As the sun started to dip lower in the sky, the group packed up together and made plans for a movie night before the big Disneyland trip. June forced herself to shake off the weird vibe. They were friends. All of them. This was just Casie being Casie.

Right?

Still, as she rode home with Kyle, June stared out the window quietly.

Kyle glanced over at her. "You okay, Junnie?"

"Yeah," she said, too fast. "Just tired."

But inside, her thoughts were tangled.

Because deep down, she knew she wasn't just *tired*. She was jealous. And maybe, just maybe... a little heartbroken.

Chapter 26: That Bitch!

The early morning glow of Disneyland day should've been magical—the kind of day June had dreamed of for months. But something inside her didn't feel right.

For the past five days, Casie had been texting Kyle nonstop. And not just casual texts. Flirty, cheeky, obviously-more-than-friendly messages. June would catch glimpses of them when Kyle left his phone screen facing up. Her chest would tighten every time she saw Casie's name light up. Each time, she swallowed the ache and pasted on a smile like everything was okay. But inside? Inside she felt like she was unraveling thread by thread.

Kyle didn't know what to do. He wasn't replying to the flirty texts the way Casie clearly wanted him to, but he hadn't shut them down either. And he could feel something was off with June. He'd catch her looking away when he looked at her. She wasn't laughing as much, wasn't teasing him like usual. He wanted so badly to ask what was wrong, to hold her hand, to tell her she meant more to him than anyone ever had. But she was still a minor. And he didn't want to cross a line.

They packed some snacks for the drive—fruit, sandwiches, and candy they both liked—barely saying more than a few words to each other. Kyle drove, glancing at June every few minutes, hoping she'd say something, anything. But she stared out the window, arms crossed, headphones in, as if he wasn't even there.

By the time they pulled into Disneyland's massive lot, the mood was heavier than any traffic jam. It was just after 9 a.m., and the others were already waiting at the entrance.

Everyone had bought the all-day pass bracelets. They could ride whatever they wanted, as many times as they liked. It should've been fun. It should've been everything. But then Casie smiled, looped her arm through Kyle's, and leaned her head on his shoulder like she belonged there.

June's heart cracked right then and there.

She didn't say anything. She just turned and walked briskly toward the closest ride without looking back. Kyle opened his mouth to say something—anything—but Casie tugged on his sleeve.

“Come onnn, Kyle! Let's go ride the Space Blaster thingy first! Sit next to me, yeah?” she said, already dragging him in the opposite direction.

Kyle's eyes followed June, but he didn't pull away from Casie. He felt torn, confused, angry with himself for not knowing what to do.

The whole day went like that.

Casie sitting next to Kyle on every ride. Casie throwing her arms around Kyle during the rollercoasters. Casie feeding Kyle a spoonful of Dole Whip and giggling.

And June? June watched it all like a ghost. She stayed close to Troy and Evan when she could, laughing politely, hiding behind sunglasses she didn't really need, and making excuses to step away whenever she felt tears threaten to spill.

Every time Kyle tried to talk to her, she'd speed up her steps or latch onto Evan or Troy like a shield.

"June, wait—can we talk?" Kyle asked softly after one ride.

She turned to him for just a second. "Go back to Casie. She's waiting."

He opened his mouth, but she was already gone.

She didn't want to cry. Not here. Not on what was supposed to be a perfect day. But the truth was, she was hurting. Deeply. Because she loved Kyle. And watching another girl drape herself all over him while he didn't stop her? It felt like being stabbed again and again with a dull blade.

By evening, as the lights began to glow and the fireworks prepped to explode in the sky, June sat alone on a bench pretending to scroll through her phone. Patches would've known she was sad. She wished she was here to curl up next to her.

Kyle finally got away from Casie, who was distracted taking selfies. He walked up to June slowly, heart pounding, and sat next to her.

"I didn't know what to do," he said quietly.

June didn't look at him. "You didn't stop her."

"I didn't want to hurt her feelings."

"And what about mine?" she asked, voice cracking.

Kyle went silent.

The fireworks exploded above them, vibrant and full of life. But neither of them looked up.

Instead, they sat in the silence of an unfinished conversation. Both aching. Both waiting for something neither of them could say aloud just yet.

They left the park later than planned. June didn't speak on the drive back. Kyle didn't push.

Chapter 27: The Drive Back Home

The night air was cool as the Disneyland parking lot slowly emptied out. Laughter and excitement from the day still echoed in the distance, but for June, none of it mattered. Not now. Not after the day she'd had.

The trio had already climbed into their car and driven off, waving cheerfully as they left. Then it was just Kyle and June.

She didn't say a word—just slowly walked to their car, climbed into the back seat behind the passenger side, and curled into herself. Her knees tucked tightly to her chest, arms wrapped around them. Her face was turned away, and her quiet, trembling sobs filled the silence between them.

Kyle stood outside the driver's side for a second, his hand frozen on the door handle. His heart felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. Eventually, he slid into the driver's seat and started the car, glancing at her through the rearview mirror every few seconds. Each time, her silence stabbed at him. Her tears were silent, but they were loud enough to shatter him.

He knew. He *knew*. He should've shut Casie down the moment those texts started coming in. He should've told her not to cling to him, not to flirt, not to take the place he desperately wanted to give to June. But he didn't. He let it happen. And now here June was, brokenhearted and quiet in the back seat, because he didn't speak up.

He tightened his grip on the steering wheel, blinking away the sting in his own eyes. He couldn't take it anymore. Without saying anything, he gently pulled the car over to the side of the quiet highway. Hazard lights clicked softly.

Kyle stepped out, walked around to the other side, and opened the back door. He didn't ask. He didn't hesitate. He just got in and sat down next to her, shutting the door softly behind him.

For a moment, he didn't move. He watched her, the soft shaking of her shoulders, the tears streaming down her face, the way she tried to make herself small. It hurt. God, it *hurt*.

Slowly, inch by inch, he slid closer until he was beside her. "Junnie..." he whispered, voice rough, almost breaking.

Then he did the only thing he could—he wrapped his arms around her waist and shoulders and pulled her gently, tenderly, into his embrace. He didn't kiss her. He couldn't. Not yet. But he could hold her. So he did.

June didn't fight it. She melted into him, her sobs breaking free in full force. Her cries muffled against his chest, soaking into his shirt as she clung to him like he was the only thing anchoring her to the world.

"Shhh... Junnie, I've got you," he whispered into her hair, his voice trembling. "No more. No more will I hurt you again. Never ever. I'm sorry. I'm so fucking sorry."

He held her tighter, burying his face in her brown curls. His own tears finally slipped free. All he wanted was to erase the pain he caused. To make it right. And he would. He *would*.

They sat like that for what felt like hours. The world faded around them. No Disneyland. No Casie. Just the two of them, wrapped in a promise that hadn't been spoken—but had always been there. That invisible thread that tied them together, stronger than either of them could ever explain.

Eventually, the tears slowed, their breathing synced. June rested her forehead gently against his, eyes red but calm.

"Let's go home," she whispered. "*Our* home."

Kyle smiled softly, brushing a stray curl behind her ear. "Our home," he echoed. "Only ours."

And as they drove off under the stars, it wasn't just the road ahead that seemed a little clearer—it was their future too. Together. Always together.

Chapter 28: Clearing the Air

Ever since Disneyland, Kyle and June had made an unspoken pact—no more confusion, no more crossed wires. Anyone and everyone around them would know: they weren't available. Maybe they weren't "official" yet, but their hearts were spoken for. Kyle belonged to June, and June to Kyle—even if they have to wait a little longer to fully say it out loud.

They weren't going to outright tell Casie—that felt a little too fucked up. Kyle had a gentler plan in mind. One that would speak louder than any words.

It was another busy weekend at the flea market. Another candle sold, another bag of fresh coffee grounds bought. Evan, Troy, and Casie showed up as usual to hang out and help. Kyle and June sat behind their booth, tired but happy, shoulders brushing as they shared a thermos of coffee. The sun was shining, their table looked great, and business was good.

Casie strolled up, bright and smiley, the way she always did when she had something flirty on her tongue. June felt that old ache in her chest starting to stir again... until—

Kyle casually draped his arm over June's shoulders and pulled her just a little closer to him.

"June, your candles smell amazing," Kyle said warmly, looking right at her. "*You're* amazing."

June blinked, cheeks flushing a soft pink. She gave a shy smile and mumbled, "Thanks..."

Kyle then looked up, locking eyes with Casie, who had suddenly gone very still. She definitely saw everything.

"Oh hey guys!" Kyle added like he had just now noticed them. "Hey Casie, so glad you all made it. It's a beautiful day out, isn't it?"

There was a long, quiet beat—and then Casie gave a slow, approving nod and held a thumbs-up, her signature sass replaced with surprising maturity.

From that moment on, everything settled. The tension vanished. Friends were just friends again. And Kyle? Kyle was June's—in every way that mattered. The same went for her. They didn't need to declare it. It was understood.

Another week passed, and life moved on.

Except... the six puppies were getting bigger, louder, and wilder. Kyle and June were exhausted. As much as they adored the little furballs, they couldn't keep up anymore—not in their tiny, worn-down apartment. They knew what they had to do. It was time to say goodbye.

But not to all of them.

First, they offered the pups to their friends—after all, friends got first dibs, right?

Casie lit up and immediately claimed one of the boy pups.

Evan smiled and said he didn't care if it was a boy or girl—he just wanted a good dog.

Troy hesitated. He'd never been responsible for a pet before and wasn't sure if he could handle it. But after a few days of thinking it over, he surprised everyone—including himself—by deciding to take the plunge. He was ready to give it his all. He chose a boy.

And just like that, three of the pups went to people Kyle and June trusted. Two boys and one girl each found a loving home with their trio of friends.

That left three.

After long talks and quiet moments watching the puppies snuggle Patches, Kyle and June agreed: they'd keep the other girl—so Patches would still have one of her babies by her side. As for the remaining two boys, they sold them for \$400 each to carefully chosen families.

Letting go of the puppies wasn't easy. There were tears. There were snuggles and goodbye kisses. But it had to be done. They needed space, rest, and a little more breathing room.

Still, they were proud. Proud of their small family. Proud of their little business. And proud of the quiet love they were building—one candle, one cup of coffee, one choice at a time.

Chapter 29: Bye-Bye Plumbing

Now that Kyle and June only had two dogs—sweet, sleepy **Patches** and her playful little daughter **Mocha**—their lives had calmed down just a bit. No more full-blown puppy chaos. No more wild chases at 2 a.m. And thankfully, no more mountains of puppy food and training pads to buy. It felt manageable, peaceful even.

One quiet afternoon, as they sat together organizing candle orders and packing bags of fresh coffee grounds, June looked over at Kyle and softly said, “You don’t need to keep working both jobs anymore.”

Kyle blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I mean... *we’re doing it, Kyle*. Coffee Beans & Scented Candles is actually thriving. We’re paying bills, saving money, and still having enough left over for late-night sushi and random thrift hauls. I think it’s time you let the plumbing job go.”

Kyle didn’t answer right away. He leaned back in his chair, rubbing the back of his neck, eyes flicking toward their vision board on the wall—the one they made together on New Year’s. It had candles, coffee, travel, and bold words written across the top: *Our Dream, Our Time*. He thought long and hard about it... and then nodded.

“Okay,” he said. “You’re right.”

Two days later, he handed in his two-week notice at the plumbing job. It felt surreal—like closing a door he had leaned on for years. But it also felt good. Freeing. Now, he could focus on what truly mattered: their home, their growing business, and June.

And with their success came a new milestone: **a new car**.

Well—new to them.

They wanted something small, fuel-efficient, and cute, just like their little team of four (two humans, two pups). Naturally, they called Evan to come with them to the dealership. Evan was *the guy* when it came to talking numbers. He could sweet-talk a \$10,000 car down to \$6,000 with a charming smile and some fast math. He’d done it for Troy. For Casie. Even for his own parents. The man had dealership magic.

So off they went—Kyle, June, and Evan—ready to make a deal.

When they first arrived at the dealership, Kyle and June were leaning toward a compact hatchback. But as they walked the lot, reality began to hit. Their business was growing faster than expected. Every flea market trip meant boxes of candles, crates of coffee, display shelves, signs, and bags. They didn’t need small—they needed *space*.

That’s when they saw it.

A gleaming, four-seater **red Ram truck**. Rugged, shiny, bold—and **perfect**.

June looked at Kyle. Kyle looked at June.

“We could fit *everything* in there,” she whispered.

Kyle grinned. “Let’s do it.”

The price tag: **\$30,000**.

Evan raised an eyebrow, cracked his knuckles, and stepped forward. “Let me work my magic.”

He charmed the salesperson with small talk, talked about interest rates, compared nearby dealerships, pointed out minor dents and scratches, hinted at a potential social media promotion (even though he totally made that up), and by the end of an hour-long negotiation—he did it.

\$15,000.

The truck was theirs.

By now, it was late March. The weather was warming, the days were getting longer, and life was getting softer. One little joy at a time. And Kyle and June? They were more grateful than ever.

Grateful for growth.

Grateful for peace.

Grateful for love.

Grateful for Patches and Mocha curled up on their two mattresses.

And above all—grateful for each other.

And now, they were ready for the road ahead. In their brand-new (to them) bright red Ram truck—powered by dreams, coffee beans, and a whole lot of candles.

Chapter 30: Big Red

June and Kyle couldn't wait to take their dogs, Patches and Mocha, out for a spin in their brand-new ride. The moment they climbed into the plush seats of the shiny red Ram truck, June gave the dashboard a few gentle pats and said with a grin, "Big Red is going to carry us to the top, Ky."

Kyle glanced at her, smirking with amusement. "Big Red, huh? That's cute... just like you. Let's keep it. Big Red."

It was a sweet little moment—the kind that made their partnership feel like the most natural thing in the world.

As they talked, Kyle mentioned something he'd been thinking about. "I think it's time I sell the bike. I barely use it anymore, and honestly, I don't need it."

June nodded in agreement. "We can take it to the flea market this weekend. Someone will snatch it up for sure."

Later that day, Kyle dropped June off at her part-time waitressing gig. It was supposed to be a normal shift, but things quickly went downhill.

That guy showed up again.

June hadn't told Kyle about him—not yet. She wanted to handle it herself, to prove she could stand her ground. But this man had been coming in for over a week now—eight long days—and only during her shifts. Every time, he'd request her section. Every time, he'd get closer and more aggressive. He kept trying to talk to her, pressuring her to sit on his lap to feel his hard bulge like it was some kind of joke.

Worse, he touched her without permission. Slapped her ass as she walked by. Grabbed her thigh while she was trying to take his order. It made her skin crawl.

And when she brought it up to her boss? Her boss brushed it off.

"He's a regular," she said. "And he tips really well. Just deal with it."

But June wasn't going to just "deal with it" anymore.

That night, when Kyle picked her up, she sat in Big Red, quietly fuming, before she finally said, "Ky... I need to tell you something."

She told him everything. The guy. The touching. The lap comments. Her boss's refusal to do anything about it.

Kyle was silent.

And then?

He saw red.

His jaw clenched, his hands tightened around the steering wheel, and his eyes darkened with fury. “He did *what* to you?!”

June looked down at her hands, her voice small. “I didn’t want to worry you. I thought I could handle it, but... today he grabbed me again. And laughed about it.”

Kyle didn’t respond right away.

But one thing was certain—

No one messed with his June. Not while Kyle was around.

And this time, he *was* around.

Chapter 31: Arrested

The next day, Kyle dropped June off at work like he always did—but this time, he wasn't just dropping her off.

He was going in with her.

June's nerves were buzzing. Her hands trembled slightly as she held onto Kyle's arm. But he pulled her in for a hug and whispered against her hair, "Nothing is going to happen to you again. I'm staying the whole time. I've got you."

With Kyle by her side, she felt safer. Braver. Like she could finally breathe.

She walked into the diner, clocked in, tied her apron, and got to work. Two minutes later, Kyle entered and sat at a corner booth where he had a perfect view of the whole room.

June walked over to his table with a small smile, her voice soft and teasing. "Hello, sir. What can I get you to drink today?"

Kyle looked up at her with warmth and pure happiness in his eyes. "Hey, beautiful. I'd really love an iced tea with a lemon slice, please."

June blushed slightly but recovered quickly, playing along. "Alrighty, one iced tea and one sliced lemon. Would you like anything to eat, as well?"

Kyle smirked at her blush. "Not right now. Maybe later. The iced tea will be perfect for now."

She walked away, cheeks still a bit warm. It was fun—pretending to flirt with a stranger. Only he wasn't a stranger. And it wasn't pretend. It was real.

Just as she came back with the iced tea and lemon, the air shifted.

He walked in.

The creepy guy.

June's body tensed, and her smile faltered. Her eyes flicked to Kyle's, and in that moment, Kyle didn't speak, but his gaze said everything: *Trust me*.

She gave a slight nod and took a deep breath before walking over to the man's table to take his order. And just like before, the man started touching her again—groping her arm, trying to grab her waist, brushing his hand across her lower back.

It went on for fifteen minutes.

But what the man didn't know was that Kyle had recorded every second of it.

When Kyle saw the man slide his hand under June's skirt, he was done.

He was up in a flash.

Storming across the floor, Kyle grabbed the man's wrist—*hard*—ripping it away from June's leg. There was a loud *crack*, followed by the man's pathetic scream of pain.

The entire diner went silent.

Kyle's grip didn't falter. He bent the man's wrist backwards, and the creep cried out again. *Pussy.*

A police officer rushed in seconds later and tackled Kyle to the ground.

"No!" June shouted, panicked and frantic. "He was protecting me! Please, let him go!"

The officer hesitated, confused.

Kyle, still pinned, said calmly through clenched teeth, "I have proof. I recorded everything. Please... just let me show you the video."

The officer stepped back. "Get up. Slowly."

Kyle stood and handed over his phone, pulling up the fifteen-minute video that captured every inappropriate touch, every vulgar comment, every violation.

June, still shaking, added, "I told my boss what was happening. I asked for help for eight days straight. But she said to deal with it because he gives good tips."

The officer's expression darkened. Disgust rolled across her face as she turned to both the man and the manager.

"You're both under arrest."

She cuffed them on the spot while the rest of the diner watched in shock. Kyle stood by June's side, holding her hand, his heart pounding in his chest.

His phone was taken for evidence, but Kyle didn't care. June was safe. That was all that mattered.

That, and the fact that she would *never* have to go through something like that again—not while Kyle was around.

Chapter 32: I Quit

Ever since that unforgettable day at the diner, Kyle made one thing crystal clear—June was *never* going back there again. She didn't argue. She didn't want to. She had already made up her mind.

So the next day, June marched in, handed over her uniform, picked up her last two paychecks, and walked out with her head held high. It was the most freeing moment of her life.

But that wasn't all. June wasn't just going to walk away quietly—she was going to fight. With Kyle's unwavering support and the damn 15-minute video in hand, June pressed charges against both her ex-boss and the disgusting perverted man who had harassed her.

The court date came quickly. Kyle was there, holding her hand every step of the way.

Inside the courtroom, the air was heavy, tense. June sat straight-backed on the witness stand, her voice calm and clear as she recalled everything that happened—the groping, the comments, the fear. Then came the video. Every eye in the courtroom locked onto the screen as the footage played.

Whispers rippled through the courtroom. The man squirmed in his seat. Her former boss looked down at her shoes, pale and shaking.

When the judge slammed the gavel down, it was a sound of justice.

“In light of the overwhelming evidence, both defendants are ordered to pay restitution in the amount of \$50,000 each to the plaintiff, Miss June Kingsley. Case closed.”

June felt like she could finally breathe again. Tears of relief rolled down her cheeks as Kyle hugged her tight. “You did it,” he whispered.

“No,” she said, hugging him back, “*we* did it.”

With over \$100,000 now in their bank account—technically hers, but in her heart it was theirs—June and Kyle felt the weight of survival ease off their shoulders.

They could finally move forward.

The very next morning, they sat at the kitchen table—coffee mugs in hand, Mocha curled up on Kyle's lap, and Patches snoozing at their feet—scrolling through apartment listings.

They weren't looking for luxury. Just something cozy and safe. Something that felt like a fresh start.

“Okay,” June said, pointing at her laptop. “What about this one? Two bedrooms, updated kitchen, and get this...a *private fenced backyard*. Patches and Mocha would love it.”

Kyle leaned over, whistling low. “Ooh. And it's within budget. Let's go see it. Today.”

They scheduled three viewings, but the second one had them the moment they stepped through the door.

It was perfect.

The kitchen was bright with lots of counter space—perfect for candle-making. The living room had just enough room for a couch, a coffee table, and a dog bed or two. The bedrooms were cozy, and the backyard? A little patch of heaven. Patches sniffed every corner while Mocha zoomed in happy circles.

“I can see us here,” Kyle said softly.

June nodded, her voice caught in her throat. “Me too.”

They signed the lease the same day.

By evening, they were sprawled out on the floor of their new empty apartment, laughing, sipping sparkling cider from plastic cups.

Big Red parked outside.

Two dogs curled up beside them.

A world of possibility ahead.

They’d lost a lot to get here. But they’d gained more.

Peace. Freedom. Each other.

And now? A place to finally call *home*.

Chapter 33: Moving In

Within the next two days, Kyle and June packed up everything they owned—along with their two dogs, Patches and Mocha—and moved into their new two-bedroom, one-bath apartment. It was their first real place, and even though the walls were still bare and the rooms echoed from the lack of furniture, it already felt like home.

After placing what little they had in each room, they both stood in the center of the living room, hands on hips, taking in the emptiness. “Well,” June said, raising an eyebrow, “at least we’ve got Big Red.”

Kyle smirked. “Time for a shopping trip?”

“Time for a shopping trip.”

They hopped into Big Red and drove to the nearest furniture store. With every aisle, they picked items they needed—not fancy, but sturdy and cozy. Two full-size bed frames (because the floor was getting old), two small dressers, a desk for the living room, a compact three-seater couch, a light gray rug, and a little desk chair. They loaded everything into Big Red with the kind of satisfaction only tired-but-determined people get.

Later that evening, Evan, Troy, and Casie came by to help them settle in. After the final box was unpacked, they celebrated with a strange but delicious dinner: tacos, spaghetti, and meatballs—because why not?

As the night rolled in, they popped on a scary movie. Casie and June cozied up on the couch, Troy claimed the desk chair, and Kyle and Evan took the rug. Kyle sat with his back against the couch, June’s legs draped over his shoulders, while Evan laid stretched out beside them. Patches and Mocha snuggled into the space between June and Casie like they owned it.

The movie was good—actually, too good. The group kept getting jump-scared, and at one point Troy fell off the chair with a dramatic yelp, making everyone laugh until they had tears in their eyes.

During it all, Kyle gently traced his fingers along June’s legs, while June absently combed her fingers through his golden blonde hair. It was a quiet, constant rhythm, like a secret language they spoke without needing words.

When the movie ended, no one wanted to sleep yet. So they queued up another one... and another... and another. Before they knew it, they were deep into an all-nighter horror marathon.

Evan was the first to knock out, so Kyle let him crash in his bed. Casie was next—June tucked her into her own bed. Then it was just Troy, Kyle, and June, still going strong by the time the last movie rolled around at 4 a.m.

Eventually, Troy got up and wandered off to Kyle’s room, collapsing on the bed next to Evan, who was already snoring softly.

That left just Kyle and June.

He slid over next to her on the couch, where Patches and Mocha had claimed most of the space. With barely any room left, June ended up half on Kyle's lap, and neither of them minded.

The spark between them was soft but powerful. Kyle wrapped his arms around June's waist and rested his chin on her shoulder. June leaned back into him, her back against his chest, fitting together like puzzle pieces made for one another.

"We should go to sleep, Junnie," Kyle whispered into her ear.

June smiled, her heart full. She whispered back, "Then let's sleep... here."

Chapter 34: April Fools!

Today turned out to be one of the most unexpectedly memorable days. Who knew Evan, Troy, and Casie were such pranksters? It was April 1st—April Fools’ Day—and the jokes were in full swing. From fake coffee spills to “missing” wallets and mysteriously rearranged signs at the flea market, laughter filled the air. Kyle and June couldn’t stop smiling, soaking in the playful chaos and warm spring sunshine.

But it was also a special day for another reason: it marked Kyle and June’s 25th official setup at the local flea market to sell their homemade coffee blends and hand-poured candles. Their little booth, complete with wooden crates, burlap tablecloths, and twinkle lights, gave off a cozy charm that drew in curious customers.

They were just settling into a rhythm of sales and friendly chatter when something unexpected happened.

A small cry echoed nearby.

June turned to see a little girl, no older than six, standing frozen just a few feet away. Her eyes were wide and tear-filled, scanning the crowd with frantic desperation.

Without hesitation, June walked over and knelt in front of her. “Hi, pumpkin. What’s wrong, sweetie?”

The girl hiccuped through her sobs, “I... I lost m-my mommy.”

“Oh no,” June said softly, brushing a loose curl from the girl’s cheek. “That’s not good. Do you remember where you last saw her?”

The little girl shook her head.

June offered her a gentle smile. “No? That’s okay. Hey, do you want to stay with me and my friends for a little bit? That way you’re not all alone.”

The girl sniffled and nodded.

June held her tiny hand and led her to their booth. “I’m June, and this cute guy right here is Kyle. He’s my best friend. Wanna say hi?”

The girl peeked up shyly. “Hi...”

Kyle knelt down and smiled warmly. “Well, hello there, little lady. What’s your name?”

“Rosie,” she murmured.

“Rosie?” Kyle’s eyes lit up. “That’s a very pretty name.”

Evan, Troy, and Casie quickly stepped in, offering gentle reassurance and helping search the crowd for any sign of Rosie's mother. Hours passed, but there was no sign of her—no one asking about a lost child, no familiar faces calling out for Rosie. The longer it went on, the more unsettling it felt.

Finally, Kyle made the call. The authorities needed to step in.

Two officers—one male, one female—arrived shortly after. Their expressions softened when they saw Rosie holding tightly onto June's hand.

"How long has the child been with you?" the male officer asked.

"Four hours so far," Kyle replied. "We've been looking everywhere, but eventually we just... something felt off."

The female officer nodded, her eyes full of quiet concern. "Thank you both for staying with her. She seems to trust you."

She knelt down in front of Rosie. "Hey sweetheart, we're going to take you somewhere safe now. We'll get you something yummy to eat and help you find your mom."

Rosie looked up, her voice barely a whisper. "Mama left me again."

The words hit everyone like a punch to the gut. The officers glanced at each other, understanding instantly. This wasn't the first time Rosie had been abandoned. And this time... she'd been left for good.

When the officers tried to take Rosie's hand, she clung harder to Kyle and June's arms, panic rising in her small frame.

The officers stepped aside and spoke quietly, then turned back. "Would you two be willing to look after her for a little while? Just until we can figure out what's going on and try to find her mother?"

Kyle and June exchanged a stunned look. This wasn't how they pictured their April Fools' Day ending—but somehow, it felt right. They both knew the ache of being unwanted, of being forgotten. And they couldn't let Rosie feel that way too.

"We'll take care of her," June said softly, brushing a thumb across Rosie's cheek.

As the flea market began to wind down, June held Rosie close, Casie making silly faces to make her giggle while Troy, Evan, and Kyle packed up the candles and coffee grounds. Rosie was smiling again—just a little.

It was a wild, unexpected twist to their day... and maybe to their lives. Kyle and June weren't sure if they were ready to be parents, even temporarily—but the thought of giving a little girl the safety and love they never had?

That idea didn't scare them.

It gave them hope.

Chapter 35: Changing Rooms

The first night having Rosie in the apartment felt surreal. June and Kyle weren't exactly sure what to do, but they were determined to make her feel safe. So, June grabbed a notebook and sat down with Kyle on the living room rug facing the couch, where Rosie sat, gently petting Patches and Mocha.

"Okay, Rosie," June smiled warmly. "Let's play a little question game. I'll ask you something, and you just tell me what comes to mind, okay?"

Rosie nodded, still sniffing a little, but more at ease now.

"How old are you?"

"Six."

"What's your favorite color?"

"Blue."

"Aww, that's so cute. What's your favorite food?"

"Popcorn!"

"Hehe, good choice. When do you normally go to sleep?"

"Seven."

"Ohhh, okay. Are you in school?"

Rosie tilted her head. "What's that?"

June gave Kyle a knowing look. "That's a no." Then she turned back to Rosie. "When do you usually wake up?"

"I get up early."

Kyle looked at the list of questions June had written down. "When's your birthday, Rosie?"

"Umm... I dunno."

Kyle blinked slowly. "We'll have to ask someone about that. Okay... are you hungry right now?"

"Yeah!"

June and Kyle both chuckled. They turned on YouTube and searched for healthy meals for kids. After about 30 minutes, the three of them sat at the small folding table and ate mac and cheese, green beans, and white chicken, with ketchup on the side. Simple, but according to the video, good for kids. Kyle made sure Rosie had a big cup of water too, just like the video suggested.

The next morning, Kyle left early in Big Red for work. Shortly after, Casie came over to have breakfast with June and Rosie. Then the three of them went to a children's clothing store. They didn't go overboard, just picked out enough for Rosie to have proper clothes for now.

They came back with three manageably sized bags. June bought Rosie three pairs of shoes, two little dresses, five T-shirts, four pairs of pants, two cute skirts, a spring jacket, socks, and underwear. Rosie's eyes lit up as she exclaimed, "Mama never got me this much stuff before."

June and Casie exchanged a look, their hearts silently breaking.

Once back at the apartment, Casie began preparing lunch while June turned on cartoons for Rosie. Patches and Mocha snuggled beside her as she giggled at the screen. Then, June quietly cleared out her bedroom, folding her clothes and putting them with Kyle's in his closet. She spent the next 45 minutes turning her old room into Rosie's temporary sanctuary. She hung up Rosie's new clothes, set out a blue stuffed teddy bear on the bed, and made sure everything felt warm and welcoming.

At 1:35 p.m., Kyle came home from work. He paused at the door, taking in the scene—June, Rosie, and the dogs playing in the living room, laughter echoing through the space. Casie was setting the folding table for lunch. Something about it all made his chest swell.

Rosie spotted him. "KYLE!! HI KYLE! I GOT NEW CLOTHES TODAY!!"

Kyle's heart melted. He set down his keys and lunch bag with a smile. "Oh, you did, huh? That's really cool! Can I see?"

Rosie beamed and grabbed his hand, pulling him excitedly toward June's old room. Kyle noticed the change immediately.

June leaned against the doorframe, smiling. "I put all my stuff in your room so Rosie could have this one. I hope that's okay."

Kyle walked over and wrapped an arm around her waist. "Of course it's okay, Junnie."

From the kitchen, Casie called out, "Lunch is ready!"

Rosie dashed off, leaving Kyle and June alone for a moment.

June looked up at him and spoke softly, “I did it because I want Rosie to know what it’s like... to have a family. A mother and father in the same room. Her own space. I know we might not have her for long, but...”

“But we should treat her like our own daughter and give her all the things we didn’t get,” Kyle finished gently.

June sniffled and nodded. “Yeah. That’s what I want.”

Kyle pulled her close, pressing his lips to her hair. “Then that’s what we’ll do. Up until the very last day with her.”

Chapter 36: Cinema Popcorn

It had already been three days since Rosie began living with Kyle and June, and in that short time, she had completely charmed everyone. She'd started calling the trio "Uncle Evan," "Uncle Troy," and "Aunt Casie," and it melted their hearts every time. Though Rosie still called June and Kyle by their first names, neither of them minded. They never wanted to pressure her—not when they knew their time with her might be limited. They just wanted her to feel safe and loved.

Kyle got home from work around 1 p.m. like usual, took a quick shower, and then grinned as he told June and Rosie, "We're going to see a movie!"

Rosie gasped in excitement. She had never been to a cinema before—and she definitely didn't know about the popcorn yet. That surprise was still waiting.

They got ready quickly and climbed into Big Red. Rosie sitting in the back, who was now safely strapped into the booster seat that Troy and Evan had bought the day before. Kyle and June hadn't even thought of it—thankfully their friends had. Safety first.

When they pulled into the cinema parking lot, Rosie's eyes widened so much they looked like they might pop out of her head. She was bursting with excitement. And when June handed her a small bucket of buttered popcorn, Rosie let out a joyful squeal that made a few nearby people laugh.

Kyle chose a kid-friendly movie, and once they had their tickets, they made their way into the large, dark theater. Rosie sat between June and Kyle, her little legs swinging from the seat, her eyes glued to the big screen. Throughout the movie, Kyle kept sneaking glances at June and Rosie, watching them laugh and giggle together. A warm feeling spread through him, something deep and unfamiliar—something that felt a lot like home.

For a moment, Kyle believed this was his family. And he silently promised himself that no matter what happened, he'd do everything he could to keep them both safe and happy.

After the movie, everyone was hungry. June and Kyle decided to take a little risk—they brought Rosie to their favorite sushi spot. They weren't sure if she'd like it, but they figured it was worth a shot.

Rosie eyed the sushi suspiciously, gently poking at it with one of her chopsticks. Then she picked up a piece, took a small bite, and chewed thoughtfully.

June and Kyle held their breath.

"Mmm! Yummy!" Rosie beamed, and immediately took a bigger bite.

Relief and joy washed over Kyle and June—they were thrilled to be sharing something they loved with her. It felt like another small piece falling into place.

After dinner, Kyle decided to surprise the girls with a little gift: two matching ladybug bracelets—one for June and one for Rosie.

Rosie's eyes lit up. "I will never take it off!" she said with a big smile, hugging Kyle tightly. His heart melted.

June slipped hers on immediately. "Me too," she declared proudly.

Then Rosie looked up at Kyle and said, "You need one too! So everyone knows we're a family!"

Kyle's heart nearly burst. Without hesitation, he bought a third bracelet and let June help him fasten it on.

With Rosie cradled in one arm and his other wrapped around June's shoulders, Kyle smiled as they stepped out into the cool evening air. The three of them strolled down the street together—like a real family.

And for the first time in a long time, everything felt just right.

Chapter 37: Cinco de Mayo

A full month had passed since Rosie began living with June and Kyle. In that time, their small apartment had turned into a home filled with laughter, toys, giggles, and the pitter-patter of little feet. Rosie had found her rhythm in their lives—and they in hers. Kyle still hadn't heard back from the authorities who'd asked them to care for Rosie temporarily, but honestly, he didn't mind. To him, no news just meant more time with the little girl who was starting to feel more and more like his daughter every single day.

This week, Troy had excitedly invited everyone to his family's annual Cinco de Mayo celebration. It was a big event every year, filled with vibrant colors, delicious food, traditional games, and more cousins than anyone could count. Troy insisted Rosie should experience what a big family gathering feels like—and June and Kyle couldn't agree more.

On the day of the party, June dressed Rosie in a brightly colored embroidered dress with flowers in her blonde hair, and even put a little glitter on her cheeks. Kyle wore a deep red short-sleeved shirt with hand-stitched patterns along the chest, while June twirled in a long, flowy green skirt paired with a white peasant top. Even Patches and Mocha wore tiny festive bandanas around their necks. The whole family looked like they belonged in a painting.

They loaded up Big Red and headed to Troy's family home, where the yard was already bursting with music and mouth watering smells. Colorful papel picado banners swayed in the breeze, and long folding tables were covered with platters of tamales, tacos, elote, churros, and aguas frescas in massive glass jars.

Rosie's eyes went wide at the sight of everything. "Whoa..."

"Ready to have some fun, ladybug?" June said with a wink, and Rosie grinned from ear to ear.

The party was alive with joy. Kids ran around playing **lotería** and **la cuerda**, while elders laughed and told stories over cups of horchata and chilled cerveza. Rosie quickly found a group of children to play **cascarones**—confetti-filled egg shells that they cracked over each other's heads with shrieks of laughter. At one point, she dragged Kyle into a game of **pin the tail on the donkey**, where he pretended to miss wildly just to make her laugh.

June helped Troy's mom make **fresh tortillas** while Casie danced barefoot on the grass with a gaggle of little girls, including Rosie. Evan, armed with his camera, captured every sweet and silly moment.

"Okay, everyone! Group photo time!" Evan called out at one point.

He had Kyle sit cross-legged on the grass with Mocha in his lap. June sat beside him with Patches curled up near her feet, and Rosie plopped herself right in the middle—one arm around each of them, beaming. The backdrop was a colorful mural wall, and Evan knew as he clicked the shutter: this was a moment worth framing.

After a few more rounds of food, games, and music, Kyle stood up with a gentle clink of his glass. He looked at June, who nodded encouragingly, and then turned to Troy's entire extended family, all of whom had welcomed them so warmly.

"Hey, everyone," Kyle began, his voice loud enough to carry but still soft. "I just wanted to thank you all for letting us be part of something so beautiful today. It means the world to us—and especially to Rosie."

He turned and smiled at Rosie, who was busy eating a churro twice the size of her hand. Troy's mom walked over and cradled Rosie's cheeks in her hands, calling her "mi nieta" before kissing her forehead. The whole family laughed.

Rosie, a little overwhelmed by the attention, climbed into Kyle's arms and whispered, "Are they happy because of me?"

Kyle hugged her tighter. "They sure are, ladybug."

The rest of the night was magic. Rosie fell asleep on June's shoulder just before the final round of fireworks lit up the night sky. As the colors danced above them, Kyle placed a gentle kiss on June's forehead, then looked down at Rosie—safe, warm, and home.

For the first time in their lives, both Kyle and June knew exactly where they belonged. And that was the greatest feeling ever.

Chapter 38: Building Up

It had been a couple of weeks since the Cinco de Mayo family get-together at Troy's, and things had been changing fast—in the best way.

June and Kyle's homemade business had taken off like never before. June used to sell around 30 candles a week, but now? Over 200 scented candles were flying off the shelves—more like her kitchen counters. Kyle, who usually sells about 50 bags of his special coffee grounds each week, was now selling more than 340. The sudden success had them both overwhelmed and thrilled.

Since June had stepped away from her previous jobs, she poured all her energy into making candles full-time—and Rosie was right there with her. At six years old, Rosie was at that curious, sponge-like stage where everything was exciting. June would give her little tasks—stirring melted wax, picking colors and scents, or drawing cute labels. Rosie called them “magic candles.”

But as fun as those days were, Kyle and June knew it was time to start thinking seriously about Rosie's education. Traditional kindergarten didn't seem like the right fit yet. Rosie still got overwhelmed around big groups, and they wanted to ease her into learning in a way that felt safe and encouraging.

So, they chose homeschooling.

They didn't sign up for any specific programs—they wanted the freedom to teach Rosie their own way. It became a family friend effort. Evan, being a numbers guy, took on math lessons. Casie—artistic, playful, and full of spark—handled arts and crafts. Kyle, with his gentle voice and storytelling charm, became Rosie's reading teacher. And June, patient and passionate, took care of writing.

Even Troy tried to help when he could, despite being busier than ever. On his days off, he would show up in sneakers and a whistle to lead Rosie's P.E. lessons, which usually included an obstacle course in the tiny backyard and plenty of laughs.

It was a lot of responsibility, but it was exciting—because it was all for Rosie.

One quiet afternoon, while Casie had taken Rosie out for the day, June and Kyle stayed behind to prepare a new batch of candles and coffee bags. They worked side-by-side in the kitchen, hands busy but hearts content. Still, Kyle seemed unusually fidgety. He kept checking the time, wiping his hands on his jeans, then pacing around the apartment.

Finally, he turned to June and asked, “Hey... can we take a quick break?”

She looked up with a smile, wiping wax from her fingers. “Sure.”

“Close your eyes for a second,” he said softly.

June giggled, a little confused, but played along and shut her eyes.

Kyle quietly slipped out of the room, returning moments later. He gently took her hand, the one with wax still smudged near her thumb, and carefully slid something smooth and cold onto her ring finger.

“Okay,” he whispered. “Open.”

June opened her eyes—and gasped.

There, nestled on her finger, was a simple yet breathtaking ring: a pink diamond set in a delicate silver band. Her hand trembled slightly as she stared at it, stunned into silence.

Kyle’s voice broke through the moment. “I know you’re still underage,” he began, his tone tender, “but I want to make you a promise.”

He met her tear-filled eyes, then continued.

“This ring is my promise to you. I’ll wait—however long it takes—just so I can ask you one simple question someday. But for now... I promise to be your best friend, **always**. I promise to never hurt you, **always**. And I promise to always choose your side, and to **always** be loyal to **you**.”

June didn’t say anything—she couldn’t. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she pulled him into the tightest hug she could manage.

And in that quiet moment—candle wax still cooling on the counter, the scent of coffee lingering in the air, and her hand pressed against his heart—it was enough.

More than enough. Always.

Chapter 39: It's Time

It was just another weekend at the flea market. The sun was warm, the booth was busy, and laughter surrounded the space as June, Kyle, Evan, Troy, Casie, and little Rosie ran the *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles* stand together. Sales were booming, spirits were high, and for a while, everything felt perfect.

Then Kyle's phone rang.

He stepped to the side to answer, still smiling, but his voice faltered the moment he heard the person on the other end.

"H-Hello...?" he said, and immediately, the rest of the group quieted down, sensing something shift.

"Hello, is this Kyle Hernandez?" a professional voice asked.

"Y-Yeah?"

"Hi, sir. I just wanted to inform you that the grandmother of Rosie Brooks will be picking up the child tomorrow at 8 a.m. Please have Rosie ready for pickup before then."

There was a long pause on Kyle's end. The sound of his heart cracking wasn't audible, but somehow, everyone felt it.

"...O-Okay," Kyle whispered.

The call ended. Kyle stood frozen, phone still in his hand, eyes locked on June, who was cradling Rosie in her arms, both of them glowing in the afternoon light. His throat tightened, his lips parted like he wanted to speak—but nothing came.

"Who was that?" June asked gently, her voice laced with concern.

He didn't answer. He couldn't. He just stared at the little girl who had completely changed his world.

Troy stepped in and rested a hand on Kyle's shoulder. "Hey, buddy... was that about Rosie?"

Kyle gave a slow nod, then reached out and wrapped both June and Rosie in his arms. He held them close and began to cry softly.

That's when everyone knew.

It was time.

They packed up the booth early and decided to spend their last day with Rosie making memories—bright, beautiful, unforgettable memories.

They spoiled her in every way they could think of.

Evan took her to a boutique and bought her a beautiful blue dress—her favorite color. Troy found a food stand and bought her a big scoop of blueberry cheesecake ice cream. Casie gave her a complete art kit wrapped in shiny paper with glittery stickers. June and Kyle presented her with a giant blue stuffed bunny, nearly as tall as she was.

Everyone laughed. Everyone cried—just not in front of Rosie. They held it together for her, letting her soak up every ounce of joy that day.

They did everything she wanted—visited her favorite park, danced to her favorite songs in the car, let her pick where to eat (grilled cheese and curly fries), and rode the carousel three times in a row.

But no matter how hard they tried, the sun eventually set.

That night, back at the apartment, just the three of them—June, Kyle, and Rosie—settled in for their final evening together.

Rosie picked the movie (an animated one with lots of silly animals), the dinner (pancakes with strawberries and whipped cream), the music (a playlist Kyle had made called “Ladybug’s Playlist”), and even helped June make one last candle. It smelled like bubblegum and summer.

When it was time, June and Kyle sat her down.

“Ladybug,” June began softly, “your grandmother is coming to pick you up tomorrow morning.”

Rosie’s smile faded. Her little eyes began to well up. “No...” she whispered. “I wanna stay. I don’t wanna go...”

Kyle knelt beside her and pulled her into his arms, tears escaping down his cheeks. “I know, baby girl... I know.”

“But... you’re my mommy and daddy...”

June tried to smile through the heartbreak, brushing the hair from Rosie’s face. “I know, ladybug. And you’ll always be our daughter. Forever.”

They all climbed into Rosie’s bed that night—Patches and Mocha included—and cried quietly under the covers. Kyle wrapped his arms around his girls, holding them like they might disappear. June kissed Rosie’s cheeks over and over again, whispering how much she loved her, over and over again.

Morning came too fast.

They gave her one last bubble bath. Made her one last breakfast of strawberry pancakes. Shared one last round of giggles and snuggles and songs.

June had all her clothes neatly packed in a small blue suitcase.

At exactly 8 a.m., there was a knock at the door.

Their hearts dropped.

June and Kyle opened the door slowly, and standing there was a kind, gentle woman with gray hair pulled into a bun and warm tears already brimming in her eyes. She fell to her knees the moment she saw Rosie and opened her arms wide.

Rosie ran to her—and then back to Kyle and June—and then back again, unsure and scared. But the woman just smiled and hugged her tight.

“Thank you,” she whispered to June and Kyle. “Thank you both. For everything. Oh, you two are so young.”

They stood in the doorway and talked for a while. June shared Rosie’s routines, what she liked to eat, how she slept, how she learned, what scared her, what made her laugh. The grandmother listened carefully, writing things down, asking questions, grateful and kind.

Kyle and June felt something settle in their hearts. It still hurt—God, it hurt—but they knew Rosie would be okay.

They watched from the doorway as Rosie and her grandmother got into the small car, the stuffed bunny in her lap, wearing her blue dress. She waved from the window, her face pressed to the glass.

And then... the car pulled away.

Kyle and June stood there, hand in hand, until the car disappeared from view.

Then, they walked back into the apartment.

Closed the door.

And cried for hours, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Already missing their little ladybug.

Chapter 40: Ladybug

Everywhere June and Kyle looked, there were ladybugs.

On the windowsill. In the park. On random signs or clothing at the grocery store. Sometimes, they weren't even real—just red dots that tricked the eye. But every time, they both paused, hearts aching.

Ladybugs had become little ghosts.

Reminders of a tiny girl with bright eyes and an even brighter laugh.

Rosie.

Kyle had to take two days off from his part-time job. He couldn't fix a single thing without tearing up. One moment he'd be holding a wrench, the next he'd be on the verge of sobbing, picturing her handing him tools with sticky little fingers and a serious face.

June and Kyle had spent the past week locked away in their apartment. They took turns sleeping in Rosie's bed, curled up with her blue teddy bear and whatever was left behind that still smelled like her—bubblegum, crayons, soft blankets.

The only time they left the apartment was for essentials: groceries, dog walks, the occasional deep breath outside with Patches and Mocha tugging at their leashes.

Even Patches and Mocha seemed to be grieving. They sniffed around Rosie's door and whimpered at night.

Evan, Troy, and Casie didn't push. They missed Rosie, too. But they knew grief needed space.

No matter what, Kyle and June kept their ladybug bracelets on. Like armor. Like a memory. Like a silent promise.

They weren't ready to let go. Ever.

August crept in quietly, hot and golden.

It was almost Kyle's 20th birthday.

One evening, as they sat on the couch in silence—too tired to cry, too empty to talk—June turned to him softly.

“What do you want to do for your birthday?”

Kyle stared ahead for a moment, his fingers gently brushing over the ladybug charm on his wrist.

“I want to move forward,” he finally said. “For Rosie. I want us to succeed. I want *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles* to be a real place. A store. Something permanent. Something *ours*.”

He turned to June, voice cracking. “For my birthday, I want to believe that one day Rosie will hear about her temporary parents' business. And maybe—just maybe—she'll come visit us. That's what I want, Junnie. I want to see our little ladybug again.”

June broke.

She collapsed into his arms, crying, holding him like her life depended on it. And he held her just as hard.

And so, with broken hearts and a spark of newfound determination, they stood up again.

They brushed the tears off their cheeks. They let the pain burn, but not break them.

They picked up their notebooks, made new recipes, sketched storefront ideas, and got back to creating.

All for Rosie.

For their little ladybug.

And the dream that, one day, she might walk through their doors and know—

She was always loved.

She was never forgotten.

And she always had a home waiting for her.

Chapter 41: A Business Card

June and Kyle had been busy non-stop ever since Kyle's birthday. There were no candles, no party hats—just quiet resolve and long hours.

Kyle was already 20 now. He didn't want gifts or cake. He wanted to work. And so he did—fixing cars by day, sketching floor plans and roasting coffee by night. June matched his energy, scouting possibilities, brainstorming with Casie, and pouring her soul into every new candle batch.

Casie had become June's unofficial real estate partner, and one Friday morning, the two set out to explore Vancouver in search of the perfect future home for *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*.

They weren't looking to rent. No more temporary. They were dreaming big.

Casie found **three buildings** for sale—each with promise, each different.

Building #1: The Red Brick Building

Located in the heart of an older district, this mid-sized, two-story red-brick building had huge arched windows, a welcoming double-door entry, and vintage charm. The bottom floor was wide open and perfect for a café setup. The second floor had enough space for an office, a workshop for candle-making, and even a small cozy lounge area. Out back, there was a hidden courtyard perfect for future outdoor seating or a garden.

Pros: Historic, great location with lots of foot traffic, big windows for natural light, and space for everything they dreamed of.

Cons: Needed electrical upgrades, and parking was limited.

Building #2: The Corner Warehouse

On the quieter side of town, this large, single-story warehouse sat at the corner of a slow intersection. Faded mint green on the outside, but clean inside. It had high ceilings, polished concrete floors, and already had separate rooms built in—perfect for a kitchen, storage, workshop, and sales floor. There was even a fenced side lot that could one day be turned into an outdoor seating area.

Pros: Affordable, plenty of space, ready to customize, private parking lot.

Cons: Not in the trendiest part of town, but had huge potential.

Building #3: The Glass Box

In a newer development district stood a modern building made almost entirely of glass and wood. It looked like a boutique or small tech office. Gorgeous, sleek, and probably too fancy. But it came fully furnished and was move-in ready. No renovations needed.

Pros: Stunning design, high-end neighborhood, modern utilities.

Cons: Most expensive of the three. No workshop space unless remodeled. Felt more “corporate” than cozy.

As soon as June and Casie walked into **Building #1**, they knew. It *felt* right. Warm, welcoming, and filled with character. June walked around the red brick walls and whispered, “This is it, Casie. This is what Kyle, and I wanted.”

The layout practically begged for a coffee corner in the back, candles lining the shelves along the walls, and the scent of fresh beans mingling with raspberry and vanilla bean. The upstairs felt like a hidden creative haven—perfect for candle-making, office work, and future dreaming.

They took a million pictures and sent everything to Kyle with notes and ideas scribbled everywhere.

A couple days later, Kyle was under the hood of a car when Evan walked into the garage, grinning like he had a secret.

He slid a small card into Kyle’s hand.

Kyle raised an eyebrow. “What’s this?”

Evan tapped the card. “That’s *your guy*. Name’s Elias Lima. He’s a home and commercial renovator. Real visionary. Builds homes, flips shops, does crazy cool stuff. I figured you two would need someone like that if you’re serious about turning that red brick building into your dream.”

Kyle read the card:

Elias Lima

Home, Apartment, & Building Renovator

'Big Dreams Require Bigger Hammers'

Phone number. Website. Social media.

Kyle gave a small laugh. “He sounds... passionate.”

Evan nodded. “He’s a beast. Heard he renovated daycares that looked like a jungle treehouse. Built apartments in the shape of mini-houses. He’s all about community, wild ideas, and doing things that last.”

Kyle pocketed the card.

Later that night, he looked up Elias online.

Sure enough, Evan wasn't exaggerating. The guy had glowing reviews, hundreds of projects, owned land and properties all over CA, and even helped his own parents start their own business *M&Z's Bakes*.

Kyle was impressed.

But he didn't call. Not yet.

Not until he and June signed the papers.

Not until the red brick building was *theirs*.

Then—*then*—he'd bring in Elias Lima to help them build something unforgettable.

For their dream.

For their future.

For Rosie. Wherever she may be.

Chapter 42: It's Ours!

Thanks to the money June won from the legal case against her old boss and that creep, she and Kyle were finally able to make their move. The red brick, two-story building—the one June and Casie had fallen in love with—was officially theirs. They managed to buy it for \$40,000 instead of the original \$55,000, thanks to how poorly kept it was.

They were thrilled. Beaming. Jumping with excitement.

But once the adrenaline wore off, the reality hit: they only had about \$30,000 left in their budget. It wasn't a lot—at least not for a full-blown renovation. Kyle knew they couldn't afford to go all-in at once, but maybe... maybe they didn't have to.

Sitting beside June on their couch, Kyle let out a long breath and pulled out the business card Evan had given him.

He dialed the number.

“...Hello, this is Elias Lima.”

Kyle straightened up. “Hi Elias, my name's Kyle Hernandes. I got your number from a friend who spoke very highly of your work. I'm looking to renovate an old building I just bought here in Vancouver. I want to turn it into my first business.”

There was a short pause, then a curious voice: “Vancouver? As in Canada?”

Kyle chuckled, “Yeah. It's a bit of a trip, I know. I only have enough funds to cover about half the renovations right now. I was hoping we could work in phases—start with what we can, then pause and pick up again when I've saved more.”

He glanced at June and gently squeezed her hand. She looked at him and gave him a soft, reassuring smile.

Meanwhile, Elias was quiet for a moment, then said warmly, “I like people with vision, Kyle. I'd be happy to take a look. Let's set up a time to meet at the site.”

Kyle's eyes lit up. “That'd be amazing! Thank you!”

They scheduled a visit for later that week. As soon as the call ended, Kyle turned to June and shook her shoulders with excitement.

“He's coming over later this week, babe!”

Shit! They both froze.

Kyle's face went red. "Ugh, I—I meant June! I meant June."

June smiled softly, understanding exactly what he meant—and what he felt. Their relationship had only grown stronger over time. They shared the same dreams, the same grief, the same hope, same fears. But even still, they were careful. June was still sixteen, and Kyle twenty. He respected her too much to ever cross that line. The last thing he wanted was for something beautiful to be ruined by rushing.

So they left it at that—a quiet moment between two people who knew what they had was real, even if they had to wait for it.

Later, they called the trio—Evan, Troy, and Casie—to share the good news. The red brick building was theirs. *Their* future had begun.

Afterward, Kyle and June, drained but happy, went their separate ways to take a well-deserved nap. June had finally turned Rosie's old room back into hers. But that didn't mean they ever stopped thinking about her.

Because some people, no matter how far away, always live rent-free in their hearts.

And Rosie? Rosie would always be home.

Chapter 43: New Friend, New Hope

It was finally the day. June and Kyle were buzzing with nervous energy as they stood outside their newly purchased two-storey red-brick building, waiting to meet Elias in person for the first time.

They'd seen his face on his website, read the testimonials, and heard his warm voice on the phone—but it still surprised them that such a talented, accomplished renovator was around their age.

Just then, a guy rounded the corner, hands tucked in his jacket pockets. Kyle lit up and waved him over.

"You must be Elias," Kyle said, stepping forward and offering a handshake. "I'm Kyle Hernandes. And this—" he turned with a proud smile, "—is my best friend, June Kingsley."

June gave a shy wave, clutching her leather-bound sketchbook close to her chest. Her long brown curls bounced around her shoulders, and her wide brown eyes flickered with curiosity and caution.

"It's great to meet you both," Elias said warmly, shaking Kyle's hand and giving June a polite nod. "Thanks for reaching out. I'm excited to see what you've got planned."

Kyle quickly unlocked the door, and the three stepped into the dusty, timeworn space that would soon become something more. The scent of age clung to the air—wood, metal, and memory. Light filtered through the big front windows and scattered over the scuffed floorboards.

Without a word, June opened her sketchbook and handed it to Elias, her expression proud but guarded. New people always made her nervous. You just never know.

But Elias didn't rush. He carefully flipped through each page, eyebrows lifting in appreciation. Her designs were thoughtful and vibrant: rich red and gray color palettes, cozy nooks with overstuffed leather couches, floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, a counter for dog treats shaped like bones, and a clean, modern espresso bar tucked into a corner. At the center was a hand-lettered concept sign: **Coffee Beans & Scented Candles** in bold, graceful lettering.

Kyle chimed in, his voice tinged with pride. "It's a mix of both our passions. I roast coffee, June makes homemade candles. We want it to feel like home—like somewhere you could bring your dog, read a book, breathe easy."

Elias chuckled, clearly impressed. "This is genius. Cozy, welcoming, full of soul. I love it."

He walked the perimeter, knocking on the walls, checking for soft spots, squinting at the beams. The foundation was solid. No signs of water damage. Electrical needed some updating, but nothing outrageous.

"This place has great bones," he said, turning back to them with a grin. "We'll need to do a full demo and redesign, but it's totally doable. My crew and I could start in about a month. We'll work with your budget, and take it in stages."

Kyle exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. "That's perfect. We're not in a rush—we just want to get it done right."

June beamed and hugged her sketchbook close. "Thank you," she whispered.

Elias gave a nod. "You've got vision. And I'm all in."

They walked him out, and he mentioned he was heading back to his hotel—his fiancée and twins were waiting for him. Kyle and June smiled and waved as he disappeared around the corner.

A few days later, June had an idea.

"I think we should celebrate," she said with a mischievous twinkle in her eye.

Kyle raised a brow. "Celebrate how?"

"Two words," she grinned. "Guns N' Roses."

He blinked. "Wait, *what*?!"

"There's a show in the city this weekend. I got us tickets."

That weekend, June and Kyle found themselves in a sea of roaring fans, the stadium lights blazing, bass thumping in their chests. The energy was electric. June wore a denim jacket decked out with pins, and Kyle had on a faded band tee he'd picked up from a thrift shop years ago.

As the first notes of *Sweet Child O' Mine* rang out, June grabbed Kyle's hand without thinking, and they both shouted the lyrics like their lives depended on it. They danced, they laughed, and for a few hours, they weren't two young people building a dream from scraps—they were just kids again, living in the moment, surrounded by noise, light, and music that made their souls rattle in the best way.

By the time the show ended, June's voice was nearly gone from singing and Kyle's face hurt from smiling so much. They left arm-in-arm, tired but exhilarated.

"That was amazing," June said as they walked toward the car.

"Seriously, best night in a long time," Kyle agreed.

They looked at each other—both a little dazed, a little in awe—and smiled.

It was just the beginning, and they could feel it.

A new friend. A new building. A new hope.

And one hell of a soundtrack to start the next chapter of their lives.

Chapter 44: Picnic Indoors

The morning after the Guns N' Roses concert, Kyle and June were still riding the high of the night before—exhausted but happy. The loud music, the lights, the shared laughter—it was all still echoing in their minds.

Kyle groaned as he rolled out of bed, his hair a mess and his eyes barely open. He trudged through the apartment in a sleepy haze, scratching his head and yawning as he stumbled toward the bathroom. His body moved on autopilot, not noticing the faint sound of running water on the other side of the door.

He opened it without a second thought—and instantly regretted everything.

June, standing in the shower, spun around at the creak of the door. Her wide brown eyes locked with Kyle's blue eyes for a second too long.

"KYLE!!" she screamed, grabbing the nearest bottle of soap and hurling it at him like a missile. "GET OUT!!"

"OH MY GOD—I'M SORRY!" Kyle yelped, shielding his face as he slammed the door shut behind him.

He stood frozen outside the bathroom, heart racing, then slowly slid down the wall with his back against it. His hand clamped over his mouth as his face turned a fiery red. He couldn't stop the image from replaying—June's wet, soapy light tan skin, her hair cascading down her back in dark, curling strands, and the way her curves had been... *perfect*.

"F-Fuck... Junnie."

Inside the bathroom, June covered her face with both hands and let out a groan, wishing the steam could just swallow her whole.

The next two days were painfully awkward. They couldn't make eye contact. Every accidental touch made them both jolt like they'd touched a live wire. "Sorry!" "SORRY!" became their new language, usually followed by running in opposite directions with red faces and flailing arms.

They both wanted something more—but they knew they had to wait.

Then came Casie's invitation.

At noon sharp, they met her, Evan, and Troy at Casie's favorite park, a sunny stretch of green with tall trees and chirping birds. Casie laid out a sheet onto the picnic table and unpacked sandwiches, snacks, and a thermos of iced tea. She sat between Troy and Evan, laughing and chatting away like the social butterfly she was. Patches, Mocha, and Patches' three other children were running around playing, like a little family reunion.

Meanwhile, June and Kyle were stuck sitting next to each other on the other side.

The tension between them was thick enough to cut with a butter knife.

They each tried to act normal, but both of them could barely chew their food. They were too aware of the other—how close they were sitting, how warm it was outside, how loud their hearts were pounding.

Then, under the picnic table, Kyle's pinky gently brushed June's. Her body stiffened in surprise, but she didn't pull away. She looked up at him, and Kyle gave her a soft, sweet smile that melted her defenses. Slowly, she intertwined her fingers with his beneath the table.

Kyle's face lit up with a big, goofy smile that made June giggle quietly.

They held hands for the rest of the day, quietly savoring the new closeness between them—unspoken, sweet, and real.

Later in the afternoon, as the group lounged in the shade, June brought something up.

"I've been thinking," she said casually, looking at Kyle. "We should probably start house hunting soon."

Kyle blinked. "Yeah?"

June nodded. "Our apartment is getting way too small. Especially with Mocha going through her teenage dog phase. She and Patches need a yard. And I wouldn't mind painting my own room whatever color I want."

Kyle smiled thoughtfully. "You read my mind, Junnie. It'd be nice to have a place that's ours, y'know? A forever kind of home."

Evan perked up. "Hey! My aunt's a real estate agent. Like, a really good one. I can set up a meeting if you want."

Kyle and June exchanged a glance, their joined hands tightening slightly.

"We'd love that," June said with a grin.

"Yeah," Kyle added, eyes bright. "Let's make it happen, bro!"

The sun dipped a little lower, casting golden light over the park. The future still held a lot of unknowns, but for the first time in a while, it felt like everything was clicking into place.

Love, dreams, and maybe—just maybe—a little white house with a red door and a big yard for their furry family.

Chapter 45: House Hunting

It was a bright Saturday morning when Evan introduced June and Kyle to his aunt, a lively woman named **Maribel**. She had a contagious laugh, bright red glasses, and a clipboard practically fused to her hand. Maribel had been in real estate for over two decades, and the moment she met Kyle and June, she lit up.

"I've heard all about you two from my nephew, Evan," she said, shaking their hands with enthusiasm. "Let's go find you a forever home!"

They hopped into her SUV and began their house-hunting adventure.

House #1 had an amazing yard—huge, green, and filled with blooming flowers. Mocha and Patches would love it. But the moment they stepped inside, Kyle gagged.

"Why does it smell like old cabbage and socks?" he whispered.

June pinched her nose. "And what is that... goo on the basement stairs?"

Maribel gave a sheepish smile. "It's... got character. Next!"

House #2 was stunning. Newly renovated, modern appliances, sleek design—and way out of their price range.

"This place is perfect," June sighed, running her hand along the marble countertops.

"If we sell both kidneys," Kyle jokes.

Maribel laughed. "A dream for later. Let's keep looking."

House #3 had vintage charm. Gorgeous hardwood floors, a wraparound porch, and a cozy fireplace. But then they met **Mrs. Heller**, the next-door neighbor.

"This house is haunted," she said seriously. "Has been since the '70s. You ever hear singing at night, don't go lookin'."

Kyle and June exchanged a look.

"Thanks for the heads-up," Kyle said, gently guiding June back to the car.

They toured **three more houses** over the next two days. Some were too cramped, some too far from the city, and one had a literal raccoon squatter in the attic.

Just when June was about to lose hope, Maribel perked up. "I think I have one more... hadn't planned to show it, but it might just be your hidden gem."

House #7 was nestled in a quiet neighborhood on the edge of town. It was a small white craftsman-style home with red double front doors and a cozy little porch with a porch swing. A white picket fence framed the yard like something out of a storybook. June and Kyle froze when they saw it.

The backyard was even better—spacious and sunny with a peach tree swaying in the breeze. Mocha and Patches would be in heaven. Inside, the house had **three bedrooms, two baths**, a good-sized kitchen, a warm living room, and a dining area perfect for game nights and dinners with friends.

June's eyes welled with tears. "It's beautiful," she whispered.

Kyle smiled and slid his arm around her. "This feels like home."

Maribel beamed. "You want to make an offer?"

June and Kyle nodded together.

"Let's make it yours," Maribel said, already pulling out her phone.

For the first time, the dream didn't feel like a *maybe*. It felt like a *yes*. A real future, one they could build together—with love, scented candles, coffee beans, and a peach tree in the backyard.

Chapter 46: Bought A Home!

Kyle and June stood quietly, hearts pounding as they waited beside Maribel—Evan’s ever-composed, poker-faced aunt—while she wrapped up a phone call with the seller of the white craftsman home. Her calm voice revealed nothing, and every second of silence felt like an hour.

June shifted nervously, her fingers fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. “W-Well?” she asked softly once Maribel finally hung up.

Maribel turned to them slowly, her expression unreadable. Kyle felt his chest tighten. “Oh... that bad, huh?” he said, already bracing for disappointment.

Maribel sighed deeply, then dropped the bomb with a grin. “Yeah... that bad... *for the seller!!*”

June and Kyle’s heads snapped up. “Wait, what!?” they shouted in unison.

“You got the house, kids!” Maribel beamed. “The owners—soon-to-be *former* owners—said they’ll hand over the second key tomorrow morning. You can move in anytime after that! \$11,000 out of \$18,000? Damn, I’m good!”

“AHHHHH!!!” Kyle and June screamed, practically exploding with joy as they ran around the empty space that would soon become their new home.

And true to her word, Maribel met them the next morning with the keys in hand. Kyle signed the final papers, and just like that, the house was theirs.

To celebrate, the two headed to their favorite sushi spot, ordering way too much food and laughing through the whole meal. It finally felt real—they owned a home.

That night, back at the apartment for one last sleepover before the big move, they lay on Kyle’s bed, staring at the ceiling in quiet happiness. June’s pink diamond ring sparkled in the moonlight still settled on her finger.

“Ky?” June whispered.

“Yes, Junnie?”

“Close your eyes.”

Kyle gave a confused chuckle but did as she asked. “Alright, they’re closed.”

June slowly shifted closer, her breath soft and warm against his skin. Kyle wanted to reach out, to hold her close, but he stayed perfectly still.

Then—her lips met his.

A soft, slow kiss. One that lasted for almost a minute.

She pulled away before he could kiss her deeper, and he already missed the contact.

“Okay,” she whispered against his ear. “Count to ten. Then open your eyes.”

Kyle groaned, smiling. “You’re really gonna leave me hanging, huh?”

Still, he counted. “One... two... three... four... five...”

June quietly slipped off the bed, tiptoeing out of his room.

“...eight... nine... ten.”

Kyle opened his eyes and looked around.

“Junnie?”

Nothing.

He looked up at the ceiling, a wide, lovesick smile spreading across his face. He could still feel the warmth of her lips. His heart beat a little faster. Life was crazy. But it was good.

A month later, things were moving fast.

Elias and his team were already at June and Kyle’s newly purchased building, spread-out blueprints and notes pinned to makeshift work tables. Elias brought along Mike, his most trusted head contractor, to explain the renovation phases.

“Alright,” Mike said, pointing at the plans. “First step: demo. We’re gonna tear out what’s not working and make space for what will.”

Kyle and June nodded.

“Step two: plumbing and electrical—gotta make sure the guts of this place are solid before we build anything new. Then step three, we hang new sheetrock. That’s as far as we’ll get for now, with your current budget.”

June looked at Kyle, and he gave her a small, reassuring nod. “We understand,” he said. “Let’s get started.”

With Elias, Mike, and the crew busy at work, June and Kyle headed off to the local flea market to set up their booth—bags of their small-batch roasted coffee beans stacked neatly beside June’s

newest line of handcrafted candles. Make sure they snap some pictures for their social media fans.

Their dream was unfolding—one little flame, one cup of coffee, one brick at a time.

Chapter 47: Childhood Memories

The first night in their new home was everything June and Kyle had dreamed of.

Boxes were scattered across the hardwood floors, the soft scent of freshly unpacked candles filling the air as Patches and Mocha ran around sniffing every corner. June had draped twinkle lights across the living room window, and the white walls already felt warmer under the soft golden-white glow.

They made grilled cheese and tomato soup for dinner and sat on a blanket in the middle of the living room floor. With no couch yet and barely any furniture, it still felt perfect—homey, quiet, and full of love.

Kyle wrapped a blanket around June's shoulders as she curled against him. "We really did it, Junnie," he whispered, forehead resting against hers.

She smiled, her voice a little sleepy. "Yeah... we did."

Later that weekend, they threw a housewarming party—just a small, casual get-together with the people who mattered most. Evan brought homemade cookies, Casie brought decorations, and Troy came with a giant speaker and blasted music that shook the walls until Mocha barked in protest.

They danced, they played Uno, they told stories and laughed until their stomachs hurt. Patches and Mocha each got their own dog cupcakes, which they devoured in one bite.

"Here's to new beginnings!" Casie cheered, raising her soda can in the air.

"To Coffee Beans & Scented Candles!" Evan added.

"To chosen family," Kyle said, his eyes on June.

They all clinked cans and bottles together as the evening sun spilled through the windows.

It was a perfect night.

Meanwhile, back at the building, Elias and Mike were wrapping up the last stages of the demo. Dust lingered in the air, but the space was finally taking shape. The old, broken bones of the building were gone, and something new and beautiful was beginning to form. Soon, it would be ready for the next phase—just like Kyle and June's life.

But peace never lasts forever.

It started as a chill down Kyle's spine. A sense that someone was watching him. At first, he thought it was nothing—just stress.

But then, he started seeing him.

A figure lurking just out of reach. A familiar shape walking past the booth at the flea market. The unmistakable sound of a voice he hadn't heard in over 2 years drifting through the air like a cold wind.

Then one day, Kyle caught a clear glimpse—and everything in him froze.

His father.

Still heavy with liquor. Still angry. Still dangerous.

The man had found him.

And now... he wanted money.

Kyle didn't have to hear it to know it. His father's motives were always the same. "I raised you, didn't I?" was his favorite excuse. "You owe me."

But what hurt more than the demand was the fear.

The old bruises felt fresh again. The childhood nights filled with yelling and hiding. The moments he wished he could disappear. They all came crashing back.

Kyle tried to keep it together, but June noticed the shift immediately. He was quieter, more withdrawn. He stayed close to her, almost never leaving her side. When they held hands, his grip was tighter. Protective. Nervous.

One night, after they packed up the Coffee Beans & Scented Candles booth at the flea market, June turned to him. "Ky... you okay?"

Kyle hesitated. Then, voice shaking, he whispered, "He found me."

June's heart dropped.

"He wants money. He's been watching. I don't know what he's planning. I just... I can't do this again."

June stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. "You're not alone this time," she said, holding him tightly. "You have me. You have all of us."

Kyle nodded against her shoulder, the weight of it all beginning to settle—but not crush him. Not this time.

Because this time, he had a home.

And a family that chose him.

He had his June.

Chapter 48: Stalker Dad

Early September brought cooler air, golden leaves, and a bittersweet milestone. Elias, Mike, and their crew had officially finished the first phase of renovations. The dusty, broken-down building now had strong bones: clean plumbing, secure wiring, new sheetrock, and the promise of something beautiful waiting just beyond the next paycheck.

As the crew packed up their gear and prepared to return to California, Kyle and June stood side-by-side inside their future dream space, smiling.

"It's starting to look real," June whispered, her fingers brushing along the smooth new walls.

Kyle nodded. "It already is."

But outside that progress... a storm was brewing.

Kyle hadn't been sleeping well. Neither had June. Because wherever they went, he was there—lurking in the shadows, a living ghost from Kyle's past. His father. A man who brought nothing but pain, now playing puppet master in their lives again.

Then came the breaking point.

One morning, Kyle opened the front door and froze.

Big Red—their truck, their pride—was sitting in the driveway with its windshield shattered, all four tires slashed, deep gashes carved into the paint like claw marks from something rabid.

And on the windshield, taped with greasy fingerprints, was a note.

"Where's my money, boy?"

Kyle stood frozen, fists clenched, heart racing. He didn't have to guess who left it.

Then the other notes began to surface.

At work:

"I'll make you cry like a little bitch just like you used to when you were a kid."

In the mailbox:

"SO K or I'll fucking break something else besides your truck!"

And the worst of all...

On June's bed.

"How beautiful you are when you sleep. Makes me want to touch you, and suck on your perfect nipples."

That one made June scream when she found it. Her hands shook for hours, her breath shallow, her chest tight. She didn't feel safe. She didn't feel *okay*.

That night, she didn't go back to her own room. She climbed into Kyle's bed, curled into him, and didn't say a word. He wrapped his arms around her like a shield, jaw clenched, fury burning beneath his skin.

He was disgusted. He was mother fucking furious. And he was scared—scared as hell for June, scared for what might happen next.

They slept in shifts now, listening closely to every creak, every bark from Mocha, every low growl from Patches. Paranoia didn't feel like paranoia anymore—it felt like survival.

Kyle knew they couldn't tell their friends. They couldn't go to the police. If the wrong person found out June was underage, it could ruin *everything*. She could be taken away. Their life, their dream, their love—it would all come crashing down.

So they kept quiet.

They suffered in silence.

And they started working on a plan.

Because one thing was for sure...

They weren't going to let him fucking win. Not now. Not ever.

Chapter 49: Birthday Horror

After the last terrifying note, the world went silent. It was too quiet. Kyle's gut twisted with unease, because he knew his father too well. Silence only meant something worse was brewing.

Now, October has arrived—June's birthday month. For a brief moment, Kyle allowed himself to hope. She was turning seventeen, which felt like a milestone, a symbol of moving forward. Maybe, just maybe, they could steal a moment of peace.

Casie was eager to celebrate and offered to host June's birthday party at her place. When Casie, Troy, and Evan asked June how old she was turning, June hesitated—but with a quick, practiced smile, she told them she was turning nineteen. Kyle held his breath until they believed her. One stressor avoided.

But peace was never theirs for long.

Kyle was at work, elbow-deep in an old SUV, when his phone rang. He didn't even glance at the screen before answering.

"Hel—"

"KYLE! HE'S IN THE HOUSE! I LOCKED MYSELF IN THE MASTER BATHROOM! KYLE, I'M SO SCARED!"

The wrench hit the ground with a loud clang. Kyle's world tilted.

"Don't worry, Junnie. I'm on my way, baby! Just please stay in the bathroom, turn off the light, and stay quiet."

"O-Ok, b-baby. Just p-please hurry."

Her broken, tear-strained voice made his heart split. Rage surged inside him.

"I swear, if he fucking touches you, I'll kill that son of a bitch."

Kyle didn't hang up. He needed to hear her. Needed to know she was still there.

As he sped through traffic in Big Red, June's terrified breaths filled the speaker. Then—

A door crashed. Screams. Kyle's blood ran cold.

"There you are, beautiful," his father's voice snarled. "Time to have some fun. Let's take off those clothes so I can see that wet little pussy."

"N-No—NO! GET OFF ME!"

Kyle's foot pressed harder to the gas. Moans, crashes, and thuds echoed through the call. His hands gripped the wheel so tight his knuckles went white.

"You think you can beat me you fucking whore? I'll show you who you're dealing with, slut!"

More noise. Struggling. June's cries.

By the time he reached their home, the red double doors had already been kicked open. Splinters littered the porch.

Kyle burst into the house, his heart pounding so loud it echoed in his ears. He raced through the living room, past the kitchen, into the master bedroom –

And there, in the master bathroom doorway, he saw it:

His father, towering over June, fists clenched. Her body limp, face bruised, fighting to stay conscious.

Suddenly... Everything snapped.

Kyle roared and charged. Years of bottled trauma, of pain, of fear—he unleashed it all. He tackled his father to the ground and rained down fists like thunder. Every blow was a memory. Every punch, a scream he never got to release as a child.

He didn't stop until his father went still.

Breathing heavy, trembling, Kyle called the police.

He cradled June, blood staining his hands, whispering broken apologies into her hair and gently kissed all over her face. When the sirens wailed outside, he never left her side. Not even as they loaded her into the ambulance. Not even in the waiting room, where hours passed and felt like a lifetime.

Finally, a nurse let him in.

She looked small on the hospital bed, wrapped in a thin blanket, IV in her arm. Bruised. But alive.

Kyle collapsed at her side, tears streaming freely. He laid his head on her chest, kissed her fingers, and sobbed.

"I'm so s-sorry," he whispered, again and again. "I should've protected you. I love you so much, Junnie. Baby, I'm so sorry."

He looked at the promise ring he gave her a couple months ago and kissed it. And in that moment, he promised her something he hadn't said aloud yet—but would soon:

This nightmare was over. And he would never let anyone hurt her again.

Chapter 50: Aftermath

Kyle didn't leave June's side once during her four-day stay at the hospital. He helped her eat, helped her shower, and did everything she needed with gentle care. He kissed her cheeks and forehead every chance he got. She'd cry, and he'd cry with her. Their pain ran deep, but so did their love.

By day four, the trio—Troy, Evan, and Casie—started to worry about their sudden disappearance. Kyle and June knew they needed a story, and fast. They couldn't tell the truth. If their friends found out the man who broke into their home was Kyle's father, it would raise too many questions. And questions could unravel the truth about June's age.

So, they made up a cover story.

A robber, they said. June had been home alone when a stranger broke in. He saw her, and he wanted more than just valuables. She fought back, but he was too strong—until Kyle rushed home just in time and fought him off. That's how they were going to explain the bruises, the chaos, the trauma.

They were going to pay the hospital bill in cash to keep June out of the computer system. It was safer that way.

When they told their friends, Troy and Evan were furious. They believed the story without hesitation. Casie burst into tears and didn't leave June's side once, laying beside her in Kyle's place that night, hugging her tightly.

June was finally discharged. Casie drove her and Kyle home, while Troy and Evan followed behind in their own cars. But when they stepped inside and saw the mess left behind by "the robber," Casie cried all over again.

Meanwhile, the man who had caused it all—Kyle's father—was behind bars. He'd be going to prison soon for theft, breaking and entering, and attempted murder in the first degree. Kyle felt a strange sense of peace knowing he was finally where he belonged.

"Somebody's little cock sucking bitch," Kyle muttered under his breath, not without a touch of grim satisfaction.

Despite everything, June still wanted to celebrate her birthday—now only three days away. She didn't want the pain to steal that from her too. So Casie went all out, decorating her house in nothing but *pink*—June's favorite color. Pink napkins, pink plates, pink streamers, pink flowers.

Even the gang agreed to wear all pink in her honor.

When the day finally arrived, Casie's entire living room looked like it had been dipped in strawberry milk. June wore a gorgeous pink dress Kyle and Casie had picked out together, with a delicate pink necklace from Kyle, pink lipstick from Evan, and soft pink eyeshadow from Troy.

She was quite literally *pretty in pink*.

The custom cake Kyle made was shaped like a giant pink ladybug, with deep rose-colored sprinkles for the dots.

Each friend took turns dancing with her, each picking a song that made them think of her.

Finally, it was Kyle's turn.

He chose *Perfect* by Ed Sheeran. As the melody filled the room, he pulled her into his arms gently. Their eyes locked, and the world faded. Every lyric, every soft note felt like it was written just for them—a quiet promise of love, of healing, and of forever.

And in that moment, surrounded by friends, pink balloons, and soft music, June smiled for real.

For the first time in a while... She felt safe. Safe with *him*.

Her Kyle.

Chapter 51: Her Choice

The morning after her birthday, June woke with the sunlight peeking through the curtains and the warmth of Kyle beside her. The chaos of the past weeks still lingered in her bones, but today—just today—she wanted to feel *normal*. She wanted a day filled with laughter, comfort, and just him.

“Kyle,” she whispered, pressing her forehead to his shoulder.

He stirred, eyes still heavy with sleep. “Yeah, Junnie?”

“I want a day with just us. Something simple. Fun.”

Kyle turned his head and smiled. “Name it, Junnie. Whatever you want.”

June grinned sleepily and said, “Let’s walk the dogs, play Uno, get tattoos, and go to a pottery class.”

Kyle blinked. “Tattoos?”

She bit her lip and nodded. “Yup.”

“Alright then,” he chuckled, brushing a strand of hair from her face. “Let’s do all of that. Even the ink part.”

Morning: Dog Walks and Quiet Talks

Their day started with coffee and a leash in each hand. Patches and Mocha practically dragged them out the front doors, tails wagging furiously. The weather was crisp, the sky bright and blue, and laughter echoed through the neighborhood as June and Kyle were pulled down the sidewalks like rag dolls.

“Okay, Patches is in a race with her own shadow,” Kyle laughed.

“And Mocha thinks she owns the block,” June added, trying to steady her tiny beast.

They strolled to their favorite trail, where they let the dogs sniff everything in sight while they talked about silly things—like what animal they’d be if reincarnated (Kyle picked a wolf, June chose a bunny), or how they’d decorate their store one day.

There was hand-holding. Quiet smiles. A couple of kisses when no one was looking. It was beautiful.

Afternoon: Uno War & Ink

Back home, Kyle set up Uno on the kitchen table while June made smoothies. Mocha curled up under the table, Patches by the window like a sleepy security guard.

“Alright,” Kyle said, slapping down a card. “Prepare to be humbled.”

June narrowed her eyes. “Nope. You’re going down, Hernandez.”

“Oh, bring it on, Kingsley.”

They played four intense games. June won three.

Kyle stared at the final draw-four card like it had betrayed him. “I want a rematch next weekend.”

June smirked. “You better bring more than your ego.”

Kyle smirks back, “Ha! Bet!”

By early afternoon, they arrived at a tattoo shop—a cozy, artsy place tucked between a record store and a smoothie bar. The artist, a chill woman named Trish, helped them sketch it out: simple script tattoos of each other’s names in their own handwriting.

Kyle went first, jaw clenched but silent. June held his hand the whole time, even kissed his knuckles.

Her name sat delicately on the inside of his left forearm—*June* in her soft, curvy script.

Then it was her turn. The moment the machine buzzed to life, June flinched—but Kyle whispered calming words the whole time, his hand never leaving hers.

On the side of her ribcage, just beneath her heart, in Kyle’s rough and neat handwriting: *Kyle*.

They stared at each other’s tattoos afterward, smiling like little kids.

“No take backs,” Kyle whispered.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” June said.

Evening: Pottery and Pizza

Their last stop was a quaint little pottery studio filled with soft indie music and twinkly lights. An instructor gave them a crash course, then left them to create.

Kyle tried to be serious. June was immediately elbow-deep in clay. At one point, she flicked a blob at him.

“Oh, it’s on now.”

A clay war broke out, ending in messy hands and laughter that echoed through the studio. In the end, they somehow made two odd, lumpy mugs. Kyle’s had a wonky handle. June’s looked like a flower pot trying to be a cup.

“They’re terrible,” June laughed.

“They’re perfect,” Kyle said, and kissed the tip of her clay-covered nose.

They grabbed greasy pizza on the way home, still giggling about the way the instructor side-eyed their creations.

At night, curled up in bed with their sore arms, ribs, and full hearts, June whispered, “Best day ever.”

Kyle stroked her cheek, “More to come, Junnie. More to come.”

Five Months Later: March

Time passed like a blur—days melting into one another with purpose and progress.

Troy had been dating a girl named Leah for three months now. Sweet, sarcastic, and surprisingly good at Mario Kart. Everyone liked her.

Even more shocking? Evan and Casie had officially become a couple two months ago. The once loud, chaotic girl, and a shy, smiling guy now spent nights baking cookies and watching crime documentaries. It was oddly perfect.

Casie even stepped up as head cashier and manager at *Coffee Beans & Scented Candles*—Kyle and June’s dream store.

Elias and his crew returned back in January to finish the final renovations. By the end of that month, the store was open. Coffee machines steamed and hissed, candles lined the rustic wooden shelves, and the sweet scent of vanilla, cinnamon, and caramel drifted through the air.

Business? Booming.

In just two months, they’d earned over \$63,000. Some weeks were slower, others busier, but every dollar reminded Kyle and June of how far they’d come together.

They worked hard, laughed harder, and came home every night smelling like coffee and hope.

Happy to have their friends, their dogs, their tattoos, and each other. Life couldn’t have smelt sweeter.

Chapter 52: Secrets & Suspicions

Business was booming, and with more customers rolling in every day, June and Kyle knew they couldn't keep running the store with just Casie helping out. So they posted a hiring ad and held a handful of interviews.

That's when Cody walked in.

He was tall, with olive skin, dark hair that hung over one brow in a perfectly messy swoop, and a lean, confident kind of stride. He wore a denim jacket over a hoodie and smiled with a quiet coolness that made even Casie raise her eyebrows.

He had barista experience, an easygoing attitude, and an answer for every question. But more than that, Cody had eyes for June the second he saw her.

And Kyle saw *that*, too.

"You guys run this place together?" Cody asked, flashing June a grin during the interview.

"Yeah," June replied, matching the smile. "It's our dream project that came true."

Cody nodded, but his eyes lingered a little too long on hers. "Dreams come true, huh?"

Kyle's jaw ticked slightly. "Yep. And we protect ours, too." Kyle casually draped his arm on June's shoulders.

Cody started the next Monday, and right away, he proved himself useful—fast, efficient, even great with customers. But something about him never quite sat right with Kyle.

Especially the way he hovered near June.

It started small. Offering to handle her shift duties. Following her around the store even when she didn't need help. Making her coffee without her asking. He laughed at her jokes like she was the funniest person alive, and acted like Kyle barely existed.

Casie noticed it too. "Either Cody thinks June is his new religion... or he's got a death wish."

"I'm betting both," Kyle muttered. Jaw tight.

One Friday afternoon, Kyle stepped out to make a supply run while June and Cody closed up the store. The sky outside was stormy and gray, and the last customer had just left when the atmosphere between June and Cody grew... too quiet.

They were wiping down tables. June hummed softly to herself.

"You're different, you know," Cody said suddenly.

She looked up. "How so?"

"Just... not like other girls. You're real. You're kind. You have this fire in you—like you've seen darkness and didn't let it change you."

June's hand paused over the counter.

"That's sweet," she said carefully.

Cody stepped closer, eyes searching hers. "You know, I felt it the first time I saw you. Like I was supposed to meet you."

"Cody—"

"I know you're with Kyle," he interrupted, voice softening. "But... I don't think he's good enough for you."

June's heart thumped. "That's not your decision to make."

Cody stepped even closer, now just a foot from her. His eyes flicked to her lips. "Maybe not. But I *feel* something when I'm with you. And I think you do, too."

Before she could respond, Cody leaned in, inching closer, his breath brushing her cheek.

June took a sharp step back.

"No," she said, her voice firm, unshaking. "You misunderstood. I don't feel *anything* for you, Cody—not like that. I'm in love with Kyle. Deeply. Fully. He's my person."

Cody froze, his face hardening as rejection settled into his features. "You really mean that?"

"I do."

He swallowed, something dark flickering in his eyes. "You'll regret that."

June's expression steeled. "No. But you might."

From that night on, things changed.

Cody still showed up to work, but he was colder, quieter, and stopped trying to charm June. Instead, weird things began happening around the store.

A cash envelope went missing from the back office drawer. Then, a full display of candles disappeared after a late shift Cody had worked alone. Kyle's suspicion turned into certainty when the supply receipts didn't match the inventory logs.

So Kyle checked the cameras.

And there it was—2:03 a.m., Cody unlocking the back door with a copy of the store key, sneaking in with a black duffel bag. He loaded it with candles, stole from the tip jar, and left without a trace.

Kyle's blood ran cold. "That fucker!"

The next day, Kyle didn't even wait. He cornered Cody in the back hallway, holding his phone out with the security footage paused on Cody's face mid-theft.

"You want to explain this?" Kyle asked, voice like steel.

Cody stared at the screen, then at Kyle. No denial. No excuses.

"She turned me down," he said bitterly. "I gave her everything. Respect. Devotion. And she chose *you*."

Kyle stepped closer, jaw tight. "She didn't *choose* me over you, Cody. She never even considered you. You were just some guy we hired. Don't confuse your fantasies with her kindness."

Cody's nostrils flared. "You don't deserve her."

Kyle's eyes narrowed. "Maybe not. But I have her heart. And that's something you'll never steal."

Cody stormed out of the store.

By the end of the day, Kyle had changed the locks, filed a report, and blocked Cody's number from every store device. He handed over the footage to the police and made sure Cody would never be allowed back.

That night, June cried in Kyle's arms—not because she was afraid, but because someone had twisted her kindness into something ugly.

"I just wanted to be nice," she whispered.

Kyle held her close. "And you were. But some people take kindness and mistake it for a door that's open."

She looked up at him, brushing her fingers along the tattoo of her name on his arm. "I'll never stop choosing you."

Kyle kissed her forehead. “And I’ll never stop fighting for you, Junnie.”

Chapter 53: Not Again

April rolled in with sunshine and blooming flowers, but for June, it brought something much darker.

Cody.

He came back.

He showed up outside the shop one warm afternoon like nothing had happened, wearing that same crooked smile and hopeful eyes. Kyle wasn't there that day, just June and Casie, so when Cody walked in asking to "talk," June froze. Casie moved to call Kyle, but June shook her head. She wanted to handle this herself.

"I just want to say I'm sorry," Cody said, hand over heart. "I made mistakes... I was hurt. But I've been thinking about you. I know I can be everything you need, everything you *want* in a man."

June tried to shut it down fast. "Cody, you're not who I want. I love Kyle—"

But he didn't hear her. Or didn't care.

Over the next week, Cody became more persistent.

He left flowers on her and Kyle's truck. Brought her lunch she never asked for. Sent her poems he said reminded him of her. Worst of all, he started showing up when she was alone—creeping around the side alley after closing, or appearing at her morning jogs with Patches and Mocha like it was a coincidence.

One day in the back room, he cornered her. "You deserve more than Kyle," he whispered, brushing her hair back and kissing the side of her neck before she could pull away.

June slapped him hard across the face, leaving a red mark on his cheek. But instead of backing off, Cody grinned like he liked it.

"I'll make you see it," he said. "You and me... we're meant to be."

Ugh! Enough was enough.

That night, June sat down with Kyle and Casie and told them everything. Kyle was livid—his hands shook with fury as he paced the room.

"We need a plan," Casie said. "This guy's obsessed. He's not going away unless we *make* him."

So, they came up with one.

June would pretend to fall for Cody.

Kyle hated the idea, but they agreed it might be the only way to make Cody drop his guard—and get him to let his obsession take him far away.

It started with small things. June smiled at Cody. Let him hug her without pulling away—even if his hugs were too long, too tight. She let him hold her hand in public and started saying things like, “Maybe I was wrong about you.”

Cody melted. He was so smitten it was like watching someone in a trance. All he wanted to do was cuddle her, kiss her cheeks, whisper about their future. He talked about running away together. About marriage.

“I just want us to start over somewhere new,” June said one night, forcing a fake smile. “Somewhere far. Like... London?”

Cody’s face lit up. “Yes! That’s perfect. A fresh start. Just us. And as soon as we land—we’re making babies. Lots of them.”

June nearly choked but kept the smile pasted on.

Within days, Cody had booked two tickets to London and packed a suitcase. June did the same.

She played the part. Held his hand through the airport. Laughed at his terrible jokes. Let him kiss her neck while whispering fantasies about their “forever.”

She hated every second of it.

Once on the plane, Cody excused himself to use the restroom. He kissed her cheek and said, “Don’t go anywhere, baby.”

“I won’t, babe. I’ll be right here waiting.” As soon as he turned the corner, June bolted.

She grabbed her suitcase and slipped off the plane just before the doors closed. Her heart pounded as she sprinted through the terminal, and she didn’t stop until she saw Kyle waiting by Big Red, watching the gate with anxious eyes.

She ran straight into his arms.

“He kissed me. My neck. My face,” she said through tears. “Please... kiss me there. Make it go away.”

Kyle cupped her face, kissed every place Cody had touched, then more. He let his lips do the talking. Let his teeth form the words. “You’re safe now,” he whispered. “He’s gone.”

He lifted her into his arms bridal-style and carried her back to Big Red. Casie was already in the backseat, ready with hot chocolate and victory music playing softly.

Cody had been fooled.

And June was finally free.

Chapter 54: Triple Date

Two months had passed since the whole Cody fiasco, and not a single day went by without someone bringing it up just to laugh. Whether it was Kyle dramatically reenacting Cody's "we'll make babies in London" speech or Casie cackling every time someone said the word "airport," the crew had turned the memory into a running joke. Even June could finally laugh about it... mostly.

Now, it was June—the month, and the girl too, hehe—and things had never felt more peaceful. With the business still thriving, everyone finally had room to breathe.

One warm Saturday morning, Evan burst into the store with Casie hanging on his arm like a koala. "Okay, okay, okay—idea!" he shouted as he entered.

Kyle looked up from the espresso machine. "That's never a good start."

"No, no, listen!" Evan grinned. "A triple date. Me and Casie, Troy and Leah, you and June." He looked at Kyle like his own words made his mind explode.

June's eyes lit up. "That sounds kinda cute!"

Casie bounced. "Right?! We never do coupley stuff at all together!"

"I'm in," Troy said, walking in behind them with Leah's hand in his.

Leah smiled. "Bowling, maybe?"

Everyone looked at each other like it was destiny.

"Hahaha. Bowling it is," said Kyle.

By 2:00 p.m., the group was all checked into **Strike Zone Lanes**, decked out in ridiculous rented shoes and oversized drinks in neon cups. They took up two lanes and ordered nachos, wings, mozzarella sticks, and a whole pizza. It was basically heaven.

Kyle and June were their usual adorable selves, constantly holding hands between frames. Kyle let her win the first game—or at least, that's what he claimed, even though June was suspiciously good at bowling.

Troy was surprisingly competitive. "You're going down, Evan," he said, staring down the lane like a soldier at war.

Evan struck a pose with his ball. "You're on, pretty boy."

Meanwhile, Casie and Leah were sipping on strawberry slushies and fake-cheering for their boyfriends, cracking jokes the entire time.

June laughed as Kyle went to bowl and slipped slightly on the slick floor, recovering with a dramatic spin. “Did you just pirouette?”

“That was a tactical dodge roll,” he replied seriously.

“You are the weirdest man alive.” She smiled and kissed his cheek. “And mine.” Kyle’s heart fluttered at her words.

Halfway through the night, they played a game where whoever got a strike got to dare someone. Evan dared Leah to sing into the bowling ball like a microphone. Troy dared Kyle to shout “I AM KING OF THE PINS!” after every throw. Kyle, of course, took it way too seriously.

June finally got a strike and looked around with a mischievous grin. “Casie... I dare you to throw your next ball with your eyes closed.”

“Oh, you evil gremlin,” Casie muttered, but she did it—and got a gutterball. “I hate you and I love you.”

“And both are valid,” June said, grinning. Sticking out her tongue playfully.

Later that night, the group sat together in one of the lounge booths, finishing their food and drinks. Everyone was smiling, glowing from laughter and competition. Some slightly gassy from the nachos.

“I missed this,” Troy said suddenly. “Like... all of us. Hanging out. No chaos. No drama. Just vibes.”

Leah nodded. “It’s rare. But perfect.”

June leaned her head on Kyle’s shoulder. “I don’t remember the last time I laughed this much. I swear I’ll start forming abs.”

Kyle kissed her hair. “Hehe, I do. It was the day you left Cody on a plane to London.”

The whole table burst into laughter again, Evan nearly choking on a mozzarella stick, “Ugh! Oh, shit!”

As the night came to a close, they all stood in the parking lot, under the soft glow of the bowling alley lights. Casie hugged June. “We’re doing this again. No excuses.”

“Next time—laser tag?” Evan asked hopefully.

Kyle raised a brow. "Dude, we're not twelve."

"I mean... it still sounds kinda fun," June said with a shrug.

"I'm in," Casie added.

Troy groaned. "God help me."

Leah chuckled and kissed Troy's cheek, "Don't worry, my child. For I am already here."

Everyone snicker while Troy rolled his eyes with a slight smile.

Soon, everyone piled into their cars. June climbed into Big Red, settling beside Kyle, fingers interlaced with his.

"Today was good, Ky," she whispered.

"Every day with you is," he replied with a soft smile.

And with that, they drove off, laughing all the way home.

Chapter 55: Road Trip Shenanigans

By the end of July, the summer heat was practically begging for something exciting. The store had been busy all month, and June, Kyle, Evan, Casie, Troy, and Leah were all feeling the burnout from their own jobs. One night, while closing up, Casie flopped onto the couch in the break room and dramatically declared, “If I don’t leave this town for at least a weekend, I will spontaneously combust.”

“You’d do it fashionably though,” June teased.

“I second the combustion,” Evan added, “but only if we take a trip.”

That’s all it took.

The plan was set: a spontaneous three-day weekend getaway. One van. Three couples. No strict plans—just good music, gas station snacks, and a map with some places circled in red. They packed up Big Red with a cooler full of drinks, bags of chips, bluetooth speakers, and enough chargers to power a small city.

“Shotgun!” Evan shouted.

“Nope,” Casie grinned, already buckled in the front seat.

“Sabotage!” Evan gasped, climbing into the back with Troy and Leah.

Kyle drove. June sat in between him and Casie, already making a playlist on her phone titled “Escape Vibes.”

Day 1: The Scenic Route

Their first stop was a giant roadside diner shaped like a donut. Naturally, they took 50 pictures in front of it and ordered enough pancakes and milkshakes to make someone question their life choices.

By noon, they were back on the road, windows down, music up, and everyone singing *badly* to throwback hits.

Leah leaned her head on Troy’s shoulder. “This is exactly what we needed.”

Later, they detoured to a lake, kicked off their shoes, and had a mini splash war. Kyle slipped while running away from June, falling dramatically into the water. She laughed until her sides hurt—then slipped right next to him. Kyle kissed her nose in the shallow water, soaking wet and happy.

Evan filmed the whole thing and wouldn’t stop replaying it.

Night 1: The Cabin (Sort of)

They booked a rustic-looking Airbnb cabin. Except... when they got there, it looked more like a slightly upgraded shed.

“Are we staying here or summoning demons?” Troy deadpanned.

“It has character,” Kyle said, already trying to open the jammed front door.

Inside, it was actually kind of cozy, if you ignored the creaky floors and one very questionable painting of a horse in the living room.

That night, they played board games by lantern light (the power went out briefly), roasted marshmallows in the fireplace, and told the dumbest scary stories. June fell asleep in Kyle’s lap, warm and content.

Day 2: Detour Disaster & Sweet Moments

The next day was supposed to be a simple drive to a small town festival. But Google Maps had *other* plans.

“Why are we on a dirt road?” Casie asked, gripping the seat.

“Trust the GPS,” Evan said confidently, right before they hit a bump that launched a soda can from the cupholder into Kyle’s lap.

They got *so* lost, but ended up stumbling across a red poppy flower field, completely unplanned. The girls took a million photos. Kyle picked one and tucked it behind June’s ear.

“You look like you belong here, Junnie,” he whispered.

She smiled. “Only if you’re here with me, Ky.”

They finally made it to the town, ate greasy food truck tacos, and danced to live music in a parking lot under string lights. June and Kyle slow-danced barefoot. Casie and Evan attempted a salsa and failed. Troy and Leah won a giant stuffed panda from a ring toss game.

Day 3: The Drive Back

On the drive home, everyone was sleepy, sun-kissed, and content. Casie leaned on Evan, Troy snored with the panda in his lap, and June’s fingers were gently laced with Kyle’s as he drove. And Leah’s head rested on June’s shoulder as she slept.

“I don’t want to go back to real life,” June murmured.

Kyle glanced at her with a gentle smile. “Then let’s make every day a little like this.”

She smiled. “Deal.”

Back in town, they dropped everyone off and headed home. June flopped onto their couch, exhausted.

“That was the best mess of a trip I’ve ever been on,” she said.

Kyle kissed her forehead. “Same. Let’s do it again sometime.”

And as she curled into his arms, June knew: these moments—the laughter, chaos, love, and friendship—were what life was all about.

Chapter 56: Ink & Intuition

After their whirlwind road trip, Kyle and June found themselves craving another form of memory, something more permanent. One quiet Tuesday, while sipping on lattes in their store, June leaned over the counter and whispered, "Let's do it. Another tattoo."

Kyle didn't even need to ask. "Already know what I want. A coffee cup with steam in the shape of a candle. Us."

June beamed. "You read my mind."

They made an appointment for that Friday and brought Evan along too, who had been weirdly quiet lately. As they waited at the tattoo shop, Kyle and June held hands while flipping through the sketchbook of their tattoo artist. When their design was drawn out perfectly—a cute little coffee cup with elegant, rising steam curling into a candle flame—they nodded in sync.

Evan sat on the other side of the studio, scrolling through his phone like he wasn't nervous. When his turn came up, he surprised both Kyle and June by asking for a dragonfly tattoo on his forearm.

"Casie loves dragonflies," he mumbled, a little embarrassed.

June melted. "You're a total softie. She's going to freak out."

Back at the store, the tattoos sparked conversation, especially from customers.

That's when *she* showed up.

A girl named Maya, early twenties, flirty smile, and full of too much confidence, had just started her trial week at the store. She was helpful, sure, but *very* obvious with her admiration toward Kyle.

She complimented his smile, his voice, even the way he brewed coffee. June tried to brush it off at first, but Maya's little "accidental touches" and the way she leaned too close were starting to wear her patience thin.

One afternoon, Maya reached over to grab a cup and let her hand linger on Kyle's arm. "You work out?" she asked with a wink.

Kyle raised his eyebrow and calmly rolled up his sleeve. "Yeah. Got this done recently too."

There it was. June's name, inked boldly in her curvy handwriting on his forearm. Maya blinked.

"Wow... you really went all in."

"I always do when it comes to her," Kyle replied coolly, then turned away to give June a quick kiss on the cheek. Maya awkwardly backed off, and June tried not to smirk too hard.

Later, June nudged him. "That was smooth."

Kyle grinned. "Gotta protect what's mine."

They spent the rest of the day laughing, sneaking kisses, and admiring each other's new ink. And Evan? Well, Casie noticed the dragonfly the moment she walked in. Her jaw dropped. "You did that for me?"

Evan scratched the back of his neck. "Maybe."

Casie hugged him so hard they nearly fell over.

It had been a day of bold choices and beautiful declarations. And June couldn't help but think that love, like tattoos, was best when done with intention and with just a little bit of fire.

Chapter 57: Make A Wish

Five days before Kyle's **21st birthday**, June lay curled up beside him on the couch, one leg draped over his, absentmindedly stroking his arm where her name was tattooed. The house was quiet, sunlight pouring in lazily through the windows. Patches and Mocha snored softly at their feet.

"Ky?" she whispered.

"Yes, Junnie?"

She lifted her head to look at him. "What do you want for your birthday?"

Kyle didn't answer right away. He sat with the question, like he really wanted to give her an honest answer. He looked down at her, brushed a loose strand of hair from her face and smiled.

"Well, honestly... I just want to stay home with you. You and the pups. I miss us. Our little household."

June smiled, touched. She leaned her head back onto his shoulder, snuggling closer. "So... you just wanna be lazy all day on your birthday, order takeout every time we're even a little hungry, and cuddle with the dogs?"

Kyle chuckled, the deep sound rumbling through his chest. "Exactly. That's all I want. No party. No stress. Just you, me, snacks, and cartoons."

June kissed his cheek and whispered, "Okay. We'll do it your way."

The morning of Kyle's birthday was slow and perfect. June woke up early to surprise him with a tray full of his favorite breakfast—blueberry pancakes shaped like hearts, scrambled eggs, and coffee with extra sugar just how he liked it. Mocha jumped on the bed first, licking Kyle's face awake. Patches followed close behind, tail wagging.

Kyle opened his eyes to see June, smiling like sunshine, holding the tray.

"Happy birthday, Ky."

"You're spoiling me already," he said, sitting up and pulling her into a sleepy hug.

"Good. You deserve it. You always do."

The rest of the day played out just like Kyle had hoped.

They stayed in pajamas all day, switched between cartoons and cheesy old movies, and napped on the couch with a dog on each of their laps. They ordered pizza, then sushi, then bubble tea,

and munched on chips and candy in between like two overgrown kids. June even baked cupcakes from a box mix and let Kyle eat the frosting straight from the bowl.

At one point, Kyle got up, disappeared for a second, and came back with a small box. "I know it's my birthday," he said, "but I got you something."

June blinked. "You got *me* something?"

He opened the box to reveal a small gold charm in the shape of a house with two tiny dogs engraved on the side. "For your charm bracelet," he said. "Our little home."

June covered her mouth, tears threatening to spill. "Kyle..."

"I just wanted to say thank you. For making my world better. For us fighting to get off the streets. For us fighting to make our lives better. For being my happy place."

She kissed him deeply, the kind of kiss that makes time slow down. They were tangled into each other. Kyle runs his fingers through her chocolate curly hair.

That night, they lit a single candle in one of the cupcakes. June held it out to him with a big grin. "Make a wish, birthday boy."

Kyle looked at the flame for a long second, then at her.

"I already got what I wished for... you."

He blew out the candle.

They didn't need big parties, expensive gifts, or wild surprises. They had each other, two dogs, leftover cupcakes, and a love that felt like **home**—and that was more than enough for them both.

Chapter 58: Dog Park Day!

It was a sunny Sunday morning when Kyle stretched his arms and looked down at Patches and Mocha, who were curled up together like a little yin-yang of fluff. June came out of the kitchen, holding two mugs of coffee and smiling at the sight.

“You know what?” she said, setting the mugs down. “They deserve a day all about *them*.”

Kyle nodded, rubbing Mocha’s ears. “Hmm? So, a spa day?”

“Exactly. Grooming, pampering, treats—the works!”

That afternoon, June booked an appointment at the best pet grooming salon in the city. It was a small but fancy place with doggie massage chairs, warm bubble baths, and enough bows and bandanas to make a runway show. Patches was suspicious at first, but once the groomer gave her a peanut butter biscuit, she was all in. Mocha practically melted into the warm water and let out a tiny “aww-woo” of bliss.

An hour later, the two dogs came trotting out with glossy coats, trimmed nails, cute bandanas (**Patches had a red one with tiny white hearts, Mocha wore a pink one with tiny white bones**), and the proudest little struts you’ve ever seen.

“They look like celebrities,” Kyle said as he handed the groomer a generous tip.

“They *are* celebrities,” June said, taking a picture of them striking a pose.

Next stop: the dog park.

It was a large, grassy space with fenced-in areas for both big and small dogs, agility tunnels, water fountains, and even a shaded bench area for the humans. June and Kyle found a spot on a bench under a tree while Patches and Mocha darted off with energy like they’d been waiting for this day forever.

Patches chased a tennis ball across the field like it owed her money, and Mocha befriended a fluffy white poodle who couldn’t stop sniffing her face.

Kyle leaned back, watching with a relaxed smile. “This is nice.”

June smiled up at him. “It is. They’re happy, we’re happy... It’s really a good day, Ky.”

After a few quiet minutes, June nudged him gently. “Hey... my birthday’s in two months.”

Kyle smirked. “You want a stay-at-home celebration with pizza and cartoons, too?”

June laughed. “Noooo. Not this time. I’m turning 18. I want to go all out—something *big*.”

Kyle sat up a little straighter. “Okay, big. Like... road trip big?”

“Ehh...” she wrinkled her nose. “Too much sitting, and not enough cool stuff.”

“Cruise?”

“Tempting,” she said. “But I’d rather be on land most of the time. You know how I am.”

Kyle nodded. “So, international?”

June’s eyes lit up. “Yes! I want to go somewhere colorful. Somewhere full of life. Good food. Pretty places. Culture. Something we’ve never experienced before.”

They ran through ideas like it was a game—Italy, Paris, Greece—until they both said it at the same time: “**Singapore.**”

June’s jaw dropped in excited surprise. “**YES!** That’s it!”

“The colors, the street food, the art—it’s perfect,” Kyle said. “We’ll fly out the day before your birthday. Make it the most unforgettable trip of our lives.”

June leaned her head on his shoulder. “It already sounds amazing.”

They spent the next hour at the dog park watching their furry babies and daydreaming about street markets, night festivals, and glowing city lights in Singapore. By the time the sun started to set, Patches and Mocha had collapsed into a happy, panting heap of dog fur and contentment.

Back at home, Kyle tucked them both into their dog beds like they were royalty, and June whispered to them, “Just wait till we bring you back souvenirs.”

Later that night, June grabbed a colorful poster board sheet and stuck it on the fridge. At the top, she wrote in big bubble letters: “**SINGAPORE COUNTDOWN!**” Underneath, she drew a little calendar with tiny numbered boxes, one for each day until their flight. Each day got its own doodle—fireworks, dumplings, lanterns, and little hearts. She even used glittery stickers to mark the weekends.

Kyle walked in just as she stuck on the final sticker.

“You’re really doing this?” he asked, amused.

June grinned. “Heck yeah! I want to wake up every day and see how close we’re getting.”

He pulled her into a hug from behind and placed his chin on her head. “It’s gonna be perfect, Junnie. Just like you.”

The trip was now officially in motion. And for the first time in a long time, everything just felt right—exciting, safe, and beautifully full of promise.

Chapter 59: Early September

The air had just started to shift, that barely-there hint of fall whispering through the late summer heat. It was early September, and upstairs at **Coffee Beans & Scented Candles**, things were as warm and cozy as ever. Kyle and June were elbows-deep in creative mode, testing new scents and flavors, their playlist humming softly in the background.

Patches and her daughter, **Mocha**, lay curled up together in their oversized dog bed like two sleepy queens, occasionally sighing in contentment.

June swirled the wax in her tin and grinned. "Smell this."

Kyle leaned in, inhaling the soft, juicy scent. "Peaches."

June nodded proudly. "I'm calling it '**Rosie's Peaches.**' It smells like the peaches that we used to eat with our little Rosie."

Kyle smiled and kissed her temple. "That's perfect, Junnie."

June blushed, "You know, for me still being under age, you sure do kiss me a lot."

Kyle smirked proudly, "I can't help it. I already know that you're my girl." He winked playfully.

Feeling inspired, Kyle began grinding coffee beans with a focused look on his face. He mixed, brewed, and tested until the kitchen smelled like sugar, spice, and something special. When June tried it, her eyes lit up.

"Kyle, what is this?!"

"**Ladybug's Coffee**," he said quietly.

June paused, heart full. "You named it after her."

He nodded. "I miss her, Junnie. And wherever our little Rosie is... I just hope she's smiling. She deserves that."

They stood in silence for a moment, their hearts wrapped around a memory, a person neither of them would ever let go of. Their ladybug. Their Rosie.

Two days later, it was *girls' day!*

Leah, **Casie**, and **June** had been planning it for weeks—and they went *all out*. **First stop: a luxury hair salon** where they got deep conditioning treatments, trims, and curls that bounced like movie stars. **Second stop: a nail spa** for mani-pedis with sparkly gel polish and rhinestones that caught

the light. **Third stop: a boutique** to try on dresses, giggling and twirling in the mirrors like they were teenagers again. Well... one of them still was. But nobody has to know that. Hehe.

Casie picked a lavender ruffle dress. Leah went with emerald green satin. June found a butter-yellow sundress that made her eyes pop.

And **fourth stop: a rooftop restaurant** with fairy lights, good wine (non-alcoholic for June), and laughter that echoed through the night.

Four days later, it was *the guys' turn!*

Kyle, Evan, and Troy started the morning with a jog around a peaceful park, pushing each other to run faster while cracking jokes between breaths. Afterward, they hit their favorite old-school diner for steak, eggs, and green chili peppers that made Troy cough like a dragon was breathing fire down his throat.

Then it was off to the bar—pool tables, neon signs, and greasy fries. They talked about their girls like proud fools: Evan couldn't stop bragging about Casie's new management skills, Troy swore up and down that Leah was secretly a goddess, and Kyle just grinned, talking about June like she hung the stars herself.

The night ended with a roar—literally—as they stood side by side in a packed stadium for **Monster Truck Night**. The engines rumbled, tires flew, and three grown men yelled like a couple of kids excited for an ice cream sundae.. It was awesome.

A week later, the group reunited for another **triple date**—this time at the laser tag arena they'd talked about for weeks.

They split into teams: Kyle, Casie, and Leah vs. June, Evan, and Troy. Lights flashed, lasers zippy-zapped, and laughter bounced off the walls as they ducked behind barriers and whispered strategies like they were in an actual spy movie.

June tagged Kyle right in the chest, earning a dramatic, slow-motion “Noooo!” from him before he fell onto the mat like he'd been mortally wounded.

They played three full rounds, and by the end, everyone was sweaty, out of breath, and happy as could be.

As they sat in the back of the parking lot, sipping slushies and teasing each other about who cheated most, June looked around and smiled. This—this right here—was what love and friendship looked like.

And October was just around the corner. A birthday. A new adventure. And even more memories to make.

Chapter 60: Prep Checks

In less than 72 hours, Kyle and June would be flying halfway across the world to Singapore. And even though they were thrilled, they were also slightly panicked.

“Okay, we’re not forgetting anything, right?” June asked for the fifth time that morning, staring at the giant “**SINGAPORE COUNTDOWN!**” board on the fridge. Only **2 days and 23 hours** left.

Kyle glanced up from his coffee mug, eyes half-lidded. “We’ve checked our bags twice, Junnie.”

June raised an eyebrow. “So we’re due for a third check.”

She wasn’t playing around. Their suitcases and duffle bags were spread out across the living room floor like they were packing for a year, not a week. Outfits were folded in color-coded piles, each with sticky notes that said things like “Day 3-shopping” and “Fancy Dinner Night.”

“Did you put the international plug adapters in the front pouch?” June asked.

“Yes,” Kyle said patiently, “and I packed extra socks, a mini first aid kit, the travel toothpaste, and your face mask that looks like a panda.”

She blinked, impressed. “Okay, okay. You get points.”

Kyle just shrugged with a casual wink.

They ran through their packing list again, out loud this time, pointing at each item as they checked it off.

- ☒ Passports
- ☒ Flight confirmation
- ☒ Hotel info
- ☒ Currency exchanged
- ☒ Light jackets
- ☒ Sunglasses
- ☒ Emergency snacks
- ☒ Power banks
- ☒ Camera
- ☒ Polaroid
- ☒ Mini notebook for memories
- ☒ Birthday dress
- ☒ Kyle’s dress shoes (June insisted)

After another hour of zipping and unzipping bags, Kyle flopped backward on the couch. “This vacation better be worth all the prep.”

June leaned over and kissed his cheek. “It will be. Just think... street food, neon lights, temples, and me in my birthday dress in Singapore.”

Kyle grinned. “Okay, now I’m back in. That last one got me good.”

Next was the **dog situation**.

Evan and Casie had already agreed to dog-sit Patches and Mocha, and Kyle and June wanted to make sure everything was perfect. They drove over to Evan and Casie’s house that afternoon with a full doggie care basket—custom food bags, treats, toys, leashes, their favorite blankets, and even a printed schedule.

“Wow, you’re really not messing around,” Casie said as June handed her a folder.

“It has everything,” June said, seriously. “Vet numbers, feeding times, walking instructions, even a playlist for when they’re home alone.”

Evan held up a chew toy. “What’s this one called?”

“That’s Mr. Bouncy Sausage,” Kyle said, deadpan. “They fight over him every day.”

Patches barked like she knew they were talking about her. Mocha gave Kyle puppy eyes, already sensing that her humans were going somewhere without her.

“I’m gonna miss them,” June whispered, scratching behind Mocha’s ears.

“They’ll be in good hands,” Casie reassured her. “We’ve got this. Go make some memories.”

That night, back at home, the nerves settled in harder. They sat in bed with their travel folders between them, going over it all one last time. June kept checking the time zones and weather forecasts. Kyle printed out boarding passes even though they had them digitally.

“Why am I kinda scared?” June said softly, playing with the edge of her pillow. “Like, this is exciting but also... big.”

Kyle turned to her and took her hand. “It’s your first time leaving the country. That’s huge. But I’m right here, and we’re doing this together. It’s going to be amazing.”

June looked at him, her nerves melting just a little. “Okay. Let’s do one last check in the morning, and then we rest.”

“You mean you’ll pretend to sleep and actually mentally pack the bags a fourth time?” Kyle teased.

“Exactly,” June said, smirking.

The countdown board ticked closer to zero.

Singapore was just around the corner—and adventure, celebration, and a whole new chapter awaited them.

Chapter 61: Taking Flight

Kyle's phone alarm buzzed at 5:30 a.m., sharp and crisp in the still darkness of their cozy bedrooms. A minute later, June's softer chime followed, and in near perfect sync, the two of them got out of their separate rooms and met each other in the hallway. Their eyes met, sleepy but shining with quiet excitement.

Kyle smirked, rubbing the back of his neck. "We're really doing this, huh?"

June nodded, her voice soft but sure. "We're really doing this."

Kyle took the first shower while June wandered into the kitchen to start a simple breakfast. The smell of pancake batter and sizzling eggs filled the house. By the time Kyle emerged in fresh clothes and travel-ready sneakers, June slipped into the bathroom for her turn. When she returned—hair damp, face fresh, and heart racing—the table was already set. Two plates, warm with food. And two glasses of well needed milk.

They ate in silence, savoring both the flavors and the moment. After washing the dishes and making a final pit stop in the restroom "just in case," they heard a car horn outside.

It was time.

They each grabbed their own suitcase and duffle bag and headed out the front door, where an Uber was already waiting—trunk open, ready. An elderly woman sat behind the wheel, her silver curls glowing in the morning sun. She looked up into the rearview mirror and smiled kindly at them.

"Seatbelts, please," she said in a gentle but firm voice.

"Yes, ma'am," Kyle and June said at the same time, bursting into laughter a second later.

The ride to the airport was peaceful, filled with light-hearted chit-chat. The elderly woman asked where they were going, what the occasion was, and lit up with delight when June told her, "Singapore. For my 18th birthday." She wished them happiness, safe travels, and even told them a short story about the first time *she* flew, back in the 70s.

When they arrived, Kyle handed her a generous tip and June waved goodbye. "You take care of each other," the woman said before driving off.

Inside the airport, things moved fast—security checks, boarding passes, baggage drops. But the closer they got to the gate, the slower time seemed to move. Suddenly, it all felt all too... *real*.

As they passed through the walk-in scanners and stepped into the waiting area, the gravity of it hit both of them at once. They stood together, holding hands, hearts pounding with a swirl of nerves and wonder.

Kyle swallowed hard. “We’ve never done this before.”

“Not like this,” June agreed quietly, clinging to his arm. “Last time we left the country, it was to run from something..”

“But this time,” Kyle said, pulling her into a tight side hug, “we’re running *towards* something.”

“Yeah... Our future,” June whispered.

Boarding was called, and they joined the line, every step echoing in their ears like a heartbeat. They finally reached their seats—June had let Kyle have the seat by the window, like always. Their duffle bags were stowed in the overhead bin, and their suitcases were already on their way to the cargo hold.

The flight attendants stood at the front, going over the safety precautions with practiced enthusiasm. June tried to focus, but her mind was buzzing too much. Kyle slipped his hand into hers, their fingers lacing naturally.

As the plane began to move, both of them closed their eyes tightly and gripped each other’s hands.

Then, the engines roared louder. The wheels left the ground. And they were flying. O Lord, they were flying.

For a moment, everything felt like a dream. The vibration of the seat, the pull of the sky, the sudden realization that yes—this was happening.

June peeked out of one eye, then the other. She exhaled and turned to Kyle. “That... wasn’t so bad.”

Kyle gave a nervous laugh. “We’re in the sky. *The sky*, Junnie. Ugh....my stomach.”

She squeezed his hand. “And we’re doing it together. You got this, baby.”

He stared at her for a good minute, it’s rare to hear her call him that. It made him feel a little better about being in a plane. Grateful that it’s with her and no one else.

And so, for the next 16 hours and 10 minutes, they were passengers on the journey of a lifetime. A birthday. A memory. A step into their next big chapter.

Singapore, here they come!

Chapter 62: Jet Lag Tenderness

The long flight stretched on, but Kyle and June made the most of it. Between quiet conversations, shared glances, and hand squeezes, they each managed to slip in two or three naps. They took turns resting their heads on each other's shoulders, letting the engine's hum lull them into soft sleep.

When June finally woke up for the last time, she checked her phone and nudged Kyle awake. "Ky," she whispered with a smile, "look."

He blinked groggily and leaned in close to her screen.

8:30 a.m.

Her birthday.

Kyle's eyes widened as the realization clicked. "It's your birthday," he said, voice full of wonder.

June nodded. "I'm eighteen."

He didn't say anything at first—just stared at her. Then his lips crashed against hers, hot and full of fire. It was rough and hungry, as if all the waiting, all the holding back had finally snapped. June kissed him back just as fiercely, her hands clutching at his shirt, her heart pounding like crazy.

Kyle's hands slipped up and under her shirt and pressed them on her soft skin. June moaned quietly, looking around to see if anyone was watching. Then she quickly straddled him and started grinding against his already harden bulge. Kyle growled into the kiss and swallowed her small moans.

When they finally pulled apart, breathless and dazed, Kyle pressed his forehead against hers.

"You're mine," he whispered possessively, eyes dark with intense desire.

June smiled with a blush, eyes mirroring his own. "I always was, baby."

By 9:30 a.m., the plane landed—and they were finally in Singapore.

Everything around them looked like a dream come to life. The airport was unlike anything they'd ever seen. There was an actual cinema, gardens, water features, and even a butterfly zoo. It was like a city inside a building. The colors, the smells, the soft chatter of different languages—it was magic.

A kind woman who spoke English met them outside customs, holding a sign that said, '**Kyle & June Hernandez**'. She helped them gather their things and escorted them into a private car that would take them to their hotel.

June rested her head against Kyle's shoulder, watching the scenery blur by. Kyle held her hand the whole way there.

Their hotel was breathtaking—tall and modern, with a sleek lobby and warm lighting. Their room was just as stunning. A single king-sized bed waited in the center, plush and inviting.

Kyle gave June a wink and smacked her ass.

They laughed at how tired they were—but excitement won out.

Taking turns, they showered off the flight. When June stepped out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel, Kyle was already dressed in his suit: black, sharp, and clean, with a soft pink dress shirt underneath. He looked like a dream.

June slipped into her light pink dress, the one that flowed just past her knees in the front and trailed to her ankles in the back. When she stepped out, Kyle stood up slowly like he was seeing her for the very first time.

“Wow...” he breathed. “It’s like I’m falling for you all over again.”

June giggled and twirled around for him, her hair still slightly damp but beautiful.

Kyle stepped closer and took her hand—the one with the pink diamond promise ring. He lifted it gently and kissed the back of it with deep affection.

“Let’s go celebrate your 18th birthday, baby,” he whispered into her ear, his voice tender and full of love.

And this time, there was nothing holding them back.

Chapter 63: 18th Birthday In Singapore!

The city was alive with color, energy, and adventure—and so were Kyle and June.

Hand in hand, they wandered through the streets of Singapore, soaking in the sights and sounds. Kyle couldn't take his eyes off her—his birthday girl, now officially eighteen, and now completely his. They laughed over plates of sushi at one of the top-rated restaurants in the city, feeding each other spicy tuna rolls and giggling like they were the only two people in the world.

Later, they strolled down a bustling street market, sipping on boba tea with oversized straws and snapping selfies in front of lanterns and flower walls. They tried unfamiliar street foods—sweet, spicy, crunchy, and warm. Every bite was a shared experience, and every shared smile made the day even more unforgettable.

But there was something on Kyle's mind.

As they wandered under strings of fairy lights stretching across the street, he felt his heart racing. His hands were sweaty. His nerves were building, but so was the urgency. He couldn't wait any longer.

"Junnie?" he said suddenly, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk.

She turned to him with a warm smile. "Yes, Ky?"

He looked like he might explode. And then—he did.

"LET'S GET MARRIED!!! TODAY!!! I'M SORRY, BUT I WANT TO BE TIED DOWN TO YOU FOREVER!!! PLEASE SAY YES!!!" he shouted, breathless and shaky.

June's eyes widened, her boba tea almost slipping from her hand. "What?!"

Then came the realization. Her mouth dropped open in disbelief before joy took over.

"Oh my God... yes! YES! YES, I'LL MARRY YOU! LET'S DO IT!!"

They both screamed and started laughing like little kids. Then they were off—running through the city like maniacs in love, searching for a place that could turn this wild moment into a forever reality.

They stopped by a florist and grabbed a bouquet made from five different pink flowers—roses, tulips, peonies, carnations, and dahlias. Next, they ducked into a small jewelry store and picked out two simple but elegant silver wedding bands, \$200 each, and they fit perfectly.

And then... they found it.

A greenhouse wedding venue, tucked between two larger buildings, almost hidden by vines and flowers. It was small and quiet, but beautiful—filled with blooming orchids, lilies, and colorful petals that danced in the breeze.

They didn't have family with them, but they didn't let that stop them.

With hands still shaking and hearts beating out of their chests, they sent a quick text, then started a group video chat and pulled in their closest friends: Troy, Leah, Evan, and Casie. The moment the group answered, screams filled the speakers.

"YOU'RE GETTING MARRIED?!" Casie cried out.

"RIGHT NOW?!" Evan laughed.

"OH MY GOSH!!! I'M SO EXCITED!!!" Leah shouted.

"YOOO! AND YOU'RE IN SINGAPORE, GUYS!!!" Troy exclaimed.

Everyone was thrilled—laughing, crying, clapping, cheering.

As the officiant read the vows, Kyle couldn't stop staring at June. She looked like a dream in her light pink dress, holding her bouquet like it had always been meant for her. When it was time to say "I do," neither of them hesitated.

"I do," June whispered with a glowing smile.

"I do," Kyle said, with so much love it made her heart melt.

"You may now kiss the bride," the officiant said.

And Kyle did.

He kissed her like it was the first kiss and the last kiss all at once, and when they pulled away, the video call was filled with cheers, clapping, and Casie yelling, "JUNE, YOU'RE OFFICIALLY HERNANDES NOW!!"

They were married.

In a greenhouse full of flowers.

In Singapore.

On her 18th birthday.

And nothing had ever felt more right.

"I love you, Mr. Hernandez."

"I love you too, Mrs. Hernandez. Forever."

Chapter 64: Newlyweds

After chatting and laughing with their friends on the group video call for over an hour, Kyle and June finally hung up, their hearts full and their smiles aching from so much happiness.

Hand in hand, they wandered back to their hotel room under the warm glow of the city lights. Standing outside their door, Kyle turned to June with a mischievous grin. Without warning, he scooped her up bridal-style, making her laugh and cling to his shoulders.

He carried her through the doorway like she was the most precious thing in the world.

Inside, the room was softly lit, cozy and perfect. Kyle didn't put her down yet. Instead, he carried her all the way into the bathroom, where he gently set her down on the marble counter. She watched him with a soft smile as he started running a warm bath, filling the tub with bubbles and the soothing scent of roses.

Without a word, they helped each other undress, their movements shy and tender. When they slid into the bath together, the world outside the walls seemed to disappear. The warm water surrounded them as they held each other tightly, their foreheads touching, kisses soft and slow. They whispered words of love, promises for the future, and quiet laughter echoed between them.

Their skin wet and pressed together like they were one being. Kyle pulls June on his lap and slowly massages her breasts. June let out a little moan and slid her hand to his shaft, stroking it gently up and down through the warm water. He growled against her neck and started to suck on her perfectly soft skin.

After almost an hour, when their skin was wrinkled and their hearts overflowing, Kyle once again lifted June into his arms. This time, he carried her to their king-sized bed, laying her down with all the care in the world, like she was a priceless treasure.

That night, they made love for the first time.

It was tender, a little awkward, and filled with nervous laughter—but more than anything, it was full of trust and love. He settled between her legs and went in slowly. She hissed at the pain and he helped her through it, whispering sweet nothings to comfort her. It was his first time, too. They learned each other's rhythm, each other's touch, and it felt like the world had fallen away, leaving just the two of them. It was sweet, messy, overwhelming, and perfect.

June's nails were digging into Kyle's back and it gave him both pain and pleasure. He took her legs and wrapped them around his waist and rocked her world slowly, then *hard*. He reached in between their bodies as he kept his movements and found her sweet, soaking wet bud. He rubs slow circles around her rosie bean, causing her whole body to quiver.

They both gazed into each other's eyes with love and pure intensity. Biting down hard on June's neck, Kyle reached his climax and his hot seed flowed deep inside her. June followed seconds after—her walks clenching his shaft—shouted his name.

“KYLE!”

For the next six days, Kyle and June lived in a dream.

Some days, they explored every colorful corner of Singapore—marveling at the Gardens by the Bay, shopping in Chinatown, eating their way through hawker centers, and watching the light shows by the Marina Bay Sands. They took dozens of photos, kissed on every street corner, and created memories that would last a lifetime.

Other days, they stayed tucked away in their hotel room, ordering room service, cuddling under the blankets, watching cheesy movies, having sweaty, heated sex, and just being in love.

But like all beautiful things, their time in paradise had to come to an end.

As they packed up their things and headed to the airport, they held hands the whole way, already dreaming about the next adventure that awaited them once they got back home to Canada—back to Coffee Beans & Scented Candles, back to their little family with Patches and Mocha.

But now... they were different.

Now, they were husband and wife.

Forever.

Chapter 65: Back Home

As soon as Kyle and June stepped through the front door of their house, they barely had time to breathe before setting down their suitcases and duffle bags in the living room. Without missing a beat, they grabbed the keys to Big Red and headed straight to Evan and Casie's place to pick up their dogs.

When they knocked, Casie threw the door open with a wide grin and immediately pulled them inside.

Inside the living room, Evan, Troy, and Leah were all waiting—holding balloons, surrounded by snacks, and a cake on the coffee table that read "***Welcome Home Newlyweds!***" in bright red frosting.

Before Kyle and June could say a word, Patches and Mocha saw them—and the two leapt onto them, tackling them both to the floor with wagging tails, wet kisses, and excited barks. Everyone burst out laughing at the beautiful chaos.

The celebration was loud and full of love. Hugs were exchanged, slices of cake were eaten, and happy stories from the trip were shared. It was truly a remarkable day, a perfect welcome home.

Then, as the laughter quieted and everyone settled onto the couches and floor with plates of food in hand, Kyle and June exchanged a look. It was time. Time to tell their friends the truth—the full truth—about who they were and where they came from.

Kyle cleared his throat and spoke first, "Guys...we need to say something," his voice steady but filled with emotion. Everyone looks slightly worried judging from how June and Kyle look.

"Ever since I was a little kid," he began, "my dad... he always beat me. And he drank. A lot. My mom just... pretended not to see it. Every single time. When I got old enough, I started working part-time jobs, saving whatever money I could hide. By the time I was 17, I couldn't take it anymore. The yelling, the hiding in my room, the beatings, the crying..." His voice cracked slightly, but he kept going. "So, I ran away. I lived on the streets for six months... just trying to survive in my hellhole of a hometown. By the time I was 18... that's when I met June."

Everyone listened in stunned, aching silence.

June squeezed Kyle's hand and then found her own voice, though it trembled at first.

"After my dad passed away," she said, "everything changed. My mom... she was so sad. So lonely. Three years later, she started dating someone... and then married him almost right away. He moved in, took over everything. He was gross, always touching my mom in front of me... and I was only 14. He didn't work, didn't clean up after himself, and he... he completely ignored me, besides him staring at my body a little too long for comfort. Worse, he made my mom stop loving me. Whenever he yelled at me, she didn't even care. I felt so... alone."

June wiped her eyes quickly before continuing. "I had my part-time job, and I saved every penny. Then, one day, when I finally stood up for myself, my mom told me she'd pick him over me. That broke me. So, I ran away too." She smiled weakly through her tears. "Later that same day, I met Kyle. We didn't know each other. But somehow... we understood each other's pain."

Kyle took over again, his hand tightening around June's. His voice was raw but full of pride.

"We hopped on a train... just to get far away from everything that hurt us. We came here, to Canada. And we survived. Together. Some nights we slept on the streets... some nights in the cheapest motels we could find. We worked four jobs between us. That's when we got our first tiny apartment."

He chuckled softly through the emotion. "And then we found Patches. She... she made everything feel a little brighter. She gave us hope."

Everyone's eyes were glossy, holding back tears.

June continued, her voice strong with the weight of their journey. "That's when we met you guys at the flea market. We were terrified... afraid that if you found out I was underage and living with Kyle, you'd report us. So, we stayed quiet. And then... Patches had puppies. We kept Mocha."

Kyle smiled at the memory, but his voice wavered when he added, "Then we had a better apartment. Then we had Rosie... and we lost her. That... that nearly broke us too."

June squeezed his hand again before finishing the story. "But we still had all of you. You kept us going. We bought our house. Opened the store. Built a life." She wiped another tear. "And now... we're married. And Kyle's dad...he was the one who broke into our house and beat me."

Everyone gasped and then Casie and Leah started sobbing.

"We only lied about his dad being a robber because I was still underage. I didn't want CPS to take me away from Kyle. I loved him. He's my everything."

She looked around at her friends—her family—and whispered, "You don't know how much you all helped Kyle and me rebuild ourselves. You gave us something to believe in again. You gave us a family."

She choked up and Kyle finished for them both, his voice low and full of heart:

"Thank you, Evan. Thank you, Casie. Thank you, Troy. And thank you, Leah. Thank you... for everything."

The room was silent, heavy with the weight of what had been shared—until Leah moved first, standing up and pulling June into a tight hug. One by one, they all joined, a big, tangled group of hugs and tears and laughter.

In that moment, Kyle and June knew without a doubt:

They had found their forever family. And they intended to keep them all.

Chapter 66: I'm A Proud Papa

It had been a month since Kyle and June said “I do,” and November’s crisp air wrapped around their little house like a blanket. Life felt warm, simple, and full of quiet, beautiful moments—like folding laundry together at the dining table with music humming softly in the background.

June, with a mischievous little smile, “accidentally” dropped a shirt onto the floor. Kyle, chuckling, bent down to pick it up and went to fold it, but something made him pause. His blue eyes narrowed as he read the front of the T-shirt.

“I’m a Proud Papa.”

He frowned slightly and looked up at her, confused.
“Babe, what’s this?” he asked.

June giggled, that sunshine smile lighting up her whole face. “Read it again. Slower.”

Kyle squinted, humor lacing his voice as he obeyed.

“I’m... a... proud... papa...?”

He stared at her, still baffled. “I... I don’t get it.”

Still smiling, June stepped closer, took his rough hand gently in hers, and placed it on her stomach. She gazed up at him with so much love and hope in her eyes that it finally clicked.

Kyle’s heart slammed against his chest as his eyes darted between the shirt, his hand, her tiny stomach... and then back to her glowing face.

“Babe... are you—?” he whispered, his voice thick with wonder.

“Yes,” June said, barely able to contain her joy. She pulled a folded pregnancy test from her back pocket and showed him the unmistakable positive result.

“I started feeling weird three weeks ago. I wanted to be sure before telling you, so I waited until today... before our first doctor’s appointment.”

Kyle’s hands shook as he gently touched her belly again, as if she was made of porcelain.

“Wait... Wait, we have an appointment? When?” His voice cracked.

June glanced at her phone and laughed.

“In about 25 minutes.”

Kyle’s jaw dropped.

“Twenty-five minutes?!”

In an adorable frenzy, he sprinted to get his socks and shoes, slipping and crashing into a chair, scrambling up again to grab his jacket and the keys to Big Red.

“OK! I’m ready! I’m ready, baby! Let’s go!”

They made it to the clinic just in time. Kyle hovered protectively around June like she was carrying the most precious treasure on earth—which, to him, she was. He held her hand tightly, glared at anyone who got too close, and whispered jokes in her ear to keep her smiling.

When a nurse called June's name, both of them stood up at once, hands clasped, nerves buzzing.

Inside the softly lit exam room, June climbed onto the table while Kyle pulled a chair close to her side, never letting go of her hand.

The doctor entered with a kind smile.

"Hello, you must be Mama and Papa. I'm Dr. McBerry. Let's take a look at your little one, shall we?"

Kyle's heart was pounding so hard he was sure the doctor could hear it. He watched in awe as Dr. McBerry squeezed cold gel onto June's tiny bump, causing her to shiver and laugh, making the doctor chuckle too.

Then the screen lit up.

And there it was—a little flicker of life. A tiny bean-shaped baby. Their baby.

Kyle's throat tightened painfully as he stared, completely overwhelmed. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he didn't care.

June squeezed his hand, her own face wet with tears.

And then they heard it—the heartbeat.

That small, fast, and powerful sound filled the room, filled their hearts, and stitched something broken inside of them back together.

Kyle leaned down, pressing his forehead against June's, both of them crying and laughing all at once.

"I love you so much, Junnie," he whispered, voice breaking.

June kissed his cheek, her other hand covering their joined ones over her belly.

"And I love you, Ky. We're a family now."

Kyle's grin grew wider, "Just wait till we tell the dogs, and everyone else. Hahaha."

For two kids who once had no place to call home, no one to call family, they had found everything they were searching for—in each other, in their dogs, in their friends, and now in the tiny heartbeat dancing on the screen.

It wasn't just about surviving anymore.

It was about living. Loving. Building something that would last.

Kyle kissed June's temple as she wiped his tears with shaky fingers.
He smiled through the blur, looking at the little miracle growing inside her.
"I'm a proud papa," he whispered softly.

And he meant it with every ounce of his being, every ounce of his soul.

The best was just beginning. And they were ready for all the awaiting new changes the universe threw at them.



Main Characters:

Kyle Hernandez

Age: 18 (turning 19 in August)

Height: 6'2"

Physical Appearance:

- Short, wavy blonde hair
- Soft blue eyes
- Light tan skin
- Strong, athletic build

Personality Traits:

- Brave but a little shy
- Deeply caring and protective
- Goofy jokester around people he trusts
- Friendly but guarded with strangers
- Stubbornly determined to protect those he loves
- Warm and hospitable once he opens up

Fears:

- His father finding him again

Likes:

- Rainstorms and late-night drives
- Dogs (especially Patches and Mocha)

- Coffee and Asian food
- Fixing things while listening to music

Dislikes:

- Shark movies (but will sit through them for June)

Favorites:

- **Color:** Red
- **Season:** Winter

Fun Facts:

- Secretly smitten with June since the moment they met
- Feels a deep connection with Patches—both once lost and found
- Has a soft spot for old love songs
- Watches shark movies only if June insists... and will hide his face during the scary parts
- Observes everything quietly before speaking, always assessing the room
- Will drive through the rain just because it calms him down

June Kingsley

Age: 14 (turning 15 in October)

Height: 5'0"

Physical Appearance:

- Long, curly brown hair
- Warm brown eyes
- Light tan skin
- Petite but curvy build

Personality Traits:

- Sassy and outspoken
- Wise beyond her years
- Adventurous and a little impulsive
- Heart of gold—always seeing the best in people
- Quick to laugh and quicker to love

Fears:

- Being taken away from Kyle (or losing him)
- Ending up unloved again

Likes:

- Rainy days and cozy nights
- Coffee runs and scented candles
- Spoiling Patches and Mocha with toys and treats
- Asian food and late-night lake drives

Dislikes:

- Walnuts (allergic!)
- Thinking about her mom

Favorites:

- **Color:** Pink
- **Season:** Winter

Fun Facts:

- Secretly smitten with Kyle from the beginning
- Makes up silly dog voices for Patches and Mocha

- Has a hidden talent for reading people's emotions instantly
- Loves staying up late to talk about dreams and future plans
- Always finds the cutest little cafés and hidden shops wherever they go

Patches (Dog #1)

Age: About 2 years old (estimated)

Breed: Mixed breed (possibly Border Collie/Australian Shepherd mix)

Appearance:

- White fur with soft grey patches
- Fluffy coat and floppy, soft ears
- Deep, soulful dark eyes

Personality Traits:

- Loyal and protective
- Sweet, gentle, and a little mischievous
- Always ready for belly rubs or adventures
- Intuitive to Kyle and June's emotions

Likes:

- Riding in Big Red with the windows down
- Hot dogs and peanut butter
- Splashing in lakes and puddles
- Napping with June or Kyle nearby

Dislikes:

- Loud noises (especially fireworks and sirens)
- Being left home alone too long

Fun Facts:

- Found by Kyle at work and instantly became family
- Sleeps curled up by the door like a little guardian
- Does a wiggly "happy dance" when Kyle gets home
- Will drop everything at the sound of the word "snack"

Mocha (Dog #2)

Age: 1 year old (born from Patches' litter)

Breed: Mixed breed (same as Patches)

Appearance:

- Chocolate brown fur with a small white paw
- Shorter coat than Patches, but just as soft
- Big, curious brown eyes

Personality Traits:

- Playful and full of energy
- A little mischievous but very loving
- Loves to be the center of attention
- Very talkative—likes to "woo woo" when excited

Likes:

- Tug-of-war with Kyle
- Snuggling under blankets with June
- Chasing leaves and butterflies
- Trying to steal human snacks when no one is looking

Dislikes:

- Baths (but tolerates them for June)
- Being ignored

Fun Facts:

- Born into Kyle and June's arms and never left their side
- Thinks she's a lap dog even though she's getting bigger
- Learned "snack" and "walk" faster than any other words
- Will always choose to cuddle with June first, then Kyle



Self-Published by: Sarah Winter Shaw

I created this book because I believe that many **people deserve to know the dangers and possibilities of life choices**. Though I personally haven't been through anything quite like the main characters in this book, I still have some sort of understanding and similarities of it. This was not something I decided to make for a short lived thrill.

No, I wrote this book because I wanted to reach out to others who are going through similar things. I wrote this to show that with just enough hope in ourselves and in others, we could choose to make a difference in this world. Even if they're small ones.

There might be hardships ahead but at least we are hopeful. Hopeful for change. Hopeful for better days. And hopeful for love. Thank you so much for reading my book. I hope it was worth it!
