

THE FOUR YEAR HITCH

A Short Story Sequel to THE SEVEN YEAR HITCH Hallmark Channel Movie

Prologue

Like many, I attend school class reunions only when they fit my busy schedule. When I do go, it's usually to high school homecomings because several in my class remained together from K through twelve in the same school system and became lifelong friends. But as far as college reunions are concerned, I don't attend as often because I only had a small circle of friends at a big university, and our time together was shorter. Also, I was a calculator-carrying nerd, and spent most of my time studying for an engineering degree. After graduation, it wasn't surprising that our small social group scattered to pursue careers, raise families, and for some, travel the world. Hardly any made the effort to keep in touch, including me. Last fall, however, before large gatherings were canceled due to the Pandemic, I found myself with a free weekend and decided to attend my college "all-classes" reunion to be held on campus. This is where my extraordinary story begins. It was at this reunion that I learned something so unexpected and surprising that I feel compelled to make you aware.


To begin, let me ask if you remember the 2012 Hallmark Channel romantic comedy, The Seven Year Hitch? If so, entertaining story line.

characters, have a long-term were six years old. Jennifer successful businesswoman, two goals: To be her best potential. The movie draws



you'll remember it had a clever and Jennifer and Kevin, the two main friendship that began when they grew into a beautiful and while Kevin never grew up. He had friend and live a life of unfulfilled its title from events seven years

after college when Jen accepts a marriage proposal from Bryce, a handsome but deviously unfaithful man. Kevin recognizes the terrible decision she is making and in a desperate ploy to save her, argues that since they have lived together for seven years—he as her platonic houseguest—they are already married by "common law." He is too late. In a touching scene where Kevin is crushed emotionally, he confesses his love for her, but Jennifer confirms she will marry Bryce anyway, ending their long-term friendship. Not to worry, because in the movie's climax Jen




realizes and corrects her mistake. She dumps fiancé Bryce, takes Kevin back, and marries him in a simple but lovely outdoor ceremony.

*This is indeed a romantic, if predictable, Hallmark ending. But you should know that the actual ending to their story happened much differently, and I promise to convince you it's true beyond doubt. You see, I happened to have attended college with the real Kevin and Jennifer. I hadn't followed their lives or had any contact with either since graduation until I saw the movie. I recognized both movie characters immediately as the two fellow students I knew back then. I was pleasantly surprised that Hallmark made a movie based on their lives after college, but I didn't give it much thought after that, **until recently.***

As I circulated the reunion ballroom greeting and getting reacquainted with old student friends, I ran into Kevin and Jennifer. As we talked over old times, I remembered Kevin as a fun-loving, unfocused, and lazy—in my opinion—student. I remembered Jennifer differently, as a beautiful, smart, and driven student. Nevertheless, they constantly hung out together at the Waffle Habit, our favorite 24-hour eatery. Back then, I was convinced they were wrong for each other. As an engineer, I couldn't calculate how two wrongs could equal one right! But now, I could tell by Kevin and Jennifer's clingy body language that they were deeply in love, almost like newlyweds. So, I wasn't surprised when they told me they had just welcomed infant twins to their family. I mentioned how much I enjoyed the Hallmark movie based on their lives after college, which chronicled how Kevin cooked up the common law marriage ruse to keep Jennifer from marrying Bryce. I said it was very romantic how Jennifer dumped Bryce at the last minute and married Kevin. With uncomfortable silence, both stared blankly at me.

*Overcoming my embarrassment, I continued by asking them if their lives had been affected by the movie since 2012. Kevin and Jennifer looked at each other and finally declared, **"You should know that the movie ending wasn't the way it happened for us. The producer changed it to shorten the length. We didn't marry for another 4 years and we almost lost each other during that time. It's only due to God's grace that we're together at all."** With heightened interest, I asked, "Please tell me, if you will, what happened during those next four years?" To which they cautiously responded, "We'll be happy to if you want to listen."*

We found a quiet table and they began speaking rapidly, interrupting each other back and forth. After almost an hour, my head was spinning with the details of



their incredible story. As soon as I left the reunion, I rushed to transcribe my mental notes on my laptop's word processor before they faded from memory. Recently, I edited them into The Four Year Hitch, an inspiring short story sequel to the original movie, The Seven Year Hitch. I intend to tell their complete love story. Kevin and Jennifer would want that.

*As their sequel story begins, Jennifer and her fiancé Bryce are the couple who marry, not Jennifer and her best friend Kevin. So, how can I describe their **true** story without contradicting the final Hallmark movie scene where Jennifer and Kevin marry? **This is how...***

Jennifer

After practicing their wedding ceremony with the minister at the rehearsal dinner, where Bryce embarrassingly boasted that Jennifer's diamond engagement ring was "the biggest rock at the jewelers," exposing his lie that it was "carried across two continents by his grandfather," Jennifer retreats to a quiet place to think...and decide. Following minutes in a trance-like stare, Sally, her BFF and matron of honor, firmly taps her on the shoulder, interrupting her daydream of the final scenes in the movie where she tosses her engagement ring into Bryce's champagne glass, runs after Kevin and marries him. This daydream is her heart telling her to dump Bryce and choose Kevin, her best friend, and unrealized true love. But when Jennifer returns to reality, her practical mind dismisses the daydream as merely pre-wedding jitters. She fatefully decides to marry Bryce after he begs her forgiveness for being so insensitive and self-absorbed. Bryce promises to change his behavior and Jennifer pins her hopes for a happy marriage on him keeping his promise.

The wedding is beautiful. Jennifer is stunning in white and Bryce is handsome in black. Mrs. Von Hoffman, Bryce's clients, and several partners attend. The reception features rockin' music, classy decorations, and Chef Henri's delicious food. The first dance is romantic. Everything is perfect...or is it?

Kevin

Heartbroken and feeling even lower than his lousy credit score, Kevin entertains the absurd thought of joining the French Foreign Legion. "Isn't this what a guy does when he needs to forget a girl and start over?" he asks his pub buddies. After all, he lost Jennifer to a low-life cheater who won't treat her the way she deserves, and there's NOTHING he can do about it now—except wallow in despair.

Lucky for Kevin, there isn't a French Foreign Legion recruiting office nearby, so he reluctantly dismisses this insane idea.

In the depth of his despair, he begins to feel an urgent need to *"have structure in his life and get a real job,"* as Jennifer admonished him to do, so Kevin follows up on a career tip from Mr. Bellamy, one of his golf caddie clients and decorated Vietnam veteran, who is showing interest in his military strategy games. Bellamy sees promise in Kevin and recommends that he seek a steady job as a civilian contractor teaching computer skills to off-duty military personnel and families of deployed soldiers at the U.S. Army Reserve Training Center located a few miles south of home in Denver, Colorado. Mr. Bellamy gives him a contact name and phone, and Kevin makes the call.


By chance, while interviewing with staffers at the Military Family Support Center (MFSC) on base, Kevin is spotted in the Commissary between interviews by an Army recruiter always on alert for qualified candidates. The recruiter offers to buy his coffee and strikes up a conversation during which Kevin casually mentions that he is interviewing for a contract teaching position, but his real passion is inventing and (hopefully) selling his military strategy games. Realizing that Kevin's revelation is a gift from the heavens, the wily recruiter suggests that his wargaming skills would be highly valued by the U.S. Army and he could have a more rewarding career developing his strategies under real world conditions, if he would consider enlisting. *Oh, really!*

Kevin takes the bait, believing that Army enlistment is an opportunity to get his remaining college hours paid, gain real-life experience for his war game designs, and most of all, numb his terrible heartache. He disregards any doubts, and on Jennifer's wedding day, signs the enlistment papers for a four year "hitch" of active duty plus four years of reserve duty without hesitation. He is sent to the Military Entrance Processing aptitude exams. Only after that Jeremy. Not surprisingly, earful of reasons why he is he leaves for basic training at after Jennifer's wedding. He taking only a change of clothes and a wallet size picture of Jennifer.



Station and takes his medical and does he inform his brother, Jeremy flips out and gives him an making a **BIG** mistake! However, Fort Benning, Georgia, two weeks departs home, and his current life,

Kevin's life quickly changes in ways he could not have imagined. His initial experience with Army Basic Training is grueling. He is unprepared physically, and ten years older than many of the other recruits but surprisingly discovers that he



is tougher mentally than expected, with his memory of Jennifer helping him. When training gets over-the-top rough, he visualizes his picture of Jennifer, gathers strength, and pushes on. With stubborn resolve, he lasts the first week... then makes two weeks, which his brother predicted he wouldn't. He hangs in for four weeks and keeps going. His body is painfully weak at first, then slowly begins toughening up.


Jennifer

Jennifer and Bryce take a honeymoon trip to the romantic Calabash Cove Resort & Spa on the Caribbean island of St. Lucia. Almost immediately Jennifer notices that Bryce has a wandering eye but dismisses it; after all, he promised. Following the honeymoon, they begin their new lives together with Bryce moving into Jennifer's house. Bryce continues traveling frequently to Chicago trying to impress Mrs. Von Hoffman and become a partner at his firm. Jennifer continues her career and wins the Fujimura account. Mr. Monroy promotes her to a bigger job in a corner office.

Kevin

Kevin completes his 10-week Army Basic Combat Training. In the final test, a 96-hour challenge called the FORGE, his squad must work together to overrun an enemy position and take prisoners. However, his team runs into trouble and is nearly captured instead. Kevin doesn't give up; he digs deep and relies on his wargaming skills to execute a maneuver that handily defeats their opponents. His instructors are so impressed with his ability to improvise that they review his aptitude tests and decide to "volunteer" him to fill a rare open slot in Army Ranger School, which is another 61 days of grueling and demanding training.

Washout rates are unbelievably high for Army Ranger hopefuls. From the first hours of training, called Assessment, the instructors shout and taunt him to quit. Yelling only inches from his ears, they tell him over and over that he is an old man, a slacker, a weakling, and a quitter. Endless running with heavy packs on little or no food, crawling over impossible obstacles, traversing logs and clinging to ropes 50 feet above the ground then dropping into water and swimming to shore, mastering explosives and multiple weapons, executing close-quarters live-fire assaults, and hand-to-hand combat drills cause stress, exhaustion, and pain so intense that at times he can barely visualize Jennifer's picture in his mind's eye. And during nighttime high-altitude-high-opening (HAHO) parachute training, he can't visualize anything except a dark curtain of fear.




Deep down Kevin knows he hasn't taken his life seriously so far, and this may be his last chance to prove he is worthy, to himself, to Jennifer, and his country. His freeloading ways and lackadaisical attitude are finished. The Army is making sure of that. Others more qualified buckle under the pressure and quit, but Kevin endures Ranger school because he has ignited within himself an intense, burning desire to become a man that Jennifer would be proud of, even though he knows he may never see her in person again.

During water jump training he meets Maxwell, a fellow trainee who becomes his buddy. Max is from the Denver area too. He attended the same college as Kevin and Jennifer but never met either while on campus. Kevin confides in Max about everything, especially about Jennifer, his *"best friend, and inspiration."* Kevin and Max complete Ranger School together. Jeremy attends the graduation ceremony at Fort Benning before both soldiers are assigned to deploy with the storied 75th Ranger Regiment to the middle east. In preparation for deployment, the Army strongly recommends that soldiers and close family members take steps to guard access to their social media accounts for security reasons. Kevin and Jeremy become invisible—digitally to the public—for the duration of Kevin's four-year overseas deployment.

Jennifer

One-year passes, and Jennifer continues to excel at her career at Monroy and Klein Architecture but is increasingly dissatisfied with Bryce and her marriage to him. She suspects that he is secretly meeting Chandra (*his colleague*) for more than business discussions. Jen thinks about Kevin frequently and yearns for his emotional support but hesitates to contact him because of the pain she knew she caused. Finally, she gives up on her dream of a happy future with Bryce. None of Bryce's apologies, excuses, and lies will work anymore. She moves him out of her house and files for divorce. The legal process takes months, but finally, she and Bryce officially split. Jennifer becomes lonely in the house by herself with only Napoleon (*her faithful Lab*) to talk to and increasingly misses Kevin and the special relationship they had. She finally admits to herself that she should never have made the mistake of letting him go.

Jennifer tries calling and texting Kevin, *but his cell number is no longer in service.* She emails him, *but it's undeliverable.* She visits the golf course where he once worked; *they don't know his whereabouts but remember him talking about finishing his degree.* She contacts the college admissions office, *but he isn't enrolled.* She



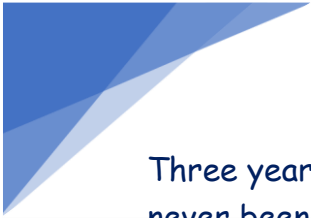
calls and texts Jeremy, but again with no luck. Then, Jennifer drives to Jeremy's old apartment and hits yet another dead end; he moved a year ago and left no forwarding address. Also, Sally uses her investigative contacts to find Kevin. Her sleuths finally locate someone with Kevin's first and last name on a list of personnel in an undisclosed branch of the military. But Jennifer dismisses the information. Kevin did crazy things to win her from Bryce, but she doesn't think he would go so far as to risk his life to win her love. Little does she know how wrong she is and how close she has come to locating him. After months of searching, Jennifer finally gives up and accepts that she may never see Kevin again.

Despite her crashing love life, Jennifer immerses herself in work and her career surges at Monroy and Klein. She becomes the youngest executive to run multiple divisions of the company. At the same time, Jennifer learns that Bryce's career is taking a nosedive. He doesn't receive the promotion to partner that he covets and is "asked" to resign by Mrs. Von Hoffman for not displaying the traits of stability that he lacked, as evidenced by his divorce.

After several months of unemployment, Bryce swallows an enormous amount of pride and contacts Jennifer to enquire about a job. Mr. Monroy interviews Bryce and thinks that even though he isn't a professional architect he has superior negotiating skills which can be crucial in closing the larger deals they plan. He begins to pressure Jennifer for her recommendation, but Jennifer isn't sure she is ready to put the past behind her. Working with someone you were once married to presents challenges on several levels for Jennifer. She still harbors anger and resentment toward Bryce for cheating and lying about it. How can she ever trust him in her organization? She finally gives Mr. Monroy her recommendation to have Bryce hired on probation, rationalizing her decision that he may become a valuable business asset in the future. After all, he is settling down with Chandra, and he's her problem now. She pledges to keep a close watch on Bryce's performance. He accepts and begins reporting to one of Jennifer's three division managers.

Kevin

Two years pass as Kevin and Max are continually deployed on surveillance missions in dangerous places. This is their job, and they are good at it. Kevin is especially smart and tough. He is assigned to the Regimental Reconnaissance Company and has become almost fearless which serves him well in combat situations. When things get bad, he pulls out his picture of Jennifer for support. He keeps it tucked away in the front pocket of his tactical vest.




Three years of deployment pass but Kevin rarely corresponds with Jeremy and has never been back home on leave between deployments, not wanting to take the chance of seeing Jennifer and Bryce together. Jennifer dates but doesn't find men that she relates well to or could fall in love with. She spends her birthday with Sally and her kids at a pizza 'n games restaurant. Her best friend, Kevin, is not there to help her celebrate. She knows that Kevin must remember her cell number and she checks her messages all day, but not even an "*HBD Jen*" text arrives.

Then, the unexpected happens. Kevin is on a mission that should be straight forward. He's positioning surveillance equipment in a new location when elements of the Taliban ambush. Kevin has been in these situations before and reacts instinctively, but a nearby RPG explosion hits him in the chest with shrapnel. Luckily its repelled by his body armor, but he's briefly knocked senseless. He's evacuated to a field hospital to be checked out overnight. The next day, Kevin is evaluated fit for duty and released back to his unit. However, an *Incident Report* is sent to Jeremy, his family contact. Jeremy becomes extremely concerned and calls a chaplain at the Military Family Support Center. The chaplain arranges a video chat with Kevin's buddy Max since Kevin has already been redeployed downrange on another mission.

Jennifer

Jeremy passes the Bar Exam and joins an environmental law firm but finds it difficult to focus on his career. He is becoming afraid for Kevin because his mild-mannered brother has turned into a warrior who isn't afraid of anything or anyone. And now this happens; he almost gets killed. Jeremy begins his trip to the Army Reserve Training Center for the video chat when he decides to stop at a coffee shop on the way. After placing his order at the counter, he turns around and comes face-to-face with Jennifer and Sally. Their facial expressions are like deer staring into headlights. First, silence, then awkward small talk. Jennifer finally acknowledges the elephant in the room by asking flippantly, "*By the way, how's Kevin; I haven't heard from him in years?*" Jeremy tells Jennifer that Kevin joined the military, became an Army Ranger, and is deployed somewhere in the middle east. Trying to hide her concern, Jennifer asks if they can "*sit for a moment,*" to give her a chance to process the news and probe deeper into Kevin's new life.

After finding a booth, Jennifer scoots in holding her coffee cup so that her empty ring finger is in plain view as an unspoken message to Kevin, via Jeremy, that she's



no longer married to Bryce. Once seated, Jeremy retrieves his phone and shows Jennifer and Sally the official photo of Kevin in his dress uniform and beret. He frustratingly admits that he isn't allowed to know specifics on Kevin's whereabouts or details of his missions. All he can say is that his job is "high-risk" because Rangers are trained to confront the enemy directly. The conversation takes a more ominous turn when Jeremy says that he has just been notified that Kevin was struck with shrapnel during a mission and he is on his way to the Military Family Support Center to video chat with Kevin's buddy Max who may give him some additional information on Kevin's physical and mental condition.

Jennifer instantly recalls Sally's investigator telling her he found a person in the military with Kevin's first and last name but had dismissed it as improbable that it was her Kevin. "What a mistake," she whispers silently to herself. She feels overwhelming urgency to reverse the string of life altering mistakes she's made with Kevin and asks if she can accompany Jeremy and speak with Max herself. This may be her best, and probably her last, chance to make things right. She must at least try, even with the risk that years apart may have driven out all the love Kevin once had in his heart for her. Jeremy gladly approves and both drive to the MFSC for the video chat.

When the video starts and Maxwell appears on screen, Jeremy asks about Max's wellbeing, then inquires how the shrapnel incident happened to Kevin. Max says that before he can discuss Kevin's incident, he must know who the person is sitting beside him. He says he can see some blonde hair but not a face. Jeremy turns the camera toward Jennifer and Max says surprisingly, "Oh, Hello Jennifer!" Jennifer and Jeremy are both dumbfounded. Jennifer pauses a few seconds then asks, "How do you know my name?" Max says everyone in their team knows her name because Kevin shows her picture to all of them and talks about her often. So many times, that everyone thinks he made her up by copying a picture from a movie star's website. After all, they think, she is way above Kevin's pay grade.

Then, Max tells Jennifer that Kevin's picture of her was destroyed when the shrapnel ripped through the vest pocket where he keeps it. He says she needs to send him a replacement picture immediately because Kevin depends on it to protect him and give him courage. He adds that it is important that every soldier carry something to remind him or her of loved ones back home. On second thought, he suggests that Jennifer also call Kevin directly in the field on a secure satellite



phone that his team leader carries. He gives her the long sequence of numbers to access the satellite phone.

Max informs Jennifer that Kevin's team leader, Mother, (*full name Second Lieutenant Brian J. Mother*) is straight out of the Academy and keeps tight control of the sat phone. He decides who gets through to his team members and who doesn't. He warns Jennifer that she likely will be confronted with Lieutenant Mother's over-the-top screening before he will give the phone to Kevin. *"Brian Mother is a multi-tasker," Max explains, "He can defend our country and offend callers to that sat phone at the same time, and he specializes in embarrassing girlfriends calling their boyfriends."* *"Be persistent, but don't lose your cool,"* he instructs. *"And one thing you should know for sure,"* he emphasizes, *"never make joking reference to Brian Mother's mother, Mrs. Mother."* *"That is if you ever want to speak to Kevin."*

Later that evening, with Sally for support, Jennifer gathers her courage. She takes a deep cleansing breath, presses the "speaker" button so Sally can hear, and dials the special access numbers of the sat phone.

Click...click...ring...click...ring...ring...ring... After hearing enough clicks and rings to make her think she must have copied the number wrong from Max, she hears a distant voice answer, **"Mother here, who's this?"** Jennifer identifies herself and says she wants to speak with Kevin. Not recognizing this soft-spoken stranger by her name or voice, Mother begins his patented phone screen tactic that Max had warned about, *"Why would you want that worm bag? He's one of our recon Rangers. They eat raw meat and bugs; and smell like it too!"* *"Because I want to talk to Kevin. I'm his best friend. Will you please put him on the phone?"* Jennifer asks again, using her business voice this time. *"Well, maybe, but I didn't think he had very many friends. Tell you what, we keep him pretty busy around here; I'll give him your message."* Mother retorts. *"Again, I'm his best friend, and I need to speak to him myself. Will you p-l-e-a-s-e give him the phone?"* Jennifer pleads. *"Hey, you wouldn't happen to be that jazzy blonde with the big brown eyes in that picture he carries around. You know, you'd be better off with a refined, sensitive guy like me."* Mother declares suggestively, trying his best to raise her ire. Jennifer quickly controls this sideways conversation like she does with impolite clients and Mother soon decides it's useless giving her any more grief. He summons Kevin to the phone, but in a parting shot, he announces loudly and sarcastically, **"Some beauty named Jennifer wants to talk to Kevin; Says he owes her money and wants to know what he's going to do about it."**

Kevin

As Mother hands Kevin the phone, he commands, "Keep this conversation short because the **neighbors** may visit for **tea** any minute; **know what I mean?**" "Copy that, Lieutenant," Kevin replies crisply, then picks up the phone, "Kevin here." Jennifer begins cautiously by saying, "Hello, Kev, this is your friend Jennifer and I've been looking everywhere for you." Kevin's mind goes blank and he's rendered speechless. Jennifer continues, "You never told me goodbye before you left for wherever you are, and I've missed you." When his painful silence continues long enough to become worrisome, Jennifer pleads, "Kevin, please say something." Finally, Kevin recovers enough to say, "Hi, Jen, I've really missed you too." The conversation between Kevin and Jennifer lasts less than two minutes when it's cut short by shouting and the deafening "**RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT**" of the team's M240 .50 Caliber machine gun in the background. Kevin shouts over the pandemonium, "**I've got to go to work now, but I'll call you back when things cool down...bye Jen.**" As the call goes dead, Jennifer realizes that Kevin has grown up and taken a seriously dangerous job, and she becomes more than concerned. She becomes alarmed and her facial expression shows fear.

In a couple of days, when Kevin gets into a safer place, he calls Jennifer's cell. When her phone rings, it interrupts her pitch to a conference room of clients. She recognizes Mother's sat number and answers immediately, "Kevin, are you safe? Are you okay?" Kevin responds, "I'm good. Our perimeter's tight. How are you doing?" Relieved but exasperated, Jennifer blurts out, "How do you think? I heard gunfire. I'm scared to death for you. I can't pray enough!" To avoid more drama in front of her clients, she walks out of the conference room to her private office. One of her staff takes over the presentation and explains that Jennifer has a loved one in harm's way overseas. She and Kevin talk until the batteries run low on Mother's phone. Jennifer fills him in on her life since the wedding. Kevin has no idea that she divorced Bryce 3 years ago. She regrets the anguish she caused because of the bad choices she made. He knew all along that Bryce wasn't right for her, and it's extra satisfying to hear her finally admit it. She wants to know how much longer Kevin's enlistment will last. Kevin says he is near to completing his 3rd deployment and plans to be stateside within a few months. She wants very much to see him and says to expect a new picture each time he glances at it. As she hopes will say, "I love you!"





for Jennifer, she will never again hide her true feelings from Kevin.

More phone calls follow, and Jennifer and Kevin's long-distance relationship grows. They both realize they are destined to be together and will reunite when Kevin's four-year hitch of active duty is over. For the first time, he starts thinking more about going home to Jennifer than redeploying. He has fewer than 90 days to go.

Then, all plans for personal leave are canceled, and deployments are extended by USCENTCOM. The middle east has once again become a tinder box of violent terrorist attacks and coalition counter attacks. Kevin has become a reconnaissance specialist and an expert with the sophisticated electronics the Army has at its disposal. He is in demand to accompany Ranger teams and keeps continuously busy.


Jennifer

All correspondence between Kevin and Jennifer stops. Kevin doesn't call when he promises, and Jennifer doesn't know why. Was Kevin okay? Did something else happen? Jennifer hears news reports that the middle east is once again in turmoil. She tenses when the names of affected soldiers are released. She worries about Kevin but can't do anything but hope and pray. She and Jeremy speak frequently and promise to share any information learned by either.

Kevin

Kevin and Max's next mission is to help plan Fire Team Bravo's attack on a terrorist training camp. The pair's objective is to reconnoiter enemy weapons capability in advance of a full-scale assault. They will be deployed downrange, then hump ten clicks at night to Zone X-ray, where they will deploy a highly sophisticated drone that Kevin carries in a special backpack. The drone is programmed to silently scan for weapons of mass destruction while simultaneously up linking data to a U.S. spy satellite. Kevin's job is to launch and verify that the communications link works properly between the drone and satellite. Controllers will guide the drone remotely, but Kevin and Max must remain ready to react in case something goes wrong with the link.

The mission proceeds well at first. Kevin and Max successfully drop into enemy-infested territory and travel in total darkness using night vision goggles. The drone must deploy by first light the next morning. Kevin and Max arrive at Zone X-Ray ready to launch on schedule. The drone launch goes as planned and communication is established between the drone and spy satellite. Rangers




specializing in reconnaissance are masters at camouflage and Kevin and Max conceal themselves in the brush near one of the enemy encampments.

Suddenly, a local herder tending livestock walks so close to Kevin's concealed position that he accidentally steps on his partially buried boot. The surprised herder retreats toward the enemy encampment in a panicked run. Kevin and Max let the herder escape to avoid the complications of a fight, but which leaves them at serious risk. They are kilometers away from backup and must remain in proximity of the drone to complete the surveillance mission. They advise Fire Team Bravo's HQ of their position and unfortunate discovery. An immediate rescue is necessary to save Kevin and Max. But before a rescue team can reach them, they will have to defend themselves without help. Both Kevin and Max are well-armed. But are not carrying enough ammunition for a prolonged defense.

The terrorists begin hunting for the pair immediately. Kevin and Max know they cannot allow themselves to be taken due to the extensive knowledge they possess of the sophisticated drone they deployed. They change their position several times to confuse trackers and evade detection.

Finally, Kevin and Max's luck runs out and they are spotted. A fierce battle ensues with rapid exchanges of small arms fire. Kevin and Max take deadly aim on their attackers and are not yet wounded in the fight. Then, Max is struck in the leg and falls. Kevin reaches him and hoists him on his shoulder. As Kevin carries Max toward the safety of a ravine, he steps into a hole, and both fall to the ground. Kevin breaks his left leg above the ankle, and as Max's weight comes down hard on Kevin's left forearm, it fractures too. Kevin is trained and disciplined to fight through fatigue and pain, so he drags Max into the ravine using his uninjured arm and leg. They hear the drone self-destruct in the distance, as it is designed to do when the upload to the satellite completes. Kevin and Max know the mission is a success as they brace to fend off the hoard of bad guys preparing to rush them.

Out of water and lying motionless in the scorching desert sun, Kevin and Max know this will be a fight for their lives. Kevin takes quick inventory of his defensive arsenal. He has his MK16 carbine with an attached MK13 grenade launcher and a limited supply of high-explosive grenades. After those, he has his M9 Beretta pistol, and after that, he has his tactical knife and one good arm to use it. And after that...



Kevin has protected Jennifer since she was 6 years old when he rescued her Slinky from a bully who stole it. He pulls out the new picture she sent him, now stained, and torn, and takes one last look. The right words come from deep inside, "Loved you then, love you now, love you forever." He tucks the picture underneath the ceramic plates of his ballistic vest. They will have to take his life to get it. He moves his hand back to the trigger. He is ready. Bring 'em on!

Only silence now, as the terrorists creep closer...closer...closer.

Like booming thunder after lightning, two Apache Longbow attack helicopters **ROAR** overhead spitting rockets and bullets that save their lives. Terrorists scatter like red ants from a kicked pile. Both choppers circle providing protection while a MEDEVAC copter lands near the ravine where Kevin and Max lay. Kevin exclaims to Max, "**Cavalry's here! I think we're gonna make it, buddy.**" From the landed chopper, no other than team leader Lieutenant Brian Mother jumps out to help them aboard. "**You two worm bags look'n for a ride?**" Mother shouts over the rotor wash. With more blasts from the Apache's mini guns, both injured soldiers are on their way to safety.

Kevin and Max land in friendly territory and are taken to a field hospital. Both are stabilized, but it's decided that because of the severity of Kevin's broken bones, and Max's leg wound, both soldiers will be flown to the Landstuhl Regional Medical Center—LRMC—near Frankfurt, Germany¹, so surgeons specialized in combat wounds can treat their injuries.

Jennifer

Good news travels fast. Bad news travels even faster. The Military Family Support Center at the Reserve Training Base has received news that two Army Rangers are "overdue for extraction" on a classified mission. This is just Army-speak for, "they're missing and we're doing everything possible to find them." Both Jeremy and Max's wife, Maria, are notified simultaneously that their soldiers are the ones in trouble. Jeremy calls Jennifer, who is at work. Jennifer takes the news calmly on the surface but is terrified inside. She tells Jeremy that she will

¹ The largest U.S. military hospital outside the continental United States.

leave work immediately. She and Jeremy arrive at about the same time at the Center and are met by one of the priests on duty.

Fortunately, news that the two Rangers were rescued reaches the MFSC just as they arrive. Relief! The worst possible outcome hasn't happened, because they know that both soldiers are alive, but no one knows their conditions. The priest finally learns from an Army nurse that Kevin has fractures of the tibia and fibula bones of the left leg and a compound fracture of the radius bone in the left forearm. He also has numerous facial lacerations and is severely dehydrated. Max has one gunshot injury to the upper thigh that passed through muscle and bone but luckily missed the femoral artery and is not life-threatening. He's also lacerated, sunburned, and dehydrated.


Jennifer and Maria immediately decide to fly together to Frankfurt where both men are being treated. The priest and staff at the MFSC help them make flight arrangements on the evening departure from Denver.

The 10-hour flight to the Frankfurt Airport, with little sleep, exhausts both Jennifer and Maria by the time they arrive the next day. They fortify themselves with double caffeine espressos and hire transportation to the LRMC, about an hour and a half ride away. Jennifer enters the hospital and approaches the security desk. She asks in which rooms Kevin and Max are admitted. Kevin is in Room 2121 and Max is in Room 2124. After showing valid ID's, she and Maria start up the stairs to the second floor. Jennifer enters Room 2121, but no one is there. A nurse soon arrives and reports second surgery and will be out hour or so. Jennifer looks picture of her that she sent to hospital staff found it in a and it is marked and torn unrecognizable. She intuitively knows she has been with him every second he was in danger.



that Kevin has just finished a of the recovery room in a half-around his room and sees the Kevin as a replacement. The pocket of his filthy camo shirt, making her face almost

Most of an hour passes, and finally, Kevin is rolled into his room on a gurney. He is still asleep, with intravenous fluid bags hanging everywhere. Tears well up in Jennifer's eyes. She gently hugs Kevin, kisses his bruised face, and strokes his bandaged left arm. Touching him confirms he isn't the soft marshmallow of a guy she remembers from years ago. His hair is buzz cut high and tight. His torso and shoulders are lean and ripped, and his right arm looks as strong as steel cable.



Then, as the nurses reposition him on the bed, Jennifer sees a patriotic tattoo on his shoulder that many Army Rangers proudly wear. She also notices an extremely curious tat on his upper left chest. It's the unmistakable letter J.

In another half-hour, he is lucid enough to realize she is at his side. *"I can't believe it. Why did you come all the way here?"* Kevin says in a raspy whisper. *"Because you saved my Slinky once, and now I'm here to save you,"* Jennifer whispers back.

Jennifer calls Sally first to give her the good news that Kevin is okay and will recover. Then she calls her office and tasks Bryce to work overtime helping her other two divisions, with Mr. Monroy's oversight, until she returns. Jennifer stays in Germany near the hospital until Kevin can walk with crutches. This gives her plenty of time to investigate how that "J" tattoo got on Kevin's chest, over his heart, and to make sure it stands for "Jennifer." The doctors eventually give him the all-clear to travel back to the states.


Jennifer, with help from the Family Support Center, makes travel arrangements on a commercial flight to Denver International Airport. Since Kevin is on active duty and healing from wounds, he and Jennifer get seats in the first-class section of the plane. The flight crew treats them as VIPs.

When they dock at the Denver International terminal, all the other passengers deplane and only Jennifer, Kevin, and one flight attendant remain. With the flight attendant's help, they make their way from their seats, off the plane, and into the ramp leading to the concourse. It was disappointing that none of the passengers lingered to say goodbye. Everyone they met on the flight had disappeared. Not one stayed.

When Jennifer and Kevin are almost down the ramp, with Jennifer and the flight attendant helping Kevin as he hobbles on crutches, they hear noise and commotion in the concourse. As they emerge into the open, they see that most of the passengers have gathered to wait for them. Then, the crowd erupts into applause. Several approach Kevin and thank him for his service. He grins for the first time in a long time...and Jennifer beams.

Epilogue

As I reflected on my conversation with Kevin and Jennifer at the reunion, I realized how fortunate they were to reunite after four years apart. They




admitted to me that they had their lucky stars to thank. Kevin and Jennifer's real story could have ended as sadly as the novel Doctor Zhivago; Yury Zhivago and his beautiful Lara, the two star-crossed lovers suddenly separated due to a poor decision made in haste escaping capture by the Soviets, tragically never reunite and die alone. If Jennifer and Sally had not stopped at that specific coffee shop, on the exact day and time when Jeremy was there too, our two lovers wouldn't have found each other either.

Kevin would have likely chosen never to come home after his injuries had healed and his active duty deployments were over. Instead, he probably would have been hired by a private security contractor and stayed abroad and off social networks, never wanting to risk reading about Jennifer and Bryce online. Worse yet, to come home and accidentally encounter them together, in person, in public. He may have met another girl overseas, but she would never have been able to replace Jennifer in his heart.

And Jennifer would likely have continued her stellar career with Monroy and Klein. But her personal life probably would have become littered with insincere and incompatible suitors competing to make her their trophy wife. However, her heart would never permit her to stop searching for Kevin, her friend and true love.

But this pair DID FIND EACH OTHER, and Kevin's FOUR YEAR HITCH as an active-duty soldier came to a fortunate end. Jennifer Lynn Curry marries Kevin Ayden Fisher in a simple ceremony with Kevin placing a diamond ring (purchased with his Army combat pay) on Jennifer's left hand, and replacing the friendship ring he reluctantly took back following their SEVEN YEAR HITCH breakup on her right hand. He also has the crumpled picture of her preserved and framed as a constant reminder of his love for her.

Since Kevin didn't have to sleep outside in sandstorms anymore, it wasn't long before he and Jennifer welcomed twins, Mack and Macey, to the world. He is awarded the Purple Heart and is serving his remaining four years in a reserve unit. Kevin resumes his game development with a different perspective on war. His new company, HITCH PRODUCTIONS, thrives. He develops exciting new virtual reality gaming concepts that make his games the most realistic on the market. Kevin and Max start a foundation and spend considerable time and resources helping injured vets.



Jennifer and Kevin become a power couple financially, but more importantly learn that life is uncertain and their love for God, each other, and their twins, are more important than any material possessions.

And when the twins get old enough to be left with a trusted sitter, they start thinking about attending one of those class reunions they've avoided since college. Maybe a few from the old Waffle Habit gang are still around?