



Back To You

Jessica Mastorakos

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By Jessica Mastorakos

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This book is dedicated to the brave men and women who serve, and the families who support them every step of the way.

Chapter One

Ellie

I deserved a medal. The lights pulsed and the music blared as I wormed my way through the crowded party. This was my going away gift for my very best friend. Spencer was on the dance floor surrounded by girls in their best summer party clothes. He was easy to spot, with his tall frame and shaved head. He caught my eye over the heads of the other dancers. I beamed and lifted my plastic cup in salute. He seemed to be having a blast, a large grin plastered on his face as a hot – but fake-looking – blonde leaned in close to speak over the music.

The room was stuffy and smelled like sweat, so I headed to the front porch for some fresh air. Wading through the mob to the door, I received several nods and hugs from the friends I passed along the way. I thanked them for coming with a smile that I knew didn't quite reach my eyes. While I was grateful for such a good turnout, I couldn't help but be sad that we were all there to say goodbye to Spencer.

The party was his last hurrah. It was Saturday night, and come Monday morning he'd be boarding a bus for Marine Corps boot camp. I wouldn't be able to see or talk to him for three months. It was going to be awful, considering we hadn't ever gone more than a few days without talking. No one knew me like he did. When he was gone, there would be a Spencer-sized hole in my life.

I pushed open the screen door leading to the porch. Eyes closed, I took a deep breath of the hot July air. San Diego was humid this time of year, and the air felt heavy as a layer of moisture settled on my skin. I glanced around, looking for my boyfriend, Tim. I hadn't seen him inside the house, though admittedly I wasn't looking very hard. I could tell that he didn't get my relationship with Spencer, and if he picked up on my sadness over my best friend leaving he would probably take it the wrong way. I wasn't in the mood to deal with whatever jealous remarks he might come up with about our "history" or "lack of boundaries." Tim's parents were psychologists, so he used all kinds of technical terms in casual conversation. It really got on my nerves from time to time.

Taking a few steps around the large wrap-around deck, I could see the shadowy forms of a couple making-out in a dark corner. Retching noises came from the lawn. A boy from my senior class was losing his dinner under a tree. His girlfriend stood by, hands on her hips and toes tapping. I shook my head and made my way to the porch swing, giving up. I'd find Tim eventually, or he'd find me.

As I lowered myself onto the swing, I squeezed an eye shut and tilted my head. The fuzziness around the edge of my vision told me that I was teetering between merely buzzed and slightly drunk. I took a swig of my beer, aiming to tip the scales before long. I wanted to let loose and have fun. I wanted to enjoy my last night with Spencer, even though I hadn't seen him much. He was on a mission to get laid one last time before boot camp. Big surprise there.

I smirked into my cup, thinking about how he wouldn't have to work hard to accomplish the goal. There were many girls at the party ready to go upstairs with him at the first opportunity. He had always been good-looking, but it was also his happy-go-lucky nature and sense of humor that made him appealing. The fact that he was about to become a U.S. Marine didn't hurt either.

I was sure that he loved all of the attention. He never got tired of it, unlike me. The spotlight wasn't my favorite place to be. I took another swig and grimaced as the bubbles tickled the back of my throat, making it hard to swallow.

Our summer had been crazy, filled with lots of parties and beach trips. I was glad we'd taken so many pictures, since I wasn't sure when my life would be as easy and carefree as the summer after high school. After graduation, my dad had offered me a job at his law firm as a receptionist, starting

the fall. It would be my first “grown-up job,” complete with the nine-to-five schedule and a brand new wardrobe.

I loved my dad, but I felt a tiny bit of dread when I thought about his high expectations when it came to following in his footsteps. He was so successful and self-assured, and I was kind of a late bloomer. I wasn't sure what I wanted to do with my life. I got good grades in high school because I knew I wanted to do *something* worthwhile. I was just taking my time deciding what that something was. I had always expected that I would have a passion for something and then follow my dream. Nothing has given me that feeling yet.

So, I decided to take some classes at the local community college. Unfortunately, my dad wanted me to attend a university and eventually go to law school, like he did. It didn't have to be *his* law school, but I'd bet my life he'd be disappointed if it wasn't. Honestly, what was the point of investing so much into a field that I might not even like? We'd eventually compromised on the receptionist job. Dad was sure that the environment would make me fall in love with law. I wasn't convinced.

I took a long pull of my beer and stared out into the night. I felt dumb for being so negative about the receptionist job when Spencer would be trading his freedom for drill instructors and combat boots. Was he getting nervous? He hadn't said anything about any fears he might be having. Then again, he wasn't the type to just pour his heart out about his emotions. Still, it must be freaking him out at least a little. I couldn't imagine how I would feel if I were in his shoes. Tonight, at least, I hoped he wasn't thinking about it at all.

The screen door swung open and hit the wall with a loud crash. I jumped, steadying my beer as the frothy liquid sloshed over the sides of the red plastic cup. I was pissed at first, but snickered when I saw Spencer stumble outside with a sheepish grin. He was trying not to spill the two fresh cups of beer on his new dark jeans and black V-Neck tee. I watched him as he regained his balance and came over to the swing. His new buzz cut made the angles of his jaw look even stronger and sexier than usual. If I was being honest with myself, I understood now why girls fawned over him all the time. He had that swagger that came with his tall and lean frame, and his deep blue eyes made him look like an Abercrombie model. Well, actually, it was his abs that made him similar to those guys. I cleared my throat and looked away from him. I wasn't used to thinking those thoughts about my best friend. Blushing, I realized that I must be drunker than I'd thought.

“My bad,” Spencer said as he closed the door with exaggerated, drunken care. “What are you doing out here alone, blondie?”

I shrugged. “It was getting kind of hot in there.”

“You're telling me! I barely escaped with my shirt,” Spencer said, with mock seriousness. “These bitches are crazy.”

“Oh, please,” I laughed, draining what was left of my beer and dropping the empty cup on the ground next to the swing. I took the fresh one that Spencer held out to me and we touched our cups together in toast. “Don't pretend you don't like it. You'll have at least two of them in your room later.”

Spencer made a smug face and took a long pull of his beer. I watched him, marveling at how he was able to be so casual about sex. I wasn't a virgin, but I had only allowed Tim to move past this base after we'd been dating for over six months and I felt close enough to him. I took sex pretty seriously, and I wanted to make sure that Tim wasn't only with me for that one reason.

Spencer's behavior didn't surprise me, by any means. It rarely did. After all, I had known him since middle school. As soon as he was old enough, he began making rounds through most of the good-looking girls in school. He never had “girlfriends,” only girls that he was “hanging out” with. It was actually kind of amused me sometimes, since he was somehow able to stay friends with every girl

he'd been with. If he had been running around stomping on hearts, I wouldn't be as close to him as I was. ~~Spencer wasn't the typical bad boy with a heart of gold. You didn't have to dig too deep to find his best qualities; they were right on the surface and within reach to all he encountered. So, he's a great guy, who also just happens to be a bit of a slut.~~

"You look great tonight," Spencer said with a smile. "What'd Timmy say when he saw that hot little dress?"

I raised my chin haughtily. "He doesn't like it when you call him that. But anyway, he was just as impressed as you thought he'd be."

"You always act so surprised when I'm right! Even a broken clock is right twice a day." He wagged a finger at me with a lopsided grin.

I swatted his hand out of the air with a laugh. Spencer had gone shopping with me earlier in the day to find an outfit for the party. He had decided to go with the basic black and jeans, but he wouldn't stop pestering me until I agreed to buy the short red sundress. He'd insisted that the color went great with my long, blonde hair, and on a hot summer night the cut of the dress would be perfect. It was strapless, with a sweetheart neckline and an empire waist that gave way to a flowing bottom. The fabric was light and airy, and the hem came mid-thigh. I had to admit he was right. I felt amazing.

"Have you seen him, by the way?"

Spencer frowned. "Who?"

"Tim."

"Oh. No, I haven't seen him for a while actually. You haven't either?"

I shook my head.

"He'll turn up."

"Yeah," I agreed. "I just hate how he does that, you know? Disappears for most of the party and then magically reappears when it's time to leave."

Spencer patted my knee. "Well, that's what you have me for! I'm much better company than Tiny Tim."

"He hates that too, you know."

"I bet he does. So, listen, there's something that I've been meaning to talk to you about," Spencer began, looking at me somberly.

I nodded in encouragement for him to continue.

"My recruiter was telling me about the phone call that we're supposed to make when we get to the Depot. It's not a big deal; it's just this script we have to read to let our families know that we made it there alive or something."

"Okay..."

"Well, my dad sucks, obviously," he gestured to the roaring house and underage drinking party as if in explanation for his dad's lack of parenting skills. A lot of our friends thought that Mike Hawkins was "cool" for allowing stuff like that to go on under his roof, but I knew Spencer resented him now and then. It would be nice for him to actually have a parent, as opposed to Mike, who was content just staying out of his son's way. "So, I'd like to call *you*, instead of him."

I nodded again. "Of course."

"Cool, thanks. I don't want you to get freaked out though. I heard we basically just pick up the phone and yell this couple-sentence thing and hang up. It's not like we'll get to chat or anything."

"That's fine, I don't mind. I'll let your dad know you got there safe." I put my hand on Spencer's knee, knowing how much he wished his mom were still alive so he could call her instead.

"Thanks," Spencer said, leaning back on the swing and putting his arm around me. I rested my head on his shoulder and closed my eyes. He swung us back and forth in companionable silence for a few minutes. When I stayed uncharacteristically quiet, he squeezed my arm. "You're moping. I told

you, this is a night for fun, not being sad! Be sad all day tomorrow for all I care, since I'll be busy packing and I won't have to see it."

I opened my eyes and took a breath, smiling at his teasing words. "I wasn't moping."

"You absolutely were. There was a distinct lack of chatter happening just then."

Spencer didn't do well with serious emotions anymore. It was like his entire capacity for pain and sorrow was used up when he lost his mom to cancer. It was like he refused to be sad about anything after that. I couldn't blame him. In fact, part of me actually envied him for the ability.

"Alright, alright," I conceded. "I'm just going to miss you, that's all."

"I'm going to miss you too, but you need to cheer up or you're going to ruin my night." One side of his mouth twitched upwards as he squeezed my shoulder again before getting up from the swing. He leaned against the porch rail across from me. Cup in his teeth, he hoisted himself up. Once comfortably seated on the railing, he took a long gulp of beer. "Besides, we're about to be pen pals. You'll need to entertain me with stories about your adventures on the outside."

"On the outside? It's not prison, Spence."

"Might as well be!"

"Well, either way, I wouldn't get too excited about letters from me. Who would I have adventures with if not you?"

"That's true. Your life is pretty boring. But that's what you want isn't it? A white picket fence, a boring husband, and a couple of messy but well-mannered kids?"

I laughed and rolled my eyes. "My future husband doesn't need to be boring. Just stable... like my dad."

"Your dad is boring," Spencer countered, before sticking his hand out to pacify my move from the swing. "Easy, easy, I was kidding! Your dad's not boring. He's predictable. Your parents remind me of a fifties sitcom... you know... 'Leave it to Beaver' style."

"Whatever, it's not wrong for me to want some stability and saneness for my life. I love my 'Leave it to Beaver' parents."

Spencer nodded solemnly and looked out at the lawn behind him. "I love your parents, too. I don't know what I would have done these last few years without Carol and Tom. And you."

I met his eyes then, seeing more emotion swimming in them than I had expected. I swallowed past the lump that had formed in my throat, unsure of what to say. If I said anything too deep he would just brush it off.

"So, I guess that makes you the adopted son of the Cleavers. If they'd had one, that is." I said, knowing how lame I sounded.

He cocked his head and narrowed his eyes a bit. "Adopted son, huh? Nah. I'll stick to being the kid from down the street. No relation."

I swallowed, once again at a loss for words. I watched as he chugged the rest of his beer and hopped down from his spot on the railing. He stretched his arms over his head and the hem of his shirt crept up to reveal about an inch of his naval. I averted my eyes.

"Listen," he said, tossing the cup over his shoulder, "I hope you find your white picket fence and all that stuff. I'm glad you know what you want. I'm not joining the Marines just to get out after my first enlistment, so it'll be nice to know that when I come back to visit you'll be happy and living life how you want it."

I smiled. "Thank you, Spence. That means a lot."

"You might not want to thank me yet. The last thing I was going to say was that I'm pretty over this thing you've got going on with Tim."

"Excuse me?" I blinked, not sure I'd heard him right. He'd known Tim just as long as I had, and we'd already been dating for over a year. Why was he speaking up about it now?

Spencer came over to where I sat on the swing and crouched down in front of me, hands on my knees. “Ellie, he wants what you want on paper, but he’s not good enough for you. In fact, I think he’s kind of a tool.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything. Just think about it. Where is he right now? This happens everywhere we go. I don’t know what he’s up to, but I think that if your boyfriend was really that into you, he’d be with you right now.”

“What makes you so sure?”

“Because that’s where I’d be if it were me.”

The intensity in his eyes messed with my already jumbled brain. What the hell was he saying? Before I could form a response, two cheerleaders Spencer had danced with earlier skipped drunkenly onto the porch. I felt a fake smile reflexively spread across my face as they glanced between us. The door was open, so the patio filled with the music from inside. The deafening beats were a dose of reality.

“Your fan club is waiting,” I told him, nodding in their direction. My stomach turned slightly as I watched him go from a laser focus on me to flirting with the girls.

“Hello, ladies! Did you miss me?”

The duo giggled and held out their hands for him. I rolled my eyes. Spencer rose from his position in front of me and headed their way. He playfully swatted the shorter one on the butt as she danced through the doorway. He followed them back into the house and let the door slam behind him, smothering the volume of the music.

I gazed out toward the lawn again, trying to gather myself. The last few minutes of that talk with Spencer had really thrown me. Why would he wait so long to speak up about Tim? And what was the part about how it would be if it were him? Did he mean for that to sound so... inviting? Taking another swig of my beer, I was grateful to find that the kid throwing up by the tree was long gone. I didn’t need that to add to the sick feeling I had. The hinges of the screen creaked open, revealing Spencer’s head through the crack in the door.

“Hey...”

I threw a smile on my face to hide the turmoil I felt. “Yes?”

“Stop being a baby and have fun. You know I always come back to you.”

He let the door close again and disappeared into the house. I stared at the space where his face had just been, wondering if he was talking about leaving with the girls just now, or the three months that he’d be in boot camp. Maybe he was referring to what he said about coming home to visit over the course of his career. Whatever he meant, my smile turned genuine that time. Maybe I should just go and ask him what he meant. I drained the last of my beer and started to rise from the swing. It was now or never, right?

“Well, you two sure looked cozy...”

I rolled my eyes and sunk back onto the swing. Apparently, I was doomed to hear a lecture on Freud instead. “Hi, Tim.”

Chapter Two

Spencer

I rolled over and felt in the dark for my phone. My fingers moved frantically over the screen in silence the obnoxious ringing of my alarm before it woke my dad in the next room. Through the haze of waking, I realized what day it was. It was Monday, and I was about to leave for boot camp. I lay in my bed wide-awake, staring at the ceiling. I hadn't expected to feel so nervous. How had I been so calm and confident yesterday, only to wake up this morning feeling like I was on death row?

Eventually, I rolled out of bed and adjusted my boxer briefs. I'd left my window open overnight and the breeze felt nice on my slightly damp skin. Why was I sweating? Was I really that nervous?

I tiptoed to the bathroom. It was just past three in the morning and the world was still quiet. I knew my father had to be up in a few hours to go to work, so I doubted he would get up early to see me off. Just as well, since my interactions with him were rarely anything but awkward anyway. I stared at my reflection in the mirror, noticing the hard expression in my eyes.

I remembered the day when I told my dad that I wanted to join the Corps. I was twelve, and I had just watched some movie at school that had Marines raising the flag over Iwo Jima. I remember telling all of my classmates that my dad was a Marine like those guys and that I was going to be one someday, too. I had rushed home from school that day and told my parents my plan. They both seemed so proud of me. Maybe my mom was looking down on me and was still that proud. Hopefully she didn't hold my dating habits against me, though. As for my dad, I wouldn't know if he was proud of me or not. We barely spoke anymore. Part of him died with my mom, and our relationship hadn't been the same ever since.

I shook my head abruptly, vowing in that moment to put the past behind me. These were exactly the kind of thoughts that would distract me from success in boot camp. I needed to focus on what would be, not what had been.

I'd been practicing the art of speed showering for a few months now. In record time, I'd washed my body and what was left of my hair. Shaving fast was also required in boot camp, so I'd taught myself to do that too. There was a lot of bloodshed until I'd mastered that particular skill. Now I was pro.

On my desk chair, there were a dark grey button up shirt, black slacks, and dress shoes. My recruiter had once said that Marines always looked sharp, and that was something I could get behind. Scrutinizing my reflection in the long mirror on the back of my bedroom door, I realized that it was the same outfit that I had worn the day I raised my right hand and swore an oath to God and country and signed over my life to the United States government. In a matter of hours, I would be boxing up these clothes and replacing them with whatever I was issued.

With nothing left to do to get ready, I grabbed my phone off the nightstand and opened my text messages. I went to the folder of conversations between Ellie and me, and paused with my thumb hovering over the on-screen keyboard. There were so many things that I wanted to say to her, but I closed my eyes to block them out. What could I possibly say without coming off as a total creeper? After my alcohol-induced confession about my thoughts on her relationship with Tim, I felt dumb enough already. On the one hand, she seemed totally pissed about me butting into her relationship. On the other hand, there was chemistry between us that was hard to miss. Fuck it. She had probably already forgotten about it. Why make it awkward now?

I settled on a simple text. "Be back soon."

I quickly powered off the phone and threw it in the top drawer of my nightstand, not wanting

wait for Ellie's reply. She was probably still sleeping anyway, but I didn't want to take the chance of seeing something that would only make leaving harder.

In the kitchen, I checked the time. It would still be thirty minutes before my recruiter, Sergeant Moore, would be there to pick me up. I grabbed a bagel out of the bag by the fridge and popped it in the toaster. I leaned against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest, settling in to wait for my breakfast to be done. I grew restless within seconds and began pacing the kitchen. I scrubbed my hands roughly over my clean-shaven face and freshly buzzed head.

There was a picture on the fridge of Ellie and me at graduation. I'd put it there because it seemed like the right place for it. Isn't that where parents displayed the accomplishments of their children? I stared at smiling face of my best friend. I had my arm around her shoulder and she was leaning into me, her body fit to mine like a puzzle piece. The fact that I'd be spending the foreseeable future without her was starting to sink in, and I didn't like how it felt. I shook my head and turned my back on the photo.

We were friends. It wasn't a big deal that I knew how much I would miss her. It made sense that the closest person in my life was the only person I was thinking about when I was getting ready to leave. It didn't mean anything. She had been my best friend for the better part of the last damn decade, but I had this nagging feeling in my stomach that things were changing between us. I sighed heavily, knowing that anything more than friendship with Ellie wasn't a good thing for either of us. Regardless, the way she'd looked the other night in that dress was frozen in my mind.

"Were you going to wake me up or just leave?" Dad's gravelly voice from behind me made me jump.

"Just leave," I answered bluntly, cursing myself for showing how anxious I was feeling. I heard the note of challenge in my own voice as I stared down my father. He had barely bothered to talk to me lately, and now he was acting like he cared if he slept through my exit. I tried for a casual expression, resuming my previous position. "Didn't think you'd mind."

Mike grumbled incoherently and tightened the belt on his robe. He crossed his arms and leaned against the counter opposite me. Something in his face changed as he looked at me, and I watched as he uncrossed his arms with a self-conscious expression. Apparently he wasn't big on displaying any similarities with me.

"You hungry?" He asked me.

"I'm making a bagel." As if on cue, the toaster popped. I turned to put it on a plate and went to the fridge to get some butter. I ducked my head into the cool air, and came back up frowning. "No butter?"

"Try cream cheese," my dad suggested.

I glanced around in the fridge again, coming up empty once more. I went to the pantry and found a jar of peanut butter. I guessed that it was probably a good thing to get some protein in my system anyway, since it might be a while before I got to eat again. I set to work spreading the peanut butter over the halves of my bagel. I never took my eyes off my meal, but I was fully aware that my dad was still standing at the counter watching my every move. I refused to be the one to break the silence.

After putting a huge helping of peanut butter on my bagel, I held the plate in my hand and leaned against the counter once more to eat. We weren't really a 'sit-down-like-civilized-people' kind of family anymore. That was just another thing Dad stopped caring about after Mom died.

"So, I bet you're gonna miss Ellie," Mike said, obviously grasping for straws to get me to open up to him. "She gonna write you?"

"Probably, are you?" I replied, biting into my bagel.

My dad nodded. "Yeah, sure, kid."

"I'll write you first, so you have the address. It'll probably take a couple of weeks though."

heard it's pretty crazy when you first get there."

—~~"It is. Receiving Week is probably the worst part. They put on a big show to culture shock the shit out of you, but it gets better with every day. I know it's changed since I was there, but that part still true, I'm sure of it."~~

"Thanks." I nodded, swallowing a mouthful of bagel. I hadn't expected him to actually say anything worth knowing. It was a shame that we didn't have a better relationship or I would have been able to ask him about everything else I wanted to know.

Mike pushed up from the counter and crossed the kitchen to where I was standing. He extended his hand for me to shake. "Good luck, son."

I hesitated for a brief moment, and then shook my father's hand. The fact that I instinctively wanted to go in for a hug shocked the shit out of me probably more than Receiving Week will. I hadn't felt any kind of affection for my dad in a few years. I thought maybe that was a clear sign of my nervousness. The lump in my throat came out of nowhere as I looked at the man in front of me. When my dad had left for boot camp many years ago, it wasn't by choice. Those were the days when you had a choice between jail and military service if you got in trouble, and he had chosen the second door. He wound up making a career out of the Marines just like I planned to, but since he'd been in the system since he was a little kid he hadn't had anyone to wish him luck the day he left.

"All right, then," Mike said, awkwardly. He nodded once more, and then retreated.

My bagel suddenly tasted dry in my mouth, the lump in my throat tightening further as I watched my father round the corner and leave me standing alone in the kitchen. I threw the bagel in the trash, not able to stomach another bite. I took a seat at one of the four chairs around our kitchen table and waited alone for Sergeant Moore.

Sergeant Moore's excited demeanor was infectious as he drove me down to the processing center downtown. I had always liked my recruiter for his laid-back attitude and great sense of humor. There were several recruiters in the office where Sergeant Moore worked, and I felt pretty damn lucky that I hadn't been recruited by any of them. I didn't need much selling though, since I'd already made my mind up about joining long before I stepped into their office at the mall. I figured that I should probably choose the guy who resembled a used car salesman the least, so Sergeant Moore was my guy.

"I wish they would let me drive you guys around in the Charger," he said with a shake of his head. He weaved in and out of traffic in his 'government car,' the Chevy Malibu that he drove whenever he had work-related errands to run. "This car is for bitches."

"What, powder blue isn't your color?" I jabbed, laughing.

"No, and thank you for proving my point. Plus, it has this pesky little MPH blocker that knocks you down if you try to go more than sixty-five."

"That's some bullshit. But I can't really complain, I don't even have a car."

Sergeant Moore smirked. "Yeah, just do me a favor talk to me before you let some idiot salesman sell you a brand new car with 'great military rates.' I'm so sick of seeing young Marines making stupid fucking decisions."

I chuckled at his passion for the topic. "Will do, Sergeant. I probably won't need a car for a while, though."

"That won't stop you from being dumb and buying one anyway."

I laughed and looked out the window. I was grateful for Sergeant Moore's shit talking. It kept me from thinking about my dad. Or Ellie. I wondered if my text had woken her up this morning and she'd replied. I clenched my fist in my lap and tried to stop that 'crazy-train' of thought before it went off the rails. I couldn't help it though. The closer I got to leaving the more I thought about what –

who – I was leaving behind.

—Ellie had been there for me when my mom was sick, and stuck by me through the worst parts of my life when she finally passed. I understood why she wanted stability so badly, because she was *needing* stability. I knew that no matter where I went or what I did, I would always be able to go back to her. I had never tried to sleep with her because I knew it would ruin what we had. I had always considered her to be more like family than anything else, especially since her parents practically adopted me when they saw the shitty job my dad was doing.

I chewed it over in my mind. I knew it made sense that I loved her, but I didn't want to even consider what *kind* of love it was turning out to be. That was just another distraction that I didn't need for the next three months.

“Take off that undershirt.”

I jolted, not sure if I had missed part of the conversation while I was thinking about that other nonsense. “What?”

“I said, take off the undershirt,” Sergeant Moore repeated. “The DI's are gonna be screaming at everyone to make sure they only have one shirt on before they get on the bus. You might as well ditch it now so you don't have to do it then.”

I narrowed my eyes at him slightly, but did as I was told. “That's really weird. Why would they care if I have an undershirt on?”

“I don't remember, and I never cared to ask. You should get out of the habit of asking ‘why’ now, too. You'll get yourself slayed for that shit.”

“Oh, thanks.”

He chuckled. “I try to prepare all of my guys as best as I can. If you work your ass off, maybe you'll get Honor Recruit. That looks great on me, so you should do that.”

I wrinkled my brow and wished that I had used more of the car ride to ask questions instead of think about Ellie and things that could never be. I saw the building looming ahead and knew I was out of time for that. Sergeant Moore pulled into the lot and found a spot in the back. We got out of the car and I checked my pockets to make sure I had everything I needed.

“What'd you bring?” Sergeant Moore moved around the car to stand beside me.

“My ID, Social Security Card, and cash,” I answered.

“No smokes?”

I shook my head. “No, I quit a few months ago.”

“Man, when I was leaving, I chain smoked like crazy right up until the last second. I even got chewed out by my recruiter for asking if I could smoke in the car on the way.” Sergeant Moore laughed at his memory and started walking toward the entrance. “Okay, when you get in there, you're gonna go into a room with a bunch of other kids that are just as freaked out as you are and listen to some guy try to motivate and scare you at the same time. They're gonna ask you *again* how many times you've smoked pot, so if you mess that up, you're not going. Then they're gonna have you swear your oath again, and you'll all head to the airport to meet some DI's and head out.”

“The airport? Isn't boot camp right here in San Diego?” I asked, confused.

“Yeah, but other recruits are coming in from around the country and it's just easier for you local kids to get in line at the airport with the rest of them. The DI's take you from the airport to the Depot on their busses. You ready for this?”

My head swam with all of the information. I forced a shaky smile and gave him the thumbs up, hoping I looked sarcastic and not terrified.

“Very convincing,” Sergeant Moore held the door open for me to pass through. We wove through hoards of other recruiters with their future Marines in tow and found the reception desk in the lobby. Sergeant Moore told the clerk behind the desk that he was checking me in, and we both signed

the clipboard on the ledge. He shook my hand.

—“Okay, kid. I’ll see you when you’re a Marine.”

Many chaotic and terrifying hours later, I was beginning to understand what my dad had warned me about. I stood in a line of recruits waiting to use the phone for my arrival call. The DI’s were screaming from all directions. I looked to my left and right and noted the sullen expressions on the guys beside me. By now, I was sure we are all thinking the same thing: *What have I gotten myself into?*

I rushed forward and white knuckled the receiver when it was my turn to use the phone. I felt the body heat radiating off of a sweaty Drill Instructor who was yelling at the kid on my left. I prayed that he didn’t turn his attention on me next. In a brief moment of panic, I was afraid that I didn’t remember Ellie’s number. I recovered quickly and dialed. She answered on the second ring.

“Spencer?”

“I have arrived safely at Marine Corps Recruit Depot, San Diego,” I read from the script posted on the wall in front of me. “Please do not send any food or bulky items. I will contact you in three to five days via postcard with my new mailing address. Thank you for your support, goodbye for now.”

Before I hung up, I waited a beat to see if she would say anything.

“Ellie,” I breathed into the phone without thinking. I wasn’t supposed to deviate from the script at all. I didn’t know what I would have said to her, but I stilled when I heard her melodic voice from the other end of the line.

“Love you, Spence. Be safe,” she said, her voice was so quiet compared to the melee around me that I couldn’t be sure if I’d heard her correctly or if I’d heard what I’d wanted to hear. The DI next to me started to turn around, so I quickly disconnected the call and took off for the line of waiting recruits.

Chapter Three

Ellie

I walked through the door to the ladies room and wrinkled my nose. Public bathrooms were awful, but even worse when you had to stand in line. I peered around the women in front of me to gauge how long I'd be subjected to the foul air. Tim and I had just seen the latest rom-com, and I now felt a little down. When the couple got their happy-ever-after in the movie, I didn't get the usual 'warm and fuzzies.' I couldn't put my finger on it specifically, but it struck me as very depressing to think that my real-life romance was lacking compared to a scripted one. Even though Tim and I have been saying those three little words for months now, our relationship seemed miles away from the love story in the movie. I hated the thought of wishing for a love found in fiction. Real life love should be better than fiction.

The line for an open stall moved slowly. I inched forward and eavesdropped on the two women in front of me. They chattered giddily about the new engagement ring decorating the brunette's left hand. Her friend complemented the groom's taste, and the bride winked conspiratorially.

"I think my mom must have had a hand in this," the brunette said in a hushed voice. "It's exactly the one I wanted."

"Girl, please. Give the guy some credit. Andrew knows you better than anyone! I bet he just got it right. Seriously, that man loves you like nothing I've ever seen. I secretly hate you for it." The friend put an arm around the bride's shoulder and squeezed. The look on the bride's face when she thought about what her friend had said was so wistful that I thought she might cry. I wanted a love like that...

"Long line?" Tim asked when I finally exited the restroom. He offered me his arm and led me out of the packed theatre.

"Very," I confirmed, suddenly annoyed with myself for being in such a funk. Here I was, on a date with a really attractive and smart guy that cared about me, and I wished I had it better. I sighed and pulled him to a halt before he could get in the car. "Let's go for ice cream. I'm not ready to call it a night."

Tim smiled at me with his pearly whites and clear green eyes. "Sounds good to me."

I stood on my toes and pressed my lips to his. He was a great kisser; there was no denying that. I felt his arms come to rest on the small of my back, and I weaved my own around his neck. Running my fingers through the short brown hair at the nape of his neck, he gently pressed me against his chest. His lips were warm and soft, his breath mingled with mine as our lips moved together. As the heat between us intensified, Tim pulled back.

"What?" I asked, slightly breathless. This was one area of our relationship that didn't need any work.

"I was just thinking that there's something I'd rather do than get ice cream."

Tim pressed his body closer to mine so that I could feel the proof against my stomach of what he had in mind. Understanding, I nodded.

"My parents are out of town again. They'll be in L.A. all weekend." Tim's parents owned their own consulting business and were often out of town. I noticed his jaw clench. His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed back his desire. He was obviously letting his imagination get the best of him.

"I'll just text my mom and tell her I'm gonna be home late." Disentangling myself from Tim's arms, I pulled my phone out of my back pocket.

When I turned the screen on, I found that I already had a missed call and a text from my mother. I opened the text first, sucking in a sharp breath when I read the words on the screen. She'd text me to tell me that I had a letter from Spencer. My heart immediately started beating faster, and I exhaled a breath that was almost a laugh. Just knowing that there was a letter waiting for me at home felt like I could finally breathe, even though I hadn't known I was holding my breath. I bit my lip and looked up at Tim. His eyes were questioning.

"Tim... I'm sorry. I have to go home after all." I racked my brain for an excuse, knowing that he would probably be a little upset if I passed up sex with him for a letter from Spencer. I didn't care about that though. Spencer had been gone for almost two weeks now and this was the first I was hearing from him since that brief phone call.

"What happened, Ell?"

"My mom needs me to help her with something. It's important," I lied.

Tim cocked his head and frowned. "It can't wait until tomorrow?"

"No, I'm sorry. Will you take me home?" Part of me was kicking myself, knowing that I would never feel better about my relationship with Tim if I made a habit out of lying to him. The other part, the part that missed Spencer like a phantom limb, couldn't get home fast enough.

I jumped out of the car as soon as Tim pulled into my driveway. "Thanks, Tim! See you tomorrow!" I called as I rounded the car. I stuck my head through his open window and kissed his cheek. He started to reach for me, but I bounded up the porch steps and through the door, not looking back.

My mom was sitting on the couch reading a travel magazine when I came in. "Hey honey, how was your date?"

"It was fine," I answered with a wave of my hand. "Where's the letter?"

"On the counter," Mom replied with a chuckle.

I darted into the kitchen and snatched the letter off the counter with greedy hands. I took it outside and went to the swing set in the backyard. Spencer and I had spent countless nights hanging out on the swings when we were younger, and it gave me some comfort to go out there now that he was away. I swung back and forth for a few minutes, staring at the outside of the envelope. Above the return address the name read, 'Recruit Hawkins.'

With shaky fingers, I opened the letter and pulled out two separate papers, each with a number on the outside. I unfolded the letter that was labeled with a number '1.' His handwriting was almost illegible, obviously written in a hurry. I smiled as I began to read.

Dear Ellie,

It's Wednesday, and I haven't slept since I woke up Monday morning. I can honestly say this has been the strangest experience of my life. It's probably five or six at night right now and we are finally going to get some sleep in a few hours. These other recruits were getting yelled at all day for falling asleep. It's so weird not being able to call you and tell you about everything. There's been some funny shit happening but it's hard to remember stuff like that right now since I haven't slept in two days. And obviously since I've mentioned sleep three times now, that's all I'm thinking about.

Just so you know, recruits are treated like the absolute stupidest, scummiest, filthiest beings on this planet. But I guess if we all have to go through it in order to call ourselves Marines, I'll do what I have to do. Each week is called something different based on what we're doing, and this week is called Receiving Week, because we're just getting here and getting all of our shit. The real work starts on Friday, or Black Friday, as it's called. That's when we meet the DI's that will be with us for the rest of boot camp. All right, I'm passing out as I'm writing this. I hope you're doing well. (And you're not to

bored without me.)

Be back soon,

Spence

I sighed as I folded the letter along its creases. I took a calming breath and unfolded the new one. This letter was dated a week after the first one, which was why I hadn't gotten anything sooner. This one wasn't as hastily scrawled, but was just as short as the last one.

Dear Ellie,

I haven't had time to write in the last week. Receiving Week was crazy, but every day gets a little better than the last. When we first met our DI's, things were hectic as all hell. One of them reminds me of Will Smith (in a really cool way), so I just pretend I'm in a movie and this isn't really happening. Sometimes it doesn't feel like reality anyway.

I don't understand why they would issue us recruits so much nice stuff only to have it dumped on the floor and mixed with other people's stuff, then shoved in our footlockers and not giving us time to organize it for days. Then they expect us to pull it out in a second and we don't even know if we have it. I found my rack mate's stuff in my footlocker, and he found some of mine. Those are some of the mind games they play, but they say boot camp is 90% mental crap and 10% physical.

But anyway, I don't have much time to finish. I'm writing this during what we call "square-away time," and I still have a lot of stuff to do before I go to bed. Including shaving my face, which I am already sick of having to deal with every damn day. I'll write you again when I can. Tell your family I say hi.

Be back soon,

Spence

I folded the second letter and put it back in the envelope with the first. I had no idea what to write him back. He was going through this crazy culture shock, and I had just gotten home from a movie. I wondered if it would come off as bragging if I told him about all of the mundane things in my life, knowing that he probably wished he could be out doing stuff like that too.

I groaned out loud. What was wrong with me? I was second-guessing how to talk to Spencer. *My Spencer* – when he had always been the one person that I didn't have to worry about that with. Why was I overanalyzing every little thing?

"Ellie?" Mom stood in the doorway that led to the kitchen, squinting into the night. "What are you doing out there?"

"Reading Spencer's letter. I'm not sure how to respond," I explained to my mother, my shoulders sagging against the chains of the swing.

"Well," Mom began, crossing the porch to join me on the swings, "you and Spencer have always had a pretty easy friendship. I don't see why things would be any different now."

"I don't know why, but I feel like it *is* different somehow. He's off doing this great thing, and I'm here, still doing the same things I always do."

Mom reached for my hand and gave it a quick squeeze. "You're living your life and he's living his. You're heading to great things too, you know. Starting your new job with your father next month is exciting."

"Yeah, I just wish he wasn't so bent on me going to law school. I'm not sure I want to do that, but I know it means a lot to him."

"That's why it's so great that you get to work at the office with him while you decide. You can get exposure to law and decide from there."

I nodded. "I know. We'll see how it goes. I just don't want either of you to get your hopes up."

Mom gave my shoulder a pat and stood from the swing. "Treat Spencer like nothing's change

Talk about the things you normally would, like how annoying your parents are. He'll welcome some normalcy, I'm sure."

As I watched her start to walk away, I took a chance. "Mom?"

"Yes?" She turned and came closer.

"Spencer said something weird at the party before he left. That's why I thought things might be different between us."

My mom tilted her head. "What did he say?"

"That he didn't approve of my relationship with Tim anymore... and that he didn't think Tim was good enough for me."

"Hmm. I'm sure it's scary for him to leave everything that's familiar to him and sign his life away. He cares about you a lot; I'm sure he probably just wants to make sure you're happy while he's gone."

"But what does that have to do with him suddenly not being cool with my boyfriend?"

"Maybe he was afraid that your friendship wouldn't be the same after he started his life with the Marines, so he wanted to make sure that he told you how he felt while you two were still close."

I shook my head. "That won't happen. I'm not going to let this pull us apart. He's my best friend."

"Then you really need to relax, sweetheart. Be normal with him, don't create drama or pressure where there doesn't have to be any. You know Spencer's been through a lot, he's protective of you."

"Thanks, Mom." I gave her a small smile and looked away as she made her way back to the house. My mom was right, I just needed to act normal with Spencer. But in the back of my mind, I couldn't help but think that there was more to our changing friendship than I realized.

"Hey, how was your night?" Tim greeted me with a kiss and proceeded into the kitchen.

"It was fine, just helped my mom." I knew I sounded off and felt guilty for lying to him again. I sat on a barstool at the counter and watched him help himself to a glass of soda and a bag of chips.

Tim brought his snack to the couch and sat down, picking up the remote control. "Ready to watch some football? Then maybe we can go back to my place and hang out there for a while."

"Sure." I crossed the room to sit beside him, not sure what to say next. It would be weird if I started apologizing for the previous night again, so I settled on saying nothing at all.

"Do you have any salsa?" Tim asked.

"I think so, want me to check?"

Tim shook his head. "I got it, you find the game."

"Thanks," I took the remote from him and surfed through the sports channels.

"You got a letter from Spencer?" Tim asked from the kitchen. He was holding my letter from Spencer.

I shrugged and continued flipping through the guide. I hoped that he wouldn't ask when I got to or draw any conclusions about why I really bailed on him the night before. I found the game we planned to watch and selected it, but I wasn't really that excited about it. I'd much rather be doing something else with my time than watching Tim's favorite football team play against another team that I didn't care about. I only liked sports when my team was playing.

I glanced toward the kitchen and balked when I saw Tim unfolding one of the letters. There was nothing in it that I wouldn't mind him knowing, but it still felt like an invasion of privacy for him to just read it like that. I jumped up from the couch and took the letter out of his hands.

"That's not very nice," Tim said, frowning. "Do you have something to hide?"

"No," I answered. "I just don't know why you would start reading it before asking if you could. It's not addressed to you."

Tim raised a perfectly kempt brow and ran his fingers through his cropped brown hair. “Ellie, are you sure there isn’t something I should know about you and Spencer? I know you guys have been friends for a long time, but I can’t help but wonder if there’s something more going on between you two.”

I laughed without humor. “Tim, we’ve been over this. Spencer is my best friend. I care about him a lot, but I’m not the girl for him. He’s not the guy for me. We both know that. So, once again, there is *nothing* going on between us.”

“I can understand why he wouldn’t be the guy for you.”

I surprised myself with how defensive I felt in that moment. It was one thing for me to occasionally mock Spencer for his womanizing ways, but I didn’t want anyone else doing it. “You know, Tim, green’s not a very good look for you.”

He cocked his head at me with a hint of challenge. “It’s not jealousy. He’s a dick. And he treats girls like objects that he can just throw away when he’s done with them. I’ve known him as long as you have, and I’ve never met a girl that he hasn’t slept with and then dumped right away. Presence company excluded.”

I watched stoically as Tim reached for my hand and brought it to his lips when he said the last words. I tugged my hand from his grasp. “That doesn’t make him a ‘dick,’ Tim. He’s complicated. There are things in his past that made him the way that he is, but he really is a good guy underneath all of that. You just don’t know him like I do.”

“And how does that excuse his behavior with girls? He’s not a God, Ellie.”

“I know that. But those girls never jump into bed with him thinking they’re going to get a relationship out of it. He tells them up front that he probably won’t even call them again.”

Tim shook his head and laughed. “Yeah, he’s a real prince. Look, all I’m saying is that I can see why he’s not the right guy for you. You’re looking for the type of guy that can give you a future and take care of you. As soon as I’m done with school, I’m going to be that guy for you. You deserve better than someone who runs off to join the military because they don’t have the grades for college.”

I felt heat rise to my cheeks. He was standing there, holding my hand again, telling – not asking – me about my future with him, all the while insulting someone I cared about very much. He was making it seem like Spencer *couldn’t* give me the life I wanted, but it was actually that Spencer *wouldn’t want* to. He had always been very clear about his feelings on marriage and being with one woman for the rest of his life, and it just wasn’t in his plans. That didn’t mean that he wasn’t as good of a guy as Tim, just that he wanted different things. And on top of all that, as if it wasn’t enough, he had the nerve to talk about Spencer’s grades. What the hell did he know about Spencer’s grades?

“Look, Tim,” I pulled my hand away and rested it on my hip. Realizing that the move probably looked a little too combative, I let it fall to my side with a huff. “First of all, I don’t want a man to ‘take care of me.’ I’m planning on taking care of myself. I just want a man who would support me no matter what I wind up doing. Second, Spencer’s grades were perfectly fine. In fact, he scored in the top five percent on his placement exam for the military. He joined the Marines because he wanted to make a difference and fight for his country. I could do a lot worse than Spencer Hawkins.”

Tim started to speak, but I held up my hand. “And last, this isn’t a freaking love triangle where we have to choose between the vampire and the werewolf. He’s my friend, and you’re my boyfriend. Be nice if you don’t knock off this jealous shit then you’ll probably lose your title.”

He looked fittingly abashed as he placed his hands on my shoulders. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I don’t know what kind of grades he got. But listen, let’s stop talking about this, okay? I’ll even write him a letter to thank him for what he’s doing if that makes you feel better.”

Without giving me a chance to reply, he sealed his lips over mine. He used one hand to cup the side of my face and I almost pulled away. He placed his other hand on the opposite side of my face

and gently held me to him, and I soon lost myself in the feel of his mouth on mine. I knew this wouldn't be the last time we'd fight about Spencer, but this seemed like the only way we ended a fight these days. We never exactly agree to disagree, we just make out instead of continue the conversation. I let the letter from Spencer slip from my grasp and back onto the counter as Tim started to lead me toward the stairs. At least we weren't watching football.

Chapter Four
Spencer

“Hawkins,” the surly Drill Instructor called my name and threw a letter in my general direction. I followed the letter with my eyes as the recruit nearest to where it fell began passing it back to me. We were all sitting on the ground in our usual formation for mail call, cross-legged and eagerly awaiting word from our loved ones. The letter finally made its way to me. I smiled broadly when I saw that it was from Ellie. We weren’t allowed to open the mail until every piece had been passed out, so I fidgeted with the corners of the envelope as I waited. The DI called my name again, and when I got hold of this one my eyebrows nearly flew off my forehead.

It was from my dad.

The DI dismissed us and I headed back to my rack to read my mail. I decided to read the letter from my father first, and balked when I saw how short the note was. How typical.

Spencer,

How are you? Is it as hard as you thought it would be? Hope the food is better than when I was there.

Dad

I shook my head as I stuffed the note back in the envelope and put it aside. I grabbed my notepad and pen, figuring it was best to just write him back now so that I didn’t have to worry about it later.

Dad,

I’m fine. It’s not that hard. The food is probably just as bad.

Spencer

With much more enthusiasm than when I opened my dad’s letter, I moved on to Ellie’s. Her letter was considerably longer. I was surprised by how happy I felt as I saw her familiar handwriting on the page. Then I got a whiff of something distinctly feminine and glanced around the room, seeing on the same smelly recruits I’d been with the whole time. Looking down at the paper, I wrinkled my nose and gave it a whiff. It was scented.

Dear Spence,

I read online that recruits can get messed with pretty bad if they get a letter with perfume on it and just because I love you so much, I decided to test that theory. Let me know how that goes for you.

It sounds like this is going to be pretty crazy. I don’t know when you’re going to get this letter but hopefully you’ve adjusted pretty well by the time you do. That’s absurd that they made you stay up for so long in the beginning. I would have been giggling like an idiot... you know how weird I get when I’m really tired! And yes, I agree that it’s odd not being able to talk to you all the time. I’m going through sarcasm withdrawals!

By the way, Sarah and Ashley both asked me why you weren’t answering their calls. Did you forget to tell some girls that you’d be unavailable for a few months? I’m not your secretary, slut!

Have you heard from your dad? I gave him your address. In fact, he was the one that called me asking for it, surprisingly. I wonder if he’s regretting being gone the whole weekend before you left. My family says ‘hi’ back, and hopes you’re doing well. My mom asked if she could send you some cookies, and I told her I’d ask you. If it will have a similar effect of perfume on a letter, I’m all for it.

In response to your question, nothing new is happening over here. Tim and I are doing fine, and I'm doing usual. He's leaving for Sacramento soon, so I guess we'll be doing the long distance thing. I'm not gonna lie, I'm really not looking forward to it. I feel like I probably won't be good at maintaining a relationship like that, but I guess we'll see. At least I'm getting practice writing letters to you, so thanks for that.

Come back soon,

E.

"Is that a letter from your girl?" A voice from above made me jump. I looked up to see my roommate hanging over from the bed above mine.

"No, just a friend."

"Smells like more than just a friend."

I widened my eyes, hoping the letter didn't attract too much attention in case what Ellie said was true. "You can smell it from all the way up there?"

Mills grinned. "After being surrounded by a bunch of dirty assholes for the last few weeks this letter is like a beacon in the night."

"Where do you come up with this shit?"

"I'm a pretty smart guy, you know. Smart enough to know that that girl is more than just a friend."

I rolled my eyes. "Give it up. She's not. Did you get a letter from your girl?"

"Yes, thank God. I was beginning to think she already forgot about me."

"She should, I've seen the Vienna sausage in your pants. That poor girl needs to move on."

Mills glared in mock fury and rolled back onto his rack without another word. I picked up my notepad and pen again and began writing Ellie back. I hesitated for a moment, trying to figure out how to start. I settled on keeping it light, even though hearing from her was the best thing that had happened to me since I'd gotten there. It was strange how disconnected from reality I felt, and even mundane detail from the outside world was welcomed.

Ellie,

Your attempt at sabotage with the perfume didn't work at all. It was just awesome to smell something other than all of these nasty assholes I'm surrounded by day and night. Nice try though. You can send whatever food you want, as long as it's healthy. The other catch is that you have to buy enough for the entire platoon or they won't let me have any. There's like 80 guys in my platoon, so we have at it. One dude got a huge box of granola bars and Gatorade packets from his mom, so we all get to have that.

Tell Ashley and Sarah (and anyone else that asks) that I died. That way, when I come back from the dead, they'll be so amazed that they have sex with me again and forgive me for never calling them after the first time. You are my secretary, and you better not mess up. I expect a full list of my missed calls when I get back. Speaking of my phone, will you bring it to graduation with you? It's in my nightstand.

Of course you and Tim are fine. You're always fine. Dump him, E. He's not right for you and you know it. He's like the evil character that infiltrates the sunny neighborhood in 'Leave it to Beaver.' A right, I'm gonna go. I'll be expecting a big box of civilian food before the week is out.

Be back soon,

Spence.

P.S. Thank you for writing me. You have no idea how good it was to hear from you.

I put away my writing materials with a sigh. I re-read the part of my letter about Tim and wondered if I should scratch it out. I really didn't like that pansy-assed goody-two-shoes. I meant every word I said to her that night before I left. Even though I knew that I wasn't right for her, that didn't mean she should be with just anybody. My new, and so far pretty well suppressed, feelings for her had nothing to do with it. Tim didn't care about Ellie. He just wanted a hot trophy wife lined up for when he was a fancy doctor.

No matter how I felt about Ellie, I wasn't going to try to make something more than friends out of our relationship. We wanted different things, and our friendship meant too much for me to start something with her and then always be leaving her behind. I couldn't offer her the stability she deserved, so I knew it wasn't just jealousy that made me want her to break things off with Tim. She could do better, that was all.

I stood to face Mills, who was still lying on the rack above my own. "Are you still pouting?"

"No, I'm over it. I know you only make tiny dick jokes to make yourself feel better." Mills grinned at me.

"You're right," I conceded, hanging my head woefully. I popped it back up and looked around the room. "So, I guess we'd better go clean some windows. Looks like everyone else already started this field day shit."

Mills leaned up to rest on his elbows. "Looks like they did. I really hate that they refer to cleaning as 'field day.' When I was a kid, 'field day' was the best day of the school year."

I snorted. "We're only three weeks in, bro. Think positive."

"It's not that easy," Mills said, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed and hopping down with a thud. We walked over to the buckets and rags that some recruits had pulled out for washing the windows. "Olivia is pretty good about staying positive in her letters, but I know this sucks for her. I'll make it up to her with a big fat ring when we get out of this hellhole."

"Wait. Did you just say that you're proposing on boot leave?" I stuttered, absolutely stunned.

Mills smiled like a fool. "Not on boot leave, at graduation. My mom picked the ring up for me and I'm gonna pay her back for it. I'm going to ask Olivia if she wants to go see a judge over Christmas if I get to come home, that way everything will be squared away before I get stationed somewhere and she can come with me."

"Dude," I drew out the word. "We're only eighteen."

"Yeah, so what?"

I grunted. "You're fucking crazy, that's all."

"Hey, man. We've been together for five years now. Plus, I want her to be able to come with me wherever I go. She can only do that if we're married. And, you know, I love her."

"You don't have to plead your case to me, Mills. It's none of my business. All I know is, I'm never getting married." I resumed wiping the window that I had been neglecting during that ridiculous exchange. I took a few glances over my shoulder to make sure a DI wasn't in the room to slay me for talking. I couldn't believe Mills was getting married at eighteen. Not to mention the fact that he was planning on ripping that poor girl away from her family and everything she knows in order to follow him around wherever they send him. Who knows, maybe his girl is excited by the idea of the unknown. Ellie would never go for something like that. Life in the military was the opposite of stable. She'd be packing up her white-picket-fence life every three years or so.

"You say you're never getting married now, but when the right girl comes around, you'll feel differently," Mills said, wagging a finger at Spencer. "I bet you think you're having the time of your life banging anything with a pulse, but this is going to go one of two ways for you."

Intrigued and amused, I took the bait. "Oh, yeah? How's that?"

"You're either going to die from an STD, or one of these girls is actually going to mean

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