

UNSEALED

An Unconventional Story of Love and Friendship

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“Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.”

- John Watson

To first loves

Prologue

When our relationship ended, everyone asked, “Did you see it coming?” Though it was masked with concern, the tone was always accusatory and bewildered. I could see the thought process in their eyes. “There must have been warning signs... You can’t have been totally surprised... You could have avoided this.”

I’ve thought long and hard about this possibility. I’ve relived every good day and bad, every passionate kiss and every screaming fight. I’ve analyzed every romantic gesture and every cutting word. I don’t think I could have avoided this. I don’t think I would have. Maybe, on some level, I did know. Maybe I knew we would end in an explosion of emotions, truths, and long-buried memories. But where they’re wrong is that I would never have guessed why. I would never have believed why. But, even if I had guessed, I know I wouldn’t have left. I wouldn’t have avoided it. He confronted this head on, and I don’t think there’s a person out there who could convince me that it would have been best to let him do it alone.

- Kara

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The sideways stares, the calls of protest as parents pulled their children tight to them, the anonymous bibles left on my doorstep - I saw them. I got the message loud and clear. I just wish that they'd seen that I was just being me; the guy who signed away his life to protect their country. But they never did. The worst were the young hicks who came into the bar from the small towns surrounding Nashville. They thought the muscles they'd gained hauling hay and building fences could teach me a lesson about what's "proper" in this country, my country. I've had to teach a few of them a good lesson instead - that my muscles are still bigger than theirs. And that I have a lot more anger bottled up in me than they do.

The confrontations don't hurt my feelings like they used to. What hurts the most now is when people, most often my friends and family, say, "This isn't you, man. Why don't you just go back to being your old self?"

"This is me now," I tell them. I don't know why they can't see it. I'm still me. I still love to drink and watch football with a big, fat dip in my lip. I might change again, might look a little different in another little while. I'm just trying to figure it all out. But, right now, for forever, I'm still me. Why doesn't anyone see that?

- Liam

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KARA EDWARDS

Competitive, outgoing, and talented, Kara Edwards grew up in a supportive upper-middle class home in Toronto, Canada and excelled in almost every area of her life. She maintained her status on the honor roll throughout high school and had a budding social life while competing at the national level in 3-Day Eventing, the most demanding and dangerous equestrian sport. She did this while traveling around the USA and Canada for competitions all year long. On the first day of a competition, she and her horse would perform in front of judges and show their control and unison by transitioning through several ballet-style movements. On the second day, her inner daredevil would come out and the pair would gallop fast and hard around a three to four mile course jumping solid fences built from logs and stone and running through water and over bridges to showcase their speed, endurance, jumping ability, and bravery. On the third and final day, the pair took on a phase called “show jumping” during which she and her horse would jump around a stadium with fences that could fall down at the slightest touch. This day allowed the horse and rider combinations to demonstrate their suppleness, obedience, fitness, and athleticism, which was difficult after the day before. With its roots in military training, 3-Day Eventing is a sport that tests the horse and rider to the maximum of their physical and mental abilities. Kara’s affection for “difficult” or “problem horses” and for taking any amount of the verbal abuse that so many top riding coaches are known to dish out without blinking an eye, gave her a reputation for being strong and tough. Her soft approach to training her big, and somewhat bull-headed, horses let people see her kind and gentle heart. The ease with which she walked into a party, without makeup or fancy hair, and could befriend anyone around her showed a confidence that many adolescent girls could only wish they had. She was fit and naturally pretty, with long brown hair and a flirty smile.

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These traits, along with the drive of an athlete, allowed her to overcome many of life's challenges with little effort.

However, like most people, she had a side of herself that she hid from everyone. She was shy and insecure about who she was deep down. She was scared of a lot – of not being good enough, of failing her family, her coach, and even her horse. She was never afraid of being hurt or falling down, but her fear of not succeeding – and what others would think of her failure to succeed – held her back from pushing her talent to its fullest potential.

In between riding, school, and seeing her friends, she wrote. It was her way of letting out the side of her that no one else knew. She wrote about achieving dreams. She wrote about the injustices she saw in every day life. She wrote about the stories of love and loss, betrayal and angst that she imagined the strangers all around her went through. She wrote about feelings she knew nothing of and that she was too afraid to acknowledge within herself. Writing was her way of experiencing life in a different way. However, she never told anyone outside of her family about her aspirations of being a writer or how she could so easily lose herself in the fictional worlds she created. Once she grew up and started university, she kept that dream to herself because she realized that the reality of becoming an author was difficult and sprinkled with roadblocks. She found that when she did open up and talk about publishing a book and, maybe, one day winning a Pulitzer or some other prestigious recognition award, boys' eyes would often glaze over and girls would look for someone less "artsy" to talk to. So, instead, she kept these dreams close to her heart and talked to others about parties, boys, the latest music, and movies. They never knew that she liked to write stories about ending horse slaughter, seeing the signs of abuse in children and animals, and of seeking to understand people thinking of suicide. She had no first-hand experience with these things, but she wanted to help give a voice

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to those who did. It gave her strength and confidence to feel like she was doing something that mattered. However, because she stopped telling others about this side of her, people only saw a popular girl who loved to laugh, enjoyed a party, but never fell in love or took life too seriously.

Throughout undergrad, almost all of Kara's friends found "love" two, three, four times at least. Some even found the real thing. Kara never came close. An avid reader, Kara often found herself enthralled in fantasy worlds filled with adventure, love, seduction, and heartbreak. In real life, she never found a man who made her weak in the knees or forced her to let down her walls. She never felt that she could be entirely herself with any guy she met, so she could never really fall in love. She watched her friends find boyfriend after boyfriend and let themselves fall harder and harder each time, letting the guys into their hearts completely, only to pick themselves back up again and again when the relationships ended. Something deep within her prevented her from opening up and finding love the same way. She knew how to play the game, and she enjoyed the chase, but she never found anyone who challenged her to let down her walls, or cared enough about her to do so. Her façade was exhausting to hold up, so every relationship ended quickly with Kara too tired or too bored to fight for it to continue. So instead, she found love in her dreams and lived it through her stories, while enjoying her college years with countless nights of beer pong, hard-bodied athletes, and long nights of studying.

At 22 and at the end of a fun and academically-tiring four years, she landed herself a position in the graduate English program at San Diego State University.

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LIAM SUNDRY

Liam Sundry had always been a dude. When people asked him to describe himself, Liam always replied with a shrug and said, “I’m a dude.”

Growing up on the outskirts of Nashville, Tennessee, Liam had a lot of freedom at a young age. While his parents taught him right from wrong, and to always accept people despite their differences, they pretty much let him roam free and do what he wanted. Working in farmers’ fields during sticky hot summers, cooling off with beer that his friends’ older siblings had bought them, and fast rides in someone’s borrowed pick up, he figured himself a man long before other boys his age considered themselves teenagers. From the time he was 12, he always had a girl on his arm. He had an easy smile and natural charm that let him have two, three, and sometimes four girlfriends at a time without breaking a sweat. Earning the coveted spot as captain of the football team in high school only increased the number of girls who were eager to win his affections and, as he got older, he learned that it was easy to convince them that this was best done naked. He always had something, or someone, to do on a Friday night, but his boys always came first. They’d go out into a field somewhere to drink beer and shoot the cans, crank their country CDs up loud, and pack their lips full of Copenhagen Straight – a man’s dip.

Liam loved the gym, loved his dip, and loved his girls. That’s what he told people and it was true. But what he never told them was that he didn’t just love girls for their bodies, but for the way they laughed and how they smelled when he picked them up for a date. He didn’t tell people that sometimes he envied the way their hair blew in the hot summer wind. And those weren’t even his biggest secrets. There was one secret that Liam carried with him. One that he never planned to tell anyone because if he told someone then it would’ve been real, and he couldn’t accept that while continuing to live large

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the way he did. Eventually though, this was the secret that pushed him to the other side of the tracks.

Christian. The thought of him popped into Liam's head at the most inconvenient of times. As a young boy, Liam was best friends with Christian's younger brother. Because they lived just a few houses down from him, and Christian was old enough to watch Liam and his friend, Liam spent much of his spare time at their house. When Liam was over, Christian was always more than happy to babysit, and often sent his parents out to dinner so they he could be alone with them. However, shortly after the adults left, Christian would always ask Liam to help him with something in his room. For a long time, they just played together – cards, board games, action figures, or whatever else Christian had lying around. As a small fourth-grader, Liam was unprepared when Christian made an advance at him. Nervously, Liam did as he was told, even though felt wrong to touch Christian where he wanted, and it felt dirty to have Christian touch him where only he touched himself.

As time passed and Liam's friend circle grew and he saw his once best friend less and less. His parents believed he was old enough to take care of himself so they didn't care if he had a babysitter anymore, and he was never pressured to go visit. Instead, he spent much of his time with his football friends, his cousin Billy, or with girls. However, the memories of that night with Christian never left his mind. The more football he played, the bigger he got. And the older he got, the angrier he got. The combination made him into a great fighter so now when he came across Christian in the streets, Christian couldn't intimidate him like he used to.

As time went by, a darkness grew in Liam. He always liked the way girls' bodies felt under his big, rough hands. He liked the softness of their skin, the firmness of their breasts, the way he could cup their asses into his hands and lift them up. But some part of him never felt

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quite satisfied. At first, he tried hard to block out the feelings. He'd try to focus on whichever naked girl he had in front of him. At 16, Christian moved away and Liam started turning to drinking, smoking weed, and even doing cocaine to block out the memory, but nothing worked and he developed new, haunting thoughts that made him uncomfortable. He loved sex with girls. He didn't think he was gay – he didn't want to have sex with men or anything. But there was something that never felt complete in him with the way he was living his life. He started dating a coke-addicted high school dropout. His friends, who saw Liam less and less, nicknamed her Caligula and, more than occasionally, Liam called her that too. She was pretty, but had hit her prime early. However, Liam was content enough with her looks, and more pleased that she spread her legs for him any time and place that he wanted with no work on his part.

By 17, Liam had done more drugs than he'd ever planned on. His grades dropped, he lost touch with most of his friends, and he got kicked off of the football team. He got in fights almost daily over the smallest of offenses, but still stuck up for others he saw getting harassed. His parents began to urge him to reach out to Christian and his old friends, wanting him to break up with Caligula, but while Caligula was the gateway to his new world, Christian was the fire behind him, pushing him farther and farther into it.

After high school graduation and a little over three years of working, Liam knew it was time for a change. His old friends had given up their old ways and were either in college or training for their careers, but he knew those kinds of careers weren't for him. He knew he had to get away and make something of himself. He needed to respect himself, he needed a challenge, and he needed to be a *man*. So when he turned 21 he joined the Navy. He knew that being in the Navy would force him to give up drinking and drugs, as well as the lifestyle he was now accustomed to, and he both needed and wanted

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that. He needed to lack the time to relive the memories and reoccurring thoughts that he had been trying so hard to escape and he couldn't think of anything more meaningful than protecting his country. So he'd broken up with Caligula, trained hard, and joined up.

"I'm here to serve my country, sir. I'd like to become a Navy SEAL," he'd told the officer.

One year later, after going through basic naval training, he was in San Diego, California – the home of the Navy SEALs – and gearing up for Hell Week.

One

Stepping off the plane, Kara let the heat seep into her bones. Breathing in the new air, she felt the kind of excitement that only new beginnings could offer. In a jean skirt and white tank top, her long brown hair cascaded down her already tanned back in beach waves, held off her face by a pair of sunglasses. With the number of a pro-surfer from her flight tucked into her pocket, she felt the promise of an exciting new life.

She grabbed a cab to her new apartment, one that she'd found online – just close enough to campus that she could walk, but far enough that she didn't feel she'd be overwhelmed by campus events. She looked happily out the window, welcoming the warm air and hot sun on her face, and at the palm trees and sidewalks full of chiseled, tanned bodies running, skateboarding, and casually hanging out with friends. She couldn't wait to get to the beach to start making friends, but she first had to attend orientation.

Though she considered herself past undergraduate immaturity, she hadn't quite reached a Master's level of maturity where beach parties didn't outweigh the excitement of academia. Orientation was exactly the level of boring that Kara expected – meeting professors, listening to their areas of study, and an awkward mix-and-mingle event with all 12 students. It might have been more exciting if Kara

had seen anyone that looked like her or the kind of fun-loving, Bay Street-bound people she was used to. Back in Canada, Bay Street was the closest Kara could get to Wall Street and was where the majority of her friends from undergrad had found jobs. She enjoyed partaking in the extravagant parties that the future lawyers and investment bankers put on in their free time. She knew if she could find people like that in San Diego she'd click with them immediately, but there was no one like that at orientation. All of the other students looked to be sun-deprived and far too interested in the program director's area of study – war poetry. In her mind, war poetry was far too depressing to dwell on. Though she herself was a “book nerd” at heart and could become enthralled in her studies like the rest, she was used to portraying herself as a less-than-serious party girl, and wasn't quite ready to shed that shell. She hadn't told anyone, but she was incredibly nervous that all the socially awkward men and women with unkempt hair around her would see her as an imposter in their intellectually superior world. While intelligent, she'd partied harder than she'd studied throughout the past four years of undergrad, resulting in many of her early grades being lower than she'd ever experienced before going to university. To protect herself from academic embarrassment, she held onto her superficial mask and let herself act as though she'd prefer to spend her afternoon acquainting herself with the men of San Diego's beaches more than learning about the program.

Ducking out of the mix-and-mingle event before it even began, she bumped into a large chest smelling of Boss cologne and cigars.

“Woah, excuse me,” said the man in a deep Californian surfer drawl. “Leaving so soon?”

Kara looked up and saw the owner of the large chest. He was staring down at her, a goofy expression on his face. His actual appearance was slightly at odds with the height and solidity that his

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chest and voice had suggested. He was lean and soft, resembling an athlete who had been too busy with books and work to keep up with spending hours in the gym, but his skin still had the tan of an active outdoorsman and his warm smile gave the impression that he could burst into laughter at any moment. Catching a glimpse of his flip-flops and Margaritaville t-shirt, she liked him immediately. "Well, unfortunately, I just remembered that I have something to do. I just moved here, you see, so I have a ton of errands to run," she replied, fumbling over her excuse because she was a little embarrassed about her lack of interest in the program's opening event.

"Doesn't look like my scene either," he chuckled, a deep *huh-huh-huh* sound. "I'll head out with you."

As he turned and walked away, she didn't think he would be the man who she hoped would steal her heart in California, but she noticed that he had his own unique, and somewhat comforting, charm. He was gangly, all legs and arms, but he moved with purpose. His personality seemed to mimic the Golden Coast's signature surfer vibe, but there was also something a little bit different about him too. She followed him out of the building and, as they reached the sunny outdoors, he turned and grinned at her while he stopped his too-long arms from swinging in time with his legs by hooking each thumb into his pockets.

"You from Canada, then? I can tell by your accent. I love Canada. Great hockey, and great fries."

Kara laughed. "Yep, it's a great country. Long winters though. I can't wait to enjoy the sun and palm trees here." She looked at him with a slightly confused expression and asked, "Are you a hockey fan? I didn't expect to meet many of those down here."

“Ah, yes. I’m a big hockey fan. I used to spend summers, Thanksgiving, and Christmas vacations on my grandparents’ farm in the northeast, and they love hockey. They don’t like L.A. too much, so we always went to visit them. We went to Montreal once too and ate poutine – it was one of the most delicious meals of my life. I was a pretty young kid then, but I still remember.”

She started walking towards the parking lot but noticed that he made no move to follow. Instead, he grinned at her and asked, “Wanna get a beer? You must drink a lot of beer up there.”

“Sure,” she answered. Kara felt immediately comfortable around him and was eager to make a new friend. She loved country music, so she felt sure she’d like anyone who liked Jimmy Buffet enough to sport his t-shirt to the first day of school.

Sitting at a bar near campus, they chatted about home, her distaste for cold winters and his nostalgia for white Christmases, his love of hockey and her mere tolerance of the sport, and their shared excitement of living in the craft beer capital of the USA. His name was Michael, and he absolutely did not like being called Mike. He was easy going, loved to laugh, enjoyed sports, and was easy to feel comfortable around. He reminded her of her friends at home, only quirker and with a bit of West Coast chill. As they packed up to leave, Kara asked what his plans were for the evening, and had to work hard to stifle a giggle as he talked excitedly about the typewriter he had bought specifically for his move. He liked to write short stories and was working on a novel, and preferred to do it in the way that all the past greats had done.

“When I get home tonight, before we get too much school work, I’m going to pour a tumbler of scotch, light a candle, and channel Hemingway while I type. It’s a restored 1915 Underwood. Have you seen how beautiful those babies are? It looks and feels just like how I

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always imagined the machines the great American writers would have used," Michael gushed. His cheeks were blushing red, and his eyes were light with barely contained excitement and pride.

Kara laughed. "You talk about your typewriter like most guys talk about girls," she said with a toying grin. While she was mocking him, he intrigued her. He was athletic, confident, and artistic. He even admitted to having a geeky side. And, most interestingly, he was comfortable with it all. In fact, he seemed proud of it. They reached the parking lot and he offered her a ride home. He handed her the only helmet and asked, "Ever been on a bike?"

With her eyes as wide as a shocked schoolgirl and the slight shaking of her hands as she did up her helmet, the answer was easy for him to guess. "Just hold on tight and, please, lean into the turns," he winked before he took her arms and wrapped them around his waist.

Once at home and readying for bed, Kara thought about Michael working with a glass of scotch beside him, alone at home on a Friday night, writing furiously about something deep and intelligent. He'd talked of sports games and kegger parties, so she knew they shared the same kind of undergraduate experience, but he was different. She, too, liked to write and create characters to tell stories, but she always kept this to herself, like a dirty little secret. Michael, on the other hand, seemed to embrace it, which only made him more interesting.

Turning off her lights, she promised to try and let herself be unique too. *What better time or place to do it? New place, new me,* she thought to herself. *And, maybe, new love,* she added hopefully.

Kara

After orientation, I'm still worried about the program and proving that I'm smart enough to be here. But I'm not worried about

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meeting people to be friends with anymore. Grad school doesn't seem like high school, or even undergrad. My program seems to have people of all ages and from all over the country. Everyone has a different background with different experiences. I met one guy from L.A. who, aside from his surfer drawl, is a lot like me. He likes to have fun, drink beer, and go to parties, but he also likes to writes stories, watch old movies, and quote Hemingway.

It's scary as hell. I don't have horseback riding or my friends from horseback riding to fall back on. No one here has the same kind of drive for a corporate future that everyone I know back home does. Here, everyone is intellectual, a little bit geeky, and totally comfortable with it. I feel like the outsider. Going forward, I have to remember to be *me*. I have to accept them for being *them* too. I can feel it... This is where *my* story is going to start. I just hope I can let it.

Two

In Coronado, Liam Sundry was in celebration mode. After a week of no sleep, 132 hours of running, carrying logs, doing pushups, laying in the ocean with nothing but their noses showing, and pushing through the pain of exhausted and frozen muscles to race against each other in the military crawl races, Liam and his friends had graduated from Navy SEAL Hell Week.

On average, only about 25% of SEAL candidates make it through the five-and-a-half days of mental and physical testing with extreme sleep deprivation, which is intended to push each candidate past his limits and allow only those who have the determination and mental power to continue fighting into BUD/S SEAL training. Without any sleep, candidates are expected to perform under harsh conditions, in great physical pain, and while completely exhausted, with commanding officers constantly yelling harsh verbal abuse intended to degrade and test mental fortitude. “You worthless piece of shit! You’re doing those pushups like a fucking faggot!” rang in every candidate’s ears long after the week was finished. The honor of becoming a Navy SEAL is bestowed on only the most deserving applicants and is earned through extremely hard work, extreme toughness, and enormous amounts of sweat and pain. Hell Week is just the tip of the iceberg. It is designed to wean out all those who

want the honor but do not want to, or cannot, endure the pain required. Most of the young men that Liam had befriended during his time in the regular Navy didn't make it past the second or third day, but that didn't matter by the end of the week. He'd become much closer with those he had graduated with. They had become his brothers. He had two staph infections – one in his hip and one in his leg. His friend Jones had a broken arm, Matthews had a gash on his jaw, Stevens had a sprained ankle, and the rest of the men scattered around were nursing other injuries, aches, or pains. They had all gone to hell and back together, and survived.

After hot showers and medically supervised sleep (men had been known to be so sleep deprived that they'd attempt suicide during their first night of sleep in a week), Liam and his friends were now celebrating at a local Mexican restaurant with, what they believed to be, the best tacos in Coronado. They were comparing battle scars and downing beers and shots while often declaring to each other, "I'd take a bullet for you, man! And I'd never leave ya behind." With every round, these promises grew louder and louder so that any local passersby knew another Hell Week must have wrapped up.

Liam looked around him as he waited at the bar for another beer, which was, in Coronado tradition, on the house. He appreciated the beer and the congratulations that came with each new bottle. He'd earned it. They all had. Seeing his new friends laughing, drinking, and holding their hurt limbs out of the way of those stumbling past, he felt more content than he ever had in his life. He was consumed by it all, and that felt good. He wasn't the strongest or the most skilled fighter. Nor was he the smartest or the fastest. It was a mish-mash group of people who, he realized, likely wouldn't have been friends in other circumstances. There were men from Ivy League colleges and some with nothing more than a high school degree, like himself. There was an ex-professional fighter, a poet, and a tech-genius who taught

himself about technology and the digital world after leaving his Amish community. They were all different and they all had their pasts. But, the Hell Week experience and the dedication they all had to serving their country as Navy SEALs kept them together. He could see the same hungry need in their eyes that he had in his. As they had stood waist-deep in the ocean with wet sand that had infiltrated their uniforms chaffing their private parts and the cold ocean whipping around them in the darkness of 3am, he'd seen what separated those standing around him now from those who had walked out of the ocean, quit, and gone home to dry beds and loving wives with soft touches. All that any of them had wanted to do was leave – walk out of the ocean and return to their quarters to dry off, warm up, and shut their eyes like so many of the other Hell Week candidates had. However, no matter how much pain they felt or how severe their exhaustion was, no one with him in this bar had quit. Liam could see his own blind and stubborn determination reflected in their eyes. For the men at this bar, there was no other option than to make it through. There was no other option but to succeed.

Thinking back to the pain he had tried so hard to block out, he remembered his leg with the staph infection and all the times that his throat and chest had tightened up and cut off his airflow for some unknown cause – a new allergy, exhaustion, pain, or all three. When he remembered how he had to fight through the threat of blackness that encroached on his normally perfect vision, he was proud. He would not let anything stand in the way of him becoming a Navy SEAL. He told himself that his body would just have to learn to adapt. He fought hard to continue running and swimming and crawling without any of the training officers seeing him struggle. He knew others had done the same and that it was possible to overcome any obstacle. He was fairly certain the ex-fighter had faced a similar challenge because he had seen in him the same flash of fear that he'd felt before his gaze hardened with determination on several occasions.

These are my people, he thought. I've finally found my people. He looked around at all the tired yet determined faces and he felt safe for the first time in a very long time. With them, with this job, I can move forward. I am a man. Only a real man can be a part of BUD/S and become a Navy SEAL. He smiled to himself as he sipped his beer. I can finally move forward, he thought.

As the night went on and the sun went down, his comrades started taking out their cell phones to call their girlfriends, wives, or just any girl with a warm bed and open legs. He didn't have any of those. His ex, who he still thought of as Caligula, had sent him numerous texts during Hell Week and he could probably have had Skype sex with her, but he didn't want that. He was happy leaving her at home. He was becoming a new man, a better man, without her. There was always the option of one of the frog hogs that followed the SEALs around town, he could have had any of them easily, but he didn't want that either. He wanted a real woman now. He wanted someone he'd have a future with. He wanted a girl that a soon-to-be United States Navy SEAL deserved.

So, instead of calling anyone, Liam finished his beer, slapped a few of his buddies on the shoulders as a goodbye, and went back to his barracks alone to enjoy another long, uninterrupted, and dreamless sleep. This was the kind of peaceful sleep that only Hell Week and starting on the Navy SEAL career path had brought him.

Liam

My calf throbs. I can feel the bandage start to get wet with blood, and maybe more puss. It hurts, but the pain just reminds me of what I've survived, like a badge of honor. It makes me proud. After Hell Week ended, the Navy assigned a nurse to each of us who was supposed to check us over, ensure that we made it to our appointment

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with the base doctor, and then look after us overnight to make sure we didn't try and kill ourselves in our sleep. Apparently that happens sometimes.

My nurse found two staph infections - one on my hip and one on my ass. Each was a lump the size of a golf ball, filled with blood, puss, and sand. I had sand everywhere. I can still feel the grains between my teeth, even though I've brushed them 20 times since. And it's still in my eyes. The grains scrape my eyeballs every time I blink. It's fucking annoying but I can't get it all out. The damn sand made my infections gooey so the nurse had to squeeze all the shit out of me. The staph infection on my leg, though, was missed. I should have been mad. My friends from home told me so anyway. After all I had been put through, they said, the nurse should have at least done her job right. I didn't see it that way. I took care of it myself, with the brand new knife I earned by graduating Hell Week, and it was nothing compared to what I had gone through that week. Plus, it gave me a reason to christen my knife. I couldn't have thought of a more fitting way to do so either. It's a badass knife - big, serrated, and can cut through anything. With just a slip of my hand, I could have cut through my calf muscle. But I didn't. My hand was perfectly steady and I didn't even have a drink before doing it. I just poured some alcohol on the blade and cut away at the thick, black scab on the underside of my calf. Then I carved out what looked like a small serving of cottage cheese, bandaged it up, and went out drinking. It was nothing, really. I'll be doing crazier shit in the field. Plus, it isn't the kind of thing a woman would do, is it?

Everyone seems to have a scar coming from this week. Jones has a broken arm; Matthews has a gash on his jaw that's still swollen from impact or infection, I'm not sure which; Stevens has a busted ankle that he's been using to get sympathy from the frog hogs; and Gonzales' shoulder is hanging at an odd angle. Everyone's knuckles and elbows are bright red - raw from the chafing of ocean water and wet sand. Hallows, who was tyke-sized for what he'd managed to do this week, was holding his shirt off his chest the whole night at the bar. His nipples must be worse than mine. The mixture of sand and sweat is a lethal combination for those little patches of sensitive skin. Gonzales actually whispered to me that he had put bandages on his - SpongeBob Square Pants, to be exact. His five-year-old nephew had given them to him before starting Hell Week. He'd wondered whether this would help or hurt his game with whichever girl he went home with tonight.

Three

At SDSU, Kara was sitting in her first class of graduate school. Her professor was an older man with wild grey eyebrows and earnest eyes that made her think of a very approachable, yet very mad, scientist. She read his profile on the school website before coming to class and had been intimidated. He was a very smart man and seemed to be one of the most respected academics in the field. She refreshed her mind by re-reading all of her old notes from her undergrad classes, but her stomach still knotted when she saw the 30% next to “class participation” on the marking rubric. Even with her newfound goal to find comfort in her own academic skin, she was still terrified of not measuring up to her peers.

As always, she answered nerves with ditzzy-sounding humor. When it came to be her turn to tell the class who she was and why she’d wanted to join this particular program, she said, “Hi everyone, I’m Kara. I’m from Toronto, Canada. I used to compete in horseback riding. I love to make up stories and write them down, I have degrees in English and Philosophy, and writing is present in all three. I joined this program for several reasons, with the most important being the men. I’ve always had a thing for California guys...” While she grinned jokingly with her last remark, she was scolding herself internally for

not stepping up to the serious nature of Master's programs. She didn't want the class to think she was a ditz.

Thankfully, the class seemed to take her comment for what she had intended – a joke.

“Well, that might have been the most honest answer of today,” said the professor, blinking his eyes a few times under his bushy brows and looking somewhat perplexed. She scolded herself for falling back into her old ways.

Kara breathed a sigh of relief when the class moved on.

The girl next to her leaned over and whispered, “If you like Cali guys, you are really going to love Coronado. It's where all the SEALs are. We'll go this weekend and try to catch them on their run down the beach – it's fantastic,” she breathed, a little too hard. She wrote down her name, thankfully, because Kara hadn't paid attention to her introduction to the class.

Franceen: (619) 555-2943

Kara eyed her up and down sideways. She was short and stocky, with arm muscles that could intimidate many men, but she had a cross around her neck and a friendly smile, so Kara figured a day out with her might be fun. Kara had never subscribed to the military fantasy that so many women, particularly those she'd met in the USA, seemed to share, but she figured it would be fun to go out and test out the San Diego nightlife.

* * *

That weekend, Kara and Franceen got ready together at Kara's apartment. Franceen lived on campus and shared an already small room with a fairly antisocial undergrad. They'd recruited a few other

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girls from the program to come, as well as Michael, who was likely to become the English program's token male.

Franceen had a thing for Michael, Kara was sure. She always acted schoolgirl-silly around him – twirling her hair, batting her eyelashes, and giggling at all his jokes. He was too good, too cool, for her, Kara thought, but he seemed to lap the attention up like a kitten with warm milk. He never reciprocated, just smiled his goofy grin and watched her.

They were going out to Pacific Beach. They had tanned on the beach in Coronado during the day in hopes that they would see the SEALs on their morning run but had missed them. A girl in the second year of the program, Tiffany, was more into chasing men than Kara had accidentally let herself seem. In fact, she was what Kara would later learn was called a “frog hog,” or a SEAL-chaser. Tiffany told them that Blake's Tavern in Pacific Beach was the place to go if they wanted to actually meet the SEALs or SEAL candidates, or any other Special Forces trainees. Of course, they'd have to deal with a large number of drunk and skimpily clad college girls who had the same idea, Tiffany said. But, as they readied, the girls realized that Tiffany was actually one of those girls in the barely-there dresses that squeezed their tiny figures into voluptuous curves and caught the attention of most men.

For her first night out in San Diego, Kara chose a short pair of cutoff jean shorts and a simple white strapless top that, when paired with flip-flops, looked more beach-ready than bar-ready. She left her face bare of makeup except for a little bit of mascara and kept her hair salty and wavy from the beach. She was tired and fairly certain that the likelihood of her meeting someone worthwhile at this kind of bar with these kinds of girls was very low. So, she spared herself the hard work of primping and sat quietly with her drink while the other girls got ready.

Franceen wore ripped jeans with a one-shoulder white tank that accentuated her arm muscles more than Kara would have allowed for herself, but tried to soften the look with plenty of makeup and big Texas-style hair. Talia, a highly sarcastic tattoo model with a part-time job working with disabled children, a lover of poetry, and the top student in the second-year class, wore a simple cotton dress. She spent most of the time the other girls used to get ready to joke, in detail, about all the things she'd like to do to one of the chiseled "SEAL babies," as she liked to call the candidates. Kara liked her.

In the middle of one particularly steamy X-rated description, Franceen turned the music down and asked all the girls to put down their drinks. She checked the door quickly to ensure that Michael was still in the pool area chatting with some other tenants who were having a BBQ party. Her face was serious, and a little embarrassed, when she turned back to the girls. "I need to tell you all something. I think it's important that you know because, well, I need to know how to play the Michael situation."

The girls all waited, unsure whether to be concerned or annoyed with the interruption.

"I'm a little inexperienced with men... And by that, I mean that I haven't really dated much so I don't know what to do now." Franceen let her words sink in for a few moments before beginning again. The other girls were fighting the urge to look at one another in confusion, not understanding what they were supposed to do with this information. "You've all probably guessed that I like Michael, and I can tell he really likes me too. And then he said to me today, 'Maybe you can even stay over tonight.' Which would be great, I want to wake up in his arms. But, the way he looked me up and down while he said it suggests he doesn't want to just sleep. And I don't know how to tell him that I'm 28 and still new to the dating game."

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Her question was met with silence. No one knew exactly what response was expected or needed.

“Do you have to tell him? If you do, I guess you could tell him that you don’t date unless you see the guy as marriage material?” offered Kara.

“No, that puts way too much pressure on him,” refuted Tiffany.

“Why don’t you just not tell him?” asked Talia. “It isn’t really his business who or what you’ve done before. He probably doesn’t care.”

“You could just take it slow and hang out as friends first?” Kara suggested.

Franceen looked embarrassed. “Well, I may have slipped him a very suggestive note.”

“How suggestive...?” asked Tiffany.

“Well, I may have detailed everything I wanted to do to him and everything I wanted him to do to me...” said Franceen, her cheeks blushing red. “And, no, I don’t normally do this type of thing, but I wanted him to think that I’m sexy and experienced so I Googled and found some very *50 Shades of Grey*-type notes and copied them. I’m pretty confident I can fool him if I keep reading, but I can’t learn enough in time to embody those things tonight.”

No one really knew how to respond, or what kind of response she needed. Finally, Talia broke the silence and said, “Well, if you want him, you’re just going to have to go for it. Don’t let him think you’re something you’re not. Just go with the flow. He seems like a good guy.” With that, Talia turned the music back on and continued to paint her nails.

Franceen still looked uncertain and, despite that Kara thought Franceen might be a little too immature to become a close friend, she said, "Hey, if tonight isn't the night for whatever reason, you can always sleep on my futon and we'll go for brunch in the morning. We can rehash the night over some pancakes and bacon."

It wasn't long before the girls, with Michael in tow, were at Blake's Tavern, a casual pub only steps from the beach. There were so many hard bodies and drunk college girls crammed into the space that the group considered turning back and trying a different bar. But Talia pushed through the crowd towards the back of the bar. She was letting no one stand between her and the breathing room that the only vacant table in the whole place could provide. Once they reached the back they all folded into a tiny booth, with Michael cushioned between the wall and Franceen – it was clear she was letting no one else near him.

Before sitting down, Kara looked around and saw a group of young, very well-muscled men near the bar. She grabbed Tiffany's hand and stopped her from grinding on a young boy who looked no older than 18, and headed for the bar. "Military," Kara said, glancing quickly in the direction of the men she had spotted.

Tiffany looked over and, apparently, liked what she saw. She quickly fixed her dress, pulled out her lip-gloss, and strutted to the bar. Tossing her hair as she reached the closest man, she asked him if he'd like to buy her a drink. That would be the last time that Kara saw her before they left the bar for the night. Normally, Kara would've been a bit annoyed that her friend had left her so quickly, but someone in the corner had caught her eye.

A young military man with a shaved head and bulging arm muscles was sitting on a stool with his back to the bar while talking with friends. As he was laughing at something one of his friends had said, he turned his head and glanced around the bar. That's when

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Kara spotted him. For years after this moment the two would disagree over how they met. Kara would insist that the world stopped turning, everything but his face blurred, and that their eyes connected – sealing their fate. She wouldn't remember what he was wearing or who he was talking to, but she would remember having the strongest need to go right up to him. And she did. She walked up to him, extended her hand, and said, "Hi, I'm Kara" with her most flirtatious smile. However, in all later discussions, Liam would remember making the first move. He'd remember seeing her talking to a friend of his and being envious that he hadn't gotten to her first. He'd remember watching her laugh and thinking that her smile was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen. He'd also remember how he'd been admiring her body and imagining how soft her skin would be. He had wanted to see her long brown hair all messed up, her makeup smudged, with nothing but a smile on as the morning sun shone in the window. With all that, he decided to walk right up to her, cut his friend off, and tell her that she was the most beautiful girl in the bar. Whichever version was true, from that point on Kara and Liam were an item.

After a night of too many shots, dancing, and exchanging life stories, last call arrived and the group started to search for a taxi. Although Kara never invited him back to her apartment, Liam started to look for a cab with them. Though unsure if she liked his confidence, Kara wasn't ready to let him go so she held onto his hand – rough, weathered, and strong. She had thought he might've been cocky and dumb, judging by his bulging muscles, tattoos, and an intimidatingly bald head, but he wasn't. He was witty, kind, and only borderline cocky. She suspected his confidence is what made him able to do his job, rather than a result of his job. Michael and Franceen were also coupled off, holding hands and whispering in each other's ears. Because they couldn't all fit into one cab, the four of them shared one while Talia and Tiffany took another. Michael's house was the first stop. When he climbed out alone, Kara looked at Franceen quizzically.

“His roommates ended up coming home early,” she explained.
“So I’m coming to your place.”

Kara’s eyes widened in surprise as she looked at Liam, who was sitting next to her with his hand on her thigh, when she realized that both he and Franceen might be expecting to stay the night at her place.

“It’s okay, darlin’. I was just coming along for the ride. I want to take you out on a proper date before I even think about inviting myself over.”

Michael was still standing outside the car, leaning in the window to whisper his drunk goodbyes to Franceen when Liam interrupted and said, “Hey man, how about we take these girls both on proper dates tomorrow? We could go for a few margaritas and some dinner in Old Town.”

Michael considered for a moment. “Sure, that sounds good. Does 7pm work for all of you?”

With that, their date was set. Liam stayed in the cab all the way to Kara’s, kissed her goodnight, and went back to base. As she readied for bed, Franceen chattered on and on about everything that Michael had said to her, overanalyzing every detail. She digressed quickly, and was soon examining every piece of evidence she had, real or imagined, that said Michael liked her, reveling in the fact that she’d found a man. However, Kara wasn’t listening. All she could think about was Liam. She’d never really understood the military fantasy, but now she did. Liam was smart, funny, incredibly fit, tough, intelligent, and incredibly brave for being willing to put his life in danger as a soldier. There was much more to his bravery though, and Kara would often witness this characteristic in play in all areas of his life, with her admiration growing each time.

Liam

I'm going to marry that girl. I thought it yesterday in the cab as I rode back to base and I know it now after taking her out on a proper dinner date. She's got something special - a spark or something. Something in her literally shines when she laughs. Everyone else sees it too, I can tell. As she walked back from the bathroom, I watched every man's head turn. I don't even think she noticed. She just kept her eyes on me or down at the ground pretending she was trying not to trip over the chairs. All throughout dinner, I just kept getting lost in her eyes. I couldn't stop my hands from running up her thigh, just to see her eyes widen a little every time. She'd try hard not to blush and to act unaffected, but she couldn't help herself. She'd stutter and get all tongue-tied. She comes across as so confident and outgoing, so I really like that I can shake her up a little bit. It's cute. You can tell that she's classy, too, by the way she talks and how she wouldn't let me make out with her at the table. She wanted to, it was pretty obvious in the way she looked at me, but she wouldn't. So, it was really unexpected when she asked me back to her place so that we could hang out in the hot tub. I actually jumped at the chance. As soon as she said, "Want to come back to my place?" I was on my feet.

I would have been fine to wait. Most girls like her would have made me work for it. But I guess she really liked me, too. What I really couldn't believe was when her friend Franceen added, "The hot tub sounds like a great idea. Michael and I would love to come too." I didn't want her to ruin our first night together. She talks too much and even

though she's short, she has huge arm muscles that I couldn't imagine looking good in a bikini. Over dinner, she kept slapping me on the shoulder like a bro and I could just feel myself cringing. Between her constant chatter and the way she treats me like a buddy instead of a friend's boyfriend (or date), I feel less like a man around her, and I need to be all man for Kara. In the end, I decided to only look at Kara and to pretend no one else was sitting in the hot tub, and it worked just fine.

Kara straddled me, kissing my lips, my neck, whispering things in my ear. Sexy things. Because of the steam from the hot tub it easy to pretend we were the only ones there. Eventually, she told me she wanted to go upstairs. I couldn't wait to get to her room because I didn't want her to rethink her decision. So, I carried her there. We stayed locked up in her room all night, entirely forgetting about the other two. In the morning, while she slept, I went to her kitchen to make breakfast. I was naked because I'd forgotten that we weren't alone and I'd been hoping for a naked breakfast with her in bed, but then I saw Franceen and Michael tangled in some sheets on Kara's futon. I didn't want to cook with them sleeping there. So, instead, I grabbed a box of granola bars that was left on the counter and a magnet from her fridge that was shaped like a Hawaiian flower and returned to the room. I had to make do with the circumstances, and I hoped that she'd find the gesture sweet.

Kara

He opened doors for me, paid the check, and never took his eyes off of me. He asked me all about myself, my friends and

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family, my studies, and he actually listened. He was a gentleman, mostly. But I kind of liked that he was confident and cocky enough to be sliding his hand up my thigh and was wanting to make out with me throughout dinner, all the while looking at me with a boyish grin. He'd lean in for a kiss and I would have to push him back, reminding him that we were at dinner. He'd just wink and say, "Just a little make out real quick. No one will see." That made me laugh.

I like him. I like him a lot. I'm still getting used to his bald head and the fact that he perpetually has a fat wad of dip in his bottom lip, but this feels real. While we were out, he'd taken the time to get to know Michael and Franceen enough so that it was a comfortable double date, but he never made me doubt that he was there for me, and only me. Even when the waitress blatantly hit on him, he made me feel special. She never asked for *my* order or if I needed a refill. Liam always had to remind her. She also had a way of showing up exactly when he'd try to kiss me. Normally, I probably would have been a little jealous, or at least annoyed. But he handled it so well, never letting anyone doubt that he was interested in only me, which made me feel *more* confident. After hanging out with him, I felt so sexy that the words just slipped out, surprising even me, "*Want to come back to my place?*" I was so nervous. I felt so innocent and unsure. I hoped he couldn't tell, but I knew that he could. As soon as I uttered those seven words he hopped to his feet and called for our waitress, even though Michael and Franceen were still working on their drinks.

"Can I get you anything else, sir?" the waitress asked, leaning in to let her chest look him right in the eyes.

"Just the bill, please. Unless my girl wants some dessert?" He looked at me questioningly. I shook my head and let my hand rest on his thigh.

"Just the bill," he told her.

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She kept at it. "Are you sure there's nothing I can get for you? Another drink?"

"Nope. I want to get going. I'm going to take this girl home," he said, looking at me with a big, boyish grin.

The waitress sighed with annoyance but finally gave in and brought us the bill. After looking at it quickly, Liam chuckled.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Well, she only charged us for your dinner, for starters."

I looked at the bill. He was right. Only my drinks and my meal were listed. That wasn't all. She'd also written her name – Carli – with a heart and what I could only presume was her phone number. I read it aloud to him in a tone that clearly mocked her, but felt a little uneasy. I mean, he was obviously on a date with me. Who did she think she was? Liam didn't let me dwell for too long, though. He just said, "That's frog hogs for ya darlin'." Then he put down the cash, left the receipt, and we walked out of the restaurant with his arm around me, jingling the keys to his Chevy truck happily in his hand.

The rest of the night was perfect. It didn't even matter that my white guest sheets were in dire need of a wash or that Franceen and Michael didn't leave my living room until 1pm the next day. Liam brought me breakfast in bed. Granted, it was a box of granola bars that I'd bought the day before. Given the situation, though, I couldn't blame him. And, he brought me a "flower" as well, after waking me with a kiss. We just spent all morning in bed. A part of me wanted him to leave, and I told him so. I felt cramped with everyone staying in my apartment for so long. He just grinned easily at me, ignoring my comment, and asked me more questions about myself. Eventually, I didn't want him to leave anymore.

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We laughed, we napped, and we ate. I wasn't able to stop looking at him. He might be the hottest guy I've ever seen. There's just something about him, and something about the way he calls me "darlin'" or "baby" that makes my stomach flutter. I traced over his scars with my finger and he told me about his crazy childhood antics, and of the hell he endured during training. In return, he traced my scars and I told him of my years as a competitive equestrian and my many falls.

This is something different. Being with him... It's just different. It's better. It's easier. And those butterflies everyone always talks about? They haven't stopped. I'm pretty excited to see where this relationship takes me.

Four

After their first date, Liam and Kara spent all of their spare time together. Liam called her every day on lunch. He went over to her apartment every weekend and spare weeknight. He listened to her. He found that he genuinely cared about her and his secret felt lighter the closer he felt to her. The shy part of Kara faded as Liam's predictability grew. He never failed to call. He never failed to make her feel wanted. Regardless of how many hours his commanding officers made him run, no matter how many dives he had to go on, no matter how many miles he had to swim in the cold Pacific Ocean, he never let her feel neglected. Any spare moment he had, he texted. He called. He told her that he was putting her first, and then he did.

Not long after, Kara and Liam were a package deal. She went to every BUD/S party in Pacific Beach and he accompanied her to every academic event that he could. She went and drank Bud Light with young, blonde co-eds who fawned over each BUD/S candidate in Liam's class, Liam included. Yet, Kara always watched with satisfaction as he ignored their advances and, instead, found her wherever she might be in the room. And she got to know his friends who, to her surprise, were so much more than just muscle. He got to know everyone in her graduate program. He became friends with them. He discussed ideas and debated with them. He showed each of

her classmates that he wasn't going to be satisfied with the SEAL stereotype of an ignorant playboy and, instead, that he was intelligent, interesting, and entirely devoted to Kara. He knew what they expected of him as a young, attractive, soon-to-be Navy SEAL, and he did everything he needed to in order to prove them wrong. Kara dreaded the nights he had to spend away for training or watch duty. She wanted his arms around her every night and wanted to wake up to him every morning. He felt the same. His hard, small bed in the barracks couldn't live up to being entwined with Kara. It wasn't all about comfort either. They both actually feared the nights that had to be spent apart. Kara's picturesque apartment complex, with manicured lawns and palm trees surrounding a large pool area, was also home to several rougher characters that had taken a particular disliking to her, the only Canadian there, and harassed her whenever Liam's truck wasn't in the parking lot.

Liam had always suffered from vivid nightmares containing some of his deepest fears and had always thought that they would vanish when he found the right girl. For him, Kara was the right girl. However, his nightmares didn't vanish. They had actually grown to be worse. He saw himself not only with long hair, but also in dresses and high heels. His nightmares were worst when he was alone and surrounded by the ultra-masculine, and often right wing-minded, men that lived with him in the barracks sanctioned for those in BUD/S. When he woke up and saw Kara's naked body covered only by a thin sheet next to his, he was able to dismiss his dreams as nothing but nightmares. When he felt turned on at the sight of her, when he felt his love for her swell in his heart, he could push those feelings down deep inside him. However, when he woke up in the dark next to men he could never really talk to, or trust with this secret, buried fears, the feelings only became more and more real and weighed heavily on his chest long into the following day and night. So, both Liam and Kara struggled through the nights until they could be together again.

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One particularly sleepless week, Kara's friends encouraged her to tell Liam about the harassment she was receiving from her neighbors. Never wanting to appear at all weak or unable to take care of herself, especially to someone she considered to be so brave and self-sufficient, Kara had been hiding the situation from him.

"Why don't you just tell him?" an exasperated Franceen asked one day after gushing to Kara about Michael as they lay on the Coronado beach, only to find Kara half-asleep with her sunglasses on.

Kara just groaned.

"You know he'd find a way to fix it," Talia pushed. "He'd take care of it. For God's sakes, you're a zombie these days." She poked Kara to make sure that she was still listening. "And you won't let us come out with paintball guns to scare them off, so this is pretty much your only option left."

Since arriving in San Diego, Kara had learned that there were several individuals in her apartment complex who, she could only assume, didn't care for Canadians and that had taken to staring at her for too long as she passed by. Additionally, her car had been vandalized several times each week – soda, urine, paint, and an unknown paste often coated her car in the mornings. Somehow, they had also figured out which apartment number was hers. She was woken up at all hours of the night by threats being shouted at her and loud bangs on her walls. Sometimes, she could hear their voices float up from the courtyard into her open window and would be privy to their discussions filled with their distaste for Canadians but how they would be willing to make exceptions for her "sexy" body.

Kara giggled. "I'm fine. It's fine. They'll get bored of picking on me soon. Liam's got enough on his plate right now. It's all he can do to stay awake for our dates. He's so tired and stressed from training, plus

he's got his second phase test coming up, I don't want to be added to that list," Kara replied. "It's the hardest test, he says. People have actually been seriously injured during it. Plus, the guy at the car wash is giving me free candies now. He says he's never seen someone wash so much urine and graffiti off of one car, so there are perks to this situation," she joked tiredly.

"Ha, well, at least there's an upside." Franceen looked serious for a moment and then added, "You should tell him. He's your boyfriend. It's his job to look after you. Don't you think he's going to start wondering why you look like you're pulling all-nighters every night?"

"I'm a grad student. What else would he expect from me?" Kara just smiled and turned over, signaling the end of the conversation. She knew she should tell Liam and that he would somehow fix it. But she didn't want him to feel like he had to take care of her. She'd ridden horses with men more foul-mouthed and less sympathetic than many sailors; had ridden through broken bones and torn ligaments; and had always faced her fears without telling a soul what she was afraid of, and she was proud of that. So instead, she decided to put off telling Liam and vowed to finally go to the Muay Thai gym near her yoga studio to sign up for some lessons and to ask the coach for some specific self-defense tips.

Unfortunately, later that evening she found she had little choice but to tell Liam what was going on. She planned to go to bed early and, to help, she had some hops tea that a hippy herbalist in Ocean Beach had strongly recommended for relaxation and sleep. With the hope that she could finally sleep through even the loudest banging, she put earplugs in and wore a headband over top for added sound protection. At around 1:30am, she was sadly disappointed when she was woken up by the loud, thundering banging she had grown so accustomed to hearing and that still made her hide under her blankets like a child. She pulled the covers up to her chin and waited for it to

stop. She heard some yelling so she took out her earplugs to see what they were saying tonight. Lately, they'd really taken to calling her a communist or a socialist, which she assumed resulted from the Canadian license plates on her car, and very detailed descriptions of all the sexual things they could, and would, do to her if they ever caught her alone. She didn't know if they actually hated Canada or if her license plate had singled her out, making her an easier target because she wasn't from San Diego. Either way, she was growing weary of them making her life hell. However, when she took out her earplugs, she didn't hear the same hate-filled yells that she was expecting. Instead she heard Liam calling her name.

She jumped quickly out of bed, slightly regretting her choice of pajamas and her decision to opt out of a shower that night. She hadn't expected to see him until the weekend and it was only Wednesday. He had 20-hour workdays scheduled for the entire week, so he'd planned to stay overnight in the barracks. She opened the door and he picked her up, still in his crisp, rough camouflage uniform. He kissed her lips as he spun her around, letting himself into the apartment.

"Hey baby, surprised?" He grinned at her.

"What are you doing here? I thought you had work!" giggled Kara as he kissed her again and tickled her cheek with his fresh stubble.

"I do. I've only got about an hour before I have to head back, but I couldn't go an entire week without seeing you, darlin'." He searched her eyes, hoping he'd see that she felt the same. He didn't add that he couldn't go another night surrounded by the other men with no one to clear his mind. No one else in the program seemed to have another side, a softer side, which needed to be hidden. The men in BUD/S were strong, driven, and simple. Even the few with artistic hobbies, like the youngest guy in the group that wrote poetry, never seemed to be ashamed of their softer sides. He never saw any of them show

anything similar to the shame he felt for his secrets. But, then again, his secrets were a little harder to confess.

“Perfect. You must be wanting to get to bed, then,” she said coyly, as she pulled him towards her room by his belt.

Liam laughed. “Girl! I’m exhausted. If I go to sleep now, I won’t get up until tomorrow night. I was thinking more of a date, like frozen yogurt. There’s a place open across the street.”

Before she could protest, he gave her one of his sweatshirts that he’d brought in from his truck and pulled her out the door.

They ate their frozen yogurt sitting on the curb outside of the store. They were the only customers of the only store open in the plaza, so the parking lot was dark and abandoned. It was quiet except for the shouts of drunks from a pub across the street and neither spoke much. Kara was tired and drained, and finally felt relaxed now that Liam was beside her. She loved his salty smell, which was probably a mix of sweat and ocean water, and how solid he felt against her. She felt so safe tucked under his arm that her eyes began to close as she ate. Liam was mentally and physically exhausted and barely felt connected to his body anymore. Between the lack of sleep, the unforgiving workouts, and his nightmares, he could do little more than put his arm around Kara and take a few moments of comfort in her nearness. Though neither said it aloud, both thought, *I wish we could just stay in this moment forever.*

As they arrived back at her apartment building, Liam insisted on walking Kara back to her room before driving to the base. That suited Kara because she wasn’t ready to let go of his hand yet. As they turned down her hallway, they were met with loud shouts and bangs. Liam tensed and muttered, “What the hell?” But Kara knew exactly what was happening.

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As they reached her door, they could see the source of the noise quite clearly. They were very obviously new recruits into the military; they still had tan lines from their new crew cuts and could not have been over 22 years old. Kara noticed with gratitude and pride that Liam had put himself casually between her and the two men, but still hadn't let go of her hand.

"Hey fellas, how can we help y'all?" Liam asked in a friendly tone. He didn't sound threatening, but Kara could feel the warning in his voice. The two boys eyed him up and down but didn't say anything. "Y'all got the right apartment?" Liam asked.

Again, he was met with a few moments of silence as the two boys, obviously drunk, stared back at him, assessing their options. Liam just looked at them levelly until one answered, "Yeah, course we do. That girl you're bangin' there, she's a fuckin' Canadian slut! Don't ya know? She's been askin' fer it. We were jus' takin' her up on what she's been offerin'."

Liam just looked at him, expressionless.

"C'mon, man. Ya know. You's sleepin' with her, which is fine. She's hot. But you should know that she runs around more than half naked when yer not here. She puts on them little shorts and goes runnin' all around the area here, gettin' sweaty, and then she goes to stretch and do her yoga by the water. All she's got on top is a little sports bra. Now, come on, that's jus' askin' fer attention. But when we whistle or call out to her, she just ignores us or shoots us a dirty look. She's a fuckin' Canadian slut and a snob. That bitch gotta learn some manners. You how how it is with these girls."

"No, actually, I don't know *how it is*. This is my girl, my little Canadian, and this is our apartment. I don't care what she wears to work out. It's hot here. But I know she's definitely not trying to invite

you for anything. It ain't even an invite to me when I work out with her. It's what she wants to wear and it's what she's comfortable in. That's her right. There ain't anything this girl can do that would give you any right to any part of her. And hell, if all she shot you was a dirty look for harassing her like you do, you boys got off easy. If you ever even so much as utter the words 'she owes me' or look at her with anything other than complete respect again, I'll be sending a hell of a lot more than just a dirty look your way." Liam's body was tensed, his muscles were visible, and his eyes were dark, but his tone was calm and firm, leaving little room for rebuttal.

The two boys eyed him carefully, assessing the situation they'd gotten into. While there was two of them, Liam's expression was ominous and daring. Kara watched carefully, nervous of a fight. She knew that in Southern California everyone seemed to be able to guess which branch of military a person was in based on haircut, build, and demeanor. These boys were new to the military, and drunk, but Liam had the no nonsense confidence and muscled build of a Navy SEAL, and she knew few would willingly get into an altercation with one of them.

After about a minute of Liam calmly letting the boys size him up, he said, "Alright. Why don't y'all let us enjoy the rest of our night and be on your way."

Finally, the chatty one ended their conversation. "Uh, yeah, wrong apartment. Sorry 'bout that. Y'all have a good night." The two walked off quickly down the hall, throwing quick glances at Liam over their shoulders.

Liam turned to Kara with concern in his eyes. "Babe, are you okay? Does that happen a lot?" He pulled her close to him and hugged her, kissing the top of her head.

“Not anymore,” she replied with a grateful smile into his chest.

From that point on, she completely dropped her guard with him. She’d never felt safer and she didn’t feel the need to protect herself anymore – from letting him see her weaknesses or from anyone else. Liam always seemed to be there. Whether they were leaving a bar with friends and some drunk frat boys decided to grope her, some young army men wanted to show off their strength by tossing her between a group of them while pulling at her clothes, or when she was nervous about walking through a bad part of town, Liam was always there and handled it. Soon, she felt like she walked in a bubble. The moment she felt something might be off about a situation, Liam seemed to appear at her side and, all of a sudden, drunken idiots and thugs treated her with nothing but indifference. Kara started to see Liam in a whole new light. She started to love his bald head, boulder-like shoulders, and the tattooed bald eagle that decorated his forearm. She loved dating a soon-to-be Navy SEAL and was proud to be the girl on his arm.

Liam noticed all of the changes with Kara. She had opened up to him and she seemed freer and more comfortable. He could see the change in the way she looked at him. He felt it in him too. Trust. He’d never felt that with another girl. He’d been cheated on and had games played with him. He’d just learned to date without even thinking about trust. But, with her, he realized the difference. Looking into her eyes, she made him feel like the only man in the world, and he liked that. So he refused to let anything happen to her. It didn’t matter if they were out together or if he was with friends miles away, if he felt that she might need him or want him beside her, he went to her.

They continued this way for months. Liam knew he was in love with her. He had known he would be from the first time he met her, but Kara had never been in love before and wasn’t quite sure what it felt like. He knew she was scared and too insecure about her

inexperience to ever say those three words first. So, he waited for the right moment.

Soon after, a little boy, with an unbarred admiration of Liam's job, gave him that opportunity. For brunch one morning, Kara and Liam went to their favorite little burrito shack in Coronado. With barely any seating room inside or out, Kara and Liam were waiting on the sidewalk for their order when a little blonde boy with wide blue eyes ran up to them and tugged on Liam's shirt.

"Excuse me, sir," he said to Liam. His eyes were brimming with excitement.

Liam looked down and grinned at him. "What can I do for ya, little man?"

"Well, I was wondering..." he said, sounding out won-der-ing in three clear syllables. "Are you a Navy SEAL?"

He looked back nervously at his father who was a couple of steps behind him, watching with a proud and humored smile. His father nodded encouragingly. Kara saw that Liam was barely containing his pride – he didn't like to show off – but his smile was beaming as he looked down at the boy. "I will be one day," he told him. "I'm in BUD/S right now."

"I'm going to be a Navy SEAL too!" exclaimed the little boy. "I just need to get bigger."

Liam chuckled and knelt down to look him in the eye. "Well, let's feel how those muscles are coming along."

The boy flexed his arm so hard that his face contorted. Liam squeezed his arm gently and said, "Wow, you've got some guns, my man. You keep workin' hard at it and you'll make a good SEAL."

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The little boy's smile stretched wide across his face. He stood tall, put his hand to his brow, and saluted Liam. Liam's eyes showed how touched he was, and told Kara that he was stifling a chuckle, but his face was serious as he stood and saluted the boy back.

Kara watched the exchange and listened as Liam politely declined the father's offer to buy their lunches. Her heart swelled. She felt proud to be standing next to him. She thought about how he knew exactly what to say to the little boy to make him smile. She thought about all the people in Coronado who shook his hand and thanked him for his service, and the pride that showed in his eyes when they did. He was working hard to achieve his dream. He had passion. He cared about people. He cared about her. It was then that she realized she loved him, and had for a while.

"So how about that, huh? Cute kid," Liam said to her as he pulled her into his arms.

"Yeah..." she added. She looked him in the eyes and wanted to tell him how she felt, but couldn't. She couldn't find the words. So instead she just kissed him and said, "You're pretty great too."

Liam saw the want in her eyes. He knew what she wanted to say. Seeing his opportunity, he told her how he felt.

"I love you, Kara." He kissed her so deeply that she could only mumble those three words as she said them right back to him.

Liam

I've done the falling fast and hard thing. I've felt passion and I've felt desire. None of that is new to me. With Kara, though, there's something more. It took me a while to figure out what it was but, finally, I realized that I feel safe. I want her, need her even, but I admire her too. She's strong, smart, and self-sufficient. I don't worry

about her like I've had to worry about other girls. In fact, I think she worries more about me. She tries hard to support me and to make me believe in possibility. Possibility has always scared me. Where I come from, we learn not to dream too big. We work hard to achieve what we can, but we see the limitations long before we let our minds dream. That's what the SEALs teach you too. You think about fighting for your country. You think about fighting alongside your brothers. You don't think or dream about anything else, which is probably because you might not be around to see those dreams come true. But I've never thought about life in any other way. I've never thought that I was missing anything. I thought it was practical, the way life was. But she's different. She dreams first and figures the rest out later. It's contagious. Being with her, I want to work harder, be better, and make myself more successful so that we can have the kind of life that she deserves. I've never felt this way before. Positivity radiates from her like the sour stench of addiction radiated from my ex-girlfriend. The man I used to be would've run away from this kind of pressure. I never dreamed of being more than where I came from. But with her, it's not as scary. With her, I believe I can make it, that I *can* be so much more.

Kara

I've never met a man like him. With him, I feel passion and love and admiration all while feeling completely and entirely safe. Last week, he took me on a date at 2am because that was the only time that he had free before the weekend. When he could have been sleeping, should have been sleeping, he wasn't. He wanted to spend time with me.

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He surprises me every time we're together. Whether it's putting an end to the harassment I've been facing in my apartment building or stopping to help someone with their grocery bags, he's always doing something. I don't know if it's that he was raised as a Southern gentleman or if this is just him, but I suspect it's the latter. I was walking to my building this morning and the homeless guy that lives outside in the alley next to a bar on the way there stopped me. I was nervous at first, judging him by his stench and ripped clothing, but then he spoke.

"Are you Liam's girlfriend?" he asked me.

"Yes..." I replied warily.

"Tell him thank you for me, would you? I wasn't in a proper state last night and I never thanked him."

"Sure, I'll thank him for you. What for?" I asked, somewhat skeptical.

"He dropped another sandwich off for me. He asked to stay for a beer too. I wasn't in good shape, see, so he was checkin' in like he always does and I just yelled at him. I didn't want company so I never thanked him."

"Checking in on you?" I asked. Liam had never mentioned anything like that to me.

"Yeah. He's a real good guy. I used to serve, see, so I called to him one time when he was walking by. We got to talkin'. No one ever talks to me. It was nice. He took me for a bite to eat inside the bar and got me a nice big bottle of water. I didn't really want water at the time, just some money, you know? But it was good of him. And he's been stopping by ever since."

My heart swelled hearing this story. I was so proud to be associated with Liam. I texted him after I left the man to ask why he had never mentioned anything. All he said was, "What's to tell? I just stop by sometimes. It's no big deal."

K. M. LANGDON

It isn't about bragging or "doing something good." He just does these things because that's who he is, and I admire that.

Five

After days of drills that included running 10 or more miles on the beach as a warm up, followed by push-ups and pull-ups and squats, followed by swims that were sometimes twice as long as their runs, Liam and the rest of his team often finished their days with some sort of classroom work. Whether the work was for tactical, cultural, or strategic learning, the effect was the same – Liam was mentally and physically exhausted. He had never been more dedicated to something in his life, but the anger, sadness, and impatience that he felt at not being able to go abroad to help sooner, along with the physical testing, was tougher than anything he had encountered before. On his time off, he learned to appreciate the one piece of advice that a commanding officer had given him early on:

“Dude, this job will get ya. No matter how big, strong, driven, or how good of a shot you are, it’ll break you down if you can’t turn work off and live your life outside of duty. Whether that’s a party, your woman, your kids – whatever, I don’t care. Just don’t forget to live. Otherwise, you’ll never see a team,” he’d said.

It seemed simple to Liam at the time. *What else would I do?* he thought, as he headed off to the first of many BUD/S parties that were held at the start of first phase. As the weeks went by, though, he learned what the officer had meant. It was easy to be consumed by the

training – the exhaustion, the stress, and the fear of failure – it built up in all of the candidates. Those who couldn't handle the build up, who couldn't let go for long enough to relax and reset, they didn't make it through. Those were the candidates that were sent back to the ships to work – sweeping, cooking, or to some other quiet job that was the antithesis of the SEAL program. Liam was determined that he was not going to have that happen to him. He relaxed. He turned his brain off of work, left his stress about training and testing at the base, and he went home to Kara. Every weekend, every moment of his time off, he spent with her, and it only made him perform better. After one particularly stressful week, he longed for some time off with just her, her hot tub, and a few margaritas. One Friday afternoon, after work, he stopped at Vons to pick up limes, margarita mix, and a fifth of tequila. With his swim trunks in his gym bag, he was ready to see her. That was, until he got a text at the checkout counter.

Caligula: Hey sweetie, I just landed in San Diego. I'm waiting for my bags. Come get me?

Liam: What? Are you serious?

Caligula: You didn't leave me much choice.

Liam: What do you mean? When I said, "We're over. I'm in love with someone else," I meant it.

Caligula: We both know it isn't over. I'm the one for you. You're just too stupid to realize it.

Liam: No. Go home. I'm with Kara now. I don't love you anymore.

Caligula: Baby, I'm here now. You might as well come spend the weekend with me. My flight home doesn't leave until Sunday... And if you don't then I'll tell your new girlfriend about that time I dressed up your passed-out body in my clothes and

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how turned on you were when you woke up and realized what I'd done.

Liam groaned. "Fucking bitch," he said to himself, shocking the cashier. *What choice do I have?* he thought.

Liam: Fine. I'll be there in a couple of hours. Get yourself a hotel. You're not coming to base with me.

Liam

With her grey-green eyes looking up at me through her long, dark lashes, I couldn't even think about telling her. I love her. She loves me. We just told each other a week ago. How can I say that to her and then tell her that I'm going to be spending the rest of the weekend with my ex-girlfriend in a hotel? Caligula is an awful girl. I'm not even sure my friends remember her real name. And now she's taking advantage of me. She knew some of my secrets and tempted me with drugs to make them go away. Then she mocked me, dressed me up in her clothes, and told me I was "pretty." She somehow knew what was deep inside of me and pulled it out, waving it around like a flag of inadequacy during our relationship.

But, if I say "no" to her now then she'll hate me. And worst, she'll tell Kara about what she used to do to me. Plus, she flew across the country to see me. How can I turn her away? On the other hand, Kara will hate me if I tell her that I'm going. She'll stop trusting me. She might even break up with me. I texted my friends immediately and every single one of them told me not to go and to stay with Kara all weekend. I know I should. I know they're right. I

love Kara. I want to be with Kara. I *do not* want to be with Caligula. I don't even care to see her again. Why can't I just stay at Kara's? It's the right choice, the *easiest* choice. I just really don't want Caligula to hate me so much that she'd expose my secrets. And I just can't have somebody really hate me. I hate myself enough without that. I hate myself for hiding all my fantasies and nightmares from Kara. If I just told her already then I wouldn't need to worry about Caligula blackmailing me right now. But I can't stand the thought of making Kara hate me. Losing her isn't an option. I'm just going to have to risk it and tell her that I'm seeing Caligula this weekend. If I don't give in to Caligula, then Kara will only hate me more if Caligula outs me. I'll just have to smooth it everything over later.

I just *can't* say "no."

Kara

The last week had been great. Liam's work schedule was lighter, so we actually spent every evening and night together. As cheesy as it sounds, he makes me feel complete. Life is better with him beside me. He makes me feel more confident and more beautiful. I actually woke up one morning to a delivery man knocking on my door with a bouquet of white lilies and a simple note that said, "I'm so blessed to have met you, baby. Love, Liam." I don't know how he knew that they were my favorite, but he did. When I'm with him, all I want to do is be with him. When I'm not, all I can think about is when I get to see him. I can't focus on schoolwork, or anything really, but I'm so happy that I don't care. But then he told me on Friday night that he was going to spend the weekend in a hotel with his ex-girlfriend. I said "okay" when he told me. I didn't give him a hard time. I trusted him. Or at least I thought I did. He said he'd call each day, but he didn't. I tried to

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stay distracted. I went to a party at his BUD/S training buddy's apartment. His friends there were supportive of my anger but they still tried to placate me. They insisted that he wasn't cheating on me. But would they really tell me if he was? I mean, he was with an ex-girlfriend in a hotel and not calling me. What was I supposed to think?

I know I should break up with him. If this happened to any of my friends, I wouldn't be able to understand why they didn't walk away. I just can't let go, not yet. I need him to tell her that he's picked me. Then I feel like I'll be fine. I think that it will matter more if he wants me for a lifetime. But I don't know what he told her or why he *had* to see her. And I feel like I don't know how to believe him anymore.

He called me Sunday night and said, "Baby, you're like a brand new book. She's an old, tattered book that's been read a hundred times over. I know how that story ends. I've only just cracked the first chapter of our book, and I can't wait to see how this one ends. I hope you'll let me."

It was cheesy and could so easily have been phony. But his voice sounded sincere. I told myself that it was his voice that made me want to stay. I was so happy to hear it that tears actually rolled down my cheeks. He'd picked me. He wanted me. He promised me she was gone. I'm happy, of course. I love him and I want him too. There's just a little part of my heart that still feels broken and a little protective voice that's telling me to pull back. But, it's too late. I've decided that I'm all in. Let's just hope that this becomes a small blip in a lifetime of months like the ones we've just had.

Please... Please let him always want me. I can't imagine feeling this way again.

Six

Liam

Ice, so much ice, and so many cold winds, un-showered men, and lonely nights in the wilderness spent thinking about how hungry we were for real food - that's survival training. While she partied in Pacific Beach and decompressed before starting the second semester of her Master's program, I spent the month freezing my ass off in the Alaskan woods, hunting what little food there was, and huddling for warmth in my lean-to constructed from nothing but a tarp and some branches. When the skies opened up and snowed too heavily for us to make a fire to cook what little dinner we could find, we went to sleep hungry, tired, and alone. We rarely got a night off, but when we did we were almost too tired to make the most of it. It didn't seem fair that all my friends who flunked BUD/S got to spend the so-called San Diego "winter" partying with her and all of the other co-eds. As I shut my eyes to rest, I could see them dancing with her, lying on the beach with her, taking shots with her. In reality, she probably wasn't hanging out with any of my friends, which actually scared me more - the unknown men who could've

been making moves on her without me there to defend her. I just wanted her bikini-clad body in my arms. Not only did I hate thinking about who she could've been dancing with, but all that time alone gave me too much time to think about what it would mean for me if it didn't work out with her and about who I really am.

We'd had a couple of relaxing weeks together after her finals, just the two of us. Things were a little rough after the Caligula situation. Kara backed off, distrust showing in her eyes and passive aggressive comments escaping her lips like darts. She wasn't herself. She wasn't letting herself be all-in in our relationship like she used to. Then, one day around Christmas, it was like she made a choice. She settled whatever dispute she had going on in her head. She became the old Kara, loving and carefree, with an even more fiery devotion. She made it clear to me, and to everyone else, that she wasn't going anywhere. We went to the beach, even though the California-natives thought it was cold, and we went in the ocean to crash waves. She felt weightless with the power of the ocean underneath her and I felt how easy it would be for her to be swept away from me. I felt how easy it would be for her to be taken in by some other life, by some other man. But then she wrapped her arms around my neck and gripped tightly while looking into my eyes, laughing as the current tried to tear her body from mine. It was as though she mocked it for even trying. She was *mine*.

I tried to remember that feeling the whole time I was in Alaska. It didn't matter where she was or who she was with, at least it shouldn't have. She trusted me now. I still

trusted her. I just didn't trust myself. Alone, in the middle of Alaska, I had time to think about all those things I worked so hard to not think about. When I'm with her, I can push those thoughts aside and focus on her warm, soft skin or her infectious giggle. If she had been with me in Alaska, I wouldn't have had to think about the fact that I stole my favorite pair of her underwear and I wouldn't have had to contemplate what that meant about me. I hate the part of me that keeps forcing me to do and think these things. All I want to do is love her, and only think about her, but when I'm alone, like when I was in Alaska with all those men, I couldn't. All I wanted was for everything else to just go away and to be with her. When I'm with her, I actually believe that it could all go away and be okay. But because we were apart I couldn't help but worry about what she was doing with all of her spare time since she was probably spending it on the beach, in a bikini, with plenty of other hard-bodied men who weren't stuck in sun-less Alaska. I can't lose her. I don't know what will happen to me if I lose her.

Kara

Liam was coming home and planning to stay with me in my new Ocean Beach apartment while he looked for somewhere else to live. However, with Michael just down the road, and plenty of space, I had a strong feeling that Liam would probably end up living with me. Most of his other friends found places before they'd left and, since he hadn't, he must've at least thought about the possibility of us living together when he got back. We never officially talked about it, even though we spend all of our time with each other, and I thought it would be nice to surprise him with the possibility. And so I gave him a key.

K. M. LANGDON

I left a white envelope with "LIAM" written in large letters tucked under the doormat. Then I texted him the address and waited. My heart was beating so fast that I couldn't sit still so I cleaned while I waited. I'd already done every dish, scrubbed every surface, vacuumed the rugs, and lit candles for a fresh scent, but I needed to keep myself busy. A month isn't a long time, but who knows what happened while he was up there. Maybe he didn't miss me as much as I missed him. Maybe he met another girl. Maybe he still wanted to have his own space. I really didn't know. All I knew was that I wanted to wake up to him every morning and go to bed with him every night. The thought that he might not feel the same way was terrifying to me. Michael and Franceen, who were the closest to me of all my friends in San Diego, couldn't keep my mind occupied, and they had escaped to a beachside hotel up the coast for the weekend. So I was left with no one to talk me through my panic. I just worried. What if he didn't see the envelope? I debated whether it would be better to just call him and tell him my plan, but where was the romance in that? I knew he'd check the envelope. He always brought up packages for my neighbors when they were left outside of my last apartment. It's who he is.

Finally, I heard the key in the lock and hid. I wanted to really surprise him, so I hid myself in the coat closet and waited for him to come inside.

"Babe? You here?" he called. I heard him drop a heavy bag. "Where are you?" I could hear him kicking his boots off and knew he'd come to the closet next. As he slid open the door, I couldn't help myself from smiling and tried not to jump on him before he actually saw me. I wanted to see him startle.

I should have known better, because he just looked up at me calmly, with nothing but happiness in his eyes. You can't surprise a

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SEAL, or even a SEAL-in-training. He grinned his easy grin and eyed me up and down.

"Well ain't you a sight for sore eyes. Let's get you outta that closet now, girl," he said as he scooped me up by my waist and pulled me out into the living room. He spun me around while I squeezed him tightly in my arms. I breathed in his salty, sweaty smell. He smelled cold, as though the fresh Alaskan air was still seeping from his pores, his body felt thinner, and he was far less tanned than when he'd left, but it felt so good to have him in my arms. He set me down in front of him and cupped my face in his hands.

"God, I've missed you," he whispered before kissing me. We stood there for a moment or two before he pulled back and said with a joking twitch of his lip, "I hope you've left me at least a little room in the closet." He picked up his bag and motioned for me to show him the way to *our* room.