

## PROLOGUE

Kelly

“You promised.”

“I told you something came up.” Levi’s voice was barely audible over the phone, the background noise too loud. “There’ll be other birthdays.”

*And you’ve only been home for the first two. The two Ashley won’t remember.*

“Where are you?” I asked despite the odds against him giving me an answer. Two years before, he’d quit the SEALs to become a mercenary. He didn’t say much about that new gig. I figured they were high risk missions of the plausible deniability type. “Sounds like a bar.”

“*Kelly*, let me talk to Ash.”

“What for?” Levi promised he’d be home. He confirmed a week ago, although those seven days stretched into a lifetime of waiting for his mission directives to change. So, in a way, I should be used to it. But getting used to it didn’t mean I was okay with it.

“Dammit, Kelly, I don’t have the time to argue with you.”

I bit my lower lip, trying my best to restrain the words I wanted to shout at him.

He exhaled an irritated breath. “Did you get the dollhouse she wanted?”

“Yes. It arrived earlier this week. It’s still in the box.”

“Ask Cillian to set it up.”

Again, I kept quiet because I’d been hoping he would do this for Ash. It might help our youngest daughter warm up to him. As it stood, Ash didn’t want to have anything to do with her father.

“Can I talk to my girls?”

As my resentment struggled with the need to respect my husband’s job, I headed to the kitchen where Ash and Whit were ogling the giant birthday cake. The *Frozen* castle confection sat majestically on the kitchen island. A gift from Gramps and Nana, it was a replica of the yet-to-be unboxed dollhouse. Emotion prickled my eyes. My grandparents were trying to make up for the void left by my children’s absentee father whom we hadn’t seen in eight months.

“It looks too good to eat, Mama.” Ash’s awestruck gaze swept toward me.

I tamped down bitter feelings and wrestled to put a smile on my face. “Your dad is on the phone.”

My daughters looked at me and then at my chest where the phone was muffled against it. The differences in their expressions stabbed my heart. Whitney—always the Daddy’s girl—was all smiles and sprang forward. Meanwhile, Ashley’s brows furrowed as she returned her attention to the birthday cake.

“Gimme.” Whit shoved her hand toward the phone. I knew Levi wanted to talk to Ash first, because it was her birthday, but I wasn’t going to break Whit’s heart either. My oldest daughter, now seven years old, had been fortunate to experience “doting Dad” Levi before everything went to hell.

After I handed her the phone, she pranced out of the kitchen.

I edged closer to my youngest.

“Hey.” I brushed an imaginary lock from her face. She wouldn’t look at me.

“Your dad wants to talk to you.”

She pursed her lips and fidgeted with the doilies at the base of the cake.

“Ash?”

She glanced up. “Do I have to?”

Those four words had more heartbreak in them than Levi breaking his promise.

“No, sweetie.” It was her birthday dammit. No one was forcing her to do anything. Levi would just have to suck it up. “You don’t have to.”

A small smile erased the anxiety from her face.

“Mom,” Whitney called from behind me. “Dad doesn’t have a lot of time,” she said, handing the phone back to me. The disappointment on Whitney’s face transformed my simmering resentment into seething anger.

“Ash can’t come to the phone.”

Whit’s gaze snapped to her sister’s, but I held a forefinger to my lips before she berated Ash.

For a few seconds, all I heard was laughter in the bar, so I knew Levi hadn’t hung up.

“Don’t know when I can call again.”

“I know.”

“Wish her a happy birthday. Gotta go.”

The abrupt silence over the line told me he’d ended the call.

*Gotta go.*

This was how he said goodbye to me now? Did he think I encouraged Ash not to talk to him? I realized I still had the phone to my ear listening to nothing. Nothing. Like our marriage.

Goosebumps skated over my skin as I considered the options that had been lurking in the back of

my mind.

“I could’ve talked to Dad longer.” Whitney glared at Ash.

My youngest daughter merely shrugged her shoulders, not even looking up from where she’d been mangling the doilies.

“Whit, not today. She can do whatever she wants on her birthday.” I stilled Ash’s fingers from ruining the lacy paper before grasping her shoulders to squeeze them gently. I made a funny face. “Except ruin the cake presentation.”

The girls giggled.

Still, we couldn’t recapture the festive mood from that morning, dampened forever by Levi’s absence.

My anger wasn’t about his job. I had no problems when he’d been with the Teams. He’d withdrawn from us after *the event*. He became a big rock of anger no one wanted to be around, and he refused to get help for it. Ash was a bubbly girl by nature, but in her father’s presence, she was subdued. As for Whitney, all she wanted was her dad and welcomed any piece of his time he could spare.

They deserved more.

So much more.

Trying not to rant in front of them about their father was draining. I was reaching my own breaking point.

The doorbell blasted through the cloud of misery hovering in the kitchen.

My two girls glanced expectantly at the entryway. “Gramps and Nana!”

“Don’t open the door!” I yelled after them. The exuberance in their stampeding feet trampled the negative vibes that descended over our home. As my hand reached for the handle, I pushed Levi’s broken promises away and opened the door.

Tom Roth darkened the entrance.

“Oh my goodness. When did you get in?” He went to BUD/S training with my brother Callum and had been a longtime friend of the family since.

“Uncle Tom!” Ashley shrieked.

“Happy Birthday, kiddo.” He went down on his haunches and gave my youngest a hug before handing her a box wrapped in festive pink paper. My discerning eyes told me it was a Barbie doll. Whitney wasn’t as animated with men except around her dad and gramps and didn’t rush to meet him. She hung back. Tom was used to it and flashed a grin at my oldest child. “How’re you doing, Whit?”

She mumbled a response.

I nodded to the birthday decor that lay on the counter. “You two are slacking. Didn’t I tell you to decorate the chairs?”

Getting up from his crouch, he said, “I have a meeting tomorrow but I remembered in our last chat, you said it was Ashley’s fifth birthday today so I flew in a day early.” He looked around. “Where’s Levi?”

When he saw the answer in my eyes, his grin faded. “Shit. Sorry.”

I jerked my head toward the kitchen.

Tom followed my lead, giving a low whistle when he took in the cake. “Damn. You sure pulled out all the stops.”

“It’s from Nana and Gramps. They should be here soon.”

“How are they liking LA?” Tom asked.

My grandparents recently moved from New York to Los Angeles. Nana wanted to help with the girls since my career in special effects was taking off. Of course Gramps was fine with the move, especially since the McGraths opened a Whiskey Distillery in San Francisco.

“Nana is ecstatic,” I said. “As for Gramps, he’s happy that she’s happy.”

“I’m glad they’re doing okay.” His eyes bore into mine. “Are you okay?”

Unable to stand the scrutiny, I changed the subject. “Where are my manners?” I feigned a slap to the forehead and headed for the fridge, but Tom snagged my elbow, gently stopping my momentum.

“No rush. It’s me, Kelly.”

I pinched my lips together to keep them from trembling. He was not wrong. Being a former SEAL himself, he helped me understand Levi and what he went through, and why it was difficult for him to open up after what happened. He kept me sane, helping translate my husband’s baffling behavior.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m fine,” I whispered.

He cocked his head and looked at me dubiously.

I exhaled a breath. “Okay, I’m not. But you know how the job is.”

“I know what I told you before, but you don’t have to continue making excuses for him.” He let go of me and transferred his hands to his hips, contemplating his shoes before looking up at me. “Do you want me to talk to him next time he’s back on the grid? Knock some sense into that mother—him?”

“Oh ... no.” My heart pounded in horror “Don’t. Please don’t. The last thing Levi should know is that I’m talking to you about our troubles.”

Tom dragged a hand down his face. “I know I told you to give him time, but it’s been three years.”

“I know.”

“I hate seeing you like this. You and the girls deserve more.”

Hearing it come from Tom rubbed me the wrong way. It was almost as if I were cheating on my husband.

Still, there was no doubt that he meant well. I put a reassuring hand on his arm. “I’m fine. Truly, I am.” I gave him a shaky smile. It had been hard to paste a genuine one on my face today, but this time, it was real. “You know how you can help?”

He stilled, and his gaze turned fierce. “Anything.”

“Help us put together the dollhouse.”

## CHAPTER 1

Eighteen months later

Kelly

I was really doing it. Going on a date with a man who wasn’t my husband.

As though feeling my gaze on him, Tom put down the menu and grinned at me across the table.

“Made your choice?”

I smiled back. “Yes.”

Our waiter appeared beside us. “Are we ready for dinner?”

We both made our choices for the evening—prime rib for him, and red snapper for me.

After the waiter left, Tom grabbed his wine and raised it. “To new beginnings.”

My smile froze. I reached for my goblet but it stayed glued to the table.

Tom’s smile faded, and he lowered his glass. “Too soon?”

The charger plate seemed like a good place to rest my gaze. “It’s not that.” Finally, I met his eyes. “I just feel sad. But I also know, I need to get unstuck.”

He slid his hand across the table and opened it palm up. Tom had been a friendly presence since I’d separated from Levi.

That time Levi hadn't shown up for Ashley's birthday had been my breaking point, so when he finally came home, I asked him to move out. The focus of our separation was his relationship with the kids, especially Ashley. I was proud of him. He'd come a long way in eighteen months. It was time to work on me, to end the cycle of falling into hot sex with my estranged husband.

I looked at the man in front of me.

Tom was the perfect candidate.

We got along. He was good to my children. The fireworks weren't the same as with Levi, but I treasured stability more than anything. Besides, I hadn't given Tom a clear shot yet.

Earlier that evening when he picked me up from the house, looking amazingly attractive in a navy suit, a familiar zing fluttered low in my belly.

And when he kissed me lightly on the lips, it wasn't ... bad. It was something I could work with. "Move on" was a repeating mantra in my head, except "liar" kept echoing inside my skull at a louder volume.

Tom's mouth tightened, making me feel guilty. I dodged his invitations for three months, but I finally succumbed to the last one. The thing was, it wasn't even because of him, but something irritating my husband had said that became the catalyst.

"It's fine." He chuckled in self-deprecation. "But I don't want to be your rebound man."

"You're not." The first goal was to quit rebounding into my husband's bed. "But I'm really sorry, Tom. It's just that this is the first time I've been on a date in forever."

I raised the glass to my lips to take a sip before I blabbered my misgivings about this dinner. My babysitters—Nana and Gramps—had been full of encouragement.

"I understand," he said wryly, taking more than a sip of wine. "I consider this a victory after you've repeatedly turned me down."

Our appetizers appeared, so we shifted to less touchy conversation, namely the girls' summer activities.

"So, they're skipping camp this year?"

"Nana and Gramps are taking them to Disney World and Universal Studios. They'd cry if we sent them to camp." Both girls hated outdoor activities when it had nothing to do with the characters they loved on television. Love for movies was in our genes.

"And Levi?"

"He still has his weekends with them."

“But he’s been out of town for the past three weeks, right?”

“He gave me a heads up about it.” Sharpness entered my tone. One of the causes of the breakdown of our marriage was that Levi didn’t communicate enough when he took off for missions. It hadn’t always been that way.

I gave myself a mental shake. I also promised myself I’d give Tom my undivided attention.

“Sorry.” He exhaled a breath. “I didn’t mean to be an asshole about it. He kept doing it—”

“Let’s not talk about him or what happened in my marriage.”

“I witnessed enough of what did happen.”

“*Tom*,” I said. “Agreeing to go out with you doesn’t give you the right to criticize my hu—the father of my children.”

He winced. Even when I caught myself before I called Levi my husband, which technically he still was, he had caught the almost slip.

“I’m sorry,” he repeated. “I’m making this awkward for you.”

If there was one thing Tom Roth was good at, it was the aw-shucks Southern farm boy persona. He forgot I knew him when he was a SEAL. He was as deadly as Levi. His current business was security installations on the West Coast which made his job more stable than my husband’s. Funny how I never considered this when Levi swept me off my feet at twenty-two and asked me to marry him. Having Whitney and Ashley changed my priorities.

I shrugged. “You can’t help yourself. You’ve been so much a part of my life. You’re not a stranger.”

“Let’s make this easy,” Tom said. “Let’s not call this a date.”

“Okay.” I stifled a small laugh. “I smell a catch here.”

“No catch. I’m failing miserably on this date and I want a do-over.”

“Oooo-kay, we haven’t even had dinner.”

“Let this be a no-pressure dinner between friends ...”

My brow arched.

“Who could potentially be more,” he added. “Our interactions have always involved the children. We don’t know how to act around each other when they’re not around.”

It was painfully true.

He raised his glass of wine and said, “To friends who could be more.”

I clinked my glass to his. “I’ll drink to that.”

But then Tom's expression changed, his jaw hardening as he looked past my shoulder. A tingle snaked up my spine, before my whole body stiffened.

I turned in my seat, my stomach dropping when I spotted all six-five, two-hundred-thirty pounds of brawny man at the seating hostess' podium. I wasn't the only one who had noticed him. Several female—and male—patrons' attention angled his way. The man's eyes met mine across the room and my treacherous body came alive. Not exactly sexually, but with the exhilaration of seeing him.

My husband, Levi James.

Along the heels of exhilaration followed biting jealousy. My eyes frantically searched around him to see if he was with another woman.

And ... that irritated the hell out of me.

*Moving on, remember?*

He started across the room, his gaze unwavering on me.

“Fuck,” Tom said. “What do you want me to do?”

My unfocused stare returned to my dinner companion. “You think I have an answer?” Irritation morphed into worry, spurring me to snatch up my phone to check for any urgent messages from my grandparents.

Nothing.

Dizzy with the pendulum of rapid-fire emotions, my swoosh of relief swung back to irritation ... and a conundrum.

First and foremost, how to handle my husband advancing upon us. His electric stare narrowed briefly on Tom before slicing back to me, pinning me to my seat as if I'd committed a grave crime.

When he reached us, he stole a chair from an adjacent table, twisted it around, and sat beside us.

“This is cozy.” Levi surveyed the wine glasses on the table. He picked up mine and downed its contents.

“Ahh, tastes expensive.” He and Tom locked stares. He was acting like an asshole and he knew it.

“Do not cause a scene,” I hissed.

“Is everything okay here?” A man in a suit, I presumed to be the restaurant manager, hurried to our table. Levi's attire was out of place. He was in tactical cargos and a tee in a room full of suits and ties.

“We're fine,” Levi said. “I was late.”

The manager kept a neutral face but glanced at Tom who was murdering Levi with his stare. My husband simply cocked a brow at my dinner companion, daring him to say otherwise.



Tom looked at me. “I’ll do whatever you want, Kelly. If you want to have this asshole thrown out of here, I’ll do that too.”

“I’d like to see you try, bro,” Levi said lazily.

His nonchalant reply was at odds with the tension radiating from him. It was suffocating the air in the restaurant.

“Don’t.” One word was all I needed to communicate with him.

“That’ll depend on you, beautiful.”

“Mr. Roth? What do you want me to do?” The manager fidgeted beside us.

I turned pleading eyes toward Tom and I was crushed at his resigned look.

Damn Levi.

“We’re fine,” Tom said.

“We’re more than fine.” Levi captured my gaze. “Because she’s my wife.”

“Soon to be ex,” I hissed back.

“You wanna play that game here? You know what happens when you do that?”

Every nerve-ending in my body woke up in response to the threat in his voice, sparking a pornographic reel in my head. Over those eighteen months we’d been hooking up, and depending on our situation, the hate fucks were explosive.

“I don’t even know why I’m in denial,” Tom said, drawing both our gazes back to him. He pointed his finger between the two of us. “That’s chemistry.”

My husband smirked. “You’re the moron who tries to get in between us”

“Levi,” I snapped.

“But you know what they say about chemistry”—Tom took a deliberate sip of his wine—“burn too hot and you burn to ash.”

Levi’s brows drew together dangerously.

“I was a chemistry nerd in high school,” Tom explained. “I would’ve been a college professor instead of a SEAL, but I like a challenge. Get me?”

“I’m not seeing your point, Roth, so spit it out.”

Tom slouched back in his chair. “It’s all about finding the right composition to start a slow burn. Burn too fast and ...” He let the words hang and pointed at the two of us again. “How’s that working for the both of you?”

I heard Levi growl and I glared at Tom. “Not helping.”

“If he’s got something to say, he can say it to me now.”

“You idiots,” I whisper-yelled. “People are starting to notice.” I ducked my head between my shoulders while my eyes darted around the restaurant, painfully aware of the interest of the patrons who were not so subtly glancing at our table. “Maybe have the server pack up the food,” I told Tom before addressing my husband. “Thanks for ruining my dinner with a friend.”

“A friend?” Levi’s heated eyes scanned me up and down.

Okay, so maybe I dressed a bit too sexily. I was feeling empowered to finally go on a date. Well, a friendly date as it appeared.

“Yes. Friend,” Tom said. “I realized I needed to go slow with Kelly. Slow burn, remember?”

I slid my chair back and got up. “I’m taking an Uber. See if I care if you two beat the crap out of each other.”

With a huff, I grabbed my purse and left the two aggravating males at the table. Tom’s response to Levi surprised me. Baiting my husband that way was a brawl waiting to happen.

I stopped by the ladies’ room first with the need to catch a breather. I had given my dark hair a blow out to compliment my little black dress, but now the curls were irritating my flushed face. I dug out a clip I always kept in my purse to put it in a ponytail. Snapping up several paper towels to run under cool water, I cooled my heated cheeks. Flushed mostly from embarrassment, no doubt partly from my husband’s heated gaze that promised retribution of the claiming kind.

I repeated the mantra in my head.

“Move on, dammit.” I pressed my palms against the sink and leaned into it, sucking in a couple of breaths, still disbelieving that Levi crashed my date with Tom. After calming down, I slipped my phone out and called my grandmother. She answered immediately. “Did Levi find you?”

“Nana, why in heaven’s name didn’t you warn me?”

“And say what? Your husband is about to descend on your date? I didn’t want to worry you for nothing in case he didn’t. Guess it was too much to assume he wouldn’t.”

“How did he find out I was on a date?”

“I think he talked to Whitney yesterday.”

“And you told him which restaurant?”

Nana made a sound as if I was even wrong to ask that question. Levi had tenacity stamped on his forehead.

“You have to be impressed. Wasn’t he clear across Europe for a job?”

“I don’t know what to do now. I don’t think he’ll let me leave with Tom.”

Nana sighed. “Didn’t I tell you to make it clear to him?”

“He was being bullheaded.”

“And this date with Tom was you being defiant. You wanted to prove Levi wrong and that you could move on.”

“What a mess.”

“Where are you calling from?”

“The ladies’ room.”

“You think it’s a good idea, child, to leave those two men alone.”

“Shit.” Images of overturned tables, broken chairs, and shattered porcelain flashed through my head.

With those thoughts scurrying in my mind, I wrenched the ladies’ room door open, sprinted out, and smacked into a solid wall.

Steady hands gripped my elbows, and before my gaze reached the face of the man I ran into, I knew who it was.

“Where’s Tom?” I asked.

Levi’s jaw clenched. I shouldn’t be poking the bear, but my irritation was at its peak.

“He’s waiting for the packed food.”

“I came with him, Levi. It’s only right that I go home with him.”

“Over my dead body.”

“This is not the place,” I hissed.

His eyes narrowed. “Don’t make me prove otherwise, Kelly.”

His voice was soft; the threat wasn’t. I felt a zap between my legs. Stupid chemistry. I wished it would burn the hell out.

All I could do was glare at him.

“Let’s take this outside,” Tom said behind the mountain that was my husband.

I pivoted on my stiletto and stalked out the rear exit of the restaurant and into the parking lot.

The two men seemed to fall back. Harsh whispers were exchanged behind me, but I continued walking until I realized I didn’t know where we were parked.

I spun around to face them. “I’m Ubering it.” Dammit, I forgot to order my ride, but they didn’t know that.

“Hell no.”

“Fuck no.”

I split a look between them. “This is ridiculous.”

Tom raised a brow. “We were having a friendly date when this jealous gorilla crashed our dinner.”

“Friendly?” Levi scoffed. “There was nothing friendly about the way you were looking at my wife.”

Tom folded his arms. “Soon-to-be ex.”

Shit.

I surged forward just as Levi punched Tom across the cheek. “Stop it!”

Tom staggered back, but before I could get between them, he launched himself into Levi’s torso, sending them crashing to the ground. My attention momentarily flitted to the takeout containers where the contents of steak and fish met their demise. I paced around the grappling pair rolling on asphalt and exchanging punches. Growing up with brothers, I knew better than to try and break them apart.

“Stop it!” I shouted.

But the two were lost in a flurry of fists, grunts, and cursing.

A crowd started to form including two parking attendants who stood there gawking at the men.

“Do something,” I yelled at them.

They both looked at me like I was crazy.

“You two are going to kill each other if you don’t stop!” They didn’t seem to hear me, and the crowd was already taking bets.

Unbelievable.

I stomped my foot. “I’m leaving.”

I spotted the restaurant manager in the crowd. He glared at me as if it was all my fault. I fished my phone out and brought up the transportation app and started walking.

“Kelly,” Levi shouted.

I continued walking, but it wasn’t long before the grip on my arm slowed me down.

I stopped and glared at him. “Is he alive?”

“For now,” he responded.

“That was a joke.”

“I don’t joke when it comes to you, Kelly.”

He tugged my arm and guided me to his Escalade.

“You had no right to show up at dinner.”

He didn’t answer me until we arrived at the vehicle.

“Kelly.” Tom limped over to where we were. He was bleeding from the nose and lips. Meanwhile, my husband only had a cut on his brow. His nickname with the SEALs was Iron Jaw. He credited his “jaw of steel” to his Samoan-Irish blood.

“You okay?” I asked my doomed dinner partner.

Levi grunted his displeasure beside me.

“I’m fine. You sure you want to go home with this asshole?”

Levi broke into a sarcastic chuckle. “You seriously didn’t learn your lesson—motherfucker.”

“You’re not the only frogman here.”

“Enough!” I pushed the mountain out of the way to talk to Tom. Levi hesitated, but emitted a grunt and circled the SUV toward the driver’s side.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “We probably shouldn’t have done this.”

Tom shot a long look in the direction of my husband who slammed into the Escalade before returning his attention to me. “Don’t. Not your fault. But maybe you should clear things up with him first.”

“He’s stubborn.”

Tom smiled wryly. “Or he’s determined not to lose the best thing that ever happened to him. I can understand that.”

The Escalade started, and the window on the passenger side rolled down. “Let’s go.”

“Call me when you get home,” Tom said.

“Okay.”

The men exchanged one last daggered look before Tom sauntered away.

I opened the SUV door, slid into my seat, and turned to my husband. “Did you really have to—”

He dragged me over and slammed his mouth on mine.