



Snowed In with Three Mountain Men

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Category: Erotic, Romance, Adult, Action

Description: I ran away on my wedding day...

And now I'm snowed in with three sizzling hot mountain men.

One minute, I'm driving in the middle of a snowstorm.

The next, my car slams into a tree...

And everything vanishes into blackness.

Luckily, three sexy ex-SEALs pull me out of the wreck,

And carry me into their cabin.

But when I finally wake up and take a look at my saviors,

I think I'm seeing triple...

But I'm not—turns out, they're triplets.

There's Callum, the one-night stand I never got over. He broke my bed—then my heart when he left before sunrise.

Chuck, the cocky flirt with a smirk that makes my panties drop.

And Dax, the big, broody mountain man who unleashes a storm in my body with just one look.

But my ex is a dangerous man...

And it's only a matter of time before he finds me.

Luckily, I have three protectors who'd burn the world down for me...

And the little miracle growing inside me.

SNOWED IN WITH THREE MOUNTAIN MEN is a smoldering standalone military reverse harem romance with an HEA hot enough to melt even the iciest heart.

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Source Creation Date: July 3, 2025, 8:29 am

PROLOGUE

CALLUM

I glance at the woman sleeping next to me—her dark hair spilled out around her on the pillow, eyes closed, the slow rise and fall of her breath the only sound in the near-silent room. She looks beautiful. Peaceful. Perfect.

And I know I can't be here when she wakes up.

The thought stabs like a blade straight into my heart, the reality of this mess getting the better of me all at once. Squeezing my eyes shut, I remind myself why I've come to this decision—why I need to leave her behind, no matter how much it fucking hurts.

Slowly, quietly, I swing my legs out of bed. I hate the thought of her waking up to find me gone, but if I stay another night, it's going to be even harder to pull myself out of here. The thought of looking her in the eyes, telling her I need to go, that whatever we've had together is over—I can't go through with it if she's there, looking into my eyes, giving me all the good reasons I should stay.

Fuck. Even the thought of that is enough to make my stomach lurch. What the hell was I thinking, bringing her to a place like this, a place that's so precious to my family, interweaving her with a part of my past I know I won't be able to shake off...?

I know the answer to that. It's because this place, this cabin, it's been my last connection to the life I had before—before I left for the SEALs, before everything

changed underneath me, before the ground beneath my feet gave way and left me grabbing at air. My father would bring my brothers and me up here every summer, and we'd spend hours out in the cold Oregon air, cutting wood, hunting, gardening, cooking. Back then, it felt like I was really useful, like I was worth something, and I needed to believe, at least for a while, that I could reach that spot again with her.

But I can't. I think I knew that even when I started packing up the car—she had emerged from her little studio apartment on the west side of the city, a couple of backpacks draped over her shoulders, and waved at me excitedly.

"I can't remember the last time I got to go out to the countryside like this!" she exclaimed as she draped her arms around my shoulders and gazed at me with an excited grin on her face. "It's going to be so much fun. This cabin, how big is it...?"

She hit me with questions as I drove her up, and I tried to answer them as they came. But even as we headed out of the city, I could sense it—that uneasiness hanging over my head, the same kind that had been there from the moment I met her for our first date. No matter how sweet she was, or how beautiful, or how clever or witty or kind, there was something clinging to me that I couldn't shake off just like that.

And now, I know that running from the city isn't enough to get rid of it either. No, whatever I have wrong with me, it's followed me up here. This one place where my life was meant to be easy, where everything was supposed to make sense, and I still feel as crazy as I did back home.

And if this isn't enough to clear my head, I don't know what will be. But I know one thing for sure—I can't inflict this bullshit on her. It's not fair.

I glance back at her. She's still sleeping, in a cami and a pair of shorts, her arms tossed up over her head as they always are when she's deep in rest. That's the thing—she's perfect, and if I'd met her a few years earlier, I never would have

allowed myself to fucking consider leaving her like this. But she deserves a boyfriend who she can actually have fun with, not one who spends Saturday nights at home because the thought of being surrounded by all that noise and all those people at a bar is way too much for him to take.

I know she's already made allowances for me. Already pulled back from some of her friends, who were so keen to meet me, because she knew it would have stressed the hell out of me. Her friends probably thought I was some abusive psycho trying to cut her off from everyone around her, but it's not that—I would never want her to make her life or herself smaller for me.

But I'm not in the same place that she is, or any of her friends, for that matter. They're all in their late teens, early twenties, and all they want to do is party and have fun and enjoy their post-college years. But me? I'm carrying the weight of the damn world on my shoulders, and that's not going to become her problem too.

I get dressed as quietly as I can, careful not to wake her. Though there is something at the back of my mind that hopes her eyes will suddenly flutter open, that she'll suddenly look over at me and sleepily ask what I think I'm doing as she reaches her arms out to draw me back to bed.

If that happens...if that happens, then I'm not going to be able to go through with this. There's a part of me, a part of me bigger than I'd like to admit, that wants to be selfish and just stay here with her, with this woman I've fallen so hard for, but I can't. It's not fair.

She deserves someone normal. Someone who can give her the life she actually wants. Not some guy who can't set foot outside the bounds of his apartment without planning it like a fucking mission first.

Of course, I've made sure she has transport back home. By the time she wakes up

tomorrow, a car will be on the way from the city to pick her up. I've paid the fare in advance. She'll be back at her apartment in a matter of hours, and hopefully, in a few weeks' time, she'll have forgotten about me entirely.

My stomach twists again at the thought, and I ignore it. This isn't about me. This is about her. Giving her what she needs, but what she won't ask for herself, because she's too fucking kind for that. She'd never walk away from me on her own terms, because she wants to help me through the shit I have to live with.

At least, now she does. I can only imagine how it would be a few months, years down the line, once she realizes that I'm still just as fucked-up as I was when we met. She'd grow tired of me, and she'd want a way out. I'm just giving her one, so she doesn't have to make the call herself. It's my last gift to her, a chance to start over, without me pulling her down.

I stand in the doorway and look at her one last time, drinking in the sight of her. I find that I'm almost willing those sweet green eyes to flutter open, but they don't. She stays sleeping.

Just the way I need her to.

Finally, forcing myself, I turn and move toward the door of the cabin, grabbing the bag that I packed earlier tonight. I told her it was for a hike, and she'd lit up at the thought, already excited to explore a little more of what this place has to offer.

I hate letting her down. But in the long run, it's the best thing for her, the best thing for both of us. I'll get back to my life, start working on myself, and from there, I'll figure out exactly how I'm going to recover from the mess that haunts me every time I close my eyes.

A mess that she will have nothing to do with.

I turn my back on her, a wrench in my chest as I head for the door and grab my bag. The car is waiting outside, sitting among the familiar trees and the scent of the Oregon dirt—in the summer, the place is alight with leaves and flowers, every inch of it punctuated by color in one direction or another.

But for now, all I can focus on is the gray. A gray that I do not want to pull Charli into. A gray that she didn't sign up for by getting involved with me.

A gray I will take with me, and free her from. For good.

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For life.

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CHARLI

Six Years Later

I stare at myself in the mirror, soft light filtering through the window beside me. The bright sunshine outside, the sound of birds singing, the distant music played by the string quartet waiting for me downstairs...it's perfect.

Or it would be. If it wasn't for the man waiting for me at the end of the aisle.

I smooth my hands shakily along the wedding dress; it's beautiful, even if it's not the one I would have chosen for myself. No, James made sure to insist that I choose a dress that covers my arms and my chest, making sure nobody else will be able to see an inch of skin outside of my face—and even that is covered by a heavy veil. I'm in there, somewhere, but it's hard to make out any part of me.

Exactly why he likes me this way.

Another stab of anxiety thrusts into my stomach, and I try to contain it. Because what am I meant to do about this now, really? It's my wedding day. My wedding day. It's not like I can just go to James and tell him that, actually, I've been having some second thoughts and I'd like to rethink this whole thing. Could we just postpone it for a day or two, while I figure out how I'm really feeling...?

The thought sends a shiver down my spine. I know exactly how he would react to that, exactly how he would fly into a rage and scream in my face—how he would count out every cent that he and his family have paid for this occasion, tell me that I'm the only family he has and I should be grateful for him, that this is so typical of me, to be so ungrateful when this was all about me in the first place...

Dark spots start to play at the corners of my eyes as the thought crosses my mind. Shit, has he really gotten under my skin so much that even thinking about him blowing up at me scares me? I guess so.

Or maybe it's the fact that I'm facing a lifetime with this guy that has me so terrified. As soon as I step out of this room—this lavish, beautiful hotel room where my makeup artist and hairstylist have just left me—I'll be on the path to putting his ring on my finger and becoming his wife.

His wife. His fucking wife. How the hell did I get here? Sometimes, it doesn't seem possible, the mess that has unfolded in the last few years since we met—since I met him at a function I was waitressing at, and he homed in on me, insisting on paying my wages for the rest of the night so he could spend it with me. At the time, I was flattered, but looking back now, I can see what a red flag that was—even then, he thought he had some claim over me. He figured out early on that throwing money at me would get me to give him what he wanted, and what have I done but proved him right since then?

And, given who his father is, it's not as though I could just slip out of the relationship like that. No, because I started to become a regular feature at his father's fundraisers, and turning up in the press on James's arm was enough to secure my place there. At first, I thought he was just careful because of how much was on the line for him and his dad, but now...now, looking back, I can see that it was just an excuse to take as much control as he could from me, and to make me pay for believing for a second that I deserved anything else.

And now, we're engaged. I can hardly remember the night it happened. I was drunk, I know that much. I can recall him telling me, over some fancy dinner, that he knew he hadn't been the partner he wanted to be, but that he wasn't willing to give up the connection we had, and then he popped open the ring box, and I stared down at it, and I...

I saw my future in there. A future with him. A future with a family I wasn't going to lose, the way I'd lost my parents. And that, combined with the promises he was spinning for me, had been enough to convince me to accept the offer.

And the rush that came afterward hardly gave me a chance to think about what I had agreed to. James seemed to know that getting that ring on my finger once and for all was all that mattered, and he did everything in his power to rush this all ahead. And now, here I am, standing in the last room I'll ever stand in as a single woman...

Knowing that what lies on the other side of this marriage for me is far from a lifetime of joy and happiness.

My eyes slide over to the window, which looks out over the perfectly manicured lawn of the garden beyond. This place is gorgeous, honestly—it's even better in person than it was in the pictures he showed me. Downstairs, there are a few hundred guests, many of them press, ready to snap some pictures for the lifestyle pages of the Sunday supplement. I will be there, in my dress, my husband at my side, clutching flowers and beaming from behind the perfect painted face they've drawn on me.

Anyone who looks at those pictures will think I'm happy. Why wouldn't they? They'll see me marrying the senator's son, turning my life from waitressing to wifedom, and they'll see it as a success story. Maybe other women will look at it, the image of me like that, and they'll think—hey, maybe I should go after someone like that too. If she can do it, I can, right...?

The thought stabs a sharp rush of panic into my chest. No.No.I can't go through with this. If not for myself, then for anyone else who might see me and think this is worth doing. I don't care how close we are to the actual ceremony, there's still time for me to get out of here. I just need to run, while I still have the chance...

Something snaps in me, and I rush over to the window, trying to dig my nails under the frame to pull it open—a couple of my tasteful pale pink falsies ping off onto the floor around me, but I pay no attention to them. Adrenaline is coursing through my system—the hairs on the back of my neck are standing on end, panic gripping me but urging me onward at the same time. I have to get out of here. I have to...

Finally, the window creaks loudly and eases up an inch or two—my eyes widen, and I whip my head around to the door to make certain nobody has overheard me. I asked for a few minutes to myself to get myself straightened up before I went down to the ceremony, but in a matter of moments, someone is going to come looking for me, and I might be caught in the act.

I pry the window open a few more inches, wincing at every scrape and scratch it makes against the frame. Someone will have heard me, I'm sure. If they walk in now, I can just claim cold feet, and pray to God that nobody mentions to him what I've been caught in the midst of.

But soon, I manage to crack a couple feet of space between the window and the sill. It's not much, but it's going to have to be enough. Grabbing my skirt and scrunching it up at my waist, I hook one leg over the sill and duck my head down to push myself out. For a horrible second, I think I'm stuck, the window frame pressing down on the back of my neck—but a moment or two later, it pops free, and I tumble into the flower beds next to my hotel room.

My eyes are wide as I spring to my feet, heart slamming against my chest. I shoot a glance this way and that—there's nobody out here. No, everyone who came to the

ceremony is in the main hall right now, waiting for me to arrive, carrying the bunch of pastel-pink roses that match the cummerbund on his tuxedo.

Instead, I spring to my feet, paying no attention to the dirt clinging to my knees and the folds of my dress, and bolt toward the parking lot. I insisted on driving up here myself—I spun some story about it being bad luck for him to see the bride before the day itself, and he'd bought it, allowing me some space to clear my head on the drive over here. It wasn't like I had bridesmaids to pick up, given that they were all handpicked by his father from his side of the family.

Nor did I really have any friends of my own anymore. Not after everything he's put me through.

Keys—keys. Do I have my keys on me? Shit, I'll just have to hope that I left the door unlocked...

I spot my car nestled among all the sleek vehicles in the parking lot—it stands out like a sore thumb, but I don't give a damn. He's tried to get me a new one a few times, but I always insisted I liked my little beat-up blue car; she might struggle on hills, but that's not a problem for me.

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I try the door, but it's locked. Crap! My head starts to spin as I kneel down beside it, attempting to find some way I can continue my escape attempt before someone notices I'm gone...

And that's when something catches my attention from the corner of my eye. A twinkle of something, there, in the sunshine—a set of keys! I dive over and snatch them up. Someone must have dropped them when they were getting out of their car, or one of the valets here must not be as careful as he should be—either way, it doesn't matter. I have keys. I just need to figure out whose car they belong to, and I'm on my way...

I check the leather tag attached to the keys, and sure enough, it matches the logo attached to one of the vehicles just a few cars over from me. I rush toward it and, with shaking hands, push the key into the lock. I almost expect it to set off some screaming alarm telling everyone in the area that I'm trying to do something I shouldn't, but instead, it unlocks smoothly, and I climb inside.

Gripping the wheel, I stare back toward the hotel. This is it—my last chance. If I want to change my mind, I still can. I can pretend none of this happened, I can turn on my heel and head back inside, I can leave those keys right where I found them and go back and marry that man, even if I know it's a bad idea...

Or I can run. I can run for the fucking hills, and never look back. And no matter how terrifying it might seem, that's better than staying here and letting him take everything from me.

I throw the car into reverse, pull away from the parking lot, and take off toward the

road. The roar of the engine is loud enough that I'm sure it's going to attract some attention, which means I have to get out of here quickly. By the time they notice I'm missing, a stolen car is going to be the last of their worries—and I don't even want to think about what kind of chaos I'm leaving behind me.

I speed through the large gates that cut off the hotel from the rest of the world, and hit the road once more—the sun is still beaming cheerfully above me, as though it has no idea what's going on here on this day. I press down on the accelerator, glancing in the rearview mirror and making sure nobody is following me—the hotel vanishes in the distance, going, going, gone, until there's nothing left of it at all. My heart skips another beat in my chest. Oh God. I'm doing this. I am really doing this.

Once I find the highway, I take a turn toward the forest. I don't know this area well, but I took a trip up to the woods a few years ago, and I can at least navigate my way back to the city from there. That damn return journey from the cabin to my real life is burned into my memory, after all.

A loud ringing plays in my ears as I drive. I can hardly take in anything that's going on around me. It feels like everything is about to shatter into a thousand pieces.

I roll down the window, trying to let some cool air in, but it's too cold—it bites me, the sky darkening overhead as rain begins to fall. I roll it up again and try to stay focused on the lines on the road as they slip beneath the car, over and over again.

Every vehicle that passes me, I find my head snapping up, looking around to see if it's him. How long has it been since I left? An hour, maybe ninety minutes? And how long would they have left it before they came to the hotel room to see what was keeping me so long? He's an impatient man, James, and I doubt he would have been willing to give it more than a few minutes. And when he finds that I'm out of there...

I am fucked. Well and truly and totally fucked.

The rain begins to turn to snow around me, and I keep my grip tight on the wheel. I'm not going to let anything move me off course, I'm just not. I can't go back now. I don't even want to think what he would do to me if he knows I tried to abandon him like this—hell, maybe he's got a right to be pissed, with me taking off like this.

No. After everything he's done to me, this is nothing. He deserves it.

A smile twists up the corners of my lips. I'm not usually cruel like this, but fuck, the thought of him standing there, realizing that I'm not coming back, it feels good. Right. Like this is the first good choice I've made for myself in longer than I can remember.

I pull onto a road that snakes into the forest, through the dark Oregon woods that rise up on either side of me—I know a lot of people think of this place as creepy, because of how rural it is, but I've always found it peaceful. The few trips I've made up here over the years, they've been quiet, and that's exactly what I need in my life right now—quiet. Something as far removed from the bullshit that he's dragged me into as I can get. If I have to make like a wild woman and go live in the bough of a tree or something, I'll do it. Better than the alternative...

But as I drive, the snow begins to fall harder. It's piling up at the sides of the road, creating heavy piles that are already starting to ice over the ground beneath me—I can't help but think of how easy it will be for them to track my tires through this snow. And it's winter, so it's not like it's going to just dissipate after a few hours, before they figure out which way I've gone. No, when we get snow, we get snow, and this blizzard will likely cut down my visibility for the rest of the night, at least...

I should pull over. But I don't know how this car works, how I can get the heating on, and staying out here in the snow with nothing to protect me from the elements is way too dangerous. I need to find somewhere to stay the night, somewhere away from the snow. There has to be a motel somewhere near here. I don't know how I'm going to

get in there with no money, or what they're going to think of me when I turn up in my wedding dress, but I can cross that bridge when I come to it. For now, all that matters is getting through these woods before the blizzard completely takes hold, and...

“Shit!”

I let out a cry as the car hits a patch of ice, spiraling out from underneath me. I manage to get it under control just before it swerves off the road entirely, but it's a close thing. I pause for a moment, breathing hard, and catch sight of myself in the mirror—the veil is still half drawn over my face, but I can see my eyes. They're narrow, focused, and I know that's the energy I need to bring to the rest of this journey.

I start the car up again and push forward. I'm going a little slower this time, but still fast enough to put some serious distance between myself and the wedding venue where I was meant to sign away the rest of my life to that man. No matter what happens to me out on this road, it's better than anything I signed myself up for back there, I'm sure of that.

I crest a hill—but as soon as I start to come down the other side, panic hits me once more. The car is sliding. It's not under my control. I try to press down on the brakes, but the cold must have hit this place sooner than anywhere else—the ice is thick, solid, and there's nothing I can do to pull the car to a halt.

It picks up speed as it comes down the hill—the snow is so thick I can hardly see what's waiting for me beyond it. I press myself back into the seat, gritting my teeth and bracing for impact...

And in a matter of seconds, the dark wood of a huge tree emerges from the whiteout—and I hear the sound of crumpling metal before everything vanishes to blackness.

CALLUM

As soon as I hear the crash, my head snaps up.

Something's wrong. Nobody comes out here, not if they can help it, especially not in this weather. If someone is on the road at this time of day, at this time of year, it's because they don't have a choice.

I drop the firewood I'm carrying, and head toward the source of the noise. No time to waste. Not now. Not here.

I grit my teeth as the snow whips into my face. I need to get my brothers. Whatever is happening here, I can't deal with it alone—not in this weather. I'd be an idiot to go and follow that noise by myself, when I could easily get lost on the way back, or caught in a snowdrift or worse. No matter how well you think you know a certain area, there's no guarantee you can handle it when the conditions turn bad. The way they are right now, they've rarely been worse.

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I lift my hand to block the rush of snow into my eyes, my glove black against the whiteout, and make out the light of the cabin in the distance. It's nothing more than a few hundred yards away, but it looks as though it could be on the other side of the damn world with how much distance there is between us right now.

My boots crunch on the fresh-laid snow as I stride toward it. Running is only going to chap my skin and make it even harder to deal with whatever the hell just happened out there on the road.

Despite it all—even in the midst of chaos like this, weather so bad you might as well be in the Arctic—there's nowhere else I would rather be than in these woods. Might sound crazy to some people, but to me, it just makes sense. Getting away from the people who fill out the rest of the world, somewhere quiet, somewhere nobody can reach you—it's what I've needed for a long time, but it wasn't until Chuck suggested this cabin that I really considered it a possibility.

And now, as I close in on the cabin once more, I spot one of my triplets inside the small greenhouse we've attached to the main building—he's making sure his plants are covered before the storm comes in and wrecks them. God knows we've been caught out like that before, our food supplies taking a serious hit. Of course, there are enough towns nearby that we can restock pretty easily, but that doesn't mean any of us want to leave this place.

“Hey!” I yell to him as I draw closer. “Hey, Chuck!”

His head snaps up; he used to work comms for the SEALs, and he's got ears sharper than anyone I've ever met. He lifts his chin at me as he throws open the door,

indicating for me to keep talking.

I duck inside the greenhouse, the sudden shock of warmth against the cold sending a jolt of heat through my system.

“What is it?” he replies, looking me up and down. “You don’t have firewood?—”

“I heard something,” I shoot back. “A crash. At the edge of the woods.”

“A crash?” he mutters, pushing a hand through his hair. “Who the fuck would be driving out here in this weather?”

“I don’t know, but we have to check.”

His jaw tightens slightly. “We don’t have to.”

“We can’t just leave them out there, Chuck,” I protest. “It’s freezing. If they’re hurt, or they got knocked unconscious?—”

“I get it,” Chuck mutters, pulling the tarp over the last row of plants before he zips them shut. “Go find Dax. There could be more people down there, we’ll need all the muscle we can get.”

“Muscle?” I reply, cocking an eyebrow playfully. “Think highly of yourself, huh?”

“Shut the fuck up,” he shoots back, but he’s grinning. I know Chuck is the first of us to get stressed when something happens to break the idyllic quiet of this place, but we can’t let that stop us. Someone out there needs help. I might not be the first to seek out human company where I can avoid it, but this is different—this could be something serious.

Chuck strides into the cabin and I follow him, to find Dax just emerging from a shower, running a towel over his shaved head. He glances between the two of us, instantly aware that something is up.

“What’s going on?” he demands.

“Get dressed,” I tell him. “There’s been an accident, out on the road. We need to go check on whoever was involved, see if they need help?—”

“What?” Dax exclaims, his eyebrows shooting up. “You want me to go out there in the middle of a snowstorm and risk my neck for someone who?—”

“Dax, we don’t have time for your shit,” Chuck tells him, voice even—he’s the only one who can get away with talking to our brother like that, and even still, Dax bristles.

“You think you can handle it, with your leg?” I add. I know it’s a dirty trick, bringing up his injury like that, but there’s no way in hell he’ll let anyone think he’s not capable of keeping up with anything we can do. His jaw tightens, and he nods.

“Yeah, I can,” he replies, and he heads to his bedroom. “Give me two minutes to put on something heavier.”

He ducks into the bedroom, and Chuck and I exchange a look. Of the three of us, Dax is the one who needs this place the most—he’s the one who wouldn’t be able to manage being back in the real world. It’s no wonder he reacted the worst out of all of us about a car turning up out of the blue, though the last thing we need is his stubborn attitude right now.

At least, that’s what I tell myself. Because maybe the truth is I’m the one with the biggest problem here—the one who had to run away from the one good thing I had

because I couldn't cope with the way my past might have followed me into it. God knows the three of us have been through our own personal hell, but here, this cabin, this place—it's the closest we'll find to a heaven of our own.

And now, someone has crashed just a half-mile away, and that's going to become our problem. Whatever peace we might have had is about to vanish in an instant—for how long, I don't know, but long enough to serve as an uneasy reminder of how delicate the balance of our existence here is.

After barely thirty seconds, Dax emerges from his room, boots on, coat zipped, slipping on his second glove—that's the SEAL training in him, ready to take on anything, and be ready to do it in less than a minute. He glances between the two of us, raises his eyebrows, and jerks his head toward the door.

“What the fuck are we waiting for?” he demands. “Let's move. Now.”

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CHUCK

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“Where did you hear the sound of the crash?” I ask as we pause in the doorway—conditions are already bad out there, and I want to know what direction we’re heading in if the snow has already gotten too bad for us to see through.

“West, next to the river,” Callum shoots back curtly. I can tell he’s struggling with this. He hates anything that disrupts the routine we’ve built here, and the storm is bad enough in its own right. This? This is beyond what we could have expected. But there’s no way I’m going to turn my back on someone who might need help in the midst of this snowstorm, and despite Dax’s protestations, I know that he wouldn’t either.

“We’ll cut through the trees, keep some of the wind chill off us,” I reply. “Follow the edge of the river down to the road, and we’ll head up and down the sides until we find it.”

Both my brothers nod sharply, and the three of us take off into the woods—Callum leads the way, falling in line with the ice-covered river, his boots crunching through the snow as the snow falls in flurries around us. It’s one of the worst storms I’ve ever seen in the four or so years since we came to this place, and anyone out in it without the correct protective clothing is going to be in serious trouble before long.

The night has already settled in, the dark studded by the white snowflakes around us—pretty, but lethal. You can’t take your eye off the ball for a minute when it comes to shit like this. The weather can turn on you and you’ll be trapped. The way we’re dressed, even if we get cut off from the cabin or lost, we’ll be okay for a few hours, but I still don’t like being out here in the dark and cold.

Hero complex, an ex of mine once called it. Said that I got it from being part of the SEALs, this urge to help people, to serve a unit and make sure we achieve our goals. Maybe she was right. I never could just turn my back on someone, even when it probably would be smarter for me to do just that. I don't even want to think what kind of idiot would have been driving these narrow, winding roads in such bad weather, but whoever they are, they better have a damn good reason for it.

We follow the ditch of the river along to the road—it takes us a little more than ten minutes, and the snow is already biting at the small amount of exposed skin on my cheeks and lips. It aches like hell, but I ignore it as we emerge from the cover of the woods and out onto the roadside.

Pulling out my flashlight, I shine it up and down the immediate area—nothing. No sign of any car. We're at the top of a hill that leads down into the valley below, and visibility is limited.

“Spread out!” I call to the two of them. “Dax, down the hill, Callum, up. I'll check here to make sure they haven't crashed into the river...”

We split up, Dax making his way down the hill as quickly as he can—he still carries a slight limp on his left leg, and I can't imagine the cold is making it any easier for him. I'm not exactly pleased that Callum goaded him into coming with us by bringing it up, but the more of us here, the better. I don't know what we're going to be up against, how many people we might find and what kind of care we'll have to apply to them, and the more hands on deck, the easier it'll be.

I cut into the woods on the other side of the road, casting my light around, though I can't see much—the light bouncing off the snow, my footsteps and labored breathing the only sound I can make out. We're losing light fast, and that dull glow from the snow is stretching out in front of me for what looks like miles?—

And then, I hear something. It takes me a moment to place what it is, but then it hits me. It's Dax, calling for the two of us.

I rush out of the forest to find that Callum has heard the same thing, and Dax waves his flashlight in the air to attract us to the beam.

"I've found her!"

Her—crap, a woman out here alone...

Callum and I make our way down the icy road as quickly as we can, doing our best not to lose our footing. Last thing we need is another injury to make this even more difficult than it already is.

And sure enough, Dax is right—he's standing next to a sleek black car, or at least, what once was a sleek black car. It slid off the road, by the look of it, and into the trunk of a large birch tree by the side of the road—lucky it wasn't something sturdier, or else the driver would have been in real trouble. I reach Dax's side, and the look on his face tells me that something is off.

"What is it?" I demand as I stride toward the car.

"There's a girl in there," he shoots back. "And she's wearing a..."

"Wedding dress."

I finish up his sentence before he can, shining my flashlight on the passenger of the vehicle. Sure enough, there's a woman inside, and she's wearing a white gown—it's smudged with dirt in a few places, but other than that, it looks pristine, as though it's never been worn before. A heavy veil has fallen into her face, and she's slumped over to the side, toward the passenger seat and away from the window.

What the fuck is someone doing in a wedding dress out here, at this time of night, in this weather? No way she's heading to the ceremony. Maybe she's running away from it...

But that's not our problem. Our problem is the fact that she's not dressed for this blizzard, and she's unconscious.

"We need to get her back to the cabin and warmed up," I instruct Dax as Callum catches up to me. I push my flashlight into his hand, and pull off my jacket.

"What are you doing?" Dax demands, a frown creasing his forehead.

"That window's nearly giving out," I reply, nodding to the one on the passenger side. "I'm going to break it, and open the lock from the inside. Stand back..."

Dax and Callum step away on instinct, and I draw my fist back and slam it into the glass—it's already spiderwebbed with cracks from the crash, and it doesn't take more than a couple of blows to get it loose. It falls inside the car in one piece, landing next to the passenger, and I quickly put my coat back on and reach across to flick the lock.

She nearly tumbles from the car at the sudden shift, and Dax races around to catch her before she hits the snow—she's out cold, and doesn't wake even as she lands heavily in his arms.

"Fuck," he growls as Callum and I move to join him. I reach for the veil and pull it back—the woman's dark hair has escaped from whatever wedding updo it was in, and it's sticking to her face, which is smattered with cuts and scrapes from the crash. I can't see any immediately concerning wounds, but then, it's not like it would be easy to tell at a glance.

“Hello?” I call to her, tapping her face slightly—no response. I part her lips and shine my torch into her mouth and throat, making sure there’s nothing stuck in there, as Dax awkwardly holds her up. She hasn’t choked on anything, thank God, and when I press my fingers to the side of her neck, I can feel a strong pulse...

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It's only then that I realize Callum has been standing away from us this whole time, staring down at this woman. And sure, she's pretty, I guess, but this isn't exactly the time to be thinking about that.

"Callum, what the hell is wrong with you?" I demand. He shakes his head slowly, as though he can't believe what he's seeing.

"That's...that's..."

He swallows hard, and shines the light on her face once more.

"I know her."

"You know her?" I exclaim, straightening up, as Dax eases her out of the car and into his arms properly.

"Yeah," Callum mutters. His voice is so low I can hardly hear it over the howling wind, but I can tell by the look on his face that he is not screwing around. He wouldn't fuck about, not with something like this, and judging by the way he's looking at this girl...

He's not exactly pleased to see her.

"What the fuck are you talking about, you know her?" Dax demands, his voice rising with irritation.

"I just do."

“You know her from before? Or you’ve been seeing her since we’ve been here?” Dax presses. His voice betrays a hint of worry—he doesn’t like the thought that one of us might have had a life outside this place, not when we vowed to make a home for ourselves together.

“From before,” Callum replies. His voice is dazed, distant—it doesn’t sound like he knows how to respond, the shock getting the better of him.

“How long before?” Dax continues.

“Guys, we don’t have time for this,” I warn them. “We need to?—”

“No, we need to talk about this!” Dax cuts me off. “What the hell is she doing here? Is she looking for you?”

“No,” Callum shoots back at once. “I don’t know. Shit, I?—”

“Does she know about the cabin?” I ask him. He glances over at me with an expression I recognize at once.

“She knows about the cabin,” I groan. “How does she?—”

“It doesn’t matter. It’s complicated.”

“Why is she back, then?” Dax asks. “You think she was looking for you when she got into this accident?”

“What, you think she was coming here to marry you?” I manage to crack a joke, waving a hand at her wedding dress. But Callum doesn’t laugh. Neither of them do.

“What if someone sent her here to find out what we’re doing?” Dax asks. “We can’t

make it this easy for her?—”

“Dax, nobody gives a fuck what we’re doing up here,” I remind him, keeping my voice as patient as I can. “It’s not illegal. We’re not hurting anyone. They don’t need to know what’s?—”

“Yeah, that’s what they want you to think,” he replies, a flash of paranoia in his eyes. “But they don’t like that we’re out here. That we?—”

“They don’t give a damn,” I snap back, impatient. I know it’s not fair of me to speak to him like this—I know all too well the shit he’s been through that’s made him fearful, and it’s not like he doesn’t have a point—but out here, in the cold, the last thing we need is to let our panic get the better of us.

“Callum, is there any way she could be a threat to us?” I demand, turning my attention to him instead. Callum is still staring down at her, his eyes wide, like he’s seen a ghost. And if she’s from his past...then I guess he has. Because that part of our lives exists only as a phantom.

“No,” he murmurs, after a long pause. “No, she couldn’t. She would never...”

“That’s all I need to hear,” I reply, and I jerk my head back in the direction of the cabin. “We need to get out of this snow, and fast. Dax, get moving. You need a hand with her?”

Dax hits me with a death stare, but I ignore it. He can tear chunks out of me all he wants once we’re back in the safety of the cabin, but for the time being, it doesn’t bother me.

“No, I can handle her,” he mutters, hefting her up into his arms again. I pull the veil down over her face—it’s not much, but it’s the only protection she has from the cold.

And besides, the way Callum is staring at her, I think it's for the best to cover her face.

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With that, we leave her car on the side of the road and turn to make our way back to our home, the cabin in the woods—now, with an uninvited guest.

Though not one who's a complete unknown to us.

4

CHARLI

Pain. That's the first thing I'm aware of, before my eyes even open—pain.

My head is throbbing, and I can feel achy spots running from my spine all the way down to my thighs—why am I so sore? It takes a moment for it to click, for me to remember what happened to me, but then it hits. The snowstorm, the car, the wheels sliding out from underneath me, and then the tree?—

And then nothing. Blackness. My eyes snap open, and I lunge forward, ready to grab the wheel once more and take off. I can't risk staying in one place for too long, not with James probably already out there looking for me?—

“Hey, hey. Stay where you are. You need to rest.”

A voice freezes me in my tracks—a man's voice, to be specific. My eyes take a second to focus, but eventually, they land on someone sitting at the end of a small bed in front of me—his brow is slightly creased, his eyes fixed on mine with concern.

“Callum?” I whisper, before I can think twice. Because this man, he looks almost

exactly like him. Same brown eyes, same dark, curly hair, though his is shorter—he has a scar beneath his lips and a smattering of stubble where Callum had none, but other than that, he’s the spitting image of him. But how...how could I...

“He’s not Callum. I am.”

My head whips around, so fast it makes my brain spin. And there he is—Callum, almost exactly as I remember him. Crop of dark hair, clean-shaven, strong jaw, brown eyes flecked with little spots of gold. As handsome and huge as ever. And yet...

And yet beside him, there’s another one. Another man who looks like him. His head is shaved, like his face, but the eyes are the same, the shape of his face, the brawn of his muscle. I scramble backward on the bed, my heart slamming against my ribs in panic.

“What the fuck is going on?” I hiss. I must have hit my head harder than I thought, because I’m seeing triple right now...

“You’re safe,” Callum assures me, as the man on the end of the bed stands up. “You’re okay, Charli, I?—”

“Who the hell are these people?” I demand, my voice rising, ragged, before I can stop it. The two other men exchange a glance, and it’s clear they’re not entirely impressed with my presence here.

“These are my brothers,” Callum replies, gesturing to the one with the shaven head. “This is Dax. And this...” He points to the other. “Is Chuck.”

“Brothers?” I shoot back. “You’re...?”

“Triplets,” he replies quietly. “I did tell you, when we...when we knew each other before. Guess you never got a chance to meet them.”

“What am I doing here? Where’s the car?” I ask, peering around. This is all too fucking surreal. And as I look around—I can tell it’s only going to get stranger.

“Wait a second,” I gasp. “This place, I’ve been here before. It’s the?—”

“Yeah, we came once before,” Callum agrees softly. He’s doing his best to keep his voice calm and steady, but it’s taking everything I have not to flip the fuck out on him right then and there. How can he be approaching this so calmly? He’s talking like this is normal, like any single part of this is normal, but I feel like I’ve been caught in the middle of the worst kind of fairy tale. Running away from my wedding day, crashing my car, and waking up surrounded by three identical men...

Three identically hot men, that is.

“When did you bring her here?” one of the other men—Dax, I think—bites out, clearly pissed with the way all of this is going. His brother fires a look at him.

“A long time ago. It doesn’t matter.”

“Why am I here now?” I ask, fear gripping hold of my heart. “I need to get out. I need to go. I?—”

“You need to rest,” the other man, Chuck, interjects. His voice is soothing, or at least attempting to be, but I can’t think about relaxing right now, not in the face of everything that’s happening.

“No, you—you don’t understand,” I plead with them. “James, he’s out there, he’s looking for me, and if he finds me...”

I trail off as I look between them again. Something strikes me. What if James sent them? He's got connections in pretty much every major force you can imagine, the cops, the army...would it be such a stretch to think he could have paid off some retired Navy SEAL to do his bidding for me? That's what Callum was when I met him, his skills just as polished as they'd ever been, except with no place to aim them. That was his problem, his inability to turn off his mind, even in the face of what we had. He might have put that to better use in the years since he dumped me out here in the woods, turned to mercenary work to make ends meet. He wouldn't be the first...

I swing my legs out of bed and plant them on the floor, trying to stand up, but I'm so dizzy that I end up crashing down to the bed once more. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath and try again—but before I can so much as get on my feet, Callum is at my side, pushing me back down.

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“You need to rest,” he orders me firmly. “You can’t go anywhere. You need to?—”

“You need to get your hands off me!” I exclaim, pulling away from him. I’m distinctly aware that I’m still in my wedding dress—I guess I should be glad they didn’t undress me, but it feels like I’m still ready to be dumped back at that altar the first chance they get. Like James is waiting to pick up where he left off, and there’s no chance I’ll be able to get out...

“We’re trying to help you, fucking hell!” Dax interjects, his voice laced with irritation.

“Then let me go,” I plead, turning to face him as I sit on the bed. “I’m not asking you to help me. Just let me out of here, I’ll leave, I’ll get back in my car and drive away and it’s like I was never here in the first place?—”

“You’re not going anywhere, not in that car,” Chuck tells me. “It’s fucked. You’re lucky you didn’t wind up with anything worse in the way of injuries?—”

“Then let me get out there and hitchhike!” I explode. “Please, you don’t understand, the longer I stay in one place, the easier it’s going to be for him to find me?—”

“Who? For who to find you?” Callum prompts me. And then I fall silent. Something about the way they’re all looking at me...it’s like they already know something. And it could just be my paranoia-addled mind, it could just be the stress of everything that’s happened, it could be my inability to accept that I might truly have escaped James once and for all...but I turn on them.

“Like you don’t know,” I spit back. “You’re working for him, aren’t you?”

“For who?” Dax fires back impatiently.

My eyes widen. “So you are working for someone?”

“That’s not what he said,” Callum protests. “Dax, shut up, let me talk to her?—”

“No, if she thinks we’re working for someone, then we deserve to know who,” he snarls, taking a step toward me. There’s anger flashing in his eyes, and I recoil without thinking. Not that I should be letting these fuckers think they’ve gotten the better of me, not that I’m going to let them intimidate me. I’ve already made it so far away from James, I won’t go back now, no matter what he’s planned, no matter how he tries to stop me.

“I don’t need to tell you,” I snap. “You already know. Don’t you? He sent you after me. Bring me out here, and lock me up until he could get to me, that’s what he told you?—”

“None of us have any idea what you’re talking about,” Callum tells me, agitated.

“Then let me go,” I beg him, turning my attention back to him once more. “If you’re not working for him, let me out of this place, now, please. I need to go. I need to?—”

“You can’t go out there, not in this weather,” Chuck tells me, shaking his head.

“The snow?” I ask, furrowing my brow. “I know it’s pretty bad, but?—”

Chuck quiets me as he gets to his feet and yanks the curtains open. Outside, everything is white, coated in a heavy blanket of snow as far as the eye can see.

My heart sinks.Crap.Suddenly, I feel as though I'm a rabbit in a trap, desperately trying to shake free before the hunter who laid it finds me. I don't know if I can trust these guys. I don't know if they're telling me the truth—is it really that bad out there, or is this just their way of spinning the story to convince me it's not worth getting out on the road again? Is James on his way right now...?

Dark shadows form at the edges of my vision, and I gasp down a breath—I feel as though I'm going to pass out.

“Here, here, lie down again,” Callum mutters, and he guides me toward the bed, slipping a pillow behind me. I'm lying on top of the covers, in my wedding dress, surrounded by three triplets—one of them the last man I loved before I got with James. And I thought today couldn't get any stranger...

“What are we going to do about her?” one of the men—Dax, I think—asks, as I squeeze my eyes shut and try to bring myself back down to earth.

“I don't know,” Callum replies. And even though it's been so long since the two of us last saw each other, I think I can recognize something in his voice—concern? Maybe. Either way, I'm not sure I buy it, but it's not as though I have much of a choice. The longer I lie here, the more my body hurts, and I can tell that the impact of that crash is only just starting to make itself clear.

“Do you really think there's someone after her?” Dax presses.

“I can't see any other damn reason why someone would be on the road in this weather if they weren't,” Chuck cuts in. I want to plant my hands over my ears, but I know it won't make any difference. I'll still be here, trapped, stuck, unable to get on the road again and put some more distance between James and me...

“Don't talk about me as if I'm not here,” I cut in, voice blunt. I manage to open my

eyes again, to find all of them staring at me like I've just dropped out of the international space station and into this cabin.

"Then tell us what you were doing on the road," Dax demands, lifting his chin and narrowing his eyes at me pointedly.

I glare back at him. "I'm not just going to tell you everything."

"Why the hell not?" he shoots back. "What are you trying to hide?"

My lips part with anger. Why does he just assume that there's something I should be ashamed of?

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“I’m not trying to hide anything! I just?—”

“Then tell us,” Dax demands. “Tell us what you’re doing here.”

“I can’t. It’s not that easy. Just let me go, I’ll?—”

“You can’t go anywhere in this weather,” Chuck reminds me again. I can feel tears pricking at the edges of my eyes—I feel trapped, my feet rooted to the ground. Fleeing the wedding, I had managed to actually get the road under my feet, to feel as though there was a way for me to get out of all of this, but now...

Now, I’m back to square one. Stuck, with no way out, these men refusing to let me so much as see the outside world. I want to scream. I want to tear this fucking wedding dress off my body, and I want to run back out into the snow—I don’t care how much danger it might put me in. It’s better than being trapped here in this place, knowing that, with every passing moment, James could be closing the distance between us.

And that, when he finds me...he’s going to rain down a hell I’ve never even imagined before.

“This girl’s going to be trouble,” Dax mutters. I don’t even want to look at him right now. Of course, I’m trouble—I’m always trouble. My life can never just be easy, no matter how hard I try, no matter?—

“Jesus, Dax, give her a break,” Chuck shoots back. At least I have someone on my side. Or do I? It doesn’t seem likely that these three could have nothing to do with James. Maybe he even thought that I would try and make a break for it on the day of

the wedding, and hiring these guys was insurance to make sure I wouldn't get far. Maybe they drove me off the road, maybe they had iced it up so I had no choice but to swerve off, maybe...

I realize I'm panting, gasping for breath, just trying to stay awake. If I pass out, I don't know what will be waiting for me when I wake up, and I don't want to know. I clench my jaw and squeeze my eyes shut, and stab my finger toward the door.

"Just...just get the fuck out!" I demand. "If you're really not here to hurt me, then just leave me the fuck alone!"

As soon as I say those words, I feel something shift in the room—Dax is on his feet, striding toward me, though I can barely make him out through the blur in the corners of my vision.

"You don't get to talk to us like that," he snarls, and he slams his hand down on the bed before me, sending a loud creak through the room that makes me jump. "You don't?—"

"Dax!" another one of the guys calls out to him, but it's clear that whatever control they had over him, it's gone. And now he's staring me down like he wants to take a chunk out of me.

But if he thinks I'm going to make it that easy for him...he's got another thing coming.

5

DAX

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" Chuck snaps at me, grabbing my

shoulder and trying to pull me away from the bed—but my eyes are fixed on her, and I’m not about to let her get away with speaking to us like that.

I don’t give a fuck what she’s been through. I don’t care how she knows this James. It doesn’t interest me how she found herself in the middle of the woods, driving in a snowstorm and running her car off the road. No, right now, she’s under our roof, which means she treats us with some fucking respect. End of story.

“You really think I’m going to play nice when I don’t even know who you are?” she fires back at me, voice laced with anger. “I—I woke up here, you didn’t give me any choice, I didn’t ask you to bring me here and now you won’t let me go!”

“Yeah, because if we’d left you in that car, you’d have frozen to death,” I snarl at her, pushing my face closer to hers. I can feel it, that red mist coming down, and even as I know I should stop it, I can’t. I don’t do well with anyone fucking up the good thing we have going here, especially not when they act as though we’ve kidnapped them to do it.

“Maybe you should have just left me, then!” she exclaims.

“Trust me, if I’d had my way, I would have,” I mutter. A shock of pain runs up my bad leg—on cold days like this, I swear I can still feel the impact of the bullet where it shocked into my hips, the fragments that were too small to remove still scattered through the muscle and bone.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” she protests. “And I’m not asking for it now.”

“We’re not letting you go back out there, and that’s final,” Callum intones. I turn to face him, eyebrows raised.

“I don’t know, man,” I reply with a theatrical shrug. “If she’s so certain she doesn’t

want to be here, then I don't see why we should force her."

"Dax," Chuck growls, clearly not up for my bullshit right now. I ignore him.

"She's clearly got somewhere she wants to be," I continue, tossing my hands in the air. "And it's got nothing to do with us."

"Shut the fuck up," Callum snaps at me, but I stare down at her again. I can see something in her eyes, just for a moment—a flash of something I recognize, though I wish I didn't. Vulnerability. Fear. Covered up with anger as best she can, though it takes everything she has to frame it as fury. Whatever she's running from out there, whatever brought her to our doorstep, it's bad—really fucking bad.

And that's all the more reason for us to get her out of here before it catches up. Because this place we've built, this life—it's the only way I can feel like a functioning member of society. And I'm not going to sacrifice it for the sake of this woman who doesn't want to be here any more than I want her to be.

"He's right," she counters, scrambling up to her knees on the bed again. She looks totally ridiculous, still wearing her wedding dress—still looking as though she's just a few moments from walking down the aisle. And as much as I hate to admit it, the guy she would have been going to meet was one lucky bastard—she's hot as hell, even after the mess she's been through, and even more so with that fiery defiance in her eyes.

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“Just give me a coat or something, some shoes,” she begs. “I can leave. I need to leave. You don’t understand, he’s?—”

“Who?” I ask her, before she can go any further. I’m not going to just stand around and let her keep spinning these stories to try and win some sympathy. My brothers might have fallen for it, but I won’t.

She presses her lips together. I take a step closer to the bed.

“Who’s after you, huh?” I demand. “Tell us.”

Slowly, she shakes her head. “I—you wouldn’t believe me. Even if I did tell you.”

I let out a snort of derision. “Damn, that’s handy for you. So you don’t have to tell us anything, huh?”

“That’s not why I’m?—”

“Dax, with me. Now.” Chuck’s tone leaves no room for argument. I glance over at him, Callum standing just by his side, and my heart sinks. I can tell I’ve lost. Chuck jerks his head toward the door, and I grit my teeth.

“Someone should stay here to keep an eye on her,” I mutter, and Callum steps forward.

“I will,” he replies. “Go, Dax. You’re not making this any easier.”

Shooting one last look in the direction of our unexpected guest, I follow Chuck outside, to the main living space of the cabin—a fire is crackling in the hearth, and there’s food on the stove, filling the room with a warm, savory scent. I would normally be starving by this time of night, but food is the last thing on my mind as I glare my brother down.

“What is it?” I ask bluntly.

He narrows his eyes at me. “You really need me to tell you?”

I sigh, and toss my hands in the air.

“I don’t see the issue,” I protest. “I’m the only one talking sense out of the three of us. Listen to the girl, for God’s sake, Chuck! She’s telling us that she wants to go. She’s practically begging to leave, and?—”

“And you know as well as I do that when you’ve been through something serious, you’re not always thinking straight,” he finishes up for me, his voice firm. I bristle. I know what he’s getting at—and I don’t like the implication.

“This is different,” I snarl. “This is a girl crashing her car near the cabin and acting like she’s got a whole army on her tail. This is nothing to do with us. This is?—”

“And that’s exactly what the people who found you out there would have said,” he reminds me, pushing his face close to mine.

I fall silent. I hate to admit it, but he’s right. I can still remember the flashlight beam in my face after the explosion, our trucksmashed into the side of the road, the men who had made up my unit scattered around me in pieces. My own leg, twisted underneath me, a bullet lodged in my hip, though I could barely feel it then, the shock too intense for that. The civilians reaching down and pulling me out of the ditch and

taking me to the nearest hospital, and if they hadn't done that—if they had looked at me and decided that I was more trouble than I was worth—then I would have died there with the rest of them, I was sure of it.

“She’s not going to die if we let her out,” I protest, but it’s weak. Truth is, if she walks out into that weather, she’s going to be in serious trouble—and that’s without even considering whatever is actually going on that she’s running from.

“Dax, she’s in trouble,” he murmurs. “And I’m not going to ask some woman in a wedding dress who’s clearly going through something to walk back out there and face it. It doesn’t sit right with me. And I know it doesn’t sit right with you either, no matter what you say about it.”

I tear my gaze away from him. Fuck, I wish he didn’t know me so well sometimes. That’s the downside of living so closely as brothers—there’s not a damn thing they don’t know about you, not a thing they can’t read in your reactions or responses to any given situation. It’s infuriating.

But at the same time, I know he’s right. This girl...she’s been through something heavy. Running away on her wedding day? I don’t even want to think what kind of marriage she might have been facing if this seemed like the better option. And even now, all she wants is to get out on the run again, like she’s terrified that whoever this guy is might already be on the brink of finding her.

“If she causes us any trouble?—”

“Then we’ll deal with it,” Chuck replies, his voice smooth, calm. Times like this, I get why he did so well as a comms operator—he knows how to handle people, even assholes like me.

“She’s not going anywhere, Dax,” he finishes. “You try fighting Callum on it if

you've got a problem with it, but you know he's not going to back down on this."

A small smirk curls up the corners of his lips.

"Hey, what do you think happened between them?" he asks, lowering his voice slightly. "You see the look on his face when he saw her there?"

I shake my head. "Yeah, it was crazy," I agree. "He's never mentioned her to me before..."

"Or me," Chuck replies. "Which means he probably screwed things up royally with her, and he's trying to do his best to pretend he didn't."

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“Sounds like the kind of shit he’d do.”

He chuckles. “Yeah, maybe this is just his chance to play the white knight,” he agrees. “She comes crashing in on her stallion, and he’s there to pick up the pieces and make it all right...”

“Shit, I feel bad for her if all she’s got is Callum to rely on,” I joke. I know his reputation with women—he’s never exactly been good at the whole dating thing, part of the reason he came down here to be with us.

“She’s got us too,” Chuck reminds me.

I roll my eyes, but nod. “Yeah, yeah,” I mutter, waving my hand. “She’s got us too, I guess.”

“Don’t say it like that,” he warns me. “She needs us, D. And I’m not going to renege on that duty.”

“Duty?” I fire back. “You left the SEALs four years ago, Chuck. Remember?”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t mean I forgot how to be a decent person,” he replies evenly. I know he’s calling me out—making sure I know that he’s not just going to let me steamroll over him with my frustration and anger at the way this woman reacted to our help.

“Who do you think is after her?” I wonder aloud, lowering my voice as I glance toward the door. “She seemed pretty stressed about them...”

“No idea,” he admits. “I mean, if I had to go by the wedding dress, I’d say her fiancé. But it’s just a matter of finding out who that actually is, and figuring out whether he’s going to be any real trouble for us.”

“He’d be an idiot to try and take us on,” I laugh. “Especially on our turf. Especially in this weather.”

“Yeah, agreed,” Chuck replies, but a slight furrow appears between his brows. “But people do stupid things sometimes, when it comes to love. Or, at least, when it comes to what they think is love.”

He lingers at the door for another moment, and then shakes his head, as though dismissing the thought.

“Come on, I need help with dinner,” he tells me. I know it’s not true—he’s the best cook I know, and if anything, I’m just going to make a mess of whatever perfect dish he’s thrown together.

But I follow him into the kitchen anyway, because I know this isn’t about me actually helping him cook—this is about keeping me busy so I don’t have time to overthink what’s happening in the next room, or to spend my time wondering just how much trouble this woman might have brought to our door.

It’s been a long time since anyone but the members of our family have been in this place. And that is honestly how I would’ve liked to keep it. This cabin belonged to our great-uncle, who used it for hunting trips, and our father inherited it when we were young, turning it into our go-to vacation spot every summer. When the three of us got together after he’d passed a few years ago and tried to figure out what we were going to do with this place, it all came together—we were all looking for a break from the real world, and this cabin, out here in the woods, gave us the chance to do just that.

We hadn't intended to stay for long. At least, they hadn't. The moment I set foot in this place, it felt like a weight was lifted from my shoulders, one that I was unwilling to replace by pushing myself back into the rush of the city. When I'd arrived back from combat—when I'd healed enough to be able to walk again, take care of myself, not rely on everyone around me for every little fucking thing like I had to in recovery—even the studio apartment I was living in above the store I worked at was too much for me to handle.

Everything was overwhelming. Every sound, every movement, every flash of light in the corner of my eye, all of it was more than I could take on. The world seemed too big all of a sudden, and I couldn't control any part of it, let alone myself.

But out here? Out here, things are quiet. They make sense. The sun rises, you go through the day, the sun sets. I don't have to deal with anyone other than Chuck and Callum, and I've spent so much of my life with them that they're known quantities to me by this point.

And now...now, there's a girl in the next room. A girl I have no idea about. A girl who was part of Callum's past, but not a part that he decided to share with us. And I'd be lying if I said that doesn't bother the hell out of me.

But Chuck's right. Whatever she's gone through, she needs help. And I'm not going to turn my back on someone in their hour of need.

Even if it means putting the comfortable life I've gotten so used to on hold.

And even if I don't know how long this newfound patience will last.

And just like that, as the door closes behind them—Callum and I are left alone together once more.

Alone, in the same cabin where he abandoned me all those years ago. I can still remember it all too well, the day I woke up to find that he was gone—looking around, wondering if this was some kind of joke, waiting for him to emerge from outside fresh from a run or something...

And the time ticking, passing, sliding away until it finally clicked for me that he was really out of here. He'd left me a note on the bedside table, but I was so distracted by searching for him that I didn't spot it—and when I did, the horror of the situation truly sank in. I can still recall, vividly, the way my tears pooled on the inky letters of his goodbye as I stared down at those words, waiting for them to actually lock into my brain, but they didn't. They couldn't.

Because he wouldn't have done that to me. Not Callum. Not this sweet, strong man who I had fallen for—not this kind, loving soul, who had his demons, sure, but who was more than what he thought he was. He wouldn't have brought me all the way out there, I told myself, just to leave me, and I waited there for hours for him to come back and change his mind, but he didn't.

He didn't.

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“Looks like you finally made it back here okay,” I mutter to him, crossing my arms over my chest and glaring up at him angrily. He’s standing at the other side of the bed, clearly unsure of what to do. Half of me wants him to pull me into his arms and hold me; the other half wants to land a sharp slap on his face for daring to land in my line of sight again, after what he did to me.

“We don’t need to talk about that right now.”

There’s a firmness to his voice that leaves no room for argument, much as I would like to make one. I roll my eyes skyward.

“And what, you expect me to believe that all of this is just a coincidence?”

“What is?”

“You finding me after the crash. Bringing me back to this cabin where we...”

I trail off. He moves to the side of the bed, pulling open one of the cabinets on the bedside table and withdrawing a small first aid kit.

“Yes,” he replies as he plants it on the bed next to me. “I do. Because it is. It’s just a coincidence. Here, give me your arm, I need to clean up those grazes...”

Before I can say another word, he reaches out and takes my hand, pulling it toward him—I wince as the extension stretches the grazes on my skin. I guess I’m lucky I’m not in a worse state—my head hurts, sure, and there’s an achiness all through mybody, but nothing that seems too serious. If I’d been out there much longer in the

cold, I'm not sure I could say the same thing, and I have them to thank for getting me out of there before anything more serious happened...

Unless, of course, they're working with him. James. That's the part I can't shake. It seems like way too much of a coincidence for anyone to find me out here, let alone Callum. And no matter how much of a fight they put up to try and convince me that they're innocent, I'm just not sure I buy it.

He pulls out some swabs and soaks them in iodine, the sharp, piercing smell making my nose wrinkle. Dabbing at the grazes on my arm, he wipes away the blood and debris that's gotten trapped there, and I twist my head away, eyes squeezed shut, trying not to let how much it hurts show on my face.

"You want to get changed?"

I glance over at him. "Into what?" I point out. "Not like I packed any more clothes."

"I can grab something for you," he replies with a shrug. "Here, wait a second..."

He gets to his feet and heads to the wardrobe, pulling out some clothes—it strikes me, in that moment, that I must be in his room. I don't know why, but it suddenly seems so...so intimate in a way I wasn't prepared for. I know it shouldn't come as a surprise to me—judging by the way the other guys reacted, it's not as though they would have wanted me in their space—but knowing that right now I'm in his bed...it's more than a little strange, to say the least.

Finally, he comes back to the bed with some sweatpants and a large shirt. I recognize them at once as his.

"You really haven't updated your wardrobe since we were?—"

“I’ll let you get changed,” he tells me, and he turns his back on me, crossing his arms and facing the door before I can make any smart comments. I stare at the back of his head.

“You really expect me to get changed while you’re in the room?”

“I heard how you were talking about getting out of here,” he reminds me. “I’m not taking the chance. I can’t see anything, don’t worry.”

I sigh—I almost want to dig my heels in and tell him that I’m not about to strip down and give him a show right then and there, but I know I’m being ridiculous. He can’t see me from where he’s standing, and besides, I have been in this wedding dress way too long. It’s constricting, the corset digging into my waist and my hips, like I’m being put on display for someone else’s benefit. Not exactly a sensation I find myself craving, I have to admit.

As quickly as I can, I reach back to undo the buttons on the dress—I manage the first few without too much trouble, but as I reach the middle of my back, my arm twinges.

“Ow!” I cry out, and his head whips around.

“Are you okay?”

“I thought you said you weren’t going to look.”

“Do you need help?” he presses, ignoring my comment. I almost want to brush him off again, but I’ll be stuck in this wedding dress if I don’t get someone to help me out of it. It took a couple of people to button me into it, and I don’t know what I was thinking, imagining that I could just get out of it in a matter of moments.

“Can you help me with the buttons?” I ask at last, turning my back to him. “Just the

ones to the bottom of the corset...”

He does as he’s told at once, and I can feel his fingers popping the buttons with ease, making certain not to touch my skin. And it reminds me, though I know it shouldn’t, of all the times he undressed me before. Now, if there was one thing that he was seriously good at, it was the physical side of our relationship. Even when he struggled to control or contain his emotions, he could always communicate with his touch, and I’ve found myself craving it more times than I’d care to count in the years we’ve been apart.

And now, here he is, undoing the buttons on my wedding dress—his fingers grazing against my skin just slightly, a reminder of how good we once were together.

But this wedding dress was meant for a different man entirely—a man who I am still supposed to be on the run from. And Callum abandoned me, in this very cabin, all those years ago. I’m not willing to just forgive and forget, not about any of it. I’ve been naive for too long, and that ends here.

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He turns his back again when he's done, and clears his throat slightly. I wonder if the same images coursed through his mind too, even as he tried to rid himself of them—or maybe he's been with so many women since then that he can hardly even remember what we had in the first place. Yeah, I can see that for him. Dumping me because he was more interested in playing the field, going out into the world to make sure he could land all the pussy he wanted without a girlfriend to hold him back...

I try to ignore the jealousy that wants to get the better of me as I slip out of the dress and hurry into his clothes, tossing them on as swiftly as I can. I don't want him to catch me thinking too hard about our past. It's just a distraction from the real trouble here, James, and I need to keep my focus...

Even if the scent of his skin still clinging to these clothes is enough to fill my head with memories that I've worked so hard to forget.

I turn back to him.

"Okay, done," I snap, my voice a little sharper than I intended it to be. He moves to face me again, and as soon as his eyes lock onto mine, something seems to shift in his gaze.

"What happened, Charli?" he asks me softly. I feel a lump leap into my throat. I guess I owe him some kind of explanation, if I'm to believe that all of this is nothing more than a coincidence—though I'm still not totally certain I believe it.

"It doesn't matter."

“Of course it fucking does,” he shoots back, and I plant myself down on the edge of the bed. To my surprise, he moves in beside me, leaving a few inches between us—but close enough that I can feel the warmth radiating from his skin, a comfort I didn’t know I’d missed as much as I did until that moment.

“We found you in a crashed car by the side of the road in a wedding dress,” he points out. “And I don’t know exactly what happened to bring you to this point, but I think we deserve to know.”

“Why?” I fire back. “You chose to walk out of my life. You forfeited the right to know my business a long time ago.”

He sighs, pushing a hand through his hair. “This isn’t about what happened in the past. This is about what’s going on now. I want to help you, Charli, but I can’t if you?—”

“You should tell your damn brothers that. Seems like they can’t wait to get rid of me.”

“That’s just Dax,” he replies, waving his hand. “And you can’t exactly blame him, given you came out here all guns blazing, acting like we were in on some conspiracy against you?—”

“And I still don’t believe that you’re not,” I remind him.

“Who the hell are you running from?” he presses. “If you think that I would work with the kind of person who would hurt you?”

He sounds stung. But it’s not as though he’s got any leg to stand on, not after the way he treated me before.

“You talk a big game about not hurting me for someone who?—”

“I’m not talking about that,” he replies, his voice sharp. “I’m talking about here. Now. We need to know what’s going on with you. Why were you in that car?—”

“Fuck—the car!” I exclaim. It hits me for the first time that I left that car sitting by the side of the road—I don’t know exactly who I stole it from, but chances are James already knows what kind of vehicle he’s looking for. As he sends his scouts out on every road that leads away from the wedding venue to catch up with me, surely he’s going to see it sitting there, and he’s going to figure out that I must be somewhere nearby.

“What about it?” Callum asks, sounding confused.

“I need to—I need to get out there,” I reply, leaping to my feet.

“I already told you, you’re not going out in that cold, not in your condition,” he replies firmly. “What do you need? Something from the car? I can get it?—”

“No, I need to get that car off the side of the road before he sees it!”

The words burst past my lips before I can stop them. I can feel him staring at me, and I hate that I’ve given so much away. I can’t even look at him, as he asks the question that I know is the natural follow-up.

“Who’s she, Charli?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I shoot back. “I just need to move that car. Please, let me?—”

“We can move it for you, if you’re worried about it.”

I stare up at him for a moment. I'm not sure I believe him. But as he meets my gaze steadily, I'm not sure that I'm in much of a place to argue. After all, I'm injured, it's snowing out, and it's not as though I can go out there and heft that car from where it's stuck by myself.

I hate to admit it, but perhaps I need to accept a little help here. They have already shown that they're willing to keep me alive—maybe I need to accept that this is nothing more than a coincidence, and let them do what needs to be done.

“You can?”

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“I’ll talk to my brothers,” he replies, jerking his head outside the door. “Once the snow’s settled, we can get out there and move it.”

I chew my lip.

“That’s a long time to just leave it out there...”

“Trust me, in this weather, nobody is going to be driving around these parts anyway,” he assures me. “Please. Just get some damn rest, Charli. We’ll deal with it.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I have no choice but to believe him right now, even if every fiber of my being is screaming at me to argue, to put up a fight and tell him that he doesn’t just get to tell me how all of this works.

Truth be told, I need to get over myself. I have to rest up. Even if I want to make a break for it first thing tomorrow, I’m not going to be able to do that in the midst of this snowstorm, while I’m still carrying injuries from that crash. He’s offering me somewhere to rest and heal up, and if I’m going to escape from James, I need to be in full fighting form to make it happen.

“Fine,” I sigh, and I sink down onto the edge of the bed. And just like that, all the fight seems to fade from me in an instant. Whatever was left, it’s gone, and all I want now is to curl up under these covers and sleep for the next five years straight. It’s not exactly how I imagined I would be spending my wedding night—but I know it’s a hell of a lot better than having to placate James all evening.

“Good,” Callum sighs, and he heads for the door. But before he can go, I blurt out his

name.

“Callum?”

He turns to face me again. I’m not even certain why I said that. It’s like an echo of what we had before played in my mind, calling out to him to stay closer. The thought of sleeping here alone suddenly scares me—like he might walk out on me and abandon me like he did before.

And as he looks down at me, I know he can feel it too. Whatever history there is between us, it won’t be so easily forgotten. And it’s about to make everything that’s happening here a whole hell of a lot more complicated, I’m sure of that.

“What is it?”

I hesitate for a moment before replying. I almost want to spill it all to him, right then and there—how much I’ve missed him, how everything changed after he left, how I settled for someone I knew wanted me back, even if he was willing to control every detail of my life to prove it.

But I swallow it down quickly. Callum doesn’t need to know all of that. In fact, the less he knows about me, the better—the easier it’s going to be to walk away from him when I’m back on my feet. He pulled himself out of my life all those years ago, and I’m not going to try and coax him back in, no matter the circumstances.

“Nothing,” I reply, shaking my head. “Sorry.”

With one last look lingering on my face, he finally heads out of the bedroom and closes the door behind him. I half expect to hear the lock slide across, but it doesn’t, much to my relief. He seems to be serious when he tells me that I can leave whenever I want to, though I don’t have much interest in testing that for the time being.

Slumping back on the pillow, I stare at the ceiling. I don't know what the hell happens next—but I know that, for the time being, the most important thing I can do is rest. Finally, as my eyes drift shut, I fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

7

CALLUM

“So,” Chuck says as we step out of the cabin and into the snow-covered forest outside. “Now that it's been a couple of days, are you going to tell us what the hell happened between you and that girl?”

“Charli,” I correct him, stuffing my hands into my pockets to ward off the cold. “Her name is Charli.”

“Charli, right,” he muses. “So what exactly happened between you and Charli, then?”

I ignore him, glancing up to the sky, still cloaked in a heavy gray cloud.

“We need to get down to the crash site,” I reply. “It might start snowing again soon. I want to make the most of the clear weather while we've got it.”

“So that's a no, huh?” Dax interjects as we begin to crunch our way through the snow toward the spot where the car crashed.

“A no?”

“About what happened between the two of you.”

“I don't see what that's got to do with anything.”

I don't even have to look back at them to know they're rolling their eyes at each other. Call it triplet telepathy—or maybe just my siblings' bad attitude in particular.

“Because as long as she's staying here, we deserve to know what you're giving up room and resources for,” Chuck reminds me as he catches up to me.

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I don't look over at him as I reply. "Because it's the right thing to do. She was in an accident."

"And we could take her down to the emergency room right now, if you'd let us," Dax points out. "We could gas up the truck, have her down there by this evening."

"That's not a good idea."

"Why? Because of whoever she's running from?" Dax presses.

Honestly, much as I'd like to have some quick comeback to that, nothing springs to mind. I don't know exactly who she's fleeing, but whoever it is, they had to have quite a grip on her for her to be considering marriage—to be on the brink of walking down the aisle, no less. And now she's here instead, in the middle of nowhere, right on my doorstep. I'm not going to send her back out into the grips of whoever that guy is—it's not who I am.

And, yeah, alright, maybe part of it is jealousy. Because there was a time, when I first knew her, that I thought I might be the one walking down the aisle with her.

Not that I ever imagined it seriously, of course, we were only together a few months. And I know logically she would have moved on—a girl like that, she would be snapped up the moment she was single, too good to waste. But being faced with the reality of it is something else entirely, and I'm not willing to just brush it off like it's nothing, especially when whoever sent her running has her so terrified to be found again.

“What exactly are we doing out here, anyway?” Chuck asks, changing the subject. He knows when he’s not going to get an answer out of me, and this is, without a doubt, one of those times. They don’t need to know about our history together. It’s just not worth it, and I’m not about to let them try and coax the story out of me—the story of the mess I made with the best woman I ever had. God knows I’ve gone over it enough times in my head as it is...

“We’re moving her car,” I remind him. “She wants it off the side of the road, in case someone spots it and figures out where she is.”

“Damn, she’s got you whipped already, huh?” Dax teases me, and I shoot a look at him. I know kidding around is a better response than any I got before—he was stalking around, pissed as hell, most of yesterday, clearly wanting nothing more than to get rid of her before she could cause any more trouble—but I don’t like being talked to like I don’t have a clue what I’m doing.

“Whoever she’s trying to get away from,” I remind him. “We don’t want them finding this place any more than she does. It’s in our best interest too.”

“Or we could just do what she asked us to in the first place,” Dax suggests. “Get her out of here. Let her hitchhike her way to wherever she wants to go?”

“Dax,” Chuck cuts in, trying to stop the conversation swerving in that direction again.

“Look at the weather,” I remind him. “And look at the state of her. She’s not well enough to be out on the roads, not by a long shot. And who knows what kind of psychos could be driving around. Even if it’s not the guy who’s looking for her, if someone spots some woman, injured, on the side of the road...”

I trail off and shake my head. No way am I letting her leave our place until I know what’s going on. She wasn’t exactly forthcoming when I tried to get it out of her

before, but I can't blame her for that, not after everything that's happened between us. I blew whatever bond of trust we had, and now I have to find some way to get it back if I'm going to make sense of this one way or another.

We make our way through the forest—it's stopped snowing, and some of the snowfall has begun to melt, leaving it icy but less treacherous overall. The cold is starting to lift, much to my relief, but I guess that means whoever has been looking for her might be out on these roads soon enough.

My mind has been racing as I try to put the pieces together—I've been tossing and turning for the last two nights on the couch in the living room, where I've been sleeping since she's been in my bed.

Who could she be so afraid of? A psycho ex? Sure, but fleeing into the mountains like this, it seems overboard, even for something like that. And if that was the case, why would she not just call the cops and get his ass put away? What does he have on her—or someone else—that has her too scared to do anything but run?

Finally, we reach the car—it's covered by a few inches of snow, but nothing too serious.

"You have that hot water?" I ask Chuck. He nods, pulling the flask from his pocket, and I grab it, pouring it over one of the wheels, which has frozen into a puddle on the ground below. With a hiss and a puff of steam, it slides free, and I hand the bottle back to him.

"Dax, you take the front," I tell him—it's the lightest, and least likely to put any serious weight on his leg, but there's no way he would leave us to do this alone. "Chuck and I will take the back..."

We move into position. It takes a couple of attempts to get a decent grip on the car,

given how cold it is, and how it's iced-over in a few places, but we manage it—Dax goes backwards into the woods, steering us between the trees as Chuck and I guide the car down the hill a few yards.

“Woah, woah!” Dax yells out, and we stop—he drops his end, and shakes his head.

“The earth just drops away here,” he warns us, wiping a little sweat from his brow. “We’ll need to steer it to the right a bit.”

“Sure, sure,” I call back. “That way. Okay, let’s?—”

But before we can get started again, the sound of an engine draws our attention. This part of the world doesn't get a whole lot of people passing through it, so any visitors are enough to attract attention. Usually, it's loggers or hunters, mostly in beat-up vans or cars that look as though they've been through more than the three of us put together.

So, when a sleek, dark-blue car mounts the hill and starts on its way toward us, we all exchange glances. It doesn't belong here. Either someone is very, very lost...

Or this could be the people who Charli is so worried about finding her.

The car slows down as it pulls up next to us. Charli's vehicle is obscured among a few trees, but it's probably still visible enough to attract attention from anyone on their way by.

A man rolls down the window as he draws to a halt beside us—an older guy, dark hair, thinning at the temples and on his scalp, with an expensive watch and heavy furrows in his brow.

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“You gentlemen alright?” he asks us, and I nod, shifting so I’m blocking his direct view to the car.

“We’re just fine.”

“What are you three up to out here, in this weather?” he replies, doing his best to look past me without making it too obvious.

“With respect, sir, that’s our own business.”

He bristles—whoever he is, he’s clearly not used to being spoken to like that. But he seems to take the point, and nods.

“Well, anything I can do to help?”

“We’re good,” Dax calls out, an edge to his voice that seems to act as the final warning shot this guy needs. His eyes narrowed slightly, he rolls up his window and pulls the car away—and I can tell before he’s even out of sight that Dax is not about to take this well.

“What the fuck was that about?” he demands, stabbing his finger in the direction the man came from.”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “But we?—”

“I thought she was just paranoid, but there are really people looking for her, aren’t there?” he continues. His eyes flash with discomfort. I can already tell he’s starting to

spin out, whatever calmness he managed to grab on to these last few days already beginning to fade.

“I have no idea, Dax,” I grit out. “But we still need to move this car.”

“You’ve got to admit, it’s weird,” Chuck interjects—as though I need someone else to point that out to me, after what just happened. “Someone rolling up out of the blue like that, in a car like that?—”

“Yeah, it is strange,” I agree. “But that’s all the more reason to move this fucking car before any more come by and ask what we’re doing.”

Chuck seems to snap back into reality, and heads to his position at the back of the car—but Dax is more distracted than anything else, his brows knitted together, his jaw tight.

“This isn’t a good idea, Callum,” he tells me. “That girl, whatever she’s dealing with, it’s not our business?—”

“She’s in our house,” I shoot back, irritable. “It’s already our business, whether you like it or not.”

“Doesn’t have to stay that way.”

“And what the fuck does that mean?” I demand, rounding on him. His face darkens.

“You know exactly what it means?—”

“Guys!” Chuck calls out, cutting through the bullshit before it can go anywhere. I gather myself quickly—the last thing we need is friction between the three of us, not in the midst of whatever the hell this is.

I move back to my spot at the side of the car, and Dax, after a moment, does the same. Steering the car to the right, we guide it into the trees and push it down the hill till it's out of sight of the road. Dax leaps out of the way at the last moment, and it wedges against a large oak tree at the bottom, immovable.

Breathing hard, we dust our hands off, our breath creating little puffs of steam in the air.

“That should keep anyone seeing it from the road,” I remark, and Dax crosses his arms over his chest.

“Yeah, but what about anyone who comes looking for more?”

“And why would they think to stop here?” I ask, gesturing around. “There’s no reason for them to look at this place and think there’s anything other than trees and cold for as far as they can see. They’d be stupid to start snooping around in these woods without a damn good reason.”

“Unless that guy tells them he saw us moving a car out here,” he mutters. I’ve been trying not to think of that part, because he’s right. It might already be too late. And if that guy has someone to report back to, there’s a good chance he’ll come back with far more trouble to cause for us.

“We don’t know that he had anything to do with it,” I point out. “He could have just been a concerned citizen, offering a hand.”

Dax lets out a short, mirthless bark of laughter.

“You said it yourself,” he reminds me. “Nobody would stop by this place unless they had a damn good reason to. Only people who would make a point to come here would have to be...”

“Total psychos. Like us,” Chuck finishes up, dissipating the tension. Dax and I both laugh—this time, for real.

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“Yeah, like us,” I agree. “Come on, let’s get back to the house. I want to let Charli know we moved the car.”

“And check on your girlfriend?” Dax taunts.

I roll my eyes. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But wasshe, at one point?” Chuck asks with interest.

I shake my head and start on the route back to the cabin. “Come on. I’ve got better things to do than stand around here gossiping with you assholes...”

We begin to head back to the cabin, but before we lose sight of the road entirely, I look back one last time. It’s quiet, as far as I can tell—but that doesn’t do much to stem the questions rushing through my mind. Who exactly was that guy? What was he doing out here? Was he the one Charli was running from—or was he just sent by that guy? I don’t know the answers yet, but I am damn sure I’m going to find them.

Because that’s what it’s going to take to keep Charli safe. And right now, that’s my priority.

Even if my brothers might have other ideas.

8

CHUCK

“That almost ready? I’m starving.”

Dax is leaning on the counter behind me, peering at the food I’m in the process of cooking up for him and the rest of the house—just an easy potato curry, mostly made from everything in my garden that managed to dodge the chill of the snow. Now that I have fully stocked the pantry with spices and flavorings, there’s hardly anything I can’t make in a snap—even for my brothers’ picky palates.

“Soon,” I reply, shooting a look over my shoulder at him. “You want to grab the beer from the fridge? I could use one. Or two.”

He grins, hopping off the counter and pulling a couple of bottles from the fridge—we have our own mini-brewery, which might not be entirely legal, but damn, is the beer worth it. We start the brewing process over the summer, and by the time winter comes around, we’ve got some good, strong beer to go with whatever I’m cooking. Good way to keep the winter fat on, and more to the point, a fun way to blow off steam when the long nights and chilly days start getting a little too much for you.

As Dax cracks open the beers, the door swings open and Callum steps inside, carrying an armful of firewood.

“Not dry enough to use yet, but it will be in a few days,” he tells us as he kicks off his shoes and carries the firewood toward the hearth. “What are you cooking? Smells good.”

“Curry. Be ready in a few minutes. You guys go have a beer, I’ll be there in a second.”

“If I knew you liked looking after us so much,” Dax teases, “I would have put you to work a long time before we moved into this cabin...”

“Hey, watch it,” I fire back, laughing. “I might just lose all interest in it if you start taking it for granted.”

He holds his hands up in apology, and heads to the small dining table that’s pressed underneath the window that looks out on the woods. Callum, once he’s pulled off his outside gear, goes to join him, and I start ladling the curry into bowls for all of us.

And I realize as I do so that this is the first time I’ve truly felt relaxed in the last few days, since we moved the car and ran into that guy on the side of the road. It’s been on my mind almost nonstop—wondering what he was doing here, if he’s going to follow up on what he saw. It’s not like we’re doing anything wrong here—for the most part, beer aside—just living off the grid in our own space, but Charli’s presence changes things.

I still don’t know what’s going on with her. She’s mostly been laid up in bed, healing from the accident—she’s in much better shape now, but she still mostly keeps herself to herself, like she’s worried that one wrong move might land her in more trouble than she can handle.

The only person she really speaks to is Callum—not that Dax has made much of an effort to reach out to her, that’s for sure, but still. If she’s going to be staying here for the foreseeable future, it’s my business to get to know her better. And if she trusts us, maybe she’ll be willing to tell us what the fuck is going on—and just how far into the shit we’ve managed to wade by getting involved.

I bring a couple of bowls over to the table where my brothers are sitting, and then I grab another—and head for the door to the bedroom she’s been staying in. At once, Callum is on his feet, stepping in front of me, his brow furrowed.

“What are you doing?”

I hold the bowl up. “I’m bringing her some dinner.”

He eyes me for a long moment, and I raise my eyebrows at him, daring him to argue with me on this. He’s the one who brought her in here. And I’m not going to just stand by and let her hide out here without trying to get to know her.

“Callum, I’ll be in the next room,” I remind him. “Stop worrying. Let me bring her some real food. She needs to eat if she’s going to heal.”

His jaw is still tense—I wonder if he’s really worried, or if it’s more to do with the fact that he doesn’t want me to be alone with her. He might think he’s slick enough to hide his real feelings from us, but he’s not. Whatever happened between them in the past, it’s clearly got a romantic edge to it, and the tension between them is palpable.

And then he steps out of the way.

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“Fine. But don’t interrogate her. I know what you’re like.”

I don’t reply as I push the door open, making sure it falls shut behind me. She sits bolt-upright on the bed when I come in, and I can’t help but notice that she’s still wearing Callum’s clothes. It shouldn’t be a surprise, I guess, since she hasn’t got anything other than that wedding dress to wear, but she looksverycomfortable in his stuff, that’s for sure.

“What is it?” she demands, voice taut, and I hold the bowl out in front of me as a peace offering.

“Thought you could use something to eat.”

She eyes it for a long moment, as though considering turning me down. But then her stomach grumbles loudly, giving her away, and she sighs.

“Fine.”

She holds her hands out, and I gently hand her the bowl. She peers down into it, inhaling deeply, and then looks back to me.

“Did you make this?”

“Of course I did.”

“Oh, I—I didn’t know you could cook...”

“You thought we were getting takeout, all the way out here?” I laugh. “I know the stereotype is that bachelors can’t look after themselves, but give us a little credit.”

She manages a small smile. Not much, but it’s the most I’ve gotten out of her so far. She takes a spoonful and lifts it to her mouth—and then lets out a long sigh as the flavor spreads over her tongue.

“Oh, wow, that’s amazing,” she breathes. “I haven’t had proper home-cooked food in so long...”

“You not much of a chef yourself?”

She shakes her head. “More into baking.”

“Oh, really?”

I spot a point of connection between us—it was in my training, when I was working comms, to find those details that I could draw on with the people I was talking to. If they felt like they knew you, they’d be more likely to believe they could trust you, and I needed her to trust me right now.

“Yeah, I was...” She trails off and shakes her head. “You know what, it doesn’t matter.”

“It matters to me,” I prompt her. “Were you going to work with food or something?”

She smiles slightly, as though a memory is rising to her mind.

“Yeah,” she admits, staring down at the bowl again. “I was...I was planning to work as a pastry chef, actually. Back when I first came out of high school.”

I let out a long whistle through my teeth. “Damn, better you than me,” I shoot back.

She turns to me, eyebrows raised. “What’s that meant to mean?”

“I could never deal with all that pastry chef shit,” I reply, waving a hand. “I think I’ve baked maybe twice in my life. Way too fiddly. Too demanding. And if you make a single mistake, everything falls apart, and you have to start over or give up entirely.”

She grins. “Yeah, but that’s what makes it so satisfying when it all works out like you wanted,” she points out. “Because you were super careful and followed everything to the letter, and then you get a delicious pastry or whatever at the end of it.”

“I’d rather do something with a bigger margin of error.”

“That’s the coward’s way out.”

“Hey,” I protest, chuckling. “I can take that curry back, if you’re going to talk about me like that?—”

“No, no, don’t, it’s so good,” she replies, clutching it to her chest as though protecting it from me. And just like that, some of the tension seems to have dissipated between us—her walls might not be entirely down, but she isn’t making it as hard as she once was to speak with her.

“I’m glad to see you eating,” I murmur to her as she tucks in.

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“Don’t get me started,” she warns me. “I won’t be able to stop. I have a huge appetite, I could eat a house if you put enough frosting on it.”

I laugh again. She has a sharp, sparky sense of humor—whatever happened between her and Callum before, I can see why he liked her so much. Now that she’s beginning to get a little more energy, she’s opening up, and the side of her I’m getting to know is sincerely intriguing.

“Sorry, am I keeping you from dinner?” she asks me, peering past me toward the door.

I shake my head. “I have to eat with those assholes every night,” I chuckle. “It’s nice to have something different in the way of company for a change.”

“Well, glad I could be a help instead of a hindrance for a change...”

“What do you mean?”

She falls silent and then glances up at me, eyebrows raised. “You really think I don’t notice how much Dax hates having me around?”

I shift slightly. I wish I could tell her it’s not that serious, but Dax has been digging his heels in about this whole thing since she arrived. She’s not stupid, she knows when someone doesn’t like her, and he’s hardly trying to cover up his irritation at her presence here.

“Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s got his own shit going on.”

“Yeah, and it seems like I’m only adding to it,” she remarks, picking at a loose thread on the covers in front of her. The corners of her mouth have turned down, and it looks like she’s having a hard time containing her hurt.

I wonder, for a second, who has made it so that she’s so sensitive to the emotions of the people around her. The guy she’s running from, if I had to guess, but I don’t know anything about him. I have no clue what he put her through, how he treated her, but clearly she’s on edge knowing that someone in this house isn’t happy she’s here. I don’t know much about this girl, but I don’t want her to let Dax’s bullshit get under her skin, especially when I know he doesn’t really mean it.

“Yeah, sure, Dax has his issues,” I admit finally. “But that doesn’t mean we’re going to kick you out, Charli.”

She lifts her gaze, her eyes scanning mine as she tries to get a read on me. I feel a pang in my chest as she looks back at me. There’s fear in her eyes, a tension in her jaw, her shoulders hunched up protectively to her chin—whatever’s going through her head, it’s not exactly comforting.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispers to me.

I pause. Truth be told, aside from the fact that Callum has made it clear he’s not letting us kick her out, I’m not sure exactly what it is that’s keeping me onside with all of this.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” I reply simply. “I know what happens when people don’t get the support they need. Our dad?—”

I cut myself off quickly. She doesn’t need to hear about that. Shit, it’s not as though we talk about it often—I don’t know why I felt like she might be willing to hear it.

I glance away from her, but I can feel her eyes on me, curious. She seems to sense that it's not the time to push for more, though, and returns her attention to the bowl in front of her.

"This is really good," she remarks as she takes another bite. "How do you get fresh vegetables out here? Not exactly like you can just head down to the store and grab them..."

"I grow them myself."

Her eyebrows shoot up, and she lets out a slight laugh.

I furrow my brow at her. "What's funny?"

"Nothing," she assures me, shaking her head. "I just...I didn't expect you to be out here gardening. Do you have a special hat for it? One of those straw boaters...?"

I chuckle.

"I don't," I concede. "But I can show you my garden, if you like, when the weather gets a little better. Callum and Dax don't know what they're doing there, so I could always use someone else who's willing to help out."

She smiles slightly, her teeth resting on her bottom lip for a moment.

"You know, I'd really like that."

"Me too."

For a moment we just sit there in the comfortable quiet—and I realize that, whatever it was that brought this girl to our door, I don't want her to go anywhere anytime

soon.

DAX

I grimace when I hear the slight gasp of pain from behind me. I don't know why she's so fucking certain that she needs to make herself useful around here, when the most helpful thing she could do is rest up, heal, and get out of here again.

I glance over my shoulder toward the kitchen where Charli is standing on tiptoe to put a couple of plates back in the cupboard. Her shirt has ridden up slightly at her waist, displaying a few inches of her soft stomach, and I hate that my eyes linger there for a moment before I go over to take care of it for her.

"Here, let me do it," I demand, brushing her aside and lifting the plates from her hand. She shoots me a look out of the corner of her eye as she drops back onto her bare heels.

"I'm fine. I can do it myself."

"You're not. You should be in bed."

She sighs heavily. "Look, I've been there all week," she points out. "And I'm going crazy. Not like I can catch up on any TV shows while I'm flopping around here, is it?"

"We have books."

"And I can't hold my hands up for long enough without my shoulders getting tired," she counters. "I'm just trying to be helpful, Dax. Let me do something. I don't like

feeling useless.”

Once I’ve put the plates into the cupboard and closed the door, I turn around to face her. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and her mouth is set into a hard line as she glares up at me. I’m not exactly pleased that she’s looking at me like that, but then, with the way I’ve been treating her, I guess it’s to be expected.

Seven days. Seven days since she got here, and she still shows no signs of getting out. More to the point, neither of my damn brothers seem interested in getting rid of her either. Callum might have talked a big game about just letting her stay here until she got back on her feet and was able to go back to her life, but even now that she’s starting to get better, he hasn’t mentioned the possibility of it again once.

Which is starting to worry me. Seriously worry me. Because I’m not going to let my little slice of paradise get all fucked up by an intruder. She might not have meant to turn up on our doorstep like that—though, truth be told, I’m still not entirely certain I believe it—but she’s here, and she’s not leaving anytime soon, and that isn’t sitting right with me.

“Go back to bed,” I order her, turning my back on her, about to head over to my seat again so I can pick up where I left off with my book. Callum and Chuck are out collecting firewood, but my hip’s been playing up, and I know I’m not going to do it any good by stomping around out there in the cold. I hoped that she would keep to her room to avoid running into me, but seems like I’m not getting so lucky.

Before I can push past her, she steps out in front of me, her arms crossed over her chest, her eyes not moving from mine.

“Go back to bed,” I repeat, through gritted teeth, a little sharper this time.

She shakes her head. “No, Dax, we need to talk,” she replies. “I don’t know what

your problem is with me, but you're clearly not happy with me being here, and?—"

"You don't know what my problem is with you?" I laugh. "You really can't figure it out?"

Her cheeks flush slightly. I hate to admit it, but when she's pissed, she's even cuter.

"No, you're going to have to tell me," she fires back. "Because I didn't ask to be brought here. I didn't?—"

"No, you didn't ask, but you haven't exactly made a point of leaving now that you're doing better, have you?" I snap back pointedly. "You could have cleared off already. Get the hell out of here, hitchhike your way to the nearest town, get out of our damn hair and be done with it."

"They said it wasn't safe?—"

"Neither was driving around these roads in a blizzard, but that didn't seem to stop you."

Her jaw clenches. "I didn't do that because I wanted to," she argues. "I did it because I had no choice."

"And why not?" I push. "You still haven't told us that part. Why exactly was it so important for you to be driving out there like an idiot in the middle of a blizzard?"

Her eyes narrow. "You wouldn't understand," she mutters, drawing her gaze away from me. I know I should leave it there—that she's done with this, and I should get back to my book and forget this conversation ever happened—but something about her defiance has sparked a response in me. I want an answer. I want it now.

“Try me,” I grit out, grabbing her arm and pulling her to face me. She wrenches herself free at once.

“Don’t touch me,” she spits. “You’re the one telling me to heal up. How can I do that if you’re manhandling me all over the place?—”

“You think that was manhandling?” I laugh.

Her cheeks darken. “I think you need to keep your hands to yourself.”

“Oh, really?” I remark, taking a step toward her. She’s backed against the counter now, just a few inches between us, and I can’t help but catch the scent of her skin in the air—the soft, warm musk of it, so tempting it almost takes me over.

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“Because if I’d kept my hands to myself out there, you would still be in that car,” I remind her. “So I think you could stand to show me a little gratitude?”

“Tell me why I should be grateful to you when you’ve been nothing but an asshole to me?” she counters. “Your brothers have been so kind, and then you’re in the middle of it, acting like a total jerk. You want to explain that? Is it just me who gets that treatment from you? Or are you just an asshole through and through?”

Neither of us says a word for a moment. We’re just staring at each other—she’s breathing hard, her chest rising and falling, her eyes not moving from mine for an instant. And I want to tell her that she doesn’t get it, that if she understood everything that I’ve been through she would never in a million years be speaking to me like this. That she doesn’t know how important this place is to me. How close I came to the same fate our father faced, how this place was a sanctuary, how she’s invaded and thrown off the balance and made it all the kind of mess that I can’t figure out any longer.

But I don’t. I don’t, because right now there’s nothing I want to do more than kiss her.

I’m not sure which of us moves first—but a second later, her mouth is against mine, her hands hooked into the loops of my jeans, pulling me against her like she’s starving for me.

And I am hungry for her, hungrier than I have been in a long time. I haven’t been this close to a woman in years, and it’s sparked something in me that I can’t deny, no matter how angry I might be at her presence here. Shit, maybe the only reason I’m

angry is because of the way she makes me feel—because I want, more than anything, to be better than this, to be stronger, to not fall for my desires so easily.

But I can't help it. I push my tongue into her mouth, sinking our lips together as I wrap my arms around her and pull her in close. The feel of her body against mine—that soft, small body crushed against my chest—it's so fucking hot to me. I had forgotten how addictive this feeling is, taking complete control of a woman, letting all my tension and self-doubt fall away as I lose myself to a kiss.

She lets out a slight moan against my mouth, and I sink my teeth softly into her bottom lip. I want to hear that noise again. More than that, I want to see what other noises I can coax from between her lips. I can already imagine just how good she'll sound when I'm inside of her, when her body is moving against mine. I slide my hands to her waist, pushing them beneath her shirt, feeling the soft curve of her body under my fingertips.

Fuck, the things I could do to this girl...

But before I can take it any further, I hear voices—Callum and Chuck, chatting as they head back to the cabin. I spring away from her, putting as much distance between us as possible, just as the door opens and the two of them step back inside.

I stride back over to the chair, slipping down in front of the fire and picking up my book as they come in. I can still feel the pressure of her lips against mine, my cock responding to it in a way I can't deny. If they hadn't interrupted us, I know I would have taken it further, and that angers me as much as it excites me.

Nobody makes me lose control. Nobody. But her...

“Hey,” Chuck greets the two of us. “You alright?”

“Fine,” Charli shoots back, and I hear her clattering around with plates in the kitchen. I don’t dare look over my shoulder, certain that if I do, it’s going to be totally obvious that something happened between us.

“What are you doing, Charli?” Callum asks, his voice softening when he realizes she’s out of bed. I close my eyes for a moment as it hits me—of course. The two of them were together. And as much as Callum might be trying his best to deny it, I can tell he still has feelings for her. What kind of asshole am I, making a move on her when I know my brother wants her...?

“Just cleaning up,” she replies. Her voice is laced with a little edge, higher than it needs to be. I can hear a slight tremble to it, and I know that if I spoke, I’d give the same game away. I lift my book up to my face, though the words do nothing but dance on the page before me.

Chuck heads over to the fire and dumps the wood that they collected next to the hearth. He looks over at me, and as soon as his gaze lands on me, he frowns.

“You okay?” he mutters, keeping his voice low as Callum and Charli talk in the kitchen. I take a deep breath, then lower my book to look at him, shrugging as though it’s a stupid question.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I reply. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He eyes me for a long moment. Chuck has always been the sharpest out of the three of us, able to read what’s truly going on in someone’s head, and for a second I fear he’s going to guess why I’m sitting here with such a strange look on my face.

“No reason,” he replies, straightening up, and I lift the book back in front of my face and let out a sigh of relief. Chuck heads to the kitchen to start making dinner, and I do my level best not to think about what just happened.

Because if I do, I know I'm going to want more. I'm going to want her. This woman who has come crashing into our lives. I've been doing my best to disguise it, but I want her. And I don't know where the fuck that leaves me—or my brothers.

Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Charli heading back to her room. Before I can stop myself, I glance up at her—and sure enough, she's staring down at me like she's doing her best to make sense of what just happened between us.

But before I can say a word, she dives into the bedroom and pulls the door shut behind her, leaving me sitting here in silence—and realizing just how much more complicated I've made things.

And just how badly I want to follow her into that bedroom, lock the door, and spend the rest of the day with my mouth on hers.

10

CHARLI

I push the lace into the boots, pinching my tongue between my teeth as I line it up with the holes. Callum pulled them out of storage for me, a pair that were too small for him, since all the shoes I have are those little kitten heels I wore for the wedding. While these boots are still way too big for me, I know I don't have much of a choice of clothing here—I've been wearing Callum's jeans and shirt for days now, hardly my sexiest outfit choice...

Not that it matters about looking sexy here, of course. That's what I keep telling myself, anyway. Because there's no way I'm going to start worrying about what I'm wearing while I'm staying in this place, right? I'm on the run from my damn ex, doing everything I can to keep my head down and avoid landing in any more trouble, praying that he'll lose interest in me and move on with his life, and yet...

And yet, that kiss with Dax has been the only thing I can think about these last few days, and I don't know when that's going to change.

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I still don't know how the hell it actually happened. I keep running it over and over again inside my head, the argument we were having before we started making out, and that sudden shift that seemed to happen in the same moment between us, when his lips were on mine and all I wanted in the world was more.

I haven't been kissed like that in a long time. By someone who really seems to want me, desire me, from some place deep down within them. Not since Callum, actually, and that's screwing with my head even more.

Because why would I want something like that with Dax? Is it because he looks so much like Callum? I've been trying to tell myself that's all it is, my mind getting wires crossed staying here with these siblings, but honestly, I'm starting to doubt that. Because Dax is so different from Callum, so it's not like I could get the two of them mixed up. I know it's Dax I want, specifically, and...

And not just him. Being so close to Callum again has made my head spin. Brought me back to those days we spent together when we were dating, when I wanted nothing more than to spend my life with him. Sure, I was young then, but the connection I felt was real. I had to convince myself it was just a fiction I'd invented in my mind in the years that have passed since, but now that I'm back in his presence, I can't argue with myself any longer. That chemistry is still there, as it always has been, and that's...that's kind of a lot to wrap my head around.

And then there's Chuck. Chuck, who's sweet and settled here. Who cooks and gardens and generally seems like the most relaxed out of the three of them. I like him a whole bunch too. But is it desire, is it relief, is it something else entirely? I'm not sure I know.

I'm not sure I want to know.

Finally, I stab the lace through the last hole, and let out a sigh of relief as I wind it through. I've had to re-lace the boots to give them any chance of fitting, but at least now they'll have a better chance of not slipping from my feet every time I take a step.

I slip the other boot on and get to my feet—they actually don't feel too bad. And, truth be told, I'll swallow whatever pill I have to in order to go outside again. It's been way too long since I've been cramped up in this place, and while I know they're just keeping me here to make sure I stay safe, I want to go out into the world again, just a little.

I open the bedroom door and step out—and Callum glances up from beside the main entrance, offering me a quick smile.

“What do you think?” I ask, striking a playful pose in my new boots.

He chuckles. “Not bad,” he replies. “How do they feel? Are they comfortable?”

“I don't know yet,” I reply. “I'll need to wear them out first. Where are you going?”

He glances outside. I can tell he doesn't want me coming with him, but if he thinks he can get rid of me that easily, he has another thing coming.

“I was going out to check on some of our traps,” he replies.

“Can I come with you?”

He looks me up and down for a moment. There's something about being under his gaze that makes it hard for me to think straight—I know I shouldn't let it get to me, but it's hard not to.

“I don’t know. You’re still healing?—”

“I’m fine,” I reply, waving a hand and trying to ignore the small jolt of pain that runs up my side at the motion. “I need to get out. Please, Callum. Let me come with you, even just for a little while?”

I bite my lip and widen my eyes at him—a dirty trick, since I know this is exactly what worked on him when we were first together. He pauses for a moment, and then sighs, shaking his head.

“Come on,” he tells me. “It’s warm enough out for now. Might as well test those new boots...”

I clap my hands together and grab a spare jacket from the rack next to the door, before following him out into the forest. It’s actually really pretty out here, now the snow has melted—it’s not exactly balmy weather, but it’s sunny, and the light dapples through the leaves to create delicate patterns and shadows everywhere we walk.

“It’s beautiful out here,” I remark as I do my best to keep pace with him. “I can see why you moved out here.”

He glances over his shoulder at me, as though surprised to hear that.

“What?” I laugh, slightly nervous. I still feel out of place here—no matter how pretty this place is, I can’t help but wonder if danger is just waiting for me around every corner, ready to spring out when I least expect it.

“Nothing,” he replies. “Just not often that people say we’re anything other than crazy for coming out to this place by ourselves.”

“Really? I thought it was a lot of people’s fantasy, you know, taking off into the woods, never to be seen again...”

“Maybe in theory,” he replies. “But in reality, not many people can hack it. It takes a lot of preparation. A lot of focus. A lot of effort. Most people get bored of it after a few weeks, maybe a month or two. And they start missing how easy everything was in the outside world.”

“The outside world,” I tease. “You make it sound like another planet.”

“It is.”

He doesn’t sound like he’s joking. He pauses in a clearing between a few trees, and drops down to check a trap—it’s empty, and he replaces and resets it swiftly.

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“You really feel that way?” I ask him as we start to walk again. “About it being another world, I mean?”

“Yep.”

“You didn’t say anything like that when we were together,” I blurt out, before I can stop myself. As soon as the words are past my lips, I wish I could reel them back in. The two of us have been doing a damn good job of pretending we don’t remember anything that went down between us all those years ago, but we both know it’s there.

He slows slightly, shaking his head. “I didn’t want to admit it, back then,” he confesses, finally. “Not when I was with you. I guess...”

He trails off. I reach out to touch his arm, just slightly—I need to know what the truth was. I’ve been wondering about it for years, what drove him away from me all those years ago.

“Was it something I did?” I ask him finally. That’s the part that’s been tormenting me the most, wondering if there’s more I could have done to make him feel at home. When I first met him, he was just a few months out of the serve he’d performed in Eastern Europe, and he barely spoke about it. I never pushed him for more information, figuring he would share it with me if he wanted to, but maybe it seemed to him like I just couldn’t handle hearing it from him.

“What?”

He rounds on me, stopping dead in his tracks. The way he’s looking at me, it’s as

though he thinks I'm insane.

I blink, staring back at him. "I mean—I mean, the reason you left," I continue. "Was that because of something I did?"

He shakes his head slowly. "No. Jesus, Charli, no, it never had anything to do with you," he murmurs, and he takes a step toward me. There's a look in his eyes that I can't read—almost angry, but not aimed at me, aimed at himself. Like he's furious to think that I might have thought that way about myself because of him.

"Then why?" I whisper, my voice cracking slightly. I didn't realize how much emotion was tied up in all of this for me, not until this instant. I can't believe I finally have the chance to get some answers—but he's still staring at me as though he can't give them to me.

He grits his teeth, draws his gaze away from me, and takes a deep breath. "Does it really matter?"

"Yes, it matters," I shoot back. "Because you leaving me like that—it's part of the reason I'm here right now."

He frowns. "What?"

"Tell me," I plead with him. "Please, just...just tell me what I did wrong?—"

"Charli," he cuts me off, grabbing my hand and squeezing it tight. "You didn't do anything wrong. Ever. You were perfect. It was me. I was the problem. I was always the problem."

"How can you say that?" I demand. "I—we were happy together, Callum. At least, I thought we were, I don't?—"

“I was happy with you, Charli,” he murmurs, tightening his grip on my hand, as though he’s reaching back all those years to keep hold of me. “Really happy. But that was...that was the only time I was truly happy.”

He pauses for a moment and looks away from me, gathering himself before he goes on. I can tell this is tough for him to talk about, but I need to hear it. I need to know what happened all those years ago.

“Because I never felt like myself again after I came back from service,” he murmurs. “After we lost our dad that year, I...I just couldn’t stop thinking about the shit he’d been through. The shit he had survived, and how it was too much for him. I never felt like I belonged with anyone my age, apart from you. Like they just looked right through me.”

Swallowing hard, he went on. “And when I took you to the cabin, the place where I’d always been happy as a kid,” he continues, “that was my last chance. The last chance I was going to give myself to feel normal. And if I didn’t, I wasn’t going to burden you with the weight of it, everything I’d been through, it just wasn’t fair. You were young, you were so free, you had your whole life ahead of you, and I wasn’t going to bring you down with me. So...so I left.”

I stare at him. All this time, I had wondered why he walked away from me like he did. I wondered, torturing myself with questions, about what I could have done to change things. And now he’s telling me that it was nothing to do with me? That it was all in his head? I want to scream. I want to hug him. I want to tell him that he’s the biggest fucking idiot on the planet...

But as I open my mouth to say something, a noise catches my attention—a slight whistling, followed by a bang and a crack.

Callum’s head whips around—my gaze follows his, and I see a small gash in the edge

of a tree beside us, splinters still falling to the ground around us. I'm about to ask him what the hell is happening, when he grabs my shoulders and lets out a panicked roar.

“Charli, get down!”

He pulls me to the ground just before another bullet whistles through the air, slamming into the tree next to us and ricocheting onto the soft earth next to me. My eyes widen as it hits me—we're being fired at!

“Shit, shit, shit,” Callum mutters, moving to block my body from the line of fire with his own.

“What the fuck is happening?” I hiss, and he shakes his head.

“We can work that part out later,” he replies. “Right now, we need to get out of here. Fast.” He catches my face in his hand and looks deep into my eyes, his gaze blazing with sincerity and concern. “You do exactly as I say, Charli. You understand?”

I nod. I can hear my heartbeat slamming against my ribs, the blood rushing through my veins. I know this is about me—this has to be. Out here, nobody would come looking for me if it wasn't James. And I feel like a fucking idiot for being so naive. How could I think I would get away with everything so easily? Wandering around the forest, like I'm totally safe, like I don't have a psycho on my tail willing to do whatever it takes to?—

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Before I can linger any more in that line of thinking, Callum grabs my hand and pulls me forward. “The shooting’s coming from over there, down by the river,” he mutters. “We need to get to shelter...”

“Back to the cabin?”

He shakes his head. “We can’t risk leading them there,” he replies. “We need to lure them somewhere else. There’s a hollowed-out tree not far from here, I’ve camped out in it a few times while I’ve been hunting. That should give us cover for now...”

I nod, my eyes wide. Right now, my life is in his hands, and I know it. Another bullet whistles through the air, exploding a branch just above me into a shower of splinters.

“Now!” he hisses. Tugging on my hand, he guides me through the forest and toward safety.

He keeps low, making sure we don’t give whoever is after us a clear line of fire—I don’t know a damn thing about avoiding gunshots, but if there’s one person who does, it’s Callum. I grip tight to his hand as he pulls me from tree to tree, counting out three shots before he makes a move to the next one.

“They’re loading every three shots,” he mutters under his breath. “We can use that. We have ten, maybe twelve seconds between every third shot to move, and they won’t see us.”

“You think they’re on their own?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I have no idea, but there’s only one person shooting right now,” he replies. “There might be more people out in the forest, but it’s just one guy after us now...”

Suddenly, the third shot rings out, and he dives toward another tree. My whole body is numb, not just from the chill that’s still in the air, but the terror—and the knowledge that I’ve brought this down on his shoulders. He came out here to escape everything he’d been through before, and now, whether he likes it or not, he’s caught up in the midst of violence all over again...

I stick close by his side, and soon we’re just a few dozen yards from the hollowed-out tree—he points it out to me.

“There,” he murmurs. “You see the gap in the wood? There’s a bigger hollow inside there, we’ll both fit easily.”

“The opening doesn’t look big enough?—”

“We’ll have to go one at a time,” he replies urgently, glancing over his shoulder. “Wait till the third shot goes off, and then run.”

“But I?—”

“Run, Charli. I’m not letting anything happen to you, you hear me?”

There’s a ferocious protectiveness in his voice that catches me off guard for a moment—but, as he tightens his grip on my hand one more time and then releases it, I know he means it. I can’t fuck this up. It’s not just me I have to think of here, it’s both of us, and I’m not going to let him get hurt on my account.

Before I can stop myself, I plant a kiss on his cheek—and then, at last, the third shot

rings out, and I take off toward the hollow.

I'm counting out the seconds inside my head—the boots slow me a little, big enough to throw my stride off. Ten, nine, eight...

I reach the edge of the hollow. I have to pry aside a few branches to widen it slightly, and there's still some frost stuck to the wood, rendering it stiff and unyielding against my grip.

Seven, six, five...

Finally, I pull the branches back, and I force one leg inside—come on, come on—and then the other. The bark of the entrance scratches at my skin where the jacket has come away from my neck, but I ignore it.

Four, three, two...

Just as I hit my final second, I tumble into the hollow, finally concealed. I let out a breath I didn't even realize I was holding—and then peer back out to make sure Callum is okay.

His eyes are pinned on the hollow, making certain I've reached it in one piece. I count out the shots again, waiting for him to come after me, and thank God I don't have to wait long for him to do it.

He manages to enter the hollow a lot more gracefully than me, throwing himself over the threshold and diving into the small space beside me. It's big enough for both of us to sit up, maybe lie down if we have to stay here longer, but honestly, I wouldn't care if it was nothing larger than a broom cupboard. We're out of sight, and there's no chance the shooter will come looking for us here.

Callum grabs a couple of branches from around us and pushes them over the small entrance to hide us even more. It's doubtful he would have come searching for us here anyway, but it's still a good idea, making sure we're not going to be busted.

In silence, the two of us hold our breath as we wait to see if the danger has passed—and if we are truly safe here.

Though the only thing I can really focus on is the pressure of his shoulder against mine, and the familiar scent of his skin just a few inches from my own.

CALLUM

“You sure you should be going out there?” Charli hisses from behind me as I pull back some of the branches so I can get a better look at what’s going on.

I nod. “I need to make sure we’re okay,” I murmur. Moving the cover I placed over the entrance, I stick my head out and look this way and that.

I can’t make out anything in the forest right now—not a sound. Which is entirely wrong. Even when there are no people out here, there are always animals and various critters rustling about and making noise. But all of them have taken off after the shooting earlier, and now this place is silent. It doesn’t sit right with me. Whoever spooked them must be close enough to keep them hiding out, and we would be smart to do the same thing.

I slip back into the hollow beside Charli—she’s lit by the moonlight filtering through the branches, and her eyes are wide, her face pale. I can’t say I blame her. After what happened out here, she’s right to be scared. I know I should be too. But all I can focus on is how she’s doing, whether she’s alright.

I notice that she’s trembling as she sits beside me—I’m not sure if it’s the cold or the shock, but either way, she needs help.

I put my arm around her and pull her in close.

“Hey, hey,” I murmur. “You’re okay. You’re safe.”

“But whoever that was?—”

“Whoever that was, they’ve given up on looking for us for now,” I assure her. “And they won’t have found the cabin. It’s too deep into the woods, and the opposite direction to where they saw us running.”

At least, that’s what I hope. If they made it back to the cabin, I have no doubt that Chuck and Dax would have dispatched of them with a quickness—we keep guns in the house, though locked away at all times. Not that I’m particularly worried about whoever is after her getting a bullet to the head, but I don’t feel like explaining what a dead body is doing on our property to anyone who might have heard the shots ringing out.

“Right,” she breathes, and she rests her head against my shoulder. I can feel the tension in every inch of her body, and I rub my hand along her arm, trying to soothe some of it, though I doubt it’s going to change much.

“Thank you,” she murmurs, after a long pause.

“For what?”

“For saving my life,” she replies. “I—I wouldn’t have known what to do if it had just been me. I’ve never...”

She trails off. Her voice sounds a little hazy, distant, as though she’s struggling to stay in the here and now. It’s one I recognize all too well—both from myself and from my brothers.

“Hey, you’re okay,” I promise her, tightening my grip on her slightly. “You’re safe. You’re here with me, and nothing’s going to happen to you.”

“I’m so sorry,” she gasps all of a sudden, a sob wracking her whole body. “I—I should never have let you take me in. I should have left. I should have?—”

“You did exactly what you needed to do,” I tell her, and I reach for her face, guiding her gaze around to me. “Hey. Look at me, Charli.”

It takes a second for her eyes to focus, but after a few moments, she manages to meet my gaze.

“I don’t know who’s after you,” I admit. “And I don’t know when they’re going to stop. I know they’re dangerous, and I know you were right to run when you did. And I know that I’ll do anything to keep you safe. You hear me? Anything.”

Finally, something seems to soften in her. She reaches up to touch my face, her fingertips lingering on my cheek for a moment.

“I know,” she murmurs back. Her fingers continue their journey across my face, brushing over my lips, and my mouth parts. I can feel the coolness of her fingertips on my skin, bringing me back to a moment when we were together before. The way she’s looking at me, the care in her eyes, the trust...it’s not until this moment that I realize how much I’ve missed it.

Before I can think twice on whether or not this is a good idea, I pull her into my lap, push my hands into her hair, and kiss her for the first time in four years.

The moment our lips meet, it’s as though all that history between us has just fallen away. We could be at the very beginning of our relationship again, not hiding out in the hollow of a tree running from someone who’s trying to kill her.

She sinks herself down on top of me, legs on either side of mine, my comically large boots sitting on the soft earth beneath us. The scent of cold dirt fills the air, something

fresh and rich and fertile, full of the promise of something new. And as my tongue slips past her lips and into her mouth, I can't focus on anything else but how badly I want her, and how deeply I need to make her mine all over again.

Her hands slide down the front of my body, over my torso, and rest on the hardness swelling beneath my pants. She lets out a little gasp against my lips as she feels it, and my mind floods with memories of how she used to do this before. I grab her hips and pull her down onto me, letting her feel how hard I am for her already, and she moans against my lips, a smile crossing her face for a moment as she quickly tugs down the zipper of my pants.

In the small space, it takes a little fumbling for us to get undressed enough to do what we need to do—and it's still so cold that I can't exactly strip her down naked like I want to right now. But I don't care. As I loop an arm around her waist and press my mouth into her neck, I can feel the throb of her pulse beneath my lips, her hand lacing around the base of my cock to hold me in place.

Shifting forward, she moves so that she's hovering just above my erection—and without taking her eyes off me for a moment, she slowly begins to lower herself down on top of me. The feeling of her warmth and wetness wrapping around my cock out here in the cold of the forest is the most goddamn electric thing I have ever felt in my life. I let out a growl, grabbing her hips again and pulling her down onto me, needing to feel her exactly as I used to.

“Oh God,” she gasps, pressing her forehead to mine. There's barely room for us to move in here, but it just seems to make every movement even more intense. I begin to grind my hips against her, stirring my cock within her and massaging every inch of her from the inside out—reminding myself how fucking perfect she is when she's on top of me, when I'm inside of her. We fit together like we were meant for this, and I can't do anything but let the sensations take control of me, our breath mingling in short gasps in the small space between us.

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I slide my hand up the back of her neck, pushing my fingers into her hair and tugging back slightly so the dim light can hit her face. I want to see her reaction to this, every second of it, I want to drink it in. Sure enough, I can see that lust in her eyes, the need, the desire, her gaze not moving from mine as she rocks back and forth on top of my cock.

In all the time since she came crashing back into my life, this is what I've wanted. Whether I've been able to put it into words or not, this is what I've wanted, what I've needed more than anything. And as she moves down to kiss me again, I can tell that she feels the exact same way.

All the time that has passed seems to fall away to nothing as we move together again, my muscle memory popping back up into place to remember exactly how she likes to be touched, what she likes to have done to her. I skim my fingers over the small of her back beneath her jacket, listening to the little gasp she lets out as I touch her. When I kiss her, I swirl my tongue along the inside of her bottom lip, and her body presses into mine with even more urgency.

I can't get enough of her. I can hardly believe it's taken us this long to give in to what we both clearly need so badly, but damn, I'm glad that we finally got here...

I grip her hips again, moving up into her as hard and as deep as I can given the limited space around us, and I can tell she's getting close. Her thighs are squeezing around me tight, and her body is hitting that pace it always does when she's starting to lose herself to the pleasure—her jaw clenching, her breath coming hard and fast from her lungs, her body rocking and tensing against mine...

And then, at last, I feel it—the moment she goes over the edge. She gasps against my mouth as she reaches her release, her pussy squeezing around me. I drive myself up into her one last time and still myself there, the pleasure coursing out to every inch of my body as I reach my release inside of her.

All I can do is stare at her as she comes. I can remember all too clearly what it feels like, what it looks like to have her come for me like this. I have done my best to forget how fucking sexy she is, just for the sake of my own sanity, but it's filling my head, my body, my system all over again, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

As she slowly begins to come back down to earth, her eyes drifting down to mine again, I know that whatever the hell is going on here has just gotten a whole lot more complicated.

And I have no idea how the hell I'm going to explain this one to the guys.

12

CHARLI

Lacing up my boots once more, I can't help but notice that my hands are shaking. I do my best to ignore it, but truth be told, I know it's more than just the terror of the attack that has me so freaked out right now.

The shooting from yesterday is still ringing in my ears, and I tossed and turned all night as I tried to put it out of my head. But how could I? I'm still scared that they could be out there, prowling the woods, trying to find this cabin so they can go after me and the guys.

And I know I could never forgive myself if something happened to them because of me. I just couldn't. I still can't believe that James has sent people out here as it is—I

mean, I've been trying to convince myself that it was some mistake, some errant hunter who needs to get his eyes checked rather than someone actively trying to hurt us, but I know that's not true. I know it's him. I know the connections his father has, and how he's used them to get what he wants before, and there's not a chance in hell I would put it past him to use them to find me and make me pay for humiliating him like I did.

Callum and I haven't spoken about what happened out there since we got back—not about any of it, even the good stuff. Well, what I thought was the good stuff, anyway. Having sex with him again, it's...it's made everything a lot more complicated, that's for sure. And yet, despite myself, I can't really find it in me to give a damn, not when it felt so good to be with him again. His touch, his hands on me, his body against mine...it's a reminder of everything I've missed all these years, and everything I've been doing my best to pretend to myself that I don't crave.

But what about Dax? It's not as though I can forget the kiss with him so easily. I don't know if Callum has even told him about what happened in the woods—we arrived back late last night, and neither Chuck nor Dax said anything about it.

I get the feeling that Dax is going to flip out if he finds out he's in any kind of danger—despite the kiss we shared, I can tell he's still suspicious of me, not exactly pleased that I'm still hanging around even after all this time.

I've been hiding out in my room all day, but I need to get out and blow off some steam—and make sure there's nobody skulking around the cabin. I can't believe that they would give up so easily, not after they came all the way out to the woods to find me.

How did they even work out where I am, anyway? Did someone see the car? I have so many questions, so many that I know I'll never get an answer to—but if there's one thing I know for certain, it's that James won't stop until he feels like he's gotten

the revenge that's owed to him. And whatever that might be, it's not going to be pretty for me.

Or for them.

Slipping out of my room, I head for the back door, past Dax and Callum who are sitting with their backs to me next to the fireplace. I can hear them talking, and I don't want to interrupt. I figure there's a lot they need to get out, and I'm not going to get in the way of it. God knows I've done enough of that as it is.

Outside, it's actually pretty nice—I wish I could appreciate the sight of the sunshine a little more, but it feels almost exposing to be under such brightness right now, as though I'm in the midst of a police interrogation. It's just so unsettling, knowing that there's someone after me, and not having any idea what kind of story James has spun to everyone else.

At least I don't have to worry about him turning my friends or family against me—it's not like I had any of those left as it was, not by the time he was done with me.

I hear a slight humming a few yards away from me, and my head whips around to see Chuck in his greenhouse, crouched over and tending to one of his plants. I let out a breath of relief. God, I need to let go of some of this paranoia. These guys have been living out here for a while—I have to trust that they know what they're doing when it comes to keeping a threat at bay.

Chuck seems to sense me watching him, and he glances up and flashes me a smile. I try to return it, but I feel like it reads as more of a grimace than anything else. He cocks an eyebrow at me, clearly not convinced, and jerks his head inside the greenhouse to indicate that I should come join him.

I hesitate for a moment, but then figure it's a good plan. Anything to get my mind off the mess that's going on inside my head. I make my way toward the greenhouse, and he pushes the door open to let me inside.

"Thanks," I mumble, ducking under his arm. It's warm in here, thanks to the sunlight being trapped by the glass planes around us, and feels almost cozy. Even though anyone could look in and see us, there's something nice about how quiet it is, apart from the slight rustle of the leaves of the plants he's tending.

"You've done a really good job with this place," I remark as I take it all in. "I never had the patience for plants..."

"Really?" he replies, picking up the shears he was working with before I interrupted him. "I find it peaceful. Relaxing, even."

"Even when you know you're trying to provide food for your brothers?"

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He chuckles. “Well, there’s a store in the nearest town,” he replies. “When I’ve had a few bad harvests, I’ve gone down there to replace them. I’m not too proud for that.”

“How do you make the money for it?” I wonder, the words escaping my mouth before I can stop them. I cringe as soon as I hear how they sound. “Sorry, that’s none of my business...”

“No, it’s fine, you can ask,” he replies, seemingly unbothered. “We all get payouts from the SEALs, Dax particularly, because of his injury?—”

“His injury?”

“His leg, yeah,” he replies. “He tries to cover it up, for the most part, but he...he got it bad in his hip. Struggles with it sometimes even still.”

“Oh, shit,” I mutter. I had no idea. I noticed him walking a little funny a few times, but I never thought much of it—I guess it makes sense, given that he was a SEAL too.

“And we get our dad’s military pension, as well,” he continues. “Between the four of us, that’s more than enough to live on, especially given that we own the cabin.”

“Right, of course,” I agree. “Your father owned it, right? Callum told me, when we were...”

I trail off. I don’t know how much Callum has said to them about our past, but I figure it’s best not to go laying it all out without speaking to him first. Especially

when our present seems so murky.

“Yeah, he bought the place when we were kids,” Chuck replies, a small smile crossing his face. “We used to come up here all the time when we were growing up. It was his way to get away from it all. Same as us.”

The words hang heavy in the air. I still don’t know what happened to their father. I knew he’d passed, but Callum hadn’t said much more to me about it than that. I didn’t want to push him at the time, wanting instead to give him a place where he wouldn’t have to focus on all the hard stuff, but maybe I should have tried more...

“Well, you’ve done an amazing job with the place,” I remark, trying to change the subject to something a little more positive. “I don’t think I would have lasted five minutes out here, trying to live on my own.”

He laughs.

“Hey, you’d have done alright,” he teases. “You could have used your pastry chef skills. They teach you how to hunt in pastry school, right?”

“Pastry school?” I shoot back, unable to hold back a laugh. “You think that’s what it’s called?”

He shrugs. “Sue me, I’m a military guy. I don’t know shit about baking.”

“Maybe I could show you,” I offer. “And you could give me some gardening hints in return. I’m sure that’ll come in useful, when I...”

I trail off. When I what, exactly? Get back to reality? Get back to my life? It’s not like I had much of a life to get back to, even before the wedding. Shit, that’s how James made it. He never wanted me to have anything else to fall back on, and he all

but succeeded. When I leave this place, I don't have a damn thing to walk back into. I'm starting from scratch.

If James lets me live long enough to start at all, that is. A shiver runs down my spine at the thought, and Chuck seems to notice the shift in my mood.

"Sure, I can show you," he replies smoothly. He reaches for my hand, pressing the shears into them.

I stare down at the large metal pincers, and then glance up at him. "I'm not sure you want me holding something this sharp..."

"Here, I'll help," he assures me, and he quickly covers my hands with his own—his hands are a little rough, calloused, but it's not exactly an unpleasant feeling. He moves in behind me, his body mirroring mine, and I can feel the warmth of him just a few inches from me.

"Just cut away these weeds," he explains as he guides the shears in my hands to a large sprout of greenery emerging from one of the tomato plants. I try to stay focused on the task at hand, but all I can think about is how near he is to me right now—how close I've been to his brothers, and how good it feels for his steady hand to be showing me just what to do.

He snips at one of the plants and it falls to the ground, bouncing off one of my boots on to the floor below.

"Not so hard, huh?" he remarks, moving my hands over to the next one.

"Not so hard," I agree. I can feel his breath on the back of my neck. Is he doing that on purpose? Is he even aware of it? I wish I had the nerve to ask him, but saying it out loud would be all kinds of stupid and all kinds of dangerous, given how

complicated things already are.

“You think you can manage this one on your own?”

I bite my lip. I probably could, of course. It’s not exactly rocket science. All I have to do is make sure I don’t spear myself on the end of these shears somehow, and I’m going to be just fine. But instead...

Instead, I find myself wanting him close to me. Needing it. Which I know is crazy, given what’s already happened between Dax and Callum and me, but...

But I can’t help it.

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“I think I could use a little more help,” I confess, glancing over my shoulder at him. He doesn’t move his hands from mine, giving me a slight smile, as though he can tell what’s going on inside my head.

“I guess I can manage that.”

He moves my hands to the next plant that needs shearing, and moves the tool toward it. He has to inch slightly closer to me to get to it, but I can feel his chest against my back, the steady thud of his heart through his shirt.

“And just squeeze down on it like this...”

He puts a little pressure on my hands again, and this time, the shears slip slightly—I let out a gasp and stumble backward, trying to dodge them before I manage to impale myself or something, and they clatter to the ground before me.

“Hey, you alright?” he asks, sounding concerned. I inhale a deep breath, and nod.

“Y-yeah,” I murmur. “I’m fine. I just...gave myself a fright, that’s all.”

“You’re good,” he adds—and I realize that his hands have come to my belly to keep me steady, and that I’m pressed against him, nearly flush to his body. A throb of excitement moves through me.

What the fuck do you think you’re doing, Charli? I scold myself internally, but I can’t deny how good it feels to be this near to him, his hands resting on my stomach, his chest pressed against my back.

I wait for him to pull away from me. But he doesn't. He stays right where he is, his strong hands holding me steady, and I try to convince myself to shift away from him, but...

But I don't want to. I can feel my breath hitching in my chest. I couldn't be making this more obvious if I tried, but it's hard to give a damn, not when he feels this good, this close to me...

"You can let me go now," I whisper to him—but it's as clear to him as it is to me that I'm just saying what I think I should, not what I truly believe. I feel his mouth graze over the back of my head, his nose brushing into my hair.

"Do you want me to?"

"I..."

My head is spinning. His breath is warm on my neck, and his strength against me is comforting, soothing, after the mess of what happened yesterday. It's not that I don't trust Callum to keep me safe—at least, not when it comes to my physical safety. But something about Chuck is so steady, so strong, so seductively tempting...before I know it, I'm leaning back into him, embracing the feeling of his arms around me as I turn my head to kiss him for the first time.

His mouth meets mine with a soft caress, like he's testing the waters at first. But as I move in closer to him, he deepens the kiss, his hands moving to my low belly, just above the cut of my jeans, easing up my shirt to brush his fingertips over the spot just above my mound.

I gasp as I feel his hand moving downward, and he breaks the kiss, shifting his lips to my neck instead. I glance down to see those strong, calloused hands moving toward my most intimate spot.

He pops the button on my jeans and dips his hand inside as he traces his tongue along my neck and up to my ear. His lips seal around my lobe, and he sinks his teeth lightly into my flesh, drawing a moan from between my lips. It crosses my mind, just for an instant, that he might have been thinking about this for a whole lot longer than I realize.

He cups his hand around my panties, his fingers massaging me softly through the fabric for a moment or two before he pulls them to the side. I rest my head back against his chest as he moves his lips down to my neck again, his fingers parting my folds with ease and teasing along the edge of my slit.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan. It’s clear he knows exactly what he’s doing, but I can’t help but wonder how long it’s been since he’s shared this kind of intimacy with a woman. Honestly, the thought of being his first in a long time is sexy as hell. Knowing that he’s waited for so long, but I’m the first in all that time to make him change his mind and decide that he wants to break his dry spell...

I angle my hips forward, letting his fingers push just an inch or two inside of me. He lets out a low growl against my ear at the feel of my pussy, and I’m already so wet from just his proximity that he easily slides himself another inch into me.

“Fuck, you feel perfect,” he murmurs against my neck, the movement of his mouth tingling across my skin. He guides his fingers all the way inside of me so his hand is pressed flat against my pussy—right here in the greenhouse, where either of his brothers could walk out the door and catch us at any second. Instead of scaring me into stopping, I find myself even more turned-on by the thought of it, how much danger we could be in, what might happen if we were interrupted, and I begin to rock my hips against his hand.

“That’s it, Charli,” he continues, his voice low and throaty, his head hooked over my shoulder so he can watch me moving against him. “Make yourself come for me.

Make yourself come on my fingers...”

His orders are firm, almost demanding, and I find myself picking up the pace, beginning to move with more intention against his hand as I draw closer and closer to the edge. I squeeze my thighs around his hand, holding him in place, and he arches his fingers slightly so he’s hitting my G-spot, that point of near-painful pleasure that draws another whimper from between my lips.

“I can feel how close you are, baby,” he murmurs, tongue teasing over my lobe in between his words. “I want to feel it. Just let go. Just let yourself come...”

I close my eyes, and with one more buck of my hips, I finally feel it—the orgasm breaking through me, coursing from the top of my scalp all the way down through my body, my toes curling in those oversized boots. I cry out, and he quickly covers my mouth with his, like he’s capturing the sound of my pleasure before anyone else can get to it.

I can feel myself pulsing around his hand, the throbbing pleasure of my orgasm taking control of me. For a moment, I forget about everything. I forget about James, I forget about having to flee my own wedding, I forget about the accident and being shot at yesterday. I forget about everything in the world but the deliciously selfish indulgence of letting myself come against his hand, his fingers stilling inside me as he allows me to grind myself down, taking exactly what I need from him.

When he finally pulls back from me, and I start to come back down to earth, I can feel the pressure of his cock against the small of my back. Instantly, another rush of desire moves through me. His fingers aren’t enough, no. I need all of him. And I need it now. I don’t care how risky it is, how likely it might be that we’re busted. I just want him, and it’s overtaking every other inch of good sense in my body.

I flip around and hop back up onto the table behind me, parting my legs and snaking

them around his thighs to pull him in close. He pushes his hand behind my neck, pulling me toward him, and his eyes are dark with a desire that's damn near intoxicating. This man wants me—all of me. And right now, there's nothing I desire more than the feeling of his cock moving inside of me.

He kisses me again as my hands scrabble for his zipper, our tongues coming together in a hungry, needy frenzy. But before I can so much as undo his fly, a sound draws our attention, and we spring apart at once.

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“What the fuck was that?” I ask, my head flipping this way and that as I try to locate the source.

“It was Dax,” he mutters, pulling back from me. “Shit. I should see what that’s about...”

“I’ll come with you,” I offer, and he looks down at me for a moment. Before I can get out another word, he leans down to kiss me one more time.

“If you think this is over,” he murmurs against my mouth, his voice low with desire once more. “You’re wrong. You hear me?”

His words are almost forceful—but I know exactly how he feels. Whatever happened here today, it’s not enough, not by a long shot, and I know I need more.

I nod. And then, before I can so much as get my bearings, he turns to head into the house, leaving me to catch up in an attempt to find out what this commotion is all about.

13

DAX

I burstout the back door, the cold air biting at my skin, though I can barely feel it. No, all I can think about is what Callum just told me—and how fucking furious I am that he didn’t come clean as soon as he stepped through that door last night.

“What the fuck happened yesterday?” I demand, pushing Chuck aside and striding toward Charli, who has just emerged from the greenhouse. Her eyes are downcast and her cheeks are red, but I’m not about to let her off because she’s playing demure. No, I deserve a fucking answer—and I want to know if she’s willing to give it to me, or if she’s going to try and cover her ass to avoid landing in more trouble than she already has.

“Dax, calm down,” Chuck tells me. He reaches for my shoulder, but I shrug him off before he can touch me, and I round on him, my eyes narrowed.

“Did you know about this?” I demand.

He stares at me for a second. “Know about what?”

“About what happened last night, while they were out,” I reply, stabbing my finger past him and toward Callum, who has followed me out of the house.

Chuck furrows his brow, and looks between Callum and Charli, clearly searching for an answer. “I didn’t know anything happened last night.”

“Neither did I, until Callum told me just now,” I spit back. “He kept it from us. We could have been in danger, and he didn’t say a damn thing?—”

“Dax!” Callum yells, trying to shut me up, but I’m spinning out. I know it’s not going to help anyone, to have me freak the fuck out on them like this, but I can’t just let it go. Someone was prowling the woods last night with a gun, and they came after Charli and Callum. Something could have happened to them. I could have lost them?—

That thought stutters to a halt in my brain, and rage takes over. As if I haven’t lost enough already. My unit, my father. My fucking sanity, it feels like sometimes. And

Callum would let that kind of danger slide? No. No fucking way am I going to let them get away with this.

“Shut the fuck up!” I yell, rounding on Callum furiously. “You could have died out there.”

“Will someone please tell me what the hell is going on?” Chuck demands.

“I can tell you,” Charli replies, her voice hollow, robotic. I turn back to her, and she stares at me, fear in her eyes. For a split second, I feel bad about spooking her, but no—I’m not going to let her guilt-trip me into thinking this is an overreaction. Chuck looks at her expectantly, and she pauses for a moment, clenching and unclenching her fists at her sides before she finally comes up with an answer.

“We were...Callum and I were shot at last night,” she finally confesses. The words hang in the air between the four of us, and I watch as Chuck registers them.

But then, instead of anger, his brow furrows, and he moves toward her. “Shit, you okay?”

“We’re fine,” Callum replies for her. “Nothing happened. We?—”

“How can you say nothing happened?” I interrupt, incredulous. “You were attacked. You could have died. You could have led them back here.”

“I would never have let that happen,” Callum cuts in hotly, his voice laced with irritation that I would even bring up the possibility—but it can’t come as that much of a surprise to him. He knows how precious this place is to me out of all of us. He knows how bad things got for me back in the city. And he knows that if I lose this place, I’ll lose myself with it.

“Of course you would,” I fire back, and I jab my finger in Charli’s direction. “You’ve been willing to walk us into trouble since the second she turned up in your life again.”

“Because she needs us!” Callum protests, and I turn to Charli, locking eyes with her.

“But she won’t tell us why,” I point out, taking a step toward her. She stands her ground, her hands clenching to fists at her sides as she stares me down. I can still feel that tension between us, the same tension that was there that day in the kitchen when we kissed, but it’s turned into something else entirely.

“You really want to know?” she replies, her voice dropping. She doesn’t want to put it all out there, but she can’t keep hiding it from us.

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“We’re putting everything on the line to give you a place to stay,” I mutter, shaking my head. “And the least we deserve is to know what exactly you’re running from. What exactly you’ve gotten all of us into.”

She swallows hard, not taking her eyes off me. “Fine,” she spits. “I’ll tell you. And if it’s too much, I can leave. I can walk right out of here this instant and never look back, and you’ll never have to worry about laying eyes on me again, you hear?”

I lift my chin, silently indicating for her to go on.

She looks between Chuck and Callum and me, as though trying to reach for a way out of this, but they stand there in silence. No matter how they might go about it, they want this as much as I do.

And she knows it.

At last, she begins to speak.

“I...after Callum and I split up,” she begins, haltingly, “I was involved with this...with this guy. I met him at an event I was waitressing, for his dad—he’s a senator, pretty influential in the city, and his son, James, set his sights on me when he saw me there that evening. I was flattered at first, I guess I liked the attention, being part of the fancy side of the city, but...” She trails off.

“You don’t have to keep going, if you?—”

She lifts a hand to cut Callum off. “No. Dax is right,” she replies, voice hollow. “You

deserve to know. You're putting so much on the line for me. This is the least I can do."

Once she's gathered herself, she keeps going. "And he liked that too. I mean, the fact that I didn't have any real connection to his world. He got to call all the shots, there was nothing—there was nothing I had control over. He started paying for stuff, started pushing my friends away, starting making like they weren't good enough for me, and then for him. And I moved in with him, because—because, fuck, I thought at least he wanted me. At least he wasn't going anywhere."

She fires a look toward Callum, and he starts as though he's been struck with a physical blow. Whatever happened between them, it's clear it laid the groundwork for whatever she's describing now—and he's not ignorant to the fact.

"And that's when it started getting...bad. Worse," she explains, her voice dropping. "Once we were living together, he was paying for everything, and he made me quit the jobs I was doing since he could provide for me. He pulled me into his world, and he made it seem like my choice. There was nobody I could turn to, I didn't have my old friends anymore, didn't have any family, and he was just telling me, over and over again, how grateful I should be that he had given this to me."

Her words are starting to lace through with anger now, as if it's finally clicking just what he did to her.

"And he started to hurt me. Not physically, not at first, he was too smart for that. But he'd put me on timers when I went out, and if I didn't get back in time, he'd spend the night berating me, to the point where I just gave up going out at all. When I told him I wanted to go back to pick up with my studies, he freaked out on me, told me I was ungrateful—that was the first time he put hands on me. He just grabbed me that time, but it left bruises, and I know I should have left then, but..."

She shakes her head. “I didn’t see a way out,” she admits. “I couldn’t. That’s how he had made all of it, so there was nowhere for me to go and nobody for me to turn to. So when he started hurting me more, I just...I took it. I would cover it up with makeup when we had to go to one of his father’s fundraising events, because he would tell me that I would make a scene and attract too much attention if I didn’t. And I let him. I fucking let him.”

The anger, now, is turned in on herself. And I recognize it well. It’s the same anger I woke to when I was pulled from the explosion that killed my unit—the anger that consumed me for years, feeling like I could have done more, should have done more, or that I should have at least had the decency to die out there with the rest of them. The nights I lay awake, turning the events of that day over and over, trying to find some crack in the memory that would grant me peace, only to come up with nothing—that’s the look on her face right now, that bitterness, that utter self-loathing.

“And then he proposed to me,” she continues, almost with an edge of laughter to her voice. “And I said yes. Because I truly didn’t know what my life would look like without him. And even though he treated me so badly, I—I thought it was better than being alone again. I thought it had to be.”

She twists her head to the side, and I can see tears glistening in her eyes. She dashes them away with the back of her hand, quickly, as though she doesn’t want any of us to see it.

“It wasn’t until my wedding day that I realized I couldn’t do it,” she confesses. “I...I climbed out the window of that stupid hotel we were meant to be getting married in, and I left him there among all the photographers and society people who came to see him make me his. I knew if I stayed, I would never find a way out, not with who his father is. They would tie me up in legal proceedings for the rest of my life just out of spite, just to keep me tied down to him. So...so I stole that car, and I ran.”

She catches her breath, like it still comes as a shock to say that part out loud.

“And that’s how I ended up here. I thought that he would—I don’t know what I thought. Maybe that he would be so angry he wouldn’t want anything to do with me anymore. But I guess that’s not how he’s playing it.”

“You think he would send people out here to find you? Kill you?” Chuck presses, his voice low with concern.

She sighs. “I wouldn’t put it past him,” she replies. “Or maybe he’s just trying to drag me back to marry him and go through with what I promised, I don’t know. His father, he’s a powerful man, and he can get the authorities to look the other way if he wants to use methods that aren’t entirely legal to get what he wants. God knows he’s already done it to cover up the drug use and shit like that.”

Finally, she falls silent, and looks between the three of us.

“So, that’s it,” she tells us, bluntly. “That’s why I’m here. That’s what I’m running from. That’s who I’m dealing with. And if you want me gone, then I’ll go, right now?—”

“You’re not going anywhere,” Callum growls, almost as though the very thought of it pisses him off. He strides toward her and crushes her against his chest in a huge hug, pulling her close like he never wants to let her go. I can see him murmuring something against her ear—an apology, maybe, for what happened between them before?

Chuck moves toward her and puts his hand on her shoulder—a surprisingly intimate gesture, given that he’s not the most forward guy in the world. She turns to him, and he nods with certainty.

“You’re staying here,” he replies. “No way am I sending you back out into the world when that psycho is looking for you. You can stay as long as you need to, Charli.”

She thanks him with a small smile—and as she breaks free of Callum’s hug at last, she looks over at me. All three of them do. And I know exactly what they’re asking. They’re asking if this is enough. If I agree to this. Because what she just told us changes everything. She might be vulnerable, but she’s put us in the middle of all of this too. And now I have to figure out if I can handle it. If we’re not all on the same page, we’re not going to be able to take down this psycho ex of hers, and I’m the one who came out here demanding answers.

But as I look at her, something shifts in me. Yes, I’m still pissed that the life we’ve made for ourselves out here has taken such a huge hit with her arrival. And I know it’s not just going to snap back to normal when all this is done either—if it’s ever done. But there’s something about her story, about the way she speaks, about the pain in her eyes, that I know all too well.

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It's the same pain I suffered when I lost the unit. The guilt, the anger, the certainty that I was to blame—it's enough to destroy a person, if you don't keep it under lock and key. It nearly destroyed me. And if my brothers hadn't been there to pull me out of that downward spiral before it completely consumed me, I don't know where I'd be right now.

Which would make me all kinds of a hypocrite if I left her to deal with this alone.

I nod my head, just once. It still doesn't feel comfortable, the thought of opening this place up to such danger. But if I can help her make things right, maybe it will go some way to fixing the mess in my own head.

"She can stay," I mutter. And just like that, she lets out a gasp of relief and dives toward me, throwing her arms around me and clinging on to me tightly. I think of pulling away, but instead, I lift my hands to her waist and pull her in close to me.

I don't know what the hell I've just gotten myself into. But I know there's no way in hell I can leave this girl to face her ex alone.

No matter what it takes, we're in it together.

And I'm not going to let anything change that.

14

CHUCK

I plant my hand against the door, holding back for a second before I push it open. For a moment, I consider just leaving her to rest—but I know, after everything that happened yesterday, I need to clear the air, and this seems to be the best time to do it.

Dax and Callum are out scouting the area to check for any remnants of the shooter who came after them earlier this week. I know they'll take their time. Dax won't be able to rest until he knows for sure that we're not in any more danger, at least for the time being, and that gives me a good hour or two alone with Charli. An hour or two that I intend to make the most of.

I knock on the door and push it open—inside, I see her lying in bed, staring at the window. The bedside light is on, and I can't tell if she's awake or not.

“Charli,” I murmur. “You sleeping?”

“No,” she responds with a sigh, turning over to face me. “I know I should, after everything, I just...can't.”

I move toward the bed, sitting down at the edge of it and reaching over to rest a hand on her leg beneath the covers. I halfexpect her to flinch away, but she doesn't. After what she told us yesterday about her ex, it seems damn close to a miracle that she doesn't want to shove any man who comes near her as far away as she can get them. But she trusts us.

“Why not?”

“Can't stop thinking about...about everything,” she admits, propping herself up on a pillow behind her. Her eyes are ringed with dark circles, and it's clear from a glance that she's not doing well. I squeeze her leg slightly, and she smiles, though it doesn't seem entirely convincing.

“About what?”

“About...about him. James,” she confesses. “And you guys. And how much trouble I brought to your door by turning up like this out of the blue...”

She shakes her head, and casts a look toward the window.

“It’s not fair,” she adds softly. “It’s not fair that you—that you have to deal with all of this. You guys came out here to get a new start away from everything, and now?—”

“And now, we’ve decided we want to help you,” I remind her. “You gave us the choice. Remember? And we chose to help you.”

She looks over at me again and smiles slightly. “I know,” she replies quietly. “And I—I’m so grateful for that. I just...I can’t help but wonder if you really know how bad James is going to make this. When he doesn’t get something he wants...”

She shakes her head. I raise my eyebrows at her.

“Charli, we’re SEALs,” I counter. “I promise whatever your shithead of an ex has planned, it’s going to be nothing compared to what we saw out there in the field.”

She smiles, a little more sincerely this time. “Of course,” she murmurs. “I forget with you sometimes, you just seem so...so calm.”

I chuckle. “I was in comms,” I tell her. “I had to keep a cool head, no matter what was thrown at me.”

“Why did you choose that?” she asks curiously.

I shrug. “Our father was a SEAL, and he was in active service,” I reply. “And I saw the weight that put on his shoulders. I wanted to do my part, don’t get me wrong, but I felt like I would be better off working the more technical side of things. Callum and Dax, they were the ones who went out there and...”

I trail off. I still don’t know the extent of what my brothers saw in their respective time fighting. Neither of them talk about it much. What I do know, I’ve gleaned from reports and documents I’ve pulled from their files, and that’s enough to confirm to me that I should never go bringing it up.

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“They both really struggle with it, huh?” she asks, and I nod.

“Dax especially,” I reply. “Just like our dad. He got injured, and he was never the same again. Never felt like he belonged anywhere. Always blamed himself for what happened.”

She shakes her head. “God, I know this sounds crazy,” she breathes. “But I know how he feels. I mean, I know I didn’t go through anything as bad as he did, but that—that feeling like you’re responsible for all of it. That you’re alone in the world. I—I know how that feels.”

Her voice cracks, and I move my hand to cover hers.

“Hey,” I murmur. “You’re not alone anymore, okay? You have us. And we’re not going anywhere.”

“Thank you,” she whispers, and she leans forward to wrap her arms around me. I hold her close, breathing in the scent of her. Being this intimate with a woman, it’s still something I’m getting used to again, but I can’t get over how well she seems to fit against my body, into my arms, like she was made to sit right there.

When she pulls back and gazes up at me, I can see something else in her eyes. A flash of what was there last night, when the two of us fooled around in the greenhouse before we were interrupted. She reaches up to rest her hand on the back of my neck, and gives me this small, sweet smile.

“You know, last night, you said that we weren’t done,” she reminds me playfully.

“Did you mean that, or...?”

I don't bother replying in words. Instead, I cover her mouth with mine and kiss her again, pulling her against me with more purpose this time, snaking my arms around her waist and gripping tight, silently trying to let her know that I'm here and I'm not going anywhere. None of us are. None of us want to.

But right now I'm not thinking of anyone but her.

I pull the covers away and toss them onto the floor, moving back on top of her and pushing her down onto the bed. She feels so small, so delicate beneath me, and another surge of protectiveness rushes through my body. But it's mixed with something else this time, something more demanding, something I want nothing more than to give in to. And as her hand traces down to the small of my back, I know she craves the exact same thing.

Her legs part and she lifts her hips to press them against mine, my cock already swelling from her attention. I didn't get a chance to release my tension last night, and it's all built up inside of me, driving a passion through me that I haven't felt in a long time.

I growl against her mouth, pushing her hands up over her head and pinning them there as I flex my hips against hers and let her feel the full hardness of my cock pressed to her through her jeans. She lets out a moan against my lips, a promise that she wants this as much as I do, and I keep her wrists pinned in one hand as I move down to undo her pants and push off her underwear.

Soon, she's stripped to the waist beneath me, and I just have to pause for a moment to admire the woman all laid out underneath me like this. It has been so damn long since I've been with a girl, and until now, I've been fine with that. But suddenly, the sight of her right here in front of me, it sends a rush of need through me that I can't even

begin to control.

“Fuck,” I mutter, kissing her again, my hand moving to my fly to unzip my pants so I can finally feel her from the inside out.

Pulling my straining erection into my hand, I press it against the entrance to her pussy. She’s already soaked, as though this is what she’s been waiting for since the moment we were interrupted yesterday. And I’m more than willing to give it to her, any way she wants it, any way she needs it.

Grabbing her hips, I pull them up toward me as I sink into her gorgeous pussy for the first time, letting go of her hands and listening to the deep sigh of pleasure she lets out at the sensation of me inside of her.

“Oh, fuck, that feels so good,” she gasps against my ear, her voice ragged with want. I pull back and thrust into her again, grabbing her thighs to push them back and allow myself even deeper into her.

She hooks her ankles around my back, pulling me into her, our bodies pressed flush together as our mouths find each other once more. Our tongues are moving against each other as I move into her hard and deep, letting the sounds of her moans and gasps guide me. It’s like something wild has overtaken me, something I can’t control. I usually pride myself on being able to keep my head even in the craziest situations, but being with her, I can’t even hope to try.

I wrap my arms around her, shifting so I’m fucking her right into the mattress. The sensation of her warm, wet pussy wrapped around my cock is intoxicating, and I know I’m not going to be able to hold out much longer before I go over the edge. Judging by the way her breathing is starting to come harder and faster against my ear, I doubt she will either.

“I want to feel you come, baby,” I tell her, mirroring my words from last night—but this time, I’m far less in control, the sentence coming out more a demand than encouragement. She moans again, and our lips crash together again as I move harder and deeper into her, needing more of her, needing as much of her as I can get...

And then I feel it, the tension of her pussy spasming around my cock. She cries out, so loud I wouldn’t be surprised if Callum and Dax can hear it from wherever the hell they are—but I don’t care. I plunge into her one last time and hold myself there, stilling inside of her as her slit throbs around my length over and over again.

And that takes me over the edge. Knowing that she’s coming for me, on me, knowing that whatever we have is enough to get her to go over the edge, it’s the last inch of mental stimulation that it takes for me to finish. I grind myself against her as I come, filling her to the very brim with my seed, not wanting to miss a second of this.

I hold her there for a long moment after the two of us are done, breathing in the scent of her, feeling the warmth of her body against mine—listening to her ragged breathing as she slowly, slowly starts to come back down to earth once more, her hands resting on my shoulders, her mouth just an inch or two from mine. After a moment, I can feel her smiling, her heartbeat pounding in her chest as she tries to make sense of what just happened.

“That was...” she begins. But before she can speak, I kiss her again—she doesn’t need to say a damn word. I already know what she’s thinking. And as I pull her against me once more, I feel her shiver happily into my body, sinking against me like there’s nowhere else she’d rather be.

And right now—I feel the same way.

CHARLI

Standing in the bathroom,I plant my hands on either side of the sink and stare at myself in the mirror.

It's weird—I haven't really spent a lot of time looking at myself since I got here. Which is new for me. When I was with James, he would always expect me to look my best, and if I turned out with anything other than the most perfect makeup and pristine outfit, he would turn it into a reason to get mad at me.

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But now? Now I have none of my usual beauty stuff. Nothing much more than a hairbrush and some face wash. And somehow—I feel like I look more myself than I ever have before.

I grab the clothes from where I dumped them on the floor, the steam still rising off my body from the scalding hot shower I just took. It feels so good, getting into a real routine here, starting to relax and allow myself to settle in now that they know the truth about me. Of course, I might not have wanted it to come out like that, but sometimes you've just got to come clean and pray that it works out for you in the long run.

And...for now, it seems to have done just that. It's been a few days since I told them about what happened with James and me, and I keep waiting for them to change their minds—keep waiting for the moment they're going to flip out and decide none of this is worth all the trouble. Dax, especially.

But they don't. They still want me here. Chuck and I even slept together—and damn, that delicious body against mine is all I've been craving ever since.

Which is just another layer on top of the spectacularly confusing cake that has been baking since I've arrived here. How is it, exactly, that I've managed to get involved with all three of them? Sure, it's just a kiss between Dax and me so far, but...but I get the feeling it will become more, in time.

Or maybe I just hope it will. Because my body is awakening again after so long under lock and key, and I want to make the most of this new craving for pleasure in any way I can.

With James, I just let him do what he wanted to me—pretty much checked out of any of our sexual encounters, lying there and allowing him to do what he needed to do so he would get off and leave me alone. God forbid I try and turn him down, which always led to a storm of screaming and accusations about how I must be cheating on him, demands to know where I'd been getting my satisfaction since I didn't want it with him. No, it was just easier to lie there and let it happen.

As a result, I became utterly disconnected from my body, from my pleasure. How could I even think about that, when I was just trying to keep him satisfied and off my back?

But being with the guys here, feeling their hands on me, their want for me, it's...confusing. And exciting. And everything else, all at once, and I don't know what to make of it.

Suddenly, a knock on the door draws me out of my reverie. I jump, and quickly button up the shirt Callum loaned me. I've been living in his clothes lately, and I'd be lying if I said I don't love the smell of his skin so close to mine, even if it's nothing more than necessity.

"Sorry, I'll be out in a second," I call.

"No rush," Callum replies. "We're just having a drink. You want one?"

"What are you having?"

"Scotch. Well, what passes for it out of Chuck's brewery, anyway."

I grin and bite my lip. It's been a while since I've had anything to drink that's been intended for actual fun, as opposed to just wiping out my current reality.

“I’d love that,” I reply. “I’ll be out in a second...”

I finish getting dressed and toweling off my hair, and then head out of the bathroom to find the guys in their usual seats around the crackling fireplace. The smell of wood and char fills the air, and Callum glances around to hold a glass out to me as I move closer to them.

“Thanks,” I murmur, gazing down at the amber liquid in the glass before me. “How strong is this stuff, exactly?”

“Strong enough,” Chuck replies, and he shifts slightly to make room for me on the large loveseat he’s on, to the right of the fireplace. Opposite us, Dax sits, and he nods at me in greeting—just a quick motion, but a far cry from how cold he’s been to me up until now.

“That’s what I like to hear,” I reply, and I lift the glass to my lips. As soon as I taste the stuff, I wince, and burst out laughing.

“Holy hell, Chuck,” I protest, turning to him. “This can’t be legal. You could take paint off cars with this!”

“In theory,” he replies, chuckling. “But I prefer to keep it for us.”

I take another sip—it still burns, but the good kind of burn, the kind of burn that warms you up on a cold night like this. There’s a large bottle on the small table in front of the fireplace, and I’m already eyeing it, wondering if I can stomach another glass, when Callum begins to speak.

“It was our dad who taught us to brew,” he remarks, and I notice Dax stiffen at once. The three of them haven’t told me much about their father. I know he died just before I met Callum, and he’s the one who got this cabin for them, but that’s about where it

ends. But here's Callum, offering me a chance to get into it a little with them—and I'm more than willing to take it.

“Oh, yeah?”

He nods. “Yeah. He came out here a lot, in the last few years. Right, Chuck?”

Chuck pauses for a moment, staring at Callum—but then he nods too.

“Yeah, he was up here all the time,” he mutters.

“It was the only place he didn't feel like he was going crazy,” Dax adds. “Can't say I don't know what that feels like.”

I glance between the three brothers, trying to work out if I can ask what's really on my mind. Finally, I swallow down the second-guessing and come out with it. If I've come clean with them, then I'm within my rights to ask a few questions of them too, right?

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“What happened to your dad?”

Those words hang there for a long moment. In that instant, I’m sure I have overstepped. The tension in the room is palpable.

“It’s okay,” I quickly add. “You don’t have to—I mean, if you don’t want to talk about it, you don’t?—”

“No, it’s fine,” Chuck cuts in, and the other two nod.

“Yeah, you told us what happened with you,” Dax remarks. “If you’ve got questions about us, you deserve to hear the answers.”

I chew my lip, glancing between them. Whatever this is, I can tell that it weighs heavy on all of them, and I hate the thought that I might have pulled up whatever this is from the depths of their memory when all they wanted was to leave it behind.

“He wasn’t well, after he came back from service,” Chuck continues, speaking slowly, like he’s not used to putting this out there so bluntly. “He was...even when we were growing up, he had a hard time. Nightmares, flashbacks, shit like that. He tried his best, brought us up here every chance he got, but I guess it could only do so much to keep him from going back to that place, when he was a SEAL.”

Silence, again. Chuck takes a long sip of his drink, and then speaks once more, gazing into the fire, like the flames give him some kind of respite from the conversation we’re having right now.

“Maybe he would have been alright in the long run,” he admits. “But it was when we joined up that it got hard for him. He heard what we went through, and he knew better than anyone, what that was like. It brought it all back to the surface for him, and he—he couldn’t live with it. Not long after Dax got back, he...” He trails off.

My lips part in shock. He doesn’t need to fill in the rest, I can already tell what he’s getting at. “He...?”

Chuck nods. “He ended it,” he replies, bluntly. “Couldn’t cope with living like that any longer. Our mom didn’t last much longer after that either. She blamed herself—she got sick, the stress of it, and...”

He shakes his head. I reach out for his hand and squeeze it tight, wishing I could do the same for all the brothers in this moment.

“God, I’m so sorry,” I breathe. “I had no idea...”

“I never wanted to tell you about it,” Callum admits. “Because—because I thought you would make yourself sick like my mom did, worrying about what might happen to me.”

“You could have spoken to me about it,” I whisper to him. “I would have—I would have understood...”

He manages a small smile. “Yeah, that was what I was worried about,” he murmurs. “I was worried you wouldn’t do the right thing for yourself and you’d try to help me. That’s why I left. I didn’t want you to let your sweetness drive you to stick by me when you should have been out living your own life.”

I can feel tears prickling my eyes. I hate this. I hate knowing that he thought so little of himself, that he didn’t believe he was worth the trouble it would have taken to be

with him. I wouldn't have gone anywhere, if I'd known what he was going through—shit, I would have done anything for him to just come out and tell me, instead of trying to conceal it, trying to force me away from this side of himself.

I take another sip of my drink, trying to ground myself with the sharp bite of it against my tongue. It's so much to take in. But it all makes sense. The pieces that have been so scattered since the night he left me are beginning to fall into place, and I'm starting to fit them together.

"And that's why you came here?" I ask, when I find it in me to speak again. Dax lets out a snort, almost derisive, though I know it's not aimed at me.

"That's why they dragged me up here," he replies. Callum and Chuck look over to him, and it's clear that they're not sure what to make of this sudden outburst. There's still tension there, heavy in the air between them and their brother, as though the memories of everything that happened to bring them to this point are all too fresh.

"Because you were ill," Chuck reminds him quietly. "You were?—"

"Because I was fucking losing it after my unit got killed around me," he shoots back, blunt. "Because I couldn't live in the real world after that happened. Because I would have ended up like Dad if you guys didn't get me out of there, shit?—"

He stops himself dead in his tracks, inhaling deeply and slowing his words. I can tell it's not easy for him. Whatever nightmare he's been through, it still clings to the top of his mind, and I wonder if he'll ever truly feel free from it.

"You saved me," he mutters, staring down at his drink. "That's why we came here. Because they wouldn't let me lose myself the way we lost our father."

He exhales slowly and nods to his brothers—the closest thing he's going to get to

effusive gratitude. Callum smiles back at him, and Chuck raises his drink slightly.

I glance around at the three of them. It's hard to believe that things could ever have gotten that bad for them, really. The way they carry themselves now, for the most part...it's with such confidence and certainty that I can't imagine them ever having to fight against the odds like that.

"Do you feel like...has it worked?" I blurt out before I can stop myself. "Coming here? Getting away from everything?"

"In some ways," Callum replies. "Most ways, really. It took me away from all the bullshit that would trigger me back in the city, and I can control everything out here, the way it all goes, how it looks, how each day unfolds?—"

"Apart from Dax's attitude," Chuck cuts in, drawing a laugh from around the room.

"Yeah, well, can't have it all," Callum concedes. "But...yeah. It's been the right choice for me."

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“And me,” Dax agrees gruffly.

I sigh heavily, staring into the fire.

“What is it?” Callum asks softly, sensing the shift in my attitude.

“It’s just...I’m glad for you, I really am,” I reply. “It makes me so glad to know that the three of you have this place, and that it’s helped you. I just...”

I trail off. I don’t want to sound selfish, or like I’m making this all about myself, but the weight of everything I’ve been through still hangs heavy over my head, even here.

“I just don’t know if I’ll ever be able to feel that way.”

“What do you mean?” Chuck asks, a furrow appearing in his brow as he laces his fingers through mine. To my surprise, neither Dax or Callum comment on our sudden closeness—have they talked about it already, what’s happening between us? Maybe. I guess it’s not what matters right now.

“I mean, with James,” I admit. “The way he got inside my head, the way he—the power he has in this state. I don’t feel like I’m ever going to be able to get away from him, or what he’s done to me. Unless I spend the rest of my life in hiding, and that’s not exactly the existence I had imagined for myself, you know?”

I shake my head. “It feels like I’m always going to be running from him,” I continue, the words spilling from me faster than I can stop them. “And now that he’s sending people out here, to this place you’ve worked so hard to build, I just...”

I find the words hitching in my throat. I hate how helpless I am in the face of this. Running from that man has landed me here, among these men who are actually worth something, these men who are decent and kind and have offered me a place to stay when it feels as though everything else is falling apart. And I've dragged my past with me, and that past might destroy them even as it takes me down too.

"I can't let him take this from you," I murmur. "And I hate that I might have made you a part of this."

"You didn't make us a part of this," Dax replies, his voice almost sharp, like he's annoyed I would even see it that way.

I glance up at him. "What do you?—"

"We might not have had a choice where you crashed your car," he replies, leaning toward me slightly. "But we had a choice to keep you here. You told us everything, and we decided we still wanted you in this cabin. Here, with us. Is that not enough to convince you?"

I raise my eyebrows at him. The way he's speaking, it's almost fierce, like he can hardly believe I would doubt them like this. And I suppose it's only fair. They've made it clear that they're not going to let me go anywhere, and instead of believing them, all I can think about is how this can go wrong.

"And besides, that motherfucker has no idea what he's getting into with us," Dax continues, leaning back in his seat again, a grin crossing his face. "He might think he knows how to handle this, but he doesn't have a fucking clue."

"But it's his father I'm worried about," I admit. "That was what he always used to get what he wanted, his father, he'd use him to?—"

“And if his father’s someone with any real power, then there are people who want to bring him down,” Chuck adds. “People who will be very interested to hear what his son has been using his influence for. And those people will probably be very interested to hear what you’ve got to say about the way he’s treated you—and how he used his dad’s power to make that happen.”

“I don’t know about that,” I mumble. “Nobody really cares about what I have to say...”

“That’s not true,” Callum fires back, his voice sharp. “People do. Whatever shit he’s spun to you about where you stand in the world, he’s only done it because he’s scared that you’ll suddenly realize you’ve got a whole lot more power than he ever wanted to give you credit for.”

I look up at him, raising my eyebrows. Within me, something begins to awaken—something that hasn’t been there for a long time. This sense that, maybe, I might be the one holding the cards here, after being certain for years that James was the one dealing them.

“He showed a side of himself to you that he doesn’t let the world see,” Callum continues, leaning toward me, speaking quickly. “And that means you have something on him. You just need some way to prove what he’s been doing, and he’s dead to rights. And so is his father.”

When he puts it like that, I can’t argue with him. It just sounds like it makes perfect sense—of course I have the power here. Of course I’m the one deciding how this is going to go. I feel the smallest hint of a smile creeping up the corners of my mouth, and I wonder, just for a second, if they might be right.

“See? There’s my girl,” Callum laughs. “You’re in control here, Charli. You can bring him down.”

“And anything you need from us—we’ll give it to you,” Chuck adds.

Dax nods in agreement. “Yeah, I don’t like the thought of that asshole out there, walking around like he owns the place,” he mutters. “I look forward to wiping the smile off his face...”

As the three of them continue to talk, I lean back in my seat and lift the drink to my lips once more. It might be the alcohol, or it might be the fact that I’m suddenly feeling optimistic in ways I haven’t in a long time—but whatever it is, the future suddenly feels a little more manageable.

As long as I have these three on my side, I can take on the world. And I know I’ll win.

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CHARLI

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“Well, that’s me for the night,” Chuck sighs as he gets to his feet and stretches. I glance up at him and smile, and he reaches down to give my shoulder a squeeze.

“You alright?” he asks softly, and I nod. It’s late now—late enough that I’ve entirely lost track of time, and of how many drinks the four of us have put away from the bottle of scotch Chuck brewed up. I’m a little tipsy, but in that warm, comforting way that makes the whole world feel a little softer around the edges.

Or maybe that’s just the aftermath of the conversation I shared with the three of them.

Chuck heads through to his room. Callum has already retreated to bed, and I guess I’m going to be joining him there tonight. I don’t know exactly where I stand with these guys in terms of our physical relationship, but in truth, I’m not sure I really care.

I glance over at Dax, who’s still sitting in his seat, staring into the fire, his hand wrapped around his glass on the edge of the chair. I get to my feet and slip into the spot next to him—I still haven’t had a chance to talk to him one-on-one since I came clean about my past, and I really want to know where he stands with all of it.

He looks over at me and cocks an eyebrow, offering me a small smile. “What do you want?” His words might sound harsh on the outside, but the way he delivers them is nothing but sweetness.

I raise my eyebrows at him. “That’s no way to talk to a lady.”

“You’re no lady,” he chuckles. “I saw how you put away that scotch. No lady could

manage something like that.”

I giggle, and take another sip.

“You’ve got me there,” I agree. “It’s just kind of...moreish, when you get into it, though, right?”

“Or maybe you just get drunk enough that you stop noticing how noxious it is.”

“Maybe that too.”

The two of us fall into a companionable silence as we both look into the fading embers of the fire before us. Even though there’s still tension in the air, it feels like we’ve gone a long way to beginning to clear the worst of it, and I’m beyond grateful that he’s been willing to give me another chance to prove myself to him.

“I’m sorry,” he says, finally, catching me off guard.

I look over at him, confused. “What about?”

“I’m sorry for the way I reacted when you first got here,” he admits, and he turns to meet my gaze. Beneath his shaved head, his eyes look wide—piercing, as though he’s doing his best to see what’s going on inside my head.

“You’ve got nothing to be worry for,” I assure him. “I would have reacted the exact same way, if I’d been in your shoes. Someone turning up out of the blue like that, with no warning, someone you didn’t know?—”

“Yeah, but I should have given you more of a chance,” he mutters, turning away from me once more. “I was too quick to judge you. If I could change that?—”

“Hey,” I murmur, reaching over to give his arm a squeeze. “You didn’t know who I was. As far as you were concerned, I just dropped out of the blue to make your whole life harder. You were within your rights to be pissed about it.”

“I wasn’t pissed, just...worried,” he replies, and he looks over at me again.

“Worried?” I laugh. “About me? You thought I was going to come in here and cause chaos?”

“Not quite,” he replies, a smile curling up his lips. “It was...different.”

“What kind of different?” I ask him curiously. This is the closest he’s gotten to telling me what he really thought when he first laid eyes on me, and I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t interested to find out just where his reaction had come from.

He stares at me for a long moment, as though considering whether or not he’s actually going to come clean with me about it. And then—much to my frustration—he turns away and shakes his head. “You don’t have to worry about it.”

“Hey, don’t play mysterious like that!” I protest, reaching over to nudge his arm. “You can’t just walk right up to telling me the answer and then change your mind at the last minute.”

He shakes his head again. “I don’t know if you want to hear it.”

“I’m telling you that I do.”

“Yeah, that’s because you don’t know what I’m going to say?—”

“And how the hell am I going to know whether I’ll like it or not if you don’t tell me?” I demand. The alcohol has me feeling a little reckless, a little daring. Normally, I

would never risk talking to Dax like this, but he's leading me on, trying to get me to coax more out of him.

"You sure you want to know?" he asks, flicking his gaze to mine again.

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I nod. “I’m certain.”

He slides his tongue over his bottom lip before he replies. I find my eyes drawn for a moment to his mouth—wondering how it tastes, if it tastes of the scotch we’ve been sipping on, or the smoke from the fire, or something else, something deeper, something more dangerous.

“I was worried,” he admits, “because I haven’t wanted a woman like I wanted you in years.”

Fuck. Now that those words are out there, it’s as though both of us have been pulled back to that moment in the kitchen, the moment he kissed me—his lips on mine, his mouth exploring my own, his hands on my body, pulling me in like he couldn’t imagine anything that he wanted more in the world. And now, here he is, telling me that’s true—telling me that there’s nothing he craved more than my body.

I can feel a heat rising deep in my belly, the same heat that rose when his brothers made their moves on me. And I know this is crazy, I know this is ridiculous, but I still want him. I can’t sleep with all three triplets—can I? That would be insane. But...

But he’s looking at me with those dark eyes, his lids heavy, his mouth curled up into a smile. He knows what he does to me. And he knows just how much I want him too.

Before I can stop myself, I put my glass on the table before us and slip out of my seat and onto his lap—catching his face in my hands and kissing him all over again.

His hands move to the buttons of my shirt at once, as though this is what he’s been

waiting for all evening. The thought of him sitting there, imagining me like this all night sends a shock of excitement through my system—I can't help it. I know this is insane, that I should try and control my passion, but between the booze and the warmth of the fire and the burning heat that his gaze drives into me, I don't stand a chance.

His tongue parts my lips slowly, and I moan against his mouth as he slips his hand beneath my shirt, cupping my breasts, brushing his thumbs over my nipples so they swell to hardness beneath his touch.

He strips me down slowly, tossing aside my shirt and then reaching for my pants and underwear—the warmth of the fire against my back is nowhere near as hot as the way he stares at me when he has me naked on top of him, our legs tangled, my body utterly exposed before him.

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he murmurs as his gaze traces from my eyes all the way down to the puff of dark pubic hair on my mound. I can't take my eyes off of him, my chest rising and falling quickly as I try to make sense of what's happening.

Can I really want him this badly? Is this right? Is this wrong?

Am I crazy, or am I falling for all three of these men at once...?

But before I can think any longer on this mess, he kisses me again, and moves his hand to the zipper of his pants, pulling himself free from the confines of the denim and stroking himself to full hardness. He presses himself against me, his cock against my folds—teasing, a promise of what's to come if I just keep this going a little longer.

And I want it. Oh God, do I want it. I pull back and gaze down at him, lifting my hips so he can guide his erection inside of me. The embers of the fire send shadows

dancing on the contours and planes of his face, and I watch his expression as he pushes just the tip of his thick cock past my entrance. His expression shifts into one of something like relief, as though this is what he's been waiting for since the moment he set eyes on me—and the thought of it, the thought of him wanting me that much and barely able to hold himself back, it's almost more than I can take.

I sink down my full weight on top of him, enveloping his length inside of me, feeling the pressure of his cock spreading me open for the first time as I take hold of the back of the chair for support. He gazes up at me as he rests his hands on my hips, letting me set the pace, letting me move exactly as I want to—and with my hair dangling into his face, creating this cocoon for the two of us, that's exactly what I do.

I want to drink in every second of his reactions, every moment of the way he looks at me. I can't hold back, can't even pretend like I want to anymore. His brothers might be just in the next room, but that doesn't matter to me. How can it, when the two of us coming together like this feels as damn good as it does? My body is already starting to boil over with pleasure, the passion and need getting the better of me, and I can hear his own breath starting to grow more ragged and needy with every movement.

Soon, he's grinding himself back into me, his hands on my hips to pull me down on top of him as he fills me with his cock. He stares up at me like he's burning the sight of me like this into his mind—like he never wants to forget the way I looked when I first took him inside of me. Our lips brush against each other, just for the barest moment, and the heat of his breath on my skin sends a near-painful spasm of pleasure through my body.

“Oh God,” I whisper, and he kisses me again—probably to keep me from making too much noise and waking his brothers, but honestly I don't care. I just want to make out with him for hours like I did when I was a teenager, utterly given over to the way it feels to be wanted this deeply by someone again.

His hand comes to the small of my back to hold me against him, and he drives himself into me deep and hard, sending shock waves of pleasure through my entire system at once. My body is teetering on the edge of this delicious release, and I need to come so badly it seems to have pushed every other thought from my mind. I grip tighter to the back of the chair, using the leverage to push down on top of him, needing him as deep as I can take him—needing as much of him as he's willing to give...

And it's at that moment that I feel his body spasm beneath mine. He lets out a long, deep groan against my lips as he reaches his release, his cock twitching inside of me as he fills me with his seed, and all I can do is hold myself there and soak up every second of this sensation. I can feel him panting for air against my mouth, and something about hearing him totally lose himself to me, even for a moment, is all it takes to get me where I need to go.

My pleasure crests and bursts just a few seconds after his does, and I have to press my lips together to keep from crying out and waking Callum and Chuck—though maybe there's some part of me that wants them to hear it, some part of me that likes the idea of all the brothers knowing about what I've been up to. My pussy clenches around his cock, over and over again, the pleasure stretching out for what feels like a lifetime before I finally come back down to earth.

And when I do, it's to find his arms wrapped around me, pulling me close, his head resting against my chest, cheek right above my heart. As a blissed-out smile spreads over my face, I reach down to cradle his head.

I might not know exactly what comes next. But I know one thing for damn sure. Between the three of these brothers, I am never going to be left unsatisfied.

And in this moment, it's hard to think of anything more important than that.

CALLUM

A few twigs and leaves snap beneath my boots as I turn from the road to continue the loop back to the cabin. The air is clear and bright, almost warm, and I can make out the sound of a few birds chirping—a good sign, as it means nobody has been here recently to scare them off.

It's morning, after our conversation with Charli last night about bringing down her ex, once and for all. After the few drinks I had last night, I figured it would be a good plan to get up and out there first thing to clear my head—not that I get hungover, but the roughness that Chuck's booze can leave you with always responds to the fresh air.

And besides, we need to be keeping our wits about us, to make sure nobody else is trying to search out Charli or the cabin. I haven't heard anything since the attack on Charli and me last week, but that doesn't mean they've given up. No, if anything, it likely just means that they've gotten a little more careful about how they're going about it, and I'm not about to let my guard down long enough for one of us to get hurt.

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Or worse.

After what we shared last night, the bond between us is even stronger—and I'm even more determined to make sure that Charli's psycho ex never gets a chance to get close to her again. She doesn't deserve that. No, she deserves a chance to get out into the world and live the life she was meant to live—the life she was on track for when I knew her.

And the life that, I can't help but wonder, she might have been able to stick to if I hadn't dumped her the way I did.

Not that I believe for a second that I was some lynchpin to her success or ability to do what she wanted, no. Nothing like that. But I did abandon her with no warning. Gave her no chance to get her feet under her before I took off. Anyone would have been thrown for a loop by that—anyone would have looked for someone, in their next relationship, who would give them the kind of stability and certainty that I had so utterly failed to provide for her.

And James gave her that. At least, for long enough that he managed to pull her into his web, and by the time she realized, it was too late. That's the part that kills me, knowing that I might have laid the groundwork for him to move in and take what he wanted from her.

All the more reason to make fucking sure that he never gets the chance again.

But I can't make out any trouble around the cabin, even in the area of the woods where we were fired on before. The roads are quiet, despite the fact that the weather

has started to improve. I want to tell myself that he might have lost interest, but I'm not stupid enough to believe that a guy like that would give up on what he thought he was owed so quickly.

I can't believe how close she came to marrying him. That's another thing that fucks with me—we found her in her wedding dress. Just a few more hours, and she would have been his wife, and I would never have known a thing about it. I would never have had a chance to make things right with her...

And now, the thought of that stings just to think about. I don't even want to imagine what her life might have looked like if she hadn't been brave enough to flee with everything she had, and leave that bastard behind for good.

I take the path back to the cabin—there isn't a single route down there, of course, and we try to vary up the journeys we take to get there whenever we're able to. Safer that way. Harder for people to find us if we haven't beaten down the grass and branches to guide whoever's looking for us straight to our cabin. Before, it was just a precaution, but now it feels damn close to a necessity.

And I'm just about to round the final bend of the river that will bring me in line with the cabin once more, when something catches the corner of my eye. I glance around—it's a flash of metal and red light, buried among the undergrowth. My eyes slide this way and that, and I try to make out if anyone's watching me, but I can't see anything else out of place.

Slowly, I pick my way toward the object. Sure enough, it's a trap—not one of the old metal traps we use for hunting, but something more modern. It still has the sharp teeth and snap mechanism, but it's fitted with some kind of alarm, a blinking red light, along with a speaker that's surely meant to go off the moment someone treads on it. Whoever put this here, they wanted to know when it was activated.

It would have led them right to us.

I pull the small penknife from my pocket and slip it beneath the wire that ties it to a small battery back—as quickly as I can, I saw through it till it pops loose, and lift the trap into my hands. As I examine it, my heart sinks. They’re still looking for us, and chances are, this is far from the only trap they were hoping we’d stumble into.

I carry it back to the cabin, and when I get there, Chuck and Dax are already up, sipping on coffee in the kitchen. Chuck parts his lips to greet me—but when he sees what I’m carrying, his brow furrows.

“What the fuck is that?” he demands, striding over to me, his eyes fixed on the trap.

“I found it out in the woods this morning,” I reply, dropping it down onto the counter with a clatter. “Attached to a battery pack. Looks like it comes with an alarm and some kind of tracker.”

“Shit,” Chuck mutters as he looks it over. “Yeah, I recognize this. It sends out a location when it’s set off, and digs itself into the ground so whoever’s in it can’t go anywhere.”

“So whoever left this for us...”

“They wanted us to get stuck,” I finish up for Dax, grimly. There’s no point trying to deny it. We can all see the truth for what it is. Might not be pretty, but God knows we’ve been faced with hard shit before.

“This is good,” Chuck remarks, placing the trap back on the table.

“Good?” I exclaim. “How the fuck can you?”

“Because it means they still don’t know where we are,” he points out. “They haven’t come deep enough into the woods yet to find us. And now that we know those traps are out there, all we have to do is find them, move them, and then set them off. Send them on a wild goose chase and give us more time.”

He speaks with a clipped, authoritative tone—the same kind I know he used when he used to work comms. Dax stiffens slightly, and Chuck glances over at him.

“Callum and I can handle this. You don’t have to?—”

“No,” Dax shoots back, cutting him off. “I want to help. I’m not going to stand around doing nothing while she’s in danger.”

He looks toward my bedroom door, where Charli’s still sleeping—she slipped into bed late last night and snuggled against me, her head resting on my arm, her hair spilled out over the pillow. I could tell she was smiling, though I didn’t think to ask her what had put her in such a good mood.

“I meant what I said last night,” Chuck adds. “She has shit on that man that he doesn’t want to get out. All we need to do is find some way to prove it, and we’ll be able to find someone out there who’s desperate to get their hands on that information.”

I look between the two of them. Hearing them speak about her like this, it’s heartening—but I can’t help but feel other questions nagging at my mind, other questions that I know I need the answer to.

“If we’re going to do this,” I begin, “then we need to be honest with each other.”

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They both turn to me.

“Honest how?” Dax demands, a hint of defensiveness in his voice.

“Honest about why we’re doing this,” I reply. Taking a deep breath, I realize that this is the first time I’ve had to second-guess my brothers—but God knows, now more than ever, we need to be able to be honest with each other.

“Do you have feelings for Charli?”

The words hang in the air between the three of us. For a moment, I think I’ve overstepped, sure that it’s just my worry about her that has me feeling this way. But, slowly, after a long pause, Chuck nods.

“Yeah,” he admits. “Yeah, I do. I can’t speak for Dax, but we’ve had a few...moments together these last couple of weeks. I really like her. And I don’t want anything to happen to her—I know I couldn’t live with myself.”

I turn to Dax. He stares at me for a second before he replies, as though not certain how I’m going to react to this, and then he nods too.

“Yeah,” he echoes, finally. “We...we slept together last night, for the first time. I was trying to ignore it for so long, but I—I’m attracted to her. Not just her body, I mean. She’s...she gets it. She gets me.”

That’s as close as I’ll get to an admission of love from Dax, and I know it. He’s falling for her. He might not want to say the words out loud, but it’s written all over

his face, just how much he likes her, how much he wants her to be safe.

“And you?” Chuck presses. “I know you guys were involved before?—”

“Yeah, I still love her,” I reply without a second thought. I don’t even have to consider my answer to that question. “I’ve loved her since we—since I left. I just didn’t want to bring her down with me. But now...now, I feel like I can actually help her. I don’t want to pass up that chance, you know?”

The three of us stand in silence for a moment, taking in the enormity of the confessions that we’ve just made. Because there’s no taking it back now. We’ve said it. We all care about her, more deeply that we could have ever expected. We’re all falling for her, at one stage of love or another, for this woman who has come crashing into our lives.

I thought I would feel jealous, but I don’t. I’ve shared everything with my brothers my whole life. This? This is just an extension of that. It makes sense that they’d fall for the same woman I did, that they’d see the same things in her I can.

And I know that, whatever we’re up against, there’s nobody I’d rather have by my side than my brothers. They’re skilled, they’re trained, and they’re dedicated—if we’re going to find some way to take this motherfucker down, then it’s going to be together, I’m sure of that.

“Neither do I,” Chuck agrees.

“So, we’re in this together?” I look between the two of them. This is it, the last chance they have to back out before everything changes—the last chance to say no, to tell me they don’t want a thing to do with everything that’s about to unfold.

But they don’t break eye contact for a second. No, instead, they both nod silently. I

glance toward the bedroom door, where Charli is still sleeping—I almost wish she was here to listen to this, to hear that we’re all on her side for whatever comes next.

But the most important thing isn’t telling her how we feel. It’s showing her. And the best way we can do that is by bringing her psycho ex down for good.

No matter what it takes.

18

CHUCK

I look this way and that along the road, ears pricked for any sound, but there’s nothing. Dead silence. I can feel the hairs on the back of my neck pricking up, waiting for something, anything to happen, but just like the rest of this evening, all I can hear is quiet in every direction.

I pull my walkie-talkie from my pocket and buzz in to Callum and Dax.

“You guys alright?”

“Fine,” Dax fires back, and Callum confirms the same thing a second later.

“Any sign of anyone?” I ask.

“Nothing yet.”

“Yeah, nothing,” Dax agrees.

I grimace. I know patience is the name of the game here—we can’t lose hope just because things haven’t gone exactly as they were meant to within the first couple

days of us laying out these traps. But the longer this goes on, the more I start to wonder if they've found some other way to pull this off, some way to catch us off guard before we can get our bearings.

I hook the walkie-talkie back over the edge of my jeans, and pull back among the trees. I've been crouching out here for a few hours now, keeping watch on the trap we've set over the roads—a run of spikes, small enough that you can't see them from inside a car, but lethal to the rubber on their tires. Dax and Callum are positioned at the other lanes that lead into the forest—we've got to cover all our bases. Any approach they take, we need to be ready to shut them down.

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But for the last day or so, since we've laid down these spikes, there's been nothing. No sound or sign from anyone trying to get into or out of the forest. Which should be a good thing—silence, at least, means nobody is on the hunt for Charli. But I find it hard to believe that this man would give up so easily, especially after everything Charli has told us about him and his father...

Suddenly, something catches my attention. It takes me a second to register it, after so much quiet, but it's an engine. A car engine. Heading up toward me—must be coming through from the nearest town, though I can't imagine why anyone would bother with making their way down here unless they were looking for something specific.

Or someone.

I reach for the knife I've stashed in the holster at my side. No guns. Too loud. Can't attract more attention than we need to. We have them locked up at the cabin, but the last thing I want is to pull firearms into it. We need whoever comes up here alive—need them for information, as much as we can get about the man they're working for and everything he has planned for us.

Sure enough, the purr of the engine draws in closer and closer, until finally, the sunlight bounces off the hood of a car emerging over the hill. I pull back into the tree line, making certain they can't see me. And then it hits me. This car, it's the same one that drove by when we were moving Charli's crashed vehicle a few weeks ago. Whoever this is, they've come back to follow up on what they saw...

But they're not going to have much of a chance to get any closer. I grit my teeth in

the second before they hit the spike trap, and an explosion of deafening pops bursts into the air as the tires break and split, the car skidding to the left and nearly sliding straight into a ditch by the side of the road.

“Shit!” A man’s voice cuts through the air, accompanied by the hissing of the tires losing pressure. He springs out of the vehicle and drops down to his haunches to inspect the damage, muttering more curses under his breath as he does so. Before he has a chance to lift his head and look around to see who caused this harm to his car, I’m on him, cutting silently through the trees and emerging out onto the road.

“What the fuck—” he exclaims, and he scrabbles at his side for a gun as he sees me approaching. I don’t give him a chance to pull it out, knocking it beneath the car with a kick before he can even get to his feet.

I might have spent most of my time in the SEALs in comms, but that doesn’t mean I didn’t have plenty of training of my own in how to handle conflict. I grab the man’s arm and twist it up his back, pinning him to the ground, but before I can plant my knee on his back to keep him there, he squirms loose and dives toward the car where I kicked his gun.

“Get the fuck away from me!” he yells, his hands scrabbling at the frigid tarmac as he tries to grab hold of the weapon. I pull my knife and drop down in front of him, grabbing him by the collar and yanking him toward me so he’s got no choice but to look me in the eye. Pressing the blade to his throat, I see the blood drain from his face as he realizes just how much trouble he’s in, his body going limp in my grasp.

“Give it up,” I order him. “You’re coming with me.”

“Who the fuck are you?” he asks, though his voice is weak—he knows he’s not going to walk away from this with a win, no matter how much he wants to. Does he have a tracker on him? Maybe. I reach into his pockets, keeping the knife pressed to his

throat, and pull out a phone, tossing it to the ground beneath the car. I can come back and get it later, maybe dispose of it somewhere far away so they'll go looking for it there—if they don't already know what's happened to him by then.

I flash him a grin.

“Oh, you'll find out,” I tell him, and I reach into my pocket to pull out the walkie-talkie. “Dax, Callum? Come meet me at the west entrance. I have someone you'll want to see.”

19

DAX

I shake out my fist, the cold, metallic scent of blood heavy in the air as the would-be attacker lolls in the chair he's tied to.

“You okay?” Callum asks me, his voice low. I nod quickly. Last thing I want is for him to go worrying about me. I'm fine. This part, the part where I beat the shit out of this guy, I can handle. It's everything else that I have a hard time with.

“You ready to talk yet?” Chuck demands, grabbing the man by the back of the head, yanking him upright by his hair and forcing him to look into his eyes. The man's gaze is distant, as though he's somewhere else entirely—or at least, he wants to be.

“I don't have anything to say to you,” he spits back. “Where the fuck am I? Who are you?”

“You start talking to us, and we'll start talking to you,” Chuck replies. “Who sent you up here? James?”

The man draws his gaze away from Chuck once more, but I can tell we've hit a sore spot. He might not want to admit it, but that fucker is the exact reason he's up here in the mountains—locked up in our storage shed, with Charli at a safe distance in the cabin, getting the shit kicked out of him until he hands over the information we need.

“You don't need to protect him,” Callum presses him. “We know what kind of guy he is. Tell us what you know, and we'll let you go. No hard feelings.”

The man spits out a mouthful of blood and lets out a sharp, mirthless laugh.

“You really expect me to believe that?” he demands. I flex my hand again at the sound of his sharp words. I don't appreciate his attitude, especially not knowing that he came here to find Charli.

“I expect you to figure out what's good for you, and fast,” Chuck snarls back. “James isn't here to protect you. And even if he was—you really think he would give a damn about what happened to one of his lackeys?”

He shoves the man's head down again, and he rocks on the chair, unable to steady himself as his hands are bound behind his back. Callum is pacing back and forth next to the door, and Chuck runs a hand through his hair, clearly not sure how to handle this.

But I know. Out of the three of us, I'm the one who saw the most action. I know how to get this information out of him. They've been too kind to him so far, and that's the last thing you want for a motherfucker like this. You need to break them.

Or at least show that you're prepared to destroy them, if that's what it takes.

I stride toward him and grab the knife at my side. It's a hunting blade, one that I usually only make use of when I'm skinning animals for food, but right now I'm

ready to tear the skin from his bones if I have to. I press the sharp edge into his cheek, and he lets out a groan of pain—so exhausted from all the hurt he can barely keep himself upright.

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“I suggest you start talking soon,” I growl at him as I draw the blade slowly over his cheek. A smear of blood darkens the metal, his skin staining with the crimson red. He winces, and a drop falls down into his mouth. His eyes widen as he seems to realize what’s happening to him, but I don’t let up, not for a second. I keep the blade trailing down his face, reaching the corner of his lip, where I tuck the tip into the crease of his mouth.

“Because you can use this mouth for something useful,” I continue. “Or I can carve a new one for you. Your choice.”

The man stares up at me, his eyes painted with terror. Behind me, I can hear Callum and Chuck breathing hard. Though neither of them would say it, they hate seeing me like this, so lost to the darkest part of myself. But if this is what it takes, if this is what I have to do to keep her safe—then I don’t have to think twice. It’s what needs to be done.

I apply a little more pressure to the serrated edge of the knife, letting it snag on the inside of his lip. And finally, it seems to get through to him. He twists his head away from me, spitting out more blood.

“I’ll talk, I’ll fucking talk,” he snarls, sounding almost as angry at himself as he does at us. I shoot a look to Chuck and Callum. They both seem relieved, though I’m sure neither would admit that they were happy to see me like this.

“What the fuck did James send you here for?” I demand, my voice catching at the back of my throat as I wipe off the blood from the blade and stuff it back into the holster. I can still smell the blood in the air, the weight of it pulling me back to the

night it happened. At the corners of my vision, I can almost see the dark shadows around me again, the bodies splayed everywhere I looked.

But I know it's not real. It can't be. The only thing that's real is keeping Charli alive—and I'm not going to let anything get in the way of that.

“For the girl,” the man fires back. “He paid us a few thousand each to follow every track she might have taken after she ran from the wedding. I was the one who saw you guys moving the car, and we set up shop here after that.”

“Set up shop? What does that mean?” I press, my hand resting on the hilt of the knife again, making sure he knows damn well what I'm willing to do if he doesn't give me what I want.

“He's got a half dozen men stationed in the town over the hill, Killinsbury,” he replies, jerking his head outside. “He's been paying them to go on recon up here every other day or so, and the surrounding areas. He's got other guys stationed in other towns, ready to catch her if she tries to run for it, but his focus is up here.”

He looks between us. “And I guess he was right about that.”

None of us say a word. We're not giving him anything to go on, not a chance in hell. As tempting as it might be to act like we have this in the bag now he's talking, all it would take would be one well-timed attack from James's men, and they'd have him right back where they wanted him, able to share any information he might have gleaned from us.

“You found the traps,” he continues. “And you must have got rid of them, because we found them dumped in the middle of the forest, miles away...”

I smirk. My idea. Something to waste their time and grow their frustration. I knew

there was nothing more likely to get these guys looking for a way to finish this than if they felt like they were being sent on a wild goose chase, and at least some of them were, by the sounds of it.

“But he kept us out here. Paid off the local cops not to ask any questions about where we came from or what we were doing. None of them have given us any shit. I heard his father’s rich...”

He trails off, looking to us again. He really doesn’t know what the hell he’s gotten himself into. I would almost feel sorry for him, if he wasn’t working with that psycho James to pay his bills. For a moment, I find myself wondering if he was once like us—back from service, just struggling to get by. I know how hard that can be...

But even at my worst, I never would have agreed to work with someone like James. Not then, not now, not ever. Being out on the street is better than that. And this guy is about to learn that, once and for all.

“What does he want with her?” Chuck demands, striding forward to pick up on the line of questioning. “Why is he so intent on getting her back?”

“She left him at the altar,” he replies, his voice hollow. “That’s what he told me, anyway. Any man would want?—”

“Would want what?” Chuck presses, leaning forward, his eyes narrowing. The man pauses for a moment, and takes a breath before he replies.

“Would want revenge.”

A coldness rushes over me. Revenge? All this time, I guess I’ve just believed that this James dude wanted her back because he intended to force her to go through with the wedding, but no—it’s not that. It was never that. He’s got something else in mind

entirely.

And if this is the extent he's willing to go to in order to get revenge, I don't even want to think what might be waiting for her on the other side of it.

"What kind of revenge does he want?" Callum asks, his voice low. He likely already knows the answer to this question, but he needs to hear it out loud. He needs to know that he's not paranoid for his mind going where it's gone. We all turn to the man, a heavy silence hanging in the air as we wait for him to respond.

He flicks his tongue over his lip, where the blood has reached his mouth. Despite the scar on his face and the bruising on his jaw, for a moment it looks as though he's the one calling the shots here.

"He wants to kill her."

20

CHARLI

As soon as I wake up and glance around, I know something is off. I can feel it in the air—a lack of something, an absence.

Of course, Callum isn't in bed with me. But he's usually up before me, so I don't think much of that. No, it's the quiet in the rest of the house that bothers me, none of the usual chatter or commotion that fills the air when the guys are getting ready for the day.

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“Hello?” I call out into the house, but there’s no response. My heart drops. Where are they? Has something happened? Are they hurt? Worse...?

I’m just about to emerge from the bedroom to start looking for them, but all at once, a sound catches my attention—conversation, overlapping voices, agitation. I freeze, and press my ear to the door to get an idea of what’s going on.

“You heard what he said!” Dax exclaims. “We can’t sit around and wait for?—”

“Yeah, I heard how many people he said were waiting for us,” Callum counters. “We can’t take them all on. There’s just three of us.”

“But with the right planning?—”

“We don’t have time to put together some master scheme,” Chuck argues. “We have to move fast. The more time we spend discussing it, the?—”

But before he can continue, I shift my weight to try and get a better ear on the conversation, and the door swings open. I stumble out, right in front of all three guys—and when I get a look at them, my stomach drops.

It’s clear they’ve been out for hours. Their clothes are caked with dirt, and Dax looks hurt—there’s blood on his hands, spattered over his fists and along his wrists. I rush over to him, my eyes widening.

“Jesus, what happened?” I gasp, staring down at the blood.

He pulls his hands from my grip and shakes his head. “Nothing. It’s not my blood.”

“Nothing?” I exclaim. “What the fuck are you talking about? I wake up and you’re not here, and you come back talking about a plan?—”

“Charli, you should get some rest,” Callum tells me gently, but I shake my head.

“No, I’m not going to be left out of this,” I protest. “I deserve to know what’s going on. Don’t try and keep me away from it!”

The words come out of my mouth in a tone far sharper than I intended, and the three guys fall silent. They look between each other, and I try to catch my breath, the shock of seeing them like this almost getting the better of me.

“What were you doing last night?” I ask, my voice dropping slightly. “What were—did something happen?”

Chuck sighs and pushes a hand through his hair, clearly giving up on trying to hide the truth from me.

“We...we set a trap,” he explains. “For some of James’s men. Catch them in the act and pull them in to ask them some questions, that was the idea.”

My eyes nearly bug out of my head. “A trap?” I gasp. “And you didn’t say anything to me about it...?”

“Because you didn’t need to know,” Callum replies. “Not until we had something to actually report to you. No point in worrying you if nothing happened.”

“So, what, you were just going to tell me when you decided it was time?”

“When we had something to go on.”

“And do you?” I demand, taking a step toward him. They glance between each other, not saying a word for a moment, and I clench my fists at my sides.

“Guys, this isn’t fair!” I protest. “You can’t leave me out of this stuff. I—I’m the one in the middle of this. I don’t want you doing shit that I have no say in, it’s—it’s not...”

I trail off, and to my surprise, I feel tears rising in my throat. I don’t know why this has gotten to me so much. But seeing them like this, knowing they were out there last night, putting themselves in the midst of this danger, it...it gets to me. It really gets to me. Something could have happened to them, and I would have known nothing about it...

And then it hits me.

This feeling. It’s familiar.

Not just because of how scared I feel, but because of how helpless—it’s that sensation that I so often got when I was with James, when I felt like there was nothing in the world I could have done to control anything in my life. That sensation of being left out of all the big choices, having no grasp on the way anything was set to go—like I was being engulfed by a huge wave and swallowed, fighting my way to the surface, with no way to get there.

“Please,” I whisper, looking between them. “Please, don’t push me out of this...”

“Hey, hey,” Callum murmurs, and he reaches over and pulls me into his arms. “It’s fine. We’re fine. You’re fine. Okay...?”

But before I can get out a response, I feel the tears starting to course down my cheeks. I know it's stupid to cry about this, but I can't help it. All my emotions are still so close to the surface, and holding them back feels like too big a task in the face of everything else that's going on.

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They guide me to sit down, and Chuck makes us all a coffee before they finally fill me in on what happened last night. The trap they set, the man they caught, the information they got out of him about what's been going on...and, when he falters, I can tell there's still something he's keeping from me.

"What else did he say?" I press. "Something about me?"

The three of them exchange a glance again, and I feel a rush of frustration.

"I know you're just trying to protect me," I tell them, speaking slowly, doing my best to contain my irritation. "But...but I can't be left out of this, guys. Please. I need to know. I deserve to know what's happening with all of this..."

I can feel the tears starting to rise again, and I quickly swallow them back. I don't want them to think I can't handle this. I need them to know that it's not just about the horror of knowing that James is still out there and looking for me. It's about knowing, from the bottom of my heart, that I want us all to be on the same side, and I can't stand the thought of being left out of my own life again.

Callum reaches his arm around my shoulders and pulls me close to him before he finally replies. "He said," he begins, his voice low and careful, "that James wants to kill you."

I close my eyes as the enormity of those words sink in. It doesn't come as a surprise. Either he would want to kill me, or he would want to make my life so miserable that I would want to end it myself. After what I've done to him, it's a miracle I've even made it this far for this long.

“Charli?”

Chuck’s voice pulls me out of my reverie. I blink back tears, and look between the guys once more. These three men—these three men who gave me sanctuary when I needed it most. I still can’t believe how lucky I was to find them, and I can’t imagine for a moment that I would have made it this far were it not for their help.

“You okay?”

I shake my head. There’s no point lying about it. Hearing those words, I’m terrified. My ex, this man with so much power and so much influence and so much brutal, violent obsession—he wants me dead. And I don’t know how much of a chance I have to keep myself alive in the face of it.

“No,” I admit. “I’m not. I...I knew he was going to want to take his revenge, but this...”

I draw in a deep, shaky breath. Dax reaches over and rests a hand on my knee; he hasn’t said much, but he doesn’t need to. I can tell from the blood smearing his knuckles that he’s already physically advocated for me, and that’s where his strength lies.

“This is a lot,” I confess. “But I’m not going to let him get what he wants. God knows I’ve done enough of that in the last few years of my life. I think I’ve earned the right to stand up against him, haven’t I?”

Chuck grins at me. The first real smile I’ve seen from any of them since they got back. He nods. “Yeah, I think you damn well have,” he agrees.

“But I need you guys on my side if I’m going to pull this off,” I warn them. “And that means no more sneaking around and trying to pull off these plans behind my back.

Everything that you do, I know about. Same goes for me. Alright?”

“Alright,” the guys echo. I bite down on my lip as I look between them. I still can’t believe I’ve pulled them all into this. On some level, I wish I could face it alone, but I don’t stand a chance against the forces that James has working against me by myself.

As part of this quartet, though? I just might.

“I know James better than anyone else here,” I continue. “And I can use that to my advantage. He’s arrogant—I know he thinks he already has this under control. So we need to lure him into making a mistake...”

“Making what kind of mistake?” Dax asks, cautious.

I pause for a moment. I know they’re not going to like what I have to say next. But I wouldn’t be bringing it up unless I truly thought there was no other way to go about this.

“We need to lay a trap. With me as bait. And get him to spring it.”

“No,” Callum shoots back at once. “No. Not a chance in hell. No fucking way.”

“Yeah, if you think we’re just going to hand you over to him—” Dax begins, but I shake my head.

“That’s not what you’re going to do at all,” I assure them. “We’re going to make it look that way. Make him feel like he’s got the jump on us. We need to think like he thinks, let him believe he has us where he wants us. You can put a tracker on me, a walkie-talkie, anything—he won’t expect me to protect myself like that. But we need to lure him out, not his men, and the only way we’re going to make that happen is if he thinks he has me.”

My breath hitches over the last word. The thought of it, of letting him believe for an instant that he has any dominion over me—it's enough to make a sick shiver run down my spine. Even in the few weeks that I've been away from him, the taste of freedom has been addictive, and having to hand that over, even for a moment, doesn't sit right with me.

But we don't have a choice. We can't risk his men stalking these woods and picking us off until there's nobody left. I need to play a big swing, and this is the biggest I can think of.

Even if the concern on the faces of the men around me tells me that they wish there was any other way to go about this.

“So,” Chuck replies, his voice taut. “How exactly do we set a trap and make sure you don't get caught in it?”

I take a deep breath.

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“That’s where you come in,” I confess with a small smile. “Because I don’t know the first thing about tactics...”

The three of them lean forward, their brows furrowed, matching expressions of determination written on their faces. And as I look between them, I feel a flood of relief.

James has no idea what he’s up against here. And I can’t wait for him to find out.

Preferably the hard way.

21

CALLUM

“Is she in position?”

Chuck’s voice comes down the line, almost making me jump. I’m so focused on Charli, I’ve almost forgotten about the other guys. Lifting the walkie-talkie to my lips, I hold down the button.

“Nearly. Should be in the next thirty seconds or so.”

“Noted.”

He doesn’t exactly sound glad, even though our plan is unfolding exactly as it should be. I don’t blame him. After all, not one of us likes the idea of sending her into the

middle of a trap—no matter the reason or how sure she is that she can handle herself. I would do anything to be in her place instead of her.

But she insisted. And, in the day since we captured one of James's men, she made it clear that she's not going to be left out of anything we do to take him down. I thought we were sparing her the stress of having to worry about it, but the way she talks about it, it's clear she sees it differently.

And as much as I wish she would sit back and let us do what needs to be done, there's a part of me that knows she's right about this. James is only going to show his scumbag face when he thinks he has her under lock and key. That's why he's sent his men out to find her so far—because he doesn't want to put himself at risk of being caught or hurt in the process.

If I get my hands on him...fuck, even thinking about it is enough to make my jaw clench, my fists tighten. I can't wait to see the look on his face when he realizes he's walked straight into our trap. I'm going to take great fucking pleasure in making sure he knows exactly what I think of him, what we think of him, before we destroy him once and for all.

I want him dead, of course. So does Dax, so does Chuck—but Charli argued against it.

“Killing him is just going to bring scrutiny onto you guys,” she pointed out yesterday, when we were fleshing out this plan. “And it lets his dad use him as a martyr. I can't stand the thought of that, of people thinking of him as some innocent victim...”

She trailed off, shaking her head.

“No, I want to destroy him in the public eye. I want to make sure nobody can even look at him again without thinking about all the shit he's done and all the harm he's

caused.”

So that’s what we began work on—capturing the truth of who James is, and letting the world see it. After spending most of the day, over coffees, plotting out exactly how we were going to do this, we put the plan into motion last night, when Dax went to drop off some food and water with our captive in our storage shed.

But he deliberately left the knots loose when he went to tie him up again, and the door ajar so he could make a break for it. We needed someone to get out there and tell James where we are, so he can send more of his men to find Charli and eventually follow them up here himself. We’ve given them a good six hours to get their shit together, and now, midmorning, Charli is out gathering firewood by herself.

Or at least, that’s what it’s going to look like, to anyone paying attention. The truth is, she has a tracker pressed into the sole of her boot, a microphone slipped beneath her shirt, and a knife hidden in a hairpin that holds her locks in a ponytail. Like she told us, she’s the bait in the trap for him, and all we can do is stand back and watch as she puts the pieces into place and waits for him to take her.

Chuck, Dax, and I are all watching from a distance—we’ve triangulated along the route she’s going to take so we’ll know exactly when she’s been taken, by whom, and where they’re going to bring her to. It’s the closest thing we’ve got to holding on to any control in the midst of all of this, but it’s still not enough.

I get it, there’s no reward without risk, but it doesn’t feel fair that she’s the one who has to put herself on the line to make this happen. Hasn’t he done enough to her? Hasn’t he taken enough? The thought of him even getting to lay a hand on her again, after the shit he’s put her through, spikes my blood pressure...

As I watch her follow the path into the woods, I try to calm myself. She knows what she’s doing. We’ve discussed it to death, and she’s assured us all a million times that

she's not going to deviate from the plan for an instant.

"I'm going to be okay," she promised me, as I pinned the microphone into her shirt and tested that it was working. She must have been able to tell how tense I was—I hoped I was doing a good job hiding it, but the way she looked at me, it must have been obvious.

"I don't like this," I muttered to her. "Letting him get this close to you..."

"Trust me, he's not going to do anything before he's had a chance to tell me what a bitch I am first," she replied with a smirk, rolling her eyes. "He's always been a big talker. Wants everyone to know exactly why he's doing what he's doing. And that's what we're going to get on this..."

She tapped the microphone slightly, and Chuck let out a groan from the other side of the room.

"Hey, not so much pressure on that thing," he protested, pulling the headphones from his ears. "It's really sensitive, remember?"

"Sorry, sorry," she replied, pulling a face, and he grinned at her before he went back to fiddling with the settings once more. I secured the microphone in place, and she buttoned up my shirt over the top of it.

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“How come you look so much better in my clothes than I do?” I murmured, brushing a strand of hair back from her face.

“A mystery we’ll have to figure out when I get back,” she replied, and she kissed my cheek.

She doesn’t seem interested in trying to hide her feelings for all three of us. I guess it’s clear that we’re all in this together by now. There’s no point trying to pretend that we aren’t utterly wrapped up in one another. Dax and Chuck are just as unhappy about the way this is going down as I am—they’re worried about her, but they can tell there’s no point fighting her on this. When she’s got an idea in her head, there’s nothing in the world that will change her from that path, even if that path leads right into the hands of her ex.

I keep my distance as she moves through the woods, a basket hanging over one shoulder which she occasionally adds a new stick or log to; now that it’s started to brighten up, firewood’s easier to come by, and she makes her way through the trees with ease, studying the ground like she’s trying to find the perfect additions to our hearth.

I scan the forest surrounding her—they must have had time to get back to Killinsbury and back by now, right? We moved the spike traps from the road, so they’ll have no trouble getting back up here. The man who escaped—or at least, thought he did—will have been able to map the route right back to us, and even giving them time for a few mistakes and missteps, they should be here any?—

All at once, a noise catches my attention. My head snaps around, and I lift the walkie-

talkie to my lips.

“You hear that?”

“I heard it,” Chuck replies at once. “Came from somewhere near me. You got eyes on anyone, Dax?”

“Nobody yet,” Dax mutters. I can hear the strain in his voice. He hates being out of control like this, even if it’s for the best in the long run, and it’s a miracle he’s lasted this long without flipping his shit and rushing out there to get her.

We all fall silent. I can hear the static on the line, Dax’s breathing where he’s still holding the button down, but other than that, nothing. Maybe it was just an animal. Or maybe?—

“Shit, I have eyes on someone!” Chuck hisses. “Closing in from the east. Three of them. Looks like one of them’s the guy we took from the car yesterday.”

My heart pounds in my chest. This is it. I wish I could call out to Charli and warn her, but we can’t let them know our position. They need to think she’s out here alone.

Finally, I spot them—three men approaching her from her right side. I can tell that she clocks them; her head shifts slightly as she hears them getting close, but she doesn’t let it show on her face. She stoops down to pick up another stick, demonstratively turning her back to them, making it easier for them to sneak up on her, or at least think they are.

And all I can do is watch as they move in on her. Three men, three fucking guys, all after Charli—James is a complete coward, I know that much for sure. Or maybe he knows just what kind of girl he’s up against. The kind of girl who would climb out the window of the venue she was supposed to get married in, steal a car in her

wedding dress, and flee into the hills rather than be stuck at his side.

I smirk. No matter how much I hate the motherfucker, I can't help but enjoy the idea of him standing there at the end of the aisle, waiting for her while she was already headed back to my arms again.

One man steps out in front of her, and she straightens up—for a moment, her face flashes with real panic, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut to keep from rushing in to get her out of there. It feels fucking twisted to stand back and let this happen, let the woman I love get taken from me all over again.

But I force my eyes open once more. I can't look away. She's relying on me to take in every detail of this. Anything I miss could condemn her to capture—or worse.

One of the other men moves behind her, shoving a bag over her head and pulling back on it hard. She stumbles, the basket falling from her shoulder, spilling the branches and logs over the forest floor. I can hear her trying to protest, but it's muffled by the sound of the fabric in her mouth. I can see her lips moving against the inside of it, but nothing comes out.

"They've got her," I mutter into my walkie-talkie.

"Fuckers," Dax hisses back.

"Keep your head, Dax," Chuck warns him. I can hear it in Dax's voice, how hard this is—how much he just wants to go out there and fight them off, make them pay for laying a hand on her. I know how he feels.

All I can do is watch as they drag her off the path and toward the road once more. I don't know where they're planning on taking her, but I know we have the truck gassed up and ready to go after them.

“They’re headed for the road,” I tell Chuck. “Pull the truck around to the cabin, meet us there, and we’ll go after them.”

“Make it quick,” Dax adds.

“Meet you there in ten,” Chuck snaps back, and he closes off his line. I watch as Charli vanishes into the forest once more. I know this is what we planned, I know this is everything she told us to do—but despite myself, it fucking kills me to watch them get their hands on her, even for a second.

Silently, I send her a message—We’re coming, Charli. You won’t have to wait long.

Just make sure you survive till then.

22

CHARLI

“Get this fucking thing off of me!” I yell, squirming in the chair. I don’t know how long I’ve been here, but the fabric in my mouth is starting to choke me, and all I want is to breathe in fresh air and see exactly what I’m up against now that James’s goons have got their hands on me.

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So far, everything is going exactly as we planned it—I wandered into the forest, apparently alone, while the guys kept watch. The man who they had kidnapped brought the information of our location back to James and his men, and they came out there to make use of it. Just as they expected, there I was, strolling around by myself, no protection, nothing.

I can't say it was easy, letting myself get taken by them. The feel of their hands on me, their urgent hissing in my ear to keep my fucking voice down and not to make a scene, it went against every fiber of my being not to kick back against it. Even as they carried me to the car and bundled me in the back seat, I had to fight the urge to slam my feet into the window and knock it loose, roll out onto the road rather than face whatever was waiting for me on the other side.

But they need to think they have me. James needs to think he has won. Even the thought of it now is enough to set my teeth on edge, but sometimes you have to sacrifice something small to win the big prize.

They didn't bother to check me for a tracker. They made sure I didn't have a phone, and that was about it, but they left the microphone and the small tracker in my boot untouched. I guess it's what James ordered—that nobody else should lay a hand on me until he gets a chance to take his revenge.

How long is he going to make me wait? His men brought me to some—well, I didn't get a look at it as I was being dragged inside, thanks to the rough burlap sack shoved over my head, but it smells like some old logging cabin, based on the scent of sawdust in the air. My hands are bound behind my back to a rickety old chair, the sharp edge pressing against my wrist. I know I should be terrified right now, but I

soothe myself with the reminder that the guys are there for me. They're not going to let anything happen to me.

James has walked right into our trap. All we need to do is keep our heads, and we're going to bring him down for good.

"Hey!" I call out again. I need to make it sound convincing—need to make it look as though I'm truly scared for my life, and I'll do anything to get out of here. Even if the truth is that I know the guys are listening to me, via the microphone stashed beneath my shirt, and that they're likely already on the way here to find me, thanks to the tracker in my shoe.

As long as I can hold out till they get here.

I push the thought away sharply. I'm not going to let that asshole get under my skin like that. I abandoned him at the altar, on the day of our wedding—if that hasn't made it damn clear to him that I'm not the person he thought I was, then I don't know what will.

All at once, a door swings open before me with a loud creak. I lift my head, and there he is, standing, silhouetted against a backdrop of blinding light pouring in from outside.

James.

My heart drops in my chest, a familiar panic rushing through me at the sight of him. This is...this is a whole fucking lot to wrap my head around. It's been so long since I've seen him, I thought...God, I don't know what I thought. I felt like I should be over the terror he sent coursing through me by now, but the shock of his presence makes the blood rush from my face.

He makes his way toward me slowly, looking me up and down, and I do my best to meet his gaze, not letting him see how frightened I am right now.

The way he looks at me—shit, it's nothing like before. I thought I was frightened of him before all of this, but now...now, it's different. He's glowering at me as though he wants to tear me to pieces right here. Not the comfortably smug expression he used to have when he looked at me—that certainty in his eyes that I wasn't going anywhere, that I wouldn't dare stand against him. No, now he knows there's a chance I'll fight back.

And he's going to do everything he can to crush that out of me.

I tense as he draws closer, squirming my hands beneath the bindings. He doesn't say a word, just standing there before me—but then he crouches down in front of me and reaches out to tilt my chin up toward his face.

“Did you miss me, Charli?”

“Don't touch me,” I hiss back at him, but my voice lacks conviction.

He chuckles, shaking his head. “That's not exactly the welcome I was expecting, as your fiancé,” he continues, tightening his grip on my chin, giving me no choice but to look into his eyes.

“We're not engaged,” I snap back. “I don't want anything to do with you, James. Just let me go, move on with your life. I'm done.”

He laughs again. “I don't think you get it,” he continues, voice almost eerily calm. “You don't get to make that call. You never did. I decide when we're over. And if you thought that running away from our wedding was going to get you out...”

He squeezes my chin tighter. I can't even catch my breath as I stare back at him, doing my best not to let his gaze frighten me.

"Then you're fucking wrong."

He straightens up again. My heart is pounding, head spinning, but I know I need to keep him talking—I need to make sure he says something to incriminate himself. I need to make him come clean. Whatever I record here today, it needs to be airtight, so when I hand it over to someone else, they can take him down, once and for all.

"You haven't taken enough from me?" I demand. "You abused me, James. You?—"

"Abused you?" he snarls, rounding on me once more, eyes flashing with fury. "I gave you everything you could have ever wanted. I gave you status, I gave you a place to live, I gave you?—"

"And you took everything from me in the process!" I cut him off. "I—I had to give up everything to become the kind of person you wanted me to be. Don't you get it? Don't you see?"

He stares down at me, and it's almost as though he's looking right through me. Like he truly doesn't understand what I mean. Whatever hope I might have had that he could become a better person, it vanishes in that instant.

"I see an ungrateful bitch sitting in front of me right now," he replies. "An ungrateful bitch who never knew what she had. I gave you everything, and you fucking humiliated me—you have no idea what you did to me. You havenoidea how you hurt me."

"Hurt you, or hurt your ego?" I shoot back. "You never cared about me, James. If you did, you would never have lifted a hand to me. You would never have kept me locked

up in that apartment. You wouldn't have cut me off from my friends and my job, you wouldn't have?—”

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“I expected you to dedicate yourself to being my wife,” he tells me, voice dropping dangerously low. “And if I had to guide you to make that happen?—”

“Guide me?” I exclaim. “James, you—you fucking hurt me! You hit me! How is that?—”

“You don’t understand how family works,” he sneers at me. “You never did. Probably because your parents didn’t give enough of a fuck to stick around for you.”

That hits me like a punch in the gut. I know he’s got no business talking about my parents that way, that they would never have chosen to leave me if they’d had a choice, but it doesn’t matter. He knows how much it hurts. Because I loved him once—or at least, thought I loved him. I shared things with him that were deep, intimate. And now he can use them all against me to make me pay for daring to turn against him.

“And what you’ve got with your father is better than that, is it?” I counter. “His corrupt ass covering for you whenever you get caught with coke or?—”

Before I can get out another word, he draws his hand back and lands a brutal slap over the side of my face. My head snaps to the side, my ears ringing as burning pain courses through my cheek.

“Shut the fuck up about my family,” he snarls at me. “You have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He’s breathing hard as he takes a step back from me. The pain in my face is sharp and

shocking, and I wait for the familiar rush of panic to move through me, the same panic I used to feel whenever he touched me like that. My mind would just shut down, leaving no space for me to take in what was happening to me—the only way I could survive, in the face of all the shit he put me through.

But it doesn't happen. I don't slip into myself, vanishing into the depths of my subconscious. No—I'm still here. Still in this room with him. And as scared as I am, as much as I hate being alone with him right now, something in me refuses to back away and let this happen.

Something in me has shifted.

I manage to lift my head again and look back at him—and when I meet his gaze, I see a flash of discomfort in his eyes. He doesn't like me like this, staring back at him, seeing him for the man he truly is. He wants to convince himself that I'm nothing more than a problem, but I'm not going to let him brush me off that easily.

I'm more than a problem. I'm going to be his downfall. And when this is all over, I'm going to make sure there isn't a person alive who doesn't know what kind of man he truly is.

23

DAX

“Fuck!”

I get to my feet. I can't stand just sitting here and listening to it any longer. I need to get out there. I need to pull her out of this mess. And I need to do it now.

“Dax!” Callum yells, but I can barely hear him through the ringing in my ears. I

round on him, my heart slamming against my ribs, and shake my head.

“No, don’t tell me not to do anything,” I warn him. “I need to get out there. I need to pull her out of that mess. The shit he’s saying to her, it’s?—”

“It’s not enough,” Chuck intones from the other side of the room. The three of us are at one of our hideouts in the forest, which we usually use for hunting—but right now we’re listening in to the feed coming from Charli’s microphone, and it’s fucking destroying me to hear the way that man is talking to her.

“I don’t care,” I snap back as I reach for my knife. “I’m not going to let him stand there and hit her and talk to her like she’s some kind of?—”

“Dax, sit your ass down!” Chuck barks at me. “We’re not done yet. Not until we have everything we need.”

My entire body is wracked with tension, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep doing this. Sitting here, unable to step in, unable to help, unable to do a goddamn thing but listen to the abuse he’s pouring down on her head...it’s pushing me to that point of no return, the point where all sensible thought vanishes from my mind and I’m left with nothing but anger and desperation and the need to do something, anything to make it right.

My eyes are pinned to the door. I know we’re just a few hundred yards from where she’s being held—at least, if the tracker is anything to go by. It doesn’t seem like these fuckers thought to check for anything that might guide us to right where they’re keeping her, but then, that doesn’t mean that they’re not going to notice when the time comes.

And if they clock that we’re onto them, we’re in serious fucking trouble. I hate this feeling, being so out of control, and knowing that the best thing I can do is keep my

distance. I need to get to her. I need to get her out of there. I need to?—

I sink down to a crouch, lifting my hands up to my head and trying to control my breathing. It's stuttering out of me in gasps, and the panic is rising so fast I can't control it. I can almost smell the blood and smoke in the air from the day my unit was attacked—like I'm back there, in the moment, though I know that's impossible.

“Dax—”

I feel a hand on my shoulder and spring to my feet to shrug it off. I can't fucking stand it when people touch me when I'm in this state—like blades against my skin, the tearing heat of the bullet that entered my hip.

“Don't fucking touch me!”

Callum holds his hands up, letting me know that he didn't mean to freak me out.

“Hey, hey, I'm sorry,” he tells me. “But you need to calm down. We need to wait until we've got something solid, and then we can move in. Okay?”

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I grit my teeth. I don't know how much longer I can take this. I feel like my heart is going to beat right out of my chest if I don't get her out of there sooner rather than later. Hearing the abuse he's piling onto her, it feels like a twisted game. How much can I take before I kill that motherfucker and make him pay for this?

But I know that's not what we agreed on. The plan we made doesn't end in murder. It ends with us taking him down and smearing his name—that's what Charli wants.

And I know it's the right call. His father would come after us with the fury of a thousand suns if we took out his son, and it would turn him and his family into martyrs. That's the last thing we want. No, we need to make them pay, need to expose them for the fuckers they are—but that hinges on letting him think that he has Charli right where he wants her, and that there's going to be no blowback for the way he's treating her right now.

"I can't listen," I snap, heading outside. "Just tell me when we're ready to go..."

I close the door behind me. Inside, I can hear the vague outline of the words coming through the radio attached to her microphone. I might not be able to make out exactly what's being said, but I can hear the tone—the way he talks to her, like she's so far below him. Even that sets my teeth on edge. I can't wait to bring this guy down to the level he thinks she's at. He's already been humiliated by her leaving him at the altar, and now we're going to smear the rest of his reputation for good.

I stare into the trees around me, trying to get lost in the motion of the branches in the wind. Absently, I rest my hand on my knife again, feeling the leather of the handle beneath my fingertips. Soon, I'll be able to make use of this damn thing. No killing,

sure, but that doesn't mean I can't find other ways to make that bastard pay for what he's done to her...

I don't know how Chuck and Callum can sit there and not want to kick his fucking head in. I don't know how they can hold themselves back from taking him out, knowing what he's done to her, knowing that he hasn't changed a bit. Knowing that, even now, he's willing to tear chunks out of Charli just to make himself feel better.

But then, I remind myself—it's because they care about her. And they're giving her what she wants in all of this. That man, that bastard who's on the other end of that microphone, he took everything from her, took her control, took her power, took her ability to advocate for herself, all of it. And she wants it back. That's why she's agreed to work with us on all of this, because she trusts that we're not going to do the same to her.

And I need to prove to her that I can let her take the reins, even if it kills me. Even if I wish, more than anything in the world, that I could change it.

Finally, the door behind me flies open. I spin around, and Chuck and Callum are standing there, grim expressions on their faces.

"He gave us what we need," Chuck tells me. "He admitted to the physical abuse. That's everything."

"We can move in?" I demand, pulling out my knife, the blade flashing its serrated teeth in the cold air.

Callum nods. "We're going to get her out," he tells me. "Let's go. I'm not going to leave her with that bastard for a second longer than she needs to be."

And with that, the three of us take off into the woods—ready to rain down hell on

James and anyone who's got the bad judgment to be on his side.

24

CHUCK

"Is that it?" Callum mutters as we pull back behind the cover of some trees to avoid detection by the guards on the door.

I check the tracker monitor on my phone, and nod.

"That's it," I reply, narrowing my eyes. "She's in there. We just need to find a way to get her out."

Callum lets out a long, slow breath. Dax, beside me, has not moved his gaze from the cabin for an instant. It's a miracle he hasn't bolted down there to bust in the doors and get her out himself the first chance he got, but at least some part of him seems to recognize that he needs to restrain himself a little longer.

We have the recording, of James admitting to the physical abuse—and the rest of it too. Truthfully, anyone who hears the way he speaks to her won't be able to defend him, even before he came clean about physically harming her. The hate in his voice, the utter lack of respect he treats her with, it's sickening to me. I don't know how anyone could treat another person like that, let alone another person who they claimed to love at some point.

But I don't have to understand. I just have to get her out of there.

"How many guards?" I mutter to Callum.

"Three," Dax shoots back. "Two on the front door, one on the side. He was taking a

smoke break when we came down, but he just went back inside.”

“And James,” Callum reminds us. The blood rushes through my veins at the mention of his name.

“He’s not going to pose a problem,” I reply. “He’s a coward. Only good at talking a big game when he’s got someone where he wants them. He’ll freak as soon as he sees us, trust me.”

Callum nods, but I can see a hint of doubt in his face. He wants to believe me, of course, but it’s not that easy for him. I know as well as he does that we don’t know exactly what we’re up against, and we could be hit with something beyond what we’re ready for when we step out of these woods.

“You ready?” Dax asks. He’s been barely holding himself back since we got to the cabin.

“I’ll take the one on the side,” I reply. “Callum, Dax, take out the two at the door. No fatalities. Keep them alive, just take them out. You understand?”

I can tell that both of them want to argue with me on that, but they seem to know better—this is what we promised her, after all, and they know I want to kill these bastards as much as they do. But we have to play it safe. Anything the authorities might be able to use against us is going to cause trouble, because of who James’s father is. It needs to be airtight, or else we’re all going down.

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And then we wouldn't be able to keep Charli out of his clutches any longer.

"Now!" I hiss, and just like that, we take off from behind our cover and move toward the cabin.

I hear a cry of shock from one of the guards on the door, but I don't stop to investigate further—I have to keep my focus on fulfilling my part of this mission. I close in on the side door and lift a foot, smashing my boot into it a couple times till it flies open. I lift my knife and move inside, eyes sliding back and forth as I try to figure out where this third guard is.

Suddenly, I hear a squeak on the floorboard beside me—this is an old logging cabin, not unlike the one we all live in, and they tend to give away movement pretty easily. My gaze flicks to the right, and sure enough, there's the guard, trying to hide behind the doorframe. I can see the flash of a weapon in his hand, and I move in quick, grabbing his wrist and twisting it roughly upward to send it falling to the ground.

He lets out a grunt of pain and tries to twist away from me. I wrap my arm around his neck, yanking him against me, and lift my knife to his throat.

"Where is she?" I demand.

He squirms, trying to pull out of my grip, but I press the knife into his skin. Just because I said I wasn't going to kill anyone doesn't mean I'm not willing to hurt them to get what I want. I can smell his blood in the air as he pants for breath, the scent of it mixing with the metallic flash of the blade. I keep the pressure steady, not doing more than I need to, but just enough to make certain that he knows I'm not going to

let him get away without answering my question.

“Hey! Help!” he yells out, but I just tighten my grip on him.

“I don’t know who you’re calling out to,” I warn him. “I have my men surrounding this place. They’ve already taken down the guards on the door. Now, show me where she is, and I might just let you live. You hear me?”

He pauses for a moment. I can tell that he’s considering continuing to fight, but he thinks better of it. Finally, he jerks his head toward a door at the end of the corridor.

“That way,” he mutters. “She’s down there. That’s where he has her.”

“Thanks for your help,” I tell him, voice edged with sarcasm. Before he can say another word, I grab the back of his hair and slam his head into the wall beside us. He slides down, letting out a groan of pain, his eyes bleary and distant as he tries to regain his composure. That should keep him out for the time being—we won’t need long, not if my brothers have done their job...

As I head down the corridor, I spot them, Dax and Callum. I lift my chin, silently asking if they’ve done what needs to be done, and Dax nods.

“They’re dealt with. Alive, but dealt with.”

“Good,” I reply, and point to the door. “That’s where they’re keeping her. We need to?—”

But before I can finish my thought, the door flies open. On the other side stands the man I hate more than anything or anyone in the world.

James.

I recognize him at once. I've seen pictures over the course of our research, but there's something about his presence in person that's all the more unsettling. He's got this wild look to his eyes, as though he's barely holding himself together.

"Charli!" Dax yells out, trying to push past him—but James blocks his path.

"Who the fuck are you?" he demands.

Dax pushes his face close to James, his eyes flashing with anger. "Get the fuck away from her," he mutters. But before he can say another word, James reaches into the waistband of his pants and pulls out a gun. He presses it into Dax's gut, and Dax stiffens, the blood draining from his face.

"You need to leave. Now," James warns him, and his eyes flick around to Callum and me. "I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing, playing hero like this, but?—"

"Your guards are down," Callum replies. "We have this place surrounded. You pull that trigger, and you'll be dead before he hits the ground. We're getting her out of here either way. And it's up to you whether you want to walk out of here alive."

His voice is cool, calm, considered—he's not going to let this fucker get to him. I can't help but feel a swell of pride toward my brother—both of them, actually. Neither of them even had to think twice about doing the right thing here, stepping in and helping Charli when she needed us most, and I know they'll do anything in their power to make sure she gets out of this safe.

Dax stares James down, not moving his gaze from his for a second. James glances between all of us, weighing up his options as he tries to figure out what to do.

"Fuck," he mutters, and he drops the gun to his side. Lunging past me, he sprints for

the door, dropping down for a moment to grab keys from the pocket of his man who's sprawled on the ground below him. He doesn't even stop to see if he's okay; he clearly doesn't give a damn. All he cares about is saving his own ass, and he's not going to let anything get in the way of him doing just that. He sprints for the exit and out into the sunlight beyond.

And then a voice cuts through the quiet.

“G-guys?”

Our attention is drawn at once to the inside of the room—and thank fuck, there she is. Charli. Tied to a chair, her arms locked behind her, her face red where he must have struck her, her eyes wet with tears—but alive.

“Oh, thank God,” Callum breathes, and he rushes into the room, pulling her into his arms and squeezing her tight. I drop down behind her to undo the bindings that are wrapped around her wrists, releasing her at last, and she flexes her hands this way and that to test her newfound freedom.

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“Oh my God,” she mutters, as her eyes start to leak once more. “I—I don’t know what to...I can’t?—”

“It’s okay,” Callum promises her. “We have everything we need. “Everything it’s going to take to bring him down.”

“We do? You got everything?” she asks, and he nods again.

“We got everything. He’s done for. You don’t have anything to worry about, I swear.”

“Oh, fuck,” she gasps, and she sinks her head into his shoulder, her trembling hands reaching up to grasp hold of him, as though she can barely believe what she’s hearing. I reach for her hand, covering it with my own, and Dax moves in to squeeze her shoulder, a silent promise that he’s there and he’s not going to let anything else happen to her.

And as we hold her, a rush of relief courses through me. It might not quite be over yet—but we’re closer than we’ve ever been to setting her free of his influence for good.

The thought of the freedom that lies on the other side is almost more than I can take.

“That looks painful,” Callum remarks, reaching up to press a damp cloth against my cheek where James hit me.

I wince, but shake my head. “It’s really not that bad,” I assure him. “I—it could have been a lot worse. I didn’t even realize he had a gun till he pulled it on you, Dax.”

“I’m fine,” Dax grunts from the bathroom door. He hasn’t let me out of his sight since the moment we got back to the cabin, and I guess it shouldn’t come as a shock. His kind of protective is almost possessive, insistent on making sure I don’t get too far from him. I can only imagine how tough it was for him to just stand back and let James speak to me like that, but judging by what Chuck has shown me on the recording, it seems like we have everything we need to take him down.

“And besides,” I add, managing a small smile. “Whatever he did to us—it’s nothing compared to what we’re going to do to him.”

All three of the guys grin when I say that part. They know as well as I do that it’s true. We’ve got him, dead to rights—that recording is going to wreck him. Not just him, but his father’s career too. I can’t believe we’ve really done it. We still need to find someone to expose it all, of course, but we’re closer now than we’ve ever been, and I can’t believe how near I am to finally being free of that fucker for life.

“You did so well,” Callum murmurs to me, gently lifting the cloth from my cheek. Behind me, Chuck is running a bath so I can scrub the remnants of this day off of me. Beyond the cabin, James and whatever guards were conscious enough to run have sped back to the town nearby, probably planning to make a break for it from there, but they have no clue what we have on him.

“I didn’t,” I reply, shaking my head. “I just sat there, let him talk at me. You were the ones who took out the guards and got me out of there?—”

“Don’t talk about yourself like that,” Dax replies, his voice almost sharp. “You handled him. You got him to say what we needed him to say. Without you, none of this would have worked.”

“Yeah, but without me, you wouldn’t have been stuck in the middle of all of this either,” I reply. I’m joking, mostly. But I can’t help but feel some guilt, knowing that these guys wouldn’t have been involved in something as dark and dangerous as this if I hadn’t turned up on their doorstep out of the blue.

Callum frowns at me, and Chuck finishes running the bath. The sudden quiet in the air as the running water stops rings heavy in my ears.

“You really think that’s how this works?” Callum murmurs to me.

“What do you mean?”

“You think that the only reason we helped you with this was because we had to?”

I glance between the three of them—Chuck sitting at the edge of the bathtub, Dax in the doorway, Callum leaning on the sink in front of me.

I shake my head. “Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” I point out. “If I hadn’t—I mean, if I hadn’t crashed my car so close to you, then I would never have been here. I would never have pulled you into it. You would never have had to get involved?—”

“We didn’t have to do anything,” Chuck shoots back, cutting me off. “It doesn’t work like that, Charli.”

“Yeah, I don’t do shit that I don’t want to,” Dax cuts in. “You wanted to leave. You were begging us to let you go. Not like we didn’t have any choice but to just go along with you.”

“We wanted to help you, Charli,” Callum adds, reaching out for my hand. “We still do. That’s why we did all of this.”

I feel a lump rise in my throat. Today has been so crazy, my emotions so close to the surface, that it’s hard to control them. Hearing James speak to me like that, being pulled back into the memories of everything I tried to forget about him, it’s...a lot to take on, that’s for sure.

But then, coming back to this place, and being surrounded by these guys—knowing that I can rely on them, knowing that there’s not a damn thing they won’t do to keep me safe, it’s everything I could have asked for.

“Hey, are you alright?” Callum asks, concerned, as he notices the shift in my attitude.

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“Yeah, I’m fine,” I assure him quickly, covering my emotions with a smile. “I just...I just can’t remember the last time that someone...anyone...was really there for me the way the three of you have been.”

Silence settles over the room for a moment. I know that’s a big statement, but it’s true. I’ve spent so long feeling like I’m utterly alone in the world. Being with James, it was as though I was cut off from every other person, knowing I had to keep his secrets at the risk of my own safety.

But here, I don’t have to try and hide that. Here, I can be honest with them and myself. After all, they’ve seen me at my worst, my very, very worst. I crashed into their lives fleeing a wedding in the middle of a blizzard, certain that I was doomed to be dragged back there one way or another. And they have shown me, without a shadow of a doubt, that there is so, so much more to the world than that. So much more than I could ever have imagined.

And I am beyond grateful to them for it.

“Thank you,” I whisper, looking around the room at the three of them. “Thank you for...for everything. I don’t think I would have survived this without you. Any of it.”

Callum leans forward and presses a kiss against my head. There’s something so intimate about the way he kisses me, even when the others are watching. I know I don’t have to hide how much I like all of them—there doesn’t seem to be that jealousy, that questioning about whether or not I’m serious about all of them when one of them touches me like this.

“Well, you did,” he murmurs.

“And I’m proud of you,” Chuck adds. I can feel Dax watching me from the other side of the room—his gaze is intense, and I’m sure he’s silently telling me that he’s right there with them. That he’s glad that they found me, and that I came here, and that we’ve finally taken the first steps to bringing down James for good.

“Now, let’s get you out of these clothes,” Callum murmurs. “You need to rest up.”

“Oh, that’s okay, I can manage the bath,” I reply, laughing lightly—but then I see the way they’re all looking at me, and something shifts in my stomach. Oh.Oh.

“I’d like to help too,” Chuck adds, moving in behind me. Slowly, he slips his hands around my shirt and begins to undo the buttons, one at a time. As each one pops open, Callum’s gaze drops down to my chest, my breasts exposed in the warm, steamy air—and as soon as the last one falls apart, he leans down to draw my nipple into his mouth.

I gasp at the feeling of his teeth against my breast, Callum’s tongue swirling around my nipple as Chuck wraps his arms around me and presses his lips to my neck. I can’t believe this is happening. Of course, I’ve been with all of them individually, but this...this is something else entirely.

I feel a pair of lips close over mine, and I reach up to pull them closer—it’s Dax. He’s kissing me. All three of them, their mouths are on me, exploring me, teasing me, like they can’t get enough, and all I can do is sink into the sheer pleasure of this sensation and let it get the better of me.

Chuck pulls me to my feet, and Callum drops to his knees and undoes my jeans, tugging them down, his breath just an inch or two from my pussy. Dax pushes a hand into my hair and guides my head back toward him as I step out of my jeans and

underwear, his tongue snaking past my lips with a barely restrained hunger that sends shivers all the way through my body.

“Come on,” Chuck murmurs softly against my ear, and he guides me toward the bath—the water is warm and steamy as I sink beneath the surface, all three men gathering at each side of the clawfoot tub to gaze down on me.

I flick my eyes between the three of them, trying to work out if this is really happening, if this can actually be real, all three of them wanting me like this. These triplets, these physical copies of one another who are so different in who they are as people—but the one thing they seem to have in common is that they’ll do anything they can to pleasure me, and I don’t see why I should deny myself that for another instant.

“Fuck, you look so gorgeous like this,” Chuck murmurs, trailing his fingers over the water and staring down at me. There’s something about the heat of their gazes on me that makes the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, pleasure prickling through every inch of my body at once.

“You think so?” I reply, playing at innocent as I let my hand move between my legs. I want to put on a show for them—I want them to see how much they turn me on, how grateful I am that they’re so willing to let me break into this perfect little world they’ve built just to keep me safe. And as their eyes follow the movement of my hands, I watch as Callum moves his hands to the zipper of his jeans, pulling out his cock. I can see a glint of pre-cum glistening at the tip of it already, and I let out a gasp as he strokes himself a couple of times at the sight of me.

I begin to trace my fingers around the edge of my clit, just teasing myself—I’m in no rush to go over the edge. No, I want this to last. Glancing to Chuck and Dax, I raise my eyebrows with a playful expectancy.

“I want to see all of you,” I breathe to them, a little nervous—is this too much?

But then, without another word, both of them do the same as Callum, and draw themselves into their hands. Chuck’s cock is rock-hard, and he grips it tight, holding himself still, while Dax moves his fist up and down his shaft a couple of times, clearly keen to relieve some of the tension that seeing me like this has built up in him.

Once I’m sure they’re all ready, and I have every bit of their attention, I move my fingers to my clit and start to play with myself.

I let out a soft, demonstrative moan, the sound filling the room along with the steam still rising from the bath. I can feel their eyes on me, even as my own drift shut, and it’s the most erotic thing in the world—being on display for them in such an intimate moment, allowing them to see me like this, to drink in the sight of me getting myself off for their viewing pleasure.

“Jesus,” Chuck growls, and he reaches down into the bath, his hand slipping beneath my ass and squeezing hard. The way he touches me, it’s like he wants to own me—not to control me, but to make sure that everyone knows I belong to him, to them.

Dax’s hand moves into my hair and he guides me toward him to kiss me again. I can feel him moaning against my mouth, the sound of it sending a shiver of pleasure through my body. Callum moves his hand beneath the water to begin to massage my breasts, his fingers brushing over my nipples and occasionally pausing to pinch and tug at them.

The sensations that are coursing through my body are so intense, so hard to control, that I find myself unable to think straight—all I can focus on is the way it feels, the way I want to give myself to these men completely and utterly. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do in this moment to please them, because they have shown me that there’s

nothing they won't do for me. The commitment, passion, care, and protectiveness they've given me since I arrived here...it's more than I ever could have imagined.

My fingers are moving with more intensity against my clit as Dax sinks his teeth into my lower lip, Chuck's hand moving a little further beneath the water to graze my asshole. Callum grabs my breast, squeezing softly, sending a shock of pleasure through my body beneath the water.

And when Dax pulls back, I open my eyes once more and take in the sight of them all around me. I have never felt more powerful in my entire life—seeing these three men on their knees around me, stroking themselves to the sight of me, kissing and touching and grabbing at whatever part of me they can get their hands on, it's the sexiest thing in the world. I still my fingers against my clit, but the orgasm has already hit hard, a shock wave of pleasure coursing through my body as another whimper draws out from between my lips. I can't control it, can't even pretend to. My body bucks against my hand beneath the water, grinding into my fingers as I go over the edge and into the release I need so badly.

And it seems like the sight of me like that is all it takes to push them over the edge and into their release. Dax comes first, his mouth just an inch or two from mine, and the sound he makes when he reaches his release is everything to me—the low, deepgrowl, as though the pleasure is rising up from some place deep down inside of him that he can't even begin to control. And then, a few moments later, Callum goes over the edge too—his eyes lock onto mine as he finishes, his body tensing for a moment as he reaches his release before he sinks back on his heels to catch his breath.

Chuck is the last to go, his hand grabbing tight to my ass as though he's drinking in the feel of me one last time before he comes. And when he does, a smile cracks over his face, blissed-out, as he tips his head back and inhales deeply.

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The four of us take a moment to come back down to earth, the intensity of what we just shared almost more than all of us can take. None of us can speak right now—but there's nothing that needs to be said, not really.

No, all that matters is that we're together. And I don't know what this new development means for our relationship, but I know I could seriously get used to having these guys lay all their passion at my feet.

And I can hardly wait to see what else I might be able to enjoy when it comes to the three of them soon. But for now, as I sink back into the bath, a blissed-out smile spreading up my face, I know that all I really want in the world is to get some rest.

And linger under their gazes just a little while longer.

26

CHARLI

As I fidget with my hands in my lap, Callum reaches over from the other side of the truck and covers my fingers with his.

“Hey,” he murmurs. “You sure you're going to be okay?”

I manage to plaster a smile on my face, and I nod. “Yeah, yeah, I'm going to be fine,” I promise him. “Just...just ready to get this over with, that's all.”

“Right,” he agrees, and he lifts my hand to his lips and plants a kiss against the back

of it. I steady my breath as best I can, staring out of the window as we arrive in Harrietsville. I can't believe we're here. I can't believe this is finally happening.

Because this is, at last, really it—we've found a journalist who's willing to talk to us about the situation with James, a woman who's been working on a story about him and his father for a few months now, but has been lacking the final sting she really needs to bring it all together. Having heard a few snippets of the audio we got of him abusing me, she's agreed to come and meet us in the nearby town of Harrietsville to get the inside scoop, and if everything goes to plan, bring him down once and for all.

But that doesn't mean that I'm entirely convinced it's going to go that way. Of course, I hope it does—and there's no reason to think that everything we have on him isn't going to be enough. God knows that there should be more than enough evidence to end his career for good, and his father along with him.

But it's been so long since someone has actually believed me when it comes to all of this, it's impossible not to second-guess myself and wonder if things will really have changed that much. I've spent so many years covering up for the kind of person he is, and it's hard to trust that people will believe me when I tell them I was lying all that time. After all, if I could mislead them about our relationship being good, right up until the point that we were supposed to be married, why in the name of holy hell would they suddenly trust me now when I turn around and say something entirely different...?

Callum insisted on coming with me today—I guess he could sense how nervous I was. Dax and Chuck offered too, but I told them I would prefer it was just us. Not because I don't want them there, but because I know if I turn up with three triplet brothers who are all fussing over me, that's going to be more of a story than the one I'm really trying to tell.

Callum pulls the truck to a halt outside the diner where we're due to meet this

woman. Inside, I'm pretty sure I can already see her sitting in one of the booths, tapping her long nails on the table, looking around as she waits for us to get here.

"You okay?" Callum murmurs, and I nod, trying to keep a smile on my face.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I reply. "Just, uh...just ready to get this over with."

"Me too," he agrees. "Come on, let's go in."

He gets out of the truck and offers me a hand to help me to the ground. My legs feel like jelly as I follow him into the diner, my heart pounding against my ribs like it wants to get out.

Inside, the journalist rises to her feet as soon as she sees us come through the door. I texted her a picture of myself to confirm my identity, and even though I shouldn't be surprised that she knows who I am, it still throws me off for a moment.

"Great to meet you, Charli," she greets me. "I'm Kennedy. How are you doing?"

"I—I'm a little nervous," I admit. "Can we sit down...?"

"Of course," Callum murmurs, and he quickly puts an arm around my waist and steers me toward a booth. I notice Kennedy's gaze flicking down to his hand against my back, and I pray she's not judging me too harshly for moving on as quickly as I have. I feel like any wrong move will be enough reason for her to paint me in a bad light, and I'm not sure I can handle the weight of it, knowing that she might see me as someone untrustworthy.

But as she moves in before me, her brow furrows sympathetically, and she reaches across the table to give my hand a squeeze.

“I know I’m here under a professional capacity,” she tells me gently. “But I just wanted to say—I think what you’re doing is incredibly brave, Charli. I’ve been following James and his father for a long time, and while I knew there was corruption in that campaign, I didn’t realize just how deep it went, just how much hurt they caused over the years. I know this can’t be easy for you, but you’re doing the right thing. You’re helping to protect other women from the same fate in the future, and stopping that father of his from abusing his power any more than he already has.”

I manage a small smile. It’s not exactly enough to make my doubts fall away entirely, but I appreciate her kindness—God knows I need it right now.

“Thank you,” I reply. “I—we brought the rest of the recording from when he kidnapped me. You want to listen to that now? I can fill you in on everything that he’s referencing as we go...”

“If you think you can handle that, sure,” she replies. I glance over at Callum, who reaches beneath the table to give my leg a squeeze. I nod.

“Yeah, I can handle it,” I reply. And to my surprise, I actually mean it.

So, I hand over the recording to her, and she starts to listen to it. I can see a dark cloud of shock crossing her face as she takes in what she’s hearing—I almost hate having to put anyone else through the shit that he said or did to me, but it’s only by facing it that I have any chance of moving on.

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Every now and then, she pulls out the headphones to ask for context about what he's saying—it's hard, but I fill her in on it. The way he hurt me, the way he pushed me away from my friends, the way he forced me out of work, insisting that he would take care of me, only to turn around and use that as leverage against me. Even now, saying it all out loud feels almost surreal, like I must be making it up, but I know it happened. Every moment of it.

And I know, most importantly of all, that I survived it.

Finally, she finishes up, and she pauses for a moment, staring down at the table as she takes in everything that she just heard.

“This—this is more than I could have imagined,” she confesses. Her face looks pale, but her eyes are steady and certain. When she looks back up at me again, I can see in her expression that she's even more convinced than she was before of what she needs to do, and I couldn't be more grateful for it.

“But I promise you that I'm going to use this story for good,” she swears to me. “Everything you've been through, it won't go to waste, Charli. This fills in so many blanks, so many gaps in the story I've been trying to piece together. By the end of this month, James and his father will be done in this city. I promise you that.”

I can feel tears prick my eyes, the relief almost more than I can take.

“I can't tell you how long I've been waiting to hear that,” I tell her. “I—if there's anything else you need, just tell me. I'll do my best to help.”

“You’ve already gone beyond what anyone could have asked of you,” she assures me. “Whatever life you want to live now, I promise—that’s where you should be putting your focus.”

I let my eyes drift shut. She’s right. Whatever life I choose to have now, I can do it. I’m not trapped by everything he wanted from me, everything he demanded, no—I’m free. I’m finally, actually, free.

And as I look over at Callum, a weight eases from my shoulders. I can be with him now, if I want—I can be with them, if that’s what I choose, which is a crazy thought.

“Come on,” he murmurs to me. “Let’s get out of here.”

We say our goodbyes to Kennedy, and she squeezes me in a tight hug before she leaves, promising me once again that she’s going to bring this man and his father down. And as Callum helps me back into the car, the world sprawls out before me—bigger than it ever has been before, so overwhelming I hardly know where to start.

“So,” Callum wonders aloud, as he sits there opposite me for a moment. “What now?”

“I—I don’t know,” I admit. “I guess we should go back to the cabin...?”

“I guess we should,” he agrees, and he starts up the engine. But all at once, as we pull out of town and start back on the road toward the forest, something strikes me—it’s over. James is done for. Which means—which means that these brothers have no reason to help me anymore.

They’ve done what they promised me they would. And now...now that it’s done, where does that leave us? I’m not sure. I came crashing into their lives because of

James, but now that he's gone, will they expect me to go too?

I stare out of the window as the trees begin to whip past outside. I'm not sure where this leaves me. But I know I don't want whatever we have to be over, not quite yet.

Not when it feels like my new life is only just beginning.

27

CALLUM

I pause for a moment in the doorway to my bedroom, looking down at her, sprawled on the bed before me. She's wearing a cute pair of pajamas, a cami and some shorts that she picked up after a trip to the city last week. She insisted that if she was going to be staying here for a moment longer, then she needed to have something of her own to wear, and when that means less clothes, I'm not going to argue.

Charli is flipping through a book, her legs kicking through the air as she lies on her front on the covers. I'm not sure if she's noticed me yet, but as I shift my weight from one foot to another and the floor creaks beneath me, she fires a look over her shoulder and flashes me the biggest grin.

"Well, hey there," she greets me playfully, wiggling her butt. "You going to just keep staring, or actually do something?"

"When you put it like that..."

I move over to the edge of the bed and let myself down on top of her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her against me tightly. She giggles, her small body squirming against mine as she flips around to face me, her book lying forgotten on the bed beside her. I kiss the corner of her lips and pull back for a moment, admiring the

way the light pours through the window to pick out the shape of her body.

“You look so fucking beautiful,” I murmur to her, and she smiles at me.

“You really think? I like these new clothes. Feels good to be out of your wardrobe for a change...”

“Yeah, I was getting sick and tired of sharing,” I tease. “About time you started grabbing your own stuff around here.”

She rolls her eyes at me and laughs. “Oh, come on. You love it when I wear your clothes. You always did.”

“You got me,” I admit, and I reach up to brush the hair back from her face.

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“You know,” she murmurs, resting her hand against my chest. “This is the same bed we stayed in when we...when you brought me here before.”

My heart drops slightly. We don’t talk about the past much. In the couple of weeks since we handed the journalist that information about James, along with the recording, it’s like a cloud has lifted from above each and every one of us, granting us a little peace in the face of everything that’s been going on. But that doesn’t mean our history is erased, just like that, no matter how much I wish I could put it all behind me.

“I know,” I murmur. I still don’t know how to talk about that part of our relationship. Even now, it’s raw—I can still remember staring down at her as she slept and wondering if I was doing the right thing, and then convincing myself that she would be better off without me.

She trails her fingers over my tee for a moment, probably able to feel the way my heart picks up the pace when she brings it up.

“You ever think about what might have been different, if you hadn’t left back then?” she asks me. The words hang in the air between us. I’m not sure if she’s accusing me or just wondering, but still, I can’t lie.

“Of course I do,” I reply softly, swiping a strand of hair away from her head so I can look at her. “Jesus, Charli, I think about it all the time.”

“Really? What do you think about it?”

I pause for a moment. I'm surprised that she even has to ask, to be honest.

"I regret it," I tell her. "I regret it more than anything else I've ever done in my life. Jesus, if I could go back in time and change it, I would. I wouldn't even think twice, I..."

I trail off. The emotion gets the better of me for a moment. When I think about all that she's been through, all that she would have been able to avoid if I had just been there for her instead of walking away, it kills me, and I still don't know if I'm ever going to be able to live with the weight of it hanging over my head.

"I'm so sorry, Charli," I murmur. "If I'd known what would happen to you because of that, I..."

"It didn't happen to me because of that," she replies, her voice suddenly taking on a firmer edge. "It happened because of James. Because James was looking for a victim, and he found me. You have nothing to do with the choices he made, Callum. I'm not going to let you blame yourself for them."

"I know," I reply. "But I...if I had still been with you, if I hadn't left you the way I did, you wouldn't have been hurting so bad, and..."

She lifts a finger to my lips and presses it there.

"Don't talk like that," she insists. "You can't hold yourself accountable for that, you just can't. It's not fair to you, it's not fair to me. It's...what happened, happened. And it's behind us now, that's all that I care about."

I rest my head against hers for a moment, breathing in the scent of her.

"Is it really?" I ask her.

She frowns up at me. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I hurt you back then,” I point out. “Badly. And it’s not like I can just...go back in time and undo that, it doesn’t work that way. I know I need to take responsibility for what I did, and I’m not denying that I made a mistake, but I—I can’t stand the thought of you hating me for that. Even though you have every right.”

Something in her face shifts as I speak, like she can hardly believe the words that are coming out of my mouth.

“You think I would hate you for that?” she murmurs, and she sits up on the bed. She reaches out, her hand on my face, her eyes staring deep into mine.

“You think that I could ever hate you?”

I move to face her, so we’re looking eye-to-eye. Her voice has such a fervency to it that it almost surprises me. She shakes her head, her gaze not breaking mine for a moment.

“I never hated you, Callum,” she assures me. “Never. I was confused, sure, I was hurt—but I knew that whatever you did, you did because of what you thought about yourself. The way that you saw yourself, the pain you were dealing with. If I’d known about it back then, if I’d known about you losing your father and how worried you were about Dax, I would have done everything I could to be there for you. But I got it, even then. I got it.”

Her voice is trembling slightly, and she has to pause for a moment to gather herself before she continues. “And besides, who’s to say that we would have made it work back then?”

I raise my eyebrows. “Charli, I was crazy about you,” I remind her. “I loved you. Still

do. Did all those years that we were apart?—”

“I know you did,” she replies. “And I loved you too. But we were different people back then, both of us. I don’t know that you would ever have been able to open up to me the way you have now, not back then. You kept it all to yourself.”

“I didn’t want to burden you with it.”

“I know,” she murmurs. “And I get that. But I guess I’ve burdened you with enough that we’re even now, huh?”

I can’t help but chuckle. “Charli, nothing about you is a burden,” I reply. “Never has been.”

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She cocks her head to the side, screwing up her face as though she doesn't quite believe me.

"You sure about that?" she remarks. "Because I'm pretty sure turning up in a wedding dress crashed out at the side of the road wasn't exactly the least burdensome thing I could have done..."

"I just couldn't believe that I had you back," I admit. "I know I shouldn't have been thinking about it like that, but shit—all this time, I had been thinking about you, and then there you were, out of nowhere. Like I had just magicked you up for myself."

"Maybe I was looking for you when I drove out here," she remarks, a smile creasing the corners of her mouth. "I mean, when I ran away from that wedding, I didn't have a damn clue where I was going. I don't even remember picking a direction. I think a part of me wanted to find you out here, in this place. It was the last trip I went on before...before I met James. Maybe the last time I was really happy before he got his claws into me."

"Well, whatever the reason," I reply. "I'm just glad you're here. And that you're not going anywhere."

She pauses for a moment when I say that part, and I can see an edge of doubt on her face—my brow furrows.

"You thinking of going somewhere?" I ask, trying to keep the surprise out of my voice.

“No, no, it’s not that,” she replies quickly. “It’s just...it’s just that I know how much of an imposition I’ve been. And I know that your brothers weren’t exactly sure about me being here in the first place. And now that everything with James is wrapped up, it feels like—well, I don’t have anything to be running from anymore, right? I should just go back to my life. Go back to what I knew before him. Try to rebuild.”

“Is that what you want to do?” I ask softly.

She sighs, her shoulders drooping downward. “I’m—I’m not sure,” she confesses. “I mean, the life I had before James, it doesn’t really exist anymore, not in the same way it once did. He pushed away all of my friends, and the people that I knew through him are hardly going to be welcoming, are they, knowing what I did to him. My career, it’s not where it should be, I don’t have any savings to fall back on. I always dreamed about getting out from under him and starting over, but I don’t know if that’s what I want anymore.”

“And what do you want?” I ask softly, reaching up to cup her face.

She chews her lip, and looks up at me again.

“I—I think I want to be here. With you. And your brothers.”

It’s the first time she’s said that out loud—and the hit of relief that it gives me is more than I can even begin to express. I wouldn’t have blamed her if this place was tainted by everything that’s happened and she wanted to get out and go back to the city where she could start over again, but the thought of letting her slip through my fingers when she has already been through so much doesn’t sit right with me.

“You know you’re welcome here, right?” I tell her. “For as long as you want.”

She eyes me for a long moment, falling silent.

“I just don’t know if I can ask for that from all of you,” she mutters. “I know how hard you worked to make this place a sanctuary for yourselves, and there’s no reason I can’t strike out on my own now, not after everything that’s—”

“It’s not about what you can do,” I tell her firmly. “It’s about what you want to do. And if you want to stay here—then we’re happy to have you. More than happy.”

“You sure Dax and Chuck agree with that?” she asks. Her voice is light, but I can tell there’s real weight behind what she’s saying. She clearly doesn’t entirely believe, even now, that we’re capable of loving her the way we do.

I nod. “Yeah, I am,” I reply. “Triplet stuff. You always know what the others are thinking. Plus, they told me how they feel about you when we were putting our plan together. I don’t have to guess.”

She smiles slightly, and sinks her teeth into her bottom lip.

“I just don’t want to make your lives harder,” she confesses. “I don’t want to mess up what you’ve worked so hard to make here?—”

“And you won’t,” I assure her. “We’ll teach you everything you need to know. Besides, you can cook, right?”

“Well, mostly pastries...”

“That’s better than any of us,” I reply. “We’ll get you in the kitchen before you know it.”

She laughs—God, I love the sound of her laugh. It feels like the whole world lights up for a moment when she’s happy, and I know I’ll never get tired of it.

“Oh, I see how it is,” she shoots back. “You’re just keeping me out here to get my nose to the grindstone, aren’t you?”

I chuckle, winding my arms around her again.

“Damn right,” I agree. “We can’t let all your skills go to waste. We need to have you hard at work, if you’re going to be living here with us.”

I drop a kiss on the top of her head, and she leans into me—and I know that there’s nothing else we need to say. Threshing out the details of another person staying here with us, that can come later down the line. For now, all that matters is that she’s here, and that she knows none of us want her to go anywhere.

CHARLI

I can feel his hands on me. His grip on my arms, shaking me—his spit flying in my face as he screams at me. I can't make out a word he's saying, but that part doesn't matter. What matters is that he hates me, he has his hands on me, and this time, nobody's going to come to rescue me...

All at once, I sit bolt upright in bed, my brow sheened with sweat, my heart slamming against my chest. I'm breathing hard, the corners of my vision blurry with panic, and nausea stirring in my stomach.

It takes me a moment to remember where I am. I look around to see Callum sprawled on the bed next to me, the covers down around his waist, his hands tucked beneath his head. Fast asleep. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, pinching the bridge of my nose between my fingertips, trying to remind myself that I have nothing to worry about.

But truth be told, these nightmares always hit hard. I hate them, more than anything, these puncture wounds in the surface of this new life I'm making for myself. I know that James has been arrested, along with his father, and that he's facing corruption charges that will likely see him going away for the better part of the rest of his life—but that's not enough to unravel the psychological harm he has done to me, and I don't know what will be.

I swing my legs out of bed and put my head in my hands for a moment. I'm sure

these dreams are going to hit me less and less hard as time goes on, but that doesn't undo the weight of them right now, and I'm not sure what will. I feel as though my heart is going to beat right out of my chest—it's like he's right there in front of me again, and I don't know what, if anything, will be enough to stop him.

Finally, dragging myself to my feet, I head through to the kitchen to get a glass of water. I know it'll be a while before I can get back to sleep again, and I don't want to wake Callum with my tossing and turning.

The few times I have woken him up with my nightmares, he's soothed me as best he can, doing everything in his power to bring me back down to earth and assure me that there's nothing wrong, but I have a hard time believing it. I just—I just hate the thought of bringing him down with me, bringing them all down with me, when this should be in the past. It almost feels ungrateful, given everything they did for me, to still be so hung up on James and all the hell he put me through.

In the kitchen, I pour myself a glass of water, the bluish moonlight filtering through the window before me. Staring up at the clear night sky, I try to calm myself, reminding myself how lucky I am to be here, how glad I am that I've found my place here among the?—

“Hey.”

I nearly jump out of my skin when I hear a voice behind me. Spinning around, I find Dax standing there, leaning against the kitchen counter and watching me. I plant a hand to my chest and inhale a deep, shaky breath.

“Jesus, Dax, you scared me.”

“Sorry. Heard someone moving around, and thought it might be you again.”

“Again?”

“Callum told me you were having bad dreams,” he murmurs, taking a careful step toward me, as though I might bolt off in panic if he moves too quickly.

I sigh, staring down at the floor, and take a sip of my water.

“I’m sorry,” I reply. “I didn’t want to wake you, I just?—”

“It’s fine. You okay?”

He speaks quietly, as though he knows that too much noise might spook me. I nod—and then shake my head.

“No,” I confess. “Not really.”

All at once, I feel tears rising to my eyes—I know it was just a dream, but that doesn’t mean I can brush it off, just like that.

“Hey, hey,” he murmurs, and he moves toward me and wraps his arms around me tight. “You’re okay. You’re okay. You’re safe here, you know that.”

“I know that,” I breathe against his shoulder, putting my arms around him and pressing my head into his neck. I inhale the scent of him, trying to remind myself that he’s telling the truth—that I’m safe here, no matter what my dreams might try to throw at me.

When he pulls back, he looks at me with concern.

“You want to come lie down with me?” he asks.

I shake my head. “No, it’s not fair for me to keep you up?—”

“You’re not keeping me up,” he replies. Taking my hand, he tugs me toward his room. “Come on.”

I hesitate for a moment, but then I go after him. Honestly, I need the company right now, and I’m not going to pass up the chance to have someone to lie next to while I fall back to sleep.

He guides me to his room, and we get in bed together—him behind me, tucked in as the big spoon, his arms woven tight around me like he never intends to let me go.

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“What did you mean, I’m not keeping you up?” I mumble, once I’ve managed to steady my breathing again.

“I don’t sleep well,” he replies, matter-of-fact. “I’m usually up and about during the night, for one reason or another.”

“Why?”

He pauses for a moment. It’s clear he didn’t entirely expect that question.

“Bad dreams, I guess.”

I can tell from the way he says it that it’s an understatement.

I sit up, turning to face him. “About...about what happened?”

His eyes glaze for a moment, but then he nods. “Yeah. About what happened.”

The two of us fall silent for a moment. We both know the weight of everything we carry, the heaviness of it—the pain of knowing that there’s so much you’ll never be able to escape from, no matter how hard you try.

“Same with me,” I confess. “I...I keep dreaming about him. About James. About what he did to me. And every time, it feels...”

“It feels as though you’re right back there,” he finishes up for me, lifting his gaze to meet mine. “Right? Feels as though you’re right back where you started. Like it’s the

realist thing in the world, and you're never going to be able to get out."

I sigh, and then nod. "Yeah. Exactly like that."

He slides his hand over mine. "I hate that you have to deal with that shit. It's not fair."

"Jesus, you lost your whole unit," I remind him. "And your father. I don't think I have anything to complain about?—"

"You know that's not how it works," he shoots back, as though he's almost annoyed that I would try to downplay it like that. "The shit you've been through is the shit you've been through. Doesn't matter what it is, matters how fucked-up your brain is at dealing with it."

I pause for a moment—but then nod.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I agree. "I just wish I was a little more...I don't know. I wish I was strong enough to put it all behind me."

"You are," he replies. "You left him. You got out."

"So did you."

"Not because I wanted to. Because I had to."

"Is there that much of a difference?" I wonder aloud.

"Yeah, you were smart enough to get out when you realized it wasn't what you wanted," he replies, shaking his head. "I wasn't. I would have kept doing it. I would have?—"

He stops himself in his tracks. I can tell he's getting agitated. I reach out for his hand and wind my fingers around it, holding on to him tight.

"Hey, you can't blame yourself," I murmur. "You did what you thought you had to do, right? What you thought was right. You can't hold that against yourself. I won't let you."

He manages a small smile, though I can tell he's not exactly feeling it. I brush my fingers along his arm, trying to bring him back into the moment.

"How did you...how did you stop it from taking over your life?" I ask him, finally. "This...these memories. The bad dreams. All of it."

He shakes his head. "I didn't," he replies simply. "I came out here. I ran from it, from everything that reminded me of that time. All the triggers that pushed my buttons."

"And was it enough?"

He glances up at me. "No."

That word hangs heavy in the air between us. I hate hearing him speak like this, clearly struggling so badly with the weight of everything he has endured. If I could just reach into his mind and lift it from his shoulders, I would, though I know that's not how this works. Or else he would have done it for me.

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“You ever think about doing therapy?” I ask him. “I know some people, when they leave the army, they?—”

“I tried it a couple times,” he replies bluntly. “But it never really did anything for me. Always felt like they wanted to dig around in my brain just for the sake of it. How was that ever going to help?”

His words are laced with bitterness. It’s clear that, whatever help he did receive, it wasn’t enough, not even close. He lifts his chin and looks at me, cocking an eyebrow.

“What about you? You do anything like that?”

“No,” I confess. “But I...I feel like maybe I should.”

He stares me down. I can tell he’s not certain about the idea. But he has shown himself to be willing to do anything he can to support me, even when he doesn’t entirely know why I would want to make a move like that.

I squeeze his hand again. “But I don’t want to go through it alone,” I continue. “I...I think I need someone there with me. Someone who understands what I’ve been through. Someone who gets what it’s like, you know?”

His chest puffs out slightly as I speak. “You want me to come with you?”

I smile. I know it’s not the most conventional method of convincing someone to take care of their mental health, but honestly, if he needs to feel as though he’s the one who came to this conclusion on his own terms, then I’m more than happy to let him.

“I would love that,” I reply. “We could work through our shit together. Get over all of this. Leave it behind, once and for all.”

His face softens slightly as I speak. I know it’s not always easy for Dax to be honest with himself about how much he’s hurting—of the three guys, he’s the one who carries the most pain from his past. But here he is, sitting before me, alive and ready to make a change—ready to stand with me as I start to move into a new phase of my life.

I lean forward and kiss him softly, and he tucks his hand protectively behind my head.

“I...” he begins, but then he stops himself, shaking his head.

I lean back, raising my eyebrows at him. “What is it?”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine. You don’t need to hear it.”

“No, tell me,” I press him. “If you’re going to be talking about this in therapy, you might as well get used to coming clean, right?”

He looks at me for a moment. I can tell he’s still not entirely into the idea, but he doesn’t shoot me down at once, as he usually does. Finally, taking a deep breath, he comes out with it.

“There was such a long time,” he confesses, speaking slowly, clearly not used to putting these things into words, “when I was sure I was going to end up like my father.”

“You mean...?”

“I mean killing myself, like he did.”

His words are laced with a pain I’m not even sure he entirely understands. I fall silent, letting him speak—I don’t want to scare him into closing his mouth now that he’s finally telling me what I want to hear.

“I was so sick, so fucking sick,” he continues, shaking his head. “And it felt like I couldn’t do anything without falling apart. Not going to the store, not seeing my family, not anything. And then, Dad died, and it was like I got a glimpse of my future. Like that was where I belonged too.”

My heart swells in my chest as he speaks. I hate knowing that he’s ever thought so little of himself—but at the same time, it’s not as though I can’t understand it. I’ve only just gotten out of the hell I was trapped in, and these memories are already driving me a little crazy. I can only imagine what he must have gone through for all those years, feeling so alone, feeling like he was losing his mind.

“And maybe I was even jealous of him,” he mutters. “Jealous that he could make it all end. Knowing that I would never do that to my brothers, fuck—I wished I could, sometimes. Wished I could just wake up and all of this would be over and I’d never have to think about it again.”

His words are laced with a real venom—and I know it’s not at me, but rather, himself. But still, I hate to hear it.

“That version of me, he was such a coward,” he spits. “Such a fucking coward for wanting to run like that?—”

“Dax,” I interrupt him. “Don’t talk about yourself like that.”

He shakes his head. “You don’t get it.”

“I know I don’t,” I reply, mirroring his blunt language. “And I’m not going to pretend like I do. But if you think I’m going to sit here and let you shit all over yourself like that, I’m not. Okay?”

He stares at me for a moment—and I can see how vulnerable he is. How hard this is for him to say out loud. No matter what kind of front he might want to put up, the pain is written all over his face, the memories more than he can take.

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“Because you stayed here,” I continue. “And now you’re with me. You’re with us. And I don’t know what I would do without you.”

I kiss him again.

“You saved me, Dax,” I murmur. “Please, let me help you too. Let me help you leave it all behind.”

He rests his head against mine for a long moment, and I can tell there’s a part of him that wants to give me what I’m asking for. It’s not going to be that easy, of course—it’s not like he can just forget everything that happened and pretend like the horrors he saw at war are done.

But he’s here with me now, not trying to make excuses, not trying to turn his back on what he knows is good for him. And as long as he can stay here, in this moment, then I know I have him. I know that’s all that matters.

“I love you,” he murmurs to me, after a long silence. The words surprise me—not because I don’t feel it from him, but because he’s never been the first to come clean about his emotions, not when he can avoid it.

After another kiss, I look him in the eyes and smile.

“I love you too, Dax,” I reply. “Now, let’s get some sleep. I’m exhausted.”

He pulls me against him, spooning me once more, and I close my eyes—and within just a few minutes, I fall into a deep, peaceful sleep, my nightmares at bay for the

time being, in the arms of one of the men I love with all my heart.

29

CHUCK

I whistle through my teeth as I get back to work, the warm spring air dancing around my bare chest—it's a bright enough day that working in the garden calls for me to be stripped to the waist to avoid overheating. Oh, and I also happen to enjoy the way Charli steals glances at me out of the corner of her eye when she thinks I'm not looking.

Now that it's starting to get closer to summer, I'm planting up everything I can to get ahead of schedule. I want to make sure we have a healthy crop this year, since we've got a new member of the family to feed. Of course, Charli has been insistent on pulling her weight here, telling me that she doesn't want to sit around on her butt and do nothing while the rest of us are working overtime to get everything done. No matter how many times I tell her that I'm perfectly fine with her ass, provided it's close to me, she wants to help, and I'm not going to argue with some assistance around the garden.

She's in the greenhouse, and I'm just finishing up another set of tomato plants along the outside edge—it's meant to be particularly warm this year, so growing them isn't going to be too hard. She's already suggested turning some of them into jams and preserves. Not something I know a whole lot about, but I'm willing to learn from her, just as she seems willing to learn from me.

"Hey, you need a hand?" Dax calls to me from inside the house. I shake my head.

"Nah, we're all good," I reply, shooting a look over to the greenhouse, where Charli is still working. But as soon as I see her, my heart drops—something's wrong. I can

tell at a glance.

She's leaning heavily over one of the plant pots, her face pale, and she looks as though she's about to pass out at any moment. I rush over toward the door and throw it open, concern pulsing through my system.

"Charli? You okay?"

She doesn't look up at me. Her eyes seem bleary, a little distant—I can tell something's seriously off.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," she mumbles. "Just a little, uh..."

But before she can finish what she's saying, she stumbles, and I rush forward to pull her into my arms.

"Hey, hey, you're alright," I promise her, smoothing down her hair. "Did you have one of the flashbacks again?"

"No, it's nothing like that," she replies, her voice shaky. "I'm just...I don't feel right."

"Don't feel right how?"

"Like I'm too tired to stay on my feet," she explains as best she can. I can hear how distant she is, her voice laced with discomfort, and I pull her against me firmly.

"You need to come sit down."

"No, let me carry on, I'm so close to being done..."

“No way,” I tell her firmly. “Into the house. Now. You need something to drink, something to eat. You can’t stay out here in this heat and not expect it to hit you...”

I finally convince her to come inside once more, and Dax is waiting there, concerned, when she steps in.

“What’s going on?”

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“I just got a little dizzy,” she mumbles, and she sinks down into the couch. Callum goes to grab her something to eat, but when he returns with some dried mango, she twists her head away and clamps her hand over her mouth.

“No, no way,” she protests. “That smells disgusting. Can’t you tell how off that is?”

We all exchange a glance.

“Charli, it smells fine to me,” I reply, and I reach up to rest a hand on her hand. She feels warm, a little clammy, but my instincts are telling me that there’s something going on here that shouldn’t be.

“We need to get you to the doctor,” I tell her firmly, and she groans.

“No, no, please, I really don’t need all of that. I’m okay. Maybe I just need to get some sleep, or?—”

“Not a chance,” I tell her, leaving no room for argument. “Something’s up. Dax, pull the car around. Callum, help me get Charli out there. I’ll call the doctor on the way, he’ll be able to fit us in...”

Despite her protests, eventually she seems to concede that she needs help, and she allows us to get her to the truck and toward Killinsbury a few miles away. She sits in the back of the truck with me the whole time, clinging to my hand tightly as though she might shoot off into space if she doesn’t do everything she can to keep herself pinned to the earth.

“You’re going to be fine,” I tell her softly as we pull the truck up outside the doctor. He argued about not having room for her today, but after a firm talking-to from me, he changed his mind and figured he could squeeze her in for a quick exam.

I help Charli out of the truck. She’s still a little shaky, but she leans on me, hanging on to my arm. Dax walks behind her, his hand on the small of her back. I know he’s grown closer to her these past few weeks, since they’ve been attending therapy. I didn’t think there was a damn person on earth who could convince my stick-in-the-mud brother that therapy was the right call for him, but damn if she wasn’t able to do it—and he’s been managing a lot better in the meantime. He still has a long way to go until he’s totally better, if that ever comes at all, but at least he’s on the path to it.

Inside, we’re hurried toward the exam room when the receptionist sees how wobbly on her feet Charli is. The doctor arrives a few minutes later, and I quickly run down the symptoms that brought us here as Charli sinks onto the exam table, her face pale and her eyes distant.

“I’m going to run some blood tests,” he replies with a nod. “Could be a deficiency that came out because of the hot weather. Stay here, I’m going to call in my tech...”

She screws her face up and draws her gaze away from the needle as he takes the blood, and when he goes out to run the tests, she glances up at the three of us.

“It’s going to be okay, isn’t it?” she asks quietly. I don’t see her scared much, not these days—but there’s a flash of terror in her eyes, as though she can see all of this slipping away from her.

“Of course it is,” I assure her, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her tight against my chest. I know how she feels. The thought of losing any of this, any of this life that has started to fall into place for all of us, it hurts. I can’t stand the thought of it. And I won’t let anything take her from me. I don’t care what we’re up against, it’s

not going to take this woman away from me...

Tense silence fills the room while we wait for the results, and when the doctor steps through the door, there's a smile on his face.

"Well, I'm glad to reassure you that nothing serious is going on," he replies. "Just some low blood pressure and tiredness. You and the baby are fine, Charli."

The world freezes for a moment. The words hang there. Baby. And the baby. Charli's eyes nearly bug out of her head as he speaks, her voice trembling as she asks for some explanation.

"The...the baby? What are you talking about?"

He frowns, glancing between us—I wonder who he thinks is her partner here. Me, probably, though he has no idea that it's actually all of us.

"You're pregnant," he replies. "Did you not...did you not know...?"

She stares at him. I can feel her trembling beneath my grip, clearly unsure what to make of this revelation. My own head is spinning, my ears ringing, and I'm sure Dax and Callum are in the exact same place too. A baby...a fucking baby...

"I'll give you a moment," he replies. "Let me get a test from our pharmacy...perhaps I..."

He continues to mutter as he rushes out, leaving the four of us alone in the room together, trying to make sense of whatever the hell just happened.

"Did he say...did he say that you're pregnant?" Dax asks finally, breaking the quiet hanging in the air between us.

“Yeah,” Charli whispers. “Yeah, I think he did.”

“Is he right?” Callum demands, beginning to pace. “I mean, they can make mistakes with these kinds of things?—”

“No, he’s right,” she replies, shaking her head. “I haven’t had a period in a couple of months. I guess I just didn’t think anything of it, what with the stress that’s been going down, and I...fuck, I don’t know. I didn’t...”

She trails off again. She’s in total shock, that much is obvious. Dax takes her hand and squeezes it tight, but he doesn’t say anything.

She looks up at me, her eyes glimmering with tears.

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“I didn’t want to ruin everything,” she whispers. “But...”

“What the hell makes you think that this has ruined everything?” Callum cuts in sharply, his gaze narrowing almost angrily as it lands on her. She looks over at him, her eyebrows raised.

“I mean...having a baby, it’s not what any of us planned...”

“Yeah, and we didn’t plan to have you crash into our lives the way you did either,” he points out. “But it’s the best thing that’s ever happened to us. Who’s to say that this baby won’t be the same?”

I nod. As shocked as I am, there’s nothing I want more than for her to be happy. Nothing will convince me that she’s not meant to be here with me—that she’s not meant to fill out our family, our cabin, our lives. And if that means adding another member to our family...shit, maybe it was meant to be.

“But...but we don’t even know who the father is!” she protests, as though she’s groping around for some reason this is a terrible idea.

“Does that matter?” Dax remarks with a shrug. “I don’t care who actually—I mean, it doesn’t matter to me who got you pregnant. Our DNA is the same anyway, it doesn’t make any difference to me.”

“Me neither,” I echo.

“Me three,” Callum agrees. “I don’t see why that would be a problem.”

She falls silent, still searching for some way to make a problem out of this. But she knows, even as she sits there before us, that she's not going to find it. Even though this clearly comes as a shock, all of us are ready to step up and do the right thing, to become a father to this child.

"So, what...?" she begins, chewing on her lip. "We go back to the cabin, we raise this child together, we...we start a family? Three dads, one mom, and a baby?"

Callum cocks an eyebrow. "You know, that sounds pretty good to me," he replies. "I've always wanted kids."

"Me too," Dax adds, surprising me. I've never thought of him as the paternal type, but clearly, the time he's been spending in therapy has unlocked something in him that he didn't even know about himself before.

"Yeah, I can see it," I agree. "Teaching them to garden, to read, to cook..."

"Running them down to school in town when they're old enough," Dax remarks. "We could take turns doing the school run."

"The school run," she laughs, and she closes her eyes for a moment, a tear leaking down her cheek.

"What? What are you crying about?" Dax asks with concern, and she shakes her head.

"I'm sorry, I'm not—I'm not sad," she assures him quickly. "I'm just...I never thought I would get to do something as normal as a school run. It—for so long, my life felt like it was totally out of my control, and now..."

She looks between us, her voice hitching in the back of her throat before she

continues.

“Here the three of you are, telling me that you want to help me raise a child. And it’s...it’s a shock.”

“The good kind of shock?” Callum asks with concern, and she laughs, wipes away her tears, and then nods.

“God, yes,” she replies. “The best kind of shock. I mean, it’s going to take some getting used to, the idea that I’m going to have a baby, but...”

She gazes down at her stomach and rests her hands there for a moment, as though cradling the little unborn child within.

“But I want this,” she murmurs. “I want it with all of you. And I want this baby’s life to be filled with so much love that they don’t know what to do with all of it.”

“And it will be,” I promise her, wrapping an arm around her shoulder and squeezing her in close. “It will be, Charli.”

“We’re going to have to build an extension onto the cabin,” Dax muses.

“Does that mean I’ll finally get my own room?” she asks, with a slightly shaky laugh.

“Hey, and make me miss out on sleeping next to you every night? Not likely,” Callum protests, kissing her. Just as his lips meet hers, the doctor returns, and he pulls back swiftly, clearing his throat. God knows that we don’t need any questions about what’s going on between us—that cabin has been a welcome respite from all the demands that normal society would have on us, and none of us are particularly interested in the scrutiny about our nontraditional relationship.

“I brought another test, if you’d like to take it,” the doctor tells her, proffering her a small plastic strip.

“Sure,” she replies, still a little shaky, but able to reach out and take the test from him. “I’ll take this. Maybe we could...uh, have a talk about what comes next, if it comes back positive?”

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“I think that’s a great idea,” he replies, glancing between the three of us. “And maybe you gentlemen could wait outside...well, apart from the father?”

“I think we’re going to stay,” I tell him firmly. He raises his eyebrows slightly, and I’m sure he’s got all kinds of questions for us—but he doesn’t have the nerve to ask a single one, much to my relief.

“Alright, well,” he mutters, backing toward the door. “I suppose I’ll leave you to it.”

“I suppose you will,” I reply. And with that, he heads outside, leaving all four of us alone together once more. None of us could have guessed that this was the direction this day was going to take. But now that we know? It feels as though everything has fallen into place.

As though everything is exactly as it should be, even if it’s not how any of us could ever have predicted.

But hasn’t that just been the story of our lives, since Charli came into them?

EPILOGUE

CHARLI

“Hey, hey, sit down,” Callum insists as I try to get to my feet and head through to the kitchen. “You’re pregnant. Don’t you remember?”

I grin at him, shaking my head.

“Oh, yeah, I remember,” I tease. “I don’t think any of you are going to let me forget...”

“It’s our job to take care of you now,” Dax replies, grabbing the plate out of my hands and heading through to drop it in the sink. “How are you feeling now, anyway? Better than before?”

“Much better.”

It’s the truth—my mood has improved a whole lot since we got back from the doctor, though I’m still trying to make sense of the ridiculously huge news he hit us with.

I’m pregnant.

Pregnant. With child. As in, in just a few months time, I’m going to be bringing a new life into this world, alongside the three men who are going to be their father.

It’s the strangest thought, but not an unwelcome one, not at all. Before everything that happened with James, I often thought about having a family of my own, but when we got together, I couldn’t stand the thought of involving a little one in the nightmare that he put me through—it just didn’t seem fair. No matter how much I craved a family of my own, I couldn’t expect a child to live in that hell with me.

But here, now? It’s different. These three have given me freedom I didn’t even know was possible, and I’m certain they’ll do the same for our little one too. It’s not exactly how I pictured my family turning out, but sometimes it’s the stuff you least expect that makes the most sense.

When we got home, Chuck cooked dinner for us, and we all sat down to talk about how we’re going to handle this—what needs to be done to make this place safe for a kid, how we’re going to manage raising them, what we’re going to do for hospital

appointments and schools and everything like that.

Of course, I'm certain there's still so much we haven't thought about, so much that none of us could even have imagined, but we're well on our way to getting there. And we have a few months yet before we have to make any big decisions. The biggest one, as far as I'm concerned, has already been made—we're keeping this baby. We're going to raise it together, as a unit. And I know I wouldn't have it any other way.

Chuck emerges from the kitchen and sinks down onto the seat next to me, draping his arm along the back of the chair and pulling me close.

"I can't believe we're doing this," I admit, biting my lip as I look up at him. Dax and Callum are sipping on whiskey in the seats opposite us. The fire is crackling in the hearth, the warm weather having given way to a chill tonight. It's so perfectly cozy in the cabin, I could almost doze off right here on the couch, if I wasn't so excited about what I just found out.

"I can," Callum replies, simply. "Ever since I met you, I always thought you would be an amazing mom."

I turn to him, raising my eyebrows. "Really?"

"Oh, yeah," he replies, grinning. "You were so sweet, and so patient. So kind. I knew any kid would be lucky to have you as a mother."

"You're too cute," I tell him, shaking my head.

"Well, I thought you would be a good mother," he muses, "and that you would look so fucking hot barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen."

I laugh, feeling my cheeks grow a little hotter.

“Hey, that’s very old-fashioned of you.”

“Hmm, yeah,” Chuck agrees, his fingers trailing up the side of my neck. “But he’s right. You will.”

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Dax lets out a groan from beside me, as though the very thought of it is enough to turn him on. “Hell, yes, you will,” he agrees, rising to his feet and then dropping down on the floor below me. He reaches for my bare feet, guiding them onto his lap and beginning to massage them. I let out a groan, my head sinking back with satisfaction at the sensation of his thumbs kneading into my soles.

“Yeah, I can just imagine it,” Callum remarks as he comes over to join me, sitting next to me on the couch. His hand slides to my leg, and he starts to inch up my skirt, going slow, until hereveals the soft white cotton panties I’m wearing underneath. I can already see Chuck starting to grow hard out of the corner of my eye. I know how much it turns him on, seeing me lavished with attention like this, and honestly, who could ever say no to this kind of pampering...?

“You all pregnant and glowing,” Callum continues as he slips his hand into the front of my panties. “Ready to burst...”

Chuck groans softly, and Dax leans down to brush his lips along the top of my feet. A start of pleasure shudders from my soles to the spot where Callum is touching me, his fingers circling around my clit slowly.

“Come here,” Chuck murmurs, and he reaches across and pulls me into his lap. I can feel the pressure of his cock against me, even through his pants, as Callum’s fingers continue to move against my clit, Dax still rubbing my feet slowly.

Chuck unzips his pants and pulls himself into his hand. Hooking my panties to the side, he presses himself at my entrance and pulls me down on top of him. I let out a long groan of pleasure. It’s not the first time I’ve been with all of the guys at once,

but there's something so intimate about the way we're doing it now, knowing the future we have together, knowing that everything is finally falling into place with us.

Chuck pushes me down on top of his cock hard, moving all the way to the hilt inside of me. Callum slides his hands up toward my breasts, pulling down the top of my dress so he can trail his tongue around my nipples, drawing them each into his mouth, one at a time.

My eyes flicker open for long enough to see that Dax has started to stroke himself as he rubs my feet, hands running along my legs. His gaze is fixed on the way Chuck is pushed inside of me, his cock stirring in deep motions as he holds me on his lap.

"Fuck, you look so good like that," Dax growls, and he leans down to skim his tongue along the inside of my calf, toward my thigh. My entire body shudders with pleasure, my chest rising and falling against Callum's mouth as he slides his hands up over my breasts, massaging them as his teeth nick at my nipples for a moment.

I grab his head and pull it up toward mine as Chuck begins to move me up and down, up and down on top of his cock. The men find this motion with me, a pattern, a pace, that has me utterly lost to these sensations before I know what's even happening. Dax sinks his teeth into my thigh, just lightly, but the start of pain jolts through me, only adding to the pleasure.

And all at once, I know that this is not enough—it's not enough to have one of them inside of me. I need more. I need as much as I can get. I need everything that they're willing to give me, and I'm not going to settle for less.

I move my hand into Callum's lap as we kiss, and then break away, staring down at Dax.

"Come here," I murmur to him, my voice taking on a low, throaty quality that surprises even me. I sound so...seductive. As though they've unlocked a part of me

that nobody has before. A part that can be totally and utterly free, a part that doesn't have to second-guess or worry or doubt about how things are going to go—a part that can just let loose and focus on what she wants, what she needs, rather than just staying safe.

He seems to know exactly what I'm talking about before I even have a chance to explain. Chuck is grinding himself into me as I pull Callum's cock from his pants, stroking him a few times and taking in the expression on his face as he watches me. I love the way he stares at me when he's turned-on, as though he can't believe that this is really happening, that he got so lucky as to be with someone like me.

Soon, Dax arrives just behind me, and I rub my hand over his hard-on. Gazing up at him, my lips slightly parted, I silently tell him just what it is I want, and he gives it to me. Unzipping his pants, he unveils his perfect cock, and I close my eyes and part my lips as he guides it toward my mouth, letting it slip onto my tongue and into me.

In that moment, the pleasure is so intense that it grows into a kind of euphoria within me. Chuck stills himself inside me, holding himself steady as my slit spreads to take him, and I swirl my tongue around the head of Dax's cock, tasting him against my lips, the salty sweetness of his pre-cum. And Callum thrusts himself into my hand, his erection throbbing between my fingers. In that instant, I have all of them right where I want them—all these men, these men who I adore so much, giving me everything I could have ever asked for. Giving me pleasure, giving me safety, giving me the chance to be part of their family—a chance to be loved by them, completely, in every way I could want.

And with that, they begin to move once more. Chuck starts to push up into me harder than before, holding my hips a few inches above his cock and thrusting into me, deep and slow. Callum is watching me, his eyes pinned to mine as I take Dax's cock into my mouth, running my tongue around his thick tip before I engulf a few more inches between my lips. And I can feel it, building inside of me, the pleasure that I can't hold back—it might be the pregnancy hormones, or it might be the connection I

suddenly feel to these men, but I can't deny it.

I moan around Dax's cock, my hand moving with a little more purpose against Callum's erection, as I feel Chuck start to tense beneath me—I can tell he's getting close, and I want to feel him go over the edge inside of me. No, more than that, I crave it. I crave it from all of them. I want to bring them the pleasure that they've brought me, over and over again. I want to show them that they have made the right choice, being with me, choosing to let me stay here with them and become part of their family.

I take a few more inches of Dax's cock into my mouth, and when I open my eyes to look up at him, he groans loudly, his hand coming to the back of my head to hold me in place, and he reaches his release inside my mouth. I feel his cock twitch in the moment before he comes, and the low, guttural curses he lets out send a shiver of excitement through my body.

And that's all it seems to take to get Callum over the edge too. I hear him sigh with relief as he comes in my hand, the ropes of his seed on my fingertips, showing me, viscerally, just how much he gets off on this.

With one last thrust into me, Chuck finds his own orgasm, buried deep within my pussy. And it's that sensation that takes me over the edge, the sensation of him filling me with his seed. I might not know which one of them actually got me pregnant, but I know it doesn't matter. I knew I have shared this intimacy with all of them, and this intimacy is going to take us so much further than we could have ever imagined.

My pussy pulsates around Chuck's cock, my hand falling onto Callum's lap as Dax draws back from my mouth and lets me catch my breath. A grin spreads over my face as I sink against Chuck, who is breathing hard, his chest rising and falling against me as he puts his arms around me. I can still feel him twitching within me, apparently in no rush to pull back and have this be over quite yet.

And as I lie there between the three of them, I feel a surge of adoration that all but consumes me. These men have changed so much for me. When I crashed my car a few hundred yards from their home, I could never have imagined the joy, the happiness, the safety and security it would bring me.

But it has. It has. And now I get to build a future with them too. As I lift myself off of Chuck and tuck my dress beneath me, sinking into his lap, I gaze up at the three of them.

“I love you,” I whisper, my voice still a little shaky from the intensity of my orgasm. It’s not the first time I’ve said it to them, of course, but it’s the first time I’ve said it to all three of them at once. Now feels like the perfect time—there’s no point pretending that we don’t all feel it, not with the baby on the way.

“I love you too,” Chuck murmurs, the first to reply, as he presses a kiss against my cheek.

“I’ve loved you for years,” Callum adds, his hand resting on my belly, head leaning on the couch—a little color to his cheeks to show he’s just gotten off.

“And I love you too, baby,” Dax tells me, sinking down next to the couch and brushing his lips across my temple. “More than you’ll ever know.”

I close my eyes, letting those words drift around me happily. I don’t ever want to forget how this feels, their presence, their adoration, their love, all aimed at me.

And as long as I have them by my side, I know I’ll never have to. This baby has confirmed it—they’re in this for life.

And I can’t think of any life I’d rather live than one with the three of them.

The End