



REAL ISN'T  
guaranteed,  
BUT EVENTUALLY,  
lines blur.

# LONE *Wolf*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**MIGNON MYKEL**

**LONE WOLF**

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Cover Design and Formatting: oh so Novel

All images and vectors have been purchased.

*For My Readers.*

*This one is for you. Thank you for sticking it out and trusting  
I'll give you the book the characters deserve.*

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# WARNINGS

*Mentions of drugs, mental health, veteran suicide, and more.  
Please check reviews for specific triggers.*

# CHAPTER ONE

KELLIE

## *Somewhere in Virginia*

THE CLICKING SECONDS OF THE CLOCK IS LOUD.

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

*Tick.*

I've been in this white room by myself for ten minutes. Maybe only five.

But it feels like hours.

Every few minutes I try to remind myself to check the time and compare it to the last time, but my mind is a jumbled mess and isn't retaining anything.

The chair the police officer put me in is padded, so at least there's that.

They promised I wasn't in trouble. They just had questions for me.

I told them I didn't know anything.

Before two hours ago, I didn't even know Clay was doing drugs, let alone *dealing* them!

One minute, my boyfriend of two months and I were driving to dinner and the next, we're being pulled over and forced into separate police cars.

I glance to the corner of the ceiling, where a camera is trained on me. I don't know what they expect to see.

I literally have nothing to give them.

Bringing a foot up to the seat, I hug my arms around my leg and rest my cheek against my knee. At least I wore a long-sleeved shirt today.

Restaurants are always cold in the summer.

The same seems to go for police stations.

I'm not sure how much longer I sit there before the door opens.

Looking over at the same time I bring my foot back to the floor, I clasp my hands in front of me and swallow hard.

It's the older detective who first started questioning me, and a blonde female I haven't met yet. She's maybe around my age, and wears a black see-through blouse over a black tank top, tucked into her tight black jeans.

And of course, she has black heels on, too.

She doesn't wear a badge of any sort, though.

"Hi, Kellie," she says, holding her hand out for me to shake before taking a seat at the table. The detective remains standing by the door. "My name is Carter Douglas. You've found yourself in quite the pickle, haven't you?"

Not the word choice I'd use but, "Seems like it." I don't mean for it, but my tone is bordering on cold.

Her light eyes glance at my lap, and she reaches out to put a hand on my clasped ones. "You're not in trouble, Kellie. I'm here to help you."

I keep my mouth shut because even if I'm not going to be thrown in jail, I'm definitely neck deep in something.

I'd consider that "in trouble," but that's just me.

"Clay wasn't a good guy," she continues, turning in her chair to face the table, before opening a manilla folder the detective left earlier. She thumbs through the papers, shaking



her head now and then. “And even if, *when*, he’s put away, there’s a high probability that you remain in danger.”

“I don’t think we’re talking about the same Clay,” I tell her. I’m so confused about this entire situation. Clearly there’s more going on than Clay dealing pain pills, but I’m completely in the dark.

I just...

I can’t wrap my head around everything.

This Carter woman then takes the next few minutes and tells me exactly who Clay is...

And who he’s not.

Everything I knew—thought I knew—comes crashing down.

“What...what does all this mean for me? I swear I didn’t know. I wasn’t an accomplice. I don’t even know those other guys!” My eyes dart to the detective before going back to Carter.

“Kellie, I know,” she tells me calmly. “We’ve been watching, and that’s clear to me and my team.” She quickly looks toward the stoic man at the door. “Detective Clydell knows this, as well. We have two options. One, nothing changes for you. You go about life as normal, but there’s a risk to your life with that. The people Clay worked for won’t take him going to jail lightly. He owes them too much. These people take women for collateral. There’s not a nicer way to say that,” she adds when my breath hitches. “The state can keep detectives on you, you can have security...none of it will matter. There will always be someone who wants you silenced.”

“But I don’t know anything!” My eyes are burning with sudden unshed tears.

“They won’t care, Kellie,” Carter says softly. “Even if they figure that out and know it to be true...there’s still the possibility they want to get back at Clay, and what better way to do that than to hurt his woman?”

“We’ve only been dating for a few months. Not even seriously!”

Carter glances at the Detective, and he nods once.

“Clay meeting you at O’Ryans wasn’t a coincidence, Kellie.” I gasp at her mention of the day he and I first started talking. “You were targeted from the beginning to be brought into the fold.” She reaches a hand out and taps her palm lightly on the table. “Again, not trying to scare you. Just letting you know the gravity of the situation. I do have another option for you, though. A far safer option.”

Swallowing, I nod. “Okay?”

“You die.”

My back straightens and I look at the detective, my entire body on alert. I *what?*

“...to them,” Carter continues. “We set it up to make you look like you die and you enter into a... Witness Protection type of program. The group I work for is willing to take on this case and get you to safety on the other side of the country. You’ll take on a new identity. A new name. A new past. An entirely new life. Kellie Zimmerman dies, and your new persona continues to live. We know your parents passed away and you have no other family. I know it’s not nice to hear but...no one’s going to miss Kellie. Maybe a couple of friends, sure...although if you ask me, this is your best option at living a long life.”

Her words are a harsh reality but she’s not wrong about me being alone.

“How...” I clear my throat past the fear. “How long?”

“You won’t ever be Kellie again. Whatever friends you have? You will be dead to them. You won’t be coming back here, and if you ever do...it will be many years down the road, and still, you won’t be Kellie.”

“Can...can I think about it?”

The woman pinches her lips together, but not in an aggravated way. Can you pull that face kindly? Well, Carter’s

doing it.

“The moment you leave this room, the offer is gone,” Carter says. “If you take the offer, what’s going to happen is you’ll be escorted from the room and placed in a transport vehicle. The vehicle will bring you to your house, but it won’t be you leaving the car. We have a decoy person. You’ll then be transported to a safe location where you’ll be met by one of my guys. He’ll give you the rest of your information and your assumed identity. Your history. What your immediate future looks like. And then you’ll head to your new life.”

“And if I don’t take the offer?”

“You’ll be escorted home, and that’s that.”

I lift a shaking hand to my face and squeeze the bridge of my nose, trying to stop tears from falling. “This is just so much.”

“I know, Kellie. I’m so sorry you got caught in all of this.”

“How... I mean... No, yes.” My words are coming out about as coherent as they’re flying in my mind. “How did you learn of all of this? You said you were *watching* me?”

Carter nods. “The group I work for deals with hostage and rescue situations, some bodyguard work. This drug case came across our desk a couple of months ago via one of our guys.”

“Why me? I mean...you said it yourself, I’m no one. Why does your...group, you called it...why do y’all want to help me?”

“Because you’re innocent.” She says it so matter-of-factly...

“Plenty of innocent people get caught in bad situations. Are you saving all of them?”

The detective clears his throat, and both Carter and I look at him. “We’ve got to wrap this up if it’s going to move seamlessly, Ms. Douglas.”

Carter nods. “I’m sorry, Kellie,” she says to me. “I know this is fast. It’s a lot to take in, and in such a short amount of time.”

The last hours flash through my head.

Do I really have a choice?

Honestly, I don't think I do. Not unless I want to look over my shoulder for the rest of my life—and if Carter's words are true, my life won't be all that long if I choose to stay.

I may not have anyone, but I certainly don't have a death wish.

The thought of not getting a chance to accomplish dreams...

Swallowing hard, I give her a nod. "I guess... I guess I'll do it."

## CHAPTER TWO

HEMMING

MY PHONE BEEPS WITH AN INCOMING CAR ALERT.

Carter and the girl are arriving.

Sighing, I stand and move toward the garage, pressing the door button so it lifts as my Marine friend's sister pulls the blacked-out, tinted SUV in.

Fourteen years ago, I joined the Marine Corps because I didn't have anything else to do. I wasn't interested in college, and as much as I enjoyed the country life, I knew I had to get out of DeKalb county.

My girl said she'd wait. Said she was excited to see the world with me.

Then she slept with my best friend.

I pop a gum bubble between my molars. No sense thinking about Celeste. That chapter is long gone and closed.

In boot camp, I met a kid named Tucker Douglas. He and another guy in our platoon, Tanner "Chance" Henderson, headed off to infantry school and I went to Little Rock for aircraft mechanics. Thanks to social media, we occasionally talked, but the messages have always been far and few between.

But then a few months ago, I got a call from Tucker.

He was starting his own military-type company and wanted to know if I wanted in.

My options were either continue working at a ground level position at an airport and use what skills I learned in the Corps, or jump into a start-up military group where my pay and benefits were better than they were in the Corps.

I took option B.

Only after I told him my choice, and gave my two weeks to the other place, did Tucker fully explain what I was getting myself into, the bastard.

I nearly backed out.

This isn't just some rescue the damsel, situation. There's more going on than me escorting this girl to Montana, where she'll live a life separated from the one she's had for twenty-six years.

Because apparently, according to Tucker, the best way for her to start a new life was to be *married*.

And Tucker thought I'd be the best guy for the job.

*"It works out better this way, Hemming," he told me as we discussed details via web cam. "She's going to need security for the first months, anyway, to make sure she doesn't fuck up and the O'Ryans find her. I'm not positive that they won't look for her, but I am positive that bringing her here, changing her identity, and giving her a constant bodyguard will keep her safe and alive. One year, and if everything seems good and she's well-adjusted, then y'all get a divorce—"*

*"You mean this is going to be legal? A legal marriage?"*

*"Yes. One-hundred percent legal. You'll have the paperwork. It's all filed. It's notarized. It's real. Every aspect. Your relationship. Her history. Hemming...it needs to be real. I mean, y'all don't have to fuck but beyond that? Real. You can live in town, or you can stay on my property. Staying on my property would probably be better to let you both adjust, but if you'd rather go all in, feet first, and force the situation...I can have a place arranged."*

*"Shit." I shook my head and looked away from the screen. "Fuck, Douglas," I repeat before lifting my hands in defeat.*

*I hadn't lived with a woman—let alone been in a long-term relationship with one—since Celeste. Now I was being saddled with one I didn't know, and was supposed to convince everyone that we were married.*

*Tucker then explained the girl's situation more in depth, what Douglas Group was pulling her from, and I had to agree that this sort of op was what was best for her safety. I asked why me and why not one of the other men he recruited for Douglas Group.*

*"You're a scary motherfucker."*

*I'm no scarier than any other Marine or soldier. I spend time at the gym because lifting gives me a sort of therapy I couldn't find anywhere besides the tattoo chair. But muscles and ink don't make a guy a scary motherfucker.*

*It probably has more to do with the fact I keep to myself and only talk when I have something to say that's important. I can see where that paired with the body would cause someone to step back.*

*"That's supposed to help the girl?"*

*"Look, Hemming," he answered seriously. "You both have nothing. Everyone here on the compound will know the details, but neither of you have anyone in your lives to convince. No family."*

*"No friends..."*

*"You have us."*

*Shaking my head, I sighed heavily. "Fine. When does it start?"*

I had a few days to get used to the idea, but here I am, on the east coast waiting in a safe house for...

My wife.

Carter Douglas turns off the vehicle but neither woman gets out until the garage door is closed. Only then do I get my first look at the woman I'm supposed to convince the world I'm married to.

She's on the taller side. As she walks behind Carter, it's clear she's at least five inches taller than my friend's sister.

I'd give the woman five nine, five ten.

She has golden hair—which will be easy to disguise. We don't have the time to do anything crazy with her hair, and lucky me, I get to play hair stylist.

Let's hope I don't fuck it up.

Thankfully, the woman doesn't have any obvious distinguishing marks, from what I can tell. No beauty marks, tattoos, or scars.

In theory, it should be easy to make her into someone else.

"Hemming," Carter says, and I step out of the way to allow both women into the house.

"Carter."

Where Carter wears black from head to toe, the woman wears a long-sleeved t-shirt that's unbranded with a pair of black leggings. She also has red high top sneakers on her feet.

The women next to one another are vast opposites—in dress and body language.

Carter appears confident.

The woman seems scared out of her mind.

"This is Kellie Zimmerman, or rather, from here on out, Kaelyn Johansen."

The squeeze my chest makes at my last name on the woman is unexpected, but I do my best to ignore it.

"It's nice to meet you. I'm sorry it's under these circumstances," I tell Kellie-now-Kaelyn. "We have a few hours and will be heading to our next location later tonight."

The three of us make our way into the living room. Carter and K each take a seat, Carter on the couch and K on the two person sofa. I stay standing between seating arrangements and the front window, my arms crossed over my chest.



Carter shakes her head lightly at the protective stance I take.

Not saying Carter hasn't earned any badass accolades she has—before Douglas Group, she was a freaking Marine Corps Lioness—but she's still a woman and I'm still going to stand between her and any potential danger.

“While you get her ready, I've been informed of a small problem in our plan,” Carter updates me.

Frowning, I keep my eyes on her. “What do you mean?”

“She has a pet,” Carter says at the same time K shifts in her seat, saying, “I have a cat.” My eyes move to the woman, but the moment they meet hers, she looks to the ground.

“So I'm going back to the house,” Carter continues, “make it look like I still have things to talk to Kellie about, and will inform Ani to bring the cat out with her.” Ani is our decoy person in the place of Kellie. She doesn't work with Douglas Group, but for another group Tucker knows of. “You two will continue your night as planned and I'll arrange transportation for the cat at a later time.”

I'm not much of a cat person, but I also realize this woman is having her entire world ripped apart.

Guess I'll be living with a strange woman *and* her cat.

Carter and I finish discussing the plan and after she leaves to fulfill her end, I bring a three ring binder to where K continues to sit.

“Here, this is what you'll have to work on memorizing.” I stand over her and hold the black binder down. She looks up at me and unclenches her hands to take it.

Her eyes are a green-brown hazel. Another piece of her that seems mostly ordinary.

Stepping back to give her space, I take the spot Carter was in earlier.

“We tried to give you a name that was close to Kellie, to make it easier to respond to. Kellie and Kaelyn do have different sounds, but they're still both K names and two

syllables. I'll be calling you K until you're more comfortable with the name." K could be for Kellie, and once she's used to it, it could be Kae for Kaelyn.

She nods and timidly opens the front, looking down at the three ringed bound papers.

"We try to stick as close to your existing story as we can, without you remaining the same person." After agreeing to the job, Tucker and I spent hours going over things the girl would need to know. Tucker has numerous contacts across many lettered agencies, and knew the ins and outs of a protection-type program. After we had Kae's basic profile down, we expanded—her family, her life, *our* life. "Your parents are still dead. You still don't have siblings. We met in North Carolina during my short time at Lejeune." I know the dates I was actually stationed there are in the papers. "We've been married for four years, with our anniversary coming up on September 15th. You wanted a fall wedding but not too late in the season that it would be cold. Everything about us and our timeline is in that binder. You'll also find random facts and shit about me in there."

My phone pings with an alarm and I look at the wall clock. "We have to dye your hair. My documents guy will be coming in two hours to get your license and passport finalized."

Surprisingly, she doesn't put up a fight, following me into the kitchen where she sits on the chair I pull out. "I can't say I've done this before but...it can be fixed at our destination if I screw up." Not that I think I'll fuck up her hair, but might as well be honest.

"Where are we going?" I've been mostly avoiding her face but I look at her now. There's still a healthy amount of shock there but I've got to give the girl credit for basically taking it all in stride.

"I can't disclose that with you until we're there. It's for your safety."

"Won't I figure it out at the airport?" K asks as I turn away, gathering the hair color box and towel. Carter said it would be easiest to change her hair to a brown color, and that black

could be too fast, too harsh, on her lighter hair and instead, give off green undertones.

The goal is to make her blend in and not stand out, so I grabbed a box that said “chocolate brown” and seemed to be a normal looking color.

What does one expect when telling a Marine he’s in charge of changing some woman’s hair color?

“We’re taking a chartered flight.” I had most of the supplies set and ready for her arrival, but I do the final prep now, shaking the bottle after putting the color in. “You going to change your mind?”

“I...” Her sigh is audible. “No.”

She sits quietly, not even questioning when I pull up multiple YouTube videos before applying the dye to her hair.

I’d question it, for sure.

Hell, I *am* questioning it. Every inch of this mission was planned, except having an actual professional change her hair color.

While following the steps from the pamphlet and videos—the gloves were *not* meant for a man’s hands—I ask her easy questions that won’t be in the binder. There are some things she gets to determine about who Kaelyn Johansen is.

Such as: “What’s your favorite color?”

“I don’t know...maybe coral?”

It’s like a woman to choose a fancy-named color.

“Food?”

“Like...food-food, or sweets-food?”

Didn’t realize a person would need that broken up.

“How about one of both?”

“French dip without au jus—”

I can’t help the chuckle. “So a beef sandwich?”

“Sure. And cupcakes. But only mine.”

“You’re a baker, right?” I ask, my hands brushing through her thick hair, doing my best to make sure the dye covers every single hair. Some of the lighter parts of her hair are looking a little...pinkish red...so I squeeze and rub more dye onto those sections.

“Well, I *like* to bake.”

That’s a damn good thing...

“When we get to town, one of our initial tasks is to go downtown and look at a storefront.”

“For...?”

“Tucker Douglas—the man guy behind this operation—thinks a good way for you to integrate into the town is to open a bakery.”

“I’m sorry, what?” She sputters and turns her head, thankfully when my dye-covered gloved hand is away from her head.

I thought I was pretty clear, but I repeat myself anyway. “You’re going to open a bakery.”

“How do you guys *know* these things? Certainly not from social media. I barely ever posted about baking.”

“Douglas knows things and he knows people. I’m almost done here,” I get her back on task. “After it sits or sets or whatever the hell the term is, you’ll wash and dry, and then I’ll get your picture taken for docs. Before the plane, we’ll have one stop to make, and then it’s on to your future.”

“Am I allowed to ask questions about you?”

“Anything you need to know is in the binder.”

“Even, like...*your* favorite color?”

“Yes. Even my favorite color.” The color bottle is now empty and I’m pretty sure I’ve covered every inch of her hair, so I guess...that’s it? Grabbing my things, I head to the garbage and toss everything inside.

But her quiet, “Oh,” has me stopping. This whole situation is fucked up. No, I’m not going into this unscathed either—

I'm walking out of the door later with a *wife*—but at least I don't have to completely change every minute detail about my past.

If we're going to make this work, I have to reciprocate.

The guys at Douglas know the truth but if there's any way in hell she and I are going to sell to the world that we're married, and had a whirlwind romance at that, there has to be two-way communication.

And if I expect her to be open and play the part, I have to do the same.

With a sigh, I move back to the table and take out another chair, turning it around and straddling it to face her.

"I don't know that I have a favorite color, but in the binder, it says green."

She nods once, avoiding my eyes.

I tap my thumb against the back of the chair, and think about the questions I asked her. "If I had to choose a food, I'd probably say barbeque ribs, but really, any meat on the grill is a plus in my book. Not really much of a sweets guy."

Her eyes leave the floor and her brows rush up as she meets my gaze. "And I'm supposed to be married to you...?"

I catch the smallest hint of a curve on her lips.

As if she's teasing.

A baker married to a man who doesn't like baked goods.

Giving her my own small grin, I lift a shoulder and let it drop. "Look, I know this is hard. It is for me too. I like my space and quiet. Tucker assured me that this marriage is only as long as it's needed. If in a year everything seems safe for you, we'll divorce. You'll remain Kaelyn...and the maiden name you were given was Zimmanck. We just ask that during the time where your protection need is at its highest, we tell the world that we're in a happy marriage. I won't step out on you, and I expect the same of you. The threat to you will *always* be watched, even ten, twenty years down the road, and

any decisions that are made about you, for your safety, will be made appropriately.”

She throws me for a loop with a subject change. “Is your name really Hemming?”

“It is. But when I was a kid, I demanded my family and friends call me Jack. In fact, at our destination, I will be introducing myself to people as Jack. But when I was in the military, the guys learned my real first name and started using it as a joke, calling me Hemingway and Drunk Poet, even though Hemingway was more a novelist and I’m not a big drinker.” The last thing the woman needs is to fear she’s being saddled with a man who can’t handle his booze.

But it’s not that she takes focus on. “Have you read Hemingway?” There’s a confused look on her face, as if men can’t read classics.

“In high school. Anyway, Hemingway was too long to call out so it was shortened...to my given name.”

“Do I call you Hemming or Jack?”

“Whatever you feel like calling me. It would make sense either way—”

She cuts me off, “And why *Jack*? They’re not similar *at all*.”

Chuckling, I push off from the chair and put it back under the table. “When I was seven, I was watching those clay animation Christmas movies, and determined Jack was my name after watching Jack Frost. It helped that when I was a kid, I had stark white blond hair like the character.”

Her eyes lift to my military-cut hair. I no longer have white-blond hair. Cut short, it looks pretty dark but if it were to grow out, it’s probably similar in color to her natural color.

“How...I mean, I’m sure it’s in the binder,” she says, again looking down. I hope she gets over this shy, unsureness stage she’s in right now, because it’s going to be hard to convince people I didn’t kidnap her. “How old are you?”

“Thirty two.”

“And we allegedly got married five years ago next month, and met...?”

“Five and a half years ago.”

“Where would we have met when I was twenty? And we had a short engagement? Six months to meet, fall in love, get engaged, *and* married?”

It isn't that out of the ordinary for people in the military to have whirlwind relationships. “It's—”

She sighs again. “In the binder, I know. I just...it's hard to wrap my head around all of this... I need to hear it, I guess. Not read it.”

I can understand that. I don't have a problem with processing things I read but I know some things are easier to hear. “We met due to a car accident. We were both parties to it —”

“Was I at fault? I'm a good driver. My current record is clean—”

“No, it wasn't your fault. You were pickle-in-the-middle. You rear ended me when another driver failed to stop behind you. No injuries. All three parties exchanged numbers, but I reached out to you a week or so later, and asked you to dinner.”

“That's... Okay, that's not a bad meet cute, I guess.”

“Meet cute?”

“How the hero and heroine...male and female main characters in a book, meet.”

“So you're a reader?”

“Did you guys not get that in your research? Y'all got that I bake, but not that I read? I definitely read more than I bake.”

“I probably skipped over it,” I tell her honestly.

“Definitely a man,” she answers, shaking her head but again...that incredibly slight, barely-there, crooked smile is on her lips. “Not paying attention to a woman's hobbies.”

These small glimpses of personality have me realizing this may not be as hard as I feared. I think I might be able to get along with this woman.

In another world, maybe I'd have picked her, anyway.

The dread of the next year dissipates, but rationally, I know this isn't the time to flirt.

Instead of carrying on, I check the clock as a way to break the conversation. "You should probably go wash out your hair now. There's shampoo and conditioner in the shower, and a hair dryer under the sink. I also placed a change of clothes for you in the bathroom."

She frowns briefly at the change in dynamic, but nods all the same. "All right. Thank you."

I force myself to turn back to the sink to clean up, refusing to give in and watch her walk away.



## CHAPTER THREE

K

AS I SHOWER, I CONTINUE TO REPEAT IN MY HEAD, “K, K, K, K... Kaelyn. Kae. Lyn. Kaelyn Johansen...” Maybe the more I say my new name, the easier it will be to respond to.

I have to admit, as far as being thrown into a marriage goes, I could have done worse in the husband department.

He’s unlike any man I’ve ever been with.

I wouldn’t necessarily say I tend to gravitate more toward the hipster kind of guy but...

Broad, muscular men have never been the ones who asked me out.

I’m also accustomed to men being mostly eye to eye with my five-ten height—if not shorter—but Hemming still stands above me.

Needless to say, I’ve never felt small next to a man.

But I feel small next to him.

Attraction aside, this is all very overwhelming.

I’m sure The Binder—and I’m absolutely thinking of it as capital T, capital B—will be a great tool but I’m afraid I’m going to screw up.

I have a good memory. I can easily memorize what’s in the binder.

My fear isn’t “knowing” who I’m supposed to be.

It's "forgetting" who I was.

What happens if I slip? What if I say the wrong thing, or inadvertently do something that says Kellie is alive and well?

Shit, thinking about myself as a *was* is so freaking strange.

Stranger is the fact I'm expected to immediately integrate with society in the new place, essentially as a person I don't even know?! Being a *baker*, in *public*?

I've only ever baked for myself.

Yes, I've absolutely made tiered cakes with fancy decorations for myself. I like pretty things, and I like cake. Baking started as a way to channel my creativity. It's one of the few things I do that keeps me focused and on task.

I'm not sure how this baking business is going to work for me. I sure hope Hemming or his people have a sense of business because that is not my forte.

Once again, my mind goes to the man and what he said about our story.

Married for basically five years...

Even with a short courting, we'd know one another well by this point. No amount of studying *The Binder* on an overnight flight is going to make tomorrow be all, *Poof! Kaelyn and Hemming, sitting in a tree.*

I've never been in a long-term relationship. Nothing's ever lasted more than a few months.

I'm totally going to screw something up.

As the brown dye rinses down my back and swirls around my feet, I can't help but try and put myself in the heroine spot in a marriage-of-convenience romance novel. The man and woman *always* fall in love.

Will our proximity have me falling in love with Hemming?

The thought barely takes time to register before I scoff at it.

Fiction and reality are not one and the same.

He said that if after a year things looked good, we could divorce. A year's a long time to play pretend, but I honestly believe that's all it will take before I can be "single Kaelyn." I'm sure by that time I'll be well adjusted to my new life, too.

There's no way anyone's going to come looking for me, regardless of what Clay was mixed up in.

*"Clay meeting you at O'Ryans wasn't a coincidence, Kellie."*

I'm smart enough to know what Carter meant with that statement. In a world where trafficking runs rampant, targeting lonely women is easiest. No one will miss them if they go missing.

Sighing, I try telling myself that as weird as this all feels, I'm lucky.

I'm going from having literally no one, to apparently having many people. I have a husband. I have his friends. I have his community.

It could be worse, I suppose.

And maybe after the time I spend with him and his people, maybe I'll still walk away from all of this with friends of my own.

Turning toward the spray, I startle at the brown water droplets that are all over the side of the shower. "Oops." I cup handfuls of water to get the colored water off the wall.

Once I'm sure it's all gone, I wash my face using my hands, sudsy from the bar of soap. I end up scrubbing a little too aggressively by my eyes, and furiously blink against the water as eyelashes seem to pierce my eyeball.

"Shit," I murmur, trying to rub the pain away.

But in doing so, something feels off with my colored contact.

With that eye squeezed shut, I quickly finish my shower and dry off in haste, then make my way to the sink, the towel wrapped around me.

Maybe there are dixie cups and saline solution. Something that I can drop the contact in to.

I pull open drawers only to find them empty.

The medicine cabinet is as well.

Resigned, I pull off a square of toilet paper before cautiously removing the now painful contact.

It somehow folded in on itself.

Carefully, I unfold it...and notice the smallest tear.

“Well, fuck,” I whisper. There’s no saving this one, and I doubt Hemming has extras lying around. I’d be quite surprised if his—their...whoever’s—intel dug as deep as my eye color.

Sighing, I look into the mirror and wipe away the fog. The version of me staring back has my heart stuttering to a quick, brief stop.

The wet hair on my head is far darker than I’m used to, and paired with my eyes—one blue and one green—I hardly recognize the woman I see.

Sure, she’s me.

Yes, that’s my nose, my mouth, my cheekbones...

But I’ve been hiding my blue eye for over ten years, and I know the difference between my two eye colors will only be more pronounced when my hair is dry.

Trying to ward off anxious tears, I sigh and shake my head. Might as well get it over with.

In my twenty-six years, I haven’t quite figured out how to dry my hair while wearing, and not losing, a towel so I get dressed in the clothes Hemming put aside for me first. I decide I’m not surprised that they’re my size—sports bra and underwear, too—even if the whole ordeal is incredibly strange.

I can’t think too hard about the fact a man like Hemming handled these items but it doesn’t stop me from wondering briefly if he picked them out, or if that Carter woman did?

Or, perhaps there's someone else on this "team" who was in charge of my clothing.

Thankfully, the clothes appear to be the kind that are comfortable for travel, and I'm pretty much swapping out one set of leggings and shirt for another.

Once dressed, I find the blow dryer under the sink and plug it in. I have a lot of fine hair and after fifteen or so minutes, I give up.

It's mostly dry and the roots at the crown of my head can air dry. Good enough for me.

I rewrap the cord and put the tool away before realizing I've been avoiding my reflection. Not once while drying my hair, have I looked again. I was either upside down, or turned with my back to the mirror.

Or, the one time I faced the mirror, I had my eyes closed.

Even now I can't bring myself to look. My eyes are fixed on the spot where the mirror meets the sink vanity.

I already saw one version of the new me...

Why is it so much more difficult to look now with dry hair, than it was with wet?

Probably because I wasn't prepared then and it caught me off-guard.

I'm prepared now and I...

Can't do it.

I gather my dirty clothes and the towel I used, turn off the light, and head back to the kitchen.

The house is mostly bare. Barer than I'd say was a minimalistic design choice. Driving from the precinct, Carter explained it was a safe house of sorts. A place where someone could hide out for however long needed, before moving onto the next step. There aren't any pictures or artwork on the cream-colored walls. The furniture reminds me of quick, IKEA builds.

Surprisingly though, the carpeting under my feet is plush. It's like whoever owns the house sprung for carpet but nothing else.

I find Hemming in the living room, sitting on the couch I'd been sitting on, leaning forward to type on a laptop.

He doesn't stop what he's doing, but I'm sure he knows I'm behind him.

"What should I do with my clothes and towel?" I ask his back.

The clicking of the keyboard doesn't falter. "You can toss them or throw them in a bag." I try to take a look at whatever he's typing, but he closes the top before I can make sense of the screen.

Hemming stands and turns to face me before I can step away. "I can show you—*fuck*."

I involuntarily flinch at the curse. "What?"

"Your eyes..."

I'm thrown back to fourth grade when the teasing and taunting began. I'd been called all sorts of names, from witch to monster...none of them pleasant. I begged and pleaded with my mom to allow me to wear contacts and she finally gave in before I started high school. They've never been my favorite things to put in and take out so eventually I just wore one, covering my blue eye and instead showing the world I had two dirty green eyes.

I liked the green better, anyway.

The greenish-hazel color with my blonde hair was different in a world of blondes with blue eyes.

Back to the situation at hand, instead of cowering down at Hemming's outburst, I feel myself getting angry. "What about them?"

"They were the same color when I sent you to the bathroom." He points in that direction, then moves his finger to point at my face. "People notice shit like that. Who knows you have two different eye colors?"

“Anyone and everyone I met before I was fourteen.”

“Clay?” I should have realized that was the person he was specifically asking about.

“As far as I know? No.” Like I’d told Carter, Clay and I were hardly more than serious. “He never stayed at my place. If we spent the night together, it was at his place. I don’t make it a habit to take out the colored contact, but it folded and tore, and unless you have extras laying around—which, from what I’m gathering, you don’t because you didn’t know about it—this is what I’m stuck with until I can get new ones.”

His stare is unnerving. I can almost see him thinking behind those stormy-colored eyes.

“This might actually be okay,” he finally says, reaching for his cellphone from the coffee table. As he types with one thick finger, he tells me, “As long as no one knows, and I have a guy looking into it, you’ll just go on with your normal eye color.”

“What if I need the contact for seeing?”

He doesn’t look up from what he’s doing. “Do you?”

“No,” I answer on a sigh.

The phone in his hands *dings* seconds after his finger stops moving, and then he’s once again typing out a reply. While he’s occupied, I move into the kitchen. There’s a carry-on sized suitcase and a clearly filled backpack. Momentarily, I consider bringing my clothes but then...

They’re just clothes.

And they’re not even great clothes, at that.

I find the trash and discard them, then hang the towel next to the one Hemming used while brushing the dye on my hair earlier. I can still feel the way his thick fingers moved over my scalp.

I’ve always loved when someone’s played with my hair and even in a time of nerves and high alert, I’d found comfort in the moves.

Even if he wasn't doing it for any reason other than changing me from Kellie to Kaelyn.

“Okay,” Hemming’s voice carries. “Two eye colors. Complete heterochromia is what it’s called.”

Moving back to the living area, I nod. “I’m aware. Have lived with it. Whole life,” I answer in short, passive-aggressive notes.

He doesn’t say anything about my clear annoyance. Instead, he points to one of the many bare walls. “Stand there so I can get your document photos.”

“I’d normally wear makeup while getting this done,” I tell him, although I do as he asks.

“We’re both getting new licenses in...where we’re going.”

“So we don’t already live there...?” I stand close to the wall, looking over my shoulder to make sure I don’t run into it, before looking back to where Hemming stands. It doesn’t look like he’s using a real camera for this. Just the one on his phone.

“Nope, we’re moving from North Carolina. But—”

“It’s in the fucking binder. God, I know.” I roll my eyes, and when he tells me to smile—I swear, the man has the smallest tip to his lips; is he laughing at me?—I plaster a grin on my face.

“You look like you’re in pain,” he says, bringing the phone close to his face. “But it’ll work.”

“No one takes a good driver’s license photo.”

“Flip your hair.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do something with your hair so I can take another photo for your passport. They can’t be the same.”

I do as he asks and this time, I don’t smile at all, which has him chuckling.



“Passport photos are even less attractive,” I explain when he says I can move away from the wall. “I don’t know what they do with them, but they distort your face.”

Instead of replying, he grunts and turns back to his laptop, opening it and getting back to what he’d been doing before.

I watch as the screen changes, showing an incoming photo download.

“Instead of standing around, you can probably get to work,” he says, picking up The Binder from the couch beside him and tossing it on the table beside the laptop.

Oh, he’s going to be a peach to live with.

I just know it...

## CHAPTER FOUR

HEMMING

AS I UPDATE THE FILES FOR HUNTER DOUGLAS—ONE OF Tucker’s brothers and the latest to get out of the Marine Corps—my mind keeps replaying the last ten minutes with K.

The initial shock had been her hair color. Clearly, I’d expected it to be darker but thinking what it would look like and actually seeing what it looked like, were two different things.

I didn’t do too bad of a job. The final color isn’t as dark as the box proclaimed it to be, but I thought it looked good on her.

The biggest shock though, were her eyes. I’d been expecting her green irises to be more prominent. Carter explained to me that lighter eyes often seem more exaggerated with darker hair colors.

But then to discover she had two different eye colors?

The differences between the two colors is stark. The green is like a dirty hazel.

The blue reminds me of a crystal clear bottle. Or the color of the sky where it meets the ocean.

Her dual colored eyes make her face distinguishable but after I told Hunter about the new discovery, he came back to tell me we should be okay keeping her eyes natural.

We were, after all, not doing anything about her eye color previously.

After I send the images and get confirmation of receipt from Hunter, I pack up the laptop and bring it to the kitchen, where I put it in the backpack. When I open the compartment specifically for electronics, a small velvet bag falls out.

Nearly forgot that step.

I pick up the bag, uncinching it as I walk back into the living room.

“Your rings.” I hold out both a wedding band and engagement ring. She looks up from the binder, her eyes not going further than my extended hand.

Her mouth works and I can’t help but look at her full lips. I wonder how long we can play pretend before I’m forced to kiss them.

The thought makes blood move south.

It wouldn’t be a hardship to kiss this woman.

K takes the rings from my hand by scooping them against one finger, and I watch as she puts them in place on her left ring finger.

Her bands are both gold in color. The engagement ring has a simple round diamond with no embellishments. The wedding band has five small channel-set diamonds.

Neither ring is elaborate to the naked eye, although they both have trackers installed.

Mine is black tungsten and as I push it up my ring finger, the metal feels strange.

I move, crunch, and wiggle my fingers. “Yours fit?” I ask, rubbing my thumb against the underside of mine.

“They do.” She doesn’t bother making a show of looking at the pair.

Her attention goes right back to the binder in front of her.

Leaving her to her studies, I go back to the kitchen to make sure all of our things are in place. My belongings arrived in Forever earlier in the week. The carry-on has a few items for K, a few odds and ends, and a set of sleep clothes for me, but is otherwise empty.

The suitcase and backpack are being used mostly for appearances.

Like I told K, we're chartering a plane but we still have to go through a regional airport. The pilot knows the story—he is, after all, yet another person on Tucker's payroll—but the moment she and I leave this house, she's Kaelyn Johansen and she's my wife.

When it came down to living arrangements, I opted to take one of Tucker's cottages on his property. I agreed with his sentiments—it would be easier to ease into everything behind the safety and security of the compound.

Not only that, but no one's going to question why one of the new Douglas Group guys is living on the Douglas Group compound.

Especially when Chance and his woman, Kate, recently moved onto the property, too.

The one thing being in the military was good for was the opportunity to make friends. I haven't spoken to Chance since we all graduated from Camp Pendleton but Tucker was as good as a gossiping old woman, and got me caught up on my old boot camp buddy's situation.

The binder has a section about where we're going—without actually saying Montana—and in it, talks about the people K's going to meet. If this were all real, if we were actually married and had been together for five years, she'd at least know of the guys.

The only person that she's going to meet that isn't in the binder is Kate Freemont. I'll have to figure out how to bring that up.

I know it's a lot of information for K to take in. She's reading basically twenty-some years of history.

It's mostly surface-level history. She and I can expand on things as they come up.

Even so, it's a lot, and I'm not sure how long it will take her to become comfortable with Kaelyn.

An incoming text tells me Hunter's on his way, and another text tells me Ani has completed her part of the mission—which means I have less than an hour to get K out of here, to our next spot, and then to the airport.

It's go time.

---

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, K AND I ARE DRIVING TOWARD THE airport. She's unaware of the stop we're making first.

At the sound of sirens, I pull the Douglas-owned truck to the side of the road, waiting until a fire engine rushes past.

The timing of everything is perfect.

From the corner of my eye, I watch as K tips her head, watching the red engine race down the road, before she turns to look over her shoulder. "There's another one coming."

I check my mirrors and sure enough, there is. I don't bother pulling away from the side of the road.

"Must be some fire," K mumbles before looking back down at the binder in her lap. I'll make her put it away in a little bit, but if it keeps her head occupied for now, it's fine.

She doesn't realize we're about to follow both trucks, and I'd rather her stay occupied than to worry about our stop.

All that to say, I need her to see her place on fire. I need her to have an image in her head that will always remind her that Kellie Zimmerman is dead.

It might be harsh.

Hell, when Tucker laid out the plan, I did say it was harsh.

But I understand the psychology of doing it this way.

The street her former house is on is blocked off from oncoming traffic by emergency vehicles, but I'd been aware that was happening. Instead, I drive to a spot on a hill that overlooks her place.

"K." I put the truck in park.

When she doesn't immediately respond, I reach over to pull the binder from her lap. She looks up and over at me, and when I nod toward her window, she looks.

And gasps.

"Oh," she manages to say softly. "Is... Are..."

This part wasn't in the binder.

This part is a Kellie part, and nothing "Kellie" is in the binder.

"The house is going to burn to the ground," I tell her, matter-of-factly, watching her as she looks out into the darkening night, her former home illuminated by bright orange flames. "The investigation is going to determine an electrical fire. To be fair, you were living in a nightmare of a house so no one's going to question it. It's surprising it hasn't burned before now. There will be remains and they'll be determined to be those of Kellie Zimmerman."

"That woman...?" K's eyes are back on mine and wide with shock.

"She's out."

"Is it arson? Will she get in trouble?"

I shake my head. In all honesty, the fire department is aware of everything.

"And Wilson?" Her voice cracks in the first full show of emotion I've seen that hasn't been nerves or annoyance.

"Is that the cat?"

She nods.

"The cat's out, too."

K stares out her window again, a whispered, “Okay,” cutting through the silent cab.

Then she takes a deep, shaky breath before looking back at me. “Okay. I get it. I’m dead. Kellie’s dead.” Her voice is solid in comparison to the breath she just took.

I dip my chin once.

Good.

“When we leave this truck, we’re on. From here on out. We’re married, we’ve been together for nearly five years. You can’t have that sad, anxious look you keep pulling. Now, put the binder away until we’re on the plane,” I say, putting the truck in drive.

The airport is only fifteen minutes away, and soon, I have K boarded on the private jet as I stand outside with the pilot. When we got here, we were met by the pilot’s wife, Mere, while he looked over the plane but I wanted the chance to talk with him before we take off.

“Jack Brighton,” he introduces himself now. “Friend of Eli’s.” Eli is the second oldest Douglas sibling, two years younger than Tucker.

I shake his hand. “Hemming Johansen. Friend of Tucker’s. You and Eli met in the Air Force?”

He nods. “We did. Served four years together. I got out to do private work.”

“Well, thank you for taking this on.” After looking around the area and being positive we’re alone, I add, “As you know, we need the utmost privacy on the matter.”

“I’m aware, and privacy is my job,” he assures me. “Mere will be up in the cockpit with me, and you guys have free range of the cabin. Mere should have shown Kaelyn around, but if you need anything, feel free to use the phone that’s at the front to talk to one of us.” His easy use of “Kaelyn” gives me hope that the name change will be natural for everyone else back in Montana. The more she hears the name, the quicker it will be cemented in her mind.

I need to be better about just using Kaelyn. She's going to need to hear it from me more often.

“Otherwise,” Jack continues, “I'm expecting an easy flight with one small change. We're landing in Billings and your personal vehicle will be parked in the long-term lot there. Once you deplane, Mere and I have to head back home.”

I nod once. “Thanks for the update.” Originally, we were flying into Bozeman, which is further away from Forever. With the six hour flight and two hour time difference, we'll be landing at midnight local time. Billings is only a thirty minute drive to Forever.

Bozeman is a two hour one.

After the events of the day, I agree that landing in Billings is the better option for Kae, but it was always dependent on Jack and what flight pattern he could take.

Jack and I board and Mere secures the door after showing me where I can find amenities and snacks. The jet is the luxury sort, with oversized camel-colored leather seats. I don't instantly see her, but there are two chairs that are facing the back of the plane.

I'm positive she's sitting in one of them.

When I find her, I sit in the chair opposite hers.

She has the binder in her lap instead of the on the table between the two chairs, her hands gripping the top edge as she looks out the window. I openly take the time to take in her features.

Her nose is straight, likely having never been broken. She doesn't have any obvious freckles, and the most remarkable thing about her is her eyes, I'd say.

She has noticeable cheekbones that, paired with her sharp chin, give her face the shape of a diamond. Since leaving the safe house, she's pulled her hair up in a folded pony tail atop her head, but her face is still free of makeup.

Not that there was any at the house for her to use.



“Kaelyn.” I figure every time I talk to her now, I should use her new name.

She doesn’t look at me, but she does respond right away with a, “Hmm?”

Good girl. Maybe this won’t be such a difficult transition for her.

“When the plane is at altitude, I’ll bring out the laptop and pull up your social media profiles. Hunter and one of his guys got you set up.”

Her gaze remains out the window as the plane races down the runway. “Nothing like having a computer savvy guy on your team,” she mumbles. I’m sure she’s tired. The events of the day, the emotional ranges she’s experienced...

When Hunter Douglas came by the house with Kae’s license and passport, it was the first time I’d met the man—just as it was the first time I’d met Carter, a few hours earlier. Before this afternoon I’d only know Tucker’s siblings through social media, and even then, I’d only “known” them for the last few months.

The Douglas family is large.

There’s Tucker, Eli, Jace, Bryson, Hunter, Carter, and Jensen. Carter and Jensen are the only sisters in their family, and Jensen’s the only one without military history. She’s only nineteen but from what I gather, the military will never be in her future.

We’re arriving late tonight, so I’m not positive we’ll meet up with anyone when we get to Tucker’s place. If not tonight, for sure in the morning. I’m not sure who else is in Montana, but I’m also not positive that bombarding Kaelyn with all the new people right away...in the middle of the night...hours after her life changed, is the appropriate thing to do.

“He’s pretty good,” I finally respond to her comment.

She finally looks at me. “This is so strange. Isn’t it strange for you?”

“Fucking bizarre,” I tell her, honestly. More bizarre are the pictures of us, which I’ll be showing her soon.

“Couldn’t we have just been... I don’t know... serious boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“Marriage allows us to do certain things easily. You’re on my insurance. When we lease the building for your bakery, it will be easier with both of our names, although the way the business plan is being drawn up, you have majority so when all is said and done, if you choose to stay in the community after divorce, the bakery is yours. Any and all work you put in is yours.”

“I guess that makes sense. I should warn you, I’m not very business savvy.”

“We’ll figure it out. How are you feeling?”

“Like I hit a brick wall.”

“Exhausted is a good time to test your mind. What’s my name?”

She crosses her arms as she frowns, but answers. “Hemming Johansen.”

“Middle name?”

“None.”

“Did you ever meet my parents?”

“No, they passed away before we met.”

“My mom?” I’m absolutely going over my hard parts first to get them over with. It’s been years, but time doesn’t make the losses any easier.

“When she died?”

“Yes.”

“When you were in Okinawa.”

“Which is where?”

“Japan. You were there for two years.” She even gives me the years.

“Good. When did my dad die?”

“When you were in boot camp. It was unexpected.”

“Before boot camp,” I correct her.

“Sorry.” She apologizes for her mistake, not the loss.

“Your parents?”

In real life, she never knew her father, and her mother died after an exploratory surgery.

“Car accident when I was nineteen. They were together. Which makes our meeting in an accident not all that cute.”

“What do you mean?” I understand she’s referring to our earlier conversation, but I’m not sure what’s changed.

“I don’t think I’d have been so open and receptive to meeting someone after being in an accident that was eerily similar to the one my parents would have died in, so close to when it happened.”

“Okay, so maybe...” I think about it for a moment. “Maybe that’s why I reached out to you specifically. Because you’d been visibly shaken up and I wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“Can we do that?”

“Fill in the blanks? Absolutely.”

“Okay. Sure, then. Are you really the kind of guy who would notice, though?”

“With the right woman? Yeah.”

She tips her head to the side. “This is a big change for you, too. Are you leaving anyone behind?”

“Aside from moving and having a wife now, nothing in my life is changing.”

“You didn’t have a girlfriend?”

“No. The last woman I was serious about was Celeste.” I don’t elaborate—it’s sort of a test to see if she recalls Celeste from her readings.

I'm not surprised that she does.

“And she cheated on you when you were in California. That's real?”

“That's real.”

“I'm sorry.” This time, the word is spoken in emotional apology. “That couldn't have been easy.”

“It was what it was. No sense harping on the past. Well,” I try to grin at her, “besides making sure you know your past as Kaelyn.”

“How do people with names like John and Anna decide to name their son Hemming?”

“It's in—”

“No, it's not,” she's quick to refute. “I know that your name means wolf, although the thought is more werewolf, shape shifting wolf, yadda yadda, but it doesn't say exactly why your parents came up with Hemming.”

I try not to grin at the bite in her voice. She can be spunky.

I'm not sure if this is a good or bad discovery.

“Even though they were both born and raised in the States, they were both very proud of their Scandinavian heritage and wanted to give me a unique name that reflected that.”

“That's nice. Names are important.” Her gaze moves toward the small window again.

Based on the tone of her words, I should give her time to process...but I'm not going to. “What's your name?”

“Kaelyn.”

“Full name.”

“Kaelyn...” Her brows furrow minutely. “Nicole.” She grins then and nods once to herself. “Kaelyn Nicole Johansen. Maiden name, Zimmer-Zimmanck.”

Her stumble worries me. “You'll have to work on that one. That name may be too similar.”

“It’ll be fine. The seatbelt light just turned off. Does that mean you can go on the internet?”

“Yep.” I unbuckle and retrieve the laptop, putting it on the table. “I haven’t even looked at any of this, so we can go through it together. Everything dates back about ten years, but every event that you’ve gone through as Kaelyn will match. In the binder, you’d have read about our engagement. That date should coincide with whatever is on your Facebook account. Wedding, anniversary, when I got out of the Marine Corps, et cetera.” Once I have the page open, I go into the security settings and turn the laptop toward her. “Go ahead and change the password. I don’t need to know it, but be aware that until the threat to you is absolutely clear, Hunter is able to see everything you do online.”

“So no online privacy, got it.”

“It’s for your safety.”

She types in a new password and then turns the laptop so it sits between us and we’re both able to see the screen. I push it closer to the outer wall of the plane.

I let her scroll through her Facebook account, where she’s listed as Kaelyn Nicole, not Kaelyn Johansen. That seems to be the popular way to set up accounts, and it gives us one additional layer of security in the event her new identity is discovered.

There are a number of Kaelyn Nicole accounts. They wouldn’t be able to find her as easily if she was listed as Kaelyn Johansen.

Her account has 154 friends, many of the accounts being fake accounts that Hunter controls in some fashion. She’s “friends” with all the Douglasses, too.

“You don’t post a lot of pictures for security reasons,” I say as she scrolls, and she nods.

“Right. Your job as an aircraft mechanic in the Marine Corps didn’t *require* that I didn’t post, you weren’t some high up Marine with fancy security clearance, but we both figured it was just better to keep most pictures off the internet.”

Her mind is like a steel trap. “For being a crazy day, you have a good memory. Good retention of information.”

She gives me a small smile before returning her attention to the screen. As she scrolls, there are random images. A sunset with a quote. A hand outstretched with a single key on a keyring, with a wooden house—“New Home” engraved on it.

I’ve been through her account and know that there are wedding and engagement pictures, and she’s getting close to them.

“Here. Hunter and his people are wizards with photoshop.” I reach for the touchpad, brushing her fingers aside. After minimizing Facebook, I find the pictures folder on the desktop. After double-clicking the first to blow it up, I move my hand to once again let her control the scrolling.

I watch her face as she looks through the images of us, the confusion and awe evident. Hell, I had a similar reaction when Hunter sent them my way.

“These are really good...” She glances up at me briefly.

“A few of them are printed and will be at the house, I’m told. About home...” I wait until I have her attention. “We’re moving from North Carolina after Tucker Douglas offered me a job with Douglas Group.”

“Right.”

“We’re living on the Douglas compound. We figured we’d stay there until we were more comfortable with the town and found a place to build or buy.”

“Mmhmm.”

“Douglas’s place is a two-bedroom, single story ranch. The house isn’t huge by any means. My things arrived earlier this week, and Tucker got the boxes and everything in today, but we’ll be unpacking and deciding what goes where. I know it’s mostly my shit, and everything you have is going to be new, but you deserve to have the house in a way that makes you comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

“Right now, the only people who live on the compound are Tucker, and then another Marine buddy, Tanner Henderson, and his woman.” I pause before giving her the last piece of information. “And you need to know that she’s Kate Freemont.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

KAE

AT FIRST, THE NAME DOESN'T RING ANY BELLS BUT THE longer Hemming stares at me, the quicker pieces fall together.

It's only been a few weeks since President Freemont died.

"As in, first daughter Kate Freemont?" I ask.

"Yes. She and Chance...Tanner...moved onto the property two or so months ago. I think Kate could be a good friend for you. Someone you can confide in. But, you're still Kaelyn to her. She's aware of your past. She knows why you're there and she knows all of this is a front. But you have to remain Kaelyn with her. Just like I know you were Kellie but you're now Kaelyn, the same goes for everyone on the compound. You have to stay Kaelyn."

"I got that," I say a little more harshly than intended. It wasn't easy watching my home burn. I thought about the pictures I'd had on the walls. The photo albums I carried around after my mom died.

The comforter I spent months debating about, before giving in and spending far more money on than I'd ever thought to in the past.

Everything...

Up in flames.

Literally.



Kellie Zimmerman is dead, and I won't be forgetting it anytime soon.

However, seeing my place on fire was almost the permission I needed to go into this situation feet first. I'm going to try my damndest to make this all believable.

"Okay, good. Well... We have a long flight. You can go back to the binder or close your eyes. We should land around midnight." He reaches for the laptop and pulls it away from me. I would have liked to continue looking through pictures, but I guess I have time for all of that.

"I think I'll close my eyes. It's been...a day."

"No worries. I'll grab you a blanket." He stands and I watch as he moves to the front of the cabin. He comes back with a blue blanket that's not anything like the scratchy ones I've received on flights before.

"Here. Get comfortable."

"Thank you, Hemming."

"You're welcome, Kaelyn." The way he says my new name sounds deliberate. Like if he uses it again and again, it will help me accept the moniker.

Curling up in the seat, my body facing the window, I watch the dark evening sky before allowing my eyes to drift close. My brain isn't exactly quiet, but instead of focusing on the scary parts of the day, it keeps repeating the pages and pages of history I read.

History turns to my new husband, and when my mind tries to conjure him into a negative light, the thoughts are immediately shut down.

Instead, the images morph into the photoshopped wedding photos.

Which in turn becomes imagining those photos in video form.

Remembering a wedding I've never actually been too.

Eventually though, I do fall asleep.

And not surprisingly, once I fall asleep, I sleep hard.

I don't wake until the plane lands and when I open my eyes, Hemming is no longer in the chair across from me but I can feel his gaze. It doesn't take but a second before I spot him in the chair on the other side of what would be the aisle. The chair he's in faces inward, with the back to the wall. His hands are linked over his stomach.

When he notices me awake, he lifts his chin once. "Sleep well?"

"Better than I thought I would," I admit. Even my voice is thick with sleep, proving my words.

"Jack will taxi us but then we'll deplane outside, enter the terminal, and then exit like a regular pair of travelers."

Swallowing hard at the sudden increase of nerves, I nod. This is it.

I am now officially Kaelyn Johansen.

"Can..." I have to swallow again. "Am I allowed to know where we are now?"

The plane stops moving and all the cabin lights turn completely on. "Montana," he tells me, unbuckling his lap belt.

Following suit, I undo my own clasp and stand after he does. "I've never been to Montana. Can't say it's ever been on my list of places to go, either."

"Same," he answers with a short chuckle, even though his facial expression remains flat. "But Tucker speaks highly of his home state."

I walk cautiously behind him as he moves to where our two bags were stored during the flight. Nearing the front, the cockpit door opens, and Jack and Mere step out. The latter opens the passenger door, revealing the staircase has already been let down.

"I'll be in touch with Tucker with my own report, but it was good to meet you both," Jack says, shaking Hemming's

hand. “We may make it back out here next summer. Winter’s my busy time, but Eli talks a lot about Montana summers.”

“We were supposed to come out this summer,” Mere offers, “but life got busy.”

We say our goodbyes, and then Hemming is leading the way down the stairs, waiting for me at the bottom to descend behind him.

“Can I take something?” I ask once my feet are on solid ground, even though I’m sure he’ll decline.

And of course, he does.

An airport employee guides us into the terminal. It’s mostly empty at this hour but I watch the few people who are there.

There’s a parent walking behind a toddler in footie pajamas. The dad looks exhausted but the kid looks like she’s on her fifth wind.

There’s another parent, a mom, sitting in a chair with a child in her lap, rocking from side to side with her eyes closed. Looking to the flight board at the gate she’s sitting at, I see there’s not a flight going out.

I wonder if they got stranded for the night.

That’s never fun as a single person, let alone with children in tow.

It’s a smaller airport though. Do they let people stay the night in airports of this size? I have no idea.

I have to quick step every now and then to match Hemming’s purposeful stride because I’m busy looking around.

A few feet ahead of us is another couple who hold hands as they casually walk out of the secured area and into baggage claim. An image of my hand in Hemming’s hits but I don’t allow it much thought.

Hemming seems to know where he’s going but I occasionally see him checking the overhead signs. He’s much

better at pretending he's not lost.

We make our way outside and cross over a quiet road with a few cars idling by the doors, waiting for travelers.

I'm about to ask Hemming if he knows where we're parked when I spot a person smoking by a bench. I can't figure out how to pose the question to make it seem like maybe I just forgot where we parked, so I say nothing.

We walk down a sidewalk and past a rental car lot, to what's labeled "Long Term Parking." I'm busy looking around and walk right into a stopped Hemming.

"Oh. Sorry," I murmur, my hand on his back as I take a step away. His back is firm and I can feel the dip of his spine. He's been dressed in long sleeves and long pants, but I'm well aware the man has muscles.

And it feels like his back muscles have muscles.

Reluctantly, I remove my hand. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, just forgot what section we parked the truck in," he answers, the backpack that was once on his back is now resting on the carry-on suitcase. He digs in the front pocket to pull out his phone.

That was a good way to make conversation about where we were parked.

Wish I'd thought of it.

Also, I appreciate that he let me know we're looking for a truck.

*Not that there aren't a lot of those*, I think, looking down the rows and rows of vehicles. Nearly every other is a truck or large SUV. There aren't many sedan-style cars.

Someone is nearing us from behind and I feel like I should say something. "All I remember was there was that white SUV you parked too close to, and I had to shimmy out." Gosh, I hope that doesn't sound as awkward to him as it does to me.

He glances at me, both brows raised. "It wasn't that close," he plays along. "Besides, you think that SUV is really still

there?”

I shrug a shoulder and reach for the backpack, making sure it's zipped before putting it over my shoulder.

It's far lighter than I thought it was.

“It's okay.” I think about how I'd respond if he were really my husband, and decide to brazenly add, “I know you like to see me shimmy.”

Hemming's laugh is real, even if his words are for the sake of a lie. “I've got to get you home.”

In character now, I grin and take a step away from him. “That's what she said.”

His laugh continues behind me but it's not long before his laugh is redirecting me. “Kae, we're not that way, babe.”

“Oops. It's late.” I turn back to him. He does as I expect—taking the handle of the rolling carry-on—but he also does what I *don't* expect.

He waits until I'm back next to him and then takes my hand.

He takes.

My.

Hand.

Why does it feel normal?

All because of a few in-character teases?

I barely met the man eight hours ago, and six hours ago I was afraid I'd never be able to pretend to be this man's wife.

Yet here we are, holding hands as we walk through a full surface lot in the middle of the night.

I'm stuck between feeling lost in the parking lot and amazed at what I'm capable of pretending, when Hemming squeezes my hand once. “Looks like your SUV left, but maybe the Dodge Ram gave you room.”

I look down the row of vehicles for two trucks. While there are a lot of trucks, there are only two that are

immediately next to each other.

One's a maroon Ford and the other's a blue Dodge. Both are lifted, although the Dodge sits higher.

Grinning at my detective skills, I shake my head. "Boys and their lifted trucks."

"It's a country thing."

I didn't ask before if the truck was really his or if it's his Marine friend's. When we get to the bed, he slips the backpack from my shoulders and digs around inside until he produces a keyring. Must really be his.

He hits the fob twice, and the lights flash as the locks disengage.

Looking beyond Hemming, I don't see anyone around so I give myself the moment to feel awkward. Do I just...let myself in his truck?

Apparently, Hemming's a mind reader, and after he slides the carry-on in the covered bed, he places his hand on the small of my back and guides me to the passenger door.

"You're sleeping on your feet, babe." When he opens the door, a step comes down. *This is some fancy truck*, I think, glancing between the motorized step and the light brown leather interior.

"Sorry. It felt like the longest flight." I step up and once my ass hits leather, he puts the backpack at my feet and closes the door, before walking around to get in on the other side.

It's not until we've paid for parking and are on the highway that Hemming breaks character. "You're doing good. I think you're going to be fine."

"Thank you." I clasp my hands together, although it's no longer from nerves. "You think we're going to pull this off? You think you can handle being my husband for a year?"

"A year's not guaranteed. It may be longer," he warns.

"I don't think..." When he glances over at me in the dark cab, I shrug. "However long it is. I'm sorry you got saddled

with this job. It's not fair that your life had to change, too."

"It is what it is. But it wasn't like I was doing anything else." He turns his head over his left shoulder as he checks lanes, before passing a slow car in front of us. "Tonight, we sleep. Tomorrow, we figure out the house. Maybe meet up with whoever's on the compound. At some point this week, we have to go into town to check out the storefront Tucker thinks will work for you. We'll also have to find the grocery store. But aside from securing the storefront, you don't have to rush into work. Tucker's giving me three days for us to settle in before I have to start work with him and Douglas Group, and I'm being paid well. You have accounts too and have a healthy balance. Obviously, the sooner you can get the bakery up and running, the better, but we also know those things take time. I'm sure Tucker will get you your banking information tomorrow."

"Can you explain Douglas Group to me a bit more? That woman... Carter. She said she was with a group, and then there was you and y'all knew each other." I think I recall her introducing herself as a Douglas, too. "I'm assuming she meant Douglas Group. Is she Tucker's...wife? Sister?"

"Yes. Sister." Hemming then gives me the rundown of the Douglas siblings, before explaining the role of Douglas Group. The missions they go on and the services they provide.

Apparently, the group is still in its infancy and I'm the first bodyguard-type case they've had.

"Obviously if the group takes on another similar case, you're not going to be saddled with a fake wife, so yay for getting it over with," I tease and thankfully, he laughs.

"That's one way to look at it."

"I promise I'm not going to be difficult to live with. I mostly keep to myself. I wouldn't say I'm shy, but I'm definitely introverted. I prefer small groups over large ones, but regardless of the size, they all exhaust me eventually. Being a business owner scares me. Having to deal with people all the time isn't really my thing."

“You don’t have to do it alone. You can hire people.”

“True...” I turn my head to look out the window, although there’s not much to see at twelve-thirty in the morning.

We drive in companionable silence and it’s only when we near a population sign that Hemming speaks again. “Welcome to Forever.”

“Well, if that’s not a sign, I don’t know what is...” Hearing myself, I grin. “That wasn’t meant to be a pun. Well, it was. But not about the sign. About the town name. Forever. And this is the start of a new kind of forever.”

“You’re not wrong.”

We drive through what must be miles and miles of ranch land before the truck’s GPS system tells Hemming his turn is upcoming. After slowing, I see the upcoming large, closed gate and when Hemming turns onto the gravel drive, I notice the call box.

He hits the automatic window button and reaches out to input a code. At the sound of a beep, the large black gate slowly swings open.

“Tucker said the gate is always closed,” Hemming says, his window rolling up again. “The entire property is surrounded by fencing and surveillance. You’re going to have to memorize the gate code. Don’t ever have it somewhere that someone could see, follow you, open the gate after you, et cetera.”

He drives down the gravel path slowly, and soon, a large barn with a black truck comes into view. A motion detected light turns on. “That’s Tucker’s place,” Hemming tells me as we drive past. “We’re the second house on the right, but there’s a decent amount of space between each place.”

The closer we get to “home,” the more my nerves awaken.

In just a few minutes, I’ll be entering a house with my husband.

It’s not much longer before we pass a ranch-style home with another black truck. “Do you all drive trucks? No one has



a need for a regular car?" I tease, although next to that black truck is a silver SUV.

"Trucks are easier out here."

"Spoken like you've been to Montana."

"No, but I grew up in a farming town in Illinois."

"Malta, right?"

"Right. Neighbor had a farm and my friends and I used to help with the haunted corn maze in October, then Christmas tree cutting in winter. Always had a use for a truck."

"I'll admit that this is a nice truck..." I brush my hand over the smooth leather seat.

"It was my dream truck. I had a beater for a while, but this was the truck I saved up for. Looks like Tucker left lights on for us."

The way he changes subjects keeps catching me off guard but I'll probably get used to it. I follow the beam of the headlights until I see the upcoming house. Like the one before, it's a single story home. It's bigger than a tiny home would be, but it's not a monstrous-sized ranch house, either.

"Home sweet home." Here goes nothing.

## CHAPTER SIX

HEMMING

“HOME SWEET HOME,” I REPEAT KAE’S WORDS AS I PUT THE truck in park. “Let’s see what kind of mess we’re dealing with. You wanna grab the backpack? I’ll grab the suitcase.”

We meet at the front door of what Tucker calls Cottage B, and I unlock it with the keypad system. I trust Tucker’s place is secure and I let Kae step into the house in front of me.

Tucker left the foyer light on. Just beyond the small space is a large living room kitchen combo. It looks like the bedrooms are on either side of the living room, and both Kae and I explore the thousand-square foot space separately.

Boxes line the walls and the furniture that came from my place is still wrapped from the moving company. I walk into the first bedroom and find all of my gym equipment. I wasn’t thinking about the size of my home when I packed everything, but now I’m wondering if I’ll even have space for the set-up I used to have in my spare bedroom. As I walk toward Kae in the other bedroom, I glance at my plastic-wrapped couch.

I don’t need to walk into the next bedroom for the sinking feeling to settle.

This is going to be a one-bed scenario.

The bedroom Kae stands in appears to be the main one. It’s larger and has an attached bathroom.

Just as I assumed, there’s a bed in here.

And not only is the bed put together, but it's made in what smells like fresh linens.

However, my asshole of a friend put together the full-sized bed.

"I can sleep on the couch," I offer when she doesn't turn at my arrival.

It's a comfortable couch. I've slept on it on more than one occasion.

"Do you even know where linens and things are?" Now, she looks over her shoulder at me. "It's fine, Hemming," she adds, shaking her head and turning her attention back to the bed I used in high school. "It's just a bed. I'll stay on my side if you stay on your side."

I should take the couch.

I should give her the bed and the find my king-sized bed frame in the mess, and put it together in the second room in the morning.

That's what I should do.

But I'm also exhausted from the day.

Yeah.

Exhausted.

I'll blame that on my quick agreement.

I find lounge clothes for us both in the carry-on suitcase and let Kae get ready to turn in first. While she's in the bathroom—which does not have a door—I walk back into the living room and look over the boxes. I swear, Tucker put these boxes in here, in this way, on purpose.

The boxes with my clothes and linens are all on the bottom of four-box stacks.

Part of the reason I chose to stay on Douglas property was because it gave Kae and I the opportunity to gradually move into comfort with one another.

The places in town that were available to rent were all one bedroom, one bath rentals. There were neighbors I didn't know yet.

We'd have to be "on" all the time.

I thought being here, we could relax our guard.

And yet it appears Tucker thinks we're better off going all in, right away.

I should be upset.

Yes, I agreed to the job. No, the day hasn't been the worst.

However, Kae and I should be the ones to determine how fast or slow we move forward. There should be space for us to "turn off."

But I realize I'm not upset.

The few instances where Kae and I acted like a couple at the airport told me this was going to work. We'll pull this off.

Easily, I think.

"I'm done."

I look over my shoulder at Kae's words and see her standing in the doorway of the bedroom, sleep shorts on with an oversized t-shirt. Her hair is still pulled up on the top of her head.

"I just hit a wall," she tells me around a yawn. When her face relaxes, it's only to show her eyes appear glassy with sleepiness. "Do you have a side of the bed you prefer?"

"Closest to the door."

She nods. "Okay."

I turn away from her to turn off the lights and make sure the front door is locked. The house is small enough that I can hear as Kae pull's back the covers and slides between the sheets. My body awakens with curiosity.

I'm attracted to my wife.

I twist my wedding band on my finger as I walk back to the carry-on. Finding my charging cord, I plug my phone into

an outlet in the kitchen before walking into the bedroom, the house completely dark now aside from one light.

Kae left the bedroom light on and I see her on the left side of the bed, on her side, her back facing the center of the bed. She doesn't move as I enter the room.

I should bring my things into the guest bath to get into sleep clothes but I just turned everything off.

Her back is to the bathroom, anyway.

There *is* a separate water closet, but I'm not changing in that claustrophobic room.

The bedroom's closet is in here, too, but there are boxes all over, making the space not much more usable than the water closet.

I change quickly into a shirt and boxers in the middle of the bathroom, gathering my clothes and dropping them in the same hamper Kae's clothes are in.

*It's going to be fine*, I think, getting into the opposite side of the bed. Kae doesn't move. Her breath doesn't hitch.

She may very well already be asleep.

Clearly, she's unbothered by sharing a bed.

So yeah, I think we're going to be okay.

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“SHOOT...”

The whispered word brings me awake but I keep my eyes closed, trying to figure out where the voice is coming from.

Quickly, the previous day comes back and when it does, I realize Kellie—shit, no, *Kaelyn*—is trying to carefully untangle her limbs from mine.

It would appear that at some point in the early morning hours, we both turned toward one another. My arm is under

her neck. Her hand was on my chest. It feels like a hot brand in the spot she removed it from.

Currently she's slowly moving her leg from between the lock my limbs have her in.

I don't want to startle her but god, the more she rubs her leg against mine...

My cock twitches beneath the loose cotton of my boxers.

With a sleepy sigh, and a prayer she buys that I'm still out, I roll to my back.

Kae stills completely. It's probably a solid ten seconds before she takes her leg back and rolls out of bed.

I hear the click of the water closet door before opening my eyes to the sun filled room.

That second bed needs to be put together a-sap.

When the toilet flushes, I sit on the side of the bed and rub sleep from my face.

"Did I wake you up?" Kae's voice holds a note of uncertainty.

I'm going to let her think I know nothing about the embrace we found ourselves in this morning. "No. You didn't."

"Oh. Okay. I'm going to... Uhm. Do you think there's a toothbrush or anything?"

She has her arms crossed over her stomach and her eyes are slightly widened. How we woke up really threw her, if the visual recurrence of nerves tells me anything. However, instead of wildly searching around, she keeps her eyes trained on mine.

"I'm not sure what Tucker put together. If you can't find one in there, I know I have a spare in our travel things from yesterday. Still in package," I clarify.

"I'll look. I just wasn't sure..."

“Kae, it’s your bathroom. Feel free to look around. I’m going to take a piss in the other one.” I stand from the bed.

“Are you sure? You can have this bathroom. I’ll... I don’t know what I can do. It’s not like we have a coffee maker out that I can make coffee or anything. Gah, this is awkward.” She tries to smile at her nerves.

“Go ahead and see if Tucker put anything together in this bathroom. I’ll use the other one and if you don’t find anything here, check the carry-on. It would be in the inner side pocket.”

“Thank you, Hemming.”

“No problem, Kaelyn.” I walk across the house to the other bathroom and do my morning business. It is awkward. I’ll give her that. Living with a woman is an intimate experience.

Living with a woman you don’t really know makes it muddy.

Awkward, like she said.

But waking up this morning with her wrapped around me didn’t feel wrong.

“I found some!” I hear Kae yell across the house as I wash my hands.

Of course, there aren’t any towels in here so I shake my hands dry then wipe them on the shirt I slept in.

I glance at the oven clock and see it’s just after seven. I give it till seven-thirty before Tucker comes knocking on the door.

The asshole can help us unpack.

“I left a second toothbrush out for you,” Kae says from behind me. I look back at her. The pony tail she put her hair in before bed was skewed and falling out before, but has since been fixed.

Of course, she still wears her bedroom clothes, and I let my eyes drop. Her breasts are obviously free under the shirt, and I can see the faintest outlines where her nipples pebble. My mind immediately has the image of me pushing her

against the wall and pulling her shirt up, exposing those taut peaks.

Are her nipples a pale pink, or are they more of a dusty rose color? How much darker do they get when they tighten...?

I swear, those spots get more pronounced and when I look back at her face, a blush colors her cheeks.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “That was...” I shake my head. “Rude. Sorry. I’m... Why don’t you go ahead and change? Shower. Whatever you have to do. Tucker will probably be by in a little while, and then we’ll get the house livable. Let me find towels and shit.”

I did the majority of my packing but the movers did some of their own too.

I find a box labeled “towels” after minimal searching. It has a box labeled “kitchen” on top of it, and after I remove it and open the towels box, I find bathroom towels under kitchen towels and five rolls of paper towels.

It’s literally the box for all things “towels.”

Kae goes back to the bathroom and while I’m no peeping Tom and she’s absolutely safe with me, I close the bedroom door to give her more privacy. At minimum, that bathroom could have one of those sliding farm doors...

Then again, we won’t be sharing a room again after today.

At the carry-on, I pull out my last change of clothes before zipping the suitcase and propping it against the wall. Not sure how the water heater is, I don’t bother with a shower now. After the work of unpacking and rebuilding furniture, I’ll need a shower later.

Once dressed for the day in old jeans and a plain navy tee, I get to work putting boxes in appropriate rooms. Boxes that contain living room items go in the living room.

Kitchen, in the kitchen.

And so forth.



As expected, there's a knock on the door twenty minutes later, at seven-thirty on the dot.

"You're a fucker, you know that?" I say by way of greeting, opening the door to my Marine buddy.

Tucker chuckles as he holds a hand out. We clasp palms as he says, "It's not intentional."

"Like fuck, it's not."

"You're laughing about it though, so it can't be that bad."

I don't confirm nor deny as I let him into the house. However, I won't let him off that easily. "The full bed? Really?"

"I didn't realize you had two fucking beds!" Tucker chuckles. "I started to put it together and then realized one of the sides was longer than every other piece, but the majority of the frame was the smaller bed, and it was eleven at night. I was fucking tired. Why can't you be normal and have a headboard or something?"

Tucker helps to put the boxes in rooms, and then starts to cut Saran wrap from furniture. It's not much longer until Kae exits the bedroom.

"Hey, do you think—" Her voice stops when she realizes we're not alone. "Oh. Hi."

I walk over to her side. "Kae, this is Tucker. Tucker... Kaelyn."

Kae takes a step forward and offers her hand. "It's nice to meet you, Tucker. I... Well, thank you."

"My pleasure," Tucker replies, shaking her hand. "I know both Carter and Hemming explained everything to you, and I'm glad you agreed this was the best option for you. I know it's a bit unorthodox and standard WITSEC wouldn't be quite this drastic, but we wanted to make sure you remained 100% safe."

"I told them both that I'm pretty sure no one will care that I'm gone, but I guess I was up for an adventure." She speaks

so freely with Tucker. Her tone lacks the nerves she occasionally has with me.

*Maybe Tucker was the better man for the job...*

A surge of protectiveness overcomes me at the thought.

“Definitely an adventure,” my friend continues. “Oh, your cat should arrive next week sometime. Carter has it and she’s driving. Making a stop on her way back, though.”

“Thank you. He’s not a great travel partner, so I’ll have to apologize to her.”

“Do you guys want a tour of the property?” Tucker points his thumb over his shoulder. “And then I have a cell phone for you, Kaelyn, up at the house.”

“Sure,” Kae says, at the same time I sweep my finger around the room.

“There’s a lot to be done here, still.”

Tucker waves me off. “See the property. Go get groceries. Boxes can wait.”

Kae moves back to the bedroom to grab her shoes.

“Douglas...”

“You guys have to get out there. You can’t stay holed up on my property. You need to start building your current footprint, *her* footprint. Speaking of, you gave her access to her social media accounts?”

“She saw them, yes.”

“Okay, good. Whatever you guys can do to make Kaelyn Johansen real, do it.” But when Kae comes back from the bedroom, Tucker’s tone switches. “Great. You like animals, Kae?”

“I do.”

I follow behind my friend and my wife, as he tells her about his donkey.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

KAE

IF I THOUGHT THE FIRST TWENTY-FOUR HOURS WERE A whirlwind, I wasn't prepared for how fast the first weeks would go.

The first day we were in Forever, Tucker showed us around his property—his house is a large barn that was converted to a mansion of a house, and he has a huge pond with mature evergreen-type trees surrounding it—and I got to meet the sweetest miniature donkey named Eeyore. I was told he's a lady's man, and that he made quick friends with Kate... but I think I can probably be his best friend too.

Tucker also has two guardian livestock dogs named Judge and Jury.

I got a kick out of that.

The dogs and the donkey help protect the horses and ducks from coyotes and other predators. I never knew donkeys were protective but I suppose with the way his hee-haw echoes when he's excited, I can only imagine how it sounds when he's warding something off.

After touring the property, I met our neighbors, Tanner and Kate.

Kate is incredibly down to earth. I'm not sure what I was expecting upon meeting the former first daughter, but I was pleasantly surprised at how easy she was to talk to. However, I

haven't gathered the nerve to seek out her company since the first day.

Later that same day, Hemming and I accomplished our first public outing to town, too.

We looked at the corner building downtown that Tucker suggested for my bakery. I'm not entirely sure what a bakery should look like... I've been to donut shops and the bakery section of grocery stores, but never a true, standalone bakery.

Thankfully, we met with a woman named Casey who specializes in bakery design. I like most of her ideas, but still have questions. We put in for the lease but I'm not quite ready for the build out process.

It didn't take long for us to put the house in working order. I tried to give Hemming the larger bedroom. It would fit the full-sized bed and his exercise equipment well. He insisted I keep the larger bedroom though. He has the bigger bed in the smaller room, and took the doors off the closet to make it work for his multi-use bench.

It's not perfect, but it works.

In the last few days, Hemming and I also got into a routine of sorts.

He gets up at the butt-crack of dawn to go running around the large pond with Tucker and Tanner. I'm generally a morning person, too, but not enough to go running. Instead, I get a pot of coffee going in the Mr. Coffee pot Hemming has from his previous life.

During the days, Hemming spends the daylight hours up at the main house doing whatever Douglas Group does, and I've been doing a lot of reading.

I read a lot of romance and have a few tropes I absolutely adore. At first, even though it's high on my list, I was avoiding marriage of convenience books. They hit too close to home.

But then one day turned to the next, to the next...

And I decided I needed my fiction to emulate my life.

There are other things I should be doing, like going over the plans for the bakery. I should go into town more often and meet the other shop owners.

As easy as it's been to pretend here at "home" with Hemming—and let's be honest, when it's just him and I in the house, we're pretty much glorified roommates who maybe eat dinner together but then go our separate ways—I'm still terrified I'll make a mistake in public.

When I'm not reading romance novels, I've been online. I'm trying to be better about social media—it's never been my thing—but after prompting from Tucker, I posted a picture of the doormat outside our house, with the caption, "Home Sweet Home." I'm not comfortable putting a picture of the house, even though it's behind a locked gate.

My Facebook profile is set to "friends only" but it's strange to get likes and comments from people that I'm pretty sure are Hunter.

At least, I hope they're Hunter.

The day Hemming and I finalized the leasing agreement on the storefront, I also posted, "*We got the store! Kae's Bakery, coming soon!*" That day, I got a text message from Hunter suggesting I start a page for the bakery, and I'm now the owner of a Facebook profile for myself, a Facebook page for the bakery, an Instagram for the bakery, and a TikTok account for the bakery.

Apparently, cakes do well on social media.

While on Facebook, I took a peek at Hemming's profile.

His is basically a ghost yard, with the random meme or post every few weeks, although he does have posts that coincide with mine and "our" timeline.

The most shocking on his profile though, was a picture of me sleeping on the plane. This one isn't a Hunter-special. This picture is actually me when I was with him.

The way Hemming captured the image, no one would know it was a luxury private jet and not a commercial plane.

But it was the caption attached to it.

*Someone's super excited about Montana. She can hardly keep her eyes open.*

There were a handful of likes on the photo, and a comment from Tucker.

*Tucker Douglas: Maybe if you didn't take the latest flight she'd be more thrilled*

Hemming responded with two middle finger emojis, although not in a proper thread string.

From there, I'd looked through his friends list, selecting a few at random to look at. Most of the ones I chose were also Marines. I did find a couple of people who had Dekalb High School listed. He must have grown up with them.

Tucker's commented on a few of Hemming's posts, but there was another Marine who popped up in comments named Wyatt. He seemed to "like" or comment on nearly every post. I Facebook-stalked him but his profile must be set to private because I wasn't able to see much of anything.

After I was done Facebook perusing, I found myself on Pinterest, where I tried to dream up the interior of the bakery. I think Casey's ideas are a great start, but the more I scroll Pinterest, the bigger my ideas become.

Big ideas usually come with big budgets, and while I've been given a bank account that's healthily padded, I'm not going to just throw money out the window.

When I questioned where the funds came from, I was assured it was all on the up-and-up, and it was mine to spend. I've tried to not use a lot of it and Hemming is pretty insistent on being the one to pay for groceries and things, but I've made a few clothing and makeup purchases with it.

There aren't any Ultas or Sephoras nearby, so I ordered the makeup I like. My packages arrived yesterday.

*After a week-plus of going without, it's nice to put it on again, I think as I coat my eyelashes with mascara. I don't put*

a lot of makeup on, just enough to make my skin tone even. The mascara makes my eyes pop too.

It's been an adjustment, getting used to having both of my eye colors on display, but my reflection no longer startles me.

My life is almost back to normal—well, as normal as it's ever going to get.

It's day ten of being in Forever as Kaelyn, and Wilson should arrive later this afternoon.

In preparation for my cat's arrival, Hemming and I made another trip into town, this time going to a store called The Stock Shop. While they mostly cater to the large animals on the nearby ranches, they have a section for pets, too.

We got Wilson food, bowls, and toys, and when I explained to Hemming that proper litter box husbandry meant Wilson needed two boxes, I was surprised when he suggested the furniture-turned-litter-box-hideaway options.

*“The place is small. If you think the cat will be okay with it, I have no problem switching out some of the furniture.”*

However, with Wilson's arrival means Carter's in town, which means a big shindig downtown with the local Douglasses, Tanner and Kate, and Hemming and myself.

It's the day I'm being forced out of hiding.

After my face is put together, I braid my hair into a French plait that rests over my shoulder, and put small gold hoops in my ears. I'm dressed for the afternoon already, even though we have six hours before we have to go.

I just know that if I wait, I'll chicken out.

This way, I'm dressed and have no excuses.

“You've got this,” I tell myself, taking a deep breath, as I walk out of the bedroom. In addition to my romance novels, I've started reading books about manifestation and mantras, and I'm being more intentional with having a positive mindset.

I hear as the electronic keypad unlocks, and walk into the living room as Hemming comes into the house.

Every morning, he runs in a t-shirt and shorts, and every morning, I'm taken aback by the amount of ink the man has on his body.

When he wears pants and sleeves, you'd never guess he's as covered as he is.

That first morning when I saw them for the first time?

I knew I was going to be in trouble.

Not only did I wake up hugging him like he was my body pillow, but I finally saw so much of his muscled body on display—as well as the black and flesh-colored designs that swirl up his right arm, and down his right leg. His left arm also has a partial forearm design that goes from mid-forearm to wrist.

I haven't been brave enough to ask about them.

Or hell, even to stare and try to figure out all of the designs, although Hemming's not above staring...

My body instantly responds to the memory of him staring at my chest in my sleep shirt.

We haven't had any run-ins like that first morning since we've been sleeping in separate bedrooms, which is good.

I'd probably jump my husband, otherwise.

Between spicy novels and an attractive fake—but legal—husband, my girly parts have been in overdrive every night.

"I'm going to shower. Want to get breakfast today?" Hemming asks, his left hand going to the lower hem of his shirt. He does some sort of fist-wrap thing with the bottom part of his shirt, and the pull of fabric gives me a hint of lower stomach skin.

Yeah, my girly parts are well aware my husband is gorgeous.

I've also noticed that he never takes off his ring, even when he's not going anywhere besides Tucker's.

I don't take my rings off either, but I guess I expected him to. There were a few years where my mom was married to a



man who only wore his ring when they went out in public. The moment they got home? It was off and on the kitchen counter.

“We’re going out for lunch,” I remind him. I’m not sure I’m ready to spend all day out in public, and lunch is only a few hours away.

He chuckles and walks away from me, toward the second bathroom. “Yeah, that’s *lunch*.”

“Is The Main Bean open yet?” One of the new businesses in town is a coffee shop and when we went to The Stock Shop, the brown paper was off the windows but the store was still closed. I could probably handle the coffee shop, but definitely don’t need two meals at the town’s only diner.

“We can check. I’ll be quick.”

Twenty minutes later, we’re in his truck and heading into town. While it’s not the first time we’ve gone to town as husband and wife, it’s the first time we’re going someplace where one of us doesn’t have a cart or something to use as a shield. I blame sleep deprivation on how easy it was to pretend at the airport because my nerves are on fire right now.

In reality, the night at the airport was probably easier because yes, I was tired, but also, I still didn’t know the man. Even after just ten days living with him, and realizing I’m attracted to him, it’s not as easy to pretend.

Especially not with the novels I’ve been reading before bed every night.

Fake flirting feels a lot like real flirting.

“Your car should be ready to pick up later today, too,” Hemming randomly says.

“Oh. Okay, good.” We found a nearly-new car on CarMax and had it delivered to Billings. I was okay with a used vehicle, but Hemming insisted the car have less than 30-thousand miles on it. At that point, and with the options, it made more sense to go newer.

It was odd to make a large purchase decision as half of a couple, but I’ve bought a car as a single female before.

The process so far has been way smoother.

I imagine the test drive will be smooth sailing, too, with Hemming by my side.

Because he's a man and that's the unfortunate state of car shopping.

"After lunch with the guys, we can head out to Billings, test drive it, and if it's good, we'll bring it home. Then you have more freedom, too..."

The way his voice drops on the last line snaps me back to reality. "But not 100% freedom."

He glances over at me briefly. "Like your phone, the car will have a tracker installed."

When I was given my cell, Tucker explained all the safety features. He didn't hide the fact there was a tracker installed. But the difference with my phone and the car is my phone could be used to break the seal into my old life. I could make a call...I could text someone...

A tracker on my car, though?

Do they not trust me to stay in and around Forever? "I'm not going to go anywhere."

He shakes his head once. "It's not you I'm worried about."

We haven't talked about *what ifs* since we left Virginia. "They're not coming after me, Hemming."

"We can't know that for sure."

"Well, I'm *sure* Tucker has someone watching them. You'd know if they were looking for me."

"Clay's out on bail," he surprises me by saying. I guess I expected to be kept in the loop. "He's been hanging around O'Ryans. As far as we can tell, there hasn't been anyone to take your place. So no. We can't know for sure that they're not coming after you. My job is to protect you and keep you safe, make sure you fully integrate into Kaelyn Zimmanck, and build a new life for yourself, one where the past is never your first response."

“Kaelyn *Johansen*.” Apparently reading all my romance novels has gone to my head because his using my alleged maiden name right now reminds me that there is an eventual end date to all of this.

So long as it remains safe for me, which hello.

It will.

There will be an end, and I will divorce this man I hardly know. I’ll have lost a year or more of my life, but at least I’ll be alive. I just have to remember it’s fake and not fall for my husband during that time.

He glances at me again and I see his hand tighten on the steering wheel as he looks back to the road.

“Marriage shouldn’t be your identity,” he finally responds.

“Ah, but that’s what you and Tucker agreed to, isn’t it?”

“You agreed to it, too. You agreed to becoming Kaelyn, and my *job* is to make sure you are comfortable with being Kaelyn.”

I don’t know why I’m getting angry, but instead of letting it become a fight, I close my mouth and look out the window.

We haven’t fought yet.

Logically, I know it’s inevitable. We’re going to fight, even if our “relationship” is all just make believe. We’re still two humans living together. We’ve both been good about bending to the other person, but eventually, we’re going to disagree on something.

Unfortunately, I can’t shake this new feeling, and when Hemming parks the truck in front of The Main Bean, I can’t fake happy. Knowing my moods like I do, I’m probably PMSing. It’s about that time.

Gotta love hormones.

“Looks like they’re open,” Hemming states the obvious. There’s an illuminated “Open” sign in the window and the door is propped.

I get out of the truck and head inside, hearing Hemming's low, "Kaelyn..." behind me. There's a small line and I take a spot, crossing my arms as I look up at the menu boards. They have the regular coffees and lattes, and for food items, have a few breakfast sandwiches, as well as flatbreads in the afternoon.

There's a burn behind my eyes and I'm kicking myself for getting emotional. I'm in the middle of a mental pity party when two large hands land gently on my shoulders. I startle lightly, even though I know it's Hemming.

"I'm sorry," he says quietly against the back of my head.

Just like that, he makes the switch. He goes from stern military bodyguard man, to my husband of almost five years. His ability to do things that feel real just makes me more emotional.

I swear, if I cry in a freaking coffee shop...

Not trusting my voice, I shake my head but don't move to step away from him. He keeps his hands on my shoulders, his thumbs pressing light circles under my neck.

*It's all fake.*

*It's all fake.*

*It's all fake.*

It's so much easier in the house where we don't have to be the happy, married couple we're supposed to show everyone else.

Because now?

What is it he's apologizing for?

Is he fake Hemming the husband, apologizing because his wife is clearly annoyed with him?

Or is he real Hemming the man, apologizing for how he worded things in the truck?

When it's our turn to order, he steps to my side but keeps a hand on my lower back. He asks for a caramel macchiato and I order a cinnamon spice latte, and when asked about pairing

either with food, Hemming adds an egg, cheese, and bacon bagel sandwich, cut in half, for us to share.

I wait by his side when he removes his hand to pull his wallet out of his back pocket, then follow him to two chairs in a corner that have a small table between them.

I don't know what to talk about that isn't some sort of continuation of our last conversation and I still don't trust myself not to give in to the hormonal urge to cry, so I reach for the *People* magazine that sits in a nearby magazine rack instead.

Crossing my legs, I use my knee as a resting spot for the periodical and try to ignore Hemming. He angles his chair a little more and sits leaning forward, his elbows on his thighs. As I scan the magazine, I occasionally glance over at him. He's staring off into the abyss and I wonder what's going through his mind.

Not that it matters.

My attention is back on the magazine when his foot taps mine.

When I glance at him this time, he's watching my face.

"I'm sorry," he mouths.

Shaking my head, I look back to the magazine. "It's okay..." But then I sigh heavily and look at him again. "You're right, anyway. I just... I don't know." I glance around the coffee shop. I can't say what I want to say, not with people around. "Maybe I'm just homesick," I decide to go with. That's as close to the truth as I can say here.

Then he goes and once again shows he's better at all of this pretending than I am, when he says, "What, am I not home enough?"

Fake it 'till you make it, I suppose.

Feeding off his words, I look back at my magazine, although I'm no longer reading it. "Maybe if you came to bed when I did, and didn't sleep in the other room..."

His voice drops. “It’s been a long week, and I don’t want to keep you up when I’m working late.”

Uncrossing my legs, I close the magazine. “You know I sleep better when you’re in bed.”

His eyes darken and he squints as if he’s trying to figure out his next step. Did I just win this round? Did I throw the master of this game?

I shrug a shoulder and put the magazine down. “I said what I said.”

“Jack!”

We both glance toward the barista who places two ceramic mugs on the counter.

“Honestly, I don’t know why you don’t just go by Hemming these days. It’s a good name. A strong name,” I tell him. When he moves to stand, I wave him down. “I’ll grab them.”

Except when I get there, our breakfast sandwich is placed down, too.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell the barista, who shakes her head.

“I’ll bring it for you!” She’s cheery, but maybe that’s a given when you have coffee and espresso at your fingertips.

The barista follows me to the corner and after I hand the macchiato mug to Hemming, I turn for the breakfast plate. “Thank you,” I tell her.

“Not a problem. Enjoy!”

I place the plate on the table and sit, afraid to look at Hemming to see if he’s watching her.

When I finally grow the nerve to look at him and his eyes are on me, I shouldn’t be surprised. He’s really good at this charade.

“We should have gotten these to go,” he mumbles, taking a sip before putting his mug on the table.

“Why?” I ask, maybe a little facetiously.

When he lifts his brows in response, I lower mine with a fake scowl, and when he shakes his head, I let myself match his smile.

“It’s going to be okay,” he tells me, reaching for half of the breakfast sandwich. “Whatever happens, it’s going to be okay.”

I sip my latte, then lick at the whipped cream I feel on my top lip, before nodding. “I trust you.”

I have no other choice.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

HEMMING

I THOUGHT I'D BEEN DOING THE RIGHT THING BY GIVING KAE space but I'm starting to think Tucker had the right idea that first night. From the second we left the safe house until the moment we woke up the next morning, there'd been an easiness between Kaelyn and me that hasn't existed since.

I spend most of my days up at Tucker's going over potential ops, as well as keeping tabs on Clay and the O'Ryans. Sometimes I get home for dinner and we'll order something for pick up, but there have been just as many nights where I've come home and she's already locked away in her bedroom.

We see each other almost every morning though. I've grown to enjoy coming home from my run with the guys and sitting in the kitchen with Kae as we drink our morning coffee.

She always tells me her plans for the day, and I tell her if I think I'll be back by dinner or not.

Then we go our separate ways.

Wash, rinse, repeat.

This morning when I got back to the house, I was unexpectedly struck by her.

Today is the first time she's gotten dressed up in something other than gym clothes—not that I find anything wrong with her tight leggings and cropped shirts.



The cream colored shirt she wears now is soft to the touch —when I put my hands on her shoulders before, I had to stop myself from rubbing her covered arms. The shirt goes to mid thigh, while doing some swoop cut thing up to her hips. She switched leggings for tight, dark jeans, and the heeled ankle boots she has on brings her height closer to mine.

She's also wearing makeup for the first time since we've met. She doesn't have a lot on. Doesn't majorly shape-shift her face with it. Although she did apply it in a way that accentuates her features.

Her eyelashes are darker, too, and it makes her blue eye brighter, and the hazel-green sharper.

It was shocking that first time, but I think her eyes are my favorite feature of hers.

They're so uniquely her.

I'm attracted to her in a way I wasn't prepared for.

Because I was caught off guard with my strong reaction to her, I purposely used her new maiden name on the drive into town, and repeated that at the end of the day, this is a job.

My job is to keep her safe.

My job is to be her protector.

My job is to make sure she doesn't do something stupid, and Clay or the O'Ryans come find her to throw her into whatever life they had planned for her.

My job is *not* to find her attractive.

My job is not to want to fuck her.

My job is not to imagine what this relationship could look like if we allowed it to be real.

But hell, I haven't been interested in a woman in the way I'm interested in her in years.

It goes beyond wanting to take her to bed, but I know I shouldn't act on it.

Yes, she chose this life. She said yes to the option.

She did not get to choose me though, and she should get to choose the person she does forever with...if she even wants to have forever with one person. Hell, maybe she never wanted marriage for herself.

I'd told her that Clay made bail but at this moment, the movement in Virginia isn't anything Tucker or I am worried about. Clay has a trial in a couple of months and as long as the O'Ryans don't make concerning moves, Kaelyn can be a single woman sooner than later.

We finish our coffees and the shared breakfast sandwich mostly in silence, which is both a good and bad thing. Good, because it allows Kae to work through whatever emotions she's clearly having this morning. I know I hurt her feelings but I keep reminding myself that it's for her own good.

Bad because the quiet has allowed me to mentally harp on everything, and try to figure out the next move.

When we're finished and back on the outside sidewalk, I reach for her hand. When she takes it, I remind myself it's for show. "You want to walk down the street? Maybe walk into your store?"

She looks up at me and shakes her head. "No. I think... Can we go home? Or even just...drive?"

It's been ages since I've sped down country roads, windows down, music up...

I'd like to give Kae that experience. Maybe it will help us both get out of our heads.

"Let's drive," I tell her and her lips curve up in response.

I walk her to the passenger door and pull it open, waiting for the step to fold down.

She doesn't let go of my hand and takes a step closer. The way the light breeze floats by picks up the scent of vanilla and mint. I shouldn't be noticing these things about her.

She's a job.

She's a job.

She's a job.

*Fuck it.*

It was only ten minutes ago when I told myself I cannot give in to my attraction, can't give in to curiosity. But hell. Men kiss their wives all the time, and if she questions it later, I'll tell her I saw someone watching.

With my unoccupied hand, I gently cup her chin and turn her face toward me. Her eyes widen a fraction and she takes a deep breath in through her nose, her shock but acceptance evident.

I lower my lips to hers and take my first kiss from my wife.

Either it's been a long time since I've kissed a woman, or there's something more going on between us, because this feels like coming home.

Immediately, I want to take the kiss further than a pressing of lips, but whether or not people are watching, I'm not the type of guy who paws and claims his woman publicly.

Kae sighs softly against my mouth and when I pull back, she has a dreamy look on her face. She blinks once before seeming to come back to reality.

"All right, fine, I forgive you," she teases lightly, and I don't care if it's real or in character; it makes me chuckle.

So I lean down to kiss her briefly once more.

A quick peck this time before letting her get into the truck.

An image crosses my mind of playfully slapping her ass upon her climbing up...

That may be too "real" for our pretend marriage.

But the thought has merit.

I close the door behind her.

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BECAUSE WE HAVE A FEW HOURS AND NOWHERE TO BE, I DRIVE the truck aimlessly. I know that we should talk, but I'm enjoying the windows down and Kae singing in the passenger seat beside me, her hand out the window and surfing against the wind.

We're thirty minutes out of town when I find a nature preserve to pull into.

"We're not exactly dressed to go hiking," Kae says in the middle of a Carrie Underwood line. She has a pretty good singing voice, and I've enjoyed listening to her.

"No, but we're dressed for tailgate sitting.

"Do people really do that? It's not just something they do in the movies?"

Grinning at her, I nod and put the truck in park. "People do a lot in the beds of their trucks."

Her eyes widen slightly and if her mind went where I think it did, I have no choice but to tease her. "Like keep extra shoes, move furniture...use as seats at a bonfire, watch the stars. And wherever your head went."

She doesn't bother denying it. "I read too many romance novels," she mumbles, unbuckling her belt.

"You'll have something to talk to Kate about. She's opening a bookstore in town. You two can talk about books at lunch today."

We both get out and meet in the back.

"No fancy mechanical steps back here?" It doesn't surprise me that she avoids the discussion about Kate and lunch with everyone later. Multiple mornings, I've suggested she hang out with Kate and she always responded with, she'd think about it.

"Nope," I respond to her joke about a step, "but if you need help, I might know a guy."

To her credit, Kae tries to get in by herself but after a few unsuccessful tries where she almost has her ass up and her legs flailing, I'm nearly rolling on the ground in laughter. "Let me help you." With her facing me, I put my hands on her hips.

The way she looks up at me has my cock twitching in anticipation, but I ignore it, lifting her easily onto the tailgate.

“Scoot back,” I direct, hopping up after.

“I have no upper body strength. Obviously.”

We both move to the other end of the truck bed, resting against the back of the cab.

“You know you can use the equipment.”

“I think I should probably start with five pound dumbbells before I use...” she swings her hand around in a circle, “all that stuff you have.”

Chuckling, I bring a knee up and rest my forearm on it. “This weekend I can help you.”

“We’ll see.”

“You afraid of some weights, Kae?” I tease, and I can see the earlier trepidation finally, fully, fade away.

“No, I’m not.” Her voice is strong and as she looks over at me, I see a shift on her face that reminds me of her carefree teasing at the airport. “But that would require we spend even *more* time together.”

I give her words a moment to sit between us before I say, “And that’s a bad thing?”

“You’re probably not going to want to spend time with me the rest of the week. Might be a bad thing for you.”

I think she might be joking. “Why?”

“I’m supposed to... Well...”

I lift my brows, urging her to continue.

“I was emotional this morning because I’m PMSing,” she says, her voice low to not carry.

I can tell she’s uncomfortable with the conversation, so I try to lighten the mood up. “Oh, so that’s what you call it. Emotional.” It’s quickly evident those were not the words to say, because she frowns and looks away, the lightness she was

showing locked down again. “I’m teasing, Kae,” I try saying, reaching for her hand.

She doesn’t let me take it, not that I blame her.

“Okay, so I won’t tease you about your...monthly, womanly cycle, least of all when it’s around the corner. Let me add this date to my calendar so I don’t do it again.” I make a show of pulling my phone out from the back pocket of my jeans.

“Oh my God,” she mumbles, backslapping my thigh. “Let’s... No. Don’t.”

“Husbands need to know when their wives are going to go demonic on them,” I continue to tease, a smile on my face that only grows wider when she leans into me in an attempt to take my phone from me.

“Hemming!”

The way she’s leaning into me and how close her face is...

The way I still taste her lips on mine...

I wrap my arm around her hips and pull her closer, and with my hand that still has my phone, press gently against the back of her head until I get to taste her lips again.

There isn’t a soul around us, and if she pulls away, I’ll let her...

But she doesn’t.

Kae moves to sit on my lap, her knees on either side of my body. I move forward and urge her to wrap her legs around me, as I take her lips with mine.

She does—and is the one to take our kiss further.

When her tongue brushes my lower lip, I have no choice but to open my mouth to hers. Our tongues brush and when I lower my hand from her head to discard my phone, she moans sadly into my mouth.

The moment my hand is free, it’s once again on her head, my fingers combing into her pulled-back hair. Her braid was pretty but it’s going to need to be redone.

One of Kae's hands is fisted in my t-shirt while the other is on my shoulder near my neck. Her thumb keeps brushing up and down against the skin there, over the curve, up the tendon, back down. I never would have guessed it was an erogenous zone to the touch, but between her light tracing there, and the incredibly minute way her hips move over my cock as we kiss, I know it won't be long before she can feel what she does to me.

I need to talk with her before she knows what she does to me.

I need to make sure we're on the same page, because if I go full mast under her...

I need her to feel safe with me, and being sexually attracted to her when the feeling isn't reciprocated probably won't make her feel safe.

Moving my hand from her back, I take both and pull her head away from mine. Her lips are swollen and red from our kisses, and fuck if I don't want to kiss her again.

"This..."

But she interrupts me. "We're adults."

"I know, Kae, but there's a fine line here, and I have to be sure you're okay with it." Our voices are low, even though there's no one visible.

"I think I like you, Hemming. I've..." She swallows and her eyes leave mine for a brief moment before coming back. "I've been confused because you're really, really good at the pretend thing. Better than I am."

"You've been doing great, Kae."

"No. I haven't. This morning..." She shakes her head. "I know it's stupid hormones, and beware... I always get super emotional the week before." Her words are further proved true when her eyes water. I brush a tear that falls and she scoffs, annoyed. When I chuckle, she sighs and continues, "I'm just having a hard time with what's real and what's pretend."

“Then just let it be real. Like you said, we’re adults. We’re in this situation for the foreseeable future... Let’s enjoy it.”

“There’s an end date though, Hemming. Whether that’s in a year or two, there’s an end date...”

“Let’s take this as if there’s not an end date. Because Kae... I *know* I like you. I think you’re beautiful and you’re easy to get along with. I enjoy our coffee mornings and going to the store with you hasn’t been terrible,” I joke. “I know I told you it wasn’t fair that you didn’t get to choose—”

“I’d choose you.”

Giving her a sad grin, I shake my head. “You don’t know that.”

“I know that after ten days, you’re a good man. You talk more with me than you do with Tucker. You tend to give the guys short, quick answers, but you actually *talk* to me. I also know that you’re not a cat guy—”

“I never told you that...”

“Hemming.” Her brows go up and even though her eyes are still glassy from her previous tears, there’s a hint of laughter in them. “Your face dropped when Carter told you I had a pet and I clarified to say ‘cat.’ It *literally* dropped. You’ve been a good sport about it though. I think you’re going to like Wilson.”

“I had dogs growing up. The only cats I knew were barn cats and they were mean.”

“Wilson thinks he’s a dog. And I’m not just saying that. He’ll do tricks for treats, and greets you at the door.”

“I’m going to have Carter bring him to the house while we’re out. I think that if you’re home when the cat gets there, there’s no way in hell I’ll get you to lunch with everyone—”

Her face immediately blanches.

“You’ve met everyone who will be there, Kae. Why are you nervous?”

“I’m not nervous...” She looks away from me.



With my hand on her back, I rub small circles. “You paled faster than Casper the ghost.”

“It’s the fact it’s everyone,” she admits, her eyes meeting mine again. “I mean, I know it’s only like...eight people, including us. But in my head, that group just multiplies and multiplies.”

Her words remind me of an earlier conversation where she told me she was introverted. “It sounds to me that it’s more than being introverted. Have you always been afraid of groups of people?”

“I don’t think so...but I’ve also never put myself in those situations. Even in...”

The way she trails off, I know her head is back to “before.”

“There’s no one around,” I reassure her. Normally I’d want this conversation to remain in the four walls of our house, but I’m positive we’re alone. “But here. Turn around...” She does and now sits between my legs, her back to my chest. I wrap my arms around her upper chest, hugging her back to me.

While I’d prefer to still see her face, this way she’s able to look around and confirm that we are indeed alone.

Kae’s legs are stretched out between mine, but she crosses her ankles.

“I was never a bar go-er,” she continues softly, relaxing into my embrace, “but O’Ryans was around the corner from my place. A couple of times, I met a girl from work there and eventually, I realized I was comfortable there. I’d go for one drink, then head home. I always sat at the bar, and I always went on days I knew certain bartenders were there. I felt safe and comfortable. Where I sat, there wasn’t any way people could crowd behind me. But now I realize that I *wasn’t* safe and I *shouldn’t* have felt comfortable. It’s a weird feeling. Second guessing everything.”

“You know you’re safe with me and Douglas Group.”

“I know. But... Anyway. Large groups. Really has nothing to do with all that, I guess.”

“No, I think it has a lot to do with it. You know that you shut down with too many people around. You need to recharge sooner. That’s the introverted part of you. But then there’s also the part where you fear your safety radar is off, because when you thought you were safe before, you weren’t. So, you’re going into a situation where your emotions are all over the place, and your body is already going into flight mode. It makes sense to me.”

“I really don’t understand why you didn’t have a girlfriend before...all of this,” she whispers, shaking her head against my chest.

Because she shared, I feel it’s only fair that I share, too. “Celeste did a number on me. We were middle school sweethearts. No one thought we’d make it to high school, let alone graduation. When I made the decision to enlist, she was part of every conversation. We talked about how we didn’t really have much else going for us. She was going to go to school to be a hairdresser and I’d worked at a nearby auto shop, but we wanted out of Malta. The Marine Corps seemed like the best answer. We’d get married after boot camp and she’d be my dependent, so if I was given an overseas assignment, she could come eventually.”

In my mind, it’s the week of the Crucible. The fifty-four hour “exercise” where recruits are tested physically and psychologically on eight hours of sleep or less. We received mail the day before, and it was then I got the letter from my mom, telling me Celeste and Danny had been hanging out, and it seemed like more than two friends waiting for their mutual person to come back home.

“It was better to break things off when we did,” I say now as Kae brings her hands up to hook on my tattooed forearm. She knows Celeste cheated. It was in her binder. “Too many guys find out about affairs while they’re overseas, and then you can’t keep your mind on the task at hand. It can be dangerous. Guys make stupid mistakes when their heads aren’t where they need to be.”

“I’m sorry. I’m sure it wasn’t easy.” She tips her head to the side so she can look back at me. “You lost both a friend

and a girlfriend in one instance.”

“Dating within the Marine Corps isn’t always easy, either. Unless you’re married, if your partner is also enlisted, you may be sent to different bases. There’s a lot of long distance, and after my first experience in long distance failed, it just never seemed worth the risk.”

“And when you got out?”

I turned my face in to kiss her forehead once. “I liked my space. Became a creature of habit. Didn’t think I needed someone else to worry about.”

Her fingertips dig into my arm momentarily as she looks back out toward the acres of trees. “And then you got stuck with me.”

Our conversation has made it full circle. “I don’t mind being stuck with you.”

## CHAPTER NINE

KAE

I FELT MUCH BETTER AFTER OUR TALK IN THE BED OF HIS truck.

While neither of us outwardly confirmed we were going to simply be real together, our conversation brought a lightness between us. Lifted a heavy veil I wasn't aware existed.

"Looks like we're meeting at Zane's instead," Hemming says as we drive back into town.

Zane's is Forever's sports grill restaurant. I'm not sure of any sports that exist in Montana but apparently the people thought small town Forever needed a place to watch games. "Guess we could have gone to the diner for breakfast, after all. Although I'd have stuffed my face on French toast and wouldn't have had room for lunch, anyway." I rebraid my hair quickly, not minding that it has a lived-in look to it.

Hemming chuckles beside me and when he holds out his hand, palm up, over the center console, I stare at it a second before placing my hand in his.

He squeezes our clasp once.

"There's a town meeting this Friday."

"Oh?" I look over at him. "Is it like...something all the residents go to, or...?"

"I don't think Tucker's been to one, but it could be worthwhile. Get to meet more people in town..." He catches

my apprehension. “We can go together. Sit in the back of the room. Hear what has to be said. Maybe you can even bring up the bakery. Get people excited about it coming.”

“I really have to get started on that,” I say on a sigh. “I should start baking again. Making sure my recipes are up to par. You sure you don’t like cake?”

His grimace makes me giggle. “A couple bites of cake isn’t going to make your eight pack a six pack, Hemming.” Suddenly, an idea hits. “Oh! What if I figure out a way to make cakes with your protein powder and stuff? But will people want that? Obviously, we’re not talking full sheet cakes, but maybe small batches of cupcakes or something. I could do petit fours, but those may be too small. One bite and you’re gonna want a cupcake anyway.”

When I look over at him, Hemming has a big smile on his face.

“What?”

“You,” he answers, glancing at me briefly. “Ten minutes ago, you were dreading baking again, and now you have a new menu.”

“Would you taste test things if I put your icky powders in them? Because let me tell you, I’ve tried whey powder once and it wasn’t a pleasant experience.”

“I’ll try them.”

“We’ll have to go to the store if I’m going to start baking. I have a lot I’m going to need. Well, just enough to work through recipes. I’ll get the big stuff when the store is closer to opening. Then I’ll get the industrial sized things. That’s something else I have to do. Figure out the best ovens and appliances. Gosh, I have so much to do.”

“Considering you haven’t even started finalizing plans on the build-out, I think you have some time.”

“I’ll talk with Casey again tomorrow. I think we have too much going on today.”

“Kate designed her bookstore.”

I'm getting better at keeping up with how Hemming switches topics. "Like...*she* did, or she had ideas that someone else made reality?"

"No, I'm pretty sure it was all her. I guess before they came to Forever, Kate was going to school for interior architecture. I know you've avoided talking to her since we've been in town, but maybe you two have more in common than you think. You can talk books, and maybe she'll be able to help you figure out the interior of your store."

"...Maybe."

"Give her a chance, babe. You need more friends than just me."

"You're assuming I consider you a friend." My goodness, once my guard is down it's so easy to tease with him, and his answering chuckle tells me he knows I'm joking.

Downtown Forever has a main street, which is where my bakery will be. However, one end of the street has a large field, and the other end has a T-intersection that butts up to the town square. All the parking around the square is parallel parking and after driving around the square and seeing every spot taken, Hemming brings the truck back to Main Street, where he parks in front of Between the Pages.

"Looks like Kate got her sign up," Hemming notices as he puts the truck in park. I'll be honest, I haven't been incredibly astute when it comes to things downtown.

He waits for me at the front and takes my hand as we walk past Bailey's then cross the street. Zane's is on the opposite side of the park.

There's a pathway in the square that leads to a gazebo, but we take the outer sidewalk and when we reach the north end, we cross the street once more.

"Do you think we should be jay walking in front of the police station?" I ask curiously, glancing to the building that wraps around the north west corner of the square. It houses the police station, fire station, and is the town's courthouse.

"Eh, no one's watching."

Zane's is a large brick building and has two patio dining areas, one in the front and one on the opposite end. Neither appears to have patrons, but the TVs are on.

Hemming releases my hand when he pulls open the door, but only so he can place it on the small of my back. Walking inside, the restaurant isn't the brightest I've been in, but it has a fun atmosphere. There's one extra-large television screen—that's actually made up of nine screens, I realize, looking closer. There are also normal-sized television screens around the perimeter.

At the small increase of pressure to my back, I focus and realize Tucker is waving us down.

It's just him at the table, but the door opens behind us before we can make our way. Glancing over my shoulder, I see it's Tanner and Kate.

Hemming gives Kate a side hug before slapping hands with Tanner.

"Hey, Hemingway," Tanner responds.

"Back to that, are we?"

Tanner shrugs. "As long as you're not getting us in trouble."

"It was never me getting us in trouble," Hemming scoffs although he's grinning.

I try to smile at the comradery but my heart is beginning to race. When Hemming takes my hand again, I look over at him and he gives me a wink. "It's okay," he mouths.

The four of us make our way to the tables that have been pushed together to accommodate a large party. Behind the tables is a wall that separates the waitstaff and grill from the restaurant. Hemming lets Tanner and Kate choose their spots first, and I'm not surprised to see Tanner choose a spot by the wall.

It faces the door. From what I understand of former military members, I'm sure those seats are a hot commodity. A fight on who doesn't have their back to the door.

He sits on the outside and Kate sits beside him, and when Hemming allows me to pick a seat, I decide I'd rather be sandwiched between Kate and Hemming, than to potentially be forced to sit next to someone else I'm really not comfortable with.

My choice seems to please Hemming, because even though he's talking to Tucker, who stands next to us, he winks down at me as I sit.

Hemming lowers himself into the chair beside me, throwing his arm over the back of mine.

Tucker sits in the chair at the head, or side, of the table. "Carter just dropped off Wilson. Said she's closing him in the bathroom with some of his things. She'll be here in a few minutes after picking up Jensen. Eli and Bryce are coming by too."

A waitress comes over to get our drink orders while we wait, and I try hard to focus on the conversation going on around me. I have my hands clasped tightly in my lap, and when Hemming moves his arm from my chair to my shoulder, his hand lightly squeezes until I look over at him.

He leans in before talking for my ears only, "Take a breath, Kae. You've got this."

"I'm breathing."

His brows go up. "Hardly."

The Douglas sisters arrive then, and Jensen sits on the corner next to Tucker, and Carter sits directly across from me. Bryce is the next to arrive, followed by Eli. I'm introduced to those I haven't met, and soon everyone is talking and sipping on waters.

I learn that Jensen is due to get her black cast off next week. Apparently, it's been on for a really long time and she's more than ready to have it off. Carter talks about her trip to Wisconsin, where a friend of hers recently discovered she's pregnant with triplets. I guess the friend already has twins.

Talk about a shock factor.



Hemming talks across the table to Eli about our flight with Jack, while Jensen chats to Carter beside her. Tucker, Tanner, and Bryce have a conversation, and Kate occasionally offers her opinion on whatever they're talking about.

All the conversations and how they crisscross around the table is hard to keep up with, but I try to give my attention to everyone, even if I don't have anything to add.

"How's the bakery plans coming along?" Tucker asks me.

I'm caught off guard at being narrowed in on. "Oh, I haven't really... I've been thinking but kind of paused this week after talking with the design girl."

"She's going to be working on recipes," Hemming says. "We're headed to the grocery store later to grab all the things she needs, so if anyone wants to taste test, you're welcome at our place this week."

For a second, I'm annoyed that he offered our house—the one place I haven't felt nerves outside of the confusion between Hemming and me—but then I take a deep breath. He didn't mean anything negative by it, and he's welcome to invite people into our home.

"He's afraid he'll lose his eight pack," I say, timidly glancing around the table.

Everyone laughs and I feel myself relaxing. "It's not like I'm making him eat full sheet cakes. I figured I'd test with cupcakes. I could go mini, but you can't really determine if a cake is good or not with a two-bite cupcake."

"I could absolutely determine if it's good with a two-bite cupcake," Kate says beside me. "And then I'll ask for twenty more just to be certain."

"Kate has a sweet tooth," Tanner grins. "You could probably make big cakes and Kate would happily eat every morsel."

"Kate! Is that a ring?" Jensen says, leaning into the table, and the conversation moves from me to the fact Kate and Tanner are newly engaged.

As I relax, Hemming's arm around my shoulder drops so he can tug me to lean into him, where he presses his lips to my temple. I can hear his unspoken words of encouragement, and I smile to myself.

Soon, appetizers are dropped off and everyone digs into the mozzarella sticks, chips with salsa, queso, and guac, and potato skins. The conversation never falters, and I find that I'm enjoying myself.

Appetizers move into a full lunch, where I steal the pickle spear off Hemming's plate while he's not looking.

Of course, he notices right away.

"Did you take my pickle?" he asks, his eyes narrowed but not an ounce of malice in his expression.

My eyes wide, I shake my head, trying to feign innocence. "Nope. Wasn't me."

He takes my wrist and lifts it. I grin wide as I try to take my hand back. "What are you doing, Hemming?"

"Smelling your fingers."

"Hemming, we're in a restaurant!" I whisper while trying to hold back my laughter.

Instead of smelling them for pickle juice, he slides his fingers between mine and puts our clasped hands on his thigh, before turning his attention back to the conversation he was participating in.

Time goes by faster than I thought it would. I learn more about the Douglas siblings, including the ones who aren't here. Hunter, who I met in Virginia, seems to be a sore spot with Jensen. Anytime his name is brought up, the nineteen year old scowls.

The other Douglas sibling who isn't here, Jace, is apparently due to get out of the Navy in a few months. The last time he was home, something big happened between him and his best friend, Finn. I didn't catch it—it's not easy keeping up with the conversations—but I think Finn's a girl.

I guess it's Jace's friends who are somehow connected to the case I wound up in, and while no one goes into detail, it sounds like those friends, Beau and Jay, are also on the list to join Douglas Group and will be arriving to Montana in a few weeks.

After the check is paid, we all walk toward the doors. Some were able to get parking closer, and Hemming and I are the only ones who parked over on Main Street.

"Kae! I'm serious," Kate calls out after Hemming and I already begin to pull away from the group. "I will eat all of the cake. All of it. I'll bring cookies."

"Store bought," Tanner clarifies. "But cookies are her love language."

My mood is up greatly, and I can't help but smile as Hemming and I walk back to the other side of the square.

"See, it wasn't that bad. Once you warmed up, you were a natural."

"I'll get better," I promise. "I think our conversation before helped, too. I wasn't worried, thinking about what you were doing, and what was real and what wasn't."

"All real," he reassures with a squeeze of my hand.

He walks me to my side of the truck and helps me inside. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't hoping he'd kiss me again like he did outside The Main Bean, but I don't allow myself to be disappointed when he doesn't.

As Hemming reverses out of our angled parking spot, he says, "Let's go get the car out of the way. Hopefully we're not in Billings too long, and then we can go rescue your cat from the bathroom."

"It was smart of Carter to lock him in there. There's a good chance we wouldn't be able to find him otherwise. When he was a kitten, I once lost him, only to find he'd found an opening in the corner, where my cupboards met, and he wiggled up into that space to hide. He's not a scaredy cat by any means, but it's a new place for him, and after his road trip, I'm positive he'd try to find a place to hide."

“Once you’re sure he’s good, then we can go into Laurel.”

Laurel, I’ve learned, is the next biggest town, between Forever and Billings.

Forever’s grocery store is a smaller mom and pop place called The Market and probably won’t have everything I need.

At least, not in the quantities I need it.

We drive away from downtown Forever, Tucker and Tanner’s trucks in the distance in front of us, and a feeling of happiness fills me.

Hemming’s been right all along.

It’s all going to be okay.

## CHAPTER TEN

HEMMING

WE PACKED A LOT INTO THE DAY.

The trip to Billing's was uneventful, although Kae was happy to have her own vehicle. While we'd had a Ford Escape transferred in for her to test drive, we ended up upgrading her into an Explorer. Kae was worried the sloped design of the back hatch in the Escape would cause issues if she ever had cake deliveries, whereas the Explorer was larger and had the boxy design of larger SUVs.

After, I got to meet the cat.

For whatever reason, I was expecting Wilson to be a shorthaired cat. What I pictured and what I was greeted with were two very different cats.

Wilson is huge.

The moment Kae opened the bathroom door, he was meowing at her and went up on his back paws, resting his front ones on her hip.

Her.

Hip.

He was also a black, fluffy thing, with rust spots that Kae explained were from the sun. With all his fur, I have a feeling we're going to be meeting the town groomer at some point.

Carter left two bowls in the bathroom with him, as well as a disposable litter box, but Kae lifted the cat and walked

around the house with him, showing him where the two hidden litter boxes were all while talking to him like he understands.

I thought the furniture pieces we picked out were pretty neat. The television console has a hidden box, and the entry way table does, too. When we bought them, Kae told me sometimes cats are finicky but she thought Wilson would be okay with them.

Time will tell, but the way Kae's face lit up when Wilson saw her, I know I'll be okay with however it all plays out.

When we left for Laurel, Kae put Wilson back in the bathroom. We ended up going to Walmart. She thought they'd have bulk sizing of some of the things she needs.

A few hundred dollars later, the back seat of the truck is filled with flour, sugars of all kinds, vinegar, oils, and so much more.

Her cakes are more than boxed mixes, I muse.

"Sometimes I'll use boxed mix for a base, but I alter what goes into it," she said when I made the same comment in the baking aisle. "And those are great when I'm in a pinch, but that's not the case right now."

We get all the things in the house and I help Kae find spots for everything. "You can eat these eggs," she tells me, putting the two sixty-count cardboard sleeves into the fridge, "but not all of them. I'll probably start baking tomorrow or the next day."

Chuckling, I close the small pantry door where I put the containers of baking soda and baking powder. "I'm not going to eat a dozen eggs in one day, babe. Although tomorrow I'm going to need to eat food from home." We ate out all three meals today, having grabbed Subway at Walmart for dinner.

"You'll just work off the extra carbs, don't lie."

"Speaking of." I lean against the pantry door, crossing my arms over my chest as I watch her finish in the fridge. "If you want, I was serious before. I'll help you figure out your way around weights. Not that you need to, but if you want to."

“Hmm. Maybe.”

Something soft brushes against me and I look down to see Wilson rubbing against my leg. When he notices me looking down at him, he lets out a loud meow.

“Wilson, leave him alone.”

The cat glances at his human before looking back at me. When I uncross my arms and offer him my fingers to sniff, he goes up on his hind legs and affectionately rubs his head against my hand.

“He likes you.”

“I always thought cats were solitary.”

“I think most cats are. Or else, you just don’t hear about the ones who need their people.” Kae comes over and picks Wilson up from behind, then cradles the beast of a cat in her arms. “C’mon, Wilson. Leave the man alone.”

We move to settle on the couch, finding a show to watch on Netflix. It’s not long before Wilson takes off for a catnip-filled ball, and not much longer after that, Kae is practically falling asleep on the couch while sitting up.

We’re sitting with respectable space between us, as well as with two throw pillows Kae ordered from Amazon, but I reach over to gently poke her arm. With a sigh, she opens her eyes again.

“Go to bed, Kae.”

Behind the heavy depths, I see a question stirring, but she doesn’t voice it. Instead, she pushes to stand. “G’night, Hemming.”

“Good night, Kae.”

I watch as she walks around the couch, but then stops at her bedroom door. She places a hand on the frame and stands there. When she looks over her shoulder at me, I have a feeling she’s going to bravely ask what she didn’t moments before.

All day, I thought about our conversations, and I kept going back to her comment at The Main Bean about going to bed. At the time, we were still on the real vs make believe line, but paired with the conversation at the nature preserve, I've had a feeling that even though the words were made as a reason for our argument, there'd been truth in her words.

But I need to hear her confirm it before I make any assumptions.

"Where are you sleeping tonight?" Her voice doesn't give way to the nerves I know she's feeling. It's in the way her fingers rub together.

The way she chews on the inside of her cheek after her question is out.

Sleeping in the same bed as her tonight would further cement our situation as real.

"Do you want me in bed with you?" I ask her instead of answering her directly.

I should have known she'd respond back with another question. "Do you *want* to be in the same bed as me?"

"A question for a question?"

"You did it first," she answers, turning so her back is directly to the corner of the door jam. She moves her upper body side to side as if she has an itch between her shoulder blades.

"Last question."

She stops her movement and tips her head to the side.

"Did you really sleep better with me there?"

"I slept well that night," she answers, bringing her chin up defiantly.

"Am I—"

"You said last question."

Chuckling, I reach for the remote and turn off the television as I stand, then stalk toward her. I have to give her



credit; she doesn't take a step back. She does, however, lift her chin further.

When I get to her, I reach for her hip, pulling her close. Our bodies meet, hard to soft. My cock already coming to life behind the zipper of my jeans.

“Am I going to wake up with you tangled with me again?”

Her jaw drops open. “You...”

“It's hard to stay asleep when an attractive woman is rubbing against you, Kae.”

“But you...” She doesn't finish the thought, but her mouth gapes open as she tries to find words.

“I figured it was better for you if you didn't realize I was awake. But I was absolutely awake.”

Her response now is a whispered, “Oh my gosh,” while she closes her eyes to embarrassment.

I turn us slightly so her back isn't to the sharp corner of the door and is instead against the flat surface of the door jam, and cup her chin in my hand. “I don't expect anything tonight,” I tell her softly, even if my straining cock contradicts my words. “I don't expect anything tomorrow, or the next day. But I'll stay in your bed if that's where you want me.”

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TRUE TO MY WORD, I DIDN'T TRY ANYTHING WITH KAE LAST night. And unlike the first night, we didn't sleep on obvious opposite sides of the bed. We started the night off in an embrace, and when I woke in the morning, it didn't seem like either of us did much moving.

Except once again, one of Kae's legs found its way between mine.

This morning, though, instead of her hand being on my chest, I wake to the feel of her slowly dragging it down my stomach, its destination clear.

“We cross that line, Kae...” I warn, my voice breaking with sleepiness.

She doesn't startle, nor does her hand stop its descent.

“We're both adults,” she whispers right before she cups me. I'm at half-chub, and I know it won't be long before my cock is absolutely aching, ready for the kind of release only a woman can give it.

“I'm an equal opportunist,” I tell her as her hand grips my dick over my shorts. “And I've been dreaming about your pussy. So take what you want, but know what's coming.”

Kae goes up to her knees and I spread mine so she can kneel between. “Yes, sir.”

I've never been about the whole sir and daddy thing, but the moment the word passes her lips, my cock jumps in her hand.

She laughs lightly then tugs the top of my boxers down enough to pull my cock free. It's not completely full yet, but she gives it a good jerk before bringing the head toward her parted mouth.

“Fuck, Kae,” I groan, watching as she brushes the head against her lips. She swipes her tongue over the top before swirling it around the entire tip, and when her eyes meet mine, she smiles wickedly.

“What do you need me to do?” she asks, her thumb brushing along the sensitive underside of the mushroomed tip. “Tell me what to do, Hemming,” she practically begs as my cock grows in her hand.

“Suck it in your mouth.”

She does as she's told, but only once.

“Again. Pump my cock while you're at it.”

This time when she does, I run my hand through her hair, pulling it back from her face. “Good girl. Take my dick all the way in. I want to feel the back of your throat.”

She hums and the vibration has my cock going completely hard. I continue to guide her up and down until I know I need a break.

I'm not coming in her fucking mouth.

Not right now.

When I pull her off my cock, she whimpers.

“On your back.”

As she does, I throw a leg over both of hers, pinning her lower body in place. I immediately take her mouth in a demanding kiss, my hand landing on her breast.

This time when she moans, she presses her chest up into my hand, and I knead the tissue until I feel her nipple beginning to pebble against my palm. Our tongues duel but when I pinch her tight nipple between my thumb and index finger, Kae gasps into my mouth.

“You like that, huh?” I ask, rolling it lightly, gradually adding pressure only to roll lighter again.

“Y-yes.” Her eyes are closed in pleasure.

“Open your eyes.”

It seems to take her a moment to do so, and the moment I get her beautiful eyes on me, I smile and squeeze her nipple hard. “Good girl. I wonder what your nipples taste like against my tongue.”

“Yes.”

Chuckling, I once again rub my palm over her breast. “Yes, what?”

“Take my nipple in your mouth. I w-want to feel your tongue on them.”

“Always tell me what you want,” I demand, moving so I can situate myself between her splayed thighs. I push her shirt up and she helps me remove it. I knew she slept bare under her shirt, but seeing her full tits and dusky nipples...

I don't take any time before circling the tip of my tongue around one peak.

"Oh, yes, Hemming," Kae moans, and I know her eyes are closed again.

Biting gently, I wait until she opens her eyes and when she does, I reward her with a hard suck.

I give each nipple the same attention. When I'm feasting on one, my hand is working the other, and vice versa. I can feel the heat of her against my stomach and I know her pussy will be gleaming when I pull her shorts off...

I can smell her arousal, and I'm ready to taste her.

"I'm going to lick your pretty pussy now," I inform her, pushing away from her so I can get her sleep shorts off. Kae helps kick them off and when she puts her legs back to the bed, she has her feet planted and her legs spread wide.

She's on full display. Not bashful in the slightest with having her cunt out and in the cool bedroom air.

"Fucking gorgeous," I tell her, situating myself between her legs. I don't waste time, and the moment my tongue laps up her center, her body arches.

"Again," she begs.

I spend a healthy ten minutes driving her crazy with my tongue, working her up only to let her back down, again and again, until her body is strung tight with her need for release.

"You're going to come on my cock," I tell her when she cries out at the loss of my mouth.

I roll off the bed to discard my lounge pants and am back between her legs quickly. Kae reaches for my cock at the same time I angle my hips, and I watch as she swirls the tip over her clit. The hitch of her breath tells me she's going to take what she wants. She's going to rub herself to orgasm by using my cock to her clit, and I'm not having it.

My hand joins hers to push it to her center and I sink into her, one glorious inch at a time.

“Oh my God, Hemming...” The muscles in her neck are tight and I can’t stop myself from leaning down to nip at one. Her body shudders against mine but she’s not coming yet.

“How’s my cock feel in your tight cunt, baby?” I growl against her ear, pulling my hips back only to slam into her again.

“So good...”

“How close are you? Still on the edge?”

“Y-yes...”

“Let me see you rub your clit. Get off on me,” I demand as I push up to my knuckles, giving room between our bodies.

My groin is flush with hers and I don’t pull out again until her fingers are where I want them to be.

“That’s right. Let me see how you like it.”

She rubs her clit with her two middle fingers and I watch, enraptured, all while giving her slow, full thrusts of my hard cock.

“Okay... Yeah. I’m...”

“Open your eyes, Kae.”

This time they snap open and her fingers begin to rub in quicker, uncoordinated movements. Her pussy starts to clench around my cock and I know she’s almost there.

“Milk my cock, Kae. Let me feel your pussy ripple on me. Let it go...”

“Fffff...” The end of her curse word ends on a long moan as her orgasm takes over.

I wasn’t prepared for how good her slick walls would feel against my bare cock, and I know I’m playing with fire, but I can’t stop myself from continuing to thrust through her tight pussy. It feels so fucking good...

I take it as far as I can before I completely lose control, roughly pulling out and taking my cock, slick with her arousal, and jerking myself off until I’m coming on Kae. Her stomach

conceals at the first jet of warm cum, and her eyes move from me working my cock above her, to my face.

After, I collapse beside her and we lay in bed, both on our backs, catching our breath.

“I need to shower,” Kae finally breaks the spell.

I roll my head on the pillow to look at her. She looks thoroughly fucked.

And when I glance down to her naked body, a strange, unexpected sense of “mine” rushes through me. Like my cum marks her.

“I’m pissed I have to work today.”

“Why?”

“I could easily spend the entire day fucking you.”

Instead of blushing, her grin is wicked. “You ever do it in the shower?”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

KAELYN

I'M SO GLAD HEMMING AND I HAD OUR CONVERSATION yesterday, because nothing has felt strange or awkward since.

The sex was a bonus, too. I feel lighter in a way I haven't in a very long time.

Gosh, when was the last time sex was as good as it was this morning?

It's been a while, that's all I know.

I can absolutely be okay being married to the sex god that is Hemming Johansen, for however long needed.

Or, however long he'll have me.

Whichever is the longest.

After our shower—where we decided it was a tight fit but doable—we had coffee and he had his usual eggs. When Tucker texted him and asked why he didn't run this morning, he texted back that he slept in.

I told him he could have told him he was otherwise occupied but Hemming shook his head. *"What goes on between us is for us."*

Now, I have two cupcake pans cooling—I ended up opting for mini cupcakes, after all—and another in the oven, and I'm batching both a buttercream and whipped frosting, both of which I'll split and flavor.

I forgot how much fun I have while baking and the hours have flown by.

While I started with traditional cake recipes, I wasn't kidding when I said I'd try to figure out a good cake recipe using whey or casein powder. I have to figure out my bases first, though.

I'm pulling out the third pan when the doorbell chimes throughout the house, startling me. I almost drop the pan but get it placed on the silicone pot holder.

"Show me the front door," I tell the smart screen that Tucker had installed before we got here. It doesn't take long before the screen flips and I see Kate standing outside, waving at the camera.

For a quick moment, my body goes into flight mode. My heart flips and starts to race, my palms sweat.

"Stop it," I tell myself. It's just Kate. I can do this.

Brushing my hands over the gray sweatpants I stole from Hemming's dresser, I head to the front door and pull it open after turning the deadlock. "Hey, Kate."

"Hi! I was going to call, but then thought you're maybe like me and wouldn't answer the phone, so I thought I'd risk walking over here. I have cookies." She holds up a blue package of Oreos.

"Nothing is finished yet, but your timing is good," I tell her, stepping aside to let her in. "I'm just finishing up my frosting batch and then I'll pipe the cupcakes."

"I'm not kidding when I say I'll taste them all," she chuckles as she closes the door behind her. Tanner must have engrained it in her too, because she flips the deadbolt as she toes off her shoes. "Do you like Oreos? We have six different varieties, and I figured it was the stash I could share."

I walk her toward the kitchen. "Honestly? I like the cookie, but I'm not a big fan of the filling."

Kate gasps jokingly, but then makes a comment about the house. "It's a way different set up than we have. Have you



been to the main house?”

“Yes, the first day we were here, Tucker gave us a tour. It’s a gorgeous house, isn’t it?”

“So pretty. Okay, tell me what cupcakes you have.”

Kate sits at the counter and we spend the next thirty minutes going over the six cake flavors I have prepared. I know when I first met her, I was amazed at how normal she was, and even at lunch yesterday, she was easy to get along with.

But today?

In a matter of minutes, it’s like we’ve been friends forever.

“This is the one I kind of randomly threw together today,” I tell her, pushing the cream-colored cupcake toward her. “It’s been a long time since I concocted a flavor, so if it’s bad, please tell me. You won’t hurt my feelings.” She’s allegedly liked every other flavor, but when they were vanilla, chocolate, red velvet, blue velvet, and carrot...

They weren’t difficult flavors to perfect.

Especially because red and blue velvet cakes are basically the same damn thing—although if someone wants a *true* red velvet, make with beetroot, I’ll do it.

“What’s it supposed to be?” Kate asks, and pretends to be a cupcake critic as she lifts it in front of her face, turning it from side to side.

“I’d like you to taste it first.” My nerves are on edge with this particular flavor. I’ve been giving thought to the town meeting on Friday and agree with Hemming that it would be a good idea to go and introduce ourselves.

I think if this cupcake is any good, it’ll be a good one to bring with. With September and fall right around the corner, it’s a flavor that should get people excited.

I watch as Kate takes a bite, immediately closing her eyes as the flavor hits her tongue. I have to bite my lip to refrain from jumping on her for a review.

“That’s so freaking good,” she finally says, her eyes wide and brows up.

“If you had to guess... What flavors do you get?”

“Some kind of spice.” She rips off a small piece from the remaining half and pops it in her mouth. “Not pumpkin. Apple?”

I bite my lips to try to stop from grinning wide, but I can’t seem to stop my shoulders from shaking.

“And is the frosting a caramel flavor?”

“It is.” No longer able to contain myself, I clasp my hands near my mouth. “Caramel apple spice. All natural flavors. I was originally going to try to make an apple cider donut flavor, but I think I want to wait until one of the local orchards has their cider ready. I’d love to support other local businesses.”

“I love that.” Kate finishes the cupcake she has then stands from the rung of her chair, reaching for another. “These will be a hit, but I kind of think they should be seasonal. People will buy you out, no doubt about it.”

We talk about other potential seasonal flavors, and soon, Kate’s going through my Pinterest board, swiping slowly with her left hand while making notes on a sheet of paper with her right.

“Tell me how long you work on that. I’ll pay you.” As Kate looked through my idea board, she told me how my vision board could morph into the real thing, and I was excited for yet another reason.

First my cupcakes were good, and then a vision for my store was starting to come to life.

Kate shakes her head, sliding the iPad back to me. “You can pay me in cupcakes. Seriously. That’s the only form of payment I’ll accept from you.”

“Here, take some of these home with you,” I say, spinning in a small circle as I try to remember where the plastic containers are. Once I remember, I grab a square one and place

three vanilla, three chocolate, and three caramel apple cupcakes in it. I take a second container and pack away both velvet varieties, as well as the carrot, handing both containers to Kate.

“Tanner’s gonna have one of each and then think he gets two of each, because I’ve been here all afternoon, but dude’s gonna be sorely mistaken,” Kate laughs.

“You have high expectations,” I chuckle, and Kate shakes her head at me.

“You need to have better confidence, Kae. These are so freaking good. It’s crazy to me that you never baked for people before. I mean, I’d totally make a cake for myself if I baked like this. But you’re going to make the town so happy. Between cupcakes by you, and wine at Pōr, and ice cream at Bailey’s...? Heck, we can host a girls night out once a month. I’ll start a group chat with the Paiges and get you on.”

The way Kate dreams loudly feels like a whirlwind, but at the same time, I feel like I fit in, and that’s a novel feeling to have.

“Thank you for coming over,” I tell her sincerely.

“Absolutely. And if you ever need taste buds, I’m your girl. Call me first. Promise me.”

Laughing lightly, I nod. “Okay, yes. Promise. Although I’ll be figuring out protein cupcakes next.”

Kate grimaces slightly before shrugging. “They may not be that bad. I’ll still be your guinea pig.”

“Do you want these?” I ask, picking up the untouched Oreos, at the same time I hear the front lock disengaging. Wilson hears it too, and comes out of the bedroom, where he was sleeping under the bed.

“No, you can keep them. We seriously have five more packages,” Kate answers, looking over her shoulder toward the foyer.

Wilson slowly meanders to the front door, no doubt expecting hello pets from Hemming.

When the front door seems to shut, I call out, “It’s a disaster in the kitchen. You might prefer to go do something else.”

Hemming walks out of the foyer, Wilson in his arms. “It smells really good in here. Hey, Kate.”

“Hey, Hemming. I was just getting ready to leave, but if you try the cupcakes, maybe tell Tanner they’re not great, so I can eat all of these by myself,” Kate says, lifting the containers up.

“Sure,” Hemming chuckles. He walks straight over to me and leans down to press his lips to mine. My heart tumbles in my chest.

I could get used to real.

Hemming pulls away from my mouth and turns back to Kate, who’s watching us with a grin on her face. The moment we look toward her, she takes a step toward the foyer. “You guys have a good night!”

“Good night, Kate,” Hemming says, at the same time I wave and say, “Thank you again, Kate.”

After the front door closes behind her, Hemming places Wilson down on the ground. “You save any room for dinner?”

“Maybe. But I have a lot of cleaning to do first...” I look around the kitchen.

It’s truly not that bad. I try to clean things as I go, especially when working with so many different bases and flavors. “Can you try just one for me?” I ask, giving him my best impression of puppy dog eyes. I’d like him to try the apple one, too, and if he likes it, I’ll share my idea with him about Friday.

“I’ll try one. What’ve you got for me?” Hemming moves to the sink to wash his hands as I get a cupcake for him.

“Here. I’d like you to taste this one.”

He frowns momentarily as he looks at it. “What kind is it?”

“Taste it.”

While the mini cupcakes are truly two-bite cupcakes for most people, Hemming pops the whole thing in his mouth. Like when Kate tasted it, I watch with anticipation. Nothing changes on his face though, and I have to tell myself it’s too early to be disappointed.

He’s not a sweets person. It might take more than a quick morsel to decide it’s good. He may need it to sit on his tongue a few seconds longer...

“That’s really good. I got caramel from it.” He surprises me by reaching around me to grab a second. “Am I close?” He pops the other one in his mouth with just as little fanfare as the first.

“Caramel apple. Kate suggested that when the bakery is open, I only offer it seasonally.”

“That’s probably a smart business decision. Hey, you got any more of this frosting laying around?”

Because it was the last frosting I used, I hadn’t cleaned it up yet. “I do.”

“Good. Don’t toss it. I’ll help you clean.”

“Has anyone ever told you you change conversations like a flip of a switch?” I grin as I ask, moving to put the remaining cupcakes in containers.

“No, but I can see why you think it,” he chuckles. “You wanna just pop a pizza in the oven tonight? We’ll clean, have pizza, and maybe you can help me switch the beds.”

I stack the containers. “I guess the king bed makes more sense if we’re both sleeping in it.”

“I fully expect to wake up with you all over me every morning, regardless of the size of the bed.” Hemming sends me a heated gaze. “You’re two for two. But you were right that the full sized bed will fit better in the second bedroom with the weight equipment.”

We finish cleaning the kitchen, and get a pizza in the oven. While that’s cooking, I take apart the full-sized bed as

Hemming works on the king. Instead of putting both beds back together though, we leave the full size one in pieces with the mattress resting against the wall in the second bedroom. I find clean linens to dress the bed, and as I put the sheets on, the oven goes off and Hemming pulls the pizza out.

It's amazing to me how quickly we fell into a domesticated routine. There's a level of ease I feel with Hemming that I'd have never guessed could exist.

After pizza, we watch an episode of the show we started last night.

"Grab those Oreos," Hemming says, getting the show set up.

"I thought you don't do sweets," I tease, ripping off a paper towel and bringing it and the blue package to the couch. As I sit, I pull back the sealed section.

"I have a sweet tooth today."

I grin as I hold the package out for him. He takes four.

"I'm starting to wonder if maybe you lied when you said you don't like sweets, and it's more of a...you don't *want* to like sweets."

He hums with a crooked smile, so I think I'm on to something.

Like any normal person, I twist the cookies apart and eat the empty chocolate cookie, but when I move to the cookie that has the cream attached to it, I roll it off and place it on the paper towel.

I'm on my third cookie sandwich before Hemming notices.

"What are you doing?"

I glance at him and shrug my shoulders. "I don't like the filling."

He looks at me incredulously. "You don't like the filling?"

"That's what I said."

“Everyone loves the filling. It’s why they make double stuff and mega stuff Oreos.”

After shrugging, I say, “Well, I guess I get your pickles, and you get my Oreo stuffing.”

Hemming takes one more cookie from the package and makes a show of making a quadruple-stuffed Oreo with my discarded middles, although he makes a crumbly mess all over his face while doing it.

We watch a second episode and when I decide it’s time for bed, Hemming says he’ll be in right after me.

After changing, washing my face, and brushing my teeth—God, Oreos make your teeth and molars an absolute mess—I climb into the large bed, sighing as the mattress seems to embrace me in its cloud-like comfort.

“Oh, this is a nice mattress.”

Hemming walks into the room as I say it, and he chuckles. “I splurged. You’ll sleep really good tonight.”

Then he tosses a small plastic container on the bed, and after it hits, he tosses something smaller. “For a few reasons,” he adds.

I sit up to take a look.

The smaller package is a condom, and the container—

“I’m going to lick that caramel frosting off your tits,” he informs me when I lift my eyes to his. “And then I’m going fuck you, and I’m not pulling out this time.”

Oh yes.

I’ll be sleeping really good tonight.

And it’ll be due to more than just a mattress.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

HEMMING

“AFTER MY HAIR APPOINTMENT, I’M MEETING WITH KATE AT The Main Bean,” Kae breaks down her plans as she ties her tennis shoes, two Sundays later. We’re both in the small foyer area as she sits on the bench with decorative pillows she picked out. “I’ll be home by four.”

The last week was equal parts great and interesting.

Great, because being with Kae feels normal. Yes, we’re pretending we’ve been married for five years...but even I almost believe it to be true.

Interesting because Kae wasn’t lying about what her period does to her.

Her emotions were a roller coaster the entire week leading up to it. One moment, she was happy and laughing, and the next, she was reading something that had her bawling for thirty minutes straight. At one point, she got mad at me for not switching out the toilet paper roll. She wasn’t even on the toilet! But when I *did* change the toilet paper, she got mad all over again because it was the “wrong way.”

I didn’t realize toilet paper was so trivial.

I’m aware now and won’t be making that mistake again.

Then Friday she was in bed all day with heat pads, hardly able to move. It was so bad, there was no way we were going to the town meeting, which made her cry all over again.



When I told her that her level of pain wasn't normal, she bit my head off, asking me how many women I'd lived with that I'd be able to make that loud, wrong assumption.

I left her alone the rest of the day—even though I went to my friend Doc Google and learned that while I was right, painful periods shouldn't be normal...she wasn't wrong either. Many women experience the same.

When we went to bed Friday night, I was *positive* the next morning would be the first she wasn't touching me. Even though I was preparing myself, I figured I'd be okay in the event it happened. We were probably in the "honeymoon" phase of whatever the hell we're in, and there was going to come a day where we woke on opposite sides of the bed, anyway.

Then I had dreams of her willingly leaving, and waking up in an empty bed. And not just empty, but she took everything, from the linens to the mattress, so my bed was just a frame and I was sleeping on slats.

Or worse, I had two back-to-back nightmares where the O'Ryans somehow found out Kellie was still alive and tracked her down.

In a few short weeks, it's clear to me I'm all in when it comes to my wife, and I'm not sure how I'm going to handle the day when she walks away.

But all that nighttime anxiety was for naught.

Kae still found her way into my arms.

Yesterday was an okay day for her, and by the looks of things, she's feeling even better today.

She has her appointment and meeting with Kate, and I'm heading to meet with the guys. "Be safe—"

"I'll just be on Main Street," she interrupts with a smile up at me, before she stands to her full height.

"I know but... Just be safe."

This will be her longest trip off the compound without me, and I can't help but worry. She's gotten under my skin.

There hasn't been any movement from Virginia, but there also hasn't been any replacement female, and it's starting to make me nervous. Tucker brought up sending a guy out to frequent O'Ryans, see if he could catch wind of anything.

He has a guy in mind but hasn't put him in position yet.

I'd feel better if we had ears on the ground. Sooner, the better.

I walk Kae to her car and after I open the door, she grins up at me, dropping into her seat. "See you later."

"Bye, babe."

But before I can close the door, she says, "I'll stop by The Market for dinner things. I'll call if I'm going to be later than four. Okay, gotta go. I'll be late."

Chuckling, I lower my head into the car and give her the reason for her procrastination, kissing her once, then twice. Life has been so much easier since we decided to just go with real and see where it takes us, and even through her exorcist hours on Friday, she likes when we kiss before we part.

"Have fun," I tell her against her lips, and when she smiles, I give in to the desire to kiss her for a third time.

Before we can get lost in a deeper tangle of mouths and tongues, I move out of the vehicle and close her door, tapping the top twice.

I watch as her taillights disappear down the drive, then hit the lock button on our front door.

While Douglas Group never "turns off," Tucker thought it was a good idea to do a full workout on Sundays, not straying too far from our military days. It's the quietest day of the week for us, with Monday through Saturday being mostly intel, figuring out movements for existing cases, and the occasional day where we help with the local police department. It was Chance that said he needed one day to sleep in, so it was determined we'd meet on Sundays at eight.

Instead of walking the gravel drive toward Chance's, I cut through the grass until I get to the path that wraps around the

pond, giving myself a few extra minutes where the only sounds I hear are the crunch of sand and gravel beneath my shoes, and birds chirping overhead.

Today, the past is heavy on my mind. Maybe it's the dreams I've been having.

For the last ten-plus years, I've been alone. No family to speak of. A few friends around the world. I've had my fair share of low moments where I wasn't sure I'd ever experience true happiness again. I was good with being the guy in the group with the short answers and quick, fleeting, grins. I gave up on being the good guy when being one had the two people I was closest to doing me dirty.

But when you're that guy, the one with a hardness you can't shake, you accept the fact you're on a dead end street to lifelong loneliness. You may have a few people you talk to on social media but you're more likely to lose those friendships than having them stick around.

Five weeks ago when I accepted this assignment, being in a *real* relationship was nowhere on my radar. Likely a mix of convincing myself I'm good with a lifetime of aloneness, and knowing that a job remains a job.

Yet here I am, worried about a woman's wellbeing beyond what I'm being paid to do.

*I can't keep being paid for this.*

Douglas Group is paying me a base salary, but I'm sure there's also a stipend for the long-term bodyguard gig. I'll have to come clean with Tucker and have that bonus removed.

I can't feel good about the easiness I feel with Kae while being paid extra.

When I get to our meeting spot, Tucker and Chance are already standing around, both stretching.

"About time you got here," Chance jokes, his voice carrying over the distance. I could jog to cut the space, but we're about to run three miles at least one time. I don't need to add more jogging to my plate.

“It’s barely eight. What happened to sleeping in?” I do, however, pick up my pace.

“I had to steal cupcakes from Kate.”

“Is that what you call it?” Tucker laughs at his joke, but Chance’s face is serious.

“I’ll have you know I left her sleeping—”

“Must have been real good for her,” Tucker continues to dig, but Chance doesn’t take the bait.

“No! Seriously.” Chance points at me. “Kaelyn keeps supplying Kate with cupcakes and then she hides them. I don’t know how you’re keeping your physique, Hemingway.”

Working out and taking my wife to bed.

That’s how.

But with Tucker on a line of teasing about fucking, I’m not going to open that can of worms.

I still find sweet things to be take it or leave it, but I won’t lie. I do enjoy Kae’s cupcakes.

Literally and figuratively.

I also really enjoy painting her in batter and frosting, and then the other night when she did the same to me...

“Hemming just went somewhere deep,” Tucker laughs, bringing me back to reality.

“Let’s get this over with,” I bring the conversation back to why we’re meeting. “What’s the plan with this super workout you want us doing? And where the hell are your brothers? How’d they get out of this?”

“Eli is getting C ready for Jay and his crew, and Bryce is at the airport.”

I forgot Jameson “Jay” Turner and Beau Wittington are getting to town today. Our group is growing, which means we’ll be able to take on more tasks. Jay, his woman, and the kids he just adopted are moving onto the compound and into the third cottage—Cottage C—and Beau and his woman—

who happens to be Jay's sister—are renting a house just outside of Forever.

“God, I wish I got airport duty,” Chance mumbles thirty minutes later, after we ran three seven-minute miles and ended the current round with burpees.

“Those cupcakes are getting to you,” I joke, pulling my shirt off and wiping my forehead with it.

“Meanwhile, you're on your way to a ten peck. What the fuck, Hemingway?”

I shrug a shoulder and toss my shirt on the grass where my phone is. “I have a good metabolism.”

“There's no way in the hell you're eating Kae's cupcakes. How...? They're fucking gold.”

With my middle finger, I scratch the bridge of my nose but make no other gestures or facial expressions. I am absolutely eating Kae's cupcakes...

“Children. Focus.” Tucker looks at the sports watch on his wrist. “We're about to start round two.”

“You're a monster,” Chance mutters, before dropping into a hamstring stretch.

“How long we doing this for?” I ask. “Just so I can prepare. Mentally.”

Tucker chuckles. “I figured three rounds. We're not getting any younger. Gotta keep in shape.”

Chance, on a roll, shakes his head as he stands again. “Didn't think any of us were out of shape.”

“You will be if you keep eating Kae's cupcakes.”

Tucker's words do something to me. I know he's talking about *cupcakes*, but with my mind working the innuendo, a surge of jealousy shoots through me. I know Chance is more than happy with Kate but apparently that doesn't matter.

Chance gives our friend his middle finger, and then we're off on our second trip around the pond.

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WE SPLIT OFF TO HEAD TO OUR OWN HOMES, EACH OF US IN dire need of showers.

I didn't get a chance to talk to Tucker about the situation I've found myself in. I could turn around but instead, I unlock my phone and shoot him a quick text.

*I need to talk to you about Kae. Remind me tomorrow.*

Tucker's quick to respond. *Is it okay to wait until tomorrow?*

*Yeah. Nothing serious. Thanks*

He sends a thumbs up emoji and I put the phone to sleep.

At home, I'm immediately greeted at the door by Wilson. He's a pretty cool cat, and Kae wasn't lying when she said he thought he was a dog. I make him work for his Temptations treats before jumping in the shower.

When I'm finished, I look at the clock and see it's only eleven-thirty. I'm not sure what the hell I'm going to do by myself for the next four or so hours. As long as nothing alerts Tucker's computers, we'll have the day completely off.

I should have offered to run to The Market.

I could go to The Main Bean and grab coffee to grind up. We're running low.

But I don't know how long her hair appointment is—I'm sure a professional job will take longer than my attempt at it—nor do I know when she's meeting with Kate. They're going to be discussing the final plans for the bakery and I don't know how long that's supposed to take them. I don't want Kae to think I'm following her to make sure she stays in town.

I know *she* knows I can see her location at any given time because of her car and phone. If she wanted, she could ditch them both.

...I have no intention to tell her both of her rings are traceable too.

At least, I don't intend to right now.

I'm of the opinion that there are somethings she's better off not knowing.

That said, there's nothing stopping her from ditching all things "Kaelyn Johansen" if she wanted to.

What if I got her a necklace? Something small and delicate that she'd potentially forget she wore? Then if she left her phone and rings in the car...maybe she'd forget she had that on, and I'd still be able to find—

*Jesus Fucking Christ. Stop, man,* I mentally berate myself.

The dreams the last two nights really got to me. I can read damn near every emotion that crosses Kae's face, and she's not a good liar.

But even the memory of Pickle Gate doesn't ease the sudden anxiety.

I'd know if she was planning something, and absolutely nothing—besides the fucking dreams—tells me she's moved away from "real" and back to pretending.

I can't figure out where all this nervous energy is coming from, though. Usually after a hard workout, my mind goes quiet. It's been a long time since constant negative thoughts fought to be at the surface.

It got bad during my time in Okinawa, but that's when I discovered the gym and tattoos.

It was either the gym or the bar, and too many Japan-based Marines got into trouble when they opted for the bar.

I look at the calendar and try to figure out if today's date is anything of importance, but it's not.

Not a birthday.

Not a death day.

I rub a circle against the center of my chest and take a deep breath, tipping my head from side to side to try and release tension in my neck.

Nothing works. Maybe a drive will help.

“Wilson, I’ll be back in a little while.” I don’t think twice about the fact Kae has me informing the cat about my coming and goings.

Grabbing my keys and phone, I head outside. Just as I open the truck door, my phone pings with a text alert.

Still not in the truck, I toss my keys toward the center console’s cup holders, and look at the device in my hand. I see it’s a text from an old Marine buddy I was stationed with in both Okinawa and Lejeune. We had the same MOS—military occupation specialty—and were both assigned to Okinawa at the same time.

He was one of my closest friends but soon after we were both stationed at Camp Lejeune, he was medically discharged. It’s been a few months since I reached out to him last, but it was almost like we were on a three month schedule with checking in.

The text is coming about the time we always touch base.

Leaning against my truck, I open the message all the way, curious what’s going on in his life. I have a lot to fill him in on.

Except the first words I read have my stomach dropping and the nervous energy I’ve been experiencing makes a weird sort of sense.

*Holden: Hi. This is Wyatt’s fiancée Chasey. I’m so sorry to do this over text, but there are so many of you to contact. Wyatt lost his battle— “No, no, no...” Everything chills in my body. I’m not reading this... —with mental health last night and the paramedics weren’t able to save him. I’ll be in touch when we’ve made funeral arrangements. We’re going to try to have it as soon as possible. Thank you and I’m sorry.*

“Fuck!” I throw my phone and bend at the waist, my hands on my knees. I feel like I’m going to get sick. I change to a



crouch and bury my head in my hands. “Fucking dammit, Holden.”

I didn’t even know he’d had a fiancée.

What kind of friend am I? Why was I so caught up in my own world that I didn’t reach out sooner?

I fall back to sit on my ass in the gravel, the palms of my hands still pressing into my eye sockets. I don’t know how long I sit there before the sound of an ATV, gravel crunching under the tires, stops nearby.

“You good?” Tucker asks.

I finally remove my hands from my face and slam my head back against the truck. “A buddy killed himself last night,” I tell him flatly, staring off into nothing.

“Shit.” Tucker’s tone is as guttural as I’m feeling. Loss is an unfortunate by-product of being in the military, but it never gets easier. “What do you need?”

I shake my head, focusing on the way the truck feels beneath my head. “Nothing.”

“When do the girls get back?”

“Don’t bother her.” My voice grows more and more monotonous with each statement. I can feel myself being dragged back to a low I’ve fought against for nearly ten years.

“I know you two—”

I cut my gaze to him, my eyes finally focusing. “I said don’t bother her.” I think about how happy she was leaving for her appointment, and how she’s finally excited about the bakery. About her future. “She needs today.”

“And you need her.”

When I open my mouth to deny it, he holds a hand up. “I’m not stupid, Hemming. I asked for you on this case because I knew you’d be good for her, and vice versa. I feel like I’m your fucking fairy godmother, setting you up, but don’t fucking tell me she doesn’t make you happy. It’s been great having you here, but you’re definitely a different person

with her in the picture. You're not the cold guy who keeps to himself anymore. You need her."

"I'm only different to you because you see me all the damn time and I was a broken kid when we met." I shake my head, once again looking back to the tree line that separates mine and Chance's properties. "Just ask Holden. I'm shit at keeping in touch otherwise. Except you can't, because he's dead."

I can feel Tucker staring at me, but I don't make any moves.

Eventually, he dismounts the ATV and comes over to where I sit. He closes the truck door and sits beside me. "Then I'll sit here until she gets back."

"Tucker..."

"Eli can check the fences. I have nowhere else I need to be. You don't have to talk. But I'm going to sit here."

I grind my molars together until my jaw aches. "Your choice."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KAELYN

I GET TO THE MAIN BEAN AND SPOT KATE SITTING AT ONE OF the small circle tables. She waves when she sees me, and I smile, making my way toward her.

“Your hair looks so good!” Kate reaches for a large curl. “Did she do red highlights too?”

I nod. “She did. I told her we didn’t have to do anything fancy because she was coming in on her day off for me, but she said it wasn’t a big deal. I think it looks very fall-y, don’t you?” Not once did Rhiannon make a comment about my at-home hair color job, but I also think Hemming did a good job on it. I don’t really think it’s hard to screw up all over hair color, but I’ve also not tried it myself.

Earlier in the week, Kate came over to try petit fours and a pumpkin spice cupcake, and when I told her I wasn’t sure what to do about my hair—it was starting to grow out and was nearly noticeable, although my hair has darker roots—she suggested Rhiannon to me. She’d just had her hair cut by her and thought she was good.

I’ve never been one of those women who was finicky about letting people touch her hair.

Hello, my husband colored my hair when I’d only known him for an hour.

But I think it’s nice to have a stylist you trust.

Rhiannon took the same brown color Hemming used, and added dimension with darker brunette pieces and super thin red highlights. She suggested I add golden tones in the summer, but I'm not sure if and when I can go lighter again.

Besides, I'm enjoying the dark hair.

"Did you order yet?" I ask and Kate shakes her head.

"I was waiting for you."

With the sketchpad and iPad holding our table, we head to the front. It doesn't take long for us to get our drinks, and we're quickly in business mode.

We've only been going through Kate's sketches for a few minutes—and oh my gosh, her vision is amazing—when my phone starts to ring.

Frowning because no one calls me, not even Hemming, I flip it over on the table.

In bold letters, *Tucker Douglas* slides across the screen.

I glance up at Kate and she shakes her head before nodding down toward the device. "You should take that. Tucker doesn't call people."

It's probably more polite to answer the call outside, especially because it's busy in here today, but I've already swiped the screen to answer.

"Hey, Tucker," I say, holding a finger to my other ear.

"Hey, Kae. You should probably come home when you have a moment. I got Hemming drunk and finally got permission to call you."

Frowning, I shake my head. "I'm sorry, what?" He got him drunk? What happened to running around the pond an infinite number of times?

"He got some bad news earlier and he didn't want to bother you—"

Those words hurt and I can feel my eyes burn with tears, but then Tucker continues, "He said today was a big day for

you. But Kaelyn, he shouldn't be alone right now. I have no problem staying until you get here but it's not me he needs."

I avoid Kate's eyes as I look at the table. Unplugging my ear, I scratch my neck before gripping the back of it. "What happened?"

"I can tell you when you get here."

"Tucker..." I use my stern voice on him.

Kate reaches to the middle of the table and taps her finger on the surface. When I look at her, she's frowning and mouths, "What's wrong?"

But it's when my eyes are locked with hers that Tucker tells me the news Hemming received. I gasp loudly, bringing my hand to my mouth.

"I'm sorry. But...the sooner you get back, the better for him," Tucker continues.

"Yes. Absolutely. I'm leaving now." We hang up and I look at Kate, the tears that burned before because Tucker originally said Hemming didn't need me, since turned to sorrow because of Hemming's loss.

"I'm so sorry, Kate, I have to get home. Hemming..." I swallow and rapidly blink away tears, looking all over to try and will them back. "He received a text message one of his Marine friends died. I need to be..."

"Absolutely. Yes. You need to be there." She's already closing the leather case she keeps her iPad in and stacking it against her sketchpad. "Do you want a ride home? Or will you be okay to drive?"

"I'll be okay, but thank you."

"I'll just be behind you, then."

We discard our mostly untouched lattes and head outside, going our separate ways. However, I spot Kate's SUV behind mine when I get on the main highway.

Because I'm the first at the Douglas gate, I type in the code. Hemming had me memorize it, and for a while anytime

we left the property—even if he was driving—he’d have me recite the code when we got back.

My hand shakes as I press the small silver squares, but sigh a breath of relief when the telltale beep of a successful entry sounds.

I know better than to speed down the gravel drive, but goodness, it feels really long today. Occasionally I glance in my rearview mirror to make sure that either the gate closes, or that Kate’s behind me. When I confirm she’s entered and the gate is closing behind her, I stop focusing on what’s behind me and instead, have laser focus on getting home to my man.

There’s a red four-wheeler blocking where I park, so I leave the Explorer on the edge of the property driveway, shutting it down and locking it as quickly as I can. As I get close to the front door, I hear old school rock music being played but I don’t see any windows open. Thankfully, when I enter the house, the music isn’t as loud as I feared.

I quickly discard my shoes and finish walking in, where I find Hemming sitting at the kitchen counter with what’s left of my pumpkin cupcakes in front of him, and Tucker standing on the opposite side.

“Hey, Kae. We moved from Jack to pumpkin spice,” Tucker tells me, reaching behind him to turn the music off on the smart screen.

There’s an apology in his tone but I shake my head at him. It’s not like I needed to eat ten cupcakes by myself.

At his friend’s words, Hemming straightens his back to sit tall, and spins—the wrong way—toward me. “Kae.”

His eyes are heavy but he looks like he’s in good spirits.

I’m sure that’s the alcohol.

Suddenly I’m at a loss for words.

Loss for actions.

“C’n I have a hug?” Hemming asks, his brows furrowed.

“Of course,” I answer softly, stepping into the space between his knees. He wraps his arms around my middle and I do the same to his shoulders, gently raking my nails up and down the base of his scalp.

“I’d feel better if I took you to bed,” he mumbles, turning his face into my chest. “Fuck, I love you, Kell-aelyn.” The words are muffled against my boobs but they were certainly clear enough to hear.

My face flames as I glance at Tucker.

He doesn’t say anything and I’m not going to draw attention to it. Especially when they’re just drunken words.

“Do you need help with him?”

Shaking my head, I keep running my fingers soothingly through Hemming’s hair. “I think I’ll be okay. Thank you, Tucker.”

“I’ll hit the lock button on my way out. Oh,” he adds, stepping around the counter and the chair Hemming occupies, “your cupcakes are phenomenal.”

I give him a smile with another “thank you,” and when he leaves, listen for the lock to engage.

“All right, big guy, let’s go lay down.”

“I a’first told him not to call you.” Hemming pulls away from me and looks at my face, a softness on his hard features I’ve never seen before. “Yer so goddamn beautiful.”

“Thank you, Hemming.” Gah, my heart breaks for him... “C’mon. Let’s get up.” I tug on his hand until he stands, then he throws his arm around my shoulder.

“I’m’a real bad friend.” His voice is full of sorrow.

“You are not, Hemming. You’re a great friend.”

“Nah. The worst. Hemming Joha’sen,” he lifts a hand in the air and motions it across like a banner, “wors’ friend.”

On his side of the bed, I pull back the sheets and tap his pillow. “Climb in.”

Facing away from me, he puts one knee on the mattress, then the other, before face planting diagonally.

“Hate to break it to you, bud, but if you want me to lay down with you, you’re going to have to change your angle.”

“Okay,” he says into the mattress. I tap his socked foot after a few seconds until he finally moves.

It’s early in the day. There are things I can do around the house.

But I know where I need to be, even if he sleeps off the whiskey well into the next morning.

He doesn’t ever sleep on his stomach that I’ve noticed, but he’s snoring within seconds. Me though, I’m not exactly tired.

Still, I crawl under the covers on my side and lay facing him, my hands under my cheek as I watch him. I’ll give it a couple of minutes and then clean up the kitchen. As long as he’s sleeping.

I nearly fall asleep myself, but Wilson jumps up onto the bed. I give him scratches for a little while, but end up getting out of bed before I *do* end up taking a nap. If I sleep now, I’ll never sleep tonight.

Carefully, I roll away from Hemming and close the bedroom door, leaving Wilson curled up on Hemming’s back.

I get the kitchen back in order, fluff the couch pillows, and check to see if anything is in the wash that needs to be switched to the dryer. I run the Swiffer around the floor, toss the sheet, then bag up the garbage.

I’ve managed to make forty minutes go by. However, in the event Hemming wakes, I’d like to be beside him.

I grab my phone and quietly go back into the bedroom and resume my spot. Wilson glances at me, his yellow eyes giving a slow blink. When he stands, he arches his back, before stepping off and curling up between the two of us. During the entire process, I switch my gaze back and forth from Hemming’s face and the cat, making sure Wilson doesn’t wake the man.



Satisfied, I unlock my phone and turn the sound all the way down, before opening the TikTok app. It's the easiest time suck I've ever discovered, and even when I'm yawning an hour later, I continue to scroll, relying on the captions to know what's going on.

Some I recognize the trend and mentally sing along.

Others I don't need the music in order to be touched by the clips.

The pets sending new pets, and stories about dogs in shelters going on six-hundred days, all make me cry. I don't need sound for those.

I quietly sniffle and wipe away tears, only to be sucked into another sad twenty-second video.

Glancing at Hemming, I startle lightly when I see his gray eyes focused on me.

"You're crying..." His voice is no longer slurring, but it is heavy. From sleep or emotions.

Likely both.

"Sad TikTok," I answer, turning the screen toward him before thinking better of it. I try turning the phone back to me but he gently takes my wrist and turns it back.

"Cute dog. You like dogs?"

"I think they're a lot of work."

"Hmm." He releases my wrist and closes his eyes, sighing heavily. After some time passes, I'm positive he's fallen asleep again but he rolls to his side and reaches for me. Wilson jumps out of bed before he can be smooshed between our bodies. "Lemme just hold you."

I drop my phone above my pillow and wiggle minutely against the mattress until I'm on my back with his head on my chest. One of his arms lays heavily over my hips and he folds the other under his pillow. We don't talk although I know he's awake. Reaching between his arm and neck, I move a hand so I can softly brush my fingers along his head again. He sighs contentedly after the first path, so I do it again.

I continue to caress his hair, which seems to slow his breathing.

But then my breaths are matching his, and I feel myself getting drowsy thanks to the slow respiration rate. I can close my eyes...

This time, I do fall asleep, and I'm not sure how long I sleep for, although the sun is still shining through the window so it couldn't have been too long. I point my toes under the covers, stretching my legs without making too big of movements.

"Holden was twenty-nine. Wyatt, that's his name," Hemming says, his head still on my chest. "He never made a big deal about his head and it being fucked up, but it was why he was discharged."

I know this isn't the place for me to say anything. I simply go back to brushing my fingers against the back of his head, and listen.

"After he got out, we texted every couple of months. I was never great about being the one to text first. Always caught up in my own shit."

Clenching my jaw to keep from crying at the pain in his voice, I bring my free hand to rest on his forearm. Hemming moves his arm though and instead, links our fingers, bringing both of our palms to rest on my lower stomach.

"I should have reached out more."

"No, Hemming... You can't..."

The way he shakes his head against me is so light, I almost miss it. "We were both having particularly shit weeks in Okinawa and I introduced him to ink therapy. I got most of back piece done out there because I just wasn't in a good place. I worked, I worked out, and I sat in a tattoo chair."

I've obviously seen his back piece. It covers exactly half of his back.

The left side is free of ink, but the right is completely covered. What I originally saw as an arm sleeve and a full leg

sleeve, was actually one continuous tattoo that also covers his right butt cheek. There are ribbons with Roman numerals. A skull wearing the Marine's white dress cap. Flowers, stopwatches, and negative space. There's even a Marine Corps bulldog—who's the USMC mascot, always named Chesty, I learned—on the back of his calf.

But it's his back that always takes my breath away.

It's a wolf's face, half of it, and it takes up damn near that entire side of his back. It has a blue eye—the only speck of color on Hemming's skin.

“We were transferred to Camp Lejeune at around the same time but he was discharged shortly after. I didn't even know...” He audibly swallows. “I didn't realize he was still having problems. Hell, I didn't even know he had a fiancée.”

I don't know what to say to him. I'm afraid any of the words I come up with will sound insensitive, and I don't want him shutting down further.

He tells me story after story. Some bring a smile to his face, but some make his voice go quiet. Some are happy, and others describe some of his darker moments, where Wyatt was the one to keep him from doing something stupid.

Eventually, the sun sets and the room darkens, and his stories become quieter, until he falls asleep again.

I wish I could take this hurt from him.

I wish there was more I could do for him.

But I'm thankful that in an odd sort of circumstances, he doesn't have to go through this alone. If he did...

My eyes tear up again because I know that if he were going through this alone, he'd probably be joining Wyatt. And while I wouldn't know Hemming if my situation hadn't placed me here, the thought of a world without Hemming Johansen makes me sad.

The three words he told me in a drunken stupor repeat over and over in my mind, but I can't bring myself to say them aloud...even with him sleeping.

Someday I may grow the courage to tell him I've fallen in love with him.

Until then, I'll just be whatever he needs...whenever he needs it.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

HEMMING

FIVE SHORT—YET SO FUCKING LONG—DAYS LATER, I'M disembarking a plane in Houston behind Kae. I haven't been the best husband—fake or otherwise—but she's been solid.

When Chasey sent out another group text saying they were able to hold a memorial service for Holden on Saturday, I immediately booked my flight.

I wasn't going to bring Kaelyn. I was going to do this by myself.

But I did tell her I'd booked the trip—after the fact.

*"I understand why you want to do it alone. You need the space, and that's fine. It's also fine if it's because you think me going could compromise things, and you're not able to be the bodyguard you've been hired to be. You're grieving and can't be 'on.'"*

Even in my own grief, I don't think she meant the words harshly. I think she was feeding off the negative energy I couldn't seem to be free of.

But I finally understood her breakdown in the truck from early in our charade because hearing her dismiss our relationship to the job fucking hurt.

It didn't stop me from continuing to take the space she offered during the day, although I held her close every night.

...Then the dreams came back with a vengeance, and it wasn't just Kae leaving in them, but her going missing and being sent back to me in pieces.

Absolutely horrid dreams that made me sick.

Needing my head to stop fucking with me, I called the airline and changed my trip to include a second passenger, yesterday.

At the end of the jet bridge, Kae steps to the side, waiting. She has a small bag that holds her phone, Kindle, and wallet over her shoulder, and she also carries the black garment bag that has my only suit. The lead flight attendant handed it to her when we were exiting.

The flight was quiet. The moment we were seated, Kae had her ear pods in and she read. I tried watching a movie on the plane's system but I ended up staring without seeing.

It's just as quiet now between us as we walk through the airport, the carry-on suitcase vibrating in my hand being the thing that keeps my focus trained. Bush airport is busy, but I suspect it's been busy all day with people getting off from the workweek and heading into a weekend away.

I have to give Kae credit—even though I planned the trip to occur without her, even though she tried reassuring me I didn't need to add her to it, she seems to know the little details.

She walks slightly ahead of me, leading the way to the shuttles. When we get to the rental car place, she doesn't wait for me to tell her which one we're getting a car from; she just walks that way.

I think back to the very first hours we had together and how she had an anxiousness about her. I'd been worried people would think I kidnapped her, with how she seemed to want to shrink into the shadows behind me.

Now look at her...

Pride tries to fight through the grief, nearly succeeding. I can feel my mouth wanting to smile. I just can't complete it.

“Hi, do you have a reservation?”

Now, Kae looks back at me for guidance, although she does tell the woman, “We do. Under Hemming Johansen.”

I guess it’s time for me to do something.

Once the paperwork is finished and I have my license and card back, we head toward the lot and the car we’re assigned. Apparently, it’s a busy weekend in Houston and we’re lucky to get a car at all. Not that rideshare would be the absolute worst thing to utilize, but there’s always small talk...

I’m not in a small talk mood.

Another mental smile hits, because I know Kae would say I’m never in a small talk mood.

The vehicle we’re given is a small compact four door sedan with manual everything.

“I didn’t realize how much I love the electric seats. I forget that I’m tall in my SUV,” Kae says after the backseat has our things and she’s getting comfortable in the passenger seat. “Do you want me to put the address into the GPS?”

Shaking my head but handing her my phone, I say, “Just pull it up on my maps. Please.” Kae takes the device and I pull forward from the parking spot, moving slowly out of the garage.

It takes an hour to get to the hotel we’re staying at, including a quick stop to pick up fast food for dinner, which we ate in the restaurant’s parking lot.

When we finally reach the hotel, I’m more than exhausted.

If I’m tired tonight after only traveling, I know tomorrow’s going to absolutely drain me.

Even though he’s being cremated and they won’t receive his ashes until next week, Holden’s parents wanted to have a formal church service in the morning, and we have to be to the church at nine. After church, Chasey and their friends wanted to have a “happier” memorial at a local hall. We’ll have lunch there, pot luck style, and then Kae and I have to get back on the road for the airport at four.

When I changed the flight to include Kae, I should have tacked on at least another twelve hours to the trip, but I wasn't thinking clearly.

"I'm going to shower," I announce, unzipping the carry-on to pull out the toiletry bag and TSA-approved liquids bag. Kae sits in the middle of the bed, cross-legged, watching me.

"What can I do for you, Hemming?"

I shake my head. "You're here. That's all I need." It's not lost on me that the original plan was she wouldn't be here. I try not to focus on *what ifs* when I'm in a negative space, but my gut tells me I'm in a better spot, mentally, because she *is* on the trip by my side.

Halfway through my shower, the bathroom door opens. I look through the glass enclosure and watch Kae undress, then step into the shower behind me.

She wraps her arms from behind me, resting her cheek against my back.

Dropping my chin to my chest, I close my eyes, the water dripping from my brow and nose. We stand there for a moment, her naked body pressed against mine, before she places a kiss between my shoulder blades.

"I hate that you're hurting," she whispers, her lips still to my back. "I don't know what to do for you, but I'm afraid of doing, saying, the wrong thing."

I turn in her arms and take her face in my hands. I don't say anything as I stare into her eyes. The worry there is evident.

As well as the pain.

Pain I caused by shutting her out.

Who knew that in such a short period of time, you could come to absolutely rely on another person? For so long, I lived a solitary life. I was happy being alone. I wasn't looking for a relationship and didn't picture one in my future.

And then my friend stepped in with an opportunity...



I know now Tucker's intentions. I never had my talk with him, but when he was pouring whiskey down my throat, he was clear that he was happy for me.

He was glad I took what was given, and accepted the gift.

I may not have had five years with her but I know I want that and more.

I want to watch her open her bakery.

I want to watch as she makes more friends with the people in town.

I want to watch her absolutely blossom, and I want to be by her side as she continues to grow and flourish.

She's taken everything in stride. Better than I imagined she would.

I'm a better person with Kaelyn Johansen as my wife, even if our path here was anything but ordinary.

Her body slides against mine as she goes up on tip toes, taking the kiss I haven't taken myself yet.

I follow her down as she goes to flat feet, holding her face as our mouths play over one another's. Her nails of one hand dig lightly into my back while her other moves up and down my side.

Blindly, I reach behind me to turn off the water before placing my hands under her ass, lifting her easily. She wraps her legs around me as I walk us, wet and naked, out of the bathroom and to the bed.

I lay her down gently and she unlocks her ankles, her legs falling to the mattress. She rolls her body underneath mine, pulling her mouth away. "Take what you need, Hemming," she tells me, our eyes locked. "I'm not going to break if you do, but I'm afraid you might if you don't."

"Kaelyn..."

She shakes her head. "If you need slow and gentle, that's fine. Take slow and gentle. But if you need to angry fuck me?"

Her hand cups the side of my face. “I know you won’t hurt me. Take what you need.”

“I don’t have condoms.” My pull-out game is weak with her. It feels too good to stop, and as much as I loved taking her bare the first time, having that protection has allowed me to lose myself in her. She ran out of her original birth control prescription and hasn’t been able to meet her new doctor yet to get a script as Kaelyn.

The Douglas team can forge many things, but most prescriptions are a no-go.

“It’s early enough in my cycle that the risk is low.”

She doesn’t say it’s impossible for her to get pregnant. Just that the risk is minimal.

The thought of her round with my child brings my cock to life in a way I’d never thought possible. It isn’t the time for that conversation, but now that the thought planted itself...

Hope for an actual future with this woman starts to crack away at the negative wall that’s been surrounding me since Sunday.

Our mouths meet again, Kae following my lead this time. Her body is like my heavenly playground. Her moans of pleasure heightening my own.

When I reach between our bodies for my cock, she tips her hips for better access.

I feed my hard length to her pussy in slow inches, pushing in, pulling back...pushing in further, pulling back...until Kae lifts a foot around my hips, pressing against my ass.

I smile for the first time in a while against her mouth. She thinks a push of her foot will get me to sink all the way into her...

Instead, I pull all the way out.

She softly cries out at the loss but when I flip her to her stomach, she doesn’t need direction to pull her knees under her, lifting her ass into the air.

This time when I sink into her, I spear her in one quick thrust. The teasing of my cock before made her ready, and her wet pussy helps the glide.

My hands circle her fleshy hips, my fingers sinking in. I try to tell myself not to hold too tightly.

Every thrust forward, I pull her ass back, and the faster I go, the louder her moans become. The sounds she makes edge me closer and closer to the top. In the back of my head, I know I need to slow down.

I need to get her off.

Fuck, I need to pull out.

But I can't stop, and even that millisecond I had the thought to stop, Kae pushed her ass back into my groin, taking my cock back.

I move my hands to the globes of her ass, spreading her cheeks and looking down. Her asshole is puckered and her pussy is spread impossibly, taking my cock like it was made for it.

My grunts with each thrust match her moans, and eventually, the vocalizations paired with the sound of our bodies slapping, the visual in front of me, it's too much.

"Fuck. Shit, Kae... Fuck," I groan, flexing my hands against her ass, squeezing as I thrust into her one last time. My cock jerks hard against her swollen walls. My hips flex against her ass with each release of cum, and when I pull out of her, I keep her ass in the air, my hands still holding her ass cheeks apart.

"Stay there. I want to see..." I say, my chest heaving from exertion.

Kae moves her head on the pillow so she can see me kneeling behind her, but my eyes are on her pussy. She clenches down and the mix of our release slowly drips out of her.

I want to push it back into her.

I want to give her my seed and plug her pussy.

Get her pregnant.

*Make her stay.*

Instead, I watch it drip down to her clit.

Her very swollen clit. A reminder she didn't get hers...

“On your back.”

She doesn't question it; just does as I demand.

My mouth descends hers, and the moment our lips meet, my fingers separate the wet folds of her pussy. I rub her clit in quick, fast circles. Kae holds my face to hers, kissing me like her life depends on it.

When she still doesn't come, I hold her apart with my index and ring fingers, and begin strumming the nub with the tip of my finger. I alternate between flicks and circles, and soon her hips are rolling beneath my hand, as she tries to find her release.

Knowing she'll get there if I bring her nipples into play, I release her mouth and dive for a tight, waiting nipple.

“Yes. Yes, Hemming,” she moans above me when I suck the peak into my mouth. I hold it between my teeth and let the tip of my tongue mimic to her nipple the same movements my finger does to her clit, and it's not long before she's shaking, her back arching from the bed as she screams out her ecstasy.

But I don't stop.

I slow my fingers, letting her ride out her orgasm. My mouth gentles, too, my teeth no longer holding her hostage and my tongue pressing gentle, lazy swipes to the underside.

“N-no more,” she moans.

I pull back from her chest. “You sure?” I also stop playing with her clit, but instead, let my finger drag down her center until the tip dips into her very wet opening.

“Oh...” Her back arches again and her eyes are once more closed.

I slowly curl my finger in and out of her but when I put my thumb against her clit, she opens her eyes and shakes her head.

Except she doesn't tell me why.

The way her eyes flash, I think I know why but I need her to say it.

"Use your words, baby. Tell me," I say, my middle finger still moving.

She swallows hard before admitting, "It's too sensitive. It...doesn't feel good there right now."

I kiss her deeply before brushing my nose down the bridge of hers. "Good girl," I murmur. When her eyes meet mine, I tell her, "Thank you. But this...?" When it's time for me to push my finger in again, I add a second. "That's okay?" Her pussy just took my cock but her walls are once more swollen and tight.

Her answer is a delighted moan against the intrusion. I kiss her gently as I finger fuck her slowly.

My fingers are soaked with her and even though I'm not sure I can make her come again, especially without clit play, there's something about this lazy moment that allows peace to wash over me.

We make out like this for a while longer, my fingers buried in her as my mouth continues to take her, before going back to the shower, where I take my time washing her. There's nothing overly sexual about our shower, but my cock remains at half-chub for the duration.

When Kae drops to her knees, she glances at me. "Let me..."

My cock swells as I brace my hands on the wall in front of me and nod.

Her hand twists up my length, her eyes still on my face. "You're going to come in my mouth, 'kay? You're not allowed to say no."

I can't stop the half grin that feels foreign. "Are we going to have to introduce a safe word, babe?"

Those dual colored eyes seem to unfocus and her hand pauses.

We're definitely revisiting this conversation...

She shakes her head, bringing her back to the situation at hand—my hard cock with precum weeping from the top. Her thumb sweeps against the fluid. “You’ve not allowed me to take you that far. I want to take you that far.”

“You drive me crazy.” The low words are out before I can think twice about them. No, I’m not confessing my love, but the way I feel whenever I’m around her...

“Do your best,” I tease, trying to take back control of my emotions.

“I think my best is pretty damn good,” she teases back, sticking her tongue out at me, and then she takes that sassy expression and puts it to good use, swirling my cock, licking up the hard steel, before taking me into her mouth.

My muscles are tight as she takes me, and eventually I have to adjust my stance to relieve the tension. I remove my hands from the wall and fist her hair, but don’t take over. She takes the change in stride, never letting up as she bobs on my length.

I can’t do anything but look down at watch her, and she keeps her eyes on mine. The connection we have is straight from an erotic fantasy.

“Touch yourself,” I growl.

My girl doesn’t fight, she just takes the hand that was gripping my thigh and it disappears between her kneeling legs.

Three minutes later and we’re both shouting into the shower, the sounds echoing around us, not at all diluted by the pounding water.

Once again, I have to brace a hand against the wall, but reach for Kae, helping her to stand. She smiles lightly as she cuddles into me.

“Think you’ll be able to sleep tonight?” she eventually asks, pulling her head away. Our arms still remain around one

another.

“I think so. My head’s finally quiet.” It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her I love her but the fear of her leaving grips my heart.

“Good,” she whispers, before placing a kiss to my shoulder. “Let’s go to bed.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KAELYN

THE FLIGHT BACK TO MONTANA IS THE EXACT OPPOSITE AS THE flight to Texas.

Today was a sad day, but I know Hemming found a sense of closure.

The church service was the hardest, even for me, but I'm a crier.

Seeing Hemming in his suit hit in a way I wasn't prepared for. I found the man attractive in gym clothes and street clothes, but there was something downright amazing with him in a full suit. The photoshopped pictures from our alleged wedding had nothing on the real thing.

We were able to change into more comfortable clothes for the afternoon, but even then, I changed from a dark blue dress to a sundress with a sweater, and Hemming switched out his suit for khakis and a more casual dress shirt. The memorial service still had tears, but Wyatt's friends and fiancée worked hard to make it a celebration of the good parts of his life. Hemming was the only Marine friend there and while I knew he thought he wasn't a good friend, I thought it spoke volumes that he was invited when no others were.

I was curious why Wyatt's parents weren't at the memorial, but I wasn't sure there was an appropriate way to ask, so I didn't.



Hemming was surprised to find pictures of him with Wyatt on a few of the memorial boards, and he took the time to explain some of the images to me and whoever else was nearby at the time.

Before we had to leave for the airport, Chasey pulled us to the side to tell Hemming that Wyatt only ever had good things to say about him and their friendship. She said if Hemming was anything like her fiancé, like she thought he was, Hemming would be having a hard time but to know there was no need for the guilt.

The car ride to the airport, the shuttle from car rental to airport, the security line...

All of it.

Hemming held my hand.

Even now, halfway through the flight from our quick layover in Denver, we have the arm rest up between us, his hand on my thigh, as we watch a movie on his phone, each of us with a single ear pod.

The sun has set when we pull onto Douglas property. The lights are on at both Tucker's, and Tanner and Kate's, places, but we don't stop. He'll see everyone tomorrow.

Upon walking into our place, we're greeted by Wilson. I bend down to pick him up, getting him out of the way so Hemming can bring our things in without a tripping hazard.

I turn on the lights as I move further into the house—Hemming stopped at the laundry closet and it sounds like he's emptying the carry-on—and find a vase with wildflowers. I recognize them as flowers that grow around Tucker's property and know these were handpicked. *Shoot, I think I might cry again today!* There's a tented card sitting beside the glass so I pick it up, flipping it open to read.

*Here's something pretty, but I'm sure the only pretty Hemming needs is you ;)*

*PS: Wilson's super cool. But he already ate tonight. Don't let him tell you otherwise.*

*xx Kate*

“I love our friends,” I can’t stop myself from saying. Hemming walks into the kitchen and looks over my shoulder. He reaches to scratch Wilson on the head.

“I love that you let Kate into your circle.” He turns his head to press a kiss to my temple, then continues on his way to the bedroom.

Pressing a kiss onto Wilson’s head before putting him on the ground, I follow behind Hemming. He moves into the water closet, leaving the door open as he does his business. I sit on the bed, waiting.

“Thank you for letting me come.” My eyes are on his profile as he washes his hands at the sink. He pulls the towel from the ring, facing me as he dries off.

“I’m sorry I thought I needed to do it alone,” he answers, discarding the towel on the vanity and not putting it back.

I lift my brows but say nothing. He notices, and I swear to God, the man rolls his eyes before turning back and making a show of putting the towel back where it belongs.

Hemming turns off the bathroom light before sitting on the mattress beside me. “Is it too early to go to bed?”

I shake my head. “Nah. It’s been a long day. Long two days.”

“Long week.”

I nod. “Long week,” I repeat, softer.

As he double checks the front door and turns out the lights, I change into one of Hemming’s shirts. We may be close in height, but he still has me in width, and his shirts make for nice sleep shirts, even if they barely cover my ass. I also pull on a pair of clean cotton briefs and as I move from the bathroom to bed, Hemming comes in, pulls me in with one arm for a quick kiss, before he heads to the bathroom to undress, too.

When we’re both in bed, Hemming pulls me in against him, the little spoon to his big spoon. I snuggle back into his

naked body and sigh contentedly. Neither of us speaks, but I know he's not sleeping.

While I know he's in a better spot now than he was two days ago at this time, a part of me can't get his quiet moments out of my mind. He was never mean to me. He wasn't ever cold. But I got the sense that those stories about his low moments while in the Marine Corps?

His low moments still exist from time to time, and I need him to know that he'd be very, very missed if he ever decided the dark was easier than the fight for light.

Looking over my shoulder, I whisper his name.

His eyes open. "Hmm?"

I roll over, pushing my foot between his knees, and lift a hand so my fingers brush the five o'clock shadow he sports at night. I watch my fingers, my heart pounding in my chest.

I'm nervous.

I know he told me he loved me when he was drunk, but he hasn't brought it up again in the light of day. He's not said the words since.

It's entirely possible he didn't mean them, and it was simply the alcohol talking. It would seem to me that Hemming is, for the most part, a happy drunk. Not that he's had a drink again since Sunday for me to make a solid assumption.

"Kae."

I slide my fingers up his jaw until my palm lays flat. "I love you, Hemming." My whisper is broken with nerves. I'm terrified he doesn't feel the same.

I'm scared I've fallen for my husband and it's a one-way street.

His hand circles my wrist gently, moving my palm to his mouth, and leaves a soft, sucking kiss there. My heart tumbles, equal parts turned on and filled with anxiety.

After his kiss, he then takes my hand and puts it on his hip, before pulling me closer... Closer, until we can't be any closer

unless we were fucking.

He tucks my head under his chin and holds me tighter. I can hear as he swallows hard.

“You don’t ha—”

“I love you, too, Kae,” he interrupts. “I’m so fucking glad you’re in my life.”

“Me too,” I whisper, tears building behind my eyes. I close them to try and ward them off.

I know that loving a person doesn’t stop them from being too low to live, but I vow to do everything I can to make sure he stays happy.

Now that I have him, I need him in my life.

I can’t imagine it any other way.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HEMMING

SITTING IN TUCKER'S WAR ROOM, I STRETCH MY ARMS OVER my head, feeling my upper back crack as I bend into the leather chair. It's only been a few days since the Houston trip, but things between Kae and me are great.

I haven't been having nightmares about her either, which helps.

That said, while things remain quiet in Virginia, we're not letting our guards down. It's too early to say Kae's safe...even if I have zero intention to divorce her when that day comes.

"It's possible they're regrouping from the ground up," Jameson "Jay" Tucker says from his chair, arms crossed and tipping his seat back. On the big screen in the middle of the room is Callen Sutherland. He's been in Virginia for a week.

The on the ground guy we were talking about having.

As Tucker builds Douglas Group, he's been big with throwing guys directly into the field, and that's what he's done with Hunter's Marine buddy.

"They were hit with Tyla and Cameron," Jay continues, holding up his thumb, then adds his index finger, "and then two months later, Clay and Kellie...now Kaelyn." At Kae's name, he looks at me, but then turns his attention back to Tucker. "It makes sense to me that things are quiet right now."

“This is true,” Tucker nods. “Definitely too early to tell if things are good for her. Clay’s trial is in October. And when he’s put away, because he will be, that’s only part of the puzzle.”

“And there’s still no chatter about what they’d planned for Kae?” I ask Callen, who shakes his head.

“Nothing. However, drug *and* human trafficking has become so big in their model that I can’t imagine they’re just going to let it go. Unless they never found a buyer.”

The thought of someone buying Kaelyn sends my blood boiling.

People buying people regardless, but I have a vested interest in one woman in particular.

Callen is not in a position to infiltrate and go undercover, but fuck, it would be nice to have someone on the inside.

“I’ll be at O’Ryans again tonight. Last Wednesday I got the impression that Darragh—the boss—comes in most Wednesdays, so I’m hoping to spot him again tonight. I don’t imagine he’ll tell me anything, but even if I can overhear a conversation...” Callen shrugs. “I’ll report back regardless of what I get.”

“Awesome. Thanks,” Tucker says, and after Callen’s screen goes off, we’re on to the next order of business. “While we’re watching that, we have a new task to oversee, too. A religious group.”

“Cult,” Carter offers, walking into the room at the right time. “It’s a cult, Tucker.”

“Okay, a religious cult.”

Carter takes a seat as Tucker continues, “A thousand-acre compound called The Ranch has had some questionable practices, but no one’s been able to get inside. Carter knows of someone who got *out*; they’re asking us to watch, make sure the big wig doesn’t come after her. She’s the daughter, from what I understand.” He looks to his sister, who nods in confirmation. “Our main focus is ensuring Nathan Johns does not leave Oklahoma. I’ve been in contact with Cooper

Waddell,” this time when Tucker pauses, he looks to Chance; best guess, they knew the man from their time in RECON, “and he’s going to start the rotation. Set up cameras and intel for us to watch here. As long as things remain quiet and Johns doesn’t do any moving, I won’t need anyone to relieve Dell when he heads here. Keep it in the back of your minds though. Any one of you may be taking a trip to Oklahoma in the near future.”

I was confident it wouldn’t be me, not with the timing, but it sounded like one of the easier jobs we’d have as a group.

“Jay, how are things settling? Kids doing good?”

The former Navy master-at-arms nods. “Kids are good. Started school this week. Getting into a routine.”

“Good. And Beau?” Tucker looks to the other new guy, another sailor.

He nods. “We’re settling. Ten’s rearranged the house five times.”

“You’ve been in town for ten days,” Eli chuckles at his friend, and Jay shakes his head.

“You don’t know my sister.”

The tone of the room has changed from serious to lighthearted, and it isn’t long before our meeting is done.

Jay sticks around to chat with Tucker, so Chance and I head toward the houses without him.

“I think Kate said she and Kae were going over plans for the bakery today. Final touches or something. Do you guys want our contractor’s number? See if he’s able to work the bakery into his schedule?” Chance asks.

“Sure. Text it to me?”

“I can do that.” As Chance splits off for his house, he holds up a hand in goodbye and I do the same, my pace picking up.

Eager to get home.

I've come to expect Wilson greeting me when I walk in, and today isn't an exception. Chuckling, I pick up the cat. "Too much estrogen in the kitchen, man?" He purrs as he stretches upward, rubbing the top of his head against my jawline.

Walking to where the women are, I spot both Kate and Kae sitting on the counter stools, bent over an iPad.

"How's it going, ladies?" I stop behind Kae, putting a hand between her shoulder blades. Today's iPad drawing isn't so much a drawing but an actual 3D rendering. "That's amazing, Kate. I like the retro vibes you have going." The cases are designed to be made of curved glass, but the counters look like a light green. Mint? Is that what Kae would call it?

Not afraid to ask, I do. "Why that...mint color, and not coral?"

Kate laughs lightly, bumping Kae's shoulder. "You trained him well."

"I did no such thing," Kae chuckles, and I can see her cheeks flushing. "I just told him once that my favorite color was coral. He's showing off."

Wilson does a few feline acrobatics in my arm, so I put him down on his feet before looking at the rendition again. "Let me see."

As Kate zooms out of the image, I place my hand back on Kae, her shoulder this time, mindlessly rubbing my thumb in circles at the base of her neck.

Kate explains what they came up with, with horizontal shiplap white walls, and mint-colored countertops and table tops. There will be one community-sized booth along the wall Kae's unit shares with the business beside it, and a thick, wooden bar top against the shop's main glass front.

"I'd love to find someone to do that funky resin thing with wood, for that," Kae says, looking over her shoulder at me. "Bring the green color there, too, but not nearly as bold and in your face."



“That would be cool.” Kae showed me a woodworker’s TikTok the other day and I had to agree, it was a neat process with an amazing end product.

“Then we’ll...I’m sorry, Kae...will have,” Kate continues and I can feel Kae’s shoulder shaking in light laughter, “a couple of bistro tables, too. She wanted a place where people could hang out and enjoy their baked goods, or a place where she could sit with customers who wanted to order specialty cakes, and we decided multiple seating options where best.”

“And maybe I could host kids cupcake or cookie decorating classes, then I can set up the tables for each student.”

Proudfness wells in my chest.

Six short weeks ago, Kae was terrified to be front and center in a town as a new person, with a career doing something she only ever did for herself.

And here she is now, not just making plans, but making community-centric ones.

“Chance said you liked your contractor and was going to send me his information,” I tell Kate, who nods.

“He was so easy to work with. Landon, is his name. I probably have his number somewhere in an email or something, but if Tanner hasn’t sent it yet, I’ll remind him when I get home. He’s better with that thing than I am.”

I get dinner started as Kate and Kae pack up. As I cook chicken, peppers, and onions for fajitas on a cast iron skillet, I listen as the women talk about Kate’s store. She’ll be opening next weekend during Forever’s fall festival. Because Kae missed the town meeting, they talk about her bringing mini cupcakes to the bookstore, which in turn became a conversation about maybe setting a table out in front of Kae’s storefront but it ultimately depended on the construction happening next door.

Listening to Kae make plans feels good.

Forever is good for Kae.

And Kae's good for me.

After Kate's gone, my girl comes back into the kitchen, leaning against the pantry door. "Can I help with anything?"

Shaking my head, I turn to grin at her quickly. "Nope. I've got it. Why don't you find a show for us? These will be ready in less than five minutes."

"I like the show here."

Chuckling, I remove the skillet from the heat source, letting it sit before we eat. "Do you?"

"Mmm. I do."

I reach for her, and when I pull, she comes into my body willingly. As I wrap my arms around her hips, she does the same to my neck, grinning up at me. The level of ease I have with this woman...

I'd have laughed if someone told me this marriage—which was presented to me to simply keep her safe—would feel incredibly real in such a short amount of time.

I would have never guessed I'd be here, in the seclusion of our home, happy to be tied to this woman.

"I'm proud of you," I tell her.

"For?"

"Everything. You came into this scared, but you didn't let that stop you. And the last couple of weeks, your excitement for baking and the bakery... I'm just really damn proud of you," I say, shrugging one shoulder, not sure how to fully convey everything I'm feeling.

"All of it is only because of you." When I shake my head, she presses her lips to my chin. "Yes, it's because of you. You've made this transition incredibly easy."

"Even when I've pissed you off?"

"All couples fight, Hemming. It isn't healthy to not have disagreements. You've helped me, and I've helped you. I think we make a good team."

“That’s something I can agree with.”

“You act like you don’t agree with dang near everything,” she laughs. Her joy is amazing to me, and I can’t stop myself from taking her lips with mine.

As we kiss, I keep her lower half pressed tight to mine, but she moves her hands from the back of my neck, to where her fingers bracket my jaw.

I’ll never tire of kissing this woman, regardless if they’re quick pecks in passing, or deep kisses of passion.

Unfortunately, before the kiss can get *really* good, Wilson winds himself between my legs before stretching...and digging his claws into my hip.

“Shit, Wilson,” I laugh, dodging him.

Not at all phased, the cat moves to his bowl and sits, his thick tail swishing in lazy movements.

“Guess it’s dinnertime,” Kae chuckles. “For him and us. Let’s eat those fajitas before they go cold.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KAELYN

IT'S THE DAY OF THE FALL FESTIVAL, AND HEMMING AND I ARE heading into town to check out the storefronts, but also to support Kate and *Between the Pages* opening.

I have two fourteen-by-fourteen boxes of mini cupcakes sitting on the back floorboard of the truck, Hemming's rear seats folded up to give them room. I thought bringing nearly four hundred cupcakes was overkill, but Kate convinced me to make them all.

One box is completely filled with my caramel apple cupcake, and the other box is half and half, vanilla and chocolate.

Hemming and I discussed taking the SUV but it rained last night. Assuming we won't be able to park in the business owners alley, we'll likely be parking in the field across the highway, and if it's muddy...

It will just be better to have the truck.

Handmade signs proclaiming the *First Annual Fall Harvest Days in Forever* are posted every few miles.

"Are you even allowed to call something an annual event if it's the first one?" I muse.

"Semantics," Hemming says with a chuckle. "Oh, I've got a riddle for you."

I adjust in my seat to try and face him better. “Okay, shoot.”

“Tripp—” Jay’s oldest “—shared it this morning during our run, so if it’s bad, blame the kid.”

Grinning, I nod. “Okay.”

“What starts with an E and ends with an E but only has one letter in it?”

Squinting my eyes, I repeat the riddle softly, trying to figure out the answer.

“Give up?” Hemming grins at me.

“You’ve got me. Yeah, I give up.”

“An *envelope*.”

Hemming looks proud of his riddle and I have to give him credit. For a joke coming from an eleven year old, he pulled it off nicely.

“Not bad, not bad,” I giggle. All morning I’ve been battling between excitement and nerves—and I’m not even doing anything today; not really—and Hemming’s riddle was just the right thing to give me peace.

As we near town though, traffic begins to slow and with it, so does Hemming’s mood. For me being the introverted one of our pair, he sure shut down quickly at the idea of spending *all freaking day* at this fall festival. I told him I didn’t plan on being there all day, and when we were ready to go, we could go.

I sometimes get a kick out of the fact I was the one who was nervous to come to town initially, and now that we’ve made been here, Hemming could take the public or leave it. He’s a bit of a homebody, and I’m not entirely sure I’ll ever be able to get him off the compound.

He seems to like the wide open space that’s secured behind a sturdy fence.

“It doesn’t even start for another thirty minutes,” Hemming mumbles.

“Everyone’s excited. And! The firefighters had their pancake breakfast this morning, remember?”

Hemming glances at me, his brows up, and I smile at him. He may not be excited, but I certainly am.

Besides Beyond the Pages opening, all the existing stores will have goodies for those walking through town, and the police and firefighters are doing a pie throwing contest for charity. I think I even heard the town square will have a bunch of blow up slides and bounce houses.

With so much of traffic being directed into the farm field across from downtown, Hemming simply goes with the flow instead of trying to get into the alleyway behind the bakery. I hold onto the “oh shit” handle as the truck rocks on uneven ground, and I glance over my shoulder at the boxes in the back.

“They’ll be fine,” he reassures me. “I’m barely going 5, which is why the bumps feel so big.”

Once parked, Hemming grabs the boxes and we walk through the field toward Main Street. It’s a good thing I went with low-heeled boots today—they go to mid-calf and I was feeling extra fallish today, pairing the camel colored boots with cute tall socks—or else I’d be breaking an ankle.

Or losing a shoe to the grip of mud.

My phone buzzes in my hand and I see a text.

“Kate says to go through the back. People are already window browsing and she doesn’t want to unlock the door yet.”

Because my bakery is on the corner of Main Street, we get to walk beside it. I can’t help but grin at the brown paper that now lines the window and glass door, signifying inside construction will be beginning soon.

As we move along the outside wall, an idea hits. “How much do you think it’d be to knock down this wall,” I run my fingers along the bricks, “and make it a window wall, too?”

Hemming doesn't stop his forward movement but he does look, and seems to consider. "I don't know. Probably wouldn't be cheap, but we're meeting with Landon on Monday. You can ask him then."

I made the call to the contractor and felt good about moving forward. Landon is only able to meet during the day, so Hemming took Monday afternoon off. I told him I could do it on my own, but I think he knew I'd feel better with him there.

"Is it a silly idea?" I ask as we turn the corner into the alleyway.

"I don't think so. But maybe don't get your heart set on it yet. Let's see what the quote is first."

There are five buildings on this side of Main Street—mine, a place where local crafters can rent out booth space and sell their goods, Pör, Between the Pages, and Bailey's Custard. The craft place, called MADE, should be opening soon, and the owners seem to be taking up both of our parking spots in the alley.

"You wanna text Kate back and say were almost there?"

"Sure."

I give her the heads up and as soon as we get to her back door, Tanner is pushing it open for us.

"Good timing," Hemming comments as we step inside.

Tanner closes the door behind us. "Kate's got a table in the front for you."

The way Kate's set up the bookstore, she has a holding room immediately to the right of the back door, and a bathroom to the left. The hallway isn't long, and as soon as you clear it, you're in the thick of the store, with a kids area being in the far back corner.

Kate pops her head around a shelving unit and smiles. "You made it! And you brought cupcakes!"

"As if you didn't know either of those points," I laugh, giving her a quick hug. "Congratulations on today!"

“I haven’t even opened yet,” she says, hugging me back.

“I can still congratulate you. Here, Hemming,” I turn away from my friend, “I can take those.”

“Nope. Show me the table, Kate.” At my lifted brows, Hemming rolls his eyes good naturedly. “Please.”

It never fails to amaze me how different he is depending on who he’s with. Aside from Wyatt’s death, it’s been such a long time since Hemming has not only given me short answers, but also random subject changes, that I usually forget that’s who he is until we’re around the people he calls friends.

Not that Kate isn’t his friend.

Kate has a place for the cupcakes near the front desk, and as Hemming opens the boxes and puts them out, Kate pulls me to the desk.

“I overnighted these from Staples because I didn’t think you’d think to bring anything,” she says, reaching for a small brown box.

“Kate...” I have no idea what she’s done, but I can feel myself getting emotional. Whatever it is, I know it’s a supportive gesture.

Heck, she’s been supportive since the moment she walked into my house, excited to eat cupcakes.

She opens the box and reaches in, pulling out a stack of cards that are secured with a paper band. After ripping it, she turns the cards over, revealing mint green postcards with a large white circle off center, “Kae’s Bakery” in a funky retro font across the entire card.

“Oh my gosh, Kate,” I whisper, reaching for them.

In smaller letters is, “Coming Soon,” as well as the website and domain email address she helped me set up a few days ago.

Tears fill my eyes and I have a hard time looking at my friend.

“You like them?”



Shaking my head and blinking rapidly, I finally lift my eyes to hers. “I freaking *love* them, Kate. Thank you so much.” I throw my arms around my friend.

“I figured you needed something for the table, so people knew what they were eating, and then they could get excited for the bakery to open.”

When I pull back from Kate’s embrace, I lower my sleeves over my palms and use them to press lightly into my eyes—completely forgetting I wear makeup today.

Kate laughs and takes my wrists, bringing them away from my face. “You’re going to have raccoon eyes, and the day hasn’t even started yet.”

“You making my wife cry?” Hemming interrupts, moving to lean into the desk on crossed arms. There’s a tease in his voice but when I look over at him, I notice the concern there, too.

“Look what she had made for today,” I tell him, holding out the stack of cards.

He takes them, looking them over, before giving me a crooked grin. “Makes it real, doesn’t it?”

“So real.”

I wouldn’t say everything up until this point felt like a fairy tale. There’s enough real in the moments, in the conversations, for me to know I’m Kaelyn Johansen and this is the life I’m building for myself.

But something about this moment, with my husband and two people I consider my closest friends, makes me incredibly excited for the future.

Kellie Zimmerman may be dead, but I don’t know that her life would have ever been as exciting as Kaelyn Johansen’s.

And I wouldn’t trade a thing.

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BETWEEN THE PAGES HAS BEEN HOPPING SINCE THE MOMENT Kate opened the doors.

The men have been in and out, but I'm pretty sure they're both over at the hardware store right now. Kate has two girls working today and when a third comes in at noon, she and I take a break. Not that I was doing much other than being a cupcake dealer.

In two hours, I've gone through nearly two hundred cupcakes.

Fifty percent of what I brought...

Gone.

I know it won't be that way when I open the bakery, but it gives me a good idea of what demand may look like.

"The Paiges will meet us in the square," Kate says as we step onto the front walk. There are people all over, milling around and chatting.

Some with bags in their hands, others with bags and samples.

There are kids running up and down the blocked off Main Street, balloons flying behind them, their faces painted in bright colors.

Pōr won't open for full service until dinnertime, but Pay does have the door unlocked, allowing people to come in and sample local wines. She'll be busy at five, no doubt.

Bailey's will be closing for winter after this weekend, so Paige and her workers are busy as people are likely filling their freezers. Her family recipe custard is so much better than anything you can buy at the grocery store, although I think I saw a few pints at The Market a few weeks ago.

I've only met Pay and Paige briefly, but Kate really enjoys their company so I'm not at all nervous to do lunch with them.

Kate and I walk to the square, talking about the morning and discussing her plans for the future of Between the Pages. We're only in the square for a few minutes before Paige meets up with us, Pay shortly behind her.

There are plenty of food options today, with the diner and Zane's being town staples, but there's also a food truck selling standard fair food.

We opt for corn dogs for each of us, and share a big plastic bucket filled with fries. As we're eating at a picnic table, I listen to the women chat and ask Kate about the bookstore opening, and I grin, looking around at all the activity.

Forever truly is a special small town. I've learned in the last months how it was practically a ghost town until earlier in the year when someone with money decided to bring it back to life. Even with new stores and modern touches, it still feels like an old small town, where the currently asphalt covered roads were once dirt or cobblestone, and old Model Ts parked diagonally along the sidewalks.

"What about you guys, Kae?" Pay's words catch me off-guard.

Shaking my head, I grimace with a grin. "Sorry, I was daydreaming. I didn't catch the question."

"Kate was telling us about the house plans she and Tanner are drawing up. Are you and Hemming going to build a house?" Paige asks.

"Oh, I..." I grimace then shake my head, shrug, nod... A whole slew of emotions as I'm hit with a single question I haven't prepped for. "I'm sure in time," I finally come up with. "Hemming really likes his space and routine. If we were going to build, we'd have to find a big chunk of land, I'd think, but..."

"That's what Kae and Tanner did, right?" Paige directs her question to Kae, who nods.

"It's right next to Tucker's land. There may be another parcel. We can be neighbors all over again," Kate suggests.

Of the three women here with me, Kate's the only one who knows the truth about me and Hemming, and for all I know, she thinks I'm playing the role I was given.

Not that the truth affects things between him and I. Not that I think, anyway.

We sleep together—figuratively and literally.

We say *I love you*.

We have embraced this marriage.

I'll be the first to admit when Hemming started shutting me out with Wyatt's death, I feared divorce was still imminent. I wasn't sure we'd survive a year, not if he couldn't let me in during his low moments.

But he and I vowed to make this marriage real, and in my heart, it feels very, very real.

"Maybe if Tucker helps him secure the land," I finally say, forcing a grin on my face. "Oh, I have a riddle for you," I change the subject. "Hemming got it from Tripp."

Kate claps her hands once and laughs. "Yes! It's great. Tanner told me it this morning, too."

"Do you..."

Kate shakes her head, smiling, and ushers her hands toward the Paiges. "No, you tell them."

I share the envelope joke, which prompts Paige to tell a similar riddle, and the mood is once again light. I'm not the topic of the moment, and I can breathe easier.

Our corndogs are long gone and the fries bucket is nearly empty, when Tanner and Hemming find us.

Kate stands up and Tanner takes her spot, pulling her back down into his lap.

Hemming stands behind me, his hands on my shoulders.

"How are things at Pōr and Bailey's today, ladies?" Tanner asks.

Once again, I can just listen, but this time, I have Hemming's body to lean back into. He's not a big cologne wearer, but I bought him one to try. "*For certain occasions,*" I'd told him when he raised his brows at it.

I was surprised when he wore it today, but I definitely love it on him.

“These two are coming up on their anniversary,” Tanner says, pointing his thumb in our direction. Once again, I’m caught off guard, having gone into my head instead of listening to the conversation around us.

How did we circle from Paige and Pay, *back* to me and Hemming?

Hemming squeezes my shoulders lightly. “We are. Next week.”

“Our fifth,” I offer the lie easily. Far easier than I thought I could. Do people actually believe we’ve been together for over five years?

“Are you guys doing anything special?” Pay asks, leaning into the table.

I shake my head, “No,” but when both Paige’s and Pay’s eyes move from my face to the man standing behind me, I tip my head to the side and look up at him. He just smirks down at me.

“Hemming...”

“Nope. Not doing anything,” he tells me, but I have a feeling he has something up his sleeve.

A phone chimes. It’s an alert that Paige has to get back to Bailey’s.

We all get up and carry our trash to the garbage bin.

“Head home in an hour or so?” Hemming asks, his hand in mine.

“Sure. That’s fine. The cupcakes are nearly gone, anyway.”

“Tanner and I stopped there before heading this way. Babe, they’re gone.”

I stop, my eyes wide and my mouth gaping open. “But there were nearly four hundred!”

Chuckling, he tugs me until my front is to his and I’m looking up at him. “The people have spoken. They want you in this town.” And when Hemming kisses me, I can’t stop myself from smiling against his lips.

I never want our kisses to end, and this one is no different. But then Hemming taps my butt and I dance away, laughing.

I'll let him think it's a PDA thing and not the fact that when his fingers brush the undercurve of my ass, it's not only ticklish, but it makes me instantly wet.

"I'll grab you from the bookstore," he tells me with a wink, and we split apart, me for the girls and him toward Tanner.

"You guys are too cute," Pay grins, her eyes following Hemming briefly. I don't feel any jealousy at her looking at what's mine.

Partly because I'm nearly positive she doesn't mean her look as anything, but also because I'm pretty confident these days in what Hemming and I have.

"Are you guys going to have kids?" she asks, looking at me now.

Once again put on the spot, I feel myself turn red. "Oh, I... We haven't really..."

"Pay!" Kate saves me. "You don't ask women that."

"I'm sorry!" Pay laughs, holding her hands up. "I was just saying... You two would make cute babies, that's all. If you wanted them, of course."

"I didn't take any offense to it, promise," I tell her, my words stronger than I feel. "We're just enjoying our time together. I have time."

"It's so unfair that women have a limited number of years to have healthy eggs but here men are, having kids well into their seventies," Paige says, shaking her head. "I'm three seconds away from going the Single Mom By Choice route. My clock's tickin'!"

"Paige, you're only twenty-five," Kate grins.

"And I haven't been on a date in over two years. There's like...cobwebs growing down there."

“Oh my gosh, girls, we all have time,” Pay laughs. “But two of you have very handsome, very *virile* men. If I had a man like either of them, I’d either be clearing the shelves of condoms, or willingly birthing dozens of children.”

All four of us laugh, and when we reach Bailey’s, everyone hugs.

Pay, Kate, and I head further down the block, and when Kate and I head for the door of Between the Pages, Pay tells us she’s bringing a bottle of wine over to celebrate Kate’s opening success.

Inside, I see my cupcakes are indeed gone, as well as most of the postcards. I clean up as Kate mans the desk, sending one of her employees on a lunch break.

“I really like your friends,” I tell Kate, after I return from throwing the bakery boxes away.

“I think you can call them your friends too,” Kate teases. “Oh, and Kae?”

I look up from breaking down the table.

“You know I know...you know. But for what it’s worth? I agree with Pay. You two would make cute babies.”

Where before the question caught me off guard, there’s something about hearing my closest friend say it. The one person from that group of girls who knows the truth of my situation. Hearing her say it...

“You think?”

“I know. And...” She leans into the counter and lowers her voice so it doesn’t carry, “I’ve seen you two. Something tells me... Well, I see the way he looks at you, and the way you look at him, and I think there will be more anniversaries.”

There’s no stopping my grin as I shrug a shoulder, looking back down at my task.

But then I give in and smile at her. “I think so too.” We kind of sound like we’re speaking in a code of some sort, but I appreciate her letting me know she sees it.

After bringing the table back to the storage room, I tell Kate to give me a job. For the next hour, between sipping on the wine Pay brought over and restocking Kate's card catalog with stickers, bookmarks, pins, and patches, I enjoy the atmosphere of Between the Pages.

I love that I can share Kate's passion with her, by being here to support her, when she's been my second biggest supporter with the bakery...

Although she does give Hemming a run for his money.

They support my business in different ways. I wouldn't trade either of them.

Today was a good day.

A really good day.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HEMMING

IT'S NEARLY THREE BY THE TIME KAE AND I GET TO THE truck.

“I had a lot of fun today,” Kae says, buckling her seat belt.

“Surprisingly, me too. There was a local band playing outside Zane’s. That’s what Tanner and I spent most of the day doing.”

“Sometimes the wind would carry the music. They were good!”

“They were,” I agree, looking behind me as I pull the truck out of the parking spot. There are still people coming in, but traffic in and out has mostly slowed down. Main Street is still busy, and I imagine it will be through dinner. I heard rumblings of a surprise fireworks show, so I’m sure people will be milling about for hours yet.

“Oh, I have a new riddle for you.” The smile on Kae’s face is in her words, and like usual, her joy brings a smile to my own face.

“Okay, tell me.”

“All right. So. What begins with *E*, ends with *E*, but only has one letter?”

Frowning, my grin still on my face, I glance over at her. “Kae, I told you that riddle this morning.”

Her brows furrow for a second. “Maybe the wine hit me harder than I thought... Oh! I know. What begins with *T*, ends with *T*, and only has *T* inside?”

“A teapot,” I answer quickly.

“Ugh,” Kae sighs. “Did Tripp tell you that one too?”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “No, but that one’s a little easier. I knew that the last *T* was actually *tea*, the drink, and then just some quick deduction.”

“I didn’t guess it right away. I was stumped. Do we have plans tomorrow?” She rolls her head on the rest to look at me.

“Just the workout in the morning. You have something you want to do?”

Shaking her head, Kae looks out the front again. “Nope. I thought it might be nice to just veg for the day, before life goes full force on Monday.”

“What makes you think it’s going to go fast?”

“Well, we talk with Landon, and get that ball rolling. The next couple of months will go fast because of that alone, but then there are the holidays coming, and everyone knows that last two months of the year fly by. Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas. Boom, boom, boom. Oh, Paige brought up Kate and Tanner building a house. What are you thinking?”

Kae’s extra chatty this afternoon, and I think it might be a mix of good times and wine. I hold my hand out and she takes it. “I thought maybe we could visit that conversation in the summer.”

“We can visit that conversation now...?” Her eyes are wide with curiosity, but not an iota of anger or confusion is in her words. In fact, I’d probably peg the words as having *hope* in them, versus any other emotion. “Unless, you know... you’re not sure of the future.”

*Oh. I’m very sure of the future.*

But instead of telling her that, I bring up a conversation I overheard while walking away from the women.

“You want kids?”

When she was asked the question earlier, I’d barely been out of earshot, and when I looked over my shoulder, I witnessed a look of longing pass over Kae’s features—while she was in the middle of gaping like a fish.

Much like she’s doing right now.

“Oh, I mean... Yes. But...” She shifts in her seat before taking a deep breath.

My mind goes back to the day we parked the truck near her Virginia house and she watched it burn, flames dancing around the structure...

And then the immediate change I saw in her, as she went from scared and unsure, to damn positive she was going to make the future work for her.

I see that again now.

“I want kids, yes. But I also don’t want to bring kids into a home where there’s an end date,” she tells me, her voice sure. “I know no one brings kids in thinking they’ll someday get a divorce but... It’s different in our situation, and I’m okay waiting. I know we’ve both said we want this to be real and nothing you’ve said or done has told me otherwise but... I also think maybe it’s too early to say for certain that we’re going to make it through the end of a year together. It’s only been... weeks, really. No one in their right mind *chooses* to have babies with someone they’ve only known a few weeks.”

“Okay, well... Imagine we’re in this spot, one year down the road. We made it past the year, you’re positive I’m not lying when I say this is real—”

“I didn’t say you were lying!”

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss the back. “Just listen. One year down the road, leaving the fall festival, I ask if you want kids... What do you say?”

I switch from watching the road to looking at her, and see as she takes a deep breath. “I’d say yes.” Her answer is nearly breathless.

Placing our hands down on my thigh, I go back to watching the road. “How many kids do you want, Kaelyn Johansen?”

“Maybe...two?”

Her hesitation prompts me to ask, “You sure?”

“Well, I think at least two, so they always have someone. So they’re not... You know.”

“Alone.” Like we’d both been.

“Right. But I really love watching the Douglas dynamic, and I haven’t even seen it with everyone, and I wonder what that was like, growing up with that many siblings.”

“So, you want *at least* two. Not maybe two.”

“How many kids do you want, Hemming?” Kae switches the questioning back to me.

“Six months ago—hell, six weeks ago—I was pretty positive I was going to die alone. After Celeste, I never gave much thought to kids.”

“But now?”

I grin at her in that moment. I love that she’s sure my thought process has changed.

“I’d give you all the babies you wanted.”

“That doesn’t answer the question though, Hemming. Do *you* want them?”

I don’t hesitate and give her the clarity she desires. “With you? Yes. I want to get you pregnant and rub your growing belly. I want to hold your hand when you bring our kids into the world. I want to see your expressions on a miniature version of your face. I want to teach our girls to stand up for themselves and to play sports but also bake and read, and our boys to be respectful young men who protect their sisters and love their mom. I think I’d be a pretty great t-ball coach, too. But it’s on your timeline. I know our situation isn’t normal, and I don’t fault you for wanting to take time. I’m not going anywhere, though, Kae.”

“We’d need to move.”

“We could fit a couple kids in our house.”

“Hemming!” She laughs in her seat. “Sure, we could, but it’s tiny. First, what would we do with your gym equipment? It would have to go somewhere. That room would be for the baby. Then, babies come with *things*. You’re not going to just be tripping on Wilson; you’ll be tripping on bouncy seats and baby pillows.”

“I want you safe—”

“Hemming, I *am* safe.”

“—even taking away that part of the equation, I want you safe. And we bring kids into this world? Damn straight, I want them safe, too.”

“So we do what Tanner and Kate are doing. Buy land, take our time, and you can secure the entire property the way Tucker’s secured his.”

“And that all costs money, Kae.”

“We’re doing just fine right now with basically one income. The bakery opens, and that’s a second income.”

“I have no doubt the bakery is going to do amazing, but for the bakery to pull in what we’d need in order stay financially comfortable, and that number changes when we add kids to the mix, you’ll be there all the damn time.”

“So, you’re on board with the bakery, but I can’t be there all the time?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied it.”

“Kae, don’t twist my words.”

That was mistake number one.

Mistake number two, I let go of her hand when I pull onto the compound, so I can lean in order to type in the gate code.

“I think I’ll walk back.”

She’s out of the truck before I can call her name.

“Fuck.” One second, we’re happy and joking about the future, and the next, she’s pissy. Just when I think I know her

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I get an inkling to pull up my calendar.

Because I’m trailing her, the truck is hardly going faster than a crawl. It’s perfectly safe to do this.

The calendar app opens to today’s date, and I pull down the full month, counting back to the day Wyatt died, then back another two days to Friday, because that was the day she was in bed all day. The week prior, we got into our first minor fight.

And I realize my wife has once again been taken over by PMS.

The crazy emotional whiplash suddenly makes sense.

It’s not fun, but it makes sense.

However, if she’s PMSing today, that means...

I look forward to the fifteenth and groan.

Hopefully my surprise for her isn’t ruined by cramps.

I watch my wife walk just ahead of the truck as I consult Doc Google.

“Hey, Siri?” The cab of the truck dings, and I ask, “What are the best ways to relieve period cramps?”

*“Here are five ways to get relief from period cramps. Apply heat. Heat can relax the muscles contributing to cramps. Take a pain reliever. Exercise. Takes steps to redu—”*

Exercise... Hmm.

“Siri, do orgasms help period cramps?”

*“Yes. When you orgasm, the blood rushes to the uterus, helping to relieve cramps. I also found this article from Heathline. 6 Reasons to Masturbate on your period. Would you like to hear it?”*

“No, thank you.”

Maybe next weekend won’t be ruined after all.

We've hardly made it to Tucker's house when I roll down the passenger window and pull up beside her. "Kae, get in the truck."

She shakes her head.

"Kaelyn."

"I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Then don't. But let me drive you home."

"I want to walk."

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her she's being unreasonable, but I'm positive that won't go over well so I keep the thought to myself.

"I will happily go into debt to build you a house, if it means you get into the truck right now."

She crosses her arms but doesn't stop her trek forward.

"I'll start looking at land this week."

She shakes her head.

"What else do you want, babe? I'll give it to you." I wouldn't say panic is starting to well up inside but...

Shit, panic is starting to well up inside.

Logically I know this is nothing. I know she'll work through this tizzy and we'll be back to normal.

That doesn't stop me from wondering if there's any way we can avoid this week in the future, though, because it's only the second time I've experienced it and it's not fun.

"You need a Snickers? You hangry?" At this point, I'm going to try anything.

Her glare tells me that wasn't the right thing.

Sighing, I stop the truck and throw it in park, hopping down and moving to meet up with her. Surprisingly, she stopped walking with the truck stopped moving.

Also surprisingly, she lets me pull her into my arms, although she does keep her arms crossed between us.

“You know why you’re pissy?” I ask the top of her head, my lips brushing back and forth over her hair.

“Yes,” she answers stubbornly.

“Then why don’t you get back into the truck, and I’ll set you up with Ben and Jerry’s, and you can watch a rom com, or *P.S. I Love You*, even though you’ll cry for the next two hours straight?”

The movie was streaming the other night and Kae mentioned she loved the film.

I’d never seen it, so I thought sure, let’s watch it.

*Why* would someone watch a movie *knowing* they were going to cry the entire damn time?! But Kae told me sometimes a girl needs a good cry, and that’s her go-to cry movie.

I’d asked why she needed to cry that day and she said she didn’t, she just wanted to watch the movie.

“I’m sorry I’m a bitch.” Her voice cracks and when I pull back to look at her, I see she’s three seconds from crying.

Grinning, I take her face in my hands. “Not a bitch. Just overtaken by hormones. They really do a fucking number on you.”

“It wasn’t this severe when I was on birth control,” she hiccups, her eyes trained on my nose.

Even though it goes against our earlier conversation and my desire to knock her up as soon as possible, I ask, “Did you schedule that appointment?” If it helps her hormonal swings, then it helps her hormonal swings. I’d rather her be happy than force the kid thing on her right now.

“Not yet.”

“You probably should.”

“I probably should...”

But... A man’s gotta shoot his shot. “Unless you want a baby.”



Her watery, dual-colored eyes meet mine then. “You really want to deal with this and me for the rest of your life? Because even if we divorce...we have a kid, and I’m always that kid’s mom and you’re always their dad.”

Wrapping an arm around her neck, I pull her in for a closer hug. She finally unwinds her arms and wraps them around me, instead. “I really do. Couldn’t imagine anything better.”

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KAELYN GOT HER GOOD CRY IN, WHILE I PLIED HER WITH ICE cream and potato chips. I still don’t get why someone would watch a movie they know makes them cry like their world is falling apart—let alone a few days after the last time the movie ripped her apart—but Kae *was* in a better mood after.

When the movie ended, I sent her to bed and cleaned up the house, but upon getting undressed for bed, saw Wilson took my pillow.

“Sorry, dude,” I whispered, not wanting to wake my sleeping wife, “that’s my spot, and you know it.”

Wilson gave me a slow blink, clearly contemplating if he was going to move or not. Thankfully, he does, moving to lay at the end of the bed.

I slip in between the covers. I transitioned back to sleeping naked although Kae opts to wear one of my shirts to bed. Before pulling her to me, I gently run a finger over her cheeks. Her eyes are still puffy from crying and even though I know the tears were thanks to a fictional story, my chest aches in memory of her crying.

Finally, I pull her close, and close my own eyes.

Sleep comes fast, but even faster, comes Kae’s startling scream that sends me out of bed quickly.

“Fuck. Where? What...?”

I look around and realize she’s not in the bedroom or bathroom.

“Kae? Where are you?”

“L-laundry.”

“You okay?” I ask, even though I’m making my way to her. She stands against the wall, the laundry closet doors fully open.

“There’s a... Eek!” She jumps back against the wall and when I look to where she points, I see a giant assed spider.

This is no daddy long leg.

“You’ve gotta kill it,” she tells me. She’s visibly shaking, her arms wrapped tight around her. “I can’t... I don’t... I don’t *do* spiders.” On “do” her entire body convulses in a full-body shiver.

“Probably a bad time to tell you, I don’t do spiders either,” I inform her, my eyes now locked on the quickly moving arachnid.

“Hemming! I can’t... I’m *stuck* here. It’s going... Oh no, it’s going to go in the dryer! My clothes!”

But instead of dropping into the dryer, the spider drops to the floor and scurries toward the front door—which is where Kae is standing.

She shrieks again, going up on tippy toes and dancing around.

“Open the door, Kae!”

“I can’t... I... But you’re *naked!*”

“No one will see. Open the door!”

Still dancing around on tiptoes, she does but of course the spider doesn’t take the hint.

“Shit,” I mumble, looking around. The Swiffer is in the laundry closet, so I quickly grab the silver and green device to try and usher the spider out.

As I do, Kae jumps behind me, leaving me to deal with the intruder.

Instead of allowing me to push it out, the spider crawls up onto the green base. Holding my breath, I reach as far as I can to get the Swiffer outside, then knock the end against the ground. When that doesn't work, I knock the Swiffer against the wall until finally, the spider falls.

And I promptly slam the door shut.

I stare at the door for a few seconds, my body heaving, until Kae starts giggling behind me.

Her giggles become bigger laughs, and when I turn to face her, she's damn near bent in half as she laughs her ass off.

"That's funny to you?" I try to ask seriously, but now that the event is over, I can feel laughter bubbling up in me, too.

"You're *naked*, Hemming. And you just..." She stands up and swings her arm wide, "*opened* the door. Anyone could have been walking the drive and seen your junk. Just... Wide open." She's nearly wheezing while laughing now.

"Hate to break it to you, babe, but Chance and Tucker have seen the junk before."

"Ooo." Kae's no longer laughing, but she *is* grinning, with her brows up and chin dropped.

"Shit, not like that," I chuckle. "Just like... Boot camp and guy things." When she wiggles her eyebrows, I shake my head. "Get your clothes, woman. I'm jumping in the shower."

"Maybe I'll join you!" she calls out as I walk away.

"Maybe I'll leave room for you."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

KAELYN

“I’M NERVOUS.”

Hemming pulls the truck into a spot in front of Pōr. “Why? You sent him the plans. He didn’t say anything to make you question the meeting, right?” He puts the truck in park and unbuckles, but doesn’t move to get out of the truck.

“But what if it’s too big of a dream? What if all the tables are the wrong idea? What if I need a bigger display case? What if—”

“What if, we just go in and talk to the man, and see what he says? I’m sure if he thinks anything is off, or has other ideas, he’ll share them.”

“I guess maybe I’m just afraid I’m in way over my head.”

When he reaches for my hand, I grip his like my life depends on it. “In case I didn’t tell you today, I’m proud of you.”

“You have.”

“Then I’ll keep saying it. I’m so damn proud of you, Kae. I don’t think he’ll tell you anything that makes you question what you and Kate came up with. And before you work yourself up, let’s just go in and see what he has to say first, okay?”

“You’re right.”

“I know,” he responds, winking.

Rolling my eyes, we separate and meet again on the sidewalk. I gave Landon the code for the backdoor so he could walk around the space before our meeting, but Hemming and I enter through the front door.

A man in jeans and a black pullover sweatshirt that states, “Hennessy Construction,” stands in the middle of the room, a notepad in his hand and one of those square-like pencils over his ear. At the door opening, he turns to us.

“Hey. Landon Hennessy,” he says, his hand extended.

Instead of offering his greeting to Hemming first, he starts with me. I don’t know why, but that sits really well with me.

He’s aware this is my project.

Not my husband’s.

“It’s very nice to meet you,” I tell him. “Kaelyn. This is my husband, Hemming. We’ve heard great things from Kate Freemont, and the bookstore looks amazing. I’m excited to discuss what you think about this space.”

We spend the next hour walking the building, comparing Kate’s drawing to Landon’s thoughts, and by the end, I’m kicking myself for being nervous.

“My wife is due with baby number five on the first of December, and I don’t think we’ll be finished here by then, but I’m going to be sure I have the best men on the job for any time I can’t be here, physically overseeing everything.”

“Five? Do you love it?” I ask, and he grins.

“All boys. It’s...interesting most days. Lots of wrestling and furniture rearranging.”

“Is the baby another boy?”

Hemming chuckles at my question.

“That’s what they say,” Landon grins. “My wife was really hoping for a girl, but we agreed we were stopping at five.”

I have so many more questions, but I give the man a break. Landon says he’s going to draw up the official blueprints and

permits, and he and his team should be able to get started in the next week or two.

We walk him to the door and after he leaves, I can't help but let out an excited little shriek. I can now *see* where everything is going to be—including a window on the outside wall.

I won't do a full window wall, but when Landon suggested a partial one instead because it would allow my counter to extend fully, I one-hundred percent was on board.

"It's real," I quietly muse to the empty walls, looking around before settling on Hemming. "It's all real."

"Yeah, baby. It's all real."

---

FOUR DAYS LATER, I WAKE TO AN EMPTY BED.

I scoop Wilson from the end of the bed and walk into the living room—stopping quickly in my tracks.

"Hemming...?"

He stands from the couch, a large suitcase—not our typically carry-on—nearby. "It's our fifth anniversary," he says before tapping the hard case. "And I thought we should celebrate it."

"Do people celebrate their fifth anniversaries?"

He shrugs. "Don't know. But we do. Go get dressed. We leave for the airport in thirty minutes."

Grinning, I set Wilson down on the ground. "Were you going to let me sleep until we had to leave?"

Wilson trades me for Hemming, twisting between Hemming's legs before he gets lifted. "You never sleep past six-thirty, so I figured you'd be awake soon."

"Where are we going?" I ask, giddy with excitement.

"It's a surprise."

“The last time—”

The last time he took me on a trip without telling me the destination, we ended up here in Forever, and my life completely changed.

His forehead wrinkles as his brows go up into his hairline. “And how did that one end up for you?”

“Not so bad, I suppose,” I tease. “But I’ll find out at the airport this time, right?”

“Just go get dressed, woman.”

“Do I have to pack anything?” I mean, I saw the suitcase, but a girl can’t be too sure.

“I packed yesterday when you were at Kate’s. I have everything. I just need you.”

“That’s sweet.”

“You’re not getting dressed.”

“Fine!”

Instead of letting me back into our room alone, Hemming follows, sitting on the edge of the bed as I walk into the closet, pulling out leggings and a hoodie.

“Wear a tank top or something under that,” he directs and I grin as I pull off my sleep shirt.

“So we’re going somewhere warm.” Completely nude, I turn toward the sink vanity where I placed my clothes, and pull on a thong and sports bra.

“I’ll never be able to surprise you, will I?”

When I look over my shoulder, I see his eyes are on my ass, so I give my hips an extra wiggle as I pull up my leggings.

I grab a Lululemon racer back tank and put it on before pulling the hoodie in place. “Okay, I’m good. You grabbed shoes?” I slip my feet into my favorite pair of HEYDUDES.

“I grabbed shoes, yes. Trust, woman. Trust.”

Turning off the lights in the closet and bathroom, I can’t wipe the smile from my face. “And you planned this all on

your own?”

“I did, I’ll have you know.” He stands and puts his hand on my lower back, guiding me out of the bedroom. “And Kate will stop by for Wilson, so you don’t have to worry about him, either.”

“Now, just being real,” I say when we’re in the truck, heading off the property, “I’m sure you’re aware, but Aunt Flow is due to arrive anytime between tomorrow and Monday. Which means there’s a good chance you’ve planned this amazing trip, and I’m going to be stuck in bed for at least one day.”

“I have your heat pads, I have your pain meds, and I have a plan. There are worse things than being stuck in a bed with you all day.”

“You really thought hard about this, didn’t you?”

“I knew I wanted to give you a real trip. The two we’ve been on haven’t been great, but I knew after Houston, I was going to do this.”

“You know, for being thrown into this as much as I was, you really are good at it all,” I tell him honestly. “Most men aren’t like you.”

“It’s a good thing you don’t need to deal with most men, isn’t it?”

“Definitely a good thing.”

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HEMMING SURPRISED ME WITH A TRIP TO CABO AND OUR FIRST day was amazing.

The resort he chose was all-inclusive, and even though we arrived in mid-afternoon, we spent time at the resort’s private beach, then traded salt water for pool water, before having dinner at one of the fanciest restaurants I’ve ever stepped foot in.



We also broke in the bed, as Hemming gave me orgasm after orgasm.

Probably in preparation for my period to start.

May as well get as much fun in as we could, right?

As life would have it, I woke up on Saturday morning with the starting signs of cramping, and my cycle started before lunch. I tried hard to stay upbeat, but as the day wore on, it became harder to function.

“You’re not mad?” I ask, as we leisurely make our way back to our room.

“Not mad,” he reassures me. Our hands are clasped and he rubs his thumb over mine. “I wish you would have told me before it got this bad, though, so I could have had you in bed and relaxing.”

“I thought I could ride it out,” I admit quietly. “I hoped I could. You planned this fantastic trip, and here I am...”

Hemming lets go of my hand but only so he can put his arm over my shoulders. “Knew it was a possibility, babe.” We reach our room and he places his phone in front of the pad, unlocking the door.

“You wanna take a hot shower or anything?”

I shake my head, stepping away from him and toward the bed. “No. I think I just want to lay down.”

“Let me get you your things,” he says, closing the door and flipping the security latch. He walks to our suitcase and flips it open, pulling out my heating pad, my heated, weighted blanket, and a small Ziplock that looks like it has two different types of pain relievers in it.

“For not wanting a future with a woman, you sure know what the heck you’re doing,” I say quietly, watching him.

“I learn quickly, and anything I can’t figure out by watching you, I look up online.” He plugs in both heat sources and hands me the smaller pad. As I put it on my lower stomach, he drapes the blanket on top of me. “What med do you prefer?”

“Ibuprofen, please. Three.”

Hemming gets me completely set up and I want to cry at the care he takes.

I definitely lucked out by being paired with this man.

“Rest, if you can,” he says, getting situated on the bed beside me. While I’m curled up on my side, he’s sitting with his back to the headrest. “Do you mind if I turn on the TV?”

Shaking my head, I close my eyes. “You can. It’s fine.”

I end up falling asleep and take a thirty minute nap. When I wake, I turn to my back, wincing at the pressure in my lower stomach, although it’s no longer the sharp, jabbing pains from earlier.

“Did you know you can start taking pain relievers the day before your period, to help with cramps?” Hemming asks, his phone in his hand while he looks down at me.

“I’ve heard it but while it’s regular, it’s not like...*every* twenty-eight days. Sometimes it’s thirty days. I’d hate to pre-med that far in advance.”

“I don’t think a couple extra doses before bed is harmful.”

“I’ll think about it,” I answer, closing my eyes again.

“You know what else can help with cramping?” I hear as he puts his phone down on the nightstand.

Keeping my eyes closed, I respond with a “Hmm?”

“Orgasms.”

I lift one eyelid. “No.”

“I saw it on multiple sites. Mayo, Healthline. Real sites.”

“You have to be in a certain frame of mind for an orgasm, Hemming,” I say, closing my eye once again. “And I feel the least sexy on my period.”

“But if you felt sexy...?”

“Hemming, I *hurt*. The very last thing on my mind is sex.” Which is currently a lie, because with him bringing it up, it’s very much on the forefront of my mind.

“You don’t even want to try? Not at all curious?”

Sighing, I open my eyes again. “You just wanna fuck.”

“Nope, I want you to feel better.”

“By fucking.”

“Listen. My dick can stay in my pants. Am I afraid of period sex? Not in the least. But it really is because I want to help you feel better.”

“Even if an orgasm helped, it would only be temporary.”

“Is this,” he motions over my laying form, “ever more than one or two days?”

“No. Usually only day one.”

“Then wouldn’t it be worthwhile to see if it works for you? It’s just one day. See how much relief you get...?”

“But we go back to the fact I don’t *feel* sexy, Hemming. A woman has to be in the right frame of mind, and this is not it.”

He studies me for a moment before nodding. “Okay. I hear you. But for what it’s worth, I think you’re sexy.”

“You’re deranged,” I tease, closing my eyes once more.

He’s watching a rerun of a *Law & Order*, and as I listen, I try to place the episode. I nearly fall back to sleep but as soon as my body is fully relaxed, a tight clench to my right ovary has me hissing out a low breath.

“You good?”

“I’ll be okay,” I tell him, trying my best to remain in a calm headspace.

“You want to try a hot shower?”

“No,” I sigh, “I just want to be right here.”

“Okay.”

As I lay beside him, Hemming’s conversation starts to replay in my head. I certainly don’t feel the worst I’ve ever felt before but...

Part of me is curious if there’s any truth to those articles.

Pre-Hemming, I wasn't exactly a stranger to sex or masturbation, but never during my cycle. However, I could see how maybe it would help.

"Maybe we could try," I say, fully aware it's out of nowhere.

"Try...?"

I look up at him and shrug a shoulder. "Let's try sex."

Unexpectedly, Hemming shakes his head. "I'm not coercing you into sex, Kae. You set a boundary. I'm going to respect it."

"And I'm telling you, I'm lifting it. Do you want a blow job first?" I try to get up on my elbow but even though I do my best not to grimace, I'm not successful at hiding my pain.

"Kae, it has nothing to do with my pleasure and everything to do with yours. No, I do not want a blow job. And I don't want to do something you're not comfortable with."

I think about my books, and then a moment a few weeks ago where fiction nearly crossed into reality. "You once brought up a safe word. We play, and if it's too much or isn't working, I let you know."

I see the contemplation crossing his features.

"Besides, I'm curious now," I add. "But I don't think it'll be easy for you." Bringing a hand to my chest, I caress my breast. "They don't hurt, but my nipples don't exactly feel good either, so they're not going to be an easy ticket to coming."

"What's your safe word?" Hemming asks, his eyes on my hand over my breast.

"I don't know... I... I've never..." I stutter, put on the spot.

"It's *your* safe word." The control in his voice is so different from the stutter of mine, and when his eyes meet mine, the gray depths are darker. Stormier. "You have to know it and you have to use it."

“V-vanilla.” It’s the first word I can think of, even though I know most people go with something like *red*.

“You’re sure?” He doesn’t wait for a reply though, and gets out of bed, walking toward the bathroom.

“Yes. I’m sure.”

He comes back with towel, draped over his shoulder, but instead of coming to bed, he moves to the suitcase.

I watch, intrigued, trying to figure out what he’s up to.

“This will go under you,” he says coming back to the bed, dropping the towel where he was sitting. “Condoms, if *you* decide to take it there. Vibrator.”

“Hemming!” My eyes widen at the pink phallus that hits the mattress last. “When did you get a vibrator? At least, it better be new. That’s not...”

“Never touched another pussy,” he reassures me. “Amazon Primed it earlier this week. In hopes we’d get to experiment.”

“You know dang well I don’t need a vibrator.” There’s never been a time where he’s not gotten me off all on his own.

“Well, I figured oral was off the table, and I thought maybe that would help you.”

There was a similar scene in a book I was reading recently, where the hero used toys on the heroine. Narrowing my eyes at him, I can’t help but tease, “Have you been reading my books?”

“Your Kindle history *is* on the Amazon app, and I may have thumbed through a book or two.”

“Hemming!” I laugh for the first time since getting back to the room.

“I love when you laugh.” He kneels on the mattress. “I hate when you hurt. Physically and emotionally. Let me help you.”

“Go ahead and give it the ol’ college try.” I lift the weighted blanket from me, and momentarily whimper at the loss of heat.

I'm not surprised when Hemming doesn't just...go for it.

He likes his foreplay.

He starts by kissing my lips lightly, gradually deepening it until I'm sighing and my mouth is open to his. I still have the smaller heat pack on my lower stomach but he makes no move to remove it. In fact, he places his hand over it, adding a gentle pressure.

As we kiss, I'm surprised to feel a wetness between my legs. I either let a clot out, or I'm getting wet because of this man. I probably should have changed my tampon before this but...

Whatever.

His hand slowly moves from the heating pad to my upper stomach, his thumb brushing the underswell of my breast. The lace of my bra is thin and not padded, but even so, I crave the feel of his skin.

"I need you," I whisper against his mouth. "Please."

## CHAPTER TWENTY

HEMMING

I PULL MY HEAD BACK A FRACTION SO I CAN STARE INTO HER eyes. “You’re positive?”

“Absolutely,” Kae whispers.

“And your safe word?”

“Vanilla. But I won’t need it.”

That’s not the song she was singing before, but I love her determination to try. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about my wife, it’s when she gets a thought in her head, she gives it her all.

I don’t want to cause her pain though, so instead of pulling her up to sit so I can remove her of her shirt and bra, I do so while she lays flat. She arches her back when my hand goes behind her, finding the clasp of her nude lace bra. Lifting her arms, she allows me to remove it from her body and I toss it mindlessly to the floor, where it lands on her shirt.

Her nipples are peaked, and I brush the pad of my thumb over one while keeping my eyes on hers. “So, that doesn’t feel good?”

She shrugs. “It doesn’t hurt, but it doesn’t feel like it normally does.”

“What’s it normally feel like?” It may not feel like much of anything, but her nipple does pebble tighter beneath my

thumb. Gently, I move to roll the tip between the pads of my thumb and index finger.

She closes her eyes, so this must not feel terrible.

“It’s hard to explain. But it just normally feels really, really good. Sometimes when you suck on them, I can feel it in my clit.”

“You want me to try?”

The question is hardly past my lips when she says, “Yes.”

Chuckling, I gently squeeze the entire breast and lower my mouth.

It may not feel normal-good, but it’s clearly okay.

Kae’s answering sigh to my mouth closing over her is deep and long. She lifts a hand into my hair, lazily scratching her nails along my scalp as I suck and lick. I keep my motions gentle, taking my time.

I lift my head but only enough for me to rub my chin *barely* over her wet, exposed nipple.

“Oh,” she says as her hips buck ever so slightly.

“Oh, you like that?” I ask, doing it again. I squeeze her breast a little more, bringing her tit further into the air and again, lightly brushing my whiskered chin over her.

“Yeah. That...”

I play with that nipple a little longer, wetting it, brushing it, sucking it, until moving to her other. Her body feels relaxed underneath mine, and I can’t help but think we’re on the right track to her feeling comfortable.

As I give her other nipple equal attention, I reach under me to blindly find the vibrator.

Sucking her nipple into my mouth, I keep my eyes on her face, and when I hold the “on” button to the vibrator, I watch for her expression to change.

It doesn’t, so I bring the dick-shaped vibrator to her chest, gently rubbing it over her tit. That nipple lost some of its



tightness.

“My clit, Hemming,” Kae moans, and even though my cock knows at *best* it’s getting my hand later, her whimper sends my cock to full-mast. “I need...”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice.

This right here is one-hundred percent about her pleasure, and I’ll do anything she asks.

Unfortunately, that means leaving my feast of her tits, and her soft cry at the loss matches the one I’m feeling inside.

I divest her of her linen shorts and underwear. “Lift your hips,” I instruct, grabbing the towel.

“Let me take it out...”

I lift my brows as she rolls out of bed with far more ease than she would have thirty minutes before. As she’s in the bathroom, I unplug both heat sources and lay the towel down on the bed.

When she comes back, she carries two more towels.

“We are not ruining their sheets,” she says, handing me her goods. “I don’t care how much bleach they use. But if we get these icky, I can soak them in water.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I joke, grinning, as I take the towels. I add them to the bed and then pat the center. “Come back here, wife.”

“I kind of think you should lose clothes, too,” she answers, crawling back in place. “It’s weird that I’m the only naked one.”

“You’re the one we’re doing this for.” I flick out my tongue when she’s flat, restarting my attention to her nipple.

“You’re silly if you think I don’t want your cock,” she moans, pushing her tit into my face.

I suck her gently as I reach for the vibrator once more. Popping off, I move to kneel between her legs, using two fingers to spread her lips apart.

“You think you’re going to come?” I ask instead of bringing attention to her comment.

Her body does a slow wave as she relaxes back into the mattress the moment the silicon cock head touches her clit.

“I do... It just took a little longer but... Yeah,” she sighs.

“You’re going to come first. If you still think you want my cock after, okay, but first... you.”

It does take me a little longer to get her off. It also took me damn near a half an hour to get her here, but I certainly don’t mind.

Leaning into her, I press the vibrator a little closer as I drop my mouth to her breast again. Even if her nipples don’t give her exactly the same sensation, my hope is the dual sensations will still help her come.

Sure enough, hardly a minute later her body starts to shake beneath mine.

My cock is rock hard and I’d love nothing more than to sink in her in this very moment, but not without her explicit permission.

Instead, I pull the vibrator away as her body calms.

“How you feeling?”

She opens her eyes, and they’re bright with passion.

“Surprisingly, really, really good.”

Grinning, I move to kiss her lips. “Sometimes you’ve gotta trust Doc Google.”

When I stand from the bed, she shifts to her elbows. “Did we make a mess?”

I look between her legs and shake my head. “Nope.” Her pussy is glistening with her juices, but it would appear she’s not actively bleeding.

Reaching for the vibrator, I take it to the bathroom.

“What are you doing?” Kae calls from the bed.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell her, turning on the water to clean the toy.

“Don’t you dare jerk off, Hemming.”

Chuckling, I leave the vibrator to dry on a hand towel and go back into the room. “Why’s that?”

“I want your cock. And don’t you dare ask, *are you sure*,” she lowers her voice to mimic mine, “because I am *sure*. Positive. No doubts.”

Even though she said it, I still nearly ask—but stop myself as I start. Kae reaches to her side and holds up a condom. “Let’s get to it, big boy.”

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WE SURPRISINGLY SPENT A LOT OF LAST NIGHT FUCKING. KAE decided she liked period sex, but only because it was us. She said she didn’t think she’d feel the same way with another man, which I told her was a good thing, because I had zero intention of letting her sleep with another man to check.

“It’s kind of embarrassing,” Kae says the next morning, ringing out the towel she was soaking overnight. “Can we just throw it away? What would they charge you for a towel? Ten dollars? Twenty?”

She got most of the blood out before it could fully stain but there are still visible marks on the white cotton. “It’s not bad. Just...wrap it in another towel. They’ll never know the difference,” I say, shrugging. “It all gets thrown in the same tub of bleach.”

“Can we just throw it away?” she asks again.

Knowing last night is something I wouldn’t mind revisiting, that means keeping it a positive experience for her. “Go ahead.” If it makes her feel better, I have no problem if I see an unexpected towel charge on the final bill, I think, watching her roll the towel into as small of a ball she can, and putting it in the small trash can.

“We’ll just have to put the other trash on top,” she says as she works, and I just shake my head, amused with her.

We have a few hours before we need to catch the shuttle to the airport, and while Kae mostly feels better, she’s still not one-hundred percent. Today’s “day two” of her period is similar to last month’s, but if you ask me, last night’s adult time helped.

“We have to check out at noon,” I say as we both leave the bathroom. “Want to do breakfast and then sit poolside for a little while?”

“Enjoy the heat and sun before we head back to Montana, where it’s easily twenty degrees cooler?”

“It’s still in the sixties. It hasn’t gotten too cold yet.”

“That’s not the glorious eighty-eight it’s been all weekend here.”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Then yes, let’s enjoy the heat and sun, as you say.”

The resort offers poolside breakfast, so we find a cabana and place an order. We opt to “go halves,” as Kae says—I get half of her French toast order, and she gets half of my eggs benedict order.

I sit on the side of my lounge chair, using the small table provided, but Kae sits cross-legged on her lounge chair, her plate in front of her.

Because of her...situation...she’s wearing shorts and a tank top, and she said under no terms was she getting in the water, but watching her enjoy her breakfast, the smile on her face tells me the weekend wasn’t ruined in the least.

“If you did this for our fifth, I can only imagine what you do for our tenth,” she says after we’ve finished eating. We walk together to the hot tub, sitting on the side with our feet in the warm water.

I think ahead five years and grin at the picture in my mind. “I’m sure I’ll come up with something.” If she thought our

fake fifth anniversary was something, I'm positive I can shock her with a true fifth anniversary trip.

"I'm kidding! We can't go on trips every five years, Hemming," she smiles at me. "That's overkill."

"Growing up, my parents always wanted to go on family trips. At least once a year. We never did. Life didn't work out that way for us. But I know I want that for our family. And that also means, mom and dad trips every five years."

"I'd say you're getting ahead of yourself but..." With a smile on her face, she shrugs her shoulders, tipping her head toward one that stays up. "I think that'd be nice."

"So, you're on board with kids?"

"I've always *wanted* them, Hemming."

"But with me?"

She rolls her eyes but the smile remains on her face. "If you want to be stuck with me for the rest of your life, that's your prerogative."

"Already told you, I don't mind being stuck to you. Tucker knew what the hell he was doing." Even though there isn't anyone on the pool deck, we can't speak freely so I leave the comment at that.

"Speaking of Tucker..." Kae leans forward to swish her hands in the water, before leaning back on her hands again. "Do you guys have anything major coming up?"

"Not really. We were told that summer is the biggest time we'll be utilized for Search and Rescue, with hikers coming in, but may be asked to go west to help with winter SAR. Won't know until it happens. Then just a few other...watch and wait jobs."

"Are you glad you took the job? It's certainly not working on airplanes. You're not, like...bored?"

Chuckling, I think about the weeks that lead to this moment, and shake my head. "Certainly not bored. And definitely happy."

“Good,” she looks over at me with a small smile. “I’m happy too.”

I know, but it feels good to hear her say it.

“You sure you don’t want to go in?” I change the subject, reaching into the water and gently splashing it her way.

Laughing, she leans away as she shakes her head. “I didn’t put my suit on, so no. I don’t want to go in.”

“There’s time to change your mind... We could run to the room, change, and be back, twenty minutes, tops. And maybe it will help before we get on our flight...?”

“You just want to get in, but don’t want to do it on your own,” she teases.

“No, I’m not going in the hot tub by myself,” I chuckle. “Not when I have a hot wife who could go in with me.”

“You’re crazy.”

“In love with you?”

“Oh my gosh, Hemming!” Kae’s laughter is the best aphrodisiac, and if she doesn’t stop, we’re going to be spending far longer in the suite than the time it takes to change.

“C’mon.” I push to a stand and hold my hand out to her. “Let’s go.”

Her eyes are lap-level and when she looks all the way up, her brows go up, too. “Hemming Johansen, we’re in public.”

“Somethings I can’t help, babe. Let’s go before it gets worse.”

“Worse, or better?” She takes my hand and I give her a gentle tug, helping her to stand.

“Maybe we’ll need to shower before coming back down...”

“I think that might be a good idea.”

*My little minx.*

We don't *jog* to our room, but we certainly walk with purpose, and no sooner than I have the door unlocked, Kae's in the bathroom, stripping.

"Grab a condom," she demands, turning toward the shower and turning it on.

"Yes, ma'am." We've already packed everything up, so I go to the suitcase and dig around until I find the small box.

Kae's already in the shower when I get back, so I open the glass door and hand her the packet. "It's the last one."

"Well, we better make good use of it," she smiles impishly at me. "Undress."

"What's that you always say if I give demands?" I tease. "Oh yes, *please*?"

"Yes. Please. *Please* get undressed, Hemming," she repeats, turning her body toward the shower stream. As she arches her back, I watch as the water hits her chest—and as she moves, I realize what she's doing.

She's finding pleasure from the pounding water on her nipples.

"They feel good today, do they?" I ask, stripping as quickly as I can. Because these are our clothes for the day, I put both of our sets on the vanity.

"Mmm. Yes. They do. But I know what would feel better..."

I step into the large shower behind her, closing the door, and turning her to me. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Your mouth. Your hands."

Placing my hands over her breasts, I knead them gently. "I did some research," I say, my hands working her flesh but my eyes on hers.

"If you say you did more period research..."

Chuckling, I lean in to kiss beside her lips, then her jaw line. "Just trying to be prepared." I lick her neck before giving her a sucking kiss that makes her body shiver in my hands.

“The reason why you don’t feel good on the first day is more than just the cramps,” I whisper to her skin. I move my hands to the sides of her breasts, allowing my thumbs to brush the pebbling tips. “It’s hormones. But then estrogen starts to rise again, and that’s why you feel good again...”

“Men aren’t supposed to know these things,” she murmurs, rolling her head.

“If you’re not on birth control, and you’re not sure about kids yet,” I lean down to suck a nipple into my mouth, playing my tongue over it, then popping off to finish, “then I need to know how your body works.”

“You’re crazy.”

“So you’ve said. Multiple times,” I joke, and when I take her other nipple in my mouth, she sighs happily above me.

She allows me to play for a little while longer before she switches our positions, and it’s her giving the pleasure. I watch as she kneels below me, my cock thrusting in and out of her mouth. I fucking love watching her give head. I love the way her lips stretch over my girth and the way her hand fondles my balls.

Before I can release my load, I pull her off and reach for the condom she left on the soap shelf, quickly sheathing myself.

Kae puts her hands on my shoulders and goes up easily as I lift her. She lowers onto my cock with a moan I echo.

Splashing warm water onto the wall before turning so Kae’s back is to the tile, I tell her, “You’ve gotta hold on.” I spread my feet to allow for solid footing before I start to give her small thrusts. My cock is buried deep and even with the short thrusts, I can feel her body responding to mine.

Kae takes my face in her hands and kisses me deeply, both of us occasionally breaking away to catch our breaths. When our mouths aren’t touching, our foreheads are, and her moans match my grunts.

With each thrust comes more confidence in our position, and I pull out a little further. There’s a bar installed in the



lower corner—for shaving legs, Kae explained on Friday—and I lift my foot to it.

I squeeze my fingers into her hips, guiding her as I thrust, harder, faster. Kae's feet press deep against my ass, and when her hands aren't on my face, they're on my shoulders, and her nails are digging into muscle.

She cries out with each thrust but I know she won't come from my cock alone. With limited resources, I shift again so I can lower my mouth to the curve of her neck and shoulder, where my kiss earlier sent her body shuttering.

I lick first, swirling my tongue over the spot, and her breath hitches.

Then, shit, all I do is brush my teeth over the spot and she's coming in my arms.

“Shhh-*fuckkkk*.” Her entire body tightens around me, her thighs quivering on my sides.

“Ride it out, baby,” I tell her, leaving my task at her neck and pressing kisses along her jaw, her cheeks, the tip of her nose. “Take me, Kaelyn. Take it, take it, take it,” I repeat with each thrust through her pulsing pussy. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, squeeze down on me. Clamp my cock with your pussy. Fuck yes, like that, baby. Yes.”

Then I'm coming, my semen caught in the condom.

I grunt with each pulsing jet, my heart pounding behind my chest.

Kae is completely plastered to me. I can feel her heart, knocking just as hard as mine.

This weekend may have been altered by her time of the month, but it certainly didn't ruin it. If anything, I think we crossed a line that brings us closer.

And now that she knows period sex can be good for her?

Hell.

I may not look forward to the emotional week leading up to it, but I certainly hold no qualms about the handful of days

she's bleeding. I don't imagine it's going to stop us in the months ahead.

Two months down, forever to go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KAELYN

CALLEN SUTHERLAND ARRIVED TO THE DOUGLAS COMPOUND on Monday, and Hemming's nerves have been high ever since.

"I don't like that no one is physically there," he tells me as he lifts weights in the spare room. He just got back from his morning run with the guys, and instead of showering and getting ready for the day, he immediately came in here.

There are worse ways to work on your nerves. Not that this is my kind of therapy.

I'm sitting on the black bench that's situated in his upper body circuit thing, and he has one knee placed on a second bench, pulling a large weight up to his chest, and then back down toward the bench in a one-arm row.

"He bugged O'Ryans though, right? And didn't he find Clay's car, and bugged it too?"

"Yeah, but..." He switches arms and legs on the bench, and starts working his other arm. I watch as the muscles flex, each band of his shoulder on display depending on where he is in the motion. "I wanted someone there until Clay went to jail. Minimum."

"Don't you think... Now, don't get angry, I'm just asking a question, but don't you think that if Clay were going to have anything to do with this, it would have been done already? Like...when I was *in* Virginia? Why didn't anything happen in the months between me meeting him and then meeting you?"

“I just don’t like it,” is Hemming’s answer, as he takes the weight and drops it on the rack.

“Did you tell Tucker that?” My eyes track Hemming as he looks over the large dumbbells. He then turns and waves me off the bench I’m on.

I walk to the one he just finished on and watch as he moves the weight pin down before straddling the bench.

He begins pulling the long bar down toward his chest, performing ten before dropping his arms, his chin falling to his chest.

“I did, but he thinks Callen’s better used here. Because I’m not deployable right now, if we’re called on by the state for a rescue, we need a five-man team, and we need the ability to rotate at any time.”

Over the weekend, Douglas Group was called to help in the mountains with a rescue turned recovery of a teen boy. Even though we were out of town—heck, out of *country*—Hemming felt guilty he couldn’t help.

Not that Hemming being in Montana would have helped the boy. From what I’ve heard in the news, the teen’s fall resulted in an immediate death.

“You know you don’t have to stay here with me. You could tell Tucker you’re open to being sent on missions outside of Stillwater and Yellowstone Counties.”

“But that leaves you here by yourself. That’s not happening, Kae.” He reaches up for the bar, and begins another set.

“I wouldn’t be by myself. I’d just tag along with someone else who’s not on the mission. I’ll stay on the property, and Kate or Kerrigan...they could run to town for me if I absolutely needed something while you were off saving people. I’m *safe* on the property.”

“Not. Happening. Kae,” he repeats, each word said during a pull of the bar.

I watch him for another set, quietly, before standing. “I’m going to go for a walk. Just around the pond. Maybe see Eeyore or the horses.”

Hemming lets the weight plates slam down as he turns to me, a frown on his face. “You mad?”

Shaking my head, I answer, “No, I’m not mad. Honestly. I just think you have things you need to work through, and I’m probably not helping.”

He stands quickly, lifting his foot to turn over the bench, nearly falling in the process to reach me. I can’t deny it’s amusing to witness.

“You promise you’re not mad?” he asks again, lifting my chin with his knuckles when he’s in front of me.

“Promise. I am not mad.”

“Hurt?”

“Hemming,” I laugh lightly and shake my head, “I am not mad, sad, emotional, upset... Nothing. I just want to go for a walk.”

“I can go with you?”

“Why don’t you trust the other guys with me?” I ask instead, curious.

The question takes him aback, and it’s a few seconds before he answers, his hand dropping to his side. “It’s not that I don’t trust them. I just trust me more.”

“Do you think maybe loving me hinders your ability to see clearly with this case? That loving me has you worried Clay and the O’Ryans know the truth about Kellie?”

His frown is quick, as is his, “No.”

“Okay.” I shrug. I know how the heroes are in my military romance novels, and Hemming shows all the classic signs, but...

I’ll let him think the way he does.

“Finish your workout, handsome. I’ll be back before you have to go down to Tucker’s.” I lift on my toes to kiss him briefly, and when he tries to take it deeper, I laugh, stepping away. “No! I’m going for a walk.”

“Better ways to exercise...”

“Hemming Johansen, finish your workout. I’ll see you in a little bit,” I tell him with a grin.

He pulls me close for another kiss but then releases me, slapping my butt as I turn away. I shake my head, my smile not leaving my face, as I walk to the foyer and slip on my shoes and grab Hemming’s discarded hoodie from the night before.

It’s getting chilly at night so the morning is brisk. It’s still barely reaching sixty-five during the day, but unless the sun is beating on you, I think it’s cold. I walk around the pond slowly, taking in the sights and sounds, while huddled comfortably in Hemming’s sweatshirt. At the southern-most point, I walk off the main pathway and head down the trail that will lead me to the pasture.

I don’t see Eeyore, but both Flash and Lightning are out grazing. I couldn’t tell you what kind of horses they are, but Flash is a red, rust color, and Lightning is tannish with a dark mane. Tucker’s other horse, Thunder, is white with black markings. Looking down the area, I see him off in the distance, walking along side what can only be Eeyore, based on the size difference.

The horses are friendly, but not as much as Eeyore. I could talk to the horses and get the occasional boop of their noses, but the moment you talk to Eeyore, he’s chattering back.

I lean against the post, watching Flash and Lightning for a few moments, enjoying the early morning breeze.

As the birds sing overhead, I wonder how the sounds will change when snow hits. Will it be quieter? Or will there be new sounds?

I’ve never been the biggest fan of winter, and I know it’s about to get really bitter out here in the plains of Montana. I’ve

heard that in this part of the state, winter is considered “mild” but I think “mild” is relative.

With a sigh, I move away from the fencing and continue my walk. As I near Tucker’s place, I see he’s outside stacking firewood. I lift a hand to wave, but instead of just waving, he waves me over.

“Good morning,” I say when I’m within earshot.

“Morning. Hey, I’ve got a question for you.” Tucker places another log then brushes his gloved hands together. “Hemming seem off to you?” he asks, pulling a glove off to scratch his forehead.

“Not off. But he’s worried.”

“About Callen being here.” It’s a statement, and I nod.

“Yeah. He doesn’t like that no one is in Virginia. We literally just talked about it this morning after your guys’ run.”

“He was especially quiet during that.” He sighs heavily and rolls his head on his shoulders. “I just needed him here. I can’t have all my men just...sitting.”

His frustration is clear. “Growing pains of the business, ‘ey?”

Thankfully, Tucker chuckles at that. “Yeah. Growing pains. Everything else going good with you two?”

I nod. “Yeah. Great.” I shift in my spot, not sure how much to share with him. “So, um.” Swallowing hard, I frown. “Can I ask you a question? While you’re here?”

“Sure. Shoot.”

“I don’t know if it’s against the rules or if it’s like...against some policy or something...but I know you heard Hemming say he loved me when he was drunk, and you didn’t say anything then, and we weren’t really... you know... Not then, but—”

Tucker holds a hand up to stop me from my ramble.

“I know, and I’m more than okay with it. I already told Hemming that.”

“Oh,” I say with a sigh of relief. “Okay, good.”

“It’s also probably why he’s taking the situation so badly. Because he loves you for real, right?”

“Right. And, like... I’ve told him I know I’m safe here, and we’ve had so many conversations about it but... He’s just worried.”

“I’ll send someone else out there.”

My jaw drops at the sudden statement. “Really?”

Tucker shrugs, taking off his other glove. “The trial’s in four weeks. I have two more guys I’m trying to get to join, and they’ve nearly agreed. We can handle it. Hemming expressed his frustrations during meetings, but I didn’t realize... I should have. I know you two crossed into the real thing some time ago, and I should have paid better attention to what he was saying. Hemming...” Tucker frowns momentarily. “We weren’t incredibly close in boot camp, but I’ve always known he was dealt a shit hand at life, and he pushed to persevere through it all. When your case came up, he was the only person for the job. Even if you guys didn’t take it where you have, I knew it would give him a moment of normalcy and the guy needs it. Normal. He’s a good man and you’ve been gold for him, but it doesn’t stop me from worrying about him. As a person.”

It seems to me that Tucker understands Hemming’s low moments, too, and I nod at my husband’s friend.

“For what it’s worth, as unconventional as this entire thing was... You’re a good friend for him, to put him on this for the reasons you did.”

“And you’re a good wife for him.”

I shrug a shoulder but can’t stop the small grin that fights free. “Can I ask you one more question?”

“Go ahead.”

I think about the land. The security. The fact he’s enlisted every family member and friend, and they’ve willingly come. “Why did you start Douglas Group?”



“Well... I was given two options. Either not re-enlist and allow a claim against me to be swept under the rug, or re-enlist—because I knew I was innocent—but have my name dragged through the mud during a military trial.”

“What...happened?” I interrupt. I can’t imagine this man doing *anything* that would warrant a negative claim.

“I was accused of rape.”

I gasp and take a step back. Tucker doesn’t make any motions to stop me though, as if he expected the reaction.

“I didn’t do it. Never saw the woman in my life before the accusation. I had an alibi and the woman was unable to pick me out of a lineup, but I knew in that moment that if someone could accuse me of something that was so against my character, and my upper command believed it... It wasn’t the spot for me. I’d always wanted to do something like Douglas Group, but it was the perfect opportunity to leave and just start the damn thing.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you.”

He shrugs. “It is what it is. But I’m pretty damn proud of what Douglas Group has accomplished in its short time, so I don’t regret anything.”

We finish our conversation on a much lighter note, joking about Judge and Jury as they take a moment to playfully romp in fallen leaves, before I head back to the house to see my husband. He’s showered and dressed, and I find him feeding Wilson.

“Good walk?”

Nodding, I smile and reach for his hips as he stands. “Great walk.” I bring my body flush to his and tip my head back. He grins crookedly and presses his lips to mine once, then twice.

“How’s your head?” I ask, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Doing better. I won’t ever stop worrying about you, though.”

“That’s probably that pesky thing called love.”

He chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re probably not wrong.”

A few minutes later, as he’s walking out the door for Tucker’s, he stops and turns, his brow drawn.

“What’s wrong?” I lean against the laundry closet.

“Nothing’s wrong. I was just thinking... It’s been a while since I’ve been in a tattoo chair.”

Knowing his tattoos have all been part of his mental healing process, I immediately worry. “Are you okay? What can I do to help?”

But he shakes his head. “I want your mark on my skin.”

My heart tumbles in my chest. “Oh. That’s... I think that’s really sweet. Are you positive?”

“Absolutely positive.”

“All of your tattoos have so much meaning for you, though. What... What are you thinking?” In a canvas of perfection, I have no idea what word or drawing he’d use for me. He’s not a “letter on the heart” kind of guy. I could see him being the type of man to tattoo his ring, but he so rarely takes the actual ring off that I’m not sure that’s up his alley, either.

“You ask it as if you don’t hold a lot of meaning for me.” His voice is light and matches the grin on his face. “I haven’t quite figured that out yet, but I’m leaning toward your lips between my shoulder blades.”

“Why there?”

Of course, he has an answer. “Any time I’ve been low, you’ve wrapped yourself behind me and pressed your lips there. It’s burned in my memory. Your mark has lifted the bad.”

“I like that. It’s...subtle.”

“I can go bigger.” It’s clear to me he’s joking, but I widen my eyes and shake my head all the same.

“Totally not necessary.”

“You want a tattoo?”

I shrug, both with my shoulders and facially. “I’ve never given thought to it.”

“Maybe give it some thought...” he says with a wink, pulling open the front door.

Suddenly, I know what I’ll be doing today—researching tattoos.

Besides, if he’s marking me on his skin?

I might just have to do the same.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HEMMING

NEVER IN MY LIFE HAS TIME FLOWN AS FAST AS IT HAS SINCE being tied to Kaelyn.

Like August before it, September flew by.

We introduced the town to what will someday be Kae's Bakery. We celebrated our "fifth" anniversary.

And I convinced Kae to let me try and get her pregnant.

I'd been watching the calendar and Doc Google told me the best time to try was between days ten and fourteen of her cycle, and on day eleven, after getting her off with my mouth, I whispered in her ear, "*Let me put a baby in you.*"

She still hadn't gotten her birth control prescription figured out, and I was hopeful the reason for the delay was because she wanted a kid, too.

Even though she told me it's usually not as easy as just timing sex, we had fun trying, but then we were in what people called the "two week wait" and I swear...

I was more on edge during those fourteen days, than she'd been.

We drove into Billings for a tattoo appointment, but learned that while it wasn't a strong "no" to get a tattoo when trying to conceive, it was safer for women trying to conceive to wait until either they weren't trying, or after baby was born.

I still got her kiss mark done on my back, but she's keeping her tattoo idea close to her chest until she's able to get it done.

She got bit by the TikTok bug, too. Not only has she been posting a few videos weekly for the bakery, but she's opened a second "fun" account. I've caught her dancing for her phone on multiple occasions.

She even got me to try a few of the couple challenges. The most recent one, I was laying on the ground and she sat backward in my lap, and she was supposed to roll back and I was supposed to flip her in the air, so her ankles were in my hands and she...planked, or something, above me. We failed spectacularly and laughed our asses off.

Of course, she still made a blooper reel of it, and it went semi-viral.

I won't lie. Watching the views climb made me nervous. I hate the idea that it could be seen by the wrong people, and they'd be able to figure out that Kaelyn is Kellie. However, when I compare Kaelyn to the images of Kellie I was given before even meeting her, there are enough differences that they simply look like doppelgängers. It's more than the hair color and dual-colored eyes though. There's an entire brightness to her that didn't exist before.

She looks happier, and fuck if that doesn't give me a sense of pride.

I helped her find that.

Just as she helped me find my own happiness.

She's had one other TikTok that had a lot of views, and it was an "undercover" one of me. She'd been sitting on the couch while I was working on a chicken stir fry in the kitchen. I assumed she was watching videos, and when the song went from melody to chorus, with two claps before the singer talks about being her man's whiskey in his soda, I absolutely dropped the spatula on the counter so I could clap my hands.

Did I mention that when I cook dinner, nine times out of ten, I've lost my shirt?

Even though we've had a lot of fun together, it hasn't all been roses.

We were hit with bad news a week ago. The build out for the bakery started, but on the fifth of October, Kae received a text in the afternoon from Landon saying they'd had a family emergency.

Being a small town, it wasn't long before the emergency became known.

His wife, dealing with unnoticed perinatal depression...

*Fuck, I can't even think about it without getting sick and worried.*

Their oldest boy found her in the garage, door closed, car on...

We barely met the man, but Kae and Kate spent a weekend organizing a food train for the family, trying to take something off Landon's plate as he figured out his new life as a single father of four sons...

And a newborn baby girl, fighting for her life in the NICU.

Kae was adamant that the build-out could wait, but Landon promised his crew would get it done and on the original time schedule. It would also be good distraction between school drop off and hospital visiting hours.

The final days of our "two week wait" went quickly, as Kae was occupied with the Hennessy family—and I couldn't stop worrying that what happened to Landon's wife could happen to Kae.

And I'm willingly trying to get her pregnant?

I'd heard of postpartum depression, but wasn't aware it was something that could happen *during* pregnancy too.

...Except it doesn't look like I have to worry about it just yet. Kae woke up today, the morning of day fourteen, spotting. Not going to lie, I'm disappointed that it's not happening yet, but Kae assured me that it takes many couples months of trying before it happens.

This was normal and expected.

“I think I’m going to run to Billings today instead of tomorrow,” Kae says over coffee after my daily run. “There’s that restaurant store I need to go to, and the manager said I could meet her today or tomorrow, but if I’m spotting today, I won’t be going anywhere tomorrow.”

“Give her a call, see if she can meet in the afternoon and I can come with.”

Except in the afternoon, when I was supposed to leave with Kae, I’m stuck in a meeting with Douglas Group. Word got out we were watching The Ranch, and a wealthy family in Oklahoma wanted to know if their daughter was taken into the cult. Cooper hadn’t laid eyes on her, but the family thought their daughter may have entered over a year prior. Our cameras were angled throughout the outside of the compound, and we were scouring through weeks of footage to try and find a woman whose likeness was similar to Marilee Ferguson.

We even placed a phone call to former San Diego hockey goaltender, Jonny Prescott, to see if his woman knew of the girl, but she wasn’t able to give us any information.

Knowing I wasn’t getting out of here on time, I texted Kae to let her know she could start on her trip, but I’d meet her in Billings. The plan wasn’t for her to purchase her ovens and appliances today, but I still wanted to be there. It was another big step for her bakery.

There was also the fact I hated the idea of her being that far out of Forever without me.

At least she wasn’t headed to Bozeman.

From the moment I hit send, sending Kae to Billings on her own, my nerves have been high. Telling myself she’s fine, I try to keep focus on work...but the day goes downhill quickly.

Tucker’s phone rings from its place on the table. He frowns as he looks up from his laptop—every man has one with four different camera angles of The Ranch.

“Hunter.” He says his brother’s name as he puts the call on speaker.

His name puts me on high alert. Hunter’s in Virginia again, this time as the eyes and ears at O’Ryans.

“Clay’s gone.”

I’m on my feet before I can think, grabbing my phone and keys from the table. Tucker holds a hand out to stop me, and I do...but I don’t like it.

Those two words are my worst nightmare. If he’s gone, then that means he might know about Kaelyn, and if he knows, that means the careful bubble I’ve made for her might not be safe, after all.

I’ve been too lax with the internet thing.

I should have put a stop to that.

It was the viral one. I just know it.

“How ‘gone’ are we talking?” Tucker asks, his fists on the table.

“Honestly, I don’t know.” Not the words I want to hear.

“Are you fucking kidding?” I can’t hold back my sudden anger at Hunter’s ineptness. Rationally I know that my anger at him is just as much anger at myself, but it doesn’t matter who the hell I’m pissed at.

I need to make sure my wife is okay.

Looking at Tucker, I point a finger at his phone. “He’s fucking kidding,” When there’s no *ha ha*, I shake my head, “I have to go after Kae. She just left. I can stop her. Who the hell knows if and where Cl—”

“Johansen.”

I clench my jaw at Tucker’s demanding tone.

“We can’t do shit unless we have a better picture. Calm the fuck down.”

“Tucker, if she’s—”

“Let Hunter explain.”



Nervous energy courses through my body, but I keep my mouth shut.

“I don’t know what the fuck happened, but one second, I’m at O’Ryans, and the next, it’s ten in the fucking morning, and I’m sleeping in my car in the parking lot. I knew something was wrong, so—”

“That was over five hours ago, Hunter,” Tucker cuts in. The lack of emotion in my friend’s voice has me wanting to launch myself at him.

How is he so fucking calm right now?

“I know. Fuck, I know.”

“Why didn’t you call at that time?”

“Because his car is parked next to mine. I thought it was fine. But then I was going through my footage, and I only realized now that he got a ride from an unknown vehicle. And not an O’Ryan one.”

Tucker moves to his laptop and starts typing. Soon, his screen is being projected and I see Kae’s phone and car trackers. The level of fear that washes through me at the visual is one I’ve never experienced before.

I feel like I’m going to pass out.

Not once since we’ve been in Forever, have we had to look at Kae’s trackers. Seeing them on the screen makes the situation real.

We have to make sure she’s going where she said she was going.

We have to make sure she’s not stopped along the way.

“She’s still moving.” Tucker crosses his arms and watches the screen. “Hemming, you and Tanner head out behind her —” I’m running for the door before he finishes. “Hemming, it’s probably nothing,” Tucker tries assuring me but I shake my head.

It doesn’t feel like nothing. I need to learn to trust my gut more. This is the second time in recent memory where my

nerves went up when something bad was about to happen.

Chance is on my heels as we hurry out of Tucker's house and toward the cottages. His truck is closest—and it's probably best if I don't drive. As soon as the truck is on, I connect my phone to Chance's Bluetooth and open a line with the war room.

"She's still moving on the 90," Tucker's voice comes through. "I'll let you know if that changes."

In the background of the call, I can hear as the others converse and I'm trying hard to hear whatever it is they're saying.

Until finally, Jay's voice comes through. "Her trackers are separating."

*Clay's gone* are no longer the words of nightmares.

These ones are.

"He has her," I tell Chance. My chest aches. I can't breathe. "He fucking has her."

"I'm sending Jay and Eli on the second lead. Tanner and Hemming, continue toward her vehicle."

"Like fuck! We're following her," I demand. I fucking *know* Clay has her.

It's a five and a half hour flight from Virginia to Montana—he's had the time to get here.

"Hemming," Chance's voice is low in warning.

But it's not his girl who's with the man who was trying to groom her for who the hell knew what.

"You two are closest to her vehicle. We need to clear it. Make sure she's not there."

I slam my palm against the dash at Tucker's level tone. "What trackers split? Her rings? You guys are following her rings? So, we fucking know she's not at her car!"

"If you weren't already on the road, I'd make you sit this out, Hemming. Calm the fuck down so we can find your

woman.”

The blood rushing through my chest and arms feels like it’s legitimately boiling. My hands shake and the truck is beginning to feel too small. “I don’t like this,” I say after a moment, not as irate as my last comment, but only because the *what ifs* of the situation, the damn fucking nightmares I’ve had over and over, are yelling in my head louder than the anger.

“Hemming, I don’t like it either. I hate that we let this happen. But we’re going to find her. We’re going to get her back. You will have your wife. Clay’s fucking stupid if he doesn’t realize we’re not far behind him. Clear her car. I’ll have a tow truck pick it up. Once I hear from you that her vehicle is clear and she’s not there, I’ll send you the other tracker information.”

Knowing I have no other choice but to sit here and follow orders, I don’t bother confirming with Tucker.

We’re sent the coordinates to where Kae’s SUV sits and even with every possible scenario racing through my mind, I’m not prepared for what I see.

“She was fucking run off the road,” I groan, leaning into the dash. There’s already a cop with his lights flashing, as he walks around the vehicle.

Chance slows the truck, pulling off onto the shoulder. The officer looks up from where he’s looking through the SUV’s windows.

I hop out of the truck as the officer holds a hand up, his other on his weapon. “This your vehicle?”

“It’s my wife’s. There’s not... She’s not...”

“There’s no one here, sir.”

“We’re with Douglas Group,” Chance says, walking up behind me. Even though I know local law enforcement agencies know about us, it wasn’t anywhere near the front of my mind to give that information. “We believe Kaelyn was abducted. You don’t have any traffic cams or anything in this area?”

The officer shakes his head. “No. But there’s one a few miles down the road.”

While the officer and Chance discuss getting footage over to the compound, I’m given permission to look inside.

She was hit hard enough that her airbags deployed.

It’s becoming increasingly harder to keep a level head, but I try.

First, I find her phone still connected to the charging cord and laying on the passenger floorboard. I pick it up and disconnect it before opening the center console, finding her clutch-style wallet inside.

I grab that too and close the door.

“I don’t see blood or anything,” I say, walking over to the other men. At least I know she’s not severely hurt. At least, not from being run off the road.

There’s one saving grace, I guess.

“We have a tow truck coming,” Chance informs the officer, “but here’s my information.”

Once things are settled there, we’re back in the truck and Tucker, true to his word, sends us the second set of tracking information. “She’s not far from where you are. Maybe fifteen minutes,” his voice fills the truck. “Assuming her rings are still on, it looks like he’s taken her to Road Inn. Jay and Eli are two minutes out.”

*Assuming her rings are still on.*

Fuck, this gets worse and worse.

As we near the motel, Tucker comes back through the line. “We found the breach. Kaelyn liked a public news post shortly after the fire. Hunter was able to go through IP addresses and found Clay. He didn’t respond to the post, but he spent a considerable amount of time on it. It looks like he’s only recently tried to access her Facebook.”

*At least Hunter did something right,* I think, although I know I shouldn’t be mad at him.

My anger needs to be directed at Clay.

Chance pulls into the parking lot of an incredibly rundown motel.

The parking lot has weeds growing through the cracks. The entire building looks like it needs a paint job and some of the windows are boarded up.

If it weren't for a car by the office and a bright red "Vacancy" sign, I'd guess the place was abandoned.

There are two other vehicles in the lot. One, I recognize is Eli's truck, and Chance is pulling up directly beside it.

The other, I can only assume is Clay's. It's in front of the door of the furthest room and has a bent frame where he no doubt connected with the Explorer.

I know I can't just knock down the door and get my wife. We don't know if Clay has weapons. We don't know if he's rigged something up to hurt Kae.

We have to be smart about this.

But *fuck*.

I just want to get my girl.

Chance sends my window down as we park next to Eli's truck.

"We used the Xaver when we got here. We have two individuals. Assuming they're Clay and Kaelyn," Eli informs us.

The Xaver 1000 is a fairly large "tool" used in military and law enforcement to detect bodies and room information from the other side of a wall. Heat signatures don't work through walls. Not like they do in the movies. The 1000 fans out and sends radio waves, giving us an accurate picture of people, animals, and room configuration.

There's also a smaller, handheld version. It's not as technologically advanced, but still gives an accurate idea of people within a room. However, where the 1000 can be used at

a distance, the 100 often needs to be used by putting it immediately against a wall or door.

“And he doesn’t know you were out there, doing it?” Chance asks, leaning toward my window.

Jay shakes his head. “No. Clay was ranting loud enough for us to hear from the outside. There’s no way he’d have heard us.”

“And you know she’s not hurt,” I manage to ask.

Eli looks over to Jay, neither answering right away.

I don’t like that non-answer.

Not able to sit still, I put my hand on the door, intending to push out of the truck, when Jay sits up. “Movement.”

We all look as the door swings open, and Clay steps out like he hasn’t a fucking care in the world.

I want nothing more than to jump out of the truck but I know he’s too close to Kae for us to do anything. We make the wrong movement, and he holes up in the room and does who the fuck knows what to her.

“Just give it a moment. If he goes to the office, that’s our opening,” Chance says, his voice low, as we all track the man. He stops at his car, grabs something from inside, then—instead of going back to the room—heads to the office.

“Fuck, yes,” I mumble. He’s so fucking dumb.

“What’s the status?” Tucker’s voice once again cuts through Bluetooth.

“Clay left the room. Grabbed something from the car. Wallet or something similar in size,” Chance relays quietly. “Heading to the office, which is clear on the other side of the building. Hasn’t even looked around the parking lot. Has no fucking clue we’re watching.”

“Send Eli and Jay after him once he’s in the office. You and Hemming, get Kaelyn. *Carefully*. We don’t know what you’re walking in to. Assuming she’s fine, she’s going to want to see Hemming first.”

Shit, I hope she wants to see me.

After weeks of me harping on her safety, needing her safe, needing her tracked...

And today happens.

I failed her.

“Copy,” Chance answers. While they all watch Clay, I can’t take my eyes off the red door. Kae’s on the other side.

She’s fine.

She has to be fine.

In the corner of my eye, I see both Eli and Jay sit up from the other truck, before Eli’s voice cuts through. “Okay, men, let’s do this.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KAELYN

I SHOULD BE TERRIFIED.

I should be crying, scared of what's going to happen next.

But I'm not.

I'm not terrified.

I'm not crying.

And I sure as hell am not scared.

What I am is angry.

So freaking angry.

Starting off the list as to why I'm angry—my brand new car is very likely totaled.

Then there's the fact I was taken by a man I was *positive* would never come looking for me. Which means I was wrong every time I told Hemming I was safe. I hate being wrong.

And then there's the part that gives me the heebie-jeebies—I'm sitting on a bed that no doubt has a bed bug infestation, while a single wrist is tightly handcuffed to a lamp that's secured to the room's only nightstand.

I'm stuck and I swear I feel things crawling on me. I pray that it's just a mind trick and not an actuality.

Part of me worries my lack of nerves should be troublesome but I have every confidence in Hemming and



Douglas Group.

“...think a name change is all you have to do?” Clay laughs, waving a gun around in the air. “And then to be on Facebook? Jesus fuck, you’re not a bright one, Kellie.”

If anyone’s “not a bright one,” it’s Clay. The way he keeps going on about the things “*I*” did to change...

I honestly think *he* thinks I did this all on my own. That I changed my name and looks, and came to some random small town on the other side of the country, like it was all my idea.

I remember being in the precinct and Carter telling me everything she knew about Clay, and realizing I didn’t know the man at all.

That thought is further cemented now, as he stalks around the room. He reminds me of a person who is having a psychotic break.

There is something wrong with Clay, and I’m positive he’s going to screw up.

He’s going to make the wrong move.

It’s just a matter of time.

I fought like hell when he pulled me from the Explorer, but belatedly realized I left my phone in the SUV. Had I grabbed it, I know without a shadow of doubt Hemming and Douglas Group would find me quickly.

As it is, I can only hope and pray Clay does something to mess up, giving them a hint to where he took me.

We aren’t far from where Clay ran me off the road. If he was smart, he’d have taken me further west.

Or hell, east into the Dakotas.

Instead, we’re practically in Forever’s back yard.

“And when I get you back to Virginia, Darragh’s going to be so fucking pleased. So. Fucking. Pleased. Do you know what he does when people fuck up, Kellie?” He’s back to swinging the gun in my direction. I pinch my lips together and

take a calming breath in through my nose. I'm gambling with being indifferent to this man.

Something tells me if I act distressed, it will only push him farther. Like my distress will fuel his craze. The maniacal laugh in my ear when he pulled me from my car is my only evidence.

I'm banking on the thought that maybe if I remain calm, the high he's on will stay at an even plateau.

Clearly, I'm thinking out of my ass, but a girl can hope.

I know that O'Ryans was bugged.

I know Clay's car was bugged—although the vehicle he has today has Idaho plates, so I assume it's a rental.

And I trust that Tucker sent someone else out to Virginia after our talk.

All of this to say, if Clay's in a rental, he mostly likely flew here, and if Douglas Group has a person in Virginia, then they know Clay is gone, and if they know Clay is gone...

I've never had as much trust in a group of people as I do Douglas Group.

*Hell, I've never had as much trust in a single man as I do Hemming.*

"I promised Darragh I'd fix this. Do you know what shit you got me into, Kellie? Sure, Darragh says it's fine. Says you're not right for their clients. But I know." He swings the gun again but this time so he can jab his index finger into his chest. "I. *Know*. I know it."

I have to fight to not ask him what he knows. It would probably come off snarky, and I don't imagine that would go over really well with his mental state.

"I need..." Clay looks around the room. "I need... Yes. Okay." He puts the gun in the back of his waistband as he walks to the bathroom. I track him with my eyes, watching as he washes his hands, then comes back to the front door.

Except when he gets to the door, he looks down.

I can't see what he sees because of the far corner of the bed, but whatever it is has him kneeling as if he's going to tie a shoe. When he does, he takes his gun from his waistband and places it on the corner of the bed.

My heart begins to race. He wouldn't...

Clay stands up again, putting his hand on the door handle. "BRB, *babe*."

For the first time since I was thrown into his car, my body begins to shake.

Not in nerves.

But in anticipation.

He opens the door...

And just leaves. Exits the room.

Closes the door behind him.

I waste no time maneuvering against the bed and when I'm as far from the top as I can go, I stretch out my left leg, pointing my toes until they touch the gun.

Carefully, I try bringing it close, but it only rotates.

"Fuck," I mumble.

I take a deep breath and try again, taking my time. The moment I move the gun two inches, my heart pounds harder. I've got it.

Once the gun is within reach, I pick it up with my free hand.

I've never fired a weapon. I'm pretty sure it's like most things and you're supposed use your dominant hand but that one is currently occupied.

Even if I can just get off a warning shot when Clay comes back in...

A visual of wildly missing and his psychosis turning into rage fills me with the first fear I've felt in the last thirty minutes.

“You’ve got this,” I whisper to myself, forcing the negativity back. By whispering the words aloud, I’m begging the universe to listen to me. To hear my words. “You’re a fucking badass with so much to live for. You know damn well Hemming’s going to find you. He’ll never let this go.” My eyes water then and I shake my head.

If something happens to me, Hemming’s the type—even if he didn’t love me—who would take an abduction or death on his watch poorly. He’s probably beating himself up right now. He’s probably going over all the worst case scenarios, and he’s probably dropping lower, and lower...

*Stop it, Kaelyn,* I scold myself.

“You’re getting out of this. You are so freaking worthy of everything you’ve been given. You wouldn’t have received all the good only for it to be taken away. You’re going to be—”

The door slams open and I shriek.

At first, there’s no one there, and with a shaking hand, I lift the gun.

But then I hear, “Clear,” and Hemming is coming around the door jam.

Every iota of strength I have crumbles in that moment, and my eyes fill with tears of relief.

I drop the gun to the mattress beside me, no longer able to see as the world blurs behind salt water. “I’m so sorry, Hemming. I’m so sorry.”

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“I DON’T NEED THE HOSPITAL.”

“You were hit hard enough for your airbags to deploy,” Hemming says, carrying me out of the motel room. My arms are wrapped around his neck as I rest my head on his shoulder. I finally stopped crying. “You’re going to the hospital.”

“I’m okay, Hemming,” I whisper.

“Don’t fucking care if you *feel* okay. Need to make sure you *are* okay.”

I can feel the way his heart pounds against his chest. The way his fingers dig into my side and knee as if he’s terrified of dropping me.

He’d never drop me.

As he deposits me in the truck—not his, but I don’t care enough to ask—three police cars with lights and sirens blaring rush into the parking lot. I turn my head to look, and see Jay and Eli holding on to Clay as Tanner walks their direction from the motel room I was in.

Tanner was the one to release my cuff.

Not only had Clay left the gun, but he left the handcuff key on top of the television.

He was incredibly sloppy.

His sloppiness aside, Hemming and the guys were extremely fast.

After my first hug from Hemming, I asked how they found me as quickly as they did. That was when I learned my rings had trackers, too. The moment Hemming said it, he added, “And I’m not going to apologize for it,” but I shook my head.

Absolutely no apology needed.

Instead of taking me to the nearest urgent care, Hemming drives to the local hospital’s emergency room. I get through triage quickly and the first nurse cleans and wraps my wrist from where the handcuff cut into skin, but then we have to wait in a curtained-off room for nearly thirty minutes.

Hemming wants the whole gamut run, and my next trip will be to radiology after a urine test is run, where I’ll be getting a CT scan. I tried arguing with Hemming that some of these tests were unnecessary but the look on his face—the fear that was there—had me stopping.

If it eases his mind, I’ll do every test known to man.

“Knock, knock.” The doctor who was in here earlier pulls back the curtain enough to step inside. I push against the thin mattress to sit further back in the angled bed, and Hemming stands from the plastic seat he was given, crossing his arms over his chest. “We’re going to cancel the CT and if you still want imaging, we can do an MRI instead,” he says, tapping a pen against his leg. He’s not the most personable doctor I’ve ever met.

“Is there a reason? Is one better than the other?” Hemming asks.

The doctor shakes his head and haphazardly circles his pen in my direction. “She’s early, but it’s better for the fetus.”

“What?” I respond, at the same time Hemming drops his arms and says, “I’m sorry, huh?”

“The urine test came back with an increased level of HCG. We can confirm with a blood draw, but...” The man shrugs, clicks his pen three times, then drops it in the pocket of his coat. “We can still do the CT but you’ll have to sign off saying you understand it could be harmful to the fetus. MRI is still an option, if you want imaging. Accident attorneys like them. As for the pregnancy...”

“I was spotting though.”

“Maybe implantation. Maybe early miscarriage. Give it a couple of days and test. If you bleed heavier, it’s likely a miscarriage and there’s nothing we can do. Do you want the MRI? The room is ready.”

The doctor has terrible bedside manner, but I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around the fact that, apparently, I *am* pregnant.

Thankfully Hemming’s good at compartmentalizing, and he agrees to the MRI.

The test doesn’t take too long, and soon we’re on our way. My wrist is wrapped in gauze and I’ve been given instructions to apply a triple antibiotic.

At some point, someone brought Hemming’s truck and took the other one. The moment we’re both in the truck,

Hemming's carefully crafted, stoic face cracks into a grin.

“We fucking did it.”

I don't need to ask what he's referencing. Putting my hands over my stomach, I look at him. I can feel the hope blooming throughout me.

“It's too early... And I was bleeding...”

He reaches over and places one of his large hands on top of both of mine. “You weren't pissy last week. And you haven't...bled out today—”

I can't help but chuckle at his description of my typical day one.

“We're having a baby, Kae.” The amount of awe in his voice causes my eyes to tear up, not for the first time today. “We're doing this.”

“Too late to back out now.”

Grinning, he leans over and takes my lips with a possessive kiss. “It was too late the moment you walked into that safe house.”

# EPILOGUE

HEMMING

## *The Following July*

“LISTEN,” I TELL MY SON, BUTTONING THE BOTTOM OF HIS bodysuit, “you cannot blow out in this one. This one has to stay clean.”

Holden Wolf Johansen grins up at me, his smile wide and toothless. Kae keeps telling me it’s just gas, but I believe it’s a real smile.

He may not have teeth, and it may be too early to tell if he’ll have blue, green, or gray eyes, but everything about this four week old is me.

My wife birthed my twin—something I tease her about often. Granted, she just laughs and jokes alongside me about being “just” the incubator.

In a year, I’ve changed careers, got a wife, had a kid...

Kae and I have been on the fast track to forever and I swear, watching the weeks tick by with Holden, I feel like life will never slow down.

When the Clay situation went down, we had to be extremely careful with how the news outlets shared it. Kellie Zimmerman is dead.

Clay came after a woman who, in his psychosis, he thought was Kellie.

The end.



He was once again arrested and transported back to Virginia—where he was killed right before his trial. There are no leads on his murder, but I've been told it was the O'Ryans.

I've also been told the O'Ryan's "don't do trafficking," but if they did, Kae is not the kind of woman they would use.

She's safe.

That's not to say we don't randomly look into Virginia though. We haven't been able to find any concrete evidence that they partake in human trafficking but that doesn't mean they aren't.

Kae and I held on to news of her pregnancy until we sent out Christmas photo cards, when she was twelve weeks along. While we celebrated Thanksgiving with the entire Douglas clan at Tucker's, we decided that Christmas was for us and spent the day laying in bed, dreaming up what future Christmases would look like, which had us deciding we'd like to aim for five kids. Something about five of them coming down the stairs for Christmas had us feeling like that was the number.

Like our little corner of the world, Douglas Group is getting bigger.

We were able to locate the missing girl in Oklahoma, which was only the beginning of a bigger fiasco. Both Callen and Cooper are now here in Montana, as well as two other new guys, Josh and Luke. This spring, Tucker had a couple smaller cottages built on the property in case the guys—or even those we rescue—needed a place to stay, but even though we haven't talked about it in a while, it won't be long before Kae and I are moving our family onto our own plot of land. I have a few feelers out but will let Kae make the final decision as to where, when, and what our home will look like.

Kae's Bakery opened in January and she's been non-stop since day one. By the end of her first month in business, not only did she need to hire more people to man the front, but also a couple of bakers for the back. Her third trimester allowed her to figure out where and what she could delegate,

and she loves and trusts her staff. My early fear was she'd be at the bakery all the time, but that hasn't been the case.

Holden squawks from where he lays on the changing table. "Sorry, man," I tell him, putting his knee-patched pants back in place. I've had a lot of practice over the weeks, but I still feel big and awkward dressing him.

He's just so small.

Lifting him to rest on my arm, I walk to the closet and push aside hangers and hangers of clothes.

Kae and I may not have a ton of clothes to choose from, but our son does.

I wish I could say they were gifts, but most of them were thanks to my wife being obsessed with little boy clothes.

I find the lightweight flannel-type shirt I'm looking for, and carefully put it on him while standing at the closet. He frowns at being jostled but otherwise, doesn't make a peep.

"Okay, I think we're good now..."

My next stop is his car seat. It's sitting in the foyer on Kae's bench. Lowering my boy into it, I carefully buckle him in before putting on my boots.

"Wilson, be back soon," I call out to the cat as I exit. I think I hear him meow from our bedroom, where he's been napping for the last thirty minutes.

Even though she's only four weeks postpartum, Kae's at the bakery today for no reason other than she wanted to make a cake, and didn't want to do it in our small kitchen. She can't stay away.

However, she prefers to breast feed during the day, so I'm bringing Holden downtown for his eleven a.m. feeding.

"Now, don't fall asleep, man," I tell Holden, snapping his car seat into the base on the back bench. "It's ten minutes, tops."

Nine minutes later, I'm carrying his car seat through the back door of the bakery. When I pulled around to the back, I

looked through the windows and grinned at what I saw. Tables are filled. Forever loves Kae's baked goods. She goes through cupcakes like nobody's business, and has custom cake orders left and right.

"I've brought your son," I announce as the door shuts behind me. Kae's standing at the big metal table in the middle of the kitchen, using a knife to even out the top of a cake.

She looks up and smiles wide in our direction.

"I was thinking it was probably about that time." She finishes what she's doing and puts the knife down as I unbuckle Holden.

"I know you're going to ask. Go ahead and eat the scraps," she teases, moving to wash her hands.

My hands tremble ever so slightly as I lift him from his seat, and hand him when Kae comes over.

She holds out her hands and I shift him to her. Each transfer gets easier, but Kae's a natural. She just...picks him up and maneuvers him like he's not going to break.

With her hands under his armpits, she smiles into Holden's face. "Hey, my handsome boy," she tells him, her voice pitched. She brings him in and presses a kiss to his cheek before bringing her hands back out. "Daddy got you dressed for fall. He seems to forget it's only July."

"He's little and his feet are always cold."

Kae glances at me from the corner of her eyes, but her smile is all for me.

"It's okay that he's a little bit of a worrywart," she tells Holden. She begins to bring him into her chest when she suddenly halts her movements.

*She read the bodysuit.*

"Hemming..." My name is drawn out and when her eyes meet mine, there's a small sheen of tears at her bottom lids.

"What's it say?" I ask, stuffing my shaking hands in the pockets of my jeans.

I watch as she swallows and then turns toward me. “It says, *Please marry my daddy*. But we’re...”

Taking a hand out of my pocket, I reach for her back and guide her to the small room she set up for breast feeding and pumping. It gives me a moment to collect myself.

The moment she sits, Holden begins to fuss so she gets him situated—all while tears slowly fall from her eyes.

Kneeling in front of her, I put a hand on her knee and the other back in my pocket where another ring sits.

“We started our journey one year ago today. Our wedding anniversary will always be September 15<sup>th</sup>, but I’d like today to have significance, too. More than that, I want to give you the choice to say yes.”

“Hemming, you know—”

“Kaelyn Johansen,” I interrupt her, “you are the very best part of my day. Well, next to him. And then any other babies we have,” I can’t help but clarify, moving my hand from her knee to Holden’s fuzzy head. “But you’ve given me so much. I love when I wake up and see you’ve wound yourself around me. I love watching you with Holden. I love seeing how much you’ve grown in the last year. My life was dull before you, and now...I can’t imagine it without you. Would you do the honor of...continuing to be my wife?”

Her laugh is watery as she nods, reaching out to place a hand on my cheek. “Of course, silly man. You’ve done the same for me, you know. I love doing life with you. But that’s a lot of anniversaries to remember,” she teases, as if I’m not the master of the calendar in our house.

“Today’s the most important one,” I shrug, pulling the new ring from my pocket. She gasps when I hold it out in between us. Unlike the ones she wears, this ring has a strawberry-gold band to match the birthstone ring I gave her on the day Holden was born, and instead of channel-set diamonds, this one has small diamonds that wrap half the band, as well as a cushioned-halo round diamond in the middle.

“There’s no tracker in this one,” I joke softly.

When Kae switches Holden to her right breast, I take her left hand and remove the original rings, replacing them with the single, new ring.

“I also have a necklace coming that you can easily put your rings on when you officially come back to work,” I tell her, squeezing her left hand lightly in mine. “I first found it on your TikTok, so you probably know how to use it.”

“You are...the most amazing man,” Kae whispers, leaning toward me. I meet her halfway and claim her lips. Holden continues to suckle between us, but starts to wiggle with being surrounded so closely. With a chuckle, I lean back to give him his space.

I push up to stand and place another kiss on the top of her head. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” she says, looking up. “I’m so glad you decided you wanted to be stuck with me, after all.”

Grinning, I walk over to the table and pick up a long scrap of cake. “I’m glad you decided you wanted real. Because this, babe?” I put a piece of cake in my mouth and chew, watching my wife feed my son. Then, I wink at her. “Real with you is so much better than pretend. And I thank God we decided to cross that line when we did. One year down. Forever to go.”

“Forever to go.”

---

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mignon Mykel is the author of the Prescott Family series, as well as the short-novella romance series, O’Gallagher Nights. When not sitting at Starbucks writing whatever her characters tell her to, you can find her hiking in the mountains of her new home in Arizona, or trying to tame her sassy (see: stubborn) mastiff-lab.

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