

Something to Remember
By Suzanne Pederson

Copyright © 2019 by Suzanne Pederson
Cover Design 2019 by Susan Krupp

This book is a work of fiction.
All characters and events portrayed are fictitious.
Any resemblance to actual people,
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Table of Contents

[Dedication](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by the Author](#)

[Discussion Guide](#)

Dedication

A love song for my sisters
Because we've shared
a similar journey

And for my treasured soulmate
Because we've similarly
never lost us
along the way

Prologue

They shared a connection
indelibly inked
upon their souls - an internal tattoo
before external tattoos
became so popular.

Chapter One

Mary, Mary quite contrary, as her friends sometimes teasingly called her, walked her newest client to the door of her boutique law firm and said goodbye to her. She was a sharp lady who had been let go from her job of twenty years due to her employer “eliminating positions”. But according to Kiara, the real reason for her termination was because she was the oldest person at her location, she was a woman, and also a disabled military veteran.

Mary returned to her desk in the suite that she shared with two other attorneys. They each worked as solo attorneys in their own separate firms, but they shared the cost of a single receptionist, an accountant, and office expenses. Mary practiced employment law, her friend Susan did family law, and her other friend, Rachel, did estate planning. The three of them met in law school and upon graduation, they opened their boutique firm together and sometimes referred clients to each other. It was a nice set up because they worked at their own pace, for themselves, without the pressures and scramble of a big law firm that required exhausting billable hours on the pathway to partnership. But the downside was that they didn’t make as much money as they might make at a big firm. Nonetheless, Mary was doing well financially, and the three of them mostly agreed that they had found a nice work/life balance.

And Mary was generally content with her life. She was single, having briefly been married and divorced after law school; and she had a decent social life that included an occasional date and the usual type of interaction with friends and family that one often engaged in throughout the years. Susan and Rachel often attended local charity events and fundraisers with her, and all three of them were actively involved in the county bar association, an organization of legal practitioners that offered continued education and opportunity for social interaction. And she loved being a lawyer.

After high school she graduated from the state university system then she went onto law school and passed the bar exam on her first attempt. It was then that she married a man that she had dated for about a year and a half, but they realized within that first year of marriage that they were better as friends, than they were as spouses, and they amicably split during their second year of marriage. He was a nice enough man, but Mary realized looking back that she had never really loved him – she had only *wanted* to love him. In reality she had loved only once in her life – and that love was the love of a lifetime. And hoping to find a second love as great as her first love was not realistic; not when her first love had been such a perfect soulmate for her.

So nowadays she was kept busy with her two friends and also her mother with whom Mary now lived. Her parents were older when they had her, and her father had died a few years ago. Her mother, though mentally sharp had become increasingly frail since his death, and Mary had finally convinced her that she shouldn’t live alone anymore. Mary had wanted her mom to move into her home, but her mom had refused to move out of Mary’s childhood home, so a couple of months ago Mary sold her place and moved back into the same bedroom she grew up in. It wasn’t an ideal situation, but the arrangement was working fairly well, and Mary had no other option since her mother was insistent on staying put. It was strange to have her mom back in her life on a daily basis, but Mary had a good relationship with her mom and for the most part, they were good friends. But her life had become fairly chaotic for the past few months as she was still living out of boxes and storing furniture in her mother’s garage.

To counterbalance her life stresses, Mary had a horse that she boarded across town. She had owned horses since high school. Back then she and the love of her life had often ridden together.

Nowadays, going to the barn gave her a chance to step away from the demands of her job and the stress that she sometimes felt from living with her mother. And it allowed her an opportunity to be carried back in time to a period in her life that was truly memorable.

But that was long ago, before her life became filled with other people's issues, like the one on her desk today. Prior to filing Kiara's civil complaint, Mary had attempted to settle Kiara's claims with her employer, and she had filed state and federal agency claims involving gender and age discrimination, as well as numerous violations of disability and family leave laws. It was now in the employer's hands to file an Answer to their Complaint.

Within thirty days Mary received a filed Answer from the employer's attorney that denied all of the allegations in the Complaint, and also asserted numerous affirmative defenses. In addition, she received a number of discovery demands. Mary had Kiara come to the office to discuss the case status with her.

"So," she closed the door to the small conference room and waved Kiara into a seat at the large table. "We've received an Answer to your Complaint and as expected, your employer has denied all of the charges we alleged and he also raised Affirmative Defenses, which are basically alternative denials that say, *okay, even if what you allege is true, here's why we were justified in doing what we did.* And this is all standard legal practice, so there's no surprise in any of this, but we'll need to respond to his Answer and make our own discovery demands."

Kiara nodded at her explanation and Mary continued. "So, discovery demands are when we ask the other side to admit or deny certain facts; produce documents or answer written questions called interrogatories, and make themselves available for depositions, which are formal opportunities to question witnesses under oath similar to taking testimony in court. In the meantime, your former employer through his insurance defense counsel has sent his own demands to which we will need to reply by certain deadlines. So, we have some work to do because the employer's counsel has been very aggressive in their demands. But we'll get through it together. My job is to assist you with the effort. So..."

Mary opened the manila folder in her hand. "I haven't spoken to the lead attorney yet, but I have spoken with the associate counsel, and she seems nice enough." Mary glanced at the names of the two attorneys in the upper left corner of the document; she couldn't remember if she had even noticed who the lead counsel was – the associate was Veronica Maples...

"Wow... that's a throw-back." Mary smiled as she read the senior attorney's name because it carried her back in time to fond memories of her treasured soulmate. "*Ian Powers.* I used to know an Ian Powers. We were high school sweethearts."

Kiara glanced over her shoulder to better see the document in Mary's hand. "Is this Ian Powers the same guy?"

Mary shook her head, wishing that could be true, but it was incredibly unlikely. The last time she ran into someone named Ian Powers she had been so disappointed that it wasn't *her* Ian. "That would be such a long shot because my Ian moved to Nebraska a few months before our high school graduation. His stepdad was in the Air force and they relocated. I never saw him again and as far as I know he never came back to California."

Mary's father had also been in the Air force, but after returning from Vietnam he retired and went to work for the commercial airline industry. She glanced at the name on the papers again,

thinking how her life might have turned out differently had Ian not moved away. “Seeing his name carries me back to some fond memories. We had a very powerful connection. He was the sweetest guy.”

Kiara smiled with her. “Well then he must be a keeper for someone now, and I hope they held onto him, because there aren’t a lot of nice guys left these days.”

They both chuckled at her sad observation.

“There sure aren’t!” Mary could certainly agree with her on that one.

In the following weeks Mary worked with Kiara on the discovery demands and she drafted her own demands that she mailed off to the associate. A few weeks later a preliminary hearing was calendared for a motion Mary filed in opposition to a defense motion demanding that Kiara submit to a psychological exam.

Mary met with Kiara prior to the hearing. “So, we have a court hearing on Monday for our pre-trial motion to limit the scope of discovery. You don’t need to attend the hearing, but I will be there and the employer’s counsel will be there; probably the associate who is handling the case.”

Kiara nodded at what Mary said. “Is it okay if I attend? Because I’d like to if it’s acceptable for me to be there.”

“Sure. We can meet outside the courtroom and go inside together.”

When Mary arrived at the courthouse the following Monday, she met with Kiara in the hallway outside of the courtroom and together they went inside and sat in a row of chairs to wait in the audience for the case to be called. There were a number of matters set on the 9:00 am Motion calendar, and she expected that hers wouldn’t be called for at least thirty minutes.

And then she saw him.

He pushed the door open and nonchalantly stepped into the courtroom with enough confidence to convincingly convey to everyone who saw him, that he was a very important person.

“Oh my God... it can’t be him.” Mary noticeably closed her gaping mouth, and with effort she struggled to steady her sudden nervousness.

“Who?” Kiara turned in the direction of Mary’s focus.

“*Ian...* from my childhood – it *is* him. I’d know that face anywhere.”

His 1970s brown shag had been replaced with an urban styled disheveled short cut; and he had aged since she last saw him, but there was no mistaking that it was Ian. Mary couldn’t peel her eyes off of him. She would never have recognized him had they merely passed each other on a busy street corner in the rush and distraction of a chaotic day’s activities, but having been armed with his name prior to seeing him here today, having had him on her mind – there was no mistaking that face. It was something about his eyes – they were always so alive – and something about the humor in his smile – it was uniquely Ian, and together, that made him so familiar to her. At his happiest he looked like he was holding onto some wonderful secret that he was struggling to keep hidden; and the effort to hold it back was lodged just barely beneath the surface of his jolly expression.

“God he looks good...” Mary said it to herself as she attempted to gather her wits as it all came tumbling back at her: his sweet childhood expressions, his teenage laughter; his *wise-beyond-his-year’s* sensitivity. He was truly a best friend for a haunting decade; and he was without doubt, her most treasured memory. It was shocking for Mary to realize that he was suddenly, in all of his magnificent glory, stepping back into her life after decades of being missing.

She took a deep breath to settle the pounding in her chest that nearly made her feel faint. Then she wiped each palm down the front of her skirt because they both suddenly felt clammy.

“Are you okay Ms. Edwards?”

“What?” Mary turned to Kiara and drew in another huge breath of air to force a steadiness to the racing of her heart. In contrast to her efforts, she could feel a number of overly active nerve endings misfiring randomly throughout her body, and she feared that they would strike her completely useless in front of the judge – *in front of Ian*. “Yes. I’m fine.” Mary willed it to be so as she tried in vain to steady her emotions.

Kiara chuckled beside her. “So that’s him, huh, *Ian from the hood*... So, what’s his story?”

I lost my virginity to him. That was the story. Mary didn’t say so out loud, but it was the single loudest thought to come crashing through her mind like it was being shot through her brain by over charged electrodes that were about to short-circuit her entire cognitive capability.

“I’m just surprised to see him...” Mary offered something less revealing.

“Oh.” Kiara nodded and looked his direction. “Well, if you ask me, he looks like he’s one of *those* men... a real player, and someone who is more trouble than he’s worth. He’s clearly overly impressed with himself which will only serve to make him act like a total jerk. I wonder what made him change from that sweet guy you remembered.”

Mary shook her head wondering the same. Kiara was right. He did seem to have an overly confident manner. It was the way he came strolling into the room like he thought he owned the place. But such arrogance was completely out of character for the Ian she remembered. He had always been somewhat confident, but he had a caring heart and a humble view of himself. He was sexy and cool, but he was also a genuine person who had the deepest soul of anyone she had ever known.

Just then, the judge stepped into the room and court was called into order. Mary looked to see where Ian had gone as people settled into chairs around her, and when she saw him, she couldn’t stop staring, though she tried to remain subtle about it. He dropped onto a seat on the other side of the aisle that divided the courtroom, three chairs into the third row from the front, and stretched out his legs, bent at the knees, but in a seemingly relaxed pose; he wasn’t that tall – just 5’8”, but his legs were sprawled out in front of him. Then he casually flipped open a leather folder in his lap, and with divided interest, he glanced down at the documents inside it.

Mary kept her stare on him, watching as he visibly sighed with apparent boredom. Then he familiarly moved his jaw to manipulate what she knew would be a small wad of gum between his front teeth, though gum chewing in court was not allowed. Then with continued disinterest, he lifted his face and scanned the immediate area around him. The gum moved once more between his front teeth and he shifted in his seat and lifted one arm over the back of the chair beside him and left it resting there as his bored focus expanded to take in the larger perimeter of the room.

Mary dropped her face to avoid making eye contact with him. She just didn’t feel ready for that yet. She was still too shocked to realize that he was here in this courtroom, after all of the

years that had passed between them, just a few feet away from her, practicing law, chewing his gum, and apparently defending the opposing party on her case. It was a crazy realization.

The judge suddenly called her case, and Mary exhaled with effort to steal herself from the grip of her stunned emotions. With shaky hands she held onto her file and pushed herself up from her seat to step forward to the plaintiff's table in the courtroom before her. She wished she wasn't wearing such tall thin heels because she feared she might trip in front of him; but it was too late to be worrying about that. And besides, the taller, thinner heels would make her legs look good – so that was a plus. Mary smiled to herself, feeling silly for caring how her legs would look in front of him. Then she smoothed the front and back of her skirt and adjusted her jacket to make sure that it hung nicely. She wished she had re-applied lipstick, but it was too late for that.

To her right, she saw Ian casually pull in his own legs from where they had been sprawled out in front of him, and with quiet resolve he pushed himself up out of his seat to join her in the aisle. He brushed by her without recognition, then abruptly stopped to take her in. Recognition splashed across his face and he shook his head with an amused smile before settling his amazing brown eyes on her.

“Foxy jockey?” he whispered the question with only a small amount of uncertainty.

“Oh my God,” Mary hadn't heard his nickname for her since she was teenager. “There's a flashback...”

“Holy moly... it *is* you.” His sparkling recognition splashed across his face with visible endearment. “When I saw your name on the papers, I couldn't stop wondering if Mary Edwards the attorney could possibly be *the* Mary Edwards...”

His unfiltered surprise gave her a heady thrill because it hinted of a mutual fondness for their shared memories; but she managed professional composure as she walked beside him to the front of the court room. “Nice seeing you, stranger... after all these years.” Her eyes glanced down to see if he was wearing a wedding band, but the way he was holding the folder blocked her from seeing.

“Yeah, an unbelievable surprise.”

They commenced with the proceedings fairly quickly – with Mary prevailing on her motion – and side by side, they walked to the back of the courtroom. Ian held the door open for her and together they stepped into the crowded hallway on the other side of the door. Ian stopped by a bench under a bank of windows, and after dropping his folder onto it he pulled her into his body to give her a warm greeting. “How have you been?” His arms wrapped tightly around her and he gave her a happy squeeze that lasted longer than a casual hello would normally last, but not as long as Mary would have liked it to last.

She hugged him back and stepped out of his arms at the moment that felt professionally polite. “I'm good.” His cologne though subtle, made her long for the first time in years for male companionship; *for him* and long-lost days, “How about you?” He smelled so good to her – as good as he looked to her – which was pretty damn incredible.

“The same; I'm good.” The sparkle in his eyes held a steady endearing gaze on her. “So, we both became lawyers...who knew?” He picked up the folder he had dropped to the bench, “A regrettable decision by both of us, huh?”

Mary chuckled. “You don't like being a lawyer? Or you've become disillusioned with the work?” That would be so like him.

He grinned with amusement. “It seemed like a cool thing to become, and I thought it’d make for an exciting career, but mostly I’ve grown tired of pushing papers around my desk, responding to endless legal demands, managing exhausting timelines, and responding to meritless legal arguments that just look trivial compared to real world concerns. It just seems like there’s a lot of childish whining going on. Like nobody knows these days how to suck it up and shrug it off and move on. I mean, how did all these people grow up with the expectation that they should be compensated for every unfortunate turn of event that occurs in their lives? It seems like being a backhoe operator might have been a lot more fun after all, and perhaps would have allowed me the opportunity to engage in more meaningful work.”

Mary chuckled at that. “Well, I like being a power person and solving peoples’ problems, so no complaints from me.”

“You would like that.” He chuckled with her. “But I could do without the power trip. If only I could figure out how to extricate myself from the legal rat race; but how do you find the motivation to execute an exit strategy when the money is so good?”

Mary shrugged with understanding. “I know what you mean.” Changing careers at this point in their lives would be pretty difficult. “So, where did you go to law school?”

“Berkeley.”

Bolt Hall – of course – one of the most respected law schools in the nation.

“And you?”

“Not Berkeley.” She chuckled.

Ian laughed with her. “So, sorry for dumping all the discovery demands on you; I had no idea it was you who my associate was burying with requests. If you need a little extra time to respond to anything...”

“We’ll be fine.” Mary wasn’t about to ask for special concessions after winning her motion today. “But it would be nice if you didn’t make us go through pre-trial motions to resolve discovery disputes. It’s costly for my client and she doesn’t have that kind of money, and I’m a sole practitioner...”

Ian cautiously smiled at what she was sharing with him. “Don’t tell me where your case is vulnerable. I might feel compelled to use it against you... And now I’m going to suggest that if your client or your firm can’t afford the cost of litigation then you should settle the case right now before I crush you with additional discovery demands. I think I can get my client to settle for some nominal nuisance amount...”

Mary scowled at his legal jockeying for position. “I did engage in settlement discussions, but your associate didn’t seem very interested in having a serious conversation with me. And this isn’t a nuisance case.”

Ian chuckled at that. “You’ve overvalued your case, Ms. Edwards.”

“Well, that’s for you to prove. And I am confident that your client violated numerous employment laws, and you are underestimating my client’s allegations.”

He smiled with confidence. “Well that’s the argument that you need to make, but just so you know, I will be rigorously defending my client’s position. And I am not holding back just because you’re the foxy jockey...”

Mary chuckled at that. “I have a very sympathetic client, and she is going to make an excellent witness in front of a jury; so, bring it on, counselor...”

To her right, Kiara stepped into sight, and they both turned her direction. Mary acknowledged her with a smile and returned her attention to Ian. “This is my client, the plaintiff... Kiara West...”

Ian nodded with professional composure. “Ian Powers. I represent your former employer.” He held his hand out to her and grasped her palm with a firm handshake that Mary wished was grasping her palm instead. She had such fond memories of holding his warm hand.

“It’s nice to meet you.” His beaming smile stayed for a polite minute on her client.

Kiara nodded and let go of his hand without saying anything.

Mary moved her focus between the two of them. “So...” The moment had become awkward with its collision of professional restraints drawn along defined battle lines and the emotional connection of being reunited with an intimate, long lost friend with whom Mary wanted to remain in conversation.

“We should meet some time for coffee...” Her eyes settled on Ian as she threw the suggestion out there to try and wrap up the strange meeting while keeping a door open for re-engagement on a personal level.

He nodded at her suggestion and shot her his wonderful, laughing smile. “Let’s do that some time. Seriously, let’s do that.” And with that, he turned and walked away in the same confident manner as he had just stepped into the courtroom and into Mary’s life, however brief, only a few short minutes ago.

Kiara winced with disgust the minute he was gone. “I feel like I should go wash my hand now... He seems like such a slimy guy...”

Mary moved her attention from Ian to Kiara. *Ian wasn’t slimy.* Mary knew that in her heart. But Kiara would never understand how wrong she had to be about him, because Kiara didn’t *know* him the way Mary did. And what Mary knew was that Ian could never be ingratiating or smarmy. It wasn’t in his character. Ian was loyal and honest. He had the most generous spirit. And he had always been more vulnerable than one might think just looking at him. There were layers to Ian that were not always visible or discernible to the casual onlooker. Sometimes they had not even been visible to Mary, despite their soulful connection.

Her mind drifted back to years ago, when Ian and a bunch of kids in Mary’s neighborhood had shared childhood days and teenage nights during the easy-going seventies. Most of her friends back then were military brats whose fathers worked at Travis Air Force Base. Many of their fathers were either in Vietnam already, or on their way to Vietnam. Ian’s father had just left when Mary met him; Mary’s father was on his way in just a few short days. And that left neighborhoods in their community full of military wives who had been left in charge of raising the children and maintaining the home front. And despite the nightly news bringing the war into American homes, life seemed fairly safe back then; more carefree than it felt today and a lot more easygoing. And that was the backdrop to Ian and Mary’s introduction.

They were both in the fifth grade together, and after that they were often in the same classes from elementary school through high school. He was not overly confident back then, but he also wasn’t shy. Like Mary, he too, was an officer’s kid, which was better than being an enlisted man’s kid; and like Mary, he was an only child. He was also a truly gentle spirit, though Mary had seen him stand up to bullies plenty of times. He was somewhat rambunctious as a child, precocious, and friendly, but as he matured over time, he also became studious and ambitious, and more confident in manner. By high school he was quite popular and involved in student government and various high school clubs. He was also a great swimmer and a competent equestrian.

Mary clearly remembered the first time they met. Her father was preparing to leave for Vietnam, and they had moved into a new house that was located a few miles from the military base. She was walking by herself to her new school that was located a few blocks from her

house. Her father had made the walk with her twice during the weekend to make sure that she knew the way, but this was the first day of school and her first time making the walk alone. She had just turned the corner at the bottom of her street when she heard Ian call out to her from behind.

“Hey, girl... Wait up and I’ll walk with you.”

She stopped and turned around, happy to have met someone who wanted to be nice to her; so often kids could be mean at that age and unwelcoming to new kids. “Hi...” She smiled at the sight of him because he was not only friendly, but also adorable with big brown expressive eyes and a sweet smile. He had straight brown hair that was long enough to cover his ears, and most of his forehead. She literally felt like she melted at the sight of him though she was only ten years old the day they met. There was just something about the joy in his face and the sensitivity in his eyes. “We just moved here.”

“Yeah, I know. I saw the moving truck parked outside your house yesterday. I’m Ian.”

“I’m Mary. You live near me?”

“Yeah, across the street. I’m in fifth grade. How about you?”

“Fifth, like you.”

“Cool beans... so, let’s be friends... Who’s your teacher?”

It had started that casually – with him inviting her to be his friend.

He sat behind her all through fifth grade, and would teasingly tug her long brown pig tails to get her attention, which often got them both into trouble because she would turn around to tell him to stop pulling her hair – which only made him laugh with glee. And then one or the other would be sent to stand in the corner for talking when they were supposed to be quietly working. And they usually ate lunch together, Ian with his *Beatles* lunch box that always held a bologna and cheese sandwich, a bag of chips and Hostess Twinkies; and Mary with her *Partridge family* lunch box which never included chips or Twinkies because Mary’s mother thought them unhealthy; and they often played on the playground together with a whole group of friends that they knew from their neighborhood. And he always walked her to and from school. It was such a wonderful, innocent childhood friendship.

In sixth grade when she was playing jump rope on the playground with her girlfriends, he would toss little chocolates at her that were wrapped in colorful foil that said things like *I adore you*, *Best friends*, and *Too cute*. And that made all of her girlfriends tease her mercilessly which Ian thought hysterically funny. He would laugh like his affection for her was a joke when they teased her about it, singing things to her like *two little lovers sitting in a tree...*, but she always knew that it wasn’t a joke and that he honestly liked her. And he made that even more known to her when he gave her a generic valentine that year that looked like any other valentine exchanged at school, except in his recognizable messy left handed scrawl, underneath where the card said *Be Mine* he had drawn a small heart with an arrow through it, and had written *I’m going to marry you someday*. He did not sign his name on the card, but she knew it was from Ian, and when she showed it to him and asked him about it, he just grinned and grinned. And she felt, even then, that she belonged to him.

Chapter Two

Mary felt horribly deflated now watching him leave the courthouse. He was the first male figure, besides her father, that mattered to her. And she had thought today, for a glimmering moment, he might similarly still harbor fond memories of her; it came out in his surprised greeting and his *foxy jockey* comment which said so much beneath the words; it showed in his expression when he was looking at her, and she felt it for just an instant when he held her in his arms; and yet, it saddened her to see how quickly and how easily he had stepped away from her, with such apparent detachment. And his determined legal jockeying made her feel equally brushed aside.

When Mary got home from work, her mother had dinner cooking, so they sat together watching the evening news, waiting for their meal to be ready. “So, guess who I ran into today?”

Her mother had no idea, “Who?” She was noticeably balancing her attention between a television news program and Mary’s conversation.

“Ian...” Mary dropped the surprising answer, watching for her reaction. As much as he had practically grown up in their home, her mother would surely be surprised and curious about him today.

“Who?” Her mother frowned with divided concentration trying to process what Mary was saying while simultaneously listening to the political commentary on the television show.

Mary huffed with impatient frustration. “Ian... *Powers*, mom. How can you not remember him? From across the street? My best friend throughout my entire childhood? My high school sweetheart? The boy you practically raised as your own?”

“Little Ian?” Her mother marveled at the realization, appropriately surprised by Mary’s clarification. “Well, how is he? My goodness! He was such a sweet boy! You talked to each other today?”

Mary nodded with more excitement now that her mother was engaged in her revelation. “He’s a lawyer now and defending a case that I’m prosecuting – so that’s a little awkward. But we saw each other in court today. I had no idea it was him until I caught my first sight of him; but there was no mistaking his face. He looks just like he looked years ago – only older and less scruffy... and more pulled together. But just as adorable. And I will openly admit to you right now, mom; I think I could love him as much today as I ever loved him before.”

Her mother chuckled at her confession. “Well you always did have a pretty bad crush on him. I think as long as you knew him that was true.”

“It was more than a crush, mom.”

Her mother nodded at her correction. “Well I hope he’s learned to feel more comfortable wearing shoes now. I can only picture him barefoot, wearing frayed jeans that were perpetually torn at the knees; and flannel shirts and tee shirts that were never tucked in.”

Mary laughed at that. “Of course, he wore shoes, mom; just never when he slipped out of his house across the street to dash over to our house to hang out with me.”

Her mother chuckled with her. “I recall him doing *that* all the time. You two were inseparable. And I remember that he loved butterscotch pudding. It got to a point that I started making it almost every day for him.”

Mary smiled at her mom's memory. "Now that you mention it, I do remember his fondness for butterscotch pudding. He also liked butterscotch hard candies. He used to suck on them in class when we weren't allowed to chew gum, which he liked to chew all the time."

Mary's mother nodded at their shared recollections. "And I recall that most nights he had dinner with us. He had such an appetite. But regardless of him eating us out of our home, your father and I really liked him. Your dad used to say that if we'd had another child, he would want it to be a boy like Ian. He became such a part of our family that in some ways, we almost felt like he was our own son."

In the following days Mary thought about calling him under the guise of settlement discussions; or alternatively, in an effort to schedule depositions, but she held back from doing so because she wanted him to call first. She wanted to see if he'd make that connection. And besides, she had no idea what his personal situation was now or whether he would even welcome a personal call from her. He could be happily married and completely uninterested in reconnecting with her on a personal level. He could even be dreading that.

But he did finally contact her two weeks later. His call was patched through by the receptionist who did not offer his name when she put the call through, so Mary answered it blindly.

"This is Mary..."

"Also known as the *foxy jockey*..."

Her face lit into a grin that she had no power to control. "Well hello there, stranger..." Mary tried to maintain a detached cool, but she was thrilled to hear his voice on the other end of the phone. "What prompts the call?"

He didn't seem to notice her professional dispassion, but instead started talking to her as if there had been no gap at all in their personal friendship. "I was just thinking about walking to school with you on cold winter days; watching *Yogi Bear* and *Road Runner* on that avocado green carpet on your family room floor on rainy Saturday mornings while eating *Captain Crunch* or *Corn Pops* by the handful out of a box and your mom catching us and shaming me for bringing junk food into the house..."

Mary chuckled, and Ian continued. "And I was thinking about us riding our bikes to the school playground on hot summer afternoons and playing in the hills and creeks around our houses; catching polliwogs and tadpoles and looking for snakes; drinking out of the garden hose and getting scolded by your mom for not coiling it back up instead of leaving it strung out across the yard; and staying outside on cool breezy nights that made us shiver though we never went inside to get out of the cold because we were having too much fun playing *Simon Says*, *Red Rover Red Rover*, and *Red Light/Green Light*; and staying outside well passed the street lights coming on. And either your mom or my mom finally coming outside to holler at us to get in the house and get ready for bed."

It was apparently a purely personal call. Mary was thrilled by the realization. "We did push the limits most nights staying outside long after the parental curfew of streetlights coming on."

Ian chuckled with the shared memory. "I don't know that we ever went inside on time. So, summer after sixth grade, I think... Remember how we used to always play *Kick the Can* up and down the street and in and out of the neighbors' yards well passed dark? It was like we owned the street and also the nights."

Mary chuckled. “We did have a lot of fun back then – that was probably the best time of my life.”

“For sure it was the better part of my life too.”

“And there were no cellphones, tablets, or video games keeping us indoors.” Mary added to what they were sharing. “We had so much fun exploring the outdoors – I don’t think kids are curious like that anymore.”

“Indoors or outdoors...” Ian sadly agreed. “I’ve often thought about the two of us playing board games at your house on rainy days. I even enjoy my memories of being in boring classrooms with you that were only made bearable by our conspired mischief. How did we not get into more trouble?” He chuckled at his own question and continued with his sharing. “I’m thinking that we were pretty lucky to have that particular childhood – all things considered.”

Mary nodded at what he said. It *was* an idyllic time. “Remember how we would walk barefoot late at night to *7-Eleven* to buy Slurpees? We felt so rebellious and carefree...”

Ian laughed. “To this day I can’t pass a *7-Eleven* without thinking about that – you and your blue Slurpees. They were disgusting.”

Mary laughed at that. “How were they more disgusting than your red Slurpees?”

“They just were. And at least my tongue didn’t turn blue.” He chuckled and changed the subject. “So, what was the name of that kid that nobody liked who always joined the late-night neighborhood games? Something reminded me of him today and I was trying to recall his name.”

“Wally?”

“Yeah. That was his name.” Ian chuckled. “I never liked him.”

“Why was that?” Mary knew without him telling her, but she wanted to hear him say it himself.

“You know why... he was obviously infatuated with you. And I can’t remember a time in my life when I didn’t have a smothering crush on you – even at the ripe old age of ten. So, him liking you was a pretty big deal to my eleven-year-old self because I was afraid that you’d start liking him back. And you’d been my girl since fifth grade, and I found you first, so I didn’t think it was very fair of him to try and steal you away from me! So, he was a real pain in the neck for me to figure out how to manage when I hadn’t yet learned those navigation skills.”

Mary smiled at that, loving the way he was describing their shared history. “I do remember you acting unusually sour whenever he came around.”

Ian chuckled and quickly moved on. “And whose mother came out that night to chew us out for kicking that can into her front living room window? Remember how she threatened that she was going to call the cops on us? And in particular, she really gave *me* what for... like *I* was the instigator for the whole neighborhood mob that she disapproved of...”

“You *were* the instigator of it!” Mary laughed with the memory. Three of their friends had run across the street to hide in Ian’s back yard. Another two had dashed into Mary’s back yard. And that left Ian, Mary and Wally to stand alone and take the scolding for all of them. “That was Mrs. Smith who chewed us out. She was Sally’s mom – the most un-liked parent on the street.” And Sally was one of the girls who had hidden in Mary’s yard.

Ian chuckled, “Yeah. She was a real meanie. I was the one who kicked that can into her front room window that particular night, not on purpose, but...”

“Well you weren’t the only one who was guilty of kicking a can into someone’s house...”

“But Wally turned out to be a pretty cool kid. Not that I allowed myself to recognize that at the time, but remember how he took the blame that night? He could have booked it out of there with everyone else, but he didn’t. He probably stayed and took the scolding just to impress you!”

Mary chuckled.

Ian continued. "I wonder what ever happened to him?"

"Yeah, I don't know."

Ian kept thinking out loud. "Looking back, we were actually pretty good kids, even though Mrs. Smith chewed us out like we were a bunch of hooligans. She should have saved her energy for another twenty years down the road... that's when the real hoodlums materialized. Her own grandchildren probably included..."

Mary chuckled. "She did chew us out pretty badly that night. And you're right – in reality, we were decent kids, notwithstanding your very bad-boy presence," which Mary had adored. "In hindsight, life was so carefree compared to today's environment where parents are afraid to let their kids play unattended in their own front yards...and being a bad-boy didn't require you to carry a gun."

"Yeah," Ian chuckled, agreeing. "It was a much safer time..." though he added clarification. "If you can forget that it was a childhood set against the backdrop of the Cold War era, the Vietnam War, Watergate, a couple of key assassinations, some fairly violent civil rights unrest, and my own father not coming back from Vietnam."

Mary soberly nodded at that. "All true." Both of their lives would likely have turned out differently but for Ian's dad being killed in Vietnam.

Ian moved on. "I started thinking about my dad the other night – after seeing you and recalling other key events that took place during my childhood."

Mary smiled, assuming from their shared history, that some of those key events included special memories of her.

Ian continued with his contemplation. "I don't have a lot of clear memories of when my dad was alive, just some general memories mostly. Like I remember him being a really funny guy who used to make me laugh a lot; and I remember him being an attentive father – we were pals. He wasn't always around because of his military career, but when he was around, he was fully there for me. And I remember when I was little, I used to climb into his lap in this big overstuffed chair in our living room, and he would read me a bedtime story, which always turned into two or three stories. And before long, my mom would yell at him to wind it up and get me to bed – which always made him defiantly read me one more story. And then when I learned to read, I would do the reading, instead of him. And then *he'd be the one* who would beg me to read one more chapter, or one more book.

And I remember him stepping into the house after work in his flight suit, and I'd yell, *Daddy's home!* – and I'd run into his arms and leap into a big hug that he would give me. And when I was older, I remember us playing toss out on the street in front of our house, and him teaching me to hit a baseball with his bat. And I remember helping him mow the lawn and him showing me how to hammer nails and fix a flat bicycle tire. And I remember him teaching me how to swim and how to build model airplanes. I thought that was so cool at the time – the two of us building those planes. We had a whole fleet of airplanes that he and I built.

But those are just a bunch of snapshots in my head now that never grow into anything more. And then there was our last night together. I didn't want to go to bed because I knew he'd be leaving in the morning and so he laid on my bed with me and we talked for what seemed like hours, but for what was probably only thirty minutes. I told him that I was afraid that he wouldn't come back and he promised me that he would do everything possible to return, but that if he didn't come home, I would just need to remember that he would always be in my heart guiding me through life. And all I need do is listen for his guidance and ask myself, *what would*

dad say or do? And I remember him telling me that most of all I needed to remember to make him proud – no matter what – with how I behaved and with what I achieved. He told me to lead a good life and do what makes me happy. And then he didn't come back and I remember thinking, how can I be happy without my dad?"

Mary nodded at what he was saying, feeling his loss all over again. She could still remember how events unfolded the day his dad died...

It was just after Christmas when Mary noticed that a car full of men in military uniforms had arrived at his house, and a few minutes later, Ian ran over to her house and banged on her door. When Mary opened it, he stared into her face with his big brown eyes, and with an unusually sober expression he just blurted out loud the horrible news he had just received. "My dad got killed. He's not coming back." Mary had gasped in shock and pulled him into her house and caringly wrapped him into a sympathetic eleven-year-old hug. And then he started crying into her shoulder and she burst into tears with him.

Her mother found the two of them in the entryway crying together, and that's how she found out about his father getting killed. The moment had such an impact on all of them. For Ian and his mother life would never be the same; and for Mary's family, the war had suddenly become more terrifying than it already was, with its ability to reach out across the globe and strike tragedy into the hearts of wives and children left behind.

Mary's mother had tried to console the two children, and though they were inconsolable, she finally left them alone to cross the street to console Ian's mother. And soon the whole neighborhood was involved in the tragedy. Men who lived on the street who were not involved in the war effort briefly took over the male chores for her, like mowing the lawn and cleaning out gutters. And the women helped by bringing food to Ian's mother in those early weeks after her husband died; and Mary's mom took Ian under her wing, helping after school with him, and on weekends – to a point, as she had recalled herself, that he began to seem like her own child. The extended reach of a military family left no person standing alone to fend for them self; and in this case, the neighborhood reacted to the death of one of their own.

Ian offered more of his own memories to the backdrop of Mary's thoughts. "Remember how your mom drove us on base a few days after my dad died, and dropped us off at the movie theater so we could get away from all the funeral planning; and we saw that movie, *Old Yeller*..."

Of course, she did. Mary figured she probably remembered every detail of every minute of their shared time together. "You kissed me in the dark..."

Ian chuckled with amused guilt. "Yeah, that was a crazy time in my life. That's the only explanation I have for me making such a bold move as an eleven-year-old... but my dad had just died and I remember thinking about all the little boy things that I wouldn't be able to ask him now that he was gone. And one of the things that crossed my mind was, how was I supposed to know if I was in love, and what did it feel like to kiss a girl, and how did all that kissing stuff even work? So in the cover of darkness, I decided that I had to figure these things out for myself now, and finding out what a kiss felt like with you seemed like a pretty safe way to get at least one of those unanswered questions answered on my own, so wham, I just looked at you, got my nerve up and did it; not that I had any idea of what I was really doing at the time."

"It was a sweet kiss." Mary recalled the moment pretty clearly. After her mom paid for their movie tickets and popcorn and soda, she had left them there at the theater alone while she went shopping for groceries for both families at the base commissary. It was the first time that either of them had gone to the movies without parental supervision and they had felt pretty grown up at

the time. So they chose their seats with care and giggled about that, and after the movie started they were quietly watching the show, eating their popcorn and sucking on sodas when all of a sudden, exactly as he remembered, he turned and stared at her, and between handfuls of popcorn he leaned into her face and planted a quick kiss on her un-expecting lips.

In response to her startled expression, he had quickly backed away and said he was sorry, but she was so tickled by the exchange that she responded by saying, *thanks, now I know what a kiss feels like*. And that made him laugh out loud during a sad scene in the movie, which made the other movie goers yell at him to be quiet. And that made him laugh harder; and in a whispered confession through stifled giggles he admitted that he just needed to know how to do that for later... when he *really* wanted to kiss a girl. And that was how they shared their first kiss.