



Stolen September: A Military Romance

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Category: Romance, Adult, War

Description: Six weeks of bliss. That's all I had with him before he left without a goodbye.

Thirteen weeks of misery and he shows up on my doorstep thinking he can win me back. The only thing Henry Edward Andrews is getting is a sucker punch to the gut.

My Honeybee has a sting despite her sweetness. I made a mistake. A big mistake. I screwed up, but I'm back and I don't want to let her go. I've only got nine days to change her mind, but I'm a Marine and we don't give up.

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Bea

“Bea, go get the door!” Mom calls from the kitchen currently filled with scents of all kinds of sweet and savory things. My legs trudge down the stairs in heavy footfalls. I pause halfway down as my eyes dart to the photographs on the wall: My parents at prom, followed by their wedding and then my dad’s night school graduation. My brother’s birth, and taking his first steps before I came along. My fingers touch the frame, missing my brother, Deacon, who isn’t home this holiday.

“Beatrice Nicole, get the door!” It also has Mom in a bit of a mood to know that Deacon is spending this Thanksgiving with a girl and her family before my mother has met her.

Another step down and my mouth waters for a taste of her caramel apple pie and nutmeg pumpkin cheesecake bites. I have to hand it to my mom—she knows how to coax me out of a bad mood with her home cooking. I almost feel bad about my thirteen-week funk, but she made an extra pumpkin pie I don’t have to share with my cousins...so maybe not too bad.

“I got it.” Skipping down the stairs, I wonder why I’m the one who ends up answering the door every holiday. It’s not like there aren’t plenty of other people in the house perfectly situated to open the door. I bet it’s one of my bonehead cousins expecting a free meal (minus my pumpkin pie) and a chance to watch the game on the flat-screen television my dad recently bought. That theater-sized screen made our house the most popular in Darlington, North Carolina because we all know my Uncle

Arty is a cheapskate.

A hard knock sounds outside and I shout, pulling the door open wide, “Jesus, Evan, it’s not like you haven’t been here...before.” My bottom lip trips over the top, and the first thing I notice are the shiny boots peeking out from a set of military dress blues. My mouth dries up as my eyes slowly travel up the body of a boy who said goodbye thirteen weeks ago and returned looking like...I gulp in an unsteady breath...a man with broad, full shoulders stretching the seams of his crisply pressed uniform.

Son of a...

My eyes must be deceiving me, because this isn’t possible. I gave up hope that he’d call, text, write, or send a freaking carrier pigeon my way as an explanation for why he left, ghosting me. The uniform only enhances the newly bulked muscles that I fondly recall hoisting me up in his arms, or holding me down on a hot summer night under a full moon and lightning bugs mingling with the stars in the dark sky. I force myself to shake off the memories and remember this for what it is: an unwelcome surprise on Thanksgiving Day.

“Oh hell.” I push the door shut as quickly as I opened it, squeezing my eyes closed saying a whimpered prayer. This can’t be happening. I’m not really seeing him here on my parents’ stoop, looking all smug and fine, as if the last three months hadn’t left me broken and in agony over a shitty goodbye. The worry that something might have—could have—happened to him churns in my empty belly.

The sneaky shots of mulled apple cider I took with my dad earlier churn like acid, sloshing up toward my broken heart.

A hand with neat-clipped nails curls around the wood doorframe. “Awe Honeybee, don’t be like that. At least let me come in and explain.” He sticks his booted foot with the blinding black shine in the door, having expected this reaction from me. His hand

flexes, holding the door steady despite my best efforts to slam it in his cocky face.

I strain to dislodge him but he chuffs at my efforts. The thing about this guy is that he's real good at waiting me out. From the day we met, he seemed to understand what made me tick better than I did myself. I'll exhaust every effort before he even thinks about giving up. From the moment we met, we were constantly running circles around each other.

I hate it.

I'm mad at him for breaking my heart. I'm mad at myself for letting him get under my skin in every way possible. I could close my eyes to the man in front of me, refusing to see him standing there, but I couldn't close my heart to the things I felt while he was gone.

The aunts dubbed it puppy love.

It felt like an affliction.

The flu, perhaps.

"Beatrice? Who's at the door?" Mom comes out of the kitchen cleaning her hands on a towel that's seen better days, and I feel a pang of guilt for the sacrificial turkey about to feed twelve of us. Once she sees his face she'll know exactly who this man is to me.

I glance between them and growl. "No one, Mom." His smile drops marginally and I think, good, about time he feels some of my pain. His chin drops like he wants to say something, but he holds back.

"Sure don't look like no one, honey." Aunt Elisa pops up from practically nowhere,

sharing her unsolicited opinion. The aunts have this sick sixth sense about things and show up at the worst times. I've come to accept this fact and merely look up at him, shaking my head no.

"Yeah, Honeybee, invite this fine, strapping young man inside," Aunt Doris drawls, crooking her witchy finger. My mother's sisters are older than my mother, Irish twins born less than a year apart. They feel the need to comment on anything and everything they shouldn't, assuming their age gives them a free pass. I love them dearly, but this is the last thing I want to hear about or discuss.

"You know, Doris, I think this is the man that gave our Bea a case of the malaise this past September." Elisa fixes her eyeglasses, checking him out, while Doris hums, patting her fluffy hair, which is a shade of powder blue.

Aunt Doris drawls, dragging out her Southern accent slower than molasses. "Yes, I think you're right. Bea was unfit for polite company this September. Only reason she left her room in October was for the Halloween candy we brought."

"Uh huh, she sure put on all that weight she lost real quick with those chocolate bars."

I glance at them, hissing, but I'm ignored. I don't want him to know I was wallowing in self-pity and grief. It's embarrassing.

He gives me an appraising look up and down, like he's trying to figure out where the weight went. My butt or my breasts sums up my curves. When his smirking gaze comes back to my eyes, he winks at me. Asshole.

I groan, wishing the floor would suck me up right now.

"Come on, Honeybee," my visitor cajoles, letting his hand on the doorframe drift

down to my clenched fingers. His touch still feels like little zings of electricity as he smooths my rigid digits. Furious, I snatch my hand back.

Henry Edward Andrews, better known as Tank, winks playfully, holding out his hand. I despise how eager my body is to melt right back into his arms as if nothing happened.

“Didn’t you miss me?” His lips turn up in a panty-melting grin.

“Nope,” I pop, and roll my eyes when he frowns. I sigh, admitting in a whisper, “I missed you liked peanut butter misses jelly.” It hurts to think about how inseparable we were.

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We had the best six weeks to

gether, and then one day he was gone. Nothing. He vanished into thin air, and when I went to visit his house I was kindly and awkwardly told by his mother and little brother that he'd enlisted in the Marines and was away at training camp. His sweet mother didn't realize who I was at first, until it clicked that I was the coffee shop girl. For a small town, Tank and I had kept our summer romance under wraps, perhaps a little too well. It was all I could do backing off their neatly white-trim-painted front porch without tripping to run back to my best friend Kate's car, hot with humiliation. His mother chased me to the curb and asked if she could send Henry a message. I knew it had been too soon to meet his family. We pretty much snuck around those six weeks, just getting to know each other on humid summer nights in his apartment above his family's garage. I had wanted that time for us, I hadn't asked a lot of questions, and I hadn't acted like a stage-five clinger even though I felt more. For all my efforts to play it cool, I got the surprise of my life that I really hadn't been worth mentioning to anyone.

I mean, who does that? Who just disappears like that? It was the worst kind of ghosting I could imagine, because when he left, he took my damn heart with him. He stole an entire month of my life, where I wallowed in the dark. I lost ten pounds and my summer tan right along with my will to attend school this fall, leaving me with the task of finding a job. Luckily, pouring coffee and cleaning toilets didn't take much skill, but it also only paid minimum wage, shooting my pride in the foot.

“Bea?” He catches my attention from the past. Big blue eyes I wish I could quit and warmth that radiates from his all too familiar chest that heaves with emotion.

I let my anger fly and sucker punch him in the gut. It's unexpected for both of us, and Tank merely releases an open-mouthed grunt. My punch did absolutely nothing to him. He laughs at me and takes my hand in his, rubbing my sore knuckles. His stomach is even harder than I recall. Of course, he had on much less clothing then, and my belly quivers remembering those details.

"Talk, Honeybee. That's all I want right now." Tank pulls me gently outside the door and winks at my aunts, who stay perched in the window like cats clicking at birds, as if we can't see them. Tank guides me further down the walkway, toward the tree-lined sidewalk reaching the mailbox at the end.

I snatch my hand back, cradling it against my chest. I glare at him hard with a look that hurts him more than my sucker punch.

"Bea," Tank starts.

I push against his chest. Clearly I haven't learned he can't be budged.

"No. I'm not doing this with you." I can't stand the way his uniform makes his eyes glow bluer and how his short hair almost looks a different color with his deeper tan. I'm irritated at how well he fills out his uniform and how badly I want to peel it off of him.

"Doing what?" he prompts, looking me over.

I step back and keep my arms protectively over my middle. "You left me. You didn't tell me anything. You didn't even say goodbye. You ghosted me!" I force the words out, praying my voice doesn't wobble. Wobbling is for the weak and I refuse to appear anything but strong around this man.

His brow furrows. "I said goodbye that night at the bar."

I scoff. If he thinks for a moment that was sufficient closure, he's dumber than a box of rocks.

He takes a step forward. I take one back.

"You made it sound like you were going back out to move your car. You said it so casually, as if you planned to see me the next day at the park concert. You made me think I was special." I huff, out of breath from my word vomit. His expression changes to one of sympathy.

I think that feels worse.

"You know what, just forget it. Go back to wherever you were and leave me alone." I brush him off.

"Honeybee."

"Don't you use that name with me," I spit back.

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"Well, you could have started the summer off with 'hey, I know we just met and all, but I'm leaving in a few weeks because I've enlisted in the military.'"

"I thought that goodbye would be enough." Tank doesn't come closer. Instead he rests his hands on his hips, I'm guessing so he doesn't reach for me, and I wonder if I can run back inside the house before he catches me. He tenses, almost ready to pounce, and I think twice about running.

"That's not a goodbye." I rally myself and suck down the emotion to speak. "Tank, that was a sorry-ass excuse for goodbye and you know it."

He steps toward me this time and I throw my hands up in the air so he backs off. I can feel the sets of eyes watching us out here, speculating. I remember how we sat at a large round table, Tank and I and two other couples, friends we'd all known mutually for years despite the two of us having never met until that summer. Rounds of drinks come to the table and a few games of pool are played—none of which constitute a goodbye.

He grumbles out a deep breath that somehow makes him larger. "I didn't know it would be like that. I thought about you every day."

My right brow cocks upward while my hip pivots defensively. "I find it hard to believe you meet a girl, spend six amazing weeks with her, and then vanish." I snap my fingers.

"You thought they were amazing?" He smiles.

I sputter. "Seriously? That's what you hear you me say?"

Tank circles around me, rubbing his shaved head like he's fighting an internal war for words. Well, landmine this, buddy.

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“I’m sorry,” he murmurs, and I almost believe him. I want to believe him, but the pain is too raw.

“I’m sorry too.” I shrug. “So, what do you want?” I glance back at the house and see my entire family glued to the windowpanes in the front like this is better than football. My mother isn’t even trying to shoo them away, clutching her turkey baster, and I sigh. I feel about as defeated as the last bit of peanut butter stuck in the jar. You want it, you can’t have it, and the only alternative is to get rid of the jar, longing for that last taste.

“Come with me.”

My eyes narrow. “Where?”

“The tree lighting tonight.”

Every year at eight o’clock on Thanksgiving night, our town does a holiday festival, lighting a Christmas tree that stays up until New Year’s. Everyone goes and participates in the tradition along with spending time to catch up on gossip at the hot chocolate stand. Darlington as a whole is good for everyone in town knowing everyone’s business. The last thing I want is to be the talk of the town.

“I’m not going,” I lie.

Tank cocks his eyebrow this time. He knows I’m full of bullshit. Everyone goes. It’s not like I have a real choice anyway. Have you met my family? We all go wearing matching scarves.

Tank sighs. “All right, Beatrice. How about you meet me for breakfast. We can talk.”

“No.” I’m also quite stubborn.

“No?”

“We’re not meeting until I’ve had my first cup of coffee.” I pretend to check my manicure.

“I’ll buy you coffee with breakfast.” He chuffs but it sounds like a frustrated growl and I hope it bugs him to not get what he wants. This guy is arrogant for sure.

“You made me wait thirteen weeks for an explanation. You can wait a few more hours and after I’ve had my fill of caffeine.” I feel very grown up giving Tank the business, but not so grown up when he leans down and his minty, kissable breath brushes past my cheek. He’s so close I could inch forward and feel his lips on my skin, but I don’t. I stay as still as the statue in the town square.

“All right, Honeybee, we’ll do this your way for now. I’ll pick you up for breakfast, after your coffee, at oh-eight-hundred hours.” He turns swiftly, leaving me in the wake of his fresh cologne scent and crisp body wash I can’t place striding down the sidewalk like he frickin’ owns it.

Pfft.

Marines.

I fix my shirt that suddenly feels too tight or too twisted or too something, and sp

in myself around, heading back into the house. I try matching my stride to his and hold my head up high. Two can play this game. My attitude is kept in check by the

crack in the sidewalk, and I catch myself before I fall. A glance over my shoulder tells me that Tank didn't turn around, and thank goodness for that. I've got more than enough cracks in my armor for him to squeeze back in if I'm not careful.

My aunts open the door, slow-clapping like I gave them a good show. Dad yells at the television and I think he's the only one who bothered to respect my privacy with Tank outside in favor of watching the game.

"Sit down, sweetheart, tell us all about it," the aunts coo like Disney villain sidekicks you don't expect curling around your ankles.

"Not much to tell," I deflect. We all sit down at the table and my father joins us as my mother hands him the turkey carver.

"Anything I need to know about this boy, Bea?" Dad revs up the electric carver. So much for thinking dad heard and saw nothing.

"No, I promise."

We all sit down and say grace over the meal.

"Well, I want to know more about him," Elisa says, filling her plate with those weird creamed onion balls we swear no one likes and yet magically appear every holiday.

"I second that motion," Doris chirps, heaping the sweet potatoes on her plate full of marshmallow fluff on top.

"You should have invited him to dinner, Sweat Bea." Mom uses my childhood nickname, looking tired from the full day of cooking. She's upset Deacon isn't here so she can have an inquisition with his girlfriend.

“Mom, he left for the Marines weeks ago. This is the first time I’ve seen or heard from him.” I try to ignore everyone by stuffing food in my mouth, hoping they’ll all get the hint and leave me alone to eat.

“Oh, a hero,” Doris swoons, and I roll my eyes.

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Elisa nudges me. “Don’t disrespect servicemen.”

I swallow my turkey. “I’m not—he broke up with me.”

“Does he have a place to go for dinner? I think you should call him back,” Mom encourages.

“Give him a second chance,” Elisa says.

“Looks like a good catch,” Doris taunts.

“He broke your heart?” Dad picks up the carver again, revving it, and I’m not sure who he’s decapitating, the turkey or Tank in his mind.

The comments and questions give me a headache and I can’t escape these people for the next few hours. Coming clean almost seems easier than enduring the inquisition another minute.

I shrug, spilling details between bites. “His parents live across town. He finished two years at a junior college and came home before enlisting. I met him at the pool hall and bowling alley with Hope and Kate. He had some of his friends there too. Jesus, please pass me the cranberry sauce and leave me alone,” I huff, letting the silverware clang in the awkward silence.

“Well, I made pumpkin pie.” Mom diffuses the situation while my cousin Evan smirks, passing me the cranberry sauce.

Boys are stupid.

2

Tank

I walk back to my car and get in, slamming the door. My brain runs through all the scenarios I pictured for our reunion. I hadn't expected to miss Beatrice Brennan with a fierce yearning when I enlisted. I had so many things I wanted to say to her if she let me, but like most things in my life, she was difficult. Not quite the sweet girl I recalled during long bouts of training when I craved her most. Her warm brown eyes remind me of cinnamon: sweet and spicy, with a kick if you aren't careful—like tonight. Her dark hair bounced with soft curls resting right above her perky tits each time she sassed right back at me. I thought she'd be happy to see me, maybe even run and jump into my arms.

My mother warned me she'd be upset, but I didn't listen.

Now I might not even have a chance.

Part of me wanted to pick her up and cart her off like a caveman because she told me no and that I'd have to wait until she was good and ready. She was kind of cute, dictating to me when we would see each other again. Trouble is, my clock is ticking too fast, and since I got back yesterday and slept like the dead, I only have nine of my ten days of leave left to convince her to be mine. Sounds crazy, but I know Bea is worth it and I want her to see that I'm worth it too—that we're worth it together.

When I replay our last few days together in my head, I know I gave Bea reasons to doubt my devotion to her. Heck, we hadn't even defined what our relationship was besides exclusive. I pulled back, thinking it was best. Make a clean break. Move on. Focus on the goal, my career and getting through the training. Beatrice made it

impossible to focus. My head and heart kept coming back to her once she was gone.

I pull into my parents' driveway and get out of the car. My mom rushes out the door with my younger brother and dad hot on her heels. I see the hope in their faces fall when they realize my girl isn't with me.

"Well, where is she?" Mom is over the moon knowing about Beatrice. When she realized the sweet girl from the coffee shop was my girl, she gave me hell for how I had ended things so abruptly.

"Leave the boy alone, Marilyn," Dad chides, squeezing her shoulder gently.

"So I got dressed up for nothing?" My younger brother Cole is fourteen and a carbon copy of me before I enlisted—still lanky and mouthy. I ruffle his full head of hair. He's dressed in jeans and a button-down shirt. It's not Sunday best, but I appreciate the effort he put in, considering it's not a T-shirt he slept in.

"Mind your brother, Cole. Think she'll come around, Henry?" Dad doesn't force things but he frowns, looking about as hopeful as I feel right now.

"A little gun-shy maybe," I mutter, following them into the house.

"Oh, she'll come around. She's bound to." My mother is ever the optimist. She'd like nothing more than grandbabies and doesn't care how young we are—it's in her nature. I know I'm not ready for kids, but I want Beatrice in my life.

"Guessing she'll make you pay the piper, eh?" Dad teases.

I place my car keys in the bowl we keep on a side table by the door. "She's going to make me work for it, that's for sure."

Dad pats my shoulder and squeezes it hard before letting me go. He married my mom young too, and understands the draw of a good woman.

“I’m sure you’ll have another chance at the tree lighting to see her.” Mom smiles, and it’s the kind of smile that feels like a conspiracy—except I know her well, and two-plus decades of her machinations haven’t changed.

“Mom, you didn’t.” I have no idea what she’s done, but the humming and the grin creeping up her face is enough to indicate otherwise. Dad laughs with a loud bark and doesn’t seem the least bit fazed.

“I may or may not have Mrs. Brennan on speed dial from the church social.” Her shoulders shrug as she pushes me toward a dinner table filled with all of my favorite foods: roasted Turkey, mashed potatoes, roasted brussels sprouts, and cranberry jam. I should have known Mom would covertly find a way to meet Bea—or at least her mother.

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I take a filled plate from her.

“Uh huh. Speed dial?”

I shovel a forkful into my mouth, savoring the flavors of good food slow cooked. I can't imagine what she did for dessert.

She passes me another side dish; this one is baked broccoli with pasta and cheese. “What? We volunteer together.”

My father chuckles, clarifying, “That's what we're calling it now, my darling wife?”

Mom huffs. “At least I know who will be at the tree lighting over by the east lawn at 7:50 p.m.”

I groan. My mother is either the best or the worst conspirator. I haven't decided yet.

“All right, but I don't need any help when we get there.”

“Are you kidding? I bet she's got another boyfriend.” Cole is taunting me and I grind my teeth until my jaw aches. If I didn't have a good sixty pounds of muscle on my brother, I'd wrestle him until he screamed uncle.

Mom pats my hand, not letting go. “Of course not, Henry. How could she possibly say no to you? Besides, Marines never give up.”

What my mother neglected to tell me was that at 6:30 I would be stuck on top of a

float making its rounds around town with all the newly enlisted. Families waved at us and thanked us for our service, but I was too busy scanning the crowd for a dark-haired girl I had to beg for a second chance.

As the float makes another round, I finally see her on the east lawn, standing next to a few guys and checking something out on her phone. Mom was more than happy to inform me with a nudge that it was just her with a bunch of odd cousins I'd never met. The whole group of them have matching plaid scarves around their necks, and I assume they're all related by their similar looks.

"There's your girl." My fellow Marine and best friend Frankie nods. He lives in the next town over but came out tonight since we're in the same group training together. Frankie had his own summer romance that fizzled and has been singularly focused as I on our careers.

"Damn right," I say, keeping my eyes trained on her. I study the way she brushes back a lock of hair. The way she smiles when the guy next to her says something that I assume is stupid. For his sake, he'd better be a cousin.

I get up, ready to jump off the float, pausing to take in her beauty.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Frankie pushes me off. Apparently that was as much of a pep talk I was going to get. I make a note to myself to get Frankie back.

I stride in her direction, ignoring folks as I go to get to her. Her cousins step back as soon as they see me, and I guess I look intimidating or determined because they slink off. I spy her two aunts off to the right, and they both give me a thumbs-up, making their own quick exit. I salute them and keep go

ing toward my girl, who hasn't seen me yet.

“Beatrice.” I sidle up to her, pretending to watch the last few floats of the parade. She still smells the way I remember—like summer—when the breeze picks up a curl of her messy hair.

“Tank,” she mutters, slipping her phone back into her pocket.

I take a peek at her tight jeans and the way her phone stretches the pocket over the tightest ass I ever had the privilege of touching, once upon a time. I’d love nothing more than to be able to peel those jeans down and hook my fingers into her lacy panties, but for now I rein in my dirty thoughts and reach for her hand, slipping it inside of mine. She doesn’t resist and I pump her hand with a gentle squeeze, warming her up.

She clears her throat and another float passes by.

“I’m still mad at you.”

“It’s okay, Honeybee. I’m mad at me too.” I bump her lightly. We stand shoulder to shoulder, watching the crowd part ways. Our families leave us alone, standing there, and I enjoy the fact that she hasn’t run off.

“In the effort of not having to deal with my nosy family tonight, we can watch the tree lighting from here if that’s okay,” she says.

I can’t get her to look at me, and that’s all right. Small steps, even if I feel like all the time I have left is for sprinting. I’ll take my cues from her.

“Sure,” I agree, moving her in front of me so I can rest my arms around her. We listen to the carolers sing and the mayor, dressed up as Santa Claus, hands out candy canes to the kids taking pictures. My own family is eyeballing us from behind a bunch of lighted bushes. My brother Cole makes an obscene gesture, probably

thinking he's cheering me on. I angle Bea away from them as my mother clocks Cole for being rude. My dad stands with his hands in his pockets, pretending to not observe with a big smile on his face.

"Oh look!" Bea points at a group with sparklers, and her eyes glow from the light while we listen to the crowd count down until the tree is lit.

I think of the ten ways I've missed her and the nine ways I wanted to hold her. During training there were eight clear memories of the times she made me smile, the seven ways she made sounds during sex, and the six favorite positions I wanted to try all over again—god willing she'd let me. There were at least five top dates, and four shared milkshakes. Off the top of my head, I could only think of three times she beat me at pool and the last two were because her sweet ass distracted me.

However, on the count of one, I turn her around and hold her close for a kiss that's meant to be chaste, but ends up as anything but. Open-eyed, she looks surprised but settles into the kiss quickly. Our lips touch for the first time in thirteen weeks, and Bea sighs like she's missed this as much as I have. It gives me hope and a reason to take the kiss deeper. I can smell the cinnamon spices on her skin and what I think is pumpkin and sugar lip balm. Her kiss is like home and I don't want to let her go, tangling my fingers in her hair. I was meant to come back for this.

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Her moan spurs me on and I tilt her chin up so I can capture more of her mouth. My brain is telling me to keep this PG because we're in public, surrounded by people we know, but my heart doesn't give a shit. My tongue slides against her sealed lips and she finally lets me in. The kiss goes from zero to sixty, from chaste to hot and messy with her hands grasping my shoulders and my hands mussing her hair into my fists. I want so much more than this one moment added to my list. I want this one as forever.

"Get a room!" Frankie yells from the float doing a second pass.

We laugh forehead to forehead. Her eyes sparkle and I can't stomach the thought of tonight ending here until morning.

"Come on." I pull her with me toward the hot chocolate stand and order two. Since I haven't gone anywhere or done anything with my pay, I've got money to burn—like I knew I was saving it all for her.

"Where are we going?" She chuckles, following my lead.

"I'm not waiting for coffee tomorrow."

We walk up to the carriage rides and I help her inside, passing her the drinks. We settle in with the lap blanket covering us, and the carriage driver takes us out on a long loop I pay extra for. I'm not letting her get away until we hash this out.

"So, what's going on here, Tank? Level with me." Bea blows on her drink, holding it with both hands. Her sipping her hot chocolate keeps me from grabbing her hand and I settle for having her next to me.

“Everything felt like it was happening at light speed when we met.” Beatrice Brennan consumed all of my thoughts, so much so that I almost missed a meeting with my recruiter, but she doesn’t know that and saying it wouldn’t help my cause right now so I lock it down and stick to the facts I can say. “I was nervous and scared and I didn’t know where it was going.”

“And then you left. You chose to go.” Her eyes glisten and tears are a blink away. My feelings for her now are solid and I don’t want her to cry any more sad tears.

“I know I did. The Marines was always my goal, but then you happened and that goal hasn’t been the same since. My focus shifted from the eagle, anchor, and globe. You were a part of it too, and I hadn’t expected that.”

“Hmm,” she murmurs, looking out toward the fields that will be filled with sunflowers and wheat come spring and summer. I know I’m making shit of this but I’ve also never felt this before and I’m out of my depth here.

“Honeybee, you’re the sweetest thing that’s ever happened to me and I couldn’t say goodbye. Obviously, I couldn’t, and I didn’t realize what I had until it was gone.”

“How can you talk to me about it now? Why come back at all?”

I take her hot chocolate and mine and slip them into the holders near our feet. I gather her up in my arms and nuzzle her neck. “Because as sweet as you are, I missed your sting. I missed your sass and I missed knowing that if I didn’t try to get you back I might lose out on the best thing in my life, because the military comes second to you. Everything is second to you. I don’t want to say goodbye again.”

“I guess breakfast is off the table.” Shrugging, she gives me an odd look I can’t place. I don’t know how to win this argument. I’ve opened my heart to her and she’s crushing it.

“No?”

“Nope.” She jabs me in the chest with her finger. “Because you are taking me on a real date.”

“Yeah?” I’d hoot and holler, making a scene, but that won’t win me any brownie points with her.

“Yes. Pick me up for dinner and then we’ll see.”

I lean my head back, thankful she’s willing to give me a chance.

“We’ll see,” she says, my sassy girl.

“So, you did miss me.” I nuzzle her neck, breathing in her cinnamon scent.

“About as much as a squirrel who misses his nuts.”

The tone bites, but I can’t blame her. She’s lashing out and I deserve it, but she’s confirmed how much we affect each other.

“You’re killing me, Honeybee.”

“That’s my sting you missed so much.” Her eyes narrow.

I definitely missed something all right, and I swoop her up in my arms for another kiss. I move my nose up and down her baby-soft neck and kiss her. I tug at her silly scarf to taste what she’s been hiding.

Growling, I attack her neck. “I want breakfast anyway. I’m hungry.”

She moans, rubbing herself against me. I suck on the tight skin exposed, leaving it red but not quite marked.

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Bea softens and says, “When are you not hungry?” She turns in my arms and the heat in her eyes matches mine.

“For you? Always.”

“Well, I need to sort myself out. You don’t get breakfast because you stole dessert.”

I attempt to kiss her lips again, but she presses her finger against mine, stalling me. I nip at the digit, loving the way she has to contain her squeal.

“Not even a taste?” I ask, reminding her of before. We would share dessert each time we went out. It didn’t matter if it was a milkshake at

the diner or a piece of pie she brought from her mom’s kitchen under the cover of darkness and bright summer starlight.

“Not if you want more, Tank.” Beatrice is serious. If I want more than a taste of this girl, I have to put all my effort into winning her back.

3

Bea

I hear the rumble as Tank pulls up to my parents’ house in his older electric blue Ford Mustang. The racing stripe down the middle and the custom paint job makes his eyes pop, and I do my best to not dream about the summer and how he loved to talk about his car. I chuckle because at first I thought he was bragging about his car like it was

his cock, but everything Tank did was just bigger and better. I bounce over to the window and peek out between the lace curtains, watching him get out of his car. My whole body succumbs to a shiver, thinking about the drives we would take to the lake and how he'd rev the engine, making my core twitch with anticipated need. Back then I admired the way he handled the manual transmission of the car as much as the way he played with my body each night.

I'm falling hard under his spell and we haven't even reconnected fully. I'm doing my best to remain level-headed, and failing abysmally in the short amount of time he's been back. Lust is clouding my mind. He apologized last night, but I'm skeptical and still hurt that he left me so easily once before. What's to say Tank wouldn't leave me again?

After our buggy ride, I left him to rejoin my family. I didn't tell them what happened and no one asked. My cousins shot me odd glances and I know they saw Tank kiss me. My cheeks could have been twin space heaters, the way I flushed. I knotted my scarf tighter around my neck, not caring if I suffocated myself. My parents, however—they had a ton of questions once they sent the aunts off and it was just us at the table nibbling on pumpkin pie. Mom gave my neck a suspicious glance, like she could see the brand he almost left marking my skin. Dad is convinced old habits are hard to break and he tried to point out that joining the military is a huge decision and a big responsibility. We're both young.

Dad is the only one home right now, and while I'm sure he's ready to go to battle, he's been sitting in his recliner most of the day reading the paper, drinking coffee, and eating leftovers while patting his gently rounded belly. He reminds me of a chonky cat waiting to pounce. It's rare he takes a day off. I'm guessing he's enjoying the quiet of a mostly empty estrogen-filled house and I can't blame him. The aunts pretty much made themselves a pair of foam fingers, chanting "Team Tank," among other obscene things, until my mother dragged them out to the outlet stores for Black Friday shopping.

I'm standing in the hallway as the knock sounds, freezing me in place. I glance into the living room and watch Dad turn to look at me. His kind eyes say more than words.

"You going to get that, Sweet Bea?" He prepares to get up and send Tank away if I ask.

I wave my hand for him to sit back down. Dad will always be my protector, no matter how old I am and grown up I try to be.

I stand in front of the door and hear Tank's second knock. It's more hesitant this time, like he's wondering if I'll open the door. It's not that I don't want to formally introduce Tank to my parents, but I feel like we need to hash a few things out before I upend my life emotionally all over again. I wasn't the easiest to live with the past few weeks, and my parents aren't exactly thrilled that I refunded my fall tuition in place of a job here in town with no real explanation other than needing to find myself before I invested thousands of dollars in a degree that would make me miserable. I had no idea what made me happy or sad, except for Tank's sudden exit from my life.

I open the door and stare at Tank for a second before leaning back to say, "Yeah, Daddy. I got it."

"I know you do." He nods, resuming his reading as I quickly open the door and slip out. He's mastered the art of letting me fight my own battles, but I'll always be Daddy's little girl. I've already left my mom a note on the fridge, letting her know I'll be out late and to not wait up. I'm too old for a curfew, but never too old for her to care.

"Bea." Tank takes my hand, leading me down to the car with a hurried step. He opens the door, fingers tapping while I get in. He leans in to pull the seat belt over me, clicking it in place. Our eyes lock on one another and the intensity of his blues

unnerves me. Minty breath puffs from his lips dangerously close to my own, teasing me. He's protective, a little pushy, but oh so gentlemanly. His momma must have taught him well. He pushes back with a smile and gets in the car on his side.

"So, dinner." Feeling awkward, I fiddle with the strap of my purse. We shared plenty of meals before, so this shouldn't feel strange. The car is permeated with his fresh cologne after a shower, and the close proximity of the car has me thinking of other things, wetter things. Dinner is clearly the last thing on the list.

"Relax, Honeybee. I don't want to start with dessert. I want to savor your company."

I chuckle. "Smooth words. They teach you that at boot camp?"

"Oh, ye of little faith, my beauty." His head inclines toward me, a smile creases his sculpted cheekbones, and my damn heart goes all fluttery in response. I'm hopeless against his wiles.

Tank drives across town to a cute little bistro that's made up to look like an Italian garden. Soft white lights frame the outdoor garden, with tall heater lamps keeping away the chill. It feels like we stepped into a completely different country, and despite it being winter, we take off our jackets in the enclosed garden restaurant.

A waiter takes our order and Tank requests a nice red wine to go with our dinner. It has a fancy name I don't recognize, considering my usual was cheap Boone's or a beer on tap at the pool hall. A plate of fresh bruschetta comes, followed by a colorful antipasto served family style. Chicken parmesan follows, along with a bowl of pasta. We'll never eat all of it and Tank doesn't care. He's too busy watching me eat each bite and making me blush.

"If I had to do it all over again..." he starts.

I put my hand on his. “Don’t. Let’s just enjoy this.” A silent agreement passes between us and we finish dinner, letting the staff box up the rest to take home. Doing this once was enough; I’m not built for emotional upheaval like this. I’m falling for him fast all over again, and I don’t want to get lost.

“I can’t stop looking at you.” He cups my face in his hands.

“Take a picture, it’ll last longer when you leave,” I softly sass back earning me a laugh from Tank that shakes his whole body.

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“You’re right.” He takes out his phone and calls a waiter over to take a photo of us. Tank doesn’t even wait for him to leave before making it his background screen.

“Really?” I tease him. He knows I’m asking about him coming or going and what that means to me, to him, to us.

“Yes. You want dessert?”

I coyly glance from under my eyelashes and shake my head no. From the moment he returned, this sexual tension has brewed between us nearly unchecked. I’m full from dinner and a little tipsy from wine, feeling braver than I did when he showed up on my doorstep yesterday.

“You want to catch a movie? They have a double at the drive-in. Since this is a proper date and all.” Tank scoots closer to me, no longer safe on the other side of the table.

Falling, falling, falling. I have no chance to catch myself with his determined charm—try as I might.

His hand makes contact with my knee, drawing circles on the smooth skin. I chose to wear a cute skirt with my brown knee-high boots, and now I wonder if I made this too easy for Tank. The heat between us is enough to melt our clothes off, leaving me panting and in need of ice-cold water in winter. I was supposed to be spurning his advances in exchange for explanations, but all I really want is him.

“We could play twenty questions, but I’d rather hear what you want to do.” Away

from prying eyes, Tank's fingers drag up my leg in a lazy caress that makes my heart leap.

I lean over and whisper in his ear, my lips touching the bottom shell of his lobe, my breath warm against his neck. "I want you to take me home." My voice shakes on the last word and Tank topples over in his chair, standing up. He's like a bull in a china shop trying to get to me, even though I'm less than a foot away.

"All right then." He seems about as composed as I am, and we giggle gathering up our leftover boxes and getting into the car. He drives a little faster than before, and instead of driving to my house, he takes a detour through town, driving me to his—specifically, his room that's over the garage.

You would have thought that both of us living at our parents' homes would have impeded hanky-panky time for the two of us. If anything, it meant that we needed to be more creative, and that's when Tank introduced me to the loft in his parents' garage. Back then the place had been a dusty shell of wood beams, old exercise equipment, and cardboard boxes. During the summer he'd been busy converting it into his place. He told me he wanted more privacy, but his parents encouraged him to save his money instead of getting an apartment in town. The garage was a family compromise, but I didn't know then that he'd enlisted either. The few times I'd been here we had drunk beers and dragged boxes to the curb filled with years of junk while his parents were at work and his little brother played rec football in the park. It looks completely different now—almost like it had a feminine touch, which I assumed is the handiwork of his mom.

White eyelet curtains cover the windows and a queen metal bedframe sits in the middle of the room, with minimal other furniture that looks like it was collected with care. The old sofa with the tear in the cushion from a night of roughhousing is gone. A tiny fridge sits in the corner next to a table with two chairs under the window.

“Been busy?” I tease.

“Been thinking of you. I might have recruited a little help.” Tank shrugs and he backs me up to the bed, nudging me on top.

I flop back, edging over the mattress, and rest on my elbows. I watch this man walk around the loft lighting candles

in strategic nooks around the room. It bathes us in a warm glow, but I shiver in anticipation.

Tank follows me down on the bed, his jean-clad knee between my legs rucking up my skirt. His warm hand cups my knee from behind and finds its way under my skirt, resting on my butt and pulling me in closer. Missing him doesn’t compare to the ache that overwhelms my chest and puts a knot of words in my throat. I rub against him and he groans, letting his head hang down over my heaving torso.

“Tank, what are we doing?” I ask, but he doesn’t answer. Instead he shows me by pulling at the tie on the top of my white peasant top, letting it open slowly, exposing my breasts filling the lace cups of my bra. His gaze studies me and I shift, nervous, uncertain.

His hand covers my breast and fondles me, slowly rubbing a thumb over my lace-clad nipple. His voice is low and thoughtful, matching his torturously slow movements.

“I know you won’t believe me right now, but the one thing I missed the most was watching you sleep. I wanted more of those nights and I regretted leaving the way I did that very next morning.” His face is contrite. I believe him. If anything, Tank isn’t a liar, although what he did hurt.

“No calls? No texts?” I question.

Tanks shakes his head; his fingers trace the line of my collarbone and between my breasts, all the way to my belly button. “No phones at training camp. I suppose I’d forgotten that part in all my excitement.”

We stare intently at the path his fingers take with gentleness across my skin. He peels the rest of my clothing away and I shift underneath him to sit up and help him divest his own. Leisurely I pull his shirt up and off. He slides his pants off, kicking them away from the bed. My hands run over his chest—beyond more muscular than before. My short nails find every groove and hollow, touching and memorizing the sensory input. I don’t know for certain how long I have Tank for, if at all. If this is the only moment available to us, well then, I’d better make the most of it.

“I know this doesn’t change what I did or how I went about it, but for what it’s worth, I’ve never regretted anything more.” His arms close around me like he’s trying to shelter me from the emotional bombs only he can detonate.

“It’s about trust, Tank.” I sigh, turning my head from him to stare at the window. Lights from outside twinkle, and I focus on the changing tempo following a holiday song that can only be heard by tuning into a radio from the cars lining up and driving past outside.

Tank turns my head to look at him. “Honeybee, give me a chance to win that trust back. The love is there and I don’t want to lose you.”

“What are you asking me? You’re going to go back to training, and at some point you’ll get deployed, and where will that leave me?”

His head burrows in my chest, breathing deep for a moment before he raises it, looking me in the eye. “If you’re my wife, you go where I go.”

A minute passes, maybe more, where I’m stunned silent. Is he proposing? Was that a

proposal? Thinking turns off when Tank reaches for my hip, pulling me under him fully. The heat of his rigid, swollen length is pressed against me. I lift up to feel as much of his heat as I can. Winding my hands around his neck, I pull him down to kiss me. Lips fuse together and I open up to Tank as he presses inside me. I whimper at the feel of him gliding inside with some resistance.

“Honeybee.” His guttural sound ignites the spark within and I relax, taking him fully inside me. I move my hips to feel more of the passionate zings between us. Tank is relentless, setting the pace far too casual. I need him. I want him. I’m clutching onto him so tightly, forcing my orgasm with each undulation of my body until I cry out, spent. He covers my mouth with his so I don’t wake the neighborhood.

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“That’s my greedy girl,” he grunts, finally giving me the hard fucking I crave so badly. The bed rocks in a steady rhythm, but it doesn’t make a sound like I expect it.

“Tank.” I demand an explanation between the panting breaths and canting hips of a second orgasm on the brink.

He bites my shoulder before responding. “A little WD-40 goes a long way.”

My eyes roll in equal measure of ecstasy and sarcasm. Of course, the bright engineer in him had to find a way to make a quiet bed because he knows I make too much sound. I can’t help but laugh. Tank can’t help but move faster, forcing me to keep up.

He rolls us over to cover us with the blanket and keep me warm in his arms. I snuggle deeper, expecting to sleep, but Tank rolls again, putting me on top.

“What’s up, big guy?” My hands find his shoulders and his hands hold my hips, keeping us connected.

“I was serious before,” he grunts.

“So I get a shitty goodbye followed by a shitty proposal.” I make a move to get up, but he’s clamped his fingers tight into my flesh, making me hiss.

“Bea, look at me. Talk to me.”

“What do you want me to say? You’ve made all the big decisions and expect me to meekly go along because it seems like a good idea.”

His chest expands and exhales.

He flips us over again, trapping me.

“Beatrice Nicole Brennan, will you marry me? Be my wife. My partner. My everything.”

“Tank.” I pause, wiggling to get out from under him.

Elbows cage me in. A knee slips between mine but he keeps his arousal off me, mostly. He can’t help the way it bobs and rubs against my tummy like it wants back in. Lust. This is lust, I tell myself, unwilling to say it might be love, though I suspect it is.

“I know I love you. I had to lose you once to realize it. Anything I do isn’t the same without you.”

My brain is a swirling mess of details—some that correspond, some that contradict—while my heart, that useless organ, is beating hard and heavy saying do it, do it. I don’t believe in angels and devils dictating choices; no, I have a body full of organs that can’t make up their damn mind beyond biological necessity.

And still, I open the door to possibility.

“I’m gonna need you prove it to me. Make it all happen—the wedding, the details, all of it.”

“And?” Tank leans in close, his massively beautiful cock rubbing against me, this time definitely not accidental.

“I’ll marry you, Henry Edward Andrews,” I sigh.

He bites his lip to keep from smiling. “Because?”

“I love you too.”

4

Tank

My hand shakes a little as I knock on the door to Mr. and Mrs. Brennan’s house. I know Bea isn’t home, and this isn’t how I’d planned on meeting with her parents. There isn’t an ideal damn thing about this situation, but I’ll do anything to get what I want, and what I want is my Honeybee. I watched her leave for work an hour earlier from when I dropped her off. Like a stalker, I sat in my car in the freezing cold morning watching her walk down the sidewalk and into her house, closing the door. With barely restrained patience, I waited until she showered and left again, giving me a wink and a saucy wave as she walked down the sidewalk to the coffee shop where she works. She wouldn’t let me drive her to work, and while I know it’s only a few blocks away, it gutted me letting her go off on her own to a job she’s had all summer.

There wasn’t much that unnerved me in basic training—not muggy weather, mosquitoes larger than my hand, or lobbing grenades for target practice. Sitting outside her house though, that scares me shitless.

Bea wasn’t kidding when she said I had to plan everything down to the last detail with zero guarantees that she would show up. Some would say I’m crazy to do this, insane to let Bea have this kind of hold over me, but she’s the light in my life I didn’t realize I was missing until it was gone. I’d do anything for her. Case in point, I have standing appointments for the cake baker, florist, and pastor. Her family is my first stop and I don’t know exactly what she’s explained to them.

“You gonna come inside, boy, or hang out like a weirdo in the street?” one of the

aunts calls from the upstairs window, and I nod my head to her.

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nbsp; “I’m sorry if this all seems strange,” I add when she winks at me like I’m dessert.

The door opens and the blue-haired one—Doris, I think—ushers me inside. “What’s strange is that you waited so long. I had my sister put on a fresh pot of coffee, we waited so long for you to git your ass in here.” She chuffs, looping her arm in mine and pulling me along into the kitchen.

I’m greeted by Bea’s entire family: the aunts, her mother (who keeps scrubbing the countertop), and her father, who seems the least keen on meeting me like this.

“Mr. Brennan.” I reach for his hand.

He tentatively shakes it, eyeing me up like I expect him to. “When my daughter came home this morning with the first smile on her face in weeks, I was suspicious. Now I’m downright curious what the Sam hill is going on. Especially when it’s not quite happening under my roof.” Mr. Brennan’s glare penetrates deep. He’s angry—but in that protective way because he can’t figure out what, if anything, I’ve actually done wrong. He’s partially right. I never meant to hurt Bea, but I did. This is me taking accountability, but also promising her family that I’ll never do it again by loving her forever. Heavy things to weigh before 9 a.m.

My face burns with a blush I haven’t experienced since grade school. Mr. Brennan isn’t pulling any punches with me, and backed up by all the females in the family I know this is it. Forget about convincing Beatrice. If I don’t convince her family I’m done for, a broken heart or not.

I steel myself, standing straight and addressing them in the eye. “When I met your daughter at the beginning of the summer, I knew she was special. When I left at the end of the summer, I was so focused on my career goals that sadly I didn’t understand where Beatrice fell in that hierarchy.”

The aunts push a coffee mug in my direction—prepped with cream and sugar, from the sweet smell.

“Keep groveling, boy. My brother-in-law may kill you yet. Military man or not, he’s got thirty years of hard labor under his belt,” one of the aunts comments, snickering.

I hope the coffee isn’t poisoned and take a sip of the offered brew. I prepare to get my ass beat by a two-by-four and three ornery women.

“Being away these thirteen weeks solidified any doubts I had for my feelings. Beatrice and I have come to an understanding, but I want to do this the right way.”

“Oh, he’s hankering for a beating, Hank.” The aunt with glasses nudges Mr. Brennan.

“Shush, Elise.” Mrs. Brennan shoos at her sister. “Let him talk. I want to know what his intentions are toward my daughter. My very heartbroken daughter,” she emphasizes.

Her reminder isn’t necessary. I know what I did was shitty, and this is clearly my one chance to make it up.

“I know we haven’t had a chance to meet, or get to know each other the proper way we should. I’d like to marry your daughter and make a life with her. I have a good career lined up, and housing that’s coming my way, but I have to marry her first before she can live with me on base.”

“You love her?” Mr. Brennan says.

I hang my head down, hoping to convey the need to be with Beatrice. “I want to marry her more than anything in this world.”

“Son, that doesn’t answer a father’s question about his only daughter,” Mr. Brennan presses and I’m not afraid to tell him how I feel. There’s a strength in loving Beatrice that makes me feel like I can do anything with her by my side, because she makes it worth it. I want to be worth it.

“I love your daughter the way the sun needs the moon. She’s the reason I want to get up in the mornings, and the reason I want to be a better person. Forgive me, but she’s the only person I want beside me.” I don’t know if I’ve answered his question sufficiently. Putting into words how much she’s come to mean to me goes beyond a simple verbal response. My actions will have to speak louder than promises anyone could give.

“Phoebe, can you give us a minute, my love? I need to speak to Henry here.”

My eyes dart up. I hadn’t been sure if her father actually knew my name. The women leave and it’s just us, man to man. I’m not sure which is worse.

“Sir, I—”

He stops me with a hand up. “Save it, Henry. I looked you up on the computer—or what little I could find. I know your family in town, but I don’t know much about you. You’re here proposing to marry my only daughter, and all I know for sure is that you left her three months ago, crying her eyes out until she made herself sick. She doesn’t know I know that, but it’s hard to hide much in this house with the walls paper-thin and her anguish killing me each day.” Hank Brennan is speaking the truth, and I’m floored by how little Bea told me. Sure, she said she was hurt, but not the

level of pain I couldn't comprehend. I did this to her and I'm ashamed.

To hurt someone like that breaks through all the tough-guy training they give us in the military, and I feel myself choking up. I can't compartmentalize what I feel for her, nor should I.

"I find it hard to forgive myself for what I did, and for the rest of my life I'll live with that mistake." I thought my hands had shaken knocking on the door; now they shake because I'm so angry with myself.

"See that you do. Beatrice went to work this morning humming to herself, but I guess you already know that. I hadn't heard that sweet sound in a long time. Just know that as quickly as you brought it back, you can take it away again. If my daughter has so much as cause to feel heartbroken again, I'll kick your ass myself."

"Mr. Brennan, sir, I can't ask for forgiveness. I don't deserve that and I deserve what I'm about to ask for even less, but I'm compelled. I'd like to humbly ask for your blessing to marry your daughter." I don't know what I would do without her.

Her father's face breaks into an unexpected smile. "Ain't me you gotta ask, son—it's her mother."

Mr. Brennan calls his wife back in. The aunts back her up, half glaring and half smirking at me. Mr. Brennan clears his throat and nods at his wife. She doesn't look pleased one bit, and clearly spent the time eavesdropping.

"Well, how much time do we have to plan? I've been on the phone with your mother this whole time."

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I should be questioning why they're aren't questioning this more. I should be wondering why they're okay with this. If this were my daughter, I wouldn't let some kid walk into my house proposing marriage with the plan to whisk her off to fuck knows where.

"Henry, there are things to organize. Snap out of it." Mrs. Brennan snaps her fingers much like the way Bea did at me last night. A glance at Hank tells me I better get with it because this is how things roll with the Brennan women. It's humbling, but I accept it wholeheartedly.

"Uh, well, I leave in eight days."

"Lord have mercy," the aunts chant. I think the lord was going to need something closer to a miracle at this point. I've never planned anything like this before. Weddings are supposed to be one-time deals, and this wasn't a part of boot camp training.

"Okay. We can do this." Mrs. Brennan whips out a planner and lays it on the table. She hands me a pen and paper to take notes. Mr. Brennan grabs two beers from the fridge and hands me one, popping the top off. I think it's a bit early for drinking, but who am I to argue? Getting married isn't exactly a coffee kind of moment.

"You're gonna be here awhile son, get comfortable." Mr. Brennan smiles and the women in the family start organizing. Two hours later they've got my whole life story and I've got a list of fifty or so items to take care of. I'd say it was productive, but I don't get to see Bea and I wonder if she planned it this way.

Honeybee: I hear you survived my parents and the aunts.

Tank: A little warning next time?

Honeybee: Now where would the fun be in that?

Tank: Because you love me?

Honeybee: I'm still deciding if I'm showing up.

Tank: Fair enough.

"You got enough favors for all this?" Ms. La Croix, the baker, pulls out a book with cake pictures.

"I got cash, if that'll help." I pull out my wallet, wondering what this will run me. I need a cake for at least a hundred people on short notice. For all I know, half the town will show up and we're not even advertising this wedding. It's mostly my family here and hers, with friends we know, and then the church in town. I've got a choir singing, and my brother's marching band playing the wedding march for extra credit.

"Put your money away. You're gonna need that for other things." She pushes my hand away and flips her book open to a page with various white sheet cakes lightly decorated.

"Now we don't have much time for anything fancy, but this I can make in a day and you'll have it ready on time."

"How much?" The cake looks elaborate, with basket weaving, vines, and flowers despite it not being "fancy," but what the hell do I know? I've never planned a wedding before.

“It would be my pleasure to see the two of you wed. I know Miss Bea loves my pumpkin spice doughnuts, so how about I make a pumpkin spice cake and do up a special vanilla buttercream frosting?”

My mouth is watering thinking about it, but all I can get out is a nod and a muffled “thank you.”

“Lovely, I’ll drop it off the morning of. You have flowers yet?”

“No ma’am. Not yet.” I scratch the back of my head and then pull out my list from Mrs. Brennan.

“Well then you head over across the street. I expect Miss Maisy Danvers is waiting on you to call.”

“Thank you.” I move to shake her hand, but she wraps me up in a hug that smells like sugar and cinnamon. I tell her goodbye and jog across the street. My list still has about half of it left. The flowers will be a huge item.

I step inside

the flower shop, which is warm and a little humid.

“Finally! I figured you was gonna make me come find you.”

“No, Miss Maisy.”

I let the older woman wrap me in a bear hug. She already knows why I’m here. It’s not like our town can keep secrets, especially with an event like this. There are only a few reasons weddings happen this quickly, and both my mother and Mrs. Brennan were keen to tell their social circles that Bea wasn’t knocked up. Not that it was

anyone's business, but getting married was the only way I could secure housing on base as a couple living together.

“What are you wearing to the ceremony?” She doesn't bother beating around the bush.

“My dress blues.”

“And the bride?”

“Her mother assures me it will be an ivory lace dress, but that’s all I know.”

“Hmm.” Miss Maisy taps her finger to her lips, walking around her shop. “I’m thinking burgundy wine-colored fiddle roses or ranunculus, a little foxglove and thistle. Oh, and some Scabiosa, and maybe quicksand roses for that blushing bride look.”

“That sounds flowery.” I have no idea what any of that is, but I hope they look pretty.

“Oh, you!” Miss Maisy taps my chest, smiling. “You’ll have a boutonniere, don’t worry.”

“It sounds beautiful and everything Beatrice deserves. How can I ever repay you?” I’m thinking cash and a round number, but she clucks at me and turns away.

“You have that brother of yours come over and mow my lawn, maybe shovel my walkway if we get those ice storms again.”

“Are you sure, Miss Maisy?” If I get off light on the cake and flowers, I might be able to stretch my budget and get Bea a nice wedding gift—something besides the wedding band. We don’t have time to pick out a proper ring, between our schedules, and she asked me to wait on that until things were settled, but it doesn’t feel right marrying my girl and no diamond ring.

I spot on a shelf in the shop a pair of matching bears. One has a wedding dress and

one a suit. I point up at the bears asking, “How much?”

“Well now, I think we can work out something fair.”

I whoosh out a relieved breath.

Miss Maisy motions for me to grab the bears and I do, handing them to her. “I’ve got something for the boy bear you’ll like better.” She takes them in the back and comes out a moment later with a bear dressed in military camo. It’s perfect.

“Aww, Miss Maisy, they’re exactly what I need.”

“Get out of here. I know you got more favors to hit up on your list before the big day. Go on with you!” Miss Maisy shoos me out of her shop and I think of my good fortune. I couldn’t do any of this without the help of the whole town rooting for us.

Tank: How do you feel about ranunculus and Scabiosa?

Honeybee: Are you trying to tell me you have an STD?

Tank: Hell no. Those are flowers.

Honeybee: Are you sure you shouldn’t be seeing a doctor about this?

Tank: I’ll see you tomorrow?

Honeybee: Not unless you get that shit cleared up.

The big day is finally here. My legs shake while I stand in the gazebo, which is covered in white holiday lights. They twinkle and my heart follows the pattern, thumping in my chest. I don’t know if Beatrice will walk down the aisle, and if she

doesn't, I wouldn't be angry with her. I called in every favor I could—and some I didn't have a right to—thanks to my family.

The wine-colored rose pinned to my dress blues smells like spring and promises even though it's the fifth of December. A canopy leads out to the gazebo as dusk rolls in. Most everyone had to work and tomorrow I leave to go back, but tonight is ours and I don't need sleep. All I need is Beatrice in my arms again, pledged to be mine. It felt like hell trying to get here, but I know heaven is on the other side as long as Beatrice is there with me.

I asked Frankie, who's in my training group with me, to stand as my best man. We've been through a lot and he's as close to me as my brother Cole. He might as well be my brother from another mother. He's got his dress blues on while my little brother is playing in the marching band. The music starts and I can't wait another second. I turn and scan the aisle for my Honeybee.

There's a hush over the crowd and the pastor wears a concerned look on his face. I don't know if she's there; I don't know what I'll do if she's left me standing here. I hear the faint jingle of sleigh bells and smile.

5

Bea

“Are you sure you want to do this, Sweat Bea?” My mother stands in the doorway to my bedroom. Her face carries concern the way only mothers can. She's been hovering more than usual since my breakup with Tank and my brother gone chasing his own happily ever after across the country.

“Yeah, Momma. I think I do.” I can't help the smile on my face and the warmth I feel for him. I sit on the bed and finger the lace of the dress she and my aunts worked

tirelessly on. I'm going into this marriage with nothing but this dress on my back that carries family memories and traditions I haven't begun to understand in building my own household. I've packed a few things, but I can't take it all as we work out the housing arrangements on base.

She joins me on the bed and brushes a hand over my hair in a soothing way. I lean into her as she peppers me with questions. "How well do you know this boy?"

"Ah, not well enough for this." I can't help the giggle that comes out of my mouth. It's not that we haven't had family discussions about this until late into the evenings over the remaining pieces of pie and turkey scramble. It's been a whirlwind of planning, all of which Tank took out of my hands, as promised. He's been all action and few words lately.

“He seems like he’s determined to make you happy.”

We both get off the bed and I let her help me slip the dress on, stepping into it and lifting the long lace sleeves that once adorned her arms. The aunts are skilled seamstresses, and between the three of them they turned my mother’s beautiful gown into something new and special.

“Well isn’t that a sight to see.” Aunt Doris beams, followed by Aunt Elisa, who has her arms full.

“What is all this?” I ask as they put down items on my bed, unwrapping things.

“It’s your something old.” Doris plucks at the sleeve of my mother’s dress.

“Your something new.” Elisa drapes a small bolero over my arms in white rabbit fur, explaining, “I had a man once who liked to spoil me. Bought me this fur which I never wore. Seeing as how it’s winter, you don’t want to catch a chill before the big night.” She winks and my mother fans herself. We’ll need to turn the AC on if this keeps up, because my husband to be is seriously hot.

“And this, my darling daughter, will be your something borrowed.” Mom reaches for a box on the bed and opens it up. It’s her county fair tiara—a beautiful, delicate crown made in silver with pearls and sparkling gemstones. She places it on my head and adjusts the veil. “Perfect,” she murmurs, kissing my cheek.

“Not quite, but I got it. Girl needs something blue.” Doris waddles around my room, reaching for a shoebox. She tosses the lid and pulls out a pair of open-toed blue

booties. The same blue as Tank's uniform.

"Doris, I love them."

She ushers me to sit at my vanity and helps me put them on.

"Well, I think our work here is done." Elisa grins, clutching her bosom.

"You think it's time we had that talk about wedding nights or what?" Doris cackles, and my mother shoos her from the room.

"Pretty sure she don't need that talk, Phoebe." Elisa snickers, following them out of my bedroom and giving me a wink.

I'm going to miss my aunts and their meddling ways. I walk to the top of the stairs and see my dad standing below in his best suit, a dark gray pinstripe.

"Beatrice Nicole." Dad uses my name with a waver in his voice.

I sniffle, taking his arm as he leads me to the car. "Dad, don't make me cry.?"

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He pats my hand, nodding. "Let's get you there on time."

It's true what they say about weddings: they're fun to attend but you barely remember your own beyond the fleeting highlights. Champaign was passed, but I barely drank. Food was served, but I couldn't eat. My stomach had been twisted in knots, being the center of attention. My feet ached from standing, greeting, and dancing the night away. For a rushed affair, Tank did more than deliver on his promise.

The things I remember most from the day start with the way he sighed in relief as I walked up to him, like he was weak in the knees. His perfectly pressed dress blues made him seem larger than life as my dad handed me off to Tank. I'll remember the vows he wrote, declaring to love me and care for me always as a partner should. I wonder if his dad and mine gave him a crash course on women, the way they bantered back and forth at the reception while I stood across the room being oohed and ahed over by his mother, mine, and the aunts who seemed to think we missed out on an opportunity for fireworks and another parade through town. I think I'll always remember the way he grinned, toothy and wide, as the priest told him he could kiss me. My back ached a little from the buttons pressed into me when he dipped me over his knee to kiss me with everyone cheering. It was a heady rush feeling, that love, as my mother dabbed her eyes. As far as fantasies go, Tank is the real deal.

A lacy garter and bouquet toss marked the end of the evening and the beginning of all our tomorrows, with Tank hoisting me into his arms to carry me off into our happily ever after. Sure, my family had reservations. I had reservations, but I also had a man looking at me like I was his everything, and tonight I believed in him.

"My wife." Tank carries me to our bridal suite. He swings around to shut the door, locking us in. Rose petals are crushed under his boots as he puts me in the middle of the bed.

"Henry," I whisper, pulling him close. I kiss his lips and taste the shots of whiskey I watched him take with his friends during the party. It's not nearly as potent as the alcohol, but his lips on mine make me drunk with need.

"Honeybee." He flips me over and I feel him slowly unbutton the back of my dress. Leave it to my mother and aunts to find the most difficult dress to alter so removing it becomes a tedious chore, stealing more time away from us.

I groan, rubbing myself against the comforter. “Rip it, Tank.” Those little buttons will be the death of me.

“Not a chance in hell.” With each button he slips through the silk fastenings, he kisses my spine with aching precision—a row of neat little nips over each vertebra designed to drive me insane. His hands cup inside the dress, easing it off my heated skin that’s chilled by the automatic AC in the room. My nipples hurt and I crave physical contact to soothe me.

Turning, I glance at him over my shoulder. Hungry eyes meet my own. I struggle to get up. “I can manage the rest.”

His face is a study in determination. I can only imagine the things he’s done in training to prepare him to be a Marine. He’s gone without sleep for days, marched many miles, and hit a target hundreds of yards away with competence. Neither of us have trained to be partners, let alone be husband and wife. I don’t know how we’ll make this work, but the want in his eyes freezes me to my place on the bed. Like most things, I’m coming to learn with this man, I’m sure Tank will show me with action.

“Why should you have to, Bea?” He lays another tender, unhurried kiss along my neck. “We’ll only do this once.” He crawls back up the bed and I flop onto my back, welcoming his hover on top of me.

“Is that all?” I tease him, earning me a much-needed laugh to the brevity that tonight is really all we’ll have. It’ll be weeks before I see him again. What is it with time robbing me of my first newlywed days with my husband? Except this time, I know what thirteen long, dreaded weeks will feel like. We’ll have spent more time apart than together, and even now, with his possessive desire, I don’t know if I’m strong enough for him.

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“We have one wedding night. I want to do this right.” Tank leans in, letting me feel the heat of his body and the thick ridges of muscles that tease and seduce. I’m lost in lust for this man.

I reach for his shirt and pull the starched fabric from his dress blues, muttering, “Too much chatter.” We’ll christen a few things tonight, and I cross my fingers the dry cleaner he uses is discreet. I sure as hell won’t be worried about his uniform tonight as I stake a claim on my Marine.

“I’m all yours.” Tank arches back and unbuttons his pants and shucks them off as easily.

I pull his boxer briefs down and cup his hard erection, hot and pulsing in my hand. He presses against me and groans with a smile that stretches near to a thousand miles under my stare. His heat is like an inferno—one move and we’ll burn out of control.

“I need you,” I moan, tugging him closer.

“You have me.” Tank jerks himself a few times, squeezing the head of his cock as if to stem the feeling.

I reach again and twine my fingers with his until I’m thumbing the slit of his cock, spreading precum juices over the flared top and down the rigid sides.

“You make me feel like a king in your grasp.”

I squeeze a guttural sound from him, pleased I have power. Somehow it balances the

equilibrium, the way we can make the other lose control. We're connected.

"Then make me your queen."

Tank kisses me with a bite. "Only if you promise to sting, Honeybee." He shifts his knees, pushing my legs wide open until they're straddled over his thighs. Cool air caresses my damp lips and my core tightens in anticipation. It's so good between us it should be criminal to feel pleasure like this. I never had a chance to rebound from him, and I doubt I would have ever been fully whole in heart and mind. His hard cock is ready to flay me open and I'm shaking, empty without him. Tank doesn't waste time probing or rubbing himself over my nether lips. No, he pushes forward in a steady thrust, filling me to the hilt without pause.

The stretch is tight. It's always been tight, and full, and tingly between us. It reminds me of missing him, missing this fullness, resurrecting the anger, hurt, and insecurity. We're husband and wife now, pledged to each other, but how long will he stay, despite the promises?

"Henry." I cry his name and he thrusts again, harder this time. I moan and writhe on the bed, fisting sheets, feeling him deeper than ever before. It's like he can't get far enough inside to claim me. I love the burning stretch of those initial strokes. I'm stuck under his ministrations like a bee pinned to the wall. For a second I worry that being on the pill isn't enough to keep him from getting me pregnant, the way he rolls his hips, digging me into the mattress. It'd be my luck his super sperm impregnated me when I was least prepared.

Tank reaches for my hands, pulling them up and over my head and directing them to hold onto the headboard. His free hand reaches in the space between us, thumbing my clit in hard circles designed to make me crazy for him. He's ruined me for other men. Happily. Passionately. Irrevocably.

“Beatrice, don’t give up on us, on this.” He shudders, releasing a steady jet of cum inside me. Claiming me.

Sweat cools to our skin as he cradles me in his arms where I nuzzle against him, biting back tears.

“We’re married now. Isn’t that forever?” Even as I say it I question it, suddenly worried that anything could happen to him in this life.

“It’s always.”

He places a lingering kiss on my forehead. I don’t care that his body feels like a furnace. I don’t want to let go, ever. I think about our impulsive vows and question my sanity. Did I make the right choice? Are we doing the right thing? We’re so young and unsettled. I don’t have any way to support myself or a degree to fall back on. Tank will pursue his career and I might get left behind.

While he’s been rocking inside of me in gentle waves, I’ve been musing how to get an annulment—which is about as unlikely as a snowstorm in summer, with the way he’s had sex with me like it’s his air to breathe. I’ve won the husband lottery, but I don’t know where to go from here. I don’t really want an annulment; what I want is more time with him.

Caressing the back of my head, he says, “Bea, don’t get lost in there.”

He means my head, and he’s right. A few minutes pass and his body relaxes in sleep, holding onto me. I rub my chin against his shoulder and whisper, “Please don’t leave me again.”

Tank

“I don’t want to go.” I reach under the covers to peel off my wife’s silky panties. She must have slipped them on sometime during the night. I pause for a moment to savor that idea: my wife.

Mrs. Beatrice Brennan Andrews.

I have a reason to come home more compelling than a home-cooked meal. Heck, I don’t even know if Bea can cook—don’t care one way or the other. She will be all the substance I need.

My fingers find the hollow divots of her hip bones and slip under the lace, giving it a firm tug. It rips in my grip with a satisfying tear that echoes in the hotel bedroom. This is my favorite new sound, next to Bea’s gasp as she attempts to scoot away from me.

“Tank,” she whines, but doesn’t sound at all serious. I’ve woken her up in the middle of the night no less than half a dozen times, because another thirteen weeks is obscenely too long to go without my Honeybee. Life feels too precious in this moment, and I’m stealing every single one I can because it might just be my last.

“Morning, baby.” My voice is gruff against her as I maneuver myself into a better position.

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She rolls around in the bed like she can't quite wake up. "What time is it?"

A glance to the nightstand clock registers the morning hour of four thirty. I chuckle because I gave her an extra half hour of sleep before digging in again.

"I'll be quick as a buzz, Honeybee, promise." I crawl up her body, laying my weight over hers to settle in the warmth. There's nothing like feeling my wife flush against me, skin to skin. Her chest expands as she puffs a breath of sweet-smelling air.

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ea grouses and I snicker in the dark, continuing to feel my way over her. I shift her legs open with my knee, dropping my hard length against her belly before moving downward to press up inside her slick heat. Her hands grasp my shoulders, slowing me down. I want her badly, but I want her to remember this and miss it when I'm gone.

"Since you're here, don't be hasty," she pants with a sassy retort.

"My girl likes it slow?" I ask, kissing her lips while resting my head in the crook of her neck. My hips undulate and I fill her with my length.

"Your girl is a little sore." She's pouting, but she's meeting me with each cant of our bodies, eager and willing.

"I miss you too much when I'm gone." I admit this on a broken whisper, feeling the confession in the root of my soul. Marines are tough. I'm tough, but the emotional

toll wrecks me when we're separated by my loyalty and duty to country.

"Then don't go, Tank. Don't leave me here alone."

She's trying to be strong, but we're both at odds in this new territory. Was it wrong of me to marry her? I'll fucking lose it if she starts bawling, because I'll be right there with her.

I force the pain away with pleasure, kissing my way up her body and leaving little bites as I go. I hope it leaves marks, like a tattoo telling a narrative of how much I love her, miss her, don't want to be parted from her because the truth is, I'm a selfish asshole for wanting both my girl and my career.

"You know that's not how the military works." I lick her barely rounded soft belly where her hip meets in a sloping indentation of skin and bone. I use my hands to memorize every curve of her so that when I'm asleep at night I might imagine her next to me, under me, being inside her sweet heat.

I continue to tease and snack away on her delectable body until she's squirming, panting, on the cusp of an orgasm so strong I'll place bets that she'll see stars. She turns quiet, fingers gripping my head, nails scraping the military-grade fuzz. It's the press of her fingertips that advises me how close she is to losing it. I love when my Honeybee goes postal, bucking, whimpering, all out clutching me close to her body like she'll never get enough of me the way I'll never get my fill of her. It's reaffirming in a way that saying I love you can't quite measure.

I still my body and let her ride me from below. Her legs wrap around my waist as she grinds upward, establishing a deeper connection on my cock.

"Henry." My name melts off her shuddering lips and I know if I look at her she'll have this overwhelmed expression bordering on those bawling tears that undo me.

I've fucked my girl into a state of an emotional hurricane and I'm not a damn bit sorry.

"Was it good, baby?" I kiss her slack mouth, letting her slide off my dick in a puddle of our combined juices. I know it was good. We're messy, love-drunk, and her hitched breath tells me all I need to know. "Will you miss me while I'm gone?"

"I'll miss you like Hans misses a stormtrooper."

Ah, there's my girl. It's hard to suppress my chuckle when I want to rage and cry at the time slipping through our fingers. I'll be back soon, but I doesn't change the time I pissed away now that I got her back. I do my best to reassure her.

"I'll be able to call you this time. You know, that right?"

A huff in the dark followed by her sigh lets me know where she stands. "It's going to be hard."

"Hard like before?"

"Harder, because I know you're out there. Harder because now I'll be waiting with the expectation of you coming home."

What she doesn't say is her fear of me not coming home. I swallow back the knot in my throat. Yeah, definitely harder. I agree with her and plan to call her as much as I can.

"We can get through the next thirteen weeks. I bet you'll be tougher than I will."

"You realize that we'll have spent more time apart than together." Her fingers trace over my face slowly. She follows the cords in my neck before wrapping her arms

around me, not letting go.

Grabbing her hand, I nip at her fingertips playfully and attempt to joke. “Some of the best relationships operate that way. You’ll miss me so much you’ll never get mad at me.”

“Tank, that’s not even funny.” Her face looks about as serious as a heart attack, and really, who could blame her. It’s a piss-poor joke and I know it.

I hope she likes the stuffed bears I got her, custom dressed to look like us. I wanted to get her something big, but I saw the bears in the flower shop and thought she might like them. They’re wrapped up for later; right now, I want to ravish my wife so she doesn’t forget me while I’m gone.

“You’re coming to graduation.” It’s not a question. I pepper her face with kisses. My parents and younger brother will be there, but I want my wife to be there. I want her to run into my open arms like a Hallmark fucking movie moment.

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Her voice is soft and sweet. “Of course I’m coming. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

7

Bea

I pedal my new-to-me bike on the cement path toward the PDX. Tank was so proud of himself, finding the ten-speed with a basket on the front so I had some way to get around. He promises it’s temporary while he pulls out of our driveway in the Mustang to go to work. I appreciate the thoughtfulness. He needs his car and I need to not be trapped at home.

The PDX is only a mile away, and I need to pick up something sweet. I dash inside and grab some cupcakes that won’t jostle too much in the basket. I see a lip gloss in a pretty peach color and grab a box of tampons. Next week is period week and I don’t want to have to pedal down here with cramps.

I’m at the checkout and swipe my debit card. The card reader beeps and rejects my card. I look back and see a mom with two kids under five. She’s bouncing the baby and looking at me with a harried smile. The cashier seems impatient and I dig inside my purse for my emergency cash.

“Sorry,” I mutter to the people around me, and grab my bag, scurrying to the ATM outside. I check my account balance and see it’s hovering in the twelve-dollar range. With a slap to my forehead, I pick up my phone and call Tank.

“Hey, Honeybee.” I didn’t expect him to pick up, so it’s a real treat to hear his voice.

“Hiya Tank.” I don’t know how to word this. I’m broke. I don’t have a job yet.

“I’ve gotta get back to work. What’s up?” he asks. He’s never impatient with me, but I know he can’t stay on the phone either.

“I’m at the PDX and my debit card isn’t working. I had some cash on me but I think I need you to take me to the bank this week.” I mash my lip between my teeth, feeling awful.

“Shoot. I forgot about that. Listen, just use the credit card in my desk with both our names on it. It came the other day, but I forgot to tell you.”

“What about cash and stuff?” It feels weird using the card, but I guess that’s what married people do. I don’t know. I’ve been married all of six months and still don’t have a clue.

“Use the card, and when we have time, I’ll take you. I have to go. Love you.” Tank hangs up before I can say I love you. I say it out loud anyway to the silent phone, because I do love him, but I love him more when he’s here.

It’s a slow pedal back to the house, where I park my bike next to the front porch and chain it to the post. My neighbor pulls up and honks her horn. I plan to check out the credit card later, and bring my bag from the PDX with me, getting into her car. She’s taking me to another WAGS meet-and-greet, and fingers crossed I’ll find some more ladies my age to bond with. She catches me up on the latest base gossip. Who knew these places were as bad as small towns, except with a defined pecking order I haven’t learned yet?

“You’ll want to get in good with the officers’ wives. They have all the connections.” Rhonda is the first person I met here, living on base, six months ago. Her house is across the street and her husband trains new recruits while she works as a nurse. She

saw me bringing in boxes one morning while

Tank was out, and offered me coffee and doughnuts. It was the perfect icebreaker, considering Tank had been so busy that he'd brought me home to an empty fridge and a mattress on the floor until we figured out shipping furniture. There'd been so many phone calls to make I didn't know where to start, and Rhonda was a blessing.

Today she's pulling me through the throng of smiling women, introducing me.

"Don't be shy. You said you wanted to find a job or something to keep you busy. These ladies practically run the base behind the scenes." Rhonda makes a good point: I do need something to occupy my time besides scrubbing counters and laundry. Tank goes through a lot on his work rotations and it's hard to keep up.

I scan the park area where we are meeting. Picnic baskets are filled with homemade salads and sandwiches. I went to the PDX and picked up cupcakes. I haven't mastered cooking, besides the basics of macaroni and cheese, which is a little embarrassing. Tank's mom sent us off with a cookbook and an Instapot, which kind of terrifies me. What if I blow something up accidentally?

"Everyone has a baby?"

Some women are older, a few are my age, and more with children than not tugging at their knees or settled on their hips. I don't have baby fever in the least, and watching children back home was something of a last resort and only because I got paid to do it. I'm not prepared to start popping my own out. I'm lonely, sure, but not enough to make a kid. I'm better off with a fish tank. My insecurities are surfacing, reminding myself that I made this choice.

Some of these women have careers they can take anywhere their husbands get deployed. Rhonda could be a nurse anywhere. I didn't even finish college because I

didn't know what I wanted to study. Four years seemed like a long time to study a subject I wasn't sure I'd love twenty years from now. My resume isn't anything special and my options are limited on and off base. I don't like other people's children well enough to try the daycare center. My mother would expire if she knew I considered the titty bar off base. Tank would lose his mind, and truth be told I only feel bold enough to go topless with my husband after a drink or two—definitely two drinks, and I couldn't get past the embarrassment of his fellow soldiers seeing me like that. Tassels like that aren't exactly stars and stripes.

I barely get through the meet-and-greet without frowning as Rhonda makes the rounds saying goodbye. She pats my hand and drives me home, dropping me off in front of our small house. She drives away and I stand at the front door unable to force myself inside the empty space. Instead I sit down on the cement stoop and watch the cars drive down the street of our little neighborhood. Tank won't be home until after eight.

In the six months of being married to Tank, we've barely spent enough time together as he settles into work on the base. My patience is raw. He's loving every minute of what he's doing and he's filled with tasks and mission objectives while I'm floundering. There's only so many times one can clean a small one-bedroom house before you run out of things to scrub and hospital corners to tuck into beds.

Some nights I fall asleep on the couch and wake in the middle of the night wrapped up in bed, wondering how I got there. The amazing sex I thought we'd be having...sometimes Tank is exhausted and sometimes I'm too homesick to be in the mood. Tank calls as much as he can, I can't fault him for that, but I'm lonely. My heart aches and nothing fills the space. Nothing I want besides him here, home, with me. When he's deployed I'll have a car. We share his Mustang since I can't afford to go and buy my own. When he's home I'm dependent on him to take me where I need to go, and sometimes a bus to bring me back if our schedules don't jive. Let's say I haven't made the best effort to make friends. I let Tank think I'm happy, but inside I

can't tell you one good thing about living here besides Rhonda's coffee if she's home from work.

8

Tank

"How's it going, soldier?" My commanding officer is grinning as I'm deep in thought wondering what to do for Bea's birthday. I don't share his good mood today, but I respond appropriately. The past few months haven't been great at home.

"It's all right." My answer is noncommittal. I talked to Bea earlier, but she didn't sound good. In fact, she sounded more despondent than before. I've been monitoring her moods lately, and not because I want to correlate if it's her period or because the rent is due.

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We fought this morning because I finally found the credit card bill stuffed under the couch cushion. Not only was it over the limit but it was a week late. I flipped through the pages and found the charges for things like food, movies we never saw together, and home goods. I had wondered how the house spruced itself up. Turns out my wife has a good eye for decorating and an even better one for sales. My stomach knots, wondering how we'll pay this month's bill. I know she doesn't have a job yet.

This new financial burden put a damper on the car I was trying to buy her so she could have more freedom to come and go as she pleased. I figured a car would open up her options for jobs off the base, if that's what she wants, or the ability to attend classes at the local college. I'd asked her to hold off because the busses don't run late for evening classes. I worried about her traveling back and forth on her bicycle after dark. Maybe I'm crazy to think that, but my job forces me to see harsher realities of life.

I'd be kidding myself if I thought this transition was easy for either of us. She fakes it well. The only thing she can't fake is the sex, and both of us are in a rut lately.

"Hey, cheer up." My CO nudges my shoulder. "You'll be happy to know your request for this weekend was approved and your sign-on bonus came through."

I perk up at that knowledge. That money will help payoff the credit card and give me something toward her car.

Sunday is my wife's birthday.

I get on the phone and call Rhonda. She's been a godsend since we came on base, and

the only person I know who can help me coordinate a surprise party for my wife on short notice.

I have the idea to get a cake FedExed from her favorite bakery back home. Flowers and balloons from the PDX. I don't think I can get her parents to come down so soon—they've been nice to give us some space so we can figure things out, same as mine—but maybe her girlfriends Kate and Hope can come down. I practically run myself in circles until Rhonda calms me down. She tells me that there are a few WAGs who will come to the party and promises to reach out. It's going to be great. I don't know how I'll keep the secret until this weekend.

"Bea, I'm home." I drop my duffel bag by the door and shrug out of my shoes. She doesn't like the mess they track inside and I don't blame her. It's a good thing I left all the party supplies I picked up in the car; I might be able to sneak them inside and into the hall closet. I know she isn't with Rhonda because I just spoke to her about the party plans. There's a stillness in the air I don't expect. The whole house is eerily quiet.

"Honeybee, baby, where are you?" I pace into the bedroom and everything looks neat as a pin. I turn around and walk to the kitchen. Not a damn thing is out of place, and a chill runs up my spine. I rack my brain. Did she say she was going anywhere? No. Her bike was still here. The bed was made. The living room looks freshly vacuumed and the dishes are clean, stacked neatly by the sink.

I scout the house again.

A note catches my eye on the counter and I pick it up, slipping my finger under the crisp, white paper. I pull out the letter inside and find my own Dear John.

The words are hard to read between blurred vision of emotion. I'm hurt she didn't trust me. I'm angry she kept this from me, like a secret between us. I'm sad that I

wasn't tuned in enough to see her unhappiness. I'm kicking myself in the ass for not realizing she needed more from me as her husband.

Henry –

This letter is hard to write. We both know how difficult this has been from the start. I don't know if I can do this the way things are. I don't know what I want out of life, but being alone and unable to feel independent isn't what I thought I was signing up for. You know where to find me.

– Bea

9

Bea

“Mom, Dad, I'm home!” I push through the front door but find the house empty—not a soul in site to greet me. I drop my bag in the hallway and go to the kitchen, hoping to find something to eat.

The cookie jar is on the counter and I pop the lid, reaching inside. It's empty. I paw around inside the ceramic base, but not even a stray crumb reaches my fingertip. I texted my parents that I was coming home. They were oddly subdued and my dad asked if I was all right. I didn't know how to respond. Am I really leaving Tank or am I visiting my parents for the weekend? I love him. I miss him. I need something from him I don't know how to explain.

Hungry and tired, I make my way upstairs. Each step and I feel the fatigue of my journey on the bus. I turn right at the top of the stairs and push open the door to my room.

“What the hell?”

The door swings open, but gone are the pale lavender walls, replaced with soft yellow and white lace trim. My twin bed is buried under fabric swatches, and a dress form takes up the corner. My desk is now a sewing table with drafted patterns and thread bundles.

Teenage posters of heartthrob celebrities are gone, as are my shelves of books and swimming trophies. I rub the center of my chest, feeling a pang of sadness. It’s like I never lived here at all.

I hear the jingle of the front door and race to the stairs. My parents are laughing and carrying in groceries.

“Mom?”

“Oh hiya, Bea. Come help your dad get the soda from the car.”

“Mom,” I say, a bit more sternly, to get her attention.

“Seriously, Beatrice, go help your dad.” Her voice brooks no argument and glumly I walk outside, grabbing soda bottles.

I place them on the counter and put my hands on my hips, giving the house a look over. What else is different? “What happened to my bedroom?” I demand. I’m this close to stomping my foot and barely hold back.

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Mom hums to herself and puts away sandwich meats.

“The craft room?” She’s moving items in the fridge and I’m getting angrier at feeling ignored.

“No. My room.?”

??

She shrugs. “I changed some things around.”

“All my stuff is gone.” My arms rise and fall, and my hands slap my thighs. This is unbelievable.

“Don’t be dramatic. I put it in the attic when you moved out. It’s not like you need a bedroom here—you have your own house now.”

If there was a mirror in front of me, my face would look like I was catching flies.

“I got married, Mom. I didn’t die.”

“I know, darling.” My mother rolls her eyes and I’m speechless.

I sniff back tears. “I don’t have a bedroom anymore?” I don’t have a place here in my own house, and I don’t feel like I have a place with my husband.

“Sweat Bea.” She sighs in that mom way that tells me I’m the exasperating one.

“Mom.”

“Beatrice, you live with your husband. There’s a pull-out cot in the closet, or you can put sheets on the couch.”

Unbelievable.

I spend the night on the couch tossing and turning. At breakfast I ask my dad what to do and he tells me this is my moment to be a grownup and face the choices I’ve made. He doesn’t say Tank doesn’t love me—quite the opposite, in fact. He explains that unless I tell Tank how unhappy I am, it’ll be hard for him to discern what’s going on. He places the blame for holding out on my shoulders, and the blame for rushing things on us both. Dad fills me in that Tank was pretty clear about how he felt about me, but that I was the one who had wavered. It was true: I had let fear cloud my emotions and expected things to be rosy when marriage takes the work of two people.

It’s eye-opening to realize I haven’t put the work into trying the way Tank has. We aren’t perfect—far from it—and I need to give him a chance to try as much as I have to try to figure out what I need to stand on my own two feet.

There’s nothing quite as humbling as having to ask your parents to drop you off at the bus station to head back home—the real home I’ve made with Tank. I suppose Mom is feeling sympathetic, as she packed a few dozen of her cookies in my bag. Dad reminds me I could come home anytime I liked, to visit, and next time to bring my Marine home with me.

10

Tank

I wake up with a crick in my neck. This old chair has to go. Another hand-me-down

while I figure things out. It doesn't match the rest of the furniture, but I'm still leery to part with it since we own it outright—unlike the sofa, which I'm still paying off. My dad had a good decade in this chair and I had hoped the luck would pass down to me, but it hasn't—not yet, anyway. Everything in my body hurts, but my heart hurts the most. Keys jingle in the door and I sit up just enough to see the glint of light as it creaks open. I missed Beatrice the way an amputee sometimes misses his limb. I could still feel her in my chest, a phantom pain, a bubbling ache left wondering. Not knowing if she was coming home was the worst feeling in the world—worse than getting my deployment assignment and not knowing if she would follow me to base.

The door slowly swings open, bringing with it cool outside breeze. I reach for the cake on the coffee table, slowly sliding the box under the couch. If this isn't my wife, I definitely don't plan on sharing this cake from back home with anyone.

“Honeybee? Is that you?” I call out, forcing myself to stand up. Under normal circumstances I might have been alarmed hearing the doorknob jangle, but living in base housing lends a certain element of safety I take for granted.

She doesn't answer me, but I watch her walk into the room. A slow shuffle of skinny legs covered in dark denim and slip-on flats. Moonlight catches the set of keys in her fingers. Her shoulders slump as she lets her bag fall to the floor.

“I was kind of hoping you'd be jumping into my arms by now.”

Bea glances around the living room. It's empty, the exact way she left it three days ago. No streamers twisted in pinks and bright yellow are strung up—the only colors I could find at the commissary. No bright-colored balloons either. All the party supplies are tucked away in the closet, unopened.

“Honestly, I'm afraid I might pee myself if anyone jumps out at me yelling ‘surprise.’ A few hours on a bus will do that.” Her voice goes husky, her face pale, and I notice

her usual thick bun of wild hair is less perky—a casualty of riding the bus back.

“Surprise.” I shrug, kicking the bottom of the rug and nudging it back in place. Thanks to Rhonda there was no one to send home as she kindly handled the rescinding of invitations. I didn’t even have anything to clean up.

“I don’t suppose this’ll be like our wedding.” There was so much leading up to the big day. All I wanted was to give her something that expressed how I felt about her. So yeah, a little like our wedding, but not quite.

I match her smile, recalling the aunts and all the shenanigans those ladies got into around the wedding. If those girls had it their way we would have had a parade and fireworks. I remember fondly a few details from the rush of that day. The way she looked as her dad walked her down the aisle, and the last smile she gave me as Beatrice Brennan turning into the first kiss as Mrs. Beatrice Andrews. No. I had hoped this would be better, but now it’s only the two of us and no one to witness our folly.

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“No party and no cake.” I step in front of the couch, blocking her view of the pink box I shoved underneath it. I still won’t share it unless she’s staying. A man can only take so many blows to his ego.

“I’m sorry I’m not good at this, Tank.”

“Good at what?”

“At being happy. At being used to this and everything that comes with it. I don’t know how to be a wife.”

“You’re being you, Bea. That’s all I ever wanted. I’ll take the good and the bad and we’ll learn the rest together.”

“There’s a lot of things I’m not ready for.” She pulls up her bag and takes out the bears I’d given her right after we got married. A pair of bears dressed up, one in military fatigues and one in a wedding dress. I hadn’t noticed they were gone when she left, but my chest aches knowing she took our bears with her.

“We have time to figure that out.”

“I’m not ready for babies, but I do want to build a family with you.”

We take steps closer to each other. The bears get squished between us and I hold her in my arms, imagining a day when she might be ready and it’s a baby we hold between us. I don’t tell her that because I know it will freak her out, but I do search her face to confirm the possibility. It’s there. I knew it would be, but sometimes you

just need to know.

“Is that cake I smell? Sugar and cream in a vaguely familiar pink box?” Her neck strains as she tries to see, and I swing her around, blocking her view.

“Oh, I don’t know. I guess it depends on a few things.”

“Like?”

“If you’re staying or leaving.” My stomach growls, wanting a bite of the cake, but I need my wife more. Cake can always wait when she’s in my arms.

“I never wanted to go in the first place.”

“But you did, and there’s nothing stopping you from leaving again.”

“I had to go so I realized what I was missing all along.”

“I guess I deserve that.”

“Deserve what?”

“A shitty goodbye.”

“Oh, Tank.” She wilts like a flower without water. No tears, just a long, sad sigh.

“Thanks for not making me wait thirteen weeks to figure it out.”

“Hmm...Since I’m staying, can I see the cake?”

“I should warn you.”

“About the cake?”

“Prudy got the order wrong.”

“Then it’ll be just like home.”

“Even Boston cream?”

“Even.”

I pick up the cake and open it on the table. We dig in with our hands, uncaring of silverware or plates. Bea turns to me and dabs a tiny bit of chocolate and cream on my cheek.

“Minx,” I tease her, pulling her in close.

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“Tank!” Bea squeals.

I rub my cheek against her nose, sharing the mess with her.

“I love you, Mrs. Andrews.”

“I love you too, Mr. Andrews.”

Unable to hold myself back, I pick Bea up and carry her to our bedroom.

“Tank, you made the bed!”

I chuff, placing her down in the middle and caging her in my arms.

“No Honeybee. I never unmade it.”

“Never?”

“I slept in the recliner. I told you I was never going to spend another night in bed without you.”

“Mom turned my bedroom into a craft room. I guess I wasn’t sleeping in a bed without you either.”

“I don't want to spend another night without you.”

“And now you don’t have to.”

“Did you miss me?” I ask. It’s our thing, and I wait for some silly metaphor that’ll make me laugh.

Her hands caress me and she tugs me down to her lips, whispering, “I missed you like a bee misses honey, and flowers, and sunshine.”

My chest gets tight and I nearly choke the words out. “Ah, all the things it needs to survive.”

She murmurs, “Always.”

Epilogue

Bea

My hand slaps my bare thigh as I stop inside the house at the base of the stairs, catching my breath. “Bruiser, get back here with my shoe!”

This mutt is going to be the death of me. The little trickster nabbed the flip-flop off my foot as I was getting the mail. He loves the sound my shoe makes as it flicks on my foot with each teasing step. My chest heaves and sweat trickles between my breasts as I shake out my short dress. The humidity is awful today, and I say a little prayer that dog hasn’t grabbed another shoe. Old Navy is about an hour away, and I don’t relish a drive there and back for a half dozen pair of flip-flops at three dollars a pop. I buy my flip-flops in bulk with this puppy. Wryly, I muse, I’m not entirely sure how much I’ve missed Tank this time.

We were stationed to Fort Bragg seven months ago, and my husband has been deployed six months of that time. I probably miss him about as much as Bruiser would miss my flip-flop if he ever came back with it. Fort Bragg has been an adventure, with a missing shipment of furniture, which put us back at square one

without a proper couch or dining room table all over again. I was determined to not use our joint credit card, after learning my lesson last time. Luckily a family down the street was moving and their two teenage sons were more than happy to move the furniture for ice tea and store-bought cookies.

A dart of black fur races by me and I step out of the way with barely enough time before I'm almost knocked down. It's pointless to call Bruiser's name again. That damn dog barely listens to me. He goes nuts when someone comes knocking on the door. He's terrified the UPS driver and the mailman, countless times barking at the front window like they're going to be his new snack. He's a real joy to get into his crate, which he's almost grown out of. When Tank comes home that's the first thing on my list I need his help with.

Bruiser worms his warm body with silky fur next to mine, glancing up with his puppy eyes—dark, fathomless orbs that reflect nothing but love. He puts his head down and wiggles his butt, tail thumping, and I shake my head. He is supposed to be the runt of his Labrador litter, which is how Tank adopted him for free when one of the families on base had a batch of unexpected puppies. Kind of a two-for-one deal, seeing as how my husband presented him as a deployment present. We don't plan on having kids for a while, so this lump of coal-dark love is the equivalent of my push present. So even though Bruiser is my dog, he loves Tank unconditionally and conveniently forgets who feeds and walks him the second my other lump of handsome broad shoulders comes home.

Bruiser gives a low bark.

“Shush, you big baby.”

I pat his head and scratch behind his ears.

“You miss Daddy, don't you?”

He perks up and barks louder this time, running off. There's plenty of mischief for him to get into between now and tomorrow, when Tank is scheduled to get home.

Standing up, I brush myself off and walk into the kitchen. I find my mangled flip-flop on the tile floor and toss it in the garbage. The navy blue plastic foam that matches my dress is mangled beyond repair. It's warm enough that I don't need shoes in the house, and I putter around looking for something to do—anything but wait, because that's the hardest part of being separated from Tank. I finally mastered my Instapot, and have a roast cooking now so I don't have to stress about prepping anything tomorrow. I want him to come home and be completely mine, with our mutual attention spoken for.

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A knock at the door sends Bruiser into a frenzy, and I don't have time to get him in his crate to open the door. It swings open and I recognize the fatigues bent over rolling on the ground with the dog. Barking and swirls of camo maneuver in the entryway until Bruiser takes off to find his extra-large dino bone. You might say that was Tank's deployment gift to the dog.

"Honeybee." He stands up, blocking out the light from the open door, and with a sharp, stinging cry, I launch myself in his arms. I can't help the flood of emotions that overwhelm me, and as much as I'm trying to meld myself into his arms, I'm pushing back so I can inspect that he's come home fully intact. He lets me go and I back away to take in this man I love more than anything in this world. His face looks tired and travel weary, while the muscles of his body, built before his absence, seem to have multiplied tenfold.

"Damn it, Tank!" I'm sniffing and look like an unmade hot mess. He's always catching me off guard.

His foot kicks the door shut behind us as I'm backed up against the wall. His hand brushes back my loose hair as he tilts my chin up to his face. Thick fingers brush the fresh tears off my cheeks.

"Hey, I've always wondered what it would be like to come home to dinner cooking and my wife barefoot in a skimpy house dress. All that's missing is for her to tell me she's pregnant." He's hoisted me up in his arms again, hiking up my dress as I wrap my legs around his waist.

"You jerk. I'm not pregnant." I bop him on the shoulder and get a ride as his

abdominal muscles shake with laughter.

“I should hope not, little lady. You’d have some explaining to do.” He swats my butt playfully while carrying me into the kitchen. I’m settled on the countertop, where his hands travel up my legs to my hips under my dress.

“You’re home early. I’m happy.” I don’t care about getting all dolled up tomorrow to greet him. This is a million times better.

“You miss me?” he asks. Big oaf. What does he think I’ll say?

I jerk my head over his shoulder to Bruiser, who comes into the kitchen holding his dino bone, showing it off proudly. “I missed you about as much as Bruiser likes his daddy-bone.”

“Cute, Honeybee.” He chuckles, resting his head against mine. His hands don’t stop their exploration of my body and I sigh, content to feel his touch all over me.

“How’d you get back early?”

He grunts. “Classified.”

I pout, wondering if he’ll relent and tell me, but he never does with things like that. I don’t pry further and instead I run my fingers over his shoulders and scratch his fuzzy, shorn head.

“Tell me how your job is going.” Tank is deflecting. He doesn’t want to hear about how I hate doing data entry eight hours a day, five days a week, but it’s giving me something to do while he’s gone. I’m working on ways to find more of myself. He’s got his passion and I need to find mine. I don’t feel the same level of despondency as I did early on. I’ve connected with my girlfriends Kate and Hope from back home and we started an online book club. It’s fun posting pretty pictures of the books we

love.

I push Tank back and hop off the counter, holding his hand. I pull him into my corner of the living room to show him my latest project.

“What’s this?” He pushes around my little table of objects and sees my small, refurbished MacBook pro.

“Kate, Hope, and I started a book club. I take pictures of the books we read and put them on my Instagram. I started writing a little. Who knows, maybe I’ll write a military romance book.”

“Romance, huh?” Tank gives me a look with a spark in his eyes that says I’m going to get a good fucking first, and then some romance. We haven’t had many deployments, but I sense this is the way of things. I don’t have any issues with an eager husband, except for missing him so damn much.

“Yeah, why don’t you give me some inspiration, big boy.” I tap his chest playfully.

Tank growls and gives chase. I scream a little and Bruiser joins in, barking loudly. I run up the stairs to our bedroom and don’t bother shutting the door.

Tank barrels in and Bruiser playfully nips at his pant leg, trying to pull him away from me.

“Oh no, Mommy is mine, you crazy mutt.” Tank guides Bruiser out of the bedroom and locks the door. My puppy whines outside and I don’t know who I feel sorry for.

“He’s going to bark and scratch,” I remind him, smirking. It’ll be the second door that needs replacing in this house, but I don’t think my husband looks overly concerned. In fact, he smiles like it’s a challenge.

His head dips

down, “More than you will, Honeybee?”

I roll my eyes, scoffing. “I don’t bark, Henry.” I’m backing away from him until my legs bump against the bedframe. I sit down and scoot back as Tank comes closer. He shucks his clothing off piece by piece. When his boots are off, he looks at me the way a lion studies its next meal. I shiver and lean back on my elbows, enticing Tank to do his worst. He stands between my legs and raises them up on the bed, parted. His hands reach for my silky panties and tug them off, tossing them over his shoulder as he pushes my dress up, exposing me to him. I shiver as if the room is cool. He licks his lips, edging closer to my center. Breath huffs from my lips as my hands fist the sheets.

So much for making the bed this morning when he taunts me.

“We’ll see, wife. We shall see.”