

A young man with short dark hair, wearing a red t-shirt and blue jeans, is shown from the waist up, looking back over his right shoulder. The background is a bright sunset or sunrise over a residential street with trees and a house. The sky is filled with soft, white clouds.

SUSAN M. BAGANZ

Is He a Traitor or a Hero?

*This former POW may be home now,
but there's one more battle to fight.*

**FINNIAN'S
RESCUE**

Finnian's Rescue

Susan M. Baganz

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

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Dedication

To all those who are prisoners of war or missing in action, you are not forgotten. May we always remember the sacrifices you have made for our freedom.

PROLOGUE

Afghanistan

April 2018

Gunfire woke Army Specialist Finnian Hunt in the dark of the cave where he'd been chained for days. The flashlights swept the area as his captors collapsed under the attack. He involuntarily shivered, whether from the damp floor or from fear...or perhaps both? He hugged the cold gritty wall and held his breath, peeking into the dark through shuttered eyelids.

Would he be next? Would he finally die here? He almost wished for that. Anything to be released from the misery of the past years in captivity. He'd lost track of how long. He instinctively closed his eyes as a bright light flashed over him. His right arm raised to cover his face, the chain digging into raw and infected skin.

"Who are you?" barked out the man behind the gun in American English.

Hope soared within him. "Specialist Finnian Hunt, United States Army," he managed to state with as much dignity as he still possessed. He rattled off his Social Security number.

The man dropped before him, lowering the light. "We thought you were dead."

"Who are you?"

"Delta Force, we're looking for someone else, but I'll take this unexpected prize from the mess we stumbled into." The man turned to yell. "Got an MIA in chains. Let's get him out of here!"

Soon the bonds were gone. "Can you stand, Specialist Hunt?"

"Yes, sir." Finnian rose to his feet. He stumbled through the winding tunnel of the cave into the dark of night with his rescuers. Finnian blinked rapidly at the full moon and stars glittering above, grateful that he'd not been rescued in daylight. Soon he was whisked aboard a helicopter, surrounded by the men who'd found him, even if it was only by accident.

Words escaped him as adrenaline surged. Was this a dream? Had he really been rescued? He forced himself to speak. "Thank you."

"Our pleasure, Specialist. Any injuries? Do you need a medic?"

"Nothing critical."

"Thirsty?"

"Absolutely." A bottle of water was shoved in his hands. He sipped it, leaned his head back, and prayed that they'd make it out of enemy territory alive.

"When we get to the post we'll get you checked out. Welcome back," the soldier said.

"I thought I'd never get out of this alive. How'd you find me?"

"Rumors of an American prisoner recently surfaced. How long have you been here?" another one questioned.

"What year is it?"

"2018."

Finnian closed his eyes. "Month?"

"April."

"I was captured three years ago on a scouting mission with two other soldiers." Tears threatened. He'd thought he was past that. "I kept hoping they'd come back for me—and began to think I'd never be free."

"Usually they kill prisoners of war," another soldier said. "No offense, but no one ever expected to find you alive after all this time."

"None taken. I fully expected to die any day. They threatened it a few times when I wouldn't give them information they sought. The worst I got was being starved and beaten. I have no idea why they let me live."

"We're just glad we found you."

"Me too. I'm sure a lot has happened in the world in the three years I've been held captive. It'll probably be weird at first."

"You're a soldier. You'll survive."

Finnian had endured torture and isolation. Could he survive this new reality? The chopper landed at the base and the men helped him out.

One shook his head. "You look pale, but otherwise pretty strong for someone held captive."

"Boot camp regimen whenever I could. Pushups, sit-ups, running in place when I was able. Helped keep me sane."

"Smart man." The soldier led him toward a tent. "Medic!"

Susan Baganz

Finnian was hustled inside, and his re-birth into life began.

1

July

Wednesday mid-morning

Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, USA

Why had he even come here? Finnian needed to escape the house, but now he stood as if paralyzed before the display at the grocery store. Bright lights knifed into his brain, and the cacophony of shopping carts warred with the pop music piped through the building. His hands clenched and the muscle in his jaw throbbed. Why? There was no danger here. He swallowed the tears that threatened.

"It's a little daunting, isn't it? All those apples." A feminine voice pierced through the noise but without the same level of pain as everything else overwhelming him. He turned to glance at her. His first impression was of big brown eyes, a quirky smile, and long, thick dark hair.

"Various shades of red and green. What kind do you prefer?" She rattled on without taking a breath. "Some really like the Red Delicious. A popular choice, I grant you, but if you want really tart, Granny Smiths are the ones to go for as they have a nice crunch. They are the best for making apple pies in my opinion, although sometimes a combination is best."

"Apple pie?" he asked. What nonsense was this?

"Yes. I make the best apple pies with Granny Smith apples. What kind do you prefer?"

"I don't know." He was grateful his sunglasses hid his confusion. She was cute.

"If you want a crunchy apple that's sweet and tart, my recommendation is the Pink Ladies. They are my personal favorite for a refreshing snack." She reached for one and held it up to him.

He took it from her and held it like a precious jewel in the palm of his hand. "Pink Lady?"

"I know, strange name. And they aren't all pink or even red, but they really are good. My name is Piper, by the way."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "Like the bird?"

"Far from it. Obviously, you didn't take a close look at me."

His gaze traveled her body which was clad in jeans, a baggy t-shirt, and sneakers. "You look fine." She really did. Her personality was bright and charming. There was a word he'd thought he'd never use, but it fit.

"I'm not a dainty sandpiper. My mom loves those birds, and I think she had great hopes of me becoming more ladylike. Might say I'm a bit of a disappointment in that regard."

He frowned. "You make apple pies?"

"I've been known to do that on occasion. Why? Would you like one?"

"Really? You'd bake me a pie?" Anticipation built like a kid at Christmas.

Piper nodded. "If that's what you really want. I'd be glad to. Just tell me who I'm to deliver it to, and where. I'll have it to you either later today or tomorrow. Whenever is convenient."

"I'm Finnian."

"Doesn't that name have an Irish origin? You look more Asian to me."

He gave a soft chuckle. "Irish or Gaelic, and it means white or fair. Ironic that I'm neither, although in all fairness, my hair was lighter when I was a baby. As I grew to a toddler my hair darkened. The joke was on my parents who are of Korean, Japanese, and German descent."

She grinned as she fished in her purse for a business card. "Here is where I work. Call and let me know where to deliver that pie."

He scanned the business name on the card and could hardly believe it. "You work for my grandmother?" He fingered the card in one hand while holding on to the apple in the other.

"Gladys is your grandmother?"

He nodded. "Do you cut and style hair?"

She shook her head. "No. I only make the appointments, collect the money, and tell people how fabulous they look."

"Will you be at the welcome home event tomorrow?"

Her eyes grew wide. "Oh, my. *You're* Corporal Hunt?" She smacked her forehead with her palm. "Why didn't I see it? You have all the marks of a military man, and if I had to guess, your stocking cap

covers a military haircut? I'm sorry. I don't watch the news much and have only listened with half an ear to details."

Finn pocketed the card into his jeans. "You didn't answer my question."

"Yes. Of course, I'll be there. Would you like me to bring you that pie then?"

"That'd be great. Nothing more American than apple pie. I'd say it reminds me of 'home' but that'd be a lie. My mom specialized in frozen dinners." He extended his hand and enfolded hers in his strong grip. The connection woke something long dead inside. He wasn't sure just what it was. "Thank you, Piper."

"For what?"

Emptiness washed over him as he released her hand. "For treating me like a normal human being." The sentiment was sincere.

She grinned. "You mean you're *not* human? Sure fooled me."

His gaze dropped to the apple in his hand. "Human, yes. Normal? I'm not even sure what that is anymore." He popped the apple in the air and caught it, grabbed a clear plastic bag to put it in along with two more, and knotted it. "Thank you for the help. I look forward to that pie." With a curt nod, he pivoted and walked away. Why had he brushed her off like that? Piper was the first person who had seen him for who he was. A man.

Not a traitor.

Not some misfit.

Not broken.

Maybe she realized just how broken he really was and was being kind. He sighed.

Finn checked out. He wasn't even sure what brought him to the store. He'd been gone from this area for six years, shaking the dust off his boots when he'd enlisted. He'd only planned to be gone for three years, but life didn't work out that way.

Exiting the store, he opened the bag and pulled out an apple. He peeled off the sticker and rubbed the fruit against his shirt several times. Pesticides meant nothing compared to all he'd eaten for the last three years. He took a bite and chewed. He stopped into the parking lot and savored the flavor bursting in his mouth. He swallowed. The intrepid young woman was right. The Pink Lady satisfied. He finished the apple slowly as he drove home.

Finn entered his mom's home and looked around. While far more comfortable, in some ways, he'd left one prison for another.

Only this time it was emotional chains that held him captive.

~*~

The next afternoon, the house and front yard swarmed with people. Faces vaguely familiar swirled against a backdrop of overwhelming noise.

"Hey, Finnian, so what really happened over there? Did you defect and change your mind?" an old school buddy, Vincent, asked. The man worked for a factory and likely hadn't ever traveled out of the state of Wisconsin.

"I love my country and almost died for your

freedom to say such things. My conscience is clear. I don't need to justify myself to you." He gritted his teeth and clenched his fist tight. He had years of practice in not retaliating when someone called him names or hit him, yet the temptation to haul off and wipe that smirk off the man's face was strong.

Piper bounced into the house with her bright smile and the promised pie. It was almost as if she had come with the key to rescue him. Hope surged within as he licked his lips. She spied him and winked, walking to him as Vincent moved on to talk to someone else.

"Here it is, Finnian. Fresh from the oven. Would you like some ice cream on a slice?"

He led her away to the kitchen. "Finn. Just call me Finn. Please?"

"Sure. Ice cream?"

He nodded.

She grabbed a knife and plate and sliced a generous piece of the pie. Grabbing the ice cream from the freezer she found the spoon and added a heaping scoop. The ice cream quickly began to melt and created a puddle of white on one side. Piper got a real fork, instead of the plastic ones found everywhere else, and handed the treat to him.

He sat at the table and inhaled. Apples, cinnamon, and nutmeg. He couldn't hide his grin. He dug into the pie and savored the bite of the warm apple, luscious crust, spices, and ice cream.

"Mmmmmmm. Piper, this is heaven. Will you marry me?" He didn't register the words he blurted out.

Piper stiffened, a frown marring her sweet face.

"There's no need to be cruel. Welcome home, soldier boy. Enjoy your pie." She escaped out the back door and took off through the backyard with a strong stride.

He glanced down at the pie and again at the young woman. *Chase her.* He raced after her. In spite of his captivity, he'd found ways to stay in shape and he caught up to her easily. He grabbed an arm to stop her. "Hey!"

She stopped but didn't glance his way. Her shoulders shuddered. That glorious hair hid her face.

"Piper?"

"I was only trying to be nice. You didn't need to make fun of me."

He tipped her chin up. Tears pooled in her beautiful eyes. "I wasn't making fun of you."

"Right. Proposing marriage because of a pie. Sure. Why not say something more romantic like, 'Hey, chubby, you can cook and that's all I really need, so be my wife.'"

He frowned. "Chubby? Is that how you see yourself?"

"You're military. I'm an overweight civilian. Don't play games with me."

"I wasn't playing."

"Then what was that back there?" She pointed back toward his mom's house.

"What was what?" He truly was confused.

"You asked me to marry you." she shouted.

Finn stepped back. "I did?" Seriously? How could he? His fiancée had up and married someone else when he went missing. He figured no one would want

him now. Especially since most thought he lied about what went on in Afghanistan.

Tears streamed down her cheeks as she shook her head. "You're adding insult to injury. You're right. Maybe you're not human after all." She turned to leave.

"Hey!" He grabbed her hand. "I'm human, all right. And a man. You twice have offered me comfort instead of phony platitudes. I'm sorry if my comment was inappropriate. I'm not even sure why it slipped out. I didn't mean to offend. My mom can't cook to save her life. And you? You're sweet, you can cook, and you don't treat me as though I'm Afghani dirt."

She frowned. "Why would I do that? You're special. A hero."

"No, I'm not. I'm a man who did his job and survived. It's what I signed up for. Well, maybe not the last three years. I hadn't exactly expected that. But everyone else treats me strange. Either they won't talk to me, or they act as though I never left, or they want me to tell them every detail of my captivity. There are those who call me a traitor simply because another soldier who was rescued ended up being one." He sighed. "And the women? They seem to think that the kind of comfort I really need is between the sheets. I'm not that kind of guy."

"Really?"

Finn shook his head. "Definitely not. I had always hoped someday I would find a great Christian gal and marry. Now...I'm not even sure if I'm fit to be a husband or a father. I don't have a plan for my future.

What kind of work do I want? Who would hire me?
What would I even be good at?"

Piper wrapped her arms around him, and he enfolded her into his embrace.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings." Finn paused. "You're not chubby. You're a woman with curves, a beautiful smile, and a sweet spirit. My Grandma told me about your faith. I could think of no woman better suited to be my wife than you. Still, I was wrong to ask. It was impulsive, and I never meant to hurt or insult you. Maybe I'm chasing windmills in thinking that the one woman who's treated me like a real *hu-man*, might like me back."

Piper peeked up at him, and he wiped a tear from her cheek with his thumb. Was she inviting a kiss? It'd been so long since he'd been kissed. He grinned and bent toward her, but she stepped out of his grasp. *What am I doing?* He stepped back, holding her arms to steady her. "If you don't want to marry me, at least let me take you on a date." Convinced she wouldn't run away again, he released her.

"You. Want to date. Me?" Her fingers poked his chest before poking her own.

"Yes. Please? Or do I need to do more convincing?" He bent his head down, but she pushed his chest. Her hand was warm there, and he longed for it to stay.

A soft smile greeted him. "A date? Yes. Marriage? At least for now—no."

"Tomorrow? After work?"

"Marriage? Oh, wait, you mean a date. I guess. I

don't get off until 5:30."

"That's fine. I'm not used to this time zone." He grabbed her hand. "Come back to the house, and protect me from all the well-intentioned people."

"The soldier needs security." Piper stated, giving him a perplexed look.

"This soldier needs Pip."

"Pip?"

"Yeah, is that OK?"

"Sure, Finn. That'll be just fine." She swiped a tear. "It's what my dad calls me."

Hand in hand they walked back, and Finn believed she *would* save him. From what? He had no clue, but he rested in the comfort and security she brought to his heart and soul. *Thank You, Lord, for a real friend.*

2

The clock tick-tocked as the murmur of voices combined with the snip of scissors and hair driers. It'd been a busy day. Piper wondered if Finn would show up. She'd had more than enough experiences with broken promises to wonder whether he was sincere when he made his offer. She'd not said anything to his grandmother. Piper didn't want Finn to look bad if he changed his mind. Most men did. She also didn't want her employer to have any matchmaking ideas. Which begged the question—why did Piper accept his invitation?

The phone rang and Piper picked up. "Gorgeous Gladys, how may we help you?"

"Is this Piper?" a male voice asked.

"Yes. To whom am I speaking?"

"Finn. I was wondering if you'd be OK with a late picnic. Something simple? We can pick it up at a drive through...?"

"Sure, that'd be fine."

"Your apartment entrance is out back, above the beauty shop?"

"Correct."

"Great. See you soon. Oh, and wear comfortable shoes or even hiking boots if you have them. Bring a

jacket.”

Piper disconnected the call. Confusion rose within. It almost sounded as though he wanted her to go hiking? *Her*? The most exercise she got in a day was climbing the stairs to her apartment. What had she agreed to?

As the last customer left, Piper flipped the front door sign to CLOSED and locked up for the night. Gladys had already walked out the back door and Piper only had to do one final sweep before she headed upstairs. She yawned. She wasn't a night owl.

Work started at 7:00 AM the next morning. Saturdays were often bustling, and they had a wedding party coming in. Maybe she'd fall off a cliff and escape the torture of sucking up to the women who'd already proven to be a bridezilla and her wicked bridesmaids. The day was destined to be torture, and she was fully prepared to consider alcohol for the first time. If only she could work up the guts to go buy some and knew what kind to even purchase. She was exactly what her former fiancé had called her—naïve.

She locked the back door and took the stairs as weariness wore at her. Accepting this date might have been a mistake. Finn was cute, hurting, and lonely. She was at least two of the three. He could do so much better than a woman like her. He deserved better. She was surprised that the local gals hadn't swarmed around him at the party. He'd hidden most of the time in the kitchen with her avoiding the chaos as much as possible. Maybe the local women didn't consider the

military man a hero as she did. Missing in action for so long and recovered alive? She didn't think he was anything like that other guy who had been a traitor after he defected, and then claimed to be a prisoner of war.

No, Finn was the good stuff. All-American, hard-working, full of integrity. She knew because his grandmother had told her so much about him. Her deepest prayers were to see her grandson restored to them—alive. God finally answered those prayers. Even Piper had prayed for the missing soldier.

She dropped her keys on the kitchen table and strode to the bedroom. She didn't own hiking boots. She had some decent cross trainers though. She had tried a walking program to lose weight but quit after a dog got loose and bit her. Leash laws weren't strictly enforced in this little country village. She still had the scar on her calf to show for it. That preventative tetanus shot wasn't any fun either. After that she'd abandoned any aspirations to fitness. She didn't have the money to go the gym, and the closest one was a couple of towns away.

A knock diverted her attention as she finished tying one shoe. With the other in her hand, she limped to the door and opened it.

Finn was dressed in a hoodie, blue jeans, and hiking boots. His short dark hair was only about an inch long. He really was a 'good-looking boy' as his grandma repeatedly told her.

"Hey, you almost ready?"

"Sure. Come in and let me finish getting this shoe