



A NOT-THAT-JOLLY HOLIDAY ROMANCE

**FOUR CALLING  
BIRDS**

**BOOK ONE MOURNINGKILL**  
**MOLLY BRIAR**

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# **Four Calling Birds**

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Molly Briar

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Also By

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## Author Note

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WHILE “LUCKY 13” IS based on a real unit, any resemblance to anyone who was in that Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) past, present, or future is completely coincidental. There is no 6th Special Forces Group. For the military aficionados, there are only seven Special Forces Groups (SFGs). SEVEN. Two are National Guard. Each of them has a distinct culture, and geographic area of responsibility.

So why is there no 6th SFG? Because they don't ever want to make it easy.

I'm taking extreme liberties to make one up, and to create a dynamic that is a vessel for these love stories. The world I'm creating has no basis in reality, and much of the military jargon that I use will be a total figment of my lusty, thorny imagination.

Likewise, I treat the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) like my own little personal playground for all things shady in the world I am creating. It is CIA in name only, and does not resemble the company in any possible way. Any agency related to “Brett Bradley” exists in a completely different world than the one you and I live in, and for good reason.

The guys of the fictional “Lucky 13” have no rules and adhere to no law and order. Everything works out for everyone in the end, and because I write romances, there’s always a happy ending. They will commit extrajudicial killings, tamper with evidence, and will frame others to suit their needs. These would make them villains in real life! But not in Romancelandia. In Romancelandia, it makes them sexy.

So, for the reader who wanted a “realistic” military romance, this is not the book for you.

This book also discusses miscarriages, and it is an important part of the plot. This will not end in a happy “surprise” pregnancy, or with infertility suddenly “cured” during a happy ending. An estimated 10-20% of women will experience a miscarriage, and not all of them will be blessed with a rainbow. If this is something that is taxing on your mental health, then I might suggest giving this one a miss.

Oh, and of course there’s gratuitous sex and violence. Because it’s a Molly Briar book. We expect that from me by now, right?

Stay Thorny,

Molly

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# Dedication

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*To the wonderful people who helped me push this book out in record time:*

**Developmental Editor:** Mikaela Tauiliili instagram @Mikaelabooks\_

**Beta Readers:** Ana Naj, Stephanie Buchanan, Maddie Watson

Without you, this book would never have happened. You guys are  
phenomenal!

To Sara (insta @sarasbookshelf1) who won the "name a character" contest  
over in the facebook group, **Thorny Tales!**

Special thanks to Erin Alford for always being there when I need help.

To Natalia Roth and the rest of the *Poultry Newtons*! I appreciate you letting  
me whine while I pushed this project out. I adore getting to know you all!



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# Prologue

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## Lotte

“ YOU WEREN’T AT YOUR post.” Magnus lumbered towards me, his Nordic accent thick, and deep. Wiry blonde hair, soaked and matted in sweat and rain fell over his low, but broad, wrinkled forehead. He was hugely pissed.

His enormous frame cast a shadow over me, as the knife in his hand glinted in the lamp light behind him. The tent smelled of dirt. The plastic canvas flapped loudly in the harsh wind, growing faster and frantic, like the pulse in my ears.

“Yes, I was.” I said, trying to look annoyed at the accusation.

*Deny, deny, deny*, I reminded myself.

“No, you weren’t!” He pointed the enormous knife at me. I noted the serrated edge, and the blood groove that ran parallel to the blunt end. The thing was enormous, but dwarfed in his gargantuan hand. “You’re a fucking traitor!”

*Shit. Shit. Shit.*

If you can’t deny anymore, counter accuse. “How could you possibly know that I wasn’t at my post? Where the fuck were you, huh? You’re the fucking traitor!”

Yeah, it was a lame attempt, but I had to try something. Being alone with a ‘roided out caveman with severe anger issues wasn’t fucking ideal.

Magnus headed the Scorpio Network, a high-end arm’s dealership that specialized in crossing borders with some seriously dangerous hardware. Magnus sold to the highest bidder, and would even supply both sides of a war if it suited him. And he was technically right. I *was* a traitor. The recent

seizure of a shipment heading to Kemet was, entirely, my doing. But he couldn't possibly know that.

“You CIA scum!”

I'm not CIA. Not technically. I'm a freelancer. But that was a semantic difference now.

I felt the knife plunge into my belly before I saw him move. Cold metal on hot flesh, the tearing of the outer layer of skin, past the insulation of fat, and into the tender organs underneath. For a big fucker, Magnus moved fast. I didn't even have time to block it. My hand came up to the hilt, where his hand still held on.

His bared teeth and growl reminded me of a wolf in the forest, snarling before a kill. And I was the prey.

Again, it wasn't an ideal situation.

But there was no way I was going to die. Call it stubbornness. Call it willpower or intestinal fortitude, but I refused to die until I had figured some things out in my life. I would not let Magnus be the last thing I see before I shucked off this mortal coil.

Then another pair of eyes flashed through my mind. They were a warm amber, gently staring out from above a lopsided grin of sweet tolerance. I remembered the little necklace the owner of those eyes had given me. It was such a small, cheap trinket, but I was never able to let it go.

“Not today, fucker!” I said through gritted teeth.

I dug my fingers into Magnus' icy, gray, right eye. It was soft, but the membrane was surprisingly tough. It moved under the pressure of my fingertips like a wet grape covered in slime. He let out a growl. My hand shook with desperation as I tried to scoop his eye out with my nails. His free

hand came up to my wrist, to pry my sharp fingers away from his precious eye socket, but I refused. I refused. I refused!

The wet, slippery eyeball moved and pulled from its perch, hanging on by thin, stringy vessels. All at once, it ruptured, the insides in red and white liquid goop fell down his face and onto my palm, slicking it with a disgusting, oozy substance that smelled like rot and made me want to hurl.

Magnus threw himself backwards, roaring like a wild animal that was struck by a killing blow. Like the Cyclops, when Jason speared his eye.

His hand came to his disfigured face - it was an improvement, I promise! - and blood seeped down his right cheek, as he howled in pain and shock.

Did I want to kill him? Absolutely. I had imagined his death almost every day for at least two years. I knew he would die by my hands... one day.

But that was not this day. On this day, I would fucking run.

Blood pulsed in my ears. *Thump. Thump. Thump!*

I looked at the huge knife embedded in my side. My blood spilled down my stomach, soaking my trousers, spilling red down to my boot.

I didn't feel pain. At least not yet. I *refused* to feel it. My shaking hand came to the hilt, and I held onto it, knowing that if I pulled it out, I'd likely bleed to death. *Shit.*

If I kept it in, then I had more time. Time to get to the rendezvous. Time to get out. Time to live.

In the split second it took for Magnus to come to his senses and come to terms with the loss of one eye, I was out of the tent, running into the darkness, trying to obscure the trail of blood I left behind like breadcrumbs.

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# 1. Bruce the Buck

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# Mack

*THAT. MOTHER. FUCKER.*

Bruce was taunting me. He was *absolutely* taunting me. He stood on the ridge, his antlers high, large and proud, as his pointy black nose sniffed at the air. I swear, he was looking right at me, as if he was saying, “Catch me if you can, fucker.”

Not to be cliché, but I’m really too old for this shit. I’ve been broken by thirty years in the Army, and twelve combat tours.

Bruce, the buck, was old like me. He was six years old, if he was a day. Practically geriatric in cervine years. His antlers were enormous, and he had a grumpy arrogance that could only come with age.

His younger companions might be more spry. They might be able to leap over my wire fence and get into my vegetable garden. But they weren’t smart enough to know that my light-up Scarecrow, which turned on a strobe and played Classic Rock anytime it detected motion, wasn’t a real person.

Not Bruce. Bruce knew. I caught him at dawn, munching away in my garden, not giving a shit about the disco-tech Scarecrow hollering AC/DC.

While he was masticating my patch of broccoli stems, that were getting ready to bolt for the winter, he shook out his fur, as if to say, “*What are you gonna do about it, punk?*” and then calmly walked out of the garden, and up the mountain.

I swear to God, he got to the ridgeline, looked down at me, and snorted like he was giving me the deer-version of flipping the bird. I taunted him back, taking the bow, and pulling the string. It was a silent promise that next time,

he was fucking dead. I'd stick an arrow into his thick hide, and I'd dress him right here on the porch for all of his little doe bitches to see.

He made that grunting deer sound, as if he was laughing at my threat.

*That son of a bitch...*

I put the bow over my shoulder, looking down to the wagging tail attached to my old dog, Bo. He looked up at me with eyes that had grayed and dulled with age. He still had the heart of a puppy, but the laziness of a true grandpa.

"Great help you are," I grunted.

*I fucking love this dog.* He had taken a liking to my wife, back when she worked with the military police and he was a bomb-sniffer. When the dog retired at the rank of Sergeant First Class – yes, dogs have ranks. They usually had one rank over their handlers – she brought him home.

Her new "civilian" job didn't let her keep him, so he and I were stuck together.

We were both the discarded baggage of one, Charlotte Elizabeth McClanahan. Together, we moved to an Upstate New York farm to forget the fucking devastation she left us in down in Pinehurst, North Carolina.

Just me and my old buddy.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I dug my hand into my jeans to fish out the old flipper. Why do I have a dumb phone? Because smart phones are easily hackable. I worked strictly off of burners. I don't need constant access to google, social media or any of that other shit. I didn't need Siri or Alexa to give me directions, or track my shopping habits. I had done just fine through a thirty year military career and a youth spent outdoors.

So, an old flipper phone was all I needed. Texting took a while, since it still used the old T9 method. But it forced me to keep things short and efficient.

I answered the call and brought it to my ear. I regretted it almost

immediately.

“How’s retirement treating you?” I recognized the voice on the other end right away. It was none other than the harbinger of spooks, the man, the myth, the bowel irritant, Brett Bradley. The guy made James Bond look like a puppy dog.

And I mean the Daniel Craig version. No one comes close to the amazingness of Sean Connery.

I looked at my decrepit, ancient Victorian house, the treated lumber that was strewn over my three-acre lawn that would, eventually, turn into a fence, and the tools over in my detached garage. My vegetable garden was half decimated by Bruce. The untended woods that lined the back of my property were inaccessible to any biped, at least until the damn ferns, weeds, and underbrush died for the winter. I’d need to make a hiking trail soon, but that was a level of hacking and axing that my old bones resisted last summer.

I’m retired. So, I just put it off until next year.

“It’s going fine,” I said through gritted teeth. No, it wasn’t. The house was falling apart. Getting a contractor to help me with the collapsing barn was impossible. It felt like I couldn’t even throw money at the damn problem, because no one wanted to work. I still refused to admit that I bit off more than I could chew when I decided to get this fucked-up fixer-upper. “What do you want?”

“Is that any way to talk to an old friend?” Brett asked.

“No, but it’s a perfectly fine way to talk to you,” I grumbled, and repeated, slower, “What do you want?”

I still hadn’t forgiven him. I don’t think I ever would. This... this was all his fault, when I got down to it. If he hadn’t meddled, Bo and I would still have Charlotte. My sweet Lotte.



“Command Sergeant Major,” he said with false respect. The sarcasm was just an innate part of his personality now. “Would you believe that I was in the neighborhood and thought I’d come by for a beer and a bit of your hospitality?”

“No. I would definitely *not* believe that.”

“Well, I *am* in the area,” he said, and paused, letting that linger in the static between us.

“And?” I pried, because there was always a catch when it came to liars like Brett Bradley. Liars. Spooks. Company men. Agents. They were all scum.

“Remember when I took a bullet for you in Mozambique?”

“Jesus.” I wiped my face with my hands. “You stole my wife! Don’t you think that makes us even?”

“I didn’t steal your wife!” His protest fell on deaf ears. If I ever saw him again, there was a huge chance I would fucking kill the bastard. “And we are far from even.”

“So, what do you want?” Then I added with an uncharacteristic amount of optimism, “Money?”

He laughed, loud from his belly. The sound irritated me so much that I almost crushed the phone in my hand.

When I didn’t join him, he suddenly shut up. “Oh, shit! You were serious?”

“I’d like to hang up now.”

“You owe me a marker.” His voice was somber. Stern. Martial. Like the military man he had been before he switched sides and went over to the CIA. We had almost died in Ranger School together, many moons ago. That was the highlight of our acquaintanceship. “I’m coming to collect.”

“What the fuck do you want?”

“Well, it’s not for me” I heard him chattering to someone in the background,

but I couldn't make out the words. "One of my agents was burned. They got out, but they're in bad shape, but stable. They're on the run, and I need to stash them somewhere while they recuperate until I get their backsides clear, you dig? I need a place off the beaten path and hard to find. Somewhere no one wants to go. Naturally, I thought of your new house."

Of course, he knew where I lived. I had kept records down to a minimum, had no social media to speak of, and other than my parents who lived a half hour away, I told no one outside of 6th Group Special Forces where I put myself out to pasture... But Brett had found me. *The fucking asshole...*

I ran my finger through my graying hair, and looked up at the gray clouds that threatened to dump snow on me.

I knew I had no choice.

"Okay." I owed him. Honor dictated that I paid him back. Letting someone crash at my house seemed... well... like I was getting off light. "Fine. You know where I am, I'm sure." Still, there was something about this whole deal that made me uneasy, so I just asked outright, "What's the catch?"

There was silence on the other end. Seconds turned into minutes. The silence got so loud, I felt a tension headache coming on.

Still, he said nothing.

I checked to make sure we were connected. We were. The numbers measuring the length of the phone call kept on ticking by, and I could still hear static and the sound of an engine on the other end.

"No catch," he said quickly. Too quickly. Then hung up.

There was going to be a catch the size of Moby fucking Dick.

Bo barked twice, then groaned. Animals have a sixth sense about disasters, and he could probably smell it in a cloud of Brett-scented bullshit.

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## 2. Brett the Bastard

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## Mack

THE INCONSIDERATE PRICK ROLLED in at 0200 hours. Of course, he did. He couldn't have done the drop-off in the middle of business hours.

The loud pounding on my door could have woken the dead. Thankfully, I knew it was him. They triggered my alerts the moment they entered the mile-long road from the main thoroughfare. Motion cameras hidden in the trees followed his Gray Audi A6 up the winding path, to the circular driveway in front of my house. Motion-triggered flood lights announced their presence.

Despite all that, I *still* waited for the fucker to knock on my door because I wasn't in the business of making Brett Bradley's life easy. I could have met him at the car, but nope. I made him traipse up the stairs to my porch, and then I made him *wait* out in the frigid November cold as I took my sweet ass time getting up from the couch, and strode to the foyer.

"Hey, champ," he said, giving me a playful punch on my shoulder.

I wanted to give him a playful punch to the throat.

"I'm gonna need help getting the package in," he flicked a thumb over his shoulder to the Audi A6 with blacked out windows idling in my driveway.

I stepped out into the frozen night. The air smelled like it was about to snow, but not quite yet.

The stars twinkled overhead. The leaves had all turned and fallen, blanketing the ground with yellow, red, and brown foliage that I hadn't bothered to rake up. There was no homeowner's association to get on my ass out here, so I preferred the natural cycle of things. Other than mowing the lawn in the

summer, I liked seeing the seasons this way. A stark reminder of the circle of life.

The tree branches of barren seasonal flora pointed towards the sky, silhouetted by moonlight, like the twisted, thorny forest within an old fairy tale. Why did I know that? Well, because my former wife liked that kind of shit. Loved them, in fact. Old books and stories were her hobby. Not the Disney shit, either. The Grimm, disgusting, violent, bloody tales that should give you nightmares.

*I can't imagine why that love affair didn't last*, I thought bitterly.

“The place is a shithole!” Brett said as he jaunted down my front porch steps towards the back seat of his car.

“Go fuck yourself, Brett.” I begrudgingly followed, looking over my shoulder to where I had opened up the pull-out couch and dressed it with fresh linens. That should be plenty comfortable for a man on the mend. I was going to stick him on the floor, but then I realized that it wasn't his fault he was associated with this fucking asshole. My better angels took over.

Brett opened the back seat of his car, and I was floored. She was the last person I ever thought I'd see again. Charlotte. My little Lotte...

She was hunched to one side, a bloody bandage covered a half-naked torso, the jacket over her shoulders like a cape.

There was so much blood. Dried. And the yellow of iodine tainted her tan skin. Brown, gorgeous eyes peered up at me. Almond-shaped, and upturned at the ends. Her chapped lips opened in surprise and delight. Then she frowned.

Her bleary eyes were cloudy with pain as she looked up to Brett. Then to me. “Is this a joke?” she whispered, her breaths labored and harsh. She sounded like she was in pain.

It was. It was a sick, sick joke. A hallucination. A bit of insanity. Maybe I was dead. Maybe I had hit my head while running after Bruce, and I was somewhere in a coma, and this was all a dream. I should pinch myself, to see if I still felt pain.

No. No, I had a better idea. I turned to Brett, and in one large motion, punched him right on his smug mouth. He fell backwards on impact, his hand flew to his nose, his other hand braced his fall as he slid on the gravel. He shook his head out, as if I had rung his proverbial bell. Blood dripped from his nostrils, into his mouth, outlining his teeth in red, as he looked up at me with a shit-eating grin.

In one smooth motion, he rolled up to his feet, put his hands in his pockets and shrugged.

“Okay,” he said with a laugh, “maybe there’s a small catch.”

“You think?” I screamed, my voice echoing off the distant trees. Birds flew from their nests in fear, and I heard the distinct holler of a far-off coyote.

“You son of a bitch.”

I swept into the back seat and picked the woman up bridal-style in one smooth motion. A move I had done before. Back when she was, in fact, my bride.

“Get the fuck off my property, before I shoot your sorry ass,” I warned.

“Meds and instructions for her care are in the jacket pocket. Happy Holidays!” Brett chuckled as he rounded his car to get to the driver’s seat.

“See you, Charlie.”

Charlie? How dare he give her a nickname. And a shitty one at that.

My steps faltered halfway up the stairs. It *was* the Tuesday before Thanksgiving. I had forgotten.

Holidays don’t have any significance when you’re a hermit. My parents lived

nearby, but they were taking a cruise for Turkey Massacre Day, and would drop by when they got back. So, I was solo.

*Was* being the operative word.

“Go fuck yourself, Brett.” I walked into the house, and kicked the door shut.

“Mack...” the woman in my arms whispered, as her head lolled onto my shoulder, her eyes shuttering closed.

“I’ve got you, sweetheart,” I whispered into her hair.

She smelled like antibiotics and disinfectant. Like she had just gotten out of surgery.

She was completely asleep by the time I got her into the main bedroom. I tucked her into the bed, pulling off the jacket from around her and letting it fall on the floor. The distinct sound of pill bottles rattled on the new hardwood. I tucked her under my red, plaid quilt, pushing her hair from her brow. I cupped her cold cheek, running a thumb over the smooth skin. There were wrinkles in the corners of her eyes that hadn’t been there before. Her shoulder had some marks and scars that I didn’t remember.

But in so many ways, she hadn’t changed at all.

“What the hell happened, Lotte?” I whispered as I kissed her temple. “What has that asshole done to you?”

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## 3. Mellie

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# Charlotte

I AWOKE WITH A start. My senses were on overdrive. I heard tweeting birds, and smelled the scent of birchwood and smoke. I was in a dark, cold room, staring up at some interesting crown molding. To one side were large, multi-paned windows, blocked by heavy curtains.

There was a small gap between the heavy curtains that let in a dull, white light. The gap was just wide enough for me to see a manicured field, a red barn and a mountain covered in forest. The day was halfway through, the sun was in the western sky on the far side of jagged mountains with trees bare of seasonal leaves, pock marked with evergreens. In the hazy, gray mid-afternoon, it gave them the vague look of thorns.

I was in a strange bedroom. I tried to turn onto my side, and groaned in pain. I had a sports bra on, but no shirt. I had a bandage on and was still slightly bleeding from a knife wound to the torso. A few more ribs up, and they would have struck me in the heart.

I fiddled with my pants pocket, feeling the secret compartment that was on the inside of the calf. A hidden pouch for a small blade, and a necklace that I couldn't wear anymore. I pulled on the silver chain tugging out the little pendant of a blue flower in a clear, resin circle. A Forget Me Not.

I put it back in its hiding spot and brought my feet down to the ground with a groan. I tried to sit up, but I fell forward, my knees hitting a soft carpet with a faded, vaguely Persian, red pattern. My hands slowed my descent, as my forehead came forward. Dizzy. I was dizzy as fuck. My stomach hurt. The throbbing, slicing pain slid up to my shoulder, and down my back to my

thigh. I hoped I hadn't done something to my sciatic nerve, because that would certainly be a bitch to deal with...

Why had Brett saved me? He could have let me bleed out. That would have made everything so much simpler. Now, the Scorpio Network would be on my tail, and they were not going to be happy.

Had I seen Mack last night? I lifted my head, looking around. No. That must have been a hallucination, because... well... this wasn't the house I had remembered. *Our* house. No, *his* house. We had decided that when we separated that I would just vacate his life, and he'd get to keep everything. I'd just take what I could carry out.

It wasn't Mack's idea. It was mine. I was trying to make it easier for everyone. But that didn't lessen the sting.

Oh, and I remember those parting words. They didn't even come from Mack. They came from my former Father-in-Law, affectionately called "Big Mack". "What good is a bitch if she can't have pups?" he had said in that gruff, smoker's voice. "You're better off getting a newer model."

My relationship with my in-laws had always been contentious. Worse, as time went on and the promised grandchildren never came. Big Mack was glad to see me go. Mack stood, staring at the ground as I walked away. It wasn't how I *wanted* things to end. I was the one doing the leaving, after all. But I had hoped that I could have had one hug. Or a kind word? No, that was delusional. But I had hoped...

I shook away the memories, feeling my dyed hair grazing the sensitive skin of my cheek. I hated coloring it, because it meant bleach, which always gave it the consistency of straw. My life as a secret agent didn't exactly give me a lot of time to keep a good hair care routine.

I walked down a hall, to what looked like a living room. There was no TV to

be seen, but there was a roaring fireplace, with a deer rug on the floor, and several stuffed heads mounted on the wall. Then, I saw the one thing that could have stolen my pain and brought joy to my otherwise blackened heart.

Bo. Bo, the old German Shepherd, with a graying snout and a chew toy under one large paw. He was happily snoozing on the puffy couch. I couldn't believe he was still alive.

"Hi, boy!" I said, coming down to my knees in front of him and scratching his ear. He looked... old. His coat was duller and rougher than before. It broke my heart not to have seen him in all these years. Time was stretching behind me. There were so many missed cuddles that made me ache.

He opened one lazy eye, then his tongue lolled out in a doggy grin.

"Oh! You remember me don't you, sweetheart?" With one long lick, he gave me a kiss that went from my chin, up one cheek to my forehead. "You do remember me!"

If you don't get thrilled when a dog decides you're cool, then you don't have a soul. And Bo was the coolest dog in existence.

He slowly lumbered off the couch to where I was on the floor. He sniffed at my abdomen, right at the knife wound. His cold little wet nose lightly smelt the area over the cut before he whined.

"Oh, it's not so bad, sweetheart," I reassured him. "I'm mostly okay. Just need some more rest. No wrestling bears or escaping cartels for a few months and I'll be right as rain."

I cupped Bo's face in my hands. His snout had a lot more drab than before. His eyes were a little milky as well. But he was still the same dog I had known years ago. He gave me a kiss, a long, sloppy lick from mouth to eyebrow. I scrunched my nose and wiped the spit away with the back of my hand.

“I’m glad to see you too, sweetheart.”

Someone knocked on the door. Whoever it was, Bo must have recognized him because he gave one greeting bark, then lay down on the rug. Had it been a stranger or a mail man, he would have tried to ram through the door. One bark was a greeting. More than that was a warning.

I got to my feet, feeling a little dizzy when I straightened, then walked, hunched down one side, to the front door.

I opened it to be greeted by a chestnut brunette, young, with breasts that were emphasized by the yellow and orange checkered button down, which bowed at her breasts. Her modest little braid was practical, yet still very full and cute. Her heart-shaped face and light sprinkling of freckles, as well as the smile she turned my way, before she actually *looked* at me, was tooth-paste commercial worthy. She *screamed* “nurturer” from every fiber of her being.

If she didn’t already have a brood of kids, I’m sure she’d have one real soon.

What did she think about the shirtless woman greeting her at another man’s door? I wasn’t sure. Her face only registered surprise.

“Oh, I was here to see Mack... are you...? His...?”

The glass door in the back of the farmhouse kitchen slid open and closed. I heard the panicked steps of a man caught with his hand in the cookie jar. Mack’s breaths were heavy, as if he’d ran over the mountain to get here, probably hoping to prevent this exact meeting.

“Jesus. Mellie. Hi!” Mack sauntered beside me, nudging me out of the way, before he gritted out, “Go sit down on the couch before you hurt yourself.”

I did as I was told. Not because he ordered me to. But because the couch happened to be within view of the front door. I could eavesdrop from there *and* spy on them. I’m a spook. Spying is just our natural tendency.

Bo joined me on the couch, placing his face on my lap, his tongue rolling out

of his mouth as I scratched the top of his head and watched the show.

“Hey, I didn’t know you had a guest.” Her voice was off-putting. It was light, breathy. Young. So were the pretty, stitched leather cowboy boots under her slim-fitted jeggings. Was this his type now? Cute little missies in gingham shirts?

“Yeah, she’s... a pain in the ass, but we go way back. She needs a place to crash while she recovers from some... surgery...”

“Was it something serious?” Her eyes went saucer wide. She looked at me with genuine, saccharine concern. *I fucking hated her.*

“Tit job!” I yelled from my place on the couch, raising my hand in a slight finger wave.

Mack shut his eyes, tilting his head back, and staring up at the ceiling in agitation, as if he was sending up a prayer to the heavens for divine intervention.

Ha! We both knew that help wasn’t coming.

I leaned back in the seat and looked at my fingernails, while I casually sighed, “He’s been very good with massaging them all better.”

Mellie looked between me, Mack, and Bo. I wonder what that little pea-brain of hers was thinking as she took in the very domestic scene she had walked into.

“I’m about to throw her into the pond in the middle of fucking winter, I swear to God,” he said, shaking his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Don’t listen to her. She’s off her fucking meds.”

“Oh, well, I just came over to see if you wanted to come over for Thanksgiving tomorrow.” She tore her eyes away from me to look at Mack.

“You can bring your friend, if you like. I just wasn’t sure if you had plans or not...”

“He’ll be taking care of my tits,” I said, crossing my legs, and smugly laying my chin on my hand, my elbow on the armrest. Bo gave a small “ruff” of disapproval, as if even *he* was telling me to lay off the girl.

“She’s not fit to be around humans,” Mack said, sticking his hands in his pockets. “She’s feral, and mildly psychopathic. You don’t want to feed her.”

*Mellie* looked a little frightened, and a whole lot confused. If they were screwing, she still hadn’t figured out that she should be absolutely indignant by now. She should be clawing Mack’s eyes out. Oh, and when she gets the full story, she should shoot him and bury his corpse under a rose garden. I’d even help her, if she asked nicely.

Poor little moron was more looks than brains, obviously. But that’s what men liked, didn’t they? I may have thought Mack was different, but, in the end, all men are really the same. Huge disappointments.

“Listen, I’ll come by later, and we’ll talk about this?” he said in a whisper that he hoped I didn’t hear. But he should know better. I had the hearing of a fucking bat.

“Okay,” *Mellie* said with a smile. She went up on her toes, put a hand on his shoulder and put a small kiss on the corner of his mouth. He smiled at her. Genuinely *smiled* at her, and watched her go down the steps, back to her truck.

He waved from the door as the truck drove out of view.

Then he slammed the door closed, and like a lumbering beast turned to me with furious eyes.

“What the fuck was that?” His eyes darkened in a way that should only ever happen in books. His amber eyes were the color of a forest fire, as it blacked out an otherwise blue sky. “Really? My first time dating since the disaster

called Charlotte Elizabeth, and you had to swoop back in and piss all over that too? Has your time with Brett turned you into a douche bag as well?"

I tilted my head to the side. "I never took you to be a cheater."

Oh, this was so good. His fucking high horse was stumbling, and soon, it would turn into a dead horse that I could beat with a stick.

"What the hell are you talking about? You and I haven't been together in three years." He tugged at the chestnut hair that was turning silver with age. It was irritating that it looked good on him. Even the act of aging was fucking sexist. That's how I know God is a man. "You made sure of that!"

"Yes, that's true," I said, snapping my fingers and giving him the finger gun point. "But that doesn't really change that we're married. I'm still Charlotte McClanahan. *You* made sure of that!"

He looked at me confused, his brows knit together, and a deep divot came over the bridge of his nose. "Come again?"

"I'm sure that's why Brett decided to drop me off in the middle of nowhere."

I rolled my eyes, preferring to look down at Bo, instead of the darkening cloud that circled over Mack's head. "You could still make medical decisions for me if push came to shove because you are my legal husband."

I was met with silence. It stretched for so long that I looked up to make sure he was still alive. But his face... *Holy shit, he had no idea.*

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## 4. Married

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## Mack

“YOU NEVER DIVORCED ME, you fucking moron!” Her hands went to her eyes, as if she was rubbing the disbelief from her face. Her fingers slid up, combing the matted mess away from her angular forehead, and she looked at me like I was some kind of imbecile. “You really didn’t know?” You could have bowled me over with a fucking feather.

“What the hell are you talking about, Lotte?” I hated how easily that nickname came back. For three years I had forced myself to think of her as Charlotte. Charlotte Elizabeth. Charlotte Elizabeth Rivera. Not... Lotte McClanahan. “I mailed you the damn papers. I assumed you took care of it.”

“You are a complete idiot,” she said in an exasperated sigh. “You did send back the papers, that is absolutely accurate.” She pressed her palm to her forehead like she was fighting off a headache. “But you didn’t sign it, dipshit.”

“I... I didn’t?” I swear I had. I remembered standing over *our* dining room table, the one I had made for her on our first anniversary. The same dining room table that was in my workshop now. I contemplated turning it into firewood. But I *had* the pen in hand and I had vowed to bleach Lotte out of my mind, and move on with my existence. “No, that’s not right. I signed them.”

“Really? Because the signature line beside the little sticky arrow that said, ‘sign here’ was blank.” She came to her feet, but didn’t fully straighten. One shoulder stooped lower than the other, and I watched a slight red stain bleed

through her bandage. “I stared at it for days trying to figure out if you were trying to send me some kind of message.”

“What message would that be?” I said, flapping my arms to the side.

“I have absolutely no idea!” She waved her hands to the side, back and forth.

“It was like you were trying to piss me off or something.”

“Why would I do something like that?”

“I don’t fucking know, Mack!” she said. “Why would you contest the divorce in the first place?”

“Obviously, because I didn’t want a divorce!” The roar started from somewhere in my gut and bellowed out of my mouth. Her hair almost moved with the force of my yell. But she didn’t back down. Even as her side started to shake with the effort of standing. I didn’t know what pain she was in. But she was in it. And she was still up, ready to fight.

“So that’s what I assumed you were trying to tell me! Trying to make it hard for me again!”

“Oh, come on,” I rolled my eyes, stepping away from her. “It was a mistake. I meant to sign them that time... I just...”

The memory of what happened came fast. I had the blue pen in my hand, I was ready to drop it onto the paper to sign my name. I had paced the living room of my North Carolina house over and over again, trying to build up the courage to end a ten-year marriage. I deserved to be free. Hell, why wouldn’t I *want* to end it when she so clearly had no intention of being tied down. I was letting her go. Setting her free.

Free of me.

Free to go off and be the super-secret spook she had always wanted to be without the burden of her fucking husband who had held her back, over and over again. She had sacrificed her job to be my wife. To move from duty

station to duty station, and heading up Family Readiness Groups, and hanging out with my soldier's needy wives... all for the possibility of a family that we would never have.

But then I got a call from my soldier, Kai Griffith, who found himself on the other end of a divorce as well. We decided to get rip roaring drunk instead. I must have mailed it off the next day without looking.

"So..." I said, my brows coming together in front of me. "We're... still man and wife."

She let out a long, annoyed moan of disbelief.

"That's what I'm saying, asshole." She shook her head, looking off to the side. "We've been legally separated, but not divorced, for over three fucking years."

I stared at Lotte, and her gaunt frame. She'd gotten thinner in the last three years. But she was still beautiful. She still had that invisible pull, the one that had made me drawn to her across from a Fayetteville Bar. Staring at her face, especially those eyes, was a bit like seeing the world through those old movie-close ups, where they put a soft filter on everything but a woman's eyes to make everything look like it was in a dream.

But I had to focus. And when I did, the thing I saw was the growing red mark on her bandages.

"Sit down," I told her, coming up to grab her by the elbow and help her to the couch.

She flinched away from my touch, and sat down in a pained, groaning movement without my assistance. Stubborn, as always. When she was situated, Bo came over and put his snout on her thigh, and she petted his head, and he moaned in happy contentment. *Traitor.*

"We're still married?" I sat beside her on the couch. The drop made the

cushions bounce, raising her a little before the old thing settled under our weight. I wiped my face, feeling the roughness of my beard under my palms. “Do you...” I wasn’t sure what I was trying to say. “Do you have the divorce papers? I’ll... I’ll sign them now.”

*Please don’t have the papers.* The words popped into my head, even though I didn’t want them to.

She leaned back in the seat, that one perfectly arched brow rose. Once upon a time, I had thought that this expression was kinda cute. Now it was just annoying, and condescending. Proven, when her voice dripped with sarcasm. “No, strangely enough, when I went undercover to infiltrate the Scorpio Network, I did *not* actually bring a copy of our divorce petition with my real fucking name on it with me.”

She shook her head, shrugged, with a dramatic, palm-up gesture at her shoulder as if she was talking to a particularly stupid child. And oh, she didn’t need to give me that look to make me feel that way. I already felt like a complete and total moron.

“So...” I laughed, completely baffled by this entire situation. Here I was, sitting next to my *wife* in the Victorian house in the middle of nowhere, that I was renovating as a means to forget her absence. And now, it was tainted as well. I’d have to burn the house, and build a shack out back. Maybe I’d have to perform an exorcism to get her presence out of here now. “How do we fix it?”

She crossed her arms under her small breasts, which pushed them up against the sports bra she had worn from the night before. She was cold, her nipples pebbling under the soft fabric.

“Well, you could sign the papers the next time I send them to you.”

I chuckled, putting my arm across the backrest out of habit. My hand lay

right behind the nape of her neck. I fought the strange muscle memory that begged me to massage the base of her skull just like I used to when she was stressed.

“I like your hair,” I told her, twirling an auburn strand in my finger. She had put highlights in it. I hadn’t noticed them last night when it was dark, but the light outside was going from a foggy gray, to a brilliant orange sunset. It made the auburn highlights look even brighter. It suited her. “I liked it when it was all natural, but this is cute. Seasonal.”

“Cute?” She tried to suppress a smile. “Since when do you use a word like that?” Then her eyes darkened, and she pulled her head out of my grasp. With bitter irritation, she asked, “Something you picked up from *Mellie*?”

She made her voice high and almost ditzzy when she said Melody “Mellie” Gray’s name.

“Jealous, *wife*?” I reached out a finger, tracing a line from her cheekbone to her jaw. She was so thin, that even her cheeks had hollowed. I didn’t like it. It wasn’t... healthy.

She pulled her head away again, and with a resigned sigh, I lifted my hands palm out and put them on my lap. I leaned back into the large cushions, and regarded her, and Bo, and the flames crackling in the fireplace. It wasn’t decorative. The heat in this old, decrepit building was unreliable at best. Fires were still the most economic way to heat the damn place.

But she looked good on my couch. In front of the fire. With my dog. She always had.

Lotte had a way of making everyone feel like they were home. She had a way for turning this old, slightly creepy, looking house and making it seem like a comfortable space to read, and tell stories, and have a drink over a fire.

I knew she would have loved this overstuffed monstrosity of a couch. That

wasn't why I bought it, of course. It was a pull-out, in case I ever had guests. Not that I ever wanted to have guests, but I was a team guy for so long that I knew random 6<sup>th</sup> Group, from my Special Forces days, were liable to crash, uninvited, at any moment.

This house had four bedrooms, three baths, and an enormous farmhouse kitchen with an adjoining foyer and living room. It also had well water, spotty electrical, inadequate heating, disgusting wall-to-wall shag carpeting that I was in the process of replacing and wood siding that had holes from an overzealous woodpecker. The beautiful Catskill mountains, of which I now owned 400 acres of, had hiking trails, gorgeous rivers, and an overpopulation of deer, including the asshole, Bruce.

I had done all this to get her out of my mind. And now she was here, proverbially deposited on my lap. "Send them, and I'll sign them."

"I'm sure your girlfriend will appreciate that." She tried to smile.

Did the thought of me with another woman bother her? Of me moving on? I hadn't, of course. Mellie, strictly speaking, had been one date. She lived across the street, on a family farm she was trying to run with her teenage brother. The girl was on the struggle bus, after her parents died. And she was nice. *Young*. But nice. We went to a bar, had a couple drinks, and I dropped her off home. That was it.

I'm convinced that Mellie's interest in me wasn't attraction. It was a hope that I could be an influence on her brother, who had all the hallmarks of a slacker in the making. The kid wasn't dealing with the tragedy well, from what I gathered, and was a real shit about it.

Lotte's eyes moved forward to the coffee table. A coffee table we had picked out maybe twelve years ago from an antique store in Aberdeen, near Fort Bragg. The smile melted from her face when she saw it. What was she

thinking? Was she awash with the memories of a life we had lived together? Did she remember any of it? Did she care?

“Do you have my pain meds?” she asked, a sudden crease burrowing between her eyebrows. She looked pained. But I don’t think it had to do with anything physical. And just like seven years ago, the hurt in her eyes pierced a part of my heart, and made me want to spring into action.

“It said 'as needed',” I swallowed, idly running a finger down her jaw. She had always hated how square it was, but I always thought the sharpness of it added to her beauty. “Are you in pain?”

“It’ll help me go back to sleep.” Her evasion didn’t slip my notice. But I didn’t challenge her on it.

“We should get you into a bath first.” Hoping to make her smile, I leaned towards her, sniffed loudly, then crinkled my nose like she smelled bad... and she kind of did. The overwhelming stench of surgical liquids came off her skin. She tried to slap my shoulder, but she winced.

Maybe her pain was coming back. But I knew she hated going to bed dirty. At least, not *this* kind of dirty.

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## 5. The Naked Rights

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## Lotte

HE PICKED ME UP, one arm behind my back, the other under my knees. More than ten years on, and he was still able to lift me like he had on our wedding day.

“Brett didn’t give you any extra clothes,” he said, as he shouldered us into a room down a narrow hallway. Too narrow by modern standards, but I assumed this was an ancient house. “So, I’ll have to dig into some boxes and see if you have anything in your old things.”

“You kept my things?” I lifted my head. “I thought you would have dumped them in a landfill by now. Or sold them in a garage sale.”

“Stuck them on the lawn and lit them on fire?” he said with a slight smirk under that full-grown beard that hadn’t been there while he was in the service. “I thought about it.”

I chuckled, placing my head under his chin.

“You should have.”

He snorted. “Well, I didn’t.”

He put me down on a tiled sink. The mirror behind it was murky, with brown spots from age. The thing was ancient. It may be as old as the house itself.

“When was this place built?” I asked, absently.

“1850.”

“Hmm,” I grunted. “Almost as old as you.”

He turned on the hot water. He smirked at my remark, but otherwise said nothing.

“I know you like your baths hotter than the flames of hell,” he said with a small laugh. “Probably makes you feel right at home.”

I bit my lower lip, trying not to laugh at his well-timed jab. He got up, and started to unravel the bandages on my stomach. I winced, as they pulled at the clotted blood. The tugging pain of the stitches made my eyes water, but I refused to cry.

He stared down at the dried blood, those prominent brows knitting together.

Time had not been cruel to William “Mack” McClanahan. In fact, the silver at his temples, and the fine standing of gray through his lush chestnut hair made him look... distinguished. Almost professorial. Like he should be in an Aran sweater, on a high-backed leather chair, in a study, with a leather-bound book, and a pipe in his lips. Coupled with his build, he was the hot professor who could also go out and chop wood for the enormous fireplace.

He ran his fingers over the black stitches. Fifteen in total.

I knew he was counting them.

“I was stabbed,” I told him, before he could ask. “I got burned. We’re not sure how. I think they were suspecting me for a while. So, they stabbed me. But I fought them off and got away. The problem was that the knife had a serrated edge.”

Oh serrated fighting knives were the work of the devil. Like barbed arrows, those suckers caused as much damage coming out as they did going in.

“I went on the lam with it in me, so I didn’t bleed out” I placed my hand on his. The one that was lightly tracing the ugly, jagged horizontal scab that pierced between the lowest intercostal space. It was surrounded by red and purple bruising. “But I caused more damage with all the commotion, until I could hijack a car and get to the extraction point.”

His hand came up to cup my cheek. I realized that my jawline sagged more

now, than it had when he last saw me. I knew that my wrinkles were more defined, and my cheek bones looked pale. I wasn't the lithe, youthful thing he had tried to hold down in marriage. Maybe that's why he was more willing to sign the demise of our marriage now.

"Oh, Lotte." He called me by the nickname that only he had ever used. His forest green eyes met mine, and I found myself staring at the face that had stopped me dead in my tracks at the Bad Monkey bar in Fayetteville all those years ago.

"I'll be fine, Mack." I wasn't fine. Can all the memories from years ago come flooding back in a second? Could all the feelings that were built over years of marriage return in a blink of an eye? And why did that hurt more than the bruising on my ribs? "The stitches inside and out will dissolve by themselves. Other than the occasional difficulty breathing, I'm mostly fine." I was vastly understating everything. "Just tired. The safe house wasn't great for convalescing. It was a cold ass storehouse, with a cot."

"I dunno how great this house will be for it either," he unbuttoned the top of my trousers, unzipping the fly. "No central air. You gotta keep the fire going to keep this place warm. It's pretty old school."

"Just like you," I teased, even though he wasn't much older than me. He just always looked older, not because of wrinkles or grays. There was something in his eyes that was timeless. Like he could be any age all at once. I always imagined it was the same quality you might see in Dorian Gray, or any of the immortal Anne Rice vampires.

*"Exactly like me."*

I held my breath, willing my eyes not to shudder closed as he leaned in to me. He smelled like coffee. Strong coffee with vanilla.

"I can do that myself." I tried to stand up, but he pushed me back down with

a firm hand.

“Or I can do it for you,” he said, with a slight shake of his head. “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before. And nothing I don’t have the right to see.”

I balked, and snorted. “The *right* to see?”

“Yeah.” His hand traced down to the waistband, pushing it down gently. “I’m still your husband. I still have the naked rights. It’s the law.”

“The naked rights?” I said through a small laugh.

“That’s right.” He pushed my pants down, and I lifted myself a little bit off the counter so that he could get it down my thighs. The pants bunched at my ankles as he pulled it over one foot, then the other.

His brow creased again as he felt the weight in my trousers. The inner pocket on the inside of the calf. Without permission, he turned the leg inside out, opened the pocket and looked at the small blade. Then the necklace.

My heart stopped as he looked at it with impassive eyes.

I stayed perfectly still. Just waiting for his reaction. Did he recognize it? Would he say anything?

He looked mad. Why was he mad? Maybe he wanted it back? Or... should I have just thrown it away?

He silently put the necklace and the blade on the counter and put the cargo pants on the floor. He then reached up and pulled my sports bra over my head without saying a word. I tried to cover my naked breasts, but the way he looked at my arms made me drop them to my side.

His mouth opened. He took in a deep breath. I had no idea what it meant but my nipples pebbled under his scrutiny. I looked down at myself. There were so many new lines and scars, and jagged pieces on my skin. His eyes didn’t darken with lust. At least, I didn’t think they did. He was probably disgusted

with what his wife had become. The scars made me look like a female Frankenstein monster. Like I was a patchwork of mismatched pieces.

Without a word he picked me up and gently lowered me into the claw foot tub.

“Mack, I—”

“Don’t say a fucking word if you know what’s good for you.”

I clamped my mouth shut. His voice was heavy, almost throaty. The demand in it was something he had only ever used when he was in the military, and the way he used it now made me flinch and clench my thighs together at the same time.

“Mack...” I whispered.

He placed a hand over my lips, shushing me.

“Don’t.” His eyes were cruel. Angry. And also filled with a heat that made my breasts feel heavy. “You know what your voice does to me, so don’t...”

He took his hand from my lips as he went into a nearby drawer and pulled out a washcloth. He gently dipped it in the soapy bath water and started to trace it over my arms, my neck, my shoulders... I let out a small moan at the blissful sensation.

“I swear to God, Lotte, shut the fuck up.” There was no anger in his voice now. Just the heaviness of a desperate man trying not to give in to his baser instincts. Was I wrong? Was he still attracted to me? I felt the heat of desire from my core coil up my stomach, spreading to my eager breasts that wanted his attention. I licked my lips, wondering if he still tasted the same...

“If you have the right to see me naked,” I leaned my head back on the lip of the tub, “shouldn’t you have the rights to touch.”

“Lotte...” it was a warning growl. Like a wolf before it attacked.

“I can fuck,” I whispered. “If you can be gentle.”

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## 6. She's Going to Kill Me

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# Mack

*IF I CAN BE gentle? What in the hell?*

It was one thing to see my wife naked. To touch her. To hear her talk about her newly earned scar... and her banter. God, I was a sucker for a woman with a smart mouth...

But that necklace in her pocket. The small, blue Forget Me Not flower in a clear resin. The weight of it in my hand was so familiar that it stopped me dead in my tracks. I had seen that necklace on her a hundred times. I had envied the way it had dangled between her sweet, supple breasts. How I had wanted my tongue where that necklace had been.

It was the first gift I ever gave her, back when we went surfing in Wrightsville Beach. A stupid, cheap token from a beach side shop, that matched the blue bathing suit she wore. She had it on her, with her lucky blade.

My mind was screaming. Blaring out the words, "She still loves you! Look!" It was fucking with my head. Fucking with my body.

I wasn't turned on when she got naked. Her injured body did nothing for me. But the memories of the salty sea on her skin, the necklace against the groove between her breasts and the fact that she kept it on her... I could have passed out with all the warring feelings that clouded my vision and screamed for me to hold onto her.

*Don't let her go. Don't let her out of your sight. She's back. She's yours.  
CLAIM HER!*

Of all the great evils in Pandora's box, the last one was Hope. And that bit of evil was writhing around my chest like a worm going through rotten meat.

"If you..."

"Don't speak," I growled my warning, stopping her mid-speech because I couldn't fucking handle it.

I could take her. I would take her, as black and blue as she was. Her voice could still do things to me that I thought were long over. It was so low, and sensual. I wanted to make her scream in ecstasy. Maybe I could just taste her. Just one taste. Surely, that wouldn't throw me back into the misery of three years ago? I could handle just one taste...

Fuck! I adjusted myself in my jeans, squeezing my throbbing cock to get it to calm the fuck down. Because my brain knew better. One taste wouldn't be enough. One taste, and I'd be begging her to stay again.

And what the fuck was I thinking? I couldn't screw her. Not in this state. What kind of guy would *ever* take advantage of a woman who was compromised? Vulnerable? Emotionally *and* physically? She was going through hell with an injury like this and I was thinking about getting on top and humping her to the edge of her sanity! What was *wrong* with me?

The torture of running a washcloth over that familiar body was going to break me.

She didn't resist. She barely moved. Maybe it was the pain. Or the sudden heaviness in the air around us.

"Mack... I..."

"For God's sake, woman." I clenched my fist, clutching at the washcloth in my hand. "You're going to fucking break me."

She clamped her mouth shut, and looked forlornly to the side. When I had managed to wipe away the yellowing iodine from her skin, and had washed



her short hair with my shampoo, I picked up a towel and averted my eyes, holding it open in front of me.

“Stand up,” I commanded. My tongue felt heavy in my mouth, like it was anticipating a taste of something familiar and sweet. My cock bobbed in my boxers, trying to join the fucking party, as if it never got the memo that it wasn’t our right to do that anymore.

Except it was, in the strictest, most chauvinistic sense of the word. She was still my wife. Mine... even if it was due to a missed signature, it was still technically true, and my body hummed with the possibility that I could touch that marital bliss once again.

I wrapped the towel around her torso, as I unplugged the drain. She tied it up above her breast, and I had to take a moment - a stolen moment - to watch the rivulets of water trickle down from a lock of hair, down the slope of her neck, to the shoulder where a new scar had emerged. She hadn’t had it when she left me, standing immobile on the driveway as my father, wrongfully, hurled obscenities at her.

I was certain it was new because I had been an attentive husband. I knew every mark and perfect blemish on her body. There was another scar on her bicep, and several on the rounded calf that I could see. I’m sure there were even more on her torso and back that I hadn’t noticed yet.

I wanted to strip her bare, to see those perfect breasts, and every mark on her skin. I wanted to kiss each line and feel her pain like it was my own. I wanted to be one flesh, as we had been long, long ago. I *ached* to spread her open, and to plunge myself in her glorious heat, and have her cry my name, and declare me her husband as I made her body sing.

But not tonight. Not when she was injured, and frightened.

If I did things right, then there was a chance those divorce papers would be

burned in the fireplace before Christmas. I could be patient in my old age. Right?

I lifted her in my arms, and put her to bed, still wrapped in the towel. I got her water, her meds, and pulled the blanket over her shoulders as the drugs helped her drift off to sleep.

“You should get us a duck for Thanksgiving,” she whispered, adjusting into a comfortable position.

“The traditional Thanksgiving sacrifice is a Turkey,” I told her. Rehashing an argument we had had a hundred times over. Every Thanksgiving for almost ten years.

“Turkey tastes awful. Duck is better.” She was drifting. “Will you scratch my back? There’s a spot I can never get. Right by my spine.”

I started to scratch the base of her neck, but she shook her head.

“Lower.”

So, I scratched lower. Unsure if this was another seduction ploy, but knowing that if it was, I’d give in. I was able to walk away once; a second time and I know that I’d cave.

Then she shivered, moaning a throaty little, “right there!”

I was at her bra line, where a clasp would have been. My fingers touched a little bit of scar tissue, about the size of a horse pill. I scratched it and a smile pulled the corners of her mouth as she stretched like a happy kitten. Then she relaxed, her faint snoring telling me that she was in a deep sleep.

I didn’t linger too long. I wanted to. I wanted to sit on the green chesterfield armchair, and just watch her sleep. To think. To worry. But I had to protect my sanity somehow.

Maybe I’d find my brain at the Farmer’s Market, as I searched for a duck and a jar of cranberry sauce.

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## 7. Duck, Duck, Turkey

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## Lotte

I'M PROBABLY GOING TO die. I don't want to. But we don't always get what we want.

I had hotwired a car, driven it through mud and rain. I had to keep taking my hand off the knife because we were in eastern europe, which meant that all the cars were manual, not automatics. Each time I let go of the knife, I felt the weight of the hilt pulling down my flesh until the serrated edges threatened to make me blind with pain. Then there was a bang. A white balloon inflated in front of my eyes, then I was thrust into darkness.

But the banging wasn't a memory. It was real. It was present, like the pillow under my face, and the heavy quilt around my shoulders. I groaned as the pain of the dream melding with the pain of my waking. The stiff stitches tugged at my abdomen.

Being sick, weak, and vulnerable is something I don't recommend to anyone. Ever. That was humiliating enough. But the memories of last night made it worse.

I had longed for his touch. So much so, that I had asked him to *fuck* me. And... he'd declined. Kindly.

Had he been an asshole, it would have been less embarrassing. But he was perfect. Kind. Gentle. The same Mack he had always been. The same perfect husband he was.

I blame the drugs, the wound. But at least he had scratched my back. That infernal itch between my shoulder blades had gotten worse over time. I had

tried to look at it, to see if I had developed some kind of rash, but no. It was simply a spot. Maybe I had fried a nerve somewhere.

Still. If there was a place to convalesce, then... this wasn't bad at all. I felt at peace with him if it wasn't for all the baggage.

I had missed him. That was the embarrassing truth. I *missed* my husband in a way that stabbed my heart, far deeper than the knife wound that landed me here. But denial and tolerance had dulled it into a distant ache. Like an old wound. It was no more significant than the strange itch that had formed on my back from that scar tissue. Something that could be ignored.

The sun was peeking over the horizon, glowing gold through the small gap in the heavy black out curtains. I could see a red barn out in a field.

Still naked, I got up with the sheet against my chest, wrapping it around me like a toga. I winced, as my feet touched the cold wood floors. I opened the curtains and finally took a real look at the property. The red barn was two stories tall, with a grain silo down one side. It looked old and seemed to tilt to one side.

It was very Anne of Green Gables. Picturesque, and perfect. I dreamed of living in a place like this a long, long time ago. With Mack, and the stomping of little children's feet.

Beside it was a smaller house. Not a Victorian, but some kind of cabin-looking thing. Maybe it was a guest house? It sat on a slight hill, with a wraparound porch, and a long staircase down the steep hill, to a little stone path that led to the big house.

All he needed was some white range fences, a few cows and horses, and this whole property would be picturesque. A perfect little Upstate New York farm. This was exactly what he had dreamed about. A lot of land and mountains. Of course, we expected to have a dozen kids. He'd have a

workshop with his carpentry equipment, and the little ones would help him make bird houses for all the trees, and eventually help do upkeep on the house. Maybe we'd even get chickens or goats...

I wonder if he still would. Mellie looked like she liked goats. And I don't care to figure out if that's a good thing or not.

I knew when I filed for separation and divorce, he'd end up with someone else. How could he not? A good-looking man, with a little salt and pepper with a retirement pension and years of deep-dicking left in those fine hips? Yeah. He was going to move on fast. I just hoped that I would move on first. But I didn't. Because he didn't sign the paperwork and it felt... wrong.

There was a clatter on the other side of the door, similar to the one that had woken me. I reached for the drawer of the nightstand, where a black Glock 19 rustled among some papers. If I knew Mack - and I did! - it had a full magazine, was on safe, but no round in the chamber. I was about to pick it up when there was an awful shout of "Goddamnit!", quickly followed by a "Motherfucker!"

Oh, Mack... he was trying to cook again.

With my toga secured and tied to me, I walked out to the kitchen, moving on my tiptoes to reduce my little feet's contact with the freezing floor. *Jesus, didn't he have heaters in this place?*

"God damn, fucking duck!" He threw a spatula into the sink, and it caused a splash in the soapy water.

He was in a skin-tight, long-sleeve shirt and low-slung plaid pajama bottoms and bare feet. I saw every flex of his muscles as he moved. I bit my lower lip, staring as he moved from one small culinary disaster to the other.

"You do this every year, Mack," I said with a barely repressed smile. "Why don't you just wait for me to get up?"

“Because you have a knife wound and should be in bed!” He turned, rage in his eyes. But that didn’t scare me. Cooking always sent him into a rage. That’s why he ate canned beans and grilled steak all the time. The man did not know his way around a kitchen to save his life. “Why the fuck don’t you get back in bed, or at least get... on.. The...” His voice suddenly slowed down, as his eyes roamed my body, and the sheet-dress. “The couch.”

Suddenly self-conscious, I crossed my arms in front of my breasts and lifted my shoulders to try to hide myself. “I didn’t have any other clothes.”

He looked away and took a deep breath. His muscular chest threatened to pop out of that tight t-shirt.

“Yeah, I went and got your stuff out.” Without looking at me, he stepped over to some moving boxes, opening the lid. They weren’t my nice clothes. But they were definitely mine. The stuff that I had placed in the back of a closet years ago. The items that never really made it into the clothing rotation much. Oversized shirts, boxers, and a sweater. There was one pair of jeans and plenty of thick socks. There were some well-worn tennis shoes that I had left behind in my rapid departure from the house.

I touched them, remembering that dreadful day.

“Get the fuck out!” his father had screamed at me, as I packed boxes into my car. “He doesn’t fucking need an ungrateful bitch like you! My son’s a fucking hero, and you’re just a washed up, waste!”

His father, Old Mack, Had thrown the shoes at me as I backed out of the driveway, his son rushing out to stop him, as Bo barked from the porch.

“You wasted ten years of his life, you insane...” the rest of his insult was muffled as Mack pushed him back into the house. He had picked up my shoes along the way.

I imagined that the two of them had a nice, big bonfire with my things. His

father had... a strange sense of reality. I was a gold digger. A useless bitch. One of *those* women who went against nature. Eventually, I was a woman who stole ten of his son's childbearing years. The fights he and Mack used to have, especially after my miscarriages were...

Well, that was all in the past now. Old Mack would get the grandkids he wanted, and father and son could stop fighting with me out of the picture.

I became aware of Bo and Mack looking at me, as I stared down at the shoes. There was moisture falling down my face, hot and embarrassing. I wiped it away, turning from their observant gazes.

"Thanks," I whispered, when I finally put the shoes down.

"Do you... need help..." I looked at him while he spoke, his eyes not leaving my one bare shoulder. "To get dressed, I mean."

I blushed again. He swallowed and stepped towards me. Just a few steps on his heavy boots on the wood floors. He stood over me, his head near my temple as he leaned down. I felt his breath on my skin. His chest was right at eye level, and I was salivating at the idea of biting down on those muscular pecs. Biting on them, burying my head between them, as he made love to me on the quilted bed.

"You have to stop doing that, Lotte," he whispered in my ear. "I love it when your skin blushes."

One finger. He just used one finger to run down the skin from behind my ear, down the slope of my neck, to my shoulder. My skin was on fire.

"I can't help it," I whispered, wishing I could come up with something smarter to say.

"Then I won't be able to help what comes next," he whispered, as he leaned down. His mouth was so close to mine. So close that I could taste the familiar



texture of his soft lips, and warm tongue. I knew he'd smell like coffee and vanilla. "The question is: Does my wife want that?"

Yes. Yes. Yes! My God, yes! Please kiss me. Please, fuck me. Please...

The smoke alarm went off. The blaring siren sound filled the kitchen, accompanied by flashing lights. Because, of course, Mack took safety seriously, and that included smoke detectors.

"Fuck!" he said, pulling away from me. "Sit down!"

He commanded, with a quick point to the coach. He opened the sliding glass door of the white farmhouse kitchen, and then opened every window in the room. He turned off the stove, where a flaming skillet had caught fire.

"Don't put it in water! It's an oil fire!" I screamed. "Just put a lid on it!"

Oil fires weren't the same as other fires. He needed to let it burn out and deprive it of oxygen. Thankfully, he had the wherewithal to listen, grabbed the skillet lid, and covered it, before putting it back on the turned off stove. He grabbed a rag and started to fan the smoke towards a window. Though, if you ask me, the fanning didn't do anything but show me that he still worked out. His biceps flexed under his t-shirt, his red plaid pajama pants hid nothing of his rounded ass, and that back... oh, Mack always had an extraordinarily beautiful back. The kind a girl could really get her nails into.

"I said sit down!" He barked again.

I realized that I had been so absorbed in staring at his physique that I had forgotten to move. The siren turned off, the light haze of smoke was suddenly just a fine mist, and we were plunged into silence once again. I *should* do what he told me, but out of habit, I crossed my arms, and lifted a brow.

I did not respond hollering. I never had before, and I certainly wouldn't do it now.

"Please?" he brought his fingers to the bridge of his nose, letting out a

dramatic, exasperated sigh.

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” I said, sinking into the chair and started to pull on a pair of jeans. I unwrapped the toga, realized he hadn’t brought me any bras, and put a t-shirt and sweater on. “Does the heat not work in this place?”

He groaned. *Oh dear, I had struck a nerve.*

“Fireplace,” he grunted.

I looked around. There was, indeed, a fireplace, with stacked wood, and balled up pieces of junk mail, and a gas station lighter on the mantle. Now that I was suitably dressed, my feet in some plaid, wool socks, I went to the fireplace and stared at the construction. I smiled to myself as I critiqued the wooden structure, and how he’d strangle the airflow and prevent it from building. I reached in and started to fix the logs when I heard a snort from over my shoulder.

I looked and he was shaking his head.

“You were always rotten at starting fires,” I said with a smirk.

Truthfully, he was fine. In a survival situation, he’d do great. But this wasn’t a survival situation. This was a fireplace in a Victorian home. There were different requirements.

“Between you and Taz, I never had to worry about a fire.”

Again, I felt the pang in my heart. Trinity “Taz” Guerro had been his teammate when he was in the 6th Special Forces Group, Operational Detachment Alpha 0113, or SFODA 06-0113, nicknamed “Lucky 13”. She was an engineer, which meant she was mostly into demolitions and explosives. Of course, she *could* also build things. But, as she liked to tell it, she preferred to use her powers for destruction. She was another thing I lost in the divorce.

“How is she?” I asked, hoping that was neutral enough of a topic.

“She got out, and now works as some kind of Pyrotechnics expert for theme parks and concerts.”

I covered my mouth, stifling a laugh. “That’s so perfect for her.”

“Yeah, I thought so.”

He tilted his head and gave me a half-smile. It was a sweet little boyish smile. The one that used to make me swoon in my little girl heart.

“You know, she tried to call you,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pajama bottom pockets. There were wrinkles on the corners of his mouth that hadn’t been there before. Frown lines.

“I know, I just...” What excuse could I make? What could I say? “But I had just started with Brett and...”

“I get it,” he said, lifting his hand to stop me. “I don’t need to hear it.”

He turned, looking at the stove with the charred black frying pan. The conversation was done, and we were back to walking on eggshells. Or... more, aptly, the floor was made of lava, full of topics that threatened to break apart the tentative peace we had between us.

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## 8. Fuck Brett

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## Mack

I WISH I HAD let Brett die in the Florida phase of Ranger School. Strange weather had meant that we did the Swamp Phase in freezing temperatures that year. Five guys died of hyperthermia. The training accident was deemed a tragedy, but because this was the 90's, there were plenty of hard-chargers, and heinous assholes who said that the five training deaths were because the guys couldn't "hack" it.

Armchair warriors are, without exception, some of the biggest blue falcons on the planet. Blue Falcon was code for a Buddy Fucker, or a person who stepped on their comrades in order to get themselves ahead. They're the same as spotlight rangers, bar-room storytellers, and anyone who describes themselves as "practically special forces".

I can confirm that Brett and I had survived by the skin of our teeth.

Brett and I had talked each other through it, keeping each other's spirits up, and, quite frankly, cuddling, to keep ourselves warm. I am not ashamed of it either. Alive is always better. *Always*. Even if I had to get half naked and cuddle with another straight man.

But if I had known he'd be a wife-stealing son of a bitch, taking Lotte away right at the moment when she and I should have been working on our marriage... I would have let the fucker die. I would have buried his face in the swamp at Camp James E. Rudder, and never felt an ounce of guilt for it.

I'd kill him with my bare hands if I could.

Did I think my wife was having an affair? No. That wasn't her style. But the moment she took that job as a freelance agent for Brett and his cronies, the

countdown on our marriage began. She had a way out, and she took it with both hands. No kids, no ties. And my Dad was no fucking help on that either, always asking when we would have kids, and telling me that a wife was useless if she didn't give me babies.

The fights we used to have were within a hair's breadth of turning into a family brawl. All of this shit poisoned her away from me.

Had I insisted that we have kids before we got married? Yes! I wanted us to have enough to populate our own little league baseball team! I wanted enough kids to fill in the room of a big, old Victorian house like this. I wanted to have dogs, cats, and a white picket fence, and to be elbow-deep in diapers.

The first miscarriage was tough. The second was tougher. The third and fourth... when I almost lost her, I didn't care anymore. I just didn't want to lose my wife. I didn't want the woman I loved to kill herself for the possibility of a kid that might not even happen. I just wanted *her*.

But then I lost her anyway. To another man. The same man who was dangling her in front of me and calling in a favor to do it. Oh, and he was somehow responsible for the new scars on her body, and a fucking knife wound between her ribs.

I didn't care what the mission was, and who wielded the knife. If I knew my wife, that guy was long dead anyway. But Brett also had something to do with it.

Brett was on my hit list. After this marker was done, if he showed his face on my property again, I'd put two in his chest, and one in his head.

"Mack?" I heard her whisper from behind me. Her hands were out, like she wanted to embrace me. And *fuuuck, I wanted that so much*.

A hug from her could calm down my temper. She was always free with her

hugs and cuddles. Her hesitance now was just more proof that we weren't man and wife. We weren't one flesh, one body, one soul anymore. We were something else entirely, and I hated it. I felt like I had one foot in the grave, and another on high ground. And I wasn't sure which way to go.

"I'm sorry, Mack," she whispered. One of her slender hands reached out, touching my chest, right above my heart. Her palm seared through my skin, down my nerves, all the way to my cock that I had been trying, and failing, to keep down ever since she stepped out in my white sheets. What was it about a woman in a white sheet that looked so fucking sexy? What was it about Lotte wearing white...

I had purposely only given her clothes in dull beiges, and neutral tones. They were the least flattering on her yellow-tanned skin. I really needed her to look... well, not *ugly*, but... less luminous. Less vibrant. Less like a break in the clouds, letting in a ray of sunshine.

I wanted her. I always wanted her. Now more than ever.

I had never wanted her to see this house. Her fingerprints are all over it. I drew it with every fucking renovation. With every bit of furniture that I made. Could she see it? Could she see my obsession? Did she see that I had carved her name into everything I built? If she did, then she was still choosing to walk away whenever the threat on her was gone. So, nothing I did mattered.

"Look," I meant to sound calm and reasonable. But anger leaked into it. "Will you handle dinner? Everything's in the kitchen. The setup is not that different from the North Carolina House." The final home we had together. "And I got all the ingredients I just..."

I peered through the windows, to the patch to the small bush of cranberries by a scarecrow that was lighting up like a fucking disco, to the sound of

AC/DC's "Shoot to Thrill". There stood a buck, staring right... at... me.

There were leaves hanging out the side of his mouth, as if he was trying to make a fucking point. Those black eyes blinked, his head tilted forward and back. Had he been human, he would have pounded his chest and screamed, "Come at me bro!"

*That son of a bitch!*

"I'll be back," I said, grabbing a bow that I now kept by the front door. I kept one by the front door and the back door for this exact fucking scenario.

"Where are you...?" she asked, but I didn't have time for her shit.

I tried to slowly open the door, hoping he wouldn't notice me. But of course he did. Bruce knew exactly where I was. Hell, he was probably just amusing himself by taunting me! I got out, loaded an arrow, and released it, trying to anticipate which way Bruce would hop. Of course, I picked the exact wrong direction. He galloped over the vegetable garden fence, and as if to taunt me, took the time to stop, fluff his tail and look back at me.

"You son of a bitch!" I had no shoes on. I just didn't care.

I stepped onto the cold, icy ground with my bare feet, loading another bow. I let it loose, and it landed *exactly* where he was standing. But he stepped to the side with a slight tilt of his body. Then, I shit you not, he *pranced* through the field, into the wood line. I did what any man in my situation would do. I fucking went after him.

Ranger School hadn't killed me, but Bruce might.



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## 9. Retirement going well?

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## Lotte

HE RAN INTO THE woods with his bare feet, buffalo plaid flannel pajama bottoms, and a long-sleeve t-shirt with a bow and arrow in hand. It wasn't lost on me that there was a 22-gauge shotgun and, of course, an M-4 on the rifle rack by the door, above his line of assorted work boots. But he'd gone for a bow and arrow, which I didn't know he could shoot... He had never used a bow, as far as I knew.

I had so many questions, that I wasn't sure where to start.

Clearly, my husband had lost his sanity. He had totally flown over the cuckoo's nest.

I had stared at where he, and the deer, had disappeared to for several minutes before I started cooking. Because what else could I do?

I wasn't sure where Mack had stashed my meds, or the clothes I rolled in with. So I had to distract myself from the pain that I knew was going to hit me in slow, incremental waves.

So I got started making duck in orange sauce, an apple strudel and a Caesar salad. Perfect for a Thanksgiving for two. Whether I, or Mellie, would be the second had yet to be unanswered. But maybe I could find some drain cleaner and add it as some extra flavoring.

I stirred the apple, cinnamon, vanilla and sugar. He had gotten Granny Smith Apples, while I had typically preferred the sweeter Golden Delicious, but beggars can't be choosers. The fact he had gotten close to the right apple was still nice. The man had never remembered our anniversary and had always been taken by surprise on February 14th... but he had an eye for details that

mattered to him. Like the cut of duck I liked, and the ingredients I used on Thanksgiving.

Three hours had passed by the time he returned, and the strudel and duck were in the oven, just waiting for their grand reveal. I had figured out a way to time it so that the two things could co-locate in an oven, making their presentation the best they could be.

He stomped through the door; his feet were damn near blue. He put the bow away, before he limped over to the sofa. He sat on the very edge of the couch, his bare feet towards the roaring fire beneath the white stone mantle.

“Care to explain what all that was about?” I asked, waving a spatula at the front door, and vaguely towards the bow and arrow.

“That was Bruce.”

“Makes total sense,” I said sarcastically, wiping down the counter.

“Bow hunting for deer started on October 7th,” he said, as if that clarified things completely.

“It’s Thanksgiving,” I said with a small snort. “I’m pretty sure you can use muzzle-loading rifles from now until December.”

“That’s not very sporting,” he said, putting his arm across the back rest of the couch and looking over to me. His feet had gone from a strange white/blue to a red. Circulation was returning to his extremities. “I’ve been trying to kill him with a bow for over a year. It’s personal.”

“And what crime did he commit to make you give him a name, and put him on your hit list?” I bent down, opening the oven.

“He ate my vegetables.” He said, with a shrug. Then he sniffed the air, and groaned in delight. He looked over at Mo, who was on the couch, his little paws up to the ceiling, his belly waiting for a rub. “Mama’s cooking the good stuff! I bet she made a plate for you too, huh, boy?”

Yes, I had made a small dog-friendly plate. It was Bo's thanksgiving too!

I tilted my head. "He's a deer. Of course, he ate your vegetables. Did you put a fence around it?"

"Yes, I did...!" he was acting mad, but then he broke into a smile. "After they ate my vegetables." He leaned back into the enormous couch, getting swallowed in the cushions.

"Ah!" I said, placing the plate of duck on the counter.

"Anyway, I ate a ton of venison last year," he said, looking back towards the fire and wiggling his toes.

"You were never much of a country boy," I said with a laugh as I closed the oven, leaving the strudel inside.

I looked at the heap of duck meat, knowing I had made far too much. Still, leftovers were part of the fun, right?

"I'm learning," he said, turning back to me, and running a hand through his graying hair. "Anyway, Bruce won't fall for any of the tricks - the scarecrow, the music, the strobes... I swear, that fucker is testing me. He knows..."

"He's a deer," I said, putting my hands on my hips. "They're prey animals. They don't have those kinds of faculties."

"That fucker does," he pointed out to the vegetable garden. "You saw him! That son of a bitch was looking at me, and I swear, he was taunting me."

"He was not!"

"Yes! He was!"

I looked at the oven, and the timer. Then back at Mack. "Are you ready to eat?"

His emerald eyes looked back at me, sparkling with a strange little fire that I had forgotten about until that very moment. It was strange, wasn't it? That

you live with someone for so long, that you forget some of the things that made them so alluring in the first place, until you see it again.

“Fuck,” he said, smacking himself on the forehead as he got on his feet. “You should be the one sitting down, and I’m making you cook.”

“I swear, I’m fine.” I waved a hand to him, telling him to sit back down. “My injury happened two weeks ago. I can walk, and do all that stuff... I’m not as bad as you think I am.”

“Right.” His voice was suddenly husky. “You can fuck. If... if I can be gentle. Right?”

I froze. Remembering my embarrassing confession from the night before.

“Sorry about that.”

I felt the flush on my cheeks, so hot that I was surprised I didn’t completely catch fire.

“Don’t be.” His voice was so low, so gravelly, and so full of something I couldn’t quite place. Was it lust? Or was that just wishful thinking on my part? “Stop blushing like that, Lotte.” Now he was almost whispering. “You know what that does to me.”

God, yes. I did remember. Seeing me blush made him hard. He loved to see my skin red with the flush of passion. He said that’s how he knew I had an orgasm. The skin from my breast to my cheeks would turn something he called “apple red”.

“You know I can’t help it.”

I traced my finger on the dark wood butcher block countertop. It had a dark stain, then treated to withstand the cuts of a blade, and the roll of meat. I wonder if this had been here all along, or if he had chosen to install it. And if he had chosen to... was it for me? No. That was stupid. A lot of people liked butcher block counters. It was a trend, after all. But... there was a chance. A

small, infinitesimal chance that he had thought of me while he had it put in place.

And why did my heart grow heavy, with the thought that he'd one day be this thoughtful with someone else?

“Don't be stupid, Lotte.” When did he stand up and sneak up on me? He was right there. His hot hands traced my bare arms, until they circled my slender wrists. He made me flatten my hands on the counter. “I would build you a house at the bend in the river where the cottonwoods grow.”

I shut my eyes, feeling the words, the memories, and everything flood back with this intimate contact. With the heat of his chest against my back.

“You're quoting John Wayne,” I whispered, leaning back to close the gap between us. My back on his chest. His muscular arms circled me, pulling me in close.

“You like John Wayne,” he said into my ear. Again, I could feel his breath on my cheek, and the shell of my ear.

“So do you.”

“I missed you, Lotte,” he said, his lips coming down low. Low. So low that I could almost feel the heat of his lips against my bare shoulder. He nipped at the skin there. “I can be gentle.”

I closed my eyes, my thighs rubbing together as I felt the heat pooling between my thighs.

“I didn't think you wanted it,” I confessed. “You didn't seem interested...”

He thrust his hip forward, his hard cock against my ass. That familiar, thick, hard cock that would hit all the right places inside me.

“Does this seem like I'm not interested?”

“What about...”

“Don't you dare say someone else's name.” He bit down on the lobe of my

ear. He bit so hard that it hurt, and I whimpered, pulling away, but he held me close. He held me to him, not letting me go. "I'm turning the automatic shut off on this stove. I'm putting the duck massacre into the fridge. And we're going back to the bedroom."

"I... I... It's Thanksgiving and you'll be hungry."

"I'm fucking starving." His teeth bit down on my shoulder, and his tongue ran up the curve of my neck, up to my ear. "But not for turkey."

"It's a duck."

"Doesn't fucking matter."

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## 10. The Bend in the River

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# Mack

SHE LOOKED GOOD ON my bed.

She'd look better once I got her naked, and put her clothes on the floor. I remembered being away for exercises, or working late in the field, and coming home to the lights off, Bo sleeping at the foot of the bed. I hated not having dinner with her, but I absolutely adored watching her sleep as I took off my uniform and slipped into the covers.

It spoke to my masculine heart. The one that took being a husband as seriously as a job. My salary was paid by the peaks and valleys of her body, and the throaty sounds that came when she moaned against my hands.

“Did you know you were getting dropped into my care?” I asked, my fingers caressing the hem of the oversized sweater that had been in the box of things she had left behind.

“No, Bre—”

“You don't have to say his name. Ever.” I growled. I didn't want my lust to turn murderous.

She swallowed. Her eyes shut for a moment as she groaned, her thighs trying to press together, but I pushed them apart. I needed to see her pussy. Her clothes were an abomination.

“No, I did not know that I was getting dropped off here.” Her voice was so beautifully breathy.

I nodded, dipping a kiss to her lower belly. There was another jagged scar there. It clustered into a star. A bullet wound? I wanted to ask, but I also didn't... I didn't want to know the thousands of ways she could have been

hurt in the time we were separated. All the ways that I wasn't there to protect her

"If you did, would you have made them turn around?" I wanted to know if she wanted to be in my care or not. It was a stupid thing to want to know, but I did. And I refused to be ashamed of it. Not right now, when the beauty was laid before me.

Her brows creased together, then that blush on her skin faded. She became pale - something that only happened when she was unhappy about something.

"Would you have wanted me to..." her voice faded. She turned her head to the side, her eyes watery. "To not come here. To... turn around?"

"If I had a choice, you would never have left my bed," I bit down on the delicate skin at the top of her hip bone. "We never would have been apart at all."

Her eyes fluttered closed, and that blush returned in earnest. "Oh, Mack..."

Her sigh made me dizzy with desire. It wasn't fair that she could do this to me. It wasn't fair that her bastard of a boss had brought her back into my life, to dangle the thing I desired most, if things hadn't completely gone to shit. When things hadn't fallen apart. If we hadn't been dealt the cards that we had been.

"Maybe I should have turned around," she whispered, her voice heavy with a sob that she kept from boiling over. "Then we wouldn't have to go through this pain all over again."

I crawled up her body, unbuttoning her shirt as I went.

There, to the divot between her breast bone. I kissed the little space, lightly nipping on the skin. Just enough to elicit that gasp I loved so much.

"You could spare us both the pain, if you'd just stay." Maybe those words made me sound weak. A stronger man would shrug off the loss. I could be

like my teammates, Greg Veder and Kai Griffith, who dealt with loss by banging the closest available hot hole. But I hadn't. I couldn't.

I came up to her mouth and placed a kiss on her lower lip. I wanted to be sweet to her. I really did. But as soon as her pink lip entered my mouth, I had to taste it with my tongue. Then I need more. So, I grabbed it with my teeth, sucking on the flesh. I bit down on her lip, and she whimpered, as the coppery taste of her blood touched the tip of my tongue.

I pulled away and looked down at her stormy eyes, filled with passion, and arousal. Then a tear slid down her cheek again. Why was she always crying? What was going through that mind that she kept locked away from me?

"You like this," I whispered against her cheek, kissing the tear away. "You like my little bite. You *love* how I can make you feel." My hand slipped down between her thighs, lightly grazing those sweet, soaked lips. "So why are you crying?"

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## 11. Husband Privileges

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## Lotte

“YOU HAVE A LIFE here!” I gestured towards the room, the house, the street, the world he now inhabited. An entire life he had without me. “You have a girlfriend, a house, people... she can give you children. Everything I couldn’t!” I wiped at my cheek, practically slapping myself in my eagerness to wipe another fucking tear. “Your father would love that girl.” I pointed to myself, placing a hand over the palpitating heart that threatened to crawl out of my chest and break between us. “You deserve better than this.”

*Better than me.*

“Are you saying I don’t deserve you?” He still wouldn’t look at me, and I hated it.

“I’m saying you don’t deserve the burden of me.” I said the words slowly. Words I had thought to say to him a million times over. “And all the problems that come with me.” To explain. To admit why I decided to end our marriage. “You have nothing to lose in the divorce, and so much to gain.”

“And what about you, Lotte? Do you have anything to lose?”

I didn’t know what he was asking, or why. I wasn’t even sure if it mattered. All I knew was that he was slowly stepping toward me, crowding into my space. His scent, his presence, the sight of his massive arms, the forearms of his sleeves rolled up threatened to break my resolve.

“What about you, Lotte?” He asked again.

I couldn’t answer. The lump in my throat wouldn’t let me. I had everything to lose. A man. A lover. A person who could make the sun rise and fall based on his mood.

But I couldn't quit now. I couldn't turn back time and make myself fertile. To give us the family he had always wanted.

I touched his cheek, running my fingers through the thick, rough beard. I lifted myself up and I meant to just put a kiss on the corner of his lips. A kiss like Mellie had given him the first time she showed up. Sure, we were naked. But I could give him a goodbye. I could get up, and walk away. I could.

I could... Yes. I could!

I meant it to be a goodbye kiss. A simple, chaste meeting of the lips. But when I pulled away, his glassy eyes looked at me. Then he plunged back in, placing his weight on my shoulders to pin me to the bed, his thigh coming up to rub against my heated, needy core.

I whimpered, keeping my mouth closed to his invasion.

*No, no, no! This was a terrible idea. I was doing so well. I was... I was...*

"Open!" He commanded against my mouth. "Let me in, Lotte." I refused. He pulled away and he growled, "Open!"

His hand cupped my jaw, his thumb pushing through my lips, pulling down my jaw by the teeth. Then his tongue went in. Then his breath. He tasted like hops. He deepened the kiss until I was moaning against his lips.

He growled at the sound of it, hitching my legs up around his waist.

"I still have my rights, wife," he said against my lips, nipping at them, shooting electricity from my mouth straight to my pussy with every slight jolt of pain. "Who am I to you?"

"Mack, don't," I whined, unsure what I was begging for him not to do.

"Don't what? Don't fuck you? Don't make you come on my mouth?" He kissed me again. "Don't make you come on my fingers, and cock? Or don't make you scream my name, Mrs. McClanahan?"

"I-I-I..." *had no fucking clue what I was doing.* So I turned it back to him.

“You have a girlfriend.”

“How can I have a girlfriend, when I have a wife?” His head went down to the hollow of my throat, his teeth nipping at the tender flesh. “It’s now or never, Lotte. If you don’t stop me now, I will take you, and use every marital privilege I have. I will fuck my wife to within an inch of her life.”

“I couldn’t... I couldn't fight you off, even if I wanted to.”

“Bullshit,” he snorted. “You had a dagger tickling your lung, and you still walked miles until you could hotwire a car, and get to the rendezvous. Don’t tell me that these stitches are any deterrent if you really wanted to push me away from you.”

I whined, as he sucked my tender flesh in between his teeth. I wrapped my arms around his head, clutching him closer, wanting more of his mouth, his teeth, his bites. I wanted him to mark my skin. To leave scars that were as permanent as the knife wound on my abdomen, and the many knicks and scrapes that covered my body.

“You have three seconds,” he whispered. “Three.”

I almost laughed. Was he serious?

“Two.”

“Hopefully that’s not how long you last, now.”

“One.”

He grabbed something from the nightstand drawer. It was my knife and the Forget Me Not necklace.

The knife hand was... frightening and thrilling.

He took one breast in his mouth, sucking on it until I whined in ecstasy. Then the knife went down to my jeans.

“Take them off, or I cut them off,” he said, his mouth tracing a line down my abdomen, to my navel. His tongue swirled around it, and I scrambled to pull

down my pants. A small, practical voice in my mind reminded me these, and the cargo pants I wore when I was dropped here, were the only ones I had. At least the only ones that I knew of.

I kicked them away as he stepped between my naked thighs.

He dangled the pendant in the other hand, letting it loop around his middle finger. He slowly lowered it until the pendant touched the spot between my breasts. Then he let the silver chain land in a straight line, until the clasp touched the top of my belly button.

“You’re going to stay very, very still,” he said, taking the knife and tapping the flat part of it against my cheek to emphasize his words. “If that necklace moves, you’ll be punished.”

“W-w-what?” He had never, *ever* been like this.

Our sex had always been good. Energetic. We were two very athletic people giving in to carnal desires. But we had been pretty vanilla. Our passion had been enough for us. But this was a different man entirely!

“You heard me, *wife*,” he said with a drop of malice in his voice. “You’re going to divorce me anyway. So, I have no need to be nice. I can finally fuck you *exactly* how I’ve wanted to. And you’re going to give it to me.”

“What makes you think I will?” I couldn’t help myself. I’m a smart ass. I’m stubborn to a fault.

“Because, believe it or not, you actually feel like shit for leaving me.” He positioned his mouth at the sensitive little spot between my thigh and my mound. The little hip flexor protruded. He bit down on the skin, and I flinched. “If there’s no chance of keeping you, then I get to do what I want, while I have the rights to do so.”

This was all bullshit. I knew it. He knew it. There were no such things as marital rights, or naked rights. There sure as hell wasn’t a requirement for a



wife to *service* her husband.

But fuck, hearing him talk like that was hot. Hotter than anything he had ever done before. And what did it say about me that his threats, his demands made me so wet that it was almost embarrassing.

He pried my legs apart, the blade in his hand - *my* blade - hovering dangerously close to my skin.

“Now, stay very still,” he said again, in that deep, booming voice he had only ever reserved for his own soldiers.

Without preamble, he dove between my thighs, sucking at my clit. I didn’t stand a chance. My hips bucked to meet his assault. I wanted him. I needed him. My hands shot out, fingers intertwining in his hair as I pulled his head into me, wanting more contact, more friction. In the back of my mind, I felt the necklace fall off my body and onto the bed, but I didn’t care. I was chasing my high. Chasing my passion. I felt greedy and ravenous for him.

Just as I was about to crest that wave, he stopped, pushing away, making me feel hot, empty, greedy.

“No!” I whined, “Please. Mack...”

He smirked down at me, the blade still in his hand. “Bad girl.”

He ran the tip of the cold steel down my clavicle, between my breasts where the pendant was noticeably absent.

“Please, I was so close,” I whimpered, as the knife edge tickled my skin, making me tremble.

“I know. But you didn’t do as you were told.” He leaned down, picked up the pendant, and lay it down on my heated skin again. I swear, I could have melted an ice cube, the way my body felt fevered. “Now, let’s try that again. Stay still, or you’ll never get to come.”

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## 12. Bad Girls, Good Husbands

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## Mack

I HAD ALWAYS SPOILED her rotten. How could I not? An ape like me had a smart, beautiful wife with a red-blooded lust that was hard to keep up with. I was so eager to please her in every way, in and out of bed. I gave her what she liked, and enjoyed her pleasure like it was my own personal drug. So now I'd take what I could get, and she felt bad enough that she would willingly accept my terms and conditions.

Did that make me a bastard? Yes. Of the absolute worst kind. But if this was going to be the last time, then I wanted more. I needed more. I had to devour like a glutton. Like a last meal before my execution, because now that she was in my hands again, there was no way I could *live* without her. Never.

"Mack, what are you..." her phrases were cutting off. Like the words were slipping her mind. "You've never..."

That's right. I had never. I would never again. Because nothing would ever surpass this.

The pendant steamed against her bare, heated skin. Her legs spread open for my inspection. Her taste was still on my tongue, and like an addict, I needed more. I had to have her.

"Stay still," I reminded her, leaning down between her things, taking in the scent of her musk.

Her eyes were hazy as she nodded. Then let out a scared little whimper. I'd be sweeter this time. I *needed* her to be a good girl. I needed her to do what she was told, because the reward would satisfy us both. But first, I had to ruin her for all men. I needed to break her the same way I was broken.

I kissed the sweet petals of her pussy, nipping at them. She sucked in a breath but didn't flinch. Her heavy, steady breaths told me that she was trying to be unaffected. Trying to breathe through the lust, and sensations.

"Good girl." I whispered against the skin of her inner thigh. I watched the skin raise in goosebumps. She let out a soft sigh, her eyes lightly closing. I chuckled. "Does my wife have a praise kink that I didn't know about?"

She blinked, as if she was trying to wipe the fog from her eyes. She was trying to understand the question, then formulate the correct response.

"If you didn't know it, then I didn't know it either." She almost sounded pained. "Please, William..."

I raised my head and looked at her. The sound of my first name on her lips made my cock bob in anticipation. What a gorgeous sound. I don't think she had called me that since our wedding, when we took our vows. I had always been Mack, or babe, or sweetheart... I shut my eyes, to better taste the sound in my mind.

"Say that again." I ordered.

"What?"

"Say my name again." I said each word slowly, enunciating every single thing to accommodate her, and my, addled mind.

"William?" Even as a question, it was hot.

I delved into her pussy, licking her with a new fervor that I didn't know I had. Her mouth opened, her breaths became ragged and uneven, and a high-pitched whine left her lips. But she didn't move. Her thighs quivered as her orgasm built up in her body, but she resisted the urge to buck against my mouth, to steal the friction I didn't want to give her. Not yet. Not until I was buried to the hilt inside her.

"William!" Her cry was one of utter, unbridled desperation.

In our marriage, she had screamed many times in ecstasy. Screamed, moaned, whimpered, and once even laughed as her body gave in to carnal pleasures. But this was different. She had never had to beg me. I had delivered before she even knew what she needed. But she wouldn't take me for granted now.

"William! William!" She let out a scream as she crested the wave, her body surrendering to my lips, her juices spilling down my chin.

The sick level of pride I felt when she hadn't moved, the pendant still on her skin between her breasts, was... something I didn't know I needed. My sweet, obedient, lovely wife had fought her instincts, and pleased me.

I pulled off the pendant from her skin, bringing the little blue flower to my lips. I kissed it. With shaking, desperate hands, I unclasped it, then put it around her neck, fastening it again. I pulled the pendant down, so it rested against her skin. I stroked it gently as it stuck to the sweat of her skin.

"Don't take it off again," I whispered. "You can take off my ring." I grabbed her hand, which had no band, but still had the tell-tale dent on that precious finger. It still had a slight tan line, if I looked hard enough. "But don't forget me."

I touched the pendant. I finally looked up at her face, where a small tear slid down the side of her face, to her temple, into her luscious black hair.

"I've never forgotten you," she whispered, shaking her head. She was shaking. But she stayed still, her legs open to me. "I think about you every second of every day. And I will until I die."

I bent over and kissed her tear, feeling the salt mix with the evidence of her pleasure. The taste of it can only be described as bittersweet.

"Why are you crying, Lotte?"

"So many reasons..."

Were it any other time, she would turn away from me. She'd wrap her arms

around herself, and block me out. That's what she used to do after a fight. Going to bed angry was her thing. Then, when it got cold, she'd fold herself against my skin to steal my warmth, and we'd be right as rain in the morning. Those desperate hours where I waited for her to need me used to be torture. But I was a good a man, back then. I knew that she needed space.

But I couldn't let her do that now.

"Tell me," I commanded, kissing the other temple as another tear slid down. She sniffled, then swallowed.

"I'm sorry that I couldn't give you children." Her voice was so faint that I could barely hear her. But I didn't move. "I'm sorry I came between you and your father." My ear was so close to her lips, and I didn't want to miss a word. "I'm sorry that I'll lose you for it."

"You don't need to," I clenched my fists, feeling that familiar anger. "And I couldn't give a shit what my father thought."

"It was the *only* thing you wanted. The only requirement you had before we got married. You wanted children, and..."

"That was before!" I barely kept from punching the mattress. The sudden rise of my anger flooded my body, adrenaline coursing through my veins. "I don't care anymore. I don't! I just want my wife."

She shook her head. It was an insane, fast shake of almost disbelief. "You'll regret it if you..."

"No!" I yelled from somewhere in my gut. A desperate, angry cry that I wished she'd understand.

And this time, I gave in to the urge, my fist hitting the mattress hard close to her head. She turned her head to the side, her slender hand coming to her lips. Her fingers shook as she tried to hide the little sob that was trying to burst out.

I hated myself for my fucking outburst. But I knew she wasn't scared of me. That wasn't why she was crying. She wept because she was mine. Because she loved me. Because she didn't want to go. So I would make it hard for her. I would make it impossible for her to walk away.

I pressed my cock against her entrance, the tip desperately pulsing to find its target. I cupped her face, turning her back to me so that we were nose to nose. "That was before," I whispered. "Don't you understand? Yes, I wanted a family. But *you* were my family. You *are* my family. I don't need anything or anyone else."

"No." She shook her head again. "I don't want to be around when you resent me... that would... kill me."

"You're killing me by leaving." I felt my own tear slipping down my nose, landing on her bottom lip.

I couldn't wait anymore. I needed to claim her. I needed to complete the act that sealed us as man and wife. And maybe that was insane. It didn't make any logical sense. But something in me thought that was how all of this worked. My body was pleading for me to claim her in this primitive way.

"I put a wedge between you and your parents..."

"Fuck if I care," I said. "I don't want to talk about them when I'm about to be inside you."

With a slow thrust of my hips, my swollen cock buried into her soft, wet heat. I slid my arms under her shoulders, pulling her closer to me. Her forehead fell into the crook of my neck, as her hands grasped around my back. We tugged at each other, needing as much contact as possible. I put a hand on her thigh, wrapping her around my waist. She crossed her legs at the ankles, her hips lifting to meet mine.

"Sweet wife." I took the lobe of her ear into my mouth, gently sucking on it

until her head tilted backwards in pleasure.

I pistoned my hips, trying to keep the pace slow. Trying to savor the closeness. The pain. The desperation. The love... I wanted to feel it all. To feel all the torment and pleasure that came from being her husband.

“You do care. You always care about everything and everyone.” She shook her head. Maybe it was to emphasize her words, or to shake out the sudden intensity as our bodies joined. “It was better if I just... if I stopped being a problem for you. I wanted to... oh!”

I thrust into her to shut her up. I didn’t care to hear anymore.

“I love you,” I confessed, as my fingers dug into the skin of her back, feeling that little scar at the center.

She dug her nails into my shoulder in response, pulling me at me until there was no air between us.

“I love you,” I said again. “Do you hear me? I love you.”

“I love you!” she wept, her mouth trembling against my chest. “I love you so much, William McClanahan.”

“I love you too, Charlotte McClanahan.” It was cathartic to say her name. Her *proper* name, after I had mentally forced myself to think of her as Charlotte Rowen. A maiden name that didn’t fit her anymore. “Charlotte McClanahan.”

I was whispering her name, again and again, hoping that if I repeated it enough, she would own it.

“Yes,” she whispered in a light laugh. “I was never going to change my name. I couldn’t... let go of it.”

“Then don’t let go of me,” I growled. The anger was bubbling up again. I thrust in again. My hips slammed into hers, and she moved on the mattress with the impact. I had always *desperately* tried not to hurt her. I had rarely buried myself to the hilt, because my tip pushed her walls, until it pushed too



far. I was just a little too long for her body. I was always scared of bruising her on the inside... But this time, I didn't hold back. I bottomed out, and then some. Because I wanted to be selfish now. I had to mark her. To leave my teeth marks on her skin again and again until they became as permanent as those scars.

“Fuck!” she said as I slammed in again. Her eyes shot open, her head fell back, she sucked in air, her fingers clawing into my skin. “God damn!”

“Why does God get the credit, when this is all me, Mrs. McClanahan?”

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## 13. Mrs. McClanahan

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## Lotte

HE THRUST INTO ME so hard that my legs were quivering. My mind was in a mist, and I could only hold onto two thoughts - My name was still Mrs. Charlotte McClanahan, and my husband was fucking me with a reckless abandon that I didn't know he had. He had always been so gentle, and careful. And he had satisfied me in ways I never imagined! But this... this was so much more!

He thrust again, and it pushed me over the edge. My fingers raked over his back as I tried to pull him closer. I needed more. So much more...

I screamed! It came from somewhere deep in my gut. Somewhere visceral and primitive. Then I felt it. His hot seed spilling inside me with three, desperate jerks. He groaned into my ear, taking the shell between his teeth before he gave me another order.

"Tell me your name."

"Charlotte McClanahan."

"*Mrs.* Charlotte McClanahan," he corrected.

As I came down from the sweet ecstasy of pleasure, a sudden pain started in my heart. It was like an ink stain in water. Small at first, then growing to contaminate the clear fluid around it, blackening the beauty.

I started to shake my head, knowing that this sudden closeness was temporary. That it might not happen again. That a cruel twist of fate had made me incapable of bearing the children he had been desperate to have. The tears were faster to come. I felt them down my temple, and the tickle of snot hit my nose.

*And fuck... he was still inside me. Why did these feelings have to come now?*

“Charlotte...” he said my name so sweetly, and it made it all worse. He started to wipe my cheeks, pushing the tears away with his calloused palms.

“Let me go,” I said, trying to turn to my side, but he didn’t budge. He dropped his weight to fully pin me to the mattress.

“Don’t you fucking dare,” he warned, putting a reprimanding index finger against my nose. “Don’t you dare pull away now. I might have tolerated that before, but not now. Not anymore. I’m not giving you space. I’m not letting you put distance between us, *wife*.”

He said wife like it was an insult. Or a warning.

“I might not have signed the papers.” Why did his growl make me want to buck against his still half-hard cock in my pussy? “But you could have sent them back and had me fix the problem. You didn’t. Because you don’t want the divorce any more than I do.”

I shook my head. Denial is not only a river in Egypt but was the standard operating procedure in our marriage.

“I got busy... I was starting work with Brett...”

He grabbed my face, his thumb on one cheek, his index finger on the other. He squeezed so hard that I thought he’d leave bruises on my face. And I didn’t hate the feeling.

“Don’t *ever* say anyone else’s name when I’m still inside you!”

I felt the sudden tingle of arousal again as his words danced inside my brain. Good God, where had this possession been through the good years? This possessive, alpha asshole, with his demands in bed?

“Frankly, I’d rather you never say any name but mine for the rest of your life.” He pulled out of me just a little, then thrust back inside. He wasn’t hard, but he was... was he getting hard again? So soon? Before he even pulled out?

“I’m sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. Just fix it.” Another thrust, and my eyes shut. I swear, his tip was scrambling my guts. My head was in a fog, and each scrape of his shaft threatened to make me lose consciousness.

“I don’t think I can do another round...” How many orgasms had I had? Had I ever had multiples like that? No... I don’t think so. But my mind wasn’t in the right place to truly know...

“I know, wife.” He kissed my nose, then my mouth. He secured my legs against him, then rolled onto his side, never severing our body’s connection.

“Sleep.”

“Like... like this?” With him still inside me?

“Just like this.” He snaked his arm under my head, so that my cheek rested on his delt. “It’ll be easier for me, when I need to fill you again.”

He tilted my chin up and kissed me. It wasn’t deep or seductive. Just... possessive. He sucked my tongue into his mouth, his teeth grazing the tender flesh before letting it go.

“I... I don’t think I can sleep like this.” I felt his cock pulsing inside me, still. Half aroused, and more than ready.

“Up to you. But when I get fully hard again, I’m going to be right here,” He pulled my leg over his hip, bringing us tighter together. “I suggest you get some sleep, before I wake you up with another round.”

Jesus. Jesus. Jesus! He had never been like this. He had never been this demanding. He’d never been unwavering in his lust. Had he been like this all along, and just kept a lid on it?

I did fall asleep. Lulled by his steady breathing, and his warmth. And my dreams were... interesting. Filled with skin touching skin, tongues tangling, and his strong, thick arms. I felt like I was home.

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## 14. Danger Close

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## Mack

I WAS STILL MARVELING at how perfect she looked in my bed. How she looked with me still inside her. Was it more intimate because I wasn't fully hard? Because I wasn't doing it to seduce or get off... I was just casually touching her breast, with my cock nestled inside her as the blue moonlight streamed in from between the curtains, leaving a silver stripe over her naked body.

I could watch her for hours. I regretted every time I hadn't taken the time to do that more while we were married. I always thought I had more time, until we didn't. I swore I'd never take it for granted again.

I stroked her cheek, and she stirred, a small smile coming over her lips. I loved to run my thumb over that plump, lower lip, letting it curl down, to see her lily-white teeth. Her tongue darted out to meet my thumb, and I felt the blood drain south. My cock was begging for some attention, needing her again. With her eyes still closed, I wrapped an arm around her shoulders, and hiked her leg up my waist. I pulled out slightly, then buried myself deep inside her.

She moaned, her fingers flexed. But her eyes stayed closed.

“*Shhh*,” I said into her ear, putting a little kiss on her cheek. “You can stay asleep, sweet wife.”

I knew she wouldn't, and I didn't want her to. But God, the idea of using her even when she was asleep – having *permission* to do so – lit a fire in my gut that I hadn't had before.

“Mack,” she moaned, as I thrust inside her again. Slow, purposeful, gentle. I didn’t need to be rough with her in the moonlight, because she was mine. She had fallen asleep in my arms, in my bed. And there would be no more talk of divorce.

I kissed her ear.

“When we’re in here, you call me by my title. Husband.” I thrust again, and she whimpered, her eyes fluttering open. She looked at me with dreamy, dark eyes. Her lips curved up in a small smile, like she was a kitten that had drank too much warm cream, and was laying, satisfied in its bed. “Tell me what I want to hear.”

If she called me husband in her half-dreaming state, then I knew...

“Husband,” she smiled. “My husband.” Her arms wrapped around my neck, and her hips matched my rhythm.

“My wife,” I cooed into her ear, one arm grazing down the rough scars that peppered her shoulders, down her side. Then I cupped the curve of her ass, pulling her into me. She threw her head back and moaned, her skin flushing pink. “That’s right, wife. Give in to your husband. That’s it.”

I thrust and thrust, the flush growing on her skin. I knew the moment she came. Her pussy pulsed around me, flexing, and draining me as I emptied myself into her again.

It didn’t take her long before she fell onto her back, her arm up on the pillow, the other on my arm as she fell asleep, her legs askew. I reached over and cupped her cheek, pulling her so that she faced me. I stroked her jawline.

She didn’t stir this time, but I swear a small smile graced the corners of her mouth. She was smiling.

Had I ever felt more pride than that moment? Had I ever satisfied her as much as I had right then? I wasn’t sure. But I knew I wanted to do more. I



wanted to push things further. I had unlocked a possessiveness that I had been too worried to express.

But that was before. This *new* marriage would be different. It would be more. So much more.

I watched as she slept. She was so peaceful. I realized that she hadn't had any pain pills recently. She hadn't needed it. Not even after all of our marital activities. Was it possible that my cock had been the cure she needed? Because I'd have her take three a day, as needed.

My phone buzzed on the nightstand, and I scrambled to answer it before it woke her. The phone number wasn't saved, but I knew who it was.

"We have a fucking problem," Brett said, without preamble. I tightened my grip on Lotte, pulling her even closer to me.

"I'm listening," was all I said.

He dove right in. "We got her out of the safehouse because they moving towards it. I took her to you because I knew that no one would know your location... you cover your tracks, bro."

"Not enough to stay off your radar," I grumbled.

"We both have a lot of friends in common, you know that," Brett said with a chuckle. Then he was all business again. "Anyway, I thought they were coming to the safehouse. We had the place set for an ambush, but then they changed course." There was that prickle in the back of my neck. That feel of doom. "Best I can tell... they're coming to you."

"Fuck!" I said under my breath. I still wasn't willing to wake her up. Not for this, because there was nothing she could do about it. It was best to let her get her rest.

"Yeah, fuck. And I can't get my men to you in time, we're all hemmed up in the city." I was shaking with a newfound rage as he kept on talking. "Judging

by their pattern, you're looking at them getting to you by nightfall. I won't be able to get there on time to mount any defense with my team—"

"Fuck!" Again, I said it under my breath, trying to keep her asleep. She adjusted, coming closer towards me. Then she resumed her light breathing as she went back to sleep.

"Fuck, indeed."

"Thanks for nothing, ass wipe," I said, "I've got it handled from here."

I wasn't thoroughly sure how. But I would get it handled.

"Listen, I..." Brett tried to speak, but I stopped him.

"Send me the intel you have," I blurted. "I'll get a team together. You know how to reach me."

I hung up on him. I had phone calls to make. A lot of them. I didn't have time for any of this jaw-jacking.

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## 15. The Family's All Here

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## Lotte

I FELT HIS LIPS tracing their way down my throat, over the pendant that dangled between my breasts. He grabbed my wrists and pinned them to the mattress before he took one nipple into his mouth and sucked it until I moaned. My hips bucked of their own accord, trying to create some friction for the growing ache.

“*Mmm, Mack,*” I whispered, my eyes shut to better handle the sensations he was invoking in my body. “Will you wake me up like this every day for the rest of our lives.”

“It depends,” he let go of my nipple with a loud pop. “What’s your name?”

I had expected him to say something like that. Being married to a man for a decade, you learn a thing or two about their habits.

“Mrs. William McClanahan.” I smirked, knowing that this was an even better answer than the one I gave him the night before.

He groaned again, biting on my throat. “Say it again.”

And I did. But then I felt the tingles of pain. The soreness from last night, and the familiar tug and bruised tenderness on my ribs. I was slow to realize how much it hurt. It happened with every pulse, the ache getting sharper as my mind became aware of the world.

“I’m not sure I can go again.” I was practically pouting as I said it. “I’m hurting.”

He kissed my nose, nipping the tip of it before he got up. When he came back, he had water, and a beautiful white pain pill in his hand. I swallowed it, and waited, trying to breathe through the ache in my ribs. Instead of feeling

that, I decided to concentrate on the ache between my thighs. *That* was a much more pleasant pain.

His finger started to trace my shoulder blade. The familiar lines he followed made me stiffen.

“Where’s this scar from?” he asked.

I suppose that it was time to finally catch up after all the years that we had been apart. If we were going to be husband and wife, then he should understand the last few years. After all, the consequences of them would affect him. It was only fair he knew what he was signing up for.

“It was from the gauntlet.” His fingers paused. “I had to go through it to join the Scorpio Network.” I grabbed a pillow and put it under my face, as I turned away from him. It would be easier to talk about this if I wasn’t looking right at him. It was easier to stay disconnected. “For almost an hour, I had to fight their commanders. They kept coming at me, again and again. I must have been knocked out three times, but I got up. And in the end, I got in.”

He resumed tracing my scars, his fingers lightly grazing the skin, and sending warmth down my spine. His touch was dulling the pain.

“There was this huge Viking of a guy, Magnus,” I chuckled at the ridiculous name. Though, I suppose it was appropriate. “He really had it in for me. I don’t think he liked women in his command.” I could still see him. His neanderthal features, and his looming size. “He always watched me like a hawk.”

“Any of these scars from him?” Mack had been so quiet for so long that his voice almost made me jump in surprise.

“The one on my bicep.” Mack leaned down, searching for it. When he finally saw the white, jagged mark, he started to trace it as well, soothing the entire

arm with his attention. “He lost his temper about a shipment that the feds picked up... he threw a knife and it went in my arm.”

His touch paused, then resumed, as he probably took that information in.

“I got him back. I took out his right eye.” I smiled up at Mack who lifted one brow in question. “To be fair, the shipment was found because of me. So... he was kinda right.” I smiled to myself. “In fact, their operations should be seized up and put away before Christmas. They just don’t know it yet.”

I smirked, wishing that I could have been there to see their faces as each of their warehouses were seized, and every one of them was arrested.

“Merry fucking Christmas, Magnus,” I said with a chuckle.

Mack still snorted. “Is he alive?”

“As far as I know.”

“Then he won’t be for long.” The deadly malice in his voice made me feel warm and fuzzy inside. This possessive, protective version of himself was incredibly sexy.

I leaned back on my elbows, just enough to be able to pull him down for a kiss. Just a quick one. But he stayed close, so that I spoke against his lips.

“You know that the job doesn’t work that way. We follow the law. He’ll be put away.” Of course, that didn’t mean that I didn’t *want* him dead.

“In the meantime, he’s going to be gunning for you, huh?” Mack pushed me back down and began to weave his fingers through my hair.

“You’re spoiling me, Mr. McClanahan,” I said with a moan, as I leaned into his fingertips like a cat begging for more scratches.

“I got a call last night,” he whispered. “From your boss.”

I stopped moving, surprised by the abrupt change of subject. He had the weirdest dislike about saying Brett’s name. They had been ranger buddies,

but now, Mack couldn't stand him. He treated the guy like Voldemort. Or Beetlejuice.

"We're expecting company." His hand around my shoulder tightened. "Bad kind. People from the Scorpio Network are coming. They'll probably be here by nightfall."

I tried to get up. This meant I had to get out of here. Or we had to start preparing. But he wouldn't let me go. He tightened his grip on me.

"I called the team, and they're inbound."

"What team?"

"Taz, Goose, Griff, Veder," he rattled off the nicknames, knowing that I'd remember every single one of them. "They'll be here between breakfast and lunch."

I couldn't help but smile. Not because I was okay with the approaching hostiles, but because those guys had answered the call. I had thought that after I left Mack that none of them would want anything to do with me. That they'd hate me.

"Do they... Do they know it's about me?" I whispered.

"Yes," Mack said, giving a lopsided grin, as his finger trailed up to my hair. "They came without question. Though, I think you'll have to smooth things over with Taz. She took you leaving really, really hard."

"She was always our problem child." She was also the one that could break my heart.

More than once, each one of those guys had ended up on our couch, or crying in our kitchen, puking out their problems as we plied them with beer, wine, or something stronger. Taz, more than the others. She had eyes for Mack – not in the attraction type of way, but the way a daughter looks up to a dad, begging for his approval, guidance, and hoping for that hint of pride. I had

nursed that relationship when I could, because I thought she needed it. Mack did too, I think.

I got up, and went to the kitchen, hoping that the duck and other food was still salvageable. The kids would need to eat when they got here.

Mack's phone pinged, and he looked at his flipper. "First one's heading up the road now."

I was at the oven, applying orange glazing on the duck when the doorbell rang.

Mack opened the door, and the man who stood there was a stranger to me.

He looked thoroughly disgusting. Dirt covered his tan Army boots. His jeans were torn and patched up, and his shirt was missing a few buttons. The big fluffy Army jacket he wore had nothing but the flag. There was a dark green discoloration where the patch of his name tape should have been. Beneath the nest of his uncombed hair and beard were two green eyes that looked at me with a sadness I couldn't understand.

Did he know me?

"Hey, Top." Did this homeless man just call my husband by his rank? Sure, Top was short for Top Sergeant, or First Sergeant. It was a common expression. The man could have been guessing. But the way he said it made me think that he knew my husband.

"Hey, Veder."

I paused, almost dropping the damn bird. I straightened so fast that it pulled at my stitches, and I winced. Mack abandoned the door and ran to my side.

"What happened?" he asked, lifting my shirt to look at my wound.

"I'm fine, I just pulled it. Sorry." I tried to laugh, to reassure him that I was okay. "That was a bit dramatic."

He touched the wound, the space around the stitches, and then looked up at



my face, then back at the scarring skin. He almost looked angry, as if the scars were taunting him, and saying rude things about his mother.

“You should take another pill,” he said.

“I’m fine!” I insisted. “I was just surprised to... to...”

I looked at Veder, squinting to see if I could find the man under all that greasy, unwashed hair. He looked back at me, his hands in his pockets, his face downcast, as if he expected me to lash out at him. How strange. He was never one to have that kind of demeanor. He was always such a confident, happy boy.

“What’s wrong, Greg?” I finally pulled out the duck and placed it on the stove grate to cool. “Greg Veder?”

Then I walked over to him, cupping his rough cheeks in my hands. He looked windburned, and sunburned, and dirty all at the same time. He didn’t smell, which was a small mercy. But everything about him looked terrible.

Could this possibly be Greg Veder, the man so handsome he used to make young women swoon with his sheer presence alone? My husband’s former teammate? No. There was no way. But I looked deep into those emerald eyes, and it was him alright. He had a hint of crow’s feet in the corners, but there was still a spark of that young man he had been. Beneath all the shag was the handsome man I had known.

“What happened to you, son?” I asked, turning his head one way, then the other, to see if I could find the angle that would let me into the poor boy’s brain.

“I’m all right, Momma M-” he paused, realizing that he was about to call me by a nickname that might not be appropriate anymore, given the circumstances. “Ms. Charlotte,” he corrected, his ears turning red with embarrassment. “I just... civilian life is different.”

“What have you been doing with yourself?” Mack asked, putting his hand on my shoulder, and pulling me away from the boy.

“Riding the rails, mostly,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Doing some farm work for room and board, that sort of thing.”

“Jesus,” I looked at Mack. “Did he get dishonorably discharged?” Realizing that I had just spoken about him as if he wasn’t here, I turned back to Veder.

“Did something happen? Your disability alone should...”

“Nah, Momma,” he said with a shrug of that burly shoulder. “I’ve got my disability and all that, but I just...”

He shrugged again. He was starting to remind me of a teenage boy that had been caught doing something he wasn’t supposed to.

“Leave him alone, Lotte,” Mack whispered into my ear. “You missed a lot in the last few years.”

He planted a kiss on my temple.

Greg Veder looked between us, confused. Then he looked down at his feet again.

“I set up the guest house for you,” Mack said, ready to put on his boots to walk him out the little house.

Greg started to shake his head, his insane hair swishing back and forth. “Is Griff coming?”

He meant Kai Griffith. Kai had been one of the best soldiers my husband had ever seen. He had run into some personal problems, mainly to do with his wife. So many soldiers have marital problems, though. Military life isn’t easy for young couples. I’m sure the kids had worked it out by now.

“Yeah, him, Taz, and Goose.” Mack saying those names brought me back to happier times of backyard barbecues out in Pinehurst, North Carolina. The place I had been born, and where I had met and fallen in love with Mack.

“I think I’ll kick my boots off at the barn,” Greg said, pursing his plump lips.

“Look, man, if you don’t want to stay with them, I can get a room in this house ready for you. It’ll only take a sec...”

“Nah, I think it’s best if I just stay in the barn.”

“It’s not even weatherproofed!” Mack protested; his eyes concerned.

“I’m weatherproof.” He pointed to himself with a smile.

There. Right there! There was the hint of a smile. A smile I had known well when he was a little prankster.

“I’ll probably be more comfortable with a sleeping roll on a haystack anyway.” He turned to walk away, and I reached out to grab his sleeve.

“Greg, son, what’s happened?” I pleaded, wanting to know what had hurt my boy so much. What had haunted him so much?

I wanted to bring him into the house and feed him. The instinct was so strong, it was taking everything I could to remember that we were expecting people - *bad* people - soon.

Mack grabbed me by the bicep, and with a slight turn of his head, he let me know that we’d talk about it later.

Something had happened to this team. Something I wasn’t privy to.

“Go drop your things, then come back for a good meal,” I pleaded. He looked gaunt under all that hair. I bet if I hosed him down, he’d be like a cat, losing all his fluff and revealing the skinniest of bodies underneath.

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## 16. The Kids Aren't Alright

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## Mack

JESUS, SHE HAD MISSED a lot. I forgot that she wasn't there for the whole Veder-Griffith war, and then the subsequent Griffith-Taz conflict that almost turned into a full-on Tombstone shoot-out. Christ, she didn't even know about Goose.

I had so much to catch her up on, but I had no idea where to start. We watched through the window as Greg "VD" Veder grabbed his olive, dirty rucksack and sleeping roll and trudged to the barn.

"He looks awful," she lamented, her little brow creased down the center. "Did he walk here?"

It sure looked like it. There was no vehicle, and no tire tracks on the gravel.

"The kids aren't alright," I said, reaching out to take Lotte's hand in mine. She laced her fingers with mine, our palms squeezing together.

I could already feel the stress headache coming on. The mental load of taking care of these warriors and all of their intense feelings, and even more intense personal problems, had threatened to send me into an early cardiac arrest. But just having her here lessened my burden immensely.

Just having her here would make things better. I just knew it, the same way I knew that the sun would rise in the east tomorrow.

There were creases on the edge of my wife's mouth.

I wondered what she'd look like if she had a little gray in her temples. She was always the prettiest thing in a room, of course, but the prospect of watching her age did something to me. Something good. It gave me a sense of comfort, and warmth.

Hell, my grays were from these guys. So maybe she'd catch up soon enough. "I don't even know if I have time to get into it," I said, looking down at my phone as it alerted me of another visitor. It was a sky-blue minivan, which could only be one person. Tristan "Goose" Goss, dad extraordinaire. His vehicle came to a squeaking halt on the gravel, and he stepped out in what could only be described as "dad-wear". A button-down Hawaiian shirt with doggy silhouettes in lieu of flowers, cargo pants, and tennis shoes.

The guy was clearly dressing to amuse his kids, having now been consumed by his parental duties.

Like Veder, he had a beard, but his was trim. It looked like scruff from a few days of no shaving. It looked like a product of a lack of time, rather than an attempt to push people away.

"That's... that's Goose?" My woman asked, and I pushed her out the door.

She'd want to greet this one. And I hoped that he could do me the courtesy of telling her his tale. Saving me from the gut-punch.

"Momma Mack!" Goose said, his arms wide open as he gathered her into a tight, spinning hug. "Ah! You're a sight for sore eyes." He looked over at me from over her shoulder as he put her down. "Hope I didn't miss anything. I had to drop the kids off at the in-law— their grandparents."

I tilted my head, understanding his hesitation. Were they still his in-laws? I wasn't sure.

"How are the kids?" Lotte asked, looking at the family stickers on the back of the minivan. "Is the High School Honor Student for Tyler? Oh my God! I can't believe he's in High School already!"

"Sure is, Momma," Goose beamed with pride. "Just started his freshman year. He's in all Honors and AP classes this year. Thank God, he's smart like his mother."

“That’s amazing!” Lotte beamed, clasping her hands together. “And Mary?”

“They’re both doing great. Running me ragged, but great.”

“How’s Sandy?”

And there it was. The fall of the axe.

Goose looked at me, and I shrugged, unsure what to say. I should have told her, but I’m a coward, and this was going to sting. I guess I thought Goose could lessen the blow with his presence, but that was also a pretty dick move on my part.

“Sandy... she...” Goose pinched the space beneath his eyes, trying to stymie the tears threatening to spill over. “She passed away a couple of years ago.”

“Oh my God!” I knew it would all crash on her at once. “What happ—” She shut her mouth, realizing that she already knew. We all did. Sandy had been haunted by a darkness Goose couldn’t save her from. “I’m so sorry.”

Goose squeezed her shoulder and gave her an appreciative smile. Then he shook off his own darkness, plastering a smile on his lips.

“I’m glad to see you, Momma Mack.” He looked around, taking in his surroundings. “Also, glad to be operating again! Is the gang all here?”

“Not quite,” I answered, as my phone pinged another intruder coming up the road. Though this one didn’t need the alert. I heard the motorcycle long before it arrived. I only needed *one* guess to know what insane human being would be riding a motorcycle in the middle of a frosty New York Winter, and it was the banshee known as Taz Guerro.

Clad in black from head to toe, she rode on an onyx Ducati like a messenger of doom. She stopped her bike with a skid, her thick, black booted foot landing on the gravel. She turned off the beast she rode, and pulled off her helmet. She smiled at me, shaking out her jet-black that had been knotted in a long braid.

“Hey, Top,” she said with a small wave. “Goose! You old son of a bitch! I’m surprised to not see a gaggle of brats hanging around your neck.” She punched him in the stomach. “You eating for two, or what?”

Goose rubbed his slightly growing belly. Truthfully, he had gained some weight and probably didn’t have a six pack anymore, but he was still far from having anything like a Dad Bod.

“I’m busy,” he said with a chagrined smile. “Not all of us can be all free-spirited, unattached and shit.”

“Sounds like a *you* problem, my friend.”

“Fact!” Goose said, giving her a finger gun point, before he ran a hand through his growing blonde hair.

She finally turned to Lotte, and stood stock still. I had told her she was here. But I don’t think the reality of my words had ever settled with her. It rarely did, until she came face to face with something. She wasn’t much of an auditory learner, I suppose. You could tell her something a million times, but until it was ready to punch her in the face, she did not give a shit about it.

“Charlotte McClanahan,” she said, with a curt, impersonal nod.

“Taz...” Lotte said, folding a little on herself. I knew she wanted to reach out and hug the girl. They had been as thick as thieves once. Not quite best friends. They were more like that mom and daughter on that one show... Geller Girls or something like that.

Taz went to her bike, opening a large black cargo container, and pulled out a duffel not that dissimilar from Veder’s. Hers was black, though. Custom painted with white skulls. The girl was into expressing herself, that’s for sure. Whether it was paint on her clothes, or ink on her skin.

“I came packing,” she said, meaning guns. “But I assume you’ve got enough ammo to ford off a zombie apocalypse. So do we have a plan?”



“I’ve got a defense plan, yeah,” I said. “But first, we’ll eat. Griff isn’t here yet.”

“What kind of security plan do you have?” she pushed.

“CCTV and motion detectors that will alert you across the property. I’ll have it routing to your phones, while you guys chow down.” She stepped into the house without my invitation, and ignored the forlorn, longing look on Lotte’s face.

My poor wife was feeling stung by the rejection. Too hurt to see that Taz’s “all business” demeanor was her way of coping with a past hurt. If Lotte just touched her, her hard shell would melt like an easter egg with a soft center, and she’d be putty in her hands. But that was something they’d need to figure out on their own.

“Guerro!” I called after her. She paused in the foyer, turning her head towards me. Since I used her last name instead of her nickname, she knew I meant business. “Eat first. I know you and VD probably didn’t eat at all today, and I need you at your fighting best.” I nodded to Goose. “He’s probably had nothing but cheerios, and not been able to sit down to eat for the last couple years. Don’t be a dick.”

“Ugh! Come on, if we’re supposed to mount a defense...” She rolled her eyes like a teenager.

“We implement a rest plan, consult about logistics, and take care of our bodies and minds first. Then we can talk about the actual intel.” Brett Bradley had sent me what information he could, dumping it onto a secure server. Some things were blacked out for security, but I got a clear enough picture of what I was fighting against, and which one of those Scorpio network punks were in our area.

I’d get the print outs and give them to Taz, so she could devour it while she

ate. Let her avoid any awkward dinner conversation...

What was I going to do about VD and Griff? I wasn't sure.

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17. What are you Thankful For?

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## Lotte

I WAS HAPPY TO have most of his team back around the table. I had missed them. Even if Taz still pretended that I didn't exist, it was still nice to see her. To see she was breathing, and in somewhat good health.

"Are you still hungry Greg?" I asked, coming over with the pan of duck meat, which he had consumed in one large inhale. The boy was starving.

"Thanks Momma," he said, lifting his plate. He looked at me with a crooked smile, as if this little gesture was the greatest kindness. What had happened to the poor boy? I wanted Mack to tell me, but we didn't have time. I couldn't get him alone to question him. Even if we had, I don't think he would have told me.

"VD not eating enough pussy?" Taz said under her breath.

Goose chuckled, quietly. Mack gave her a reprimanding look, and she zipped her mouth. None of that surprised me. What *did* shock me was the look on Greg's face. I still refused to call him by his nickname, VD, which was short for Venereal Disease. It was a jab at his popularity with the ladies.

That had been something he was proud of – as most young men would be – but not today. He was... embarrassed. He hunched down into his chair, his brows creased, as if he didn't want to be there. Like he didn't want the attention.

There was just something so *off* about the dynamic between them. They still seemed like friends, but there was a heaviness in the air. Like they were separated by an impenetrable fog, and couldn't reach one another. They

weren't the single unit that had been a shield wall, linked seamlessly into each other. They were... puzzle pieces that didn't quite fit together.

Not to say that Brett Bradley and my team weren't great. They were. But we worked solo. We were agents, working independently to bring down international criminal organizations. Sometimes we operated in the states, but mostly, we spent our time infiltrating others in order to bring them down. I had brought down the Scorpio Network.

For my efforts, I got a knife in the gut, and had to sneak my way into Moldova. That wasn't a terrible pay out.

But I had accomplished my mission alone.

Mack always got to operate in a team he trusted. I envied that. His team was so often my only sense of connection to a family, that when I left Mack, I felt like I was losing all the ties that kept me grounded.

Now, they were here, at a grand table in the middle of a Victorian house with taupe-colored walls, and ancient, wooden furniture. A Dickensian dream.

I could already imagine how wonderful this place would look at Christmastime. I could put up evergreen boughs, and mistletoe. I'd put red velvet ribbons around every banister, and huge bows on each door. Grumpy old Mack would scoff at it, while secretly loving it at the same time.

"How was your Thanksgiving, Goose?" I asked, sitting down in front of him while I served him a plate of potatoes and duck.

"It was great. Kids got to hang out with their grandparents, and I got to have a beer without all hell breaking loose." He took the plate and dug in. "It's nice to be able to sit down without having to get someone juice every fifteen minutes."

"Oh, you poor thing," I said with a laugh. "Glad the grandparents are helping out."

I assumed they were Sandy's parents, not his own.

"Yeah, well... you do what you gotta do. It's too bad that grandma and grandpa are going on a cruise for Christmas. That holiday is going to be absolutely nuts with just us." He rubbed a hand over his face. "Last Christmas dinner was a disaster. I burned everything. The kids were pulling me in every direction... killed all the magic. Plus, it was our first one without..."

He paused, not needing to say her name.

No one said anything, as we all pushed our food around. I felt terrible for him.

"Oh!" I said, suddenly excited. "Why don't you bring the kids here for Christmas! I can cook for you, and I'm sure Mack won't..."

I paused, my hands coming to my mouth. Had I just invited people to someone else's house without thinking? As if we were still a couple? As if I'd still be here when...

"You should," Mack said, handing him a can of soda and a glass full of ice. "Bring the kids over." He sat down beside me, putting his hand across the backrest of my chair. "We can go sledding on the hill, and the fireplaces should all be working by then. Plus, I'm sure Lotte will try to decorate this place like the Paramus Mall."

He toyed with the hair at the base of my scalp.

"I'd love that," I whispered, smiling at Mack. Were we doing this? Staying together? Really?

Then my heart sank. What about Mack's father? He usually came over for Christmas... is that what would happen this year? Would it just end in another fight? Another screaming match? Me, getting my shoes thrown at me as I drove away?

“So, we’re just pretending that she’s gonna stay?” Taz’s irritated voice crawled over the table like a crawling, poisonous gas, ruining the sunshine and rainbows of denial I was living in. “I mean, she left before, what makes you think she won’t now...”

“Taz!” Mack said in a low, warning growl.

“I’m just saying what everyone’s thinking!” She looked at me with a pair of downturned brown eyes that harbored the bitterness of an angry sea. “Is she only here because she needed something? Is she gonna leave as soon as it’s all over? Why bother even making plans, when you know they’re bullshit.”

“That’s enough, Guerro,” Mack said, invoking her last name.

She shut her mouth and still looked at me with an angry fury that broke my heart. She had no reason to trust me. I knew that.

“Thank you for coming,” I said through the lump in my throat. “I’m sure it’s not easy for you to come help when...”

“I came because Top called me.” I braced myself, knowing that the next words were going to cut. “Not because of you.”

Goose was staring down at his plate, his fork hovering over the potatoes. Mack’s hand stilled on my nape, then gave me a reassuring squeeze.

“Bring the kids, Goose,” Mack said, ignoring Taz. “We’ll be here to help you. Maybe you can grab a nap in a guest room. I’m sure you’re pretty sleep deprived.”

“Fact.” He said by way of acknowledgement. His hovering fork speared a piece of meat, and we all resumed eating.

Taz went back to the folder in front of her, reading. Her mind was working at double speed. That photographic memory of hers was taking it page by page.

“The Scorpio Network?” She looked at me, searching for confirmation.

“How did you get in with them?”

I put down my fork, swallowing hard. “It took me two years. I had to create a persona that would work, then run their gauntlet.”

“Their gauntlet? You’re kidding.” She looked at me skeptically. “People die during that thing.”

“I passed out three separate times, but I made it through.” I looked at Mack. His jaw flexed. He was grinding his teeth. His hand stilled in my hair, as he took a deep breath, letting it out through his nose before his hand resumed its sweet caresses.

He didn’t look at me. His eyes got distant, as he brought his other hand to his mouth, as if he was the thinker. I knew something was swirling in his brain. None of it was pleasant.

“This contact,” Taz raised the folder in her hand, “The one that supplied the intel says that they moved you because Scorpio was on his way to the safe house where you were recovering.” She opened it up to a specific page, though she didn’t need to read it. It was already in the vault of her enormous brain. “Then they bypassed it, after you were moved, and now they’re coming here. Probably by nightfall at the earliest. So how did they know you were here? Was your contact bugged?”

“No, they debugged the vehicle, and the safe house. Not to mention that we run jammers all the time, so they can’t trace a signal.” I swallowed, finally realizing the puzzle that was my imminent execution.

“Great,” Taz said, looking down at the folder again and shaking her head. “Now Top’s in the line of fire because of you. As if you needed to cause more problems...”

“Taz!” Mack slammed a fist onto the table, making all the cutlery jump and clatter. Goose, Veder and I stilled as the dishes settled back down, and the rattling ceased.



Taz only pursed her lips, then kept on reading. Then her brows furrowed. She picked up a piece of paper and flipped it back and forth. Then looked at me. Then back on the paper.

“Did they suspect you before you got out?” Taz asked, her eyes still on the files, only paying attention to me with half her brain as she looked for answers to questions that only she knew.

“I thought they did. But a week before the Transnistria deal went down, Magnus...”

“That’s Magnus Bjornstad?” Taz interrupted, turning a page. “The Scorpio Network’s front man?”

“That’s the one.” I answered. “He shared a drink with me. I figured that meant that my cover was solid. I have no idea what it was, because it was strong as fuck, and I passed out afterwards, but...”

“You passed out?” Taz lifted her head, looking at me with unblinking eyes.

“How soon after?”

“I don’t really know, I don’t remember...”

“Did he drink the same thing? Like you saw him pour the drinks, and he had some himself?”

“No, he just handed me a glass...”

With a terrifying flick of her wrist, a switch blade was in her hand. “VD, hold Top back.”

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## 18. You're Bugging

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## Mack

“PUT THE KNIFE DOWN, Guerro!” I roared, as VD held back my arms.

“Stay the fuck away from my wife!”

The girl had lost her fucking mind. She was taking everything too far, and she needed to sit the fuck down. But VD... man... the guy was strong. He held me in a vice grip from behind, his arms across my chest, holding me in place with his huge fucking weight.

“Goose!” I ordered, “Take her down.”

Bo lifted his groggy head from the couch, and barked. Goose looked at me, then at VD. Then Taz. Then at Lotte.

He stood up, wiped his mouth, and went to Lotte. “Will you lift your shirt?”

Lotte looked confused. But...

“Don’t fucking do it, Lotte,” I growled. “Taz, I swear to God, you’re going to be dead to me.”

Bo kept on barking, coming off the couch and trotting over to the dining nook. He looked at everyone, then circled around Lotte, barking at Taz.

“We’re looking for a half inch sized bump, like a horse-pill sized ibuprofen,” Taz said, mechanically, hovering over my wife who stayed in her seat. Bo barked up at anyone who came near her, baring his teeth. *Good dog.* “Get away, you mangy old mutt.”

Bo kept on barking, and I wanted to be right there with him, yapping my head off to get that insane psychopath away from my wife. But somewhere in the back of my mind was Taz’s description of the bug.

Realization crept over me slowly. So slowly. And it did on Lotte as well.

It took her less than a few seconds to figure it out. Fucking Taz. She was a bitch, but it was the price she paid for the processor she called a brain.

Lotte lifted her shirt, to the place on her spine, right below her bra-line, where that strange scar looked back at me, with the bump underneath. I had assumed it was some kind of tissue buildup, or calcium deposit... *something*. Scars do weird things. The body isn't always the smartest thing in the world. "Go ahead and cut it out," Lotte said, grinding her teeth, leaning forward on the table.

Taz looked down at it with a look of glee that made me sick. She *wanted* to cut into my wife. The fucking insane serial killer. Did she hate her that much? Really? For what? For a few missed phone calls?

The knife glinted in her hand, ready to pierce into Lotte's skin. But she paused. Her eyes darted around my wife's bared flesh, as if noticing all the little scars at once. Her mouth opened, then shut. Then, her eyes fell on the black stitches of Lotte's new wound, and her brows furrowed together in concern and indignation. As if the cuts on my wife's skin was a personal insult to her.

Who knew what connections happened in that twisted mind of hers.

I might have loved her like she was my own kid, but that head of hers was a mystery Freud couldn't dissect.

"We should let Charlotte lie down," Taz lowered her arm, as it swung at her side. "You should get your med kit out, Goose."

"Just cut it out," Lotte said. "It's... I don't like knowing it's there. I want it out now."

The slight waver in her voice made me pause in my fight against Veder. He loosened his grip. I looked at Taz, who looked back at me with a sudden look of remorse.

With a small, annoyed sigh, she turned to Goose. She looked like this whole thing had been a huge irritation for her.

She handed Goose the knife, planting the hilt in his open palm.

“They didn’t bug the car, alright.” Taz went back to her seat, and flipped a paper over the table, and it twirled along the surface, stopping right in front of Lotte. “They bug their human merchandise. Some of their escaped trafficking victims were tagged, like wild animals.” *Human* merchandise was her cold way of referring to slaves. “Or... dogs. Just in case they have to catch and release, and probably to keep tabs on their buyers.” She looked at my wife with an impassive, unsympathetic gaze. “Some people hypothesized that they bug their soldiers too.”

If you didn’t know Taz, you wouldn’t realize what she was doing. She was *allowing* Lotte to know her thought process. She was explaining herself. She was reaching out, in her own, twisted way.

Taz looked at me, then at my wife. “Looks like we just confirmed it.”

My phone buzzed again, and I looked on my phone to see a midnight blue Cadillac CT5-V driving down the bumpy dirty road. That thing’s suspension was gonna take a real beating.

“Griff is here.” I flatly stated. No one else on the team would ever drive a car that swanky.

VD clenched his fists, his eyes looking frightened for a moment, before calming down to placid indifference.

“Oh, this is going to be so fun!” Taz clapped her hands and rubbed them together with a malicious grin.

“Taz! I swear to God, you’re the biggest instigator of chaos this world has ever fucking known. Can you lay off?” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I love you, but you are grinding my fucking gears.”

She was like the teenage daughter I never wanted. If she had been *my* daughter, I would have sent her to boarding school by now. And not a nice one. Like the kind where drill sergeants scream at them 24/7 and make them hike and do push-ups as punishment. If she hadn't joined the Army, she would have been put away for brawling or arson. Maybe both. At the same time.

"Sorry, Top," she said, without a hint of contrition. "I'll keep the commentary to myself. Jeez."

I snorted. She was funny, I'll give her that.

Lotte looked at me, concern and confusion written on her face. "What happened with Griff?"

Goose and Taz both scoffed, but said nothing, choosing to dramatically avert their eyes to avoid everyone in the room. When I heard the crackle of tires on the driveway outside, I opened the door to greet my prodigal son.

"Christ, I don't even want to get into it..." I grumbled, as the sport's car door opened, and out came the man himself, in business casual, but with boots, and a pair of aviators. His hair was thick, dark and parted to the side. Unlike Veder and Goose, his face was clean-shaven, giving him a youthful, serious appearance. I raised my hand, "Griff!"

He nodded, pulling off his sunglasses and hooking it onto his collar.

"The gang's all here?" Griff said, his eyes falling on the motorcycle, and the van. He nodded, knowing who those occupants were. Then he sheepishly looked around for another vehicle.

I waved him into the house. He'd know soon enough that we had a guest without a mode of transportation.

He went to the trunk of his car, pulled out a bag about the size of a gym bag, but far heavier. He pulled it over his shoulder, shut the trunk and followed me

into the house. Sure enough, once he was in view of the table, he looked at the faces and, just like Lotte, quizzically looked at the long-haired Veder, before deciding that it *was* him, then giving him the cold shoulder.

His eyes landed on Taz, and he sneered. “Well, shit. I’m surprised to see you with all ten fingers.”

“There’s only one important one.” She raised the middle one and smiled like a maniac.

“Thank God that’s safe,” Griff gave a slight chuckle, as he rolled his eyes.

“Or else you’d never be able to express all your complex feelings.”

“Fuck you, Griff,” she said with an adorable smile. “Not all of us have to be such emo bitches all the time.”

“Should we... leave the room?” Goose said, indicating the rest of us, and pointing with his thumbs to the sliding doors that led to the yard. “I feel like these two need some privacy.”

“No!” Taz and Griff said in unison.

“I’d rather get rectal cancer than be alone with this guy.” Her peppy voice and smile were as fake as could be.

“Holy fuck, I should have just gotten you out of here, Lotte,” I rubbed my palm over my forehead. “These guys are just going to kill each other, and we’ll be fighting the Scorpio Network alone.”

“The Scorpio Network?” Griff asked with barely repressed surprise. He looked at my wife, as if trying to decipher how she had made an enemy of them.

“Catch up, ass wipe,” Taz said, pushing the folder across the desk towards him as he walked to the last empty seat.

To her credit, she briefed him in a concise, unfeeling way. As would be expected from an intelligence specialist... except she *wasn’t* one. She was an

engineer because, in her words, she loved to blow shit up.

Griff, for his part, watched Taz speak with unblinking attention. His eyes darted to her mouth, her eyes, her hands. He was manic, trying to take in every detail of her.

“So, Goose? Got a scalpel?” She almost bounced with glee, as she looked at Lotte. “Let’s cut a bitch!”

“Watch it!” I have never wanted to slap a woman so much as I wanted to slap Taz in that moment.

Lotte grabbed my arm, and gave me a small shake of her head. “It’s okay.”

I could see the desperation in her eyes. She was like a mother trying to keep the piece with her bickering children.

I rolled my eyes and turned back to Taz. “Jesus, can you at least get the psycho look off your face?”

“No,” Lotte grabbed my forearm, instantly calming me down. “She’s right. And I’m guessing there are no narcotics, except the ones I was already on. I haven’t had any since this morning, and I should stay sharp. So... we should just do it the old-fashioned way and get it over with?”

“Can I do the honors?” Taz asked, her eyes gleaming with excitement.

“No.” Goose said, shaking his head. I *hope* he regretted letting her approach my wife with a knife in the first place. “We both knew you weren’t going to do it.”

“Was to!” Taz protested.

“Nuh-uh,” Griff said, even though he hadn’t been here for the event itself. He was doing it to piss her off, and she fell for it every time.

“Is that a fucking challenge?” she narrowed her eyes and gave him a menacing smile.

He blew her a kiss, and she flinched as if the kiss was attacking her in mid-



air.

“I’m not letting you anywhere near her with a knife until you figure your shit out,” I added, using the blade of my flattened hand to emphasize my point.

“What do I need to figure out?” Her almond eyes went large, round and innocent. God, she had the face of a child. But the heart of a serial killer.

“Your shit,” I said, without specifying anymore. I turned to Lotte. “Where do you want to do it?”

She looked at me with a placid, almost serene look.

“Couch? I assume the leather is somewhat stain proof?” Was she smiling to try and reassure me? Fuck. Why did that make me feel worse? “I’ll be okay.”

She got up, went to the bathroom.

I noted the slight stiffness in her gait. Was the wound acting up? Was she sore? Had I been too hard, pun intended, on or in her last night? And why couldn’t I make myself feel bad about that?

She came back with a towel, and laid it down on the couch. Then she lay prone on it, lifting her shirt, to the scar I had scratched over and over again.

She looked like she was offering herself as a sacrifice.

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## 19. The Last Cut is the Deepest19

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## Lotte

THE FIRST CUT OF the scalpel was... okay. But then there was scar tissue. Of course, there would be, right? There was a foreign object lodged into my skin, and each time the damn jagged chip moved - and it was a chip. I had been fucking micro-chipped - it caused scarring. Goose, in order to keep the chip intact, needed to slice, slow, precise, small cuts so we didn't destroy the device.

It was death by a thousand, or maybe it was only a dozen, cuts.

"Fuck, Momma Mack," he said, under his breath. "I'm sorry that it's taking so long. I'm slipping it out now."

It felt like there was a bug crawling out. It was like a horror film, where a scarab or something with a hard shell crawled out from under someone's skin. That's the only way I could describe it.

Griff was holding me down by the wrists to help me stay still. He hated doing it. I could see it on the distraught look on his face as he tried not to look at me. I had to breathe through the pain with some kind of grace, but I couldn't help crying. The leather of the couch beneath me was growing dark with moisture from my tears, snot, and spit. I gritted my teeth and bit my lip to try to distract me from the constant slicing.

"Jesus, Goose, come on!" That was Taz's voice. Was she worried about me? Just knowing that she cared, even a little, lessened the ache. "Before Top breaks your hands."

"I'm fine," Mack said, through clenched teeth.

I popped my head up to look at him, and he looked back at me. He *tried* to smile. He was *trying* to reassure me. It made me laugh, a little, because of how sweet the gesture was.

“Yeah,” Griff snorted. “Projecting much, Pyro?”

“My name’s Taz, you fucking moron,” she quipped.

“And yet, you still knew that I meant *you*... so what does that tell you?”

“That you’re a complete cock-bag?” her voice was artificially high, like she was trying to sound like a valley girl.

I heard Griff snarl. She barked back. Literally barked. It was so convincing that Bo lifted his head from the couch, confused, looking around for another dog in the house.

“Fucking psycho,” Griff said under his breath, shaking his head.

“Got it!” Goose finally said, holding a chip in his blood-covered, white gloved hand. Between his thumb and forefinger was a small pill-sized metallic thing. “How does it work?”

He twisted it in his hand, observing it from all angles.

“It’s a tiny fucking battery, and a low-frequency signal. Frankly, if you lose track of it, then it’d be hard to find again.” Taz said. “Which means they’ve been tracking you since the beginning.”

I was trying to breathe through the soreness. I could *feel* Goose stitching. Needle piercing flesh, then the tug of the stitch itself as he tied it off. Thankfully, he only had to do a couple.

I was able to whimper out, “So what do we do with it?”

“Alright, kids,” Mack said, clapping his hands together. “What are the three elements of a successful ambush?”

Goose lightly pressed on the bandage on my back, taping it on the sides to hold it in place before he gingerly helped me roll down my shirt.

“Surprise” Taz said, letting go of Mack’s forearm, where she'd been holding him back. His protectiveness made me warm and tingly, like heat was blossoming in my chest.

“Coordinated Fires,” said Veder, from Mack’s other side.

“Control,” said Griffith. No surprise that he’d choose control of all things to shout to the class. But Mack’s team were a predictable bunch. Even a wildfire has its patterns.

“So, since we have what they want...” Goose said, still examining the chip in his hand, no bigger than the kind you might find on a credit card. “We can lead them anywhere we want.”

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## 20. Down by the River

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## Mack

THANK GOD I KNEW my property well. I had walked it, endlessly. Especially last year when deer had stomped through my vegetable plots, eating my food. Sure, I had chosen to come out here and become farmer Mack. But the truth was, I was never much of a rural guy. There wasn't a lot of time to plant things when you moved every few years with the Army. So I hadn't anticipated what opportunistic little shits deer could be.

That first year, I ended up with a lot of venison. I learned how to dress and butcher the damn animals, and I ended up with enough jerky that I could have lasted a few more winters without slaughtering another living creature.

But that Bruce... Bruce the Buck.

He *looked* like a Bruce. He had that smug little face and twitchy little nose. He had me crawling up and down the Catskills, as I stalked him over every square meter of my four hundred acres of land.

I should probably thank the fucker. Because of him, I knew there was a river - really, more of a creek - with a high ridge on one side, where the water carved a vertical gorge. That was where we waited. Lotte, Veder and myself on the high ground. Griff, Taz and Goose were at the bend, and we made an L-shaped formation in the wood line with interlocking sectors of fire.

At the bend in the river was that chip, hidden in the back end of a roadkill rabbit, stashed in a little arm-sized hole made by some burrowing critter that had since relocated.

The first trip of my property's ground sensors happened a little bit after the sky turned from blue, to a dull gray. In a few minutes, the sun's power would

diminish, leaving us with nothing but the inky, black night. A thick, slender cloud threatened to block out the moon and throw us into darkness. Which was fine. In the black was where we all did our best fucking work.

“Ca-caw!” Goose was at the far end. He made the high-pitched falcon-like call. But the particular bird he was mimicking wasn’t indigenous to this part of New York. In fact, it wasn’t really indigenous anywhere outside of Training Command, where young Soldiers clawed for positions on the Order of Merit List, competing for the best slots, and screwing over their comrades in the process. The Blue Falcon. An affectionate term for a Buddy Fucker.

Goose was using the call to let us know that he had seen the first of the hostiles. We didn’t have radios, because... why the fuck would I? I was retired. Crypto radios weren’t exactly something I could pick up at the local hardware store. Any civilian radios would make too much noise, they’d just give us away.

We needed instinct, and teamwork to get us through. The first, we all had. The latter was so uncertain, that it gave me a distinct pucker factor. I hadn’t been with my team in almost two years, and they weren’t the cohesive unit they had been. We were all separated in body and mind by the chasms we placed between us.

“Ca-caw!” I could hear the distinct sound of Griffith’s voice, meaning that he had seen the enemy with his naked eye. He had eyes as sharp as a fucking razor.

The cloud drifted onward, blocking half the moon, the glow of silver fading to a dull blue before we were thrust in total blackness. There was a slight reflection of starlight on the river, but not enough to see much by.

This is the moment that separates prey from predator. The wait. The way you hold your nerves in those quiet, uncertain moments, when the forest makes



noises that make your heart leap to your throat. Are you able to stay still, hidden in the brush when you hear the gentle footfall of the enemy approaching? Can you stay perfectly frozen, and keep your breaths silent, as they walk before you.

Can you hold your nerve when the break in the clouds allowed just enough light for you to see moving figures heading right for the chip, where we laid our trap?

I counted twelve, just as the intel report had said. So maybe Brett wasn't completely useless after all. *He was still an asshole though.*

None of us moved. I barely blinked as the sound of their steps on the dried, fallen leaves, and on the softened, muddy ground crackled in our ears. I swear, my breath as loud as if it was on a blow horn, but I knew that was my paranoia.

I let my finger lightly graze the trigger well. It was my own little ritual. Just something to do, to keep the nerves from taking over, even if I tasted the metallic hint of adrenalin on my tongue.

Then I caressed the trigger without firing. I lightly pulled the M4 into my shoulder, just nestling it, readying to brace the familiar shock of the backfire. These were miniscule changes, not expressed outward, but could be felt inward. Like the change of balance when one was doing yoga. Simply *thinking* about something made it so.

The mind was always half the battle.

I waited for Taz to do her magic. But she would wait until the absolute last moment so that her little toys could be at their most effective.

The twelve enemy combatants were separated - trained, but not *as* trained as the military. Soldiers would always travel at least eight meters apart on terrain, which was the blast radius of a grenade. They'd also be traveling in a

formation, but these guys seemed to just walk in a roughly straight *enough* line. It'd be happy hunting for us. At least I thought so, until two pulled away from the pack. Moving straight towards the bend.

*Shit.* It looked like there were at least two professionals in the bunch. They had seen the terrain and smelled a trap. But why were they willing to sacrifice the other ten of them? Fucking strange. Stranger still, when they circled around my second team - Taz, Griff and Goose. If I didn't know better, I'd say they were heading right for Taz, who was at the far end...

*Shit. Shit. Shit.* I couldn't see them clearly in the dark. I couldn't warn her. My pulse pounded in my ears. My heart was about to leap out of my chest. I couldn't get to her without giving us all away!

They were almost on top of her, and...

There was the white of a muzzle flash. Griff had fired, breaking the silence. One of the hostiles went down.

"Shit!" Taz yelled, before her pyrotechnics lit up the riverbed. I bet she was cussing up a storm, getting pissed that Griff had fired *before* her signal.

She rigged a projectile in front of her guys, splattering light, and shrapnel towards the river. The flash of light illuminated the gorge, as a second explosion happened in front of me, blasting over the same kill zone.

Seven of them were down, rolling on the riverbank, or screaming at the tree line. She had effectively evened out our numbers. There were only five of them left. The kid had done her job.

Smoke wafted over the kill zone like a mist, drifting over the water and the rocky shore.

The second man who had escaped the line of fire was almost on top of Taz, and she was busy trying to keep her explosions going, as she prepped her second volley. She was relying on her teammates to have her back. But shit,

there were trees and other things in the way. I couldn't get a clear shot or angle without maybe hitting her at the same time. I was ready to move, to bolt, to shift, to *do something* to protect her. But then I'd be a fucking target too. Then we'd be down two people, and our numbers would be fucked.

The other bad guys jumped, hustling around, running like chickens with their heads cut off. I fired twice, and one went down. "Four left!"

Goose echoed my call, and everyone swiveled, eyes peeled, as the overhead clouds plunged us back into darkness.

"Here's the sequel!" Taz called, her feminine voice echoing around us, bouncing off the trees. The river bank lit up for a second time, first in front, casting Taz, Griff and Goose in shadow. Then an explosion in front of me. This time, the light lingered, holding a flare after the shrapnel so that we could see what we were working with.

Lotte screamed. "Taz!"

She came to her feet and ran down the ridge, not caring that she could be seen by everyone. All heads turned to her. The man on top of Taz raised his rifle, pointing it right at my wife, ready to fire. I felt my heart stop as the sound of a single shot rang through the air.

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## 21. Magnus

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## Lotte

*SHOOT ME, FUCKERS!* The words went round and round in my head as Taz set off her explosives, her eyes focused on the task at hand as a Scorpio scum got behind her. I knew him. Arvid. One of Magnus' compatriots. The two of them had broken their formation, leaving the rest of his guys in the kill zone.

Arvid had snuck behind Taz in the darkness, his platinum hair blindingly white in the moonlight. He raised his rifle over his head, ready to bring the butt down on Taz's skull.

So, I screamed. I got up, yelled, and ran down the ridge.

"I'm over here, you son of a bitch! I'm the one you want!" I bellowed, my rifle at the high ready, my eyes trailing down the sights of the M4 in my hand. But I couldn't get a shot. The trees, the fucking moonlight, the shadows and Taz's smoke from all her pyro that was meant to obscure our team was obscuring Magnus and Arvid too. I couldn't see. I couldn't get a shot, so I needed them to take a shot at me. Not at her. At me.

I didn't see Griff break formation. But I *heard* it. He let out a growl like a bear and charged towards Taz's position. Griff fired, the muzzle flash announcing the direction of his target. Arvid got off two shots before his head snapped back, popping open like a pomegranate you pry apart with your thumbs, spraying red, hot liquid all around. Griff's bullet had not embedded in his skull. No, it had gone right through his soft cranium, splitting it in two. Griff fell to one knee, his hand coming down on his thigh.

“Fuck, I’m hit!” he yelled. Taz was done with her fireworks and ran to Griff. She went to his face first, assessing for bleeding as her bare hands wiped over his head, his neck, and down his torso.

“Three!” I yelled. “Where the fuck are the other three?”

The flares seemed to answer me, as they got brighter in their final death throes.

“I can’t see shit!” Goose said, looking around. The flares and the pyro had killed our night vision, and now the trees were plunged in darkness to our eyes. Unbelievable. The final three were not supposed to be outside the kill zone. But damnit... Magnus...

“Griff is hurt!” Taz hovered over him, her right hand on his thigh. She was doing something with her left hand, adjusting her clothes. As if she was answering my silent question, she screamed, “Tourniquet!” She pulled off her belt with a snap and started to wrap it around his thigh. “We need cover!”

Griff gritted his teeth in pain, as he brought a pained fist to his mouth.

“I’m coming!” I said, bounding over, hoping that Mack had my back.

He did. I heard his voice bellow “I’ve got you covered!” before I sprinted to the river, right across from where the kids were.

I set myself in position by a tree, using it as a bullet catcher in case the leftover hostiles had their rifles trained on me.

“Cover us while we move,” said Mack, following my lead. He and Veder would bound forward, while I had my rifle up, looking for threats.

“Got you covered!” I yelled back to them.

I watched, keeping my head on a swivel, looking back and forth as Mack and Veder purposely, and quickly moved down the gorge.

Mack’s knees were bent, his rifle hitched in the low ready, the butt against his shoulder. He moved from one bit of cover to the other, his head in a

swivel as he looked for threats around him.

There was something about him, how he moved, like a leopard stalking in its natural habitat that made me glad that he was my husband. That he was on my side.

There was a muzzle flash out the corner of my eye, and Veder announced his kill. “Two!”

We echoed the number, meaning there were only two of the original twelve left. When there’s such a low number of enemy alive, it’s a game of finding a needle in a haystack. They actually have a small advantage.

Taz’s flares were starting to fade. They went from being vibrant yellow sparks, to a dying orange flame. Even with the moonlight and the darkness, I knew the small river was running red with blood. I could even smell it in the air. The metallic scent of hemoglobin.

One of those two guys left were Magnus. I prayed to God he didn’t get to Taz.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickled with anticipation. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. They say you can’t *feel* when someone is watching you. Not really. It’s a trick of the mind. It processes what you see from the corner of your eye faster than you can, so it gives you that uneasy feeling to warn you of danger.

I personally think that’s bullshit, because I’ve felt like I was watched, and the person was well out of my visual range. That’s what I felt now. I couldn’t see him. I couldn’t smell him. But I knew Magnus was out there, and he had eyes on me.

Well... not his *eyes*. Just the one eye.

I tried not to laugh with satisfaction as I remembered the feel of it squishing in my hand.

That's when I saw it. The moonlight gave me just enough time to see the shape of a single black boot. I saw the hint of a heel, and from there, my eyes adjusted to see the outline of a figure.

I took a shot.

"Fuck!" Veder said, hitting the ground a little sooner than he expected.

"One!" I called, as that booted heel went from pointing up towards the sky, to flat on the ground.

The guys echoed it. We knew there was only one hostile alive out there. Magnus. Was he lying in wait somewhere? Had he run away? No, I don't think so. He wouldn't run from anything. I just didn't see that as a possibility.

"Cover me while I move?" I turned my head a little to where Veder had settled into the ground.

He quirked a brow at me. "Do I have a choice?"

With a small laugh, I got up and ran. I'd have to get to the bank, and step over a small rock-bridge that gave us just a slim wadable path through the water, and to the other side where Taz was. Then we'd be together, and things would feel... safer... with all of us close, and able to protect our perimeter. I could protect the kids better if I could see them.

But that feeling of uneasiness was still there. Like there was something out in the night. A great evil. A witch in the woods, or something going bump under the bed.

I stepped onto the bank, my boot sinking into the cold mud made by melted snow. I stepped over to a rock. I thought I had slipped. I thought my boot had just fallen off the slick rock, and I fell into the water. But I was wrong. I knew it when I heard a growl, a scream of "Momma!" and "Lotte!" as my head went underwater. I knew it when a hand went around my calf, then my



neck. I knew it as my lungs burned, and the cold surrounded me, my eyes blurring in the raging water.

I hadn't slipped. I had been pulled down.

Magnus. I caught a glimpse of his face through the white water. I recognized the rectangular, big-mouthed, ugly Cro-Magnon mug. There was a black eye patch where I had plucked his eye out.

Then the cloud covered the moon again, and I was in black, frigid water. My body locked up and I choked, unable to hold my breath any longer. I grasped for the rifle that was long gone, probably swept down river by now.

I reached down to my calf, to the compartment sewn into the lining. I fumbled for it. I tried to feel for the blade that I had always kept. My one last chance. My final blow...

I found it, but my vision blurred. I was losing consciousness. *Fuck.*

The clouds parted and the moon came out again. I saw Magnus, his face contorted as he held me underwater, his own jaw barely above the waves himself.

*He will not be the last thing I see before I die. I made that vow before, and I would keep it now.*

I stuck the blade into his side, right between the second and third rib, into his heart. His blood mixed with the water right away, covering my vision in wine red as his weight fell limp on top of me, dragging me down to the murky, cold blackness below.

I couldn't push him off. I couldn't. I tried. But the darkness was coming. Shit. I didn't want to go like this. I didn't.

I tried to conjure amber eyes, and a lopsided grin. Of large hands that reached out through the darkness towards me.

I would go out as someone's wife. As *his* wife. And there was something

special about that. There was something about the name on my epitaph reading *Charlotte Elizabeth McClanahan - Beloved Wife*.

I knew that's what Mack would put there. That was just his way. He'd probably get an ugly heart-shaped stone too. The kind where two names would go, so that he could be laid to rest beside me.

We could spend eternity as husband and wife.

Husband and wife.

*Husband...*

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## 22. The Kids Are Batshit Crazy

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## Lotte

“LOTTE?” THE VOICE WAS coming from far away. The surface of ice broke, and I was pulled from the frigid water into the even more frigid air. The small splashes of water felt like icicles against my skin. “Lotte!”

I was alive. It took a while to figure that out.

I was so cold, but I wasn't shivering. I was too cold to shiver. I was dripping wet, and even my hair felt pointy against my skin. I felt like I had been rubbed completely raw.

“I lost my rifle,” I whispered, trying to clench my hands to grasp at where the M4 should have been. But it wasn't there, and my fingers wouldn't curl. It was like the connection from my brain just wouldn't let it happen. The nerves had been frozen, somehow.

Mack lifted me in his arms, and I felt him dragging his feet through the fast-moving ice melt. He must have been so cold. His boots would be soaked.

“We'll find the rifle in the morning,” he said off-handedly as he came to the riverbank and laid me across the ground. He pulled off his jacket and placed it around me.

“But you'll be cold,” I whispered, as my teeth began to chatter.

I looked up at the moon, and the sliver of clouds that flitted before it, casting shadows on the jagged mountains with its bare trees. It looked like the mountain was covered in spikes. The same ones that must have inspired the legend of Sleeping Beauty, when the malevolent witch surrounded the castle with a forest of thorns.

“I’ll be fine,” he tucked me into his jacket, pulling it tight around me. “Are you okay?”

I looked around me. To the team. To Griff with his wound laying before him, the blood gushing down his trouser leg as Taz struggled to staunch the bleeding below the tourniquet she had made with her belt. She wadded up a torn piece of her shirt and was putting pressure on the gaping hole.

“Jesus, woman, you have the bedside manner of a feral gorilla!” Griff let out a low cry of anger and pain as she pressed down on his thigh. “There’s a tourniquet on the damn thing. You can lay off. The bleeding has stopped!”

“Shut the fuck up!” She rolled her eyes. “You haven’t even *looked* at your leg. How the fuck would you know that it’s not bleeding?”

“Because it’s *attached to me!*” He tilted his head back, grimacing in pain. “I can fucking feel it, okay?”

“Don’t be such a baby.”

“Oh, get a room, you two,” Goose said with a grunt.

Taz pulled off her oversized jacket and tossed it to Mack. The damn thing fit her like a dress. But she had always preferred oversized things. It was as if she was hiding her body from the world. I thought Mack would put it on, but he didn’t. Instead, he wrapped Taz’s jacket around my legs.

“B-b-but you’ll get cold,” I said, my teeth chattering. Then I looked at Taz. She was only in a halter, her muscular shoulders bulging under the strain of putting pressure on Griff.

“I’ll live,” she said, without even looking at me.

“I’m getting the four-wheeler so we can get the walking wounded out,” Mack said, cupping my cheek in his large hand. His palm was so warm, I leaned into it, almost shutting my eyes.

Then he got up and slung his rifle over my shoulder, carrying it with the

barrel pointed upward.

“Keep them safe,” he commanded, looking at Goose.

“I should go with you,” Goose started getting up but Mack raised a hand to him.

“Stay,” Mack said. “At this point, we only have you and VD able to pull security. I’d rather keep you here.”

We never presume that dead bodies remain dead. We had all lived through enough combat to know that not all dropped enemy stay down. The number of times a dead body rose, with a last, violent throw of life was... more than once. That’s why even the dead got zip tied before we ever loaded them into our vehicles.

“Stay,” I tried to get to my feet. “Or let me go with you.”

“Sit down,” Mack pushed me back to the ground, pulling the jacket around me again, tucking me in like a kid at bedtime. “I’ll be back soon.”

He kissed my nose. Jesus, I was shaking so hard, it made *his* teeth rattle.

“Don’t leave me,” I whispered, leaning my forehead into his hand, rubbing my skin against his palm. Then he ran his fingers through my hair, his amber eyes were liquid in the moonlight as he stared at my face for just a second. Just one brief moment.

“I’m not, baby,” he promised. “I’ll be back. I’m always coming back to you.”

He kissed the top of my head.

“I love you,” I whispered. Had I said that to him recently? I felt the need to let him know. To tell him. Nothing was more important in that moment than him knowing that I was his faithful, loving wife. “I don’t think you should go.”

“I love you, wife.” He kissed me again. “Trust me. Just this once. Take me at my word.”

That was the moment. Right there. That was the test, wasn't it? The words that would stop me in my tracks. I hadn't trusted him before, and almost destroyed our marriage because of it. A simple clerical error and a forgotten signature had been our saving grace.

"Okay," I said. Because I had no choice. I would trust him because he asked me to. Because it was the least that I owed him.

I committed his face to memory. The amber eyes, the slight curl of a loving smile beneath a close-cut beard. The roughness of his eyebrows, and the way the strands of silver in his hair caught the moonlight.

"I'll be back soon," he promised. It sounded like a vow.

I didn't feel good about this. Not at all. I didn't want him out of my sight. There was something in my gut that told me Mack leaving was wrong. He needed to stay with me. Beside me. If he was out of my sight, something bad would happen.

I wouldn't be able to get him back again.

He turned and ran into the woods, back towards the house. The steady rhythm of his feet on the fallen leaves faded in the distance, growing fainter among the cover of trees.

He had called me "wife". My husband had called me his wife, and that was a reason to stay alive. To not give into the cold and the despair. So, I sat down, and watched him run into the shadow of the trees, out of my sight.

"He's gonna be okay, Momma Mack," Veder said, taking a knee beside me, his back towards the rest of us as his eyes surveyed the trees. "He never breaks a vow."

"No, that's what he's got you for, doesn't he?" Griff huffed from the floor.

Taz pinched at his thigh, and he flinched and growled at the pain she inflicted. Taz's eyes went wide and she hissed, "Asshole."

“Fuck you, psycho,” Griff said, gritting his teeth.

“You’re not my type, emo.”

There was a smirk that came on Griff’s lips. A strange, cruel smirk as if he knew something that no one else did. Taz kept her eyes off of him, even though I detected a slight reddening of her cheeks. It wasn’t so much that I saw the color, but the signs of how she hunched into her shoulders, as if she was embarrassed and trying to hide from his view.

Veder looked defeated. His eyes still scanned around us, but his jaw ticked with tension, as if he was holding words in his mouth that wanted to escape. Something had happened between everyone. Something had happened that I hadn’t been around for. I just knew it.

“What the hell happened?” I asked the kids, looking from Griff, to Taz, then to the back of Veder’s head. “What’s going on between you three?”

I looked at Goose, wondering if he’d be willing to fill me in. He caught my eye, then emphatically shook his head. “I refuse to get involved.”

“Does anyone want to tell me what happened?” I chided. If I had the strength, and warmth, to get up and put my hands on my hips, I would have. But I was stuck on the damp ground, trying to look intimidating. But I couldn’t.

“Go ahead, VD,” Griff challenged. “Tell Momma Mack.”

“Jesus,” Taz rolled her eyes, then squeezed Griff’s thigh. He tried to kick her with his good leg, but missed, and she just scrunched her nose at him in triumph.

I looked at Veder, who clamped his mouth shut. The disheveled mop of his hair threatened to fall forward in front of his gorgeous baby blue eyes. His jaw clenched. I could see it, even under the thick, vagrant beard.

“Fine! I’ll tell her.” Taz looked right at me as she smirked. “Kristin went to a jody bar.” Jody was Army speak for the guy a servicemember’s wife slept



with, usually while the aforementioned servicemember was on deployment. “Where she ran into our man, VD.”

Veder’s head visibly lowered at the use of that nickname.

“They got down with it and had a good time.” I could tell that her editorializing was pissing off the two men involved. “VD figured out he was at his buddy’s house when it came time to sneak out, and he saw our boy, Griff’s, photo hanging over the mantle. I guess while he was sticking his pen in his buddy’s inkwell, he didn’t bother to look at the family photos on the wall because... well...”

She shrugged, and smirked. She was implying that Veder had never cared if his prospects were married or not. He was there for a casual fuck. If they were otherwise attached, it was often a good thing for him. It was less complicated that way.

“So, VD finally grows a conscience, and decides to tell Griff.” Taz raised an eyebrow at her patient, looking like she was holding back a laugh. “And our Golden boy here went off the fucking deep end. Trashed the damn team room!”

Taz’s annoyance wasn’t so much the devastation of a failed relationship, but in the destruction of the team room that she considered her second home. Her home life had never been good.

“Wow, thanks, Taz,” Griff said, his eyes narrowing. If looks could kill, Taz would be a pile of ash. Fortunately for her, she thrived on Griff’s irritation. “Thanks for your support over the death of my fucking marriage.”

“Please,” Taz said with *another* roll of her eyes. “Those of us that actually met Kristin thought she was terrible.” Then her face softened for just a moment. The change was so fast that I almost thought I had imagined it. “She wasn’t right for you.”

“Well, whoo-whee!” Griff slow clapped three times. “Marriage advice from you is a fucking joke, Psycho. If you ever manage to get someone piss drunk enough to walk down the aisle, then maybe I’ll take your advice. Until then, keep your commentary to yourself, you insane *bitch!*”

Silence descended. Taz’s mouth shut and her face turned into a blank mask. I tried to catch her eye to give her my sympathy. Because I knew what had happened to her. Mack and I both did. She had spilled it all one frightening night when she showed up battered and bruised on our doorstep.

I wanted to reach out to her, but she shook her head instead, refusing to make eye contact.

She looked down at the ground, not acknowledging the rest of us. I looked at Griff, who stubbornly clenched his jaw. He was too angry to realize how his words could have stung. How they were one insult further than their usually hostile, but fond, banter. Oh, sure they didn’t want anyone to know how highly they regarded each other, but you could see it in the silent moments, when the two of them worked in perfect tandem, like two dancers who were always in step.

Why didn’t Griff know how wrong he was about Taz? Because she never wanted anyone to know about the times she came into my kitchen in the middle of the night, her face and body bruised, her eyes watering in despair, the thin, almost unnoticeable band still on her ring finger.

“He didn’t mean that, Taz,” Veder mumbled so low that his beard barely moved.

“You’re the last person in the world who should ever presume to speak for me,” Griff snorted.

With that, we all fell into silence. So, this was the drama I had missed out on? The one that had made my husband’s hair turn gray. Mack was correct. The

kids really weren't all right. Poor Mack had to hold them together with his two hands. But it would be fine, now that I was back, I could take some of the burden from his shoulders.

The clouds parted, and we were bathed in silver light again.

I looked around us, to the surroundings, looking for threats. Looking for Mack and his return. To the bodies that lay on the riverbank, and the blood they washed into the water, coloring it pink. Each one was pale, limp, awkwardly splayed. Every one of them...

“Why are there only eleven bodies?”

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## 23. Bruce

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## Mack

MAGNUS CAME OUT OF nowhere. Fuck! Hauling that mule of a man off of her when his corpse threatened to drag her into the water was the single most terrifying moment of my life. When she sputtered up, her breaths ragged and shallow, I could have pissed myself in joy. She was alive. I still had time. *We still had time.*

But she was okay now. I wasn't sure about Griff, though. That leg wound was fucking nasty, and even with a tourniquet, the chances of something bad happening was still higher than zero.

Still, I thought I had watched Lotte die. Everything had flashed in front of my eyes.

Lotte, at Wrightsville beach, dancing on the surf. Then her, dancing in a white dress at the botanical gardens after we got married on the golf course in Southern Pines. The look in her wistful eyes when she begged me to let her adopt Bo. The Christmases in Boone, when we'd rent a cabin in the snow, and she'd walk around with thick, flannel socks, reindeer leggings, and an oversized sweater. My life had all been her.

If she was gone, then my existence was over.

But she was okay. I had to get my head in the game.

Despite what the movies might tell you, Special Forces guys don't go into retirement and start a workout regimen, bench-pressing logs in the woods, or running for miles and miles to keep themselves sharp. No, we tend to catch up on the rest we didn't get while we were working, and let our bodies get

that civilian roundness that I had always marginally envied in some of my peers.

My ability to run back to the cabin hinged on the latent fitness and muscle memory that remained in my old bones.

I had a dozen things running through my head. In the watery scuffle with Magnus, she had lost her rifle, and I'd need to find that in the morning. I also suspected that we'd need to get Griff to a hospital. A tourniquet was a temporary solution until we could get him into a clean surgical environment. Goose would need to get home to pick up his kids, so he couldn't stick around to take care of everyone. And Taz... God, I just hoped I could keep her from setting everything and everyone on fire.

I was running the laundry list of shit I had to do through my head, while keeping half my mind occupied on not tripping on the ancient roots that cropped out of the ground. I was feeling more gray hairs sprout with every thought.

Should I have been thinking about it at that moment? No. Because I obviously didn't have my mind on the 50 meter target, the battle that I had just left, and the fallout from it. Like a mother hen, I was thinking about the kids, and their feelings, and all the drama that circled between them, and how I could keep the brood together without them clawing each other's eyes out.

It was also the holidays, and I knew that I was about to have some squatting house guests that might never leave.

So, when my footsteps were joined by someone else's dragging, lumbering gait, I didn't notice.

When the branch crackled under feet that weren't mine, it didn't register. I didn't notice anything until the glint of a matte metal barrel peaked, perfect and straight, from a tree line.

There are only two things that don't exist in nature – a perfect, flat black, and straight lines.

This was both.

“Put the rifle down!” He got the drop on me. In the time it took me to bring my rifle shouldered, and aimed, he'd be able to fire, and I'd be dead. So, I did what any sane person would do. I put my rifle down.

Out came a man with a balaclava pulled down below his chin, revealing a blood-soaked mouth. He limped, his body swaying unsteadily.

The rifle in his hand sure looked familiar. It was the one I had handed Lotte. The one she had lost in the river. I wondered what strange confluence of events landed it in his hands. Was it a sign that this was going to be it for me? I wasn't fucking sure.

“Get me a car,” he said, his barrel pointed right between my eyes.

“Okay,” I said, slowly. Trying not to match his frantic breathing partner. “I'm heading to get one now. Put the gun down, and I'll hand you a key to any of the vehicles you want...”

“Give me the keys now!”

“I don't have the keys now.”

“You son of a bitch, give me a fucking key or I'll...”

A loud, grunting wail that sounded like a walrus being boiled alive suddenly pierced through the sky. Birds flew out of the trees, and little woodland creatures scampered away. The cry echoed through the trees.

At first, I wondered if it was a bear... but what kind of fucking bear sounded like that? Then the rapid stomping of hooves and a second, frightening wail had me dropping down to shield my face because I had no earthly clue what weird fucking sasquatch would barrel through the trees, ready to devour every man or beast in its wake.

The Scorpio beside me tumbled to his side, shredded in half as an enormous, brown, furry weight collapsed into him. Two hundred pounds of well-fed, stomping venison collided through. Bruce reared back on his hindquarters, his front hooves fluttered in the air as he let out another menacing cry, then brought it down with all the force of hell, crushing the Scorpio's head like a grape, blood squishing up, splashing over his fur, and across my face, where I was huddled on the ground.

"Jesus christ!" I yelled. "My mouth was open and everything, Bruce."

I stuck out my tongue, trying to spit out bits of brain and human before I accidentally swallowed it.

The smell was odious. Sweet, like a pile of rotten fruit left on the counter too long, but much stronger, with the stomach-turning scent of shit and piss.

Bruce grunted, his snort coming out in steam from his flaring nostrils. His enormous antlers turned down, and even though those things were blunt, rounded at the tips, they were now splattered with blood which made him look... fucking scary as shit. He stepped towards me, blood dripping from his chest.

"We're cool, right?" I asked, putting my hand out defensively in front of me because he could most *definitely* end me right now. He wasn't a deer. He was a fucking woodland God, ready to take revenge on humankind! "I mean... like... we're okay?"

Was he going to beat the shit out of me too? Jesus, this is not how I want to go out. Killed by a bear? Cool. That's manly. But killed by a fucking deer? No one would ever forget that shit!

"Look, I swear, I'll keep you fat with a supply of corn from now until the end of time!" I promised.

Yup, I was bargaining with an animal. Not even a predatory animal... though



I was starting to reconsider that categorization now. I was bargaining with Bambi's dad! Either this was a fevered dream, or I had reached a new low.

But Bruce gave a snort, lifting up his head and tilting it to the side. I looked into those black eyes, and realized that he was accepting my offering. How did I know? Well, I didn't. It could all be in my imagination. But I got up, and Bruce stepped back to give me space, his back leg accidentally crushing the dead Scorpio's stomach, popping it like a balloon so that gas, and fluid came spurting out a second time.

"God, you just crushed his bowels," I brought my forearm up to my nose to try to block the odor, but there was no help for it.

Bruce looked at me and grunted. His breath came out of his nostrils in steam. It was like he was nodding at me. There was a bright red droplet going down the center of his snout. There were splashes of blood where his fur should have been bunny-white. Who knew deer could kill? I'm pretty sure that wasn't in their job description.

Was Bruce some kind of super-stag?

Anyone who said deer were prey animals, and not predators, had clearly never met this one.

"That'll do... Bruce," I said, vaguely quoting that one movie about a pig that herded sheep.

He came towards me with his giant antlers down, as if in some kind of kindly supplication. Like a dog, sniffing around for a hand to pet it.

Was this some kind of buck salute? Like we were suddenly comrades in arms, sharing a moment after a good kill? The bloody corpse under his giant hooves was, indeed, *very* dead. His hoof and antlers were coated in human blood. There was a cavity where the man's head should have been, and his

chest had collapsed, as if the bones beneath it had been bent like warped, heated steel.

“I appreciate your help,” I said, tilting my head down. “I’d pet you... but you have ticks. And I’m not into Lyme disease.”

He snorted, laughing at my joke. And like he had a million times before, he sauntered away, disappearing up into the mountain, only to reappear at the small clearing on the ridgeline to look back at me. Instead of a smug look, he regarded me from over his twitching snout and I swear... he was smiling.

I was anthropomorphizing a fucking deer.

My insanity was clearly fucking complete.

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## 24. Holy Fuck-cicles

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## Lotte

WHEN MACK CAME BACK with the four-wheeler, Taz hoisted Griff onto it with a smirk.

“Fat ass,” she teased him, as she carried his massive frame bridal style to the back end of the small vehicle.

“Not my fault you’re the size of a grasshopper,” he reached out while she secured his leg so it didn’t jostle around too much. His thumb grazed the soft side of her wrist, and they both froze for just a second. It was as if they had been paused like a movie.

Then she stepped away, giving the man a look that puzzled me. It was one of concern, and also... regret? I couldn’t tell.

I wanted to reach out and talk to her. Of course, I did. But it was too soon to smother her with my mother-hen concern.

“Mack, give me your phone,” I said, as I took the space behind him, wrapping my arms around his torso.

Mack handed it over without question. I put in my birthday, wondering if that was still his password. When it was, I wanted to fist pump with joy, but I knew that would be strange.

“Jesus, that’s brave,” Taz said from behind me. “Aren’t you scared to see who he’s sending dick pics to?”

“Taz!” Mack barked.

Not that it would be a concern since he had a flip phone. I wasn’t even sure if it *could* take photos of dicks or anything else.

“What?” I could hear the playfulness in her tone, even if Mack couldn’t. “I’m just saying what everyone was thinking.”

“I wasn’t thinking that,” Goose said.

“I kinda was.” Griff answered, and they all chuckled.

“Jesus Christ, I regret calling you guys for help.”

“No, you don’t,” Taz sing-songed. “You looooooooooove us, Top.”

Mack responded by revving the engine and starting the vehicle down the mountain. With shaking fingers, I dialed, bringing my head down into Mack’s back to block the frigid wind. The speed of travel made the wind blow harsher, freezing me to the bone, but I knew that it was for the best. I needed to get dry and warm as soon as possible, or I’d get hyperthermia. A condition Mack was all too familiar with.

“Brett?” I said as the phone clicked on.

“If it isn’t my second favorite agent!” he answered.

“Who’s the first?” I asked.

“Rose.”

“She’s your daughter. That doesn’t count.”

“Sure, it does,” he chuckled. I could hear the vague sound of chattering and laughter in the background. “What can I do you for?” Then he added, with a somber note of concern. “Is it over? Are you safe?”

“I need clean up at the farm.”

Recovery is always the worst part of any mission. You’re exhausted, and your energy is drained, and the list of things you have to accomplish is never ending.

When we got to the house, we had to clean the weapons before we stored them back into Mack’s massive gun safe. We’d need to clean the vehicles, and our clothes of any traces of *other people’s DNA*. Then we’d have to

double check that the blood in the river wouldn't cause any kind of long-term ecological damage. Griff also had to go to the hospital.

Thankfully, I just needed my warm husband, to help me recover, so that was a small mercy.

But Griff? He did not fare as well. Thankfully, we all assumed that Taz would be the one to care for him. We didn't even have to discuss it. He had no one else to help take care of him while he was hobbling around, so he'd move into the cabin with Taz to take care of him.

"Nope." Griff said, when the plan was made. "Just shoot me in the head. It'll be a lot quicker than making me live with that rabid psycho."

"Fine!" She said, throwing her hands in the air. "Let me just get your ass into the guest house, so I can board up the windows and doors, and you can just quietly die out there, by yourself."

"It'll be better than shacking up with you."

"You'll feel better after we get you some happy, happy drugs." Taz carried him, fireman style over her shoulder, occasionally bouncing him on her shoulder a little too hard with that shit-eating grin of hers. She took him to that overpriced Cadillac CT5-V, and *folded* him into the passenger seat before rounding to the driver's side, twirling the keys in her hand.

I bet he *hated* letting her drive. He loved his cars, and other symbols of wealth and success. He was a bit arrogant that way. He loved his cars, his suits, his watches...

Brett's people did come, walking about us dressed all in black, not acknowledging us in the house. They loaded bodies into a bread truck with calloused efficiency. The whole time, they didn't speak, as far as I could see.

I recognized Brett from his gait. It was a sort of, strange, shoulders-back, unnaturally even kind of walk. Like he was on a runway, but without the

power sashay that models throw in before a camera flash. It was a bizarre kind of robotic, as if he went as far as to control his steps as he moved.

I rushed out to speak to him, grabbing one of Mack's oversized, thick, winter coats from the hook by the door, and putting on a pair of his fuzzy indoor slippers as I went to the porch.

Brett saw me, his black turtleneck, cargo pants and boots, and black beanie made him look like a dock worker. Or a jewelry thief. Either one.

"You know better than to come out during cleanup," Brett said with a raised brow.

"I need to talk to you."

"Oh?" He crossed his arms, and approached the porch, putting one foot up on the bottom step. "If I come up any further, is Mack gonna pop out and deck me on the nose?"

"Probably."

"Then I'll stay down here," he put a black gloved hand on the banister. "My wife won't be a fan of me coming home with another bruised mug."

He smiled as he mentioned this elusive wife. I had never met her. But I knew the moment they met. It was in the air around him. The way things didn't weigh so heavy on his shoulders, and how he rushed home whenever he could, instead of lingering in the office to get ahead on work. It was a small shift. But it was a significant one.

"I'd like to meet her someday," I finally said.

"Maybe in a different life," Brett shrugged. People with double lives, even when one of those lives was clearly a cover, still had to keep the impenetrable wall between the two, even blurred it a little for people like me. "Are you going to tell me that you quit? Or that you're just going to be changing your home of record?"

“Why would I quit?” I asked, surprised by that.

Brett looked at the door behind me. I followed his gaze, looking over my shoulder, to see an angry Mack glaring at him through the window, his massive fists balled at his side.

“Can’t imagine why,” Brett said, his sarcasm oozing off of every word.

I gave a little laugh, pulling Mack’s jacket tighter around me. Brett’s little black-clad men were walking silently in the darkness, loading black body bags into the bread truck, as we jaw jacked on the porch. I didn’t know how I felt about that.

“It’s your choice, kiddo,” Brett said. “But this,” he nodded to the door behind me, and the man who was now absent from the window, “has been weighing you down the entire time I’ve known you. Isn’t it time you two hashed it out? It’s Christmas, for fuck’s sake.”

I blushed, wondering how long Brett had known that Mack was on my mind. I thought I had hid it so well. I kept my nose clean, my head down, and did my job with the Scorpio Network. I tried to keep my personal life out of it.

“I don’t want to stop working,” I finally said. “With Mack retired, someone needs to bring home the bacon. Upkeep and repairs on this house, and the rest of the property, aren’t cheap.”

“Tell me about it,” Brett said, with an annoyed roll of his eyes. “Have you seen the cost of lumber lately?” He lifted his head, looking up to the sky. “I was trying to build a guest house for my son-in-law, and the prices were just astronomical.” His smile faded, as he placed his hand in his pockets. “Listen, we have to put you on admin anyway. You’ve been burned. I can’t use you undercover. Not for a while, at least. Maybe not ever.”

That seemed ideal for me. They’d ship me a computer, and we’d carve out a part of the house to make sure that I met certain security guidelines. Then I’d



be able to be home with the kids. I'd have time to untangle the mess they had all made.

Then my head popped up as I remembered his last statement.

"You mean a guest house for Rose and her husband, right?" Surely, he wasn't building a house *just* for his son-in-law. But it was hard to tell with Brett.

"Nope. Just the son-in-law. Rose and the babies can live in the house with me." Brett gave me a small smirk. "Since the cost of lumber went up, the son-in-law gets to live in a doghouse."

"Jesus, Brett," I put my hand up to my face, rubbing the spot between my brows.

"He should be grateful I let him live."

I rolled my eyes, turned back to the house, and with a wave over my shoulder, went back inside.

Before I shut the door, I heard Brett call out.

"Holy fuck-cicles, this place is frigid as fuck." With his load of F-bombs, he stomped away. The bread truck started. The back of its doors slammed, and the men in black disappeared, leaving nothing but the quiet sound of the wind in its wake.

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## 25. The End

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## Mack

I LET GOOSE CRASH in the guest room. Taz was tending to Griff in the hospital. Despite their protests, I knew neither of them would want it any other way. Veder stayed in the barn like some kind of feral cat. So that left me and Bo alone on the couch, waiting for the ax to fall.

She went and talked to Brett.

I remembered the last time that happened. The aftermath.

She was wearing my jacket that was too big. My slippers, which were also too big. I wondered if that was the last time I'd ever see my clothes on her. And why did that devastate me? Why was seeing a woman in my clothes suddenly a desire? Like it somehow marked her as mine?

When she returned, she smiled. "Let's go to bed?"

The Forget Me Not was still around her neck. But, with bitterness, I looked at her hand which was still bare of any ring. We were still in this purgatory of being married, but also not...

The danger that made her lean into me was gone. Once again, the only thing that tied us together was a piece of paper that was a signature away from being useless.

I nodded, getting up from the couch. Bo groaned, following behind me as I trudged to the bed. She was already there, slipping under the covers, pulling them up to her neck. Bo took his place on the rug, and I took *my* place spooning Lotte from behind. This was how we belonged, really. The three of us. Just like old times.

I started to pull the shirt off her, and she moaned.

“You’re not generating any body heat, sweetheart,” I whispered to her. Her body was still struggling to get her warm. “It’ll be better if we’re skin to skin.”

Even if it fucking killed me to do so. To feel her against my bare chest? To feel her back against me would be agony. If she placed her breasts anywhere near me, I’d swoop in and take them in my mouth. I might be a good man. I might *know* that making love to her right now when her body was so desperate to recover from the evening’s activity was wrong. That I might actually make her worse... but I’m also human. A human with a cock. A cock that did not give a fuck about anything but being between her legs.

So, I had put on a pair of pajama bottoms. It was a small flannel barrier that should keep me in check.

Self-preservation at its finest.

I got her down to nothing but a pair of panties, and I curled her against me. Even when we were under the covers, her skin felt cool to the touch. But she was sweating, and shivering. So, the worst had passed. If we got her through the next few hours, and got her to a normal temperature, she’d be alright.

“You feel so good,” she moaned, scooting further into my grasp.

“Behave yourself, woman,” I chastised, taking a bite of her ear lobe.

“God, I wish I could do something about this,” she laughed, but it turned into a huge yawn. “Is it possible to be horny, but also too tired to fuck at the same time?”

Apparently, the answer was yes. Because she fell asleep. I stayed awake, staring out at the gap in the curtains that would mark the start of a new day, and the end of my usefulness to the woman in my arms.

When the dark night gave way to a frigid morning, I kissed her ear.

“I love you, wife,” I said, possibly for the last time.

I squeezed her close to me, and she moaned in her sleep.

I counted myself lucky. I had stolen a few more days, another Thanksgiving, as a husband. It was probably the most important job I had ever done. It was the greatest title I would ever hold. By some great mercy, I was given another moment after the post-mortem of our marriage, and I was happy about that. I had to be. Because the alternative was to eat my pistol, to make the bleakness of a future without her as short as humanly possible.

She slept long into the morning. So long that my stomach went from hungry, to settling into its empty state after we missed breakfast. Then lunch. Still, I didn't move, and neither did Bo. It was like we were both enjoying her presence for as long as possible, refusing to disturb anything, in case it would shatter the fragile glass that kept us in this state.

But the disturbance came from the outside in the loud crackle of gravel as a loud truck roared into my driveway.

She stirred, wiping drool from the side of her mouth in a move that I found adorable, as always.

"Who is it? Are Griff and Taz back?" She moaned, coming up to a sitting position as we both looked out the window.

"Nope," I said, with a sigh.

My heart sank to my stomach. Of course, I couldn't get a peaceful day with her.

I braced for the immediate disaster that was stomping up my drive as my father's voice boomed, "Are you here, boy?"

I sat up, putting my bare feet on the rug as I ran a hand through my hair. "I'll be out in a sec."

"Are you still in bed?" My father wasn't a man who tolerated any kind of tardiness, and he especially didn't believe in sleeping in. "Retirement's gotten

you lazy...”

The bedroom door slammed open, and Bo barked. Lotte gasped, pulling the duvet up to her naked chest.

My father exclaimed, “*What the hell?*”

“Get the fuck out, Dad!” I shot to my feet, wearing nothing but my pajama bottoms.

I pushed the old man out of the room, closing the door behind us to give Lotte a moment.

I dragged him into the living room by his arm. He pulled his sleeve out of my grasp, turned on me and with a knife hand bellowed, “What the fuck is she doing here?”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“She left! What are you thinking, boy?”

“I’m not a boy, Dad!” I matched him, bellow for bellow, knife hand for another knife hand. It was a rare occurrence since I had been raised to respect my parents, but I was too tired to restrain myself as this man shattered the illusion of happiness that I had been gifted. “And you have no right to barge in here and...”

“No right?” He laughed. “Do you remember why that ended?” He pointed at the bedroom door. “Do you remember that she left? That she walked out on you after she failed to... failed to...”

“Failed to carry to term?” I filled in the gap for him. I wanted him to know how stupid his point sounded when we put words to it.

It silenced my old man for a moment, but it did not lessen the indignity I felt at having my last moments with the love of my life stolen from me.

“I’m not a teenager, Dad. I’m not going to be lectured by you about who ends up in my bed, especially when that woman is my wife.”

“Your *ex-wife*.”

“No.” I raised a palm towards him in a stop gesture. “My wife. Mrs. Charlotte Elizabeth McClanahan.”

I don’t know how he interpreted that. I didn’t care. The old man shook a fist in front of his face, his teeth bared in anger as he tried to figure out what to say next. But what came next almost disarmed me in its sudden gentleness.

“Having a child is the single most rewarding experience a person can ever have.” His posture changed, the redness in his cheek disappeared, and instead of anger, he took on a look of sudden sagesness. One that wasn’t usually in his bag of tricks. “And you rob yourself of that when you’re with her.”

“Are you kidding me?” I waved my arms around me, indicating the room, the house, the land I was on. “I’ve got a son in the guest room who’s alone with two kids, dealing with the loss of the love of his life. He’s in need of way more than just a good nap and a decent holiday!” I pointed through the window to the red barn in the distance. “I’ve got a son out there who’s been on some kind of penance trip of self-flagellation, living like a vagrant, riding the rails and refusing to use hot water because he feels like he doesn’t deserve it.” I pointed to the guest cabin, which did not have any occupants, but I knew they would, sooner or later. “I’ve got a daughter with a list of people who have wronged her a mile fucking long trying to find herself, and struggling, and another boy who’s trying to control the world around him with both hands, and tearing himself apart to do it. And I can’t watch them all the time, Dad!”

My dad took a step back, confused by everything that I was telling him.

Maybe I had never expressed any of this to him. I was his only son. I had admired the man my entire life. He had been the metric with which I measured myself. That’s why I let him say these things. It’s why I let his

words fuck with my head for so long. But no more. Not when I had *her* by my side again. I refused to lose her due to inaction.

It was long past time for us to have it out.

“I need Lotte beside me,” I pointed to the bedroom door for just a flicker of a second. But in that moment, I saw that it was open, Bo at her feet, Lotte peering through a small gap. “Because I’m fucking falling apart with all of this shit. I swear to God, I am. I am worried to death that one of my kids will crumble to the pressure and suck start a fucking pistol, because I am juggling plates, not able to keep an eye on every single one of them at all times.” I stomped over to the bedroom door, grabbed Lotte by the hand and pulled her out into the living room. “This is the woman that can convince them all to stay long enough for us to mend them, because they sure as hell wouldn’t do it for me. So you know what, Dad? Maybe you regret only having one son, but I already have a fucking brood of children who need me. Sure, they’re full grown, but that doesn’t make them any less mine.”

I wrapped my arm around Lotte, tucking her into my side. The blanket was wrapped around her under the armpits like a towel. I almost groaned, realizing she was probably half-naked underneath that thing. Blood I badly needed in my head was travelling south again, like I was some kind of horny teenager.

I knew that she might be leaving. But this was a fight I should have had with my dad three long years ago. I should have had this fight when Lotte was walking out of the house. I should have had it at Christmas four or five years ago, when he started to convince her that she was ruining my life by not having kids.

It was better late than never, and if I ate crow for it later, then so be it. She deserved to see her husband putting her first. Even if it was years too late.



Lotte took my hand, intertwining our fingers as she hugged my arm to her chest, resting her head on my shoulder. Dad looked at our joined hands with surprise, and maybe even a little bit of disgust.

But Lotte stayed steady, and as if that steadiness went through our joined hands, she drained the anger out of me and my heart slowed its frantic beating.

“Big Mack,” she gently said, referring to my Dad’s old nickname. “Tristan’s kids are 10 and 13. Tyler and Mary. They’re going to be here for Christmas.” My father’s brows furrowed as he tried to figure out what the heck my wife was talking about. I looked at her, confused as well.

“They’re probably going to go sledding, or maybe snowshoeing or something while I cook Christmas Dinner. Maybe you should come and get to know them.” She looked up at me and smiled, as if oblivious to the sudden whiplash Dad and I were feeling from this turn of events. “Veder, Taz and Griffith don’t have kids of their own... yet. But it’s only a matter of time for those guys.” She turned to my dad that lit up the entire room. It was dazzling. “You should get to know them as well. They’ll need help... can you imagine Trinity Guerro changing diapers?”

My wife laughed, and I found myself laughing along, if only out of some strange politeness. Like we were at a cocktail party making conversation, not having decades worth of fighting in one sitting.

“What the hell are you doing?” I whispered in her ear.

“I’m not going to cause you anymore problems,” she whispered back as she came onto her tiptoes to kiss my cheek. “If your family breaks, I don’t want it to be because of m—”

I cut her off with a kiss to her lips. I didn’t need any more explanation. She didn’t want to drive a wedge between me and my father. Fine. I’d accept it if

it made her happy. But I was ready to hammer that wedge until we broke.

My Dad was still in the living room, shocked, scratching his head as if what he was seeing in front of him made absolutely no sense. Like he was hallucinating.

“Did you mean what you said?” she whispered up to me. “About the team... our kids?”

“Yes.” I meant every fucking word. Since she had left, my control of the team had completely disintegrated, and yet they were still here, flawed, and looking for a guiding hand that I couldn’t provide. But she could. She was our beating heart. Our home. Our hearth. And I was the walls that protected them.

She smiled. Broad, and beautiful. She turned back to my Dad.

“I bet Taz is going to be the one to give us a dozen grandchildren.” Lotte put her head back on my shoulder, staring sweetly at my father. “You should be here when she does. I bet they’re going to live in the guesthouse permanently. Just a guess...”

She lifted her head to look at me and winked. I flinched, surprised by the words.

“They?”

“Her and Griff,” she elbowed me gently. “Come on... we both know it’s going to happen.” I raised a brow at her. She smiled up at me. “Wanna bet?”

I kissed her forehead with a chuckle. “Nope. I know better than to contradict you, wife.”

“Bring Betty by for Christmas Eve.” Lotte’s smile was as saccharine as she looked up at me. My heart soared. She was going to be here for Christmas? Really? “She can keep me company while I cook.” She turned back to my father. “You and Mack can take the kids out back if the weather’s nice.”

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## 26. Honeymoon

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## Lotte

“DID YOU MEAN IT?” Mack grabbed me by the bicep after he locked the door behind Big Mack. He spun me so that we were chest to chest. I shivered, the latent cold from last night still in my bones.

He swore under his breath, and walked to the hearth, squatting down to throw in a log on top of the dying fire that had kept the house warm last night.

“Did I mean what?” I pulled the blanket up closer to me.

He came to a stand, placing his hand on the mantle, his eyes glaring at the flames like it owed him money.

“That you’re staying for Christmas.”

“Do you not want me to?”

He let out a sigh of exasperation. “Answering a question with another question? That’s kinda rude, sweetheart.”

He had a point. But I didn’t want to be the one to put myself out there first. I didn’t want to be the one to confirm or deny desire, even though I felt like we had already discussed this. Wasn’t that what that fight was about? Wasn’t that what we were leading to?

“Don’t fuck with me, Lotte,” he dropped his head to his hand on the mantle. I wondered what was going through his mind right at that second. “Are we still getting divorced?”

I swallowed, the tears burning my eyes. “Do you want to?”

“For fuck’s sake!” His hand pulled back and he struck the mantle so hard that it shook off the wall. Plaster fell to the ground. “Answer the question, Lotte.

Please. Just answer it, because I'm not the one in charge here. I'm not the one..."

The fire kicked up, as the new log heated. The room got hotter, and I flushed. At least I wanted to believe it was from the fire.

"I want to stay," I whispered. "I had thought... I thought I was staying, but if you don't want me to, then..."

"Lotte!" He snapped, his eyes shut, wrinkling at the corners.

I don't know what madness made me think that this was a good idea. But I dropped the blanket to the floor, and the blanket rustled as it piled up on the ground.

His head whipped up and he looked at my almost naked body from top to bottom. It wasn't a look of lust and arousal, though the bulge in his pants told me that it might be a part of it. It was an assessing look, as if he was trying to piece together something in his mind.

"This is what I look like now," I said, feeling my voice waver. "I have new scars that won't ever disappear. I have aches and pains that I didn't have three years ago." A hot tear went down my cheek. "And I can't change the past."

I put my palms out, pleading to him. But he stayed perfectly still, just looking at my eyes.

"I've changed a little, but not really," I kept on going. I took one step toward him, then stopped. I waited for a second before I grasped for the words I wanted. "And I still can't give you children, and I will always cry over the babies we didn't have. And a part of me still wishes that I could have had a child, even if it cost me my life because..." I placed my hands on my lower belly. There was a slight pouch there that never quite healed from the one time we had made it past the first trimester. Before it all happened again,

ending in blood, pain and heartbreak. “I really wanted to see a baby with your features, even for just a second...”

“Lotte...” his voice wasn’t angry now. His tear matched mine going down his cheek and disappearing into his graying beard. I knew that he remembered. We had dared to hope that time. We had bought little baby clothes. We had even gotten the blood test to find out the gender. She was a girl. We were naming her Amelia, and I had bought all the pink things, and... it didn’t happen.

“It will always be a hole in my heart.” I was crying freely, letting them fall from my cheek to the ground. “And I will always feel pain because of it. And it will be a burden to you if...” I took a deep breath, trying to push the words out. “If you *let* me stay.”

I took another step forward, and he still didn’t move, even though I saw his jaw tick with tension.

“Do you still want me?” I asked, putting my arms out to the side so that he could see every scar, both inside and out. “Do you still want...”

“Yes!” He lunged forward, grabbing me by the ass, pulling me up to wrap my legs around his waist. “Yes!”

He kissed me deep, pushing me against a wall. Our tongues clashed and my fingers wove into his hair, feeling how rough it had become with its new length. His gray hairs were more prickly than the smooth brown locks I had known three years ago, and I liked it. I liked that we were growing old together and might spend our later years on rocking chairs on the porch.

He pulled away just long enough to grunt out, “Of course, I fucking want you. I love every scar, and every heartache. I’ll take it all, as long as you stay with me.”

His lips came down to where the chain of the Forget Me Not dangled against

my clavicle and he sucked on the skin, his teeth grinding it until I felt a bruise form. He was marking me like a fucking teenager. I laughed.

“I burned the divorce papers,” I finally admitted in a gasp.

“What?”

“When you sent the unsigned papers, I spent days trying to figure out if you were fucking with me.” God, the whole thing sounded so stupid now, but there it was. “I thought you were trying to make things difficult for me, just for the sake of it. So, I decided that we weren’t going to divorce. I burned the papers. If you wanted to be rid of me, then you’d have to get yourself a lawyer and start the process again.”

He placed his lips against my throat and started to laugh. It was a deep, rumbling sound that made his entire body shake. I tightened my thighs around his waist, crossing my legs at the ankle.

“God, I would build you a house at the bend in the river where the cottonwood grows,” His hot breath was on my skin, sending shivers down my spine. He was quoting that John Wayne film again, and it made me melt.

“Tell me your name again.”

I couldn’t help the smile that pulled at my lips.

“You may call me Mrs. William McClanahan,” I wrapped my arms around his shoulders as he tilted his head back to look at my eyes. Those light amber eyes were sparkling with joy.

“Is that right?” He said, thrusting his hips forward. I felt his hard cock rub against my folds through his flannel bottoms. Then his eyes darkened, all humor gone, as his hand came between us. With just two fingers, he tugged at my underwear, and I felt the seams cut into my skin before it ripped, leaving my bare ass exposed to the warm air. “You better mean it, Lotte. Because if you walk away again—”

“I won’t!”

“— I will hunt you down and bring you back. I’ll fucking tie you to the bed until you’re too spent to walk.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, *husband*.”

He groaned. What was it about calling someone your husband or wife that was such a turn on? His free hand between us nudged his trousers down, unleashing his thick cock. He grabbed it by the base, guiding it between us, and I watched in rapt fascination as he navigated it to my entrance until the large tip pushed me open. I moaned as he pushed my walls. I couldn’t look away.

In our time as man and wife, he had entered me hundreds, probably thousands of times. And every time felt new. Every time felt like coming home, with fireworks and bonfires, and magic.

“Careful, love,” he said with a chuckle against my ear. “Or I’ll think you’re only staying for the sex.”

“As if you’d be mad about that,” I tried to laugh, but moaned, as he pushed further into me. Slowly. So slowly, but not slow enough that my body could adjust to his girth.

He filled me to the hilt, and I felt his tip pushing my innermost walls so hard that I thought I would bruise, I finally closed my eyes, savoring our connection.

“I don’t care why you stay,” he bit down on my shoulder. “As long as you stay.”

He pulled out until only the tip remained, and I felt that distraught, empty feeling, wanting to get him back inside. But I waited, patiently. When he didn’t thrust back inside, I whined, “Please!”

He chuckled against my skin, licking a trail up my throat. “Stay still, wife.



Let your husband get what he needs.”

“You *need* to fuck me!”

He thrust inside deep, and hard, pressing me against the wall. He found a slow and steady rhythm, and I felt every single inch of movement.

“You belong in me,” I moaned, my hands grasping at his shoulders.

“I do, don’t I?” He planted his lips on mine as he found a new rhythm. A rougher, harder pace, and I whimpered with every movement until I felt the familiar toe-curling squeeze as my entire body heated and tensed. I was about to come. I wanted to tell him so, but he swallowed my moans and my words, his mouth never letting up as he kept thrusting and thrusting.

I screamed against his mouth, his tongue swallowing it all as my body burst in white hot ecstasy.

And still, he kept thrusting. Pushing. Unrelenting.

His hand came to my hair, taking a fistful in his hand as he pulled his lips away to growl, “You belong right here.”

His own cry of pleasure echoed through the room as I felt his hot liquid coat my walls, filling me past what I thought I could take. I went limp in his arms, overcome by sudden exhaustion as the weight of my journey collapsed about me.

“I love you,” I whispered as my body began to shut down, my head giving into the darkness of sleep. “Don’t let me fall.”

“No, wife,” he whispered. “I’m here to catch you.”

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## 27. Christmas

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# Mack

## *CHRISTMAS EVE*

Griff was stitched up and sent home. But like most of my vagrant children, he had no real home to go to. None that had people to help him recover. So he was bunking in the guest house with Taz taking up the other room and helping him recover with her bizarre brand of nursing.

If Taz was fire, then Griff was gasoline. The two were just an explosion waiting to happen. The question was what kind of flame would come out of it?

But, like clockwork, every morning Taz was under his arm, helping him limp down the road to the main house. She'd sit him down at the kitchen table and serve him coffee while Lotte made breakfast.

Bo and I had started sleeping in a little more. I'd wake up to the scent of cooking bacon and the chatter of friendly voices as I walked out with my t-shirt and flannel pajamas. My faithful mut's long nails would clack on the wood floor beside me.

This old dump was starting to feel like a home.

The morning of Christmas Eve, Bruce was in the vegetable patch, rooting through the falling snow. I had made good on my promise, and kept putting out a stash of corn. But he still liked to be a pain in the ass. I was starting to think that he liked the scarecrow, and it's rock music.

"The deer doesn't bug you so much anymore?" Lotte asked.

"Nah," I said, as I took a sip of the black-as-tar coffee. Just how I liked it.

"We've come to an understanding."

“Wow, did you write up a treaty or something?” Taz said with a smart-ass smile on her lips. “From what Lotte says, you had it out for that creature.”

Taz was still calling my wife by her name, and not “Momma Mack” as they used to. She was still trying to hold on to some of that stubborn resentment, as if divorcing me meant that she had divorced her as well. Telling her that wasn’t true wouldn’t change her opinion. The only thing that could fix that was time and proximity, and we had plenty of both now.

I hadn’t told them about Bruce’s assistance the other night. I wasn’t ashamed about someone getting the drop on me, not really. But I would be ashamed if I had to tell my team that the only reason I survived was because a deer decided to gore him like a bull after a red flag.

“My priorities changed,” I said, pulling the chair out. “Veder still not coming in?”

“Nope,” Taz said, side-eyeing Griff. “He’s out plowing your driveway. He wanted to get it salted before Goose came by...”

Like clockwork, we heard the low, responsible hum of Goose’s dad-mobile crunching the gravel drive. Then his booted steps up the stairs, and the creak of the front door as it opened and shut.

“We found a house!” Goose announced from the foyer.

“Yay!” We all said in unison as we applauded.

“It’s down the road, has a room for both the kids and me, and it’s right by their school.” He pulled off his jacket, shaking the snow off before putting it on the coat rack. “Which means the little brats can walk there.”

“You say that,” Taz teased, looking over her shoulder at him. “But I bet you twenty bucks, you’re gonna be a crossing guard so that you spend more time with your spawn.”

“Is crossing guard a real job?” Goose asked, his head popping up like he had

just heard something intriguing.

Taz and Griff looked at each other, smiled, and chuckled as if they were sharing an inside joke. They weren't. The truth was that since the loss of his wife, Goose had been a more attentive parent than necessary, trying to compensate for his children's lack of a maternal figure. The guilt of not having been the primary parent until that point weighed down on him every single day. Even I could see that.

"I'm pretty sure that it's not," Lotte smiled as she started spooning out pancakes and bacon to everyone at the table. "Will someone get Veder and tell him to come in and eat?"

Where the hell was Veder? I didn't see him moping around the barn that morning. What kind of trouble was he getting himself into?

"Or don't," Griff said, with a shrug. Taz slapped him on the shoulder, and he theatrically winced, massaging where she hit. "What the hell? I'm injured, Psycho! You should be nicer to me."

"I helped you take a piss in the middle of the night," Taz pursed her lips. "I'm plenty nice to you."

"I'm only wounded because of you!" Griff leaned into her, giving her a wry smile. "You let someone get right up on you! You had *no* situational awareness that night!"

"I was waiting to set off my babies..."

"Who calls explosives their babies?" Griff interrupts her. "How un-fucking-hinged is that?"

"As un-hinged as you'll be when I start forcing you to use a bedpan at night." They went back and forth. Jesus, they were annoying. So was the constant stream of people coming in and out of the house. We were a week away from Christmas, and the house had more evergreen boughs inside than they did

out. Everything was covered in red plaid fleece, and in small ways, Taz and Lotte were talking again. Not about anything important. Not yet.

But they brought in holly, the bright red berries still attached, and twined them together to make garlands for every door and window of the house.

Tension remained, but it was under the surface, laying dormant for the time being. As far as I was concerned, that was a small mercy as we approached the “most wonderful time of year”.

In the afternoon, my parents came. My mother, Betty, stayed with Lotte in the kitchen, getting drunk on gluhwein - a mulled, cinnamon red wine famous in German Christmas Markets. My Dad and young Tyler stood, arms crossed, observing as everyone got into a snowball fight, or made snowmen. Dad seemed to have found his new shadow.

Mary and Taz went sledding, climbing up the hill and screaming their way down in laughter.

Griff, injured as he was, stayed on the porch, just watching Taz like a creep. I had no idea what the fuck was going on there, but whatever it was would end with a volatile explosion that would be glorious to watch, as long as we all kept a safe distance.

The sound of a roaring engine cut through the silence. Little birds flew out of the barren trees towards the light blue sky. A red 1992 Ford F-Series came up the long drive, its snow tires leaving patterns in the rising white slush and salt. There was a white stripe down the sides. It was a beautiful old car. A testament to old school reliability. Long planks of lumber were sticking out the back.

“Is that...?” I squinted, looking at the driver. “Is that Veder?”

Goose stopped, and Griff limped onto his feet and came over to the banister, shielding his eyes from the harsh reflection of the sun on the white snow. The

car came to a halt in front of the barn and the shaggy-haired vagrant stepped out. Except he looked... bathed.

“You buy a new truck?” I called out to Veder as he started to pull the wood out from the truck bed.

“Yeah, Top,” he said, without further explanation.

“She’s a beaut,” my Dad called, walking over to kick the tires. Tyler followed him, mimicking his movements and his little *hmms* of admiration as they looked at the fender, the paint job, and the condition of the tread.

“I’m going to renovate the barn,” Veder said in a manner that didn’t ask for permission, or approval. He was going to fix the barn. That was it. “I’ll turn it into a garage and workshop in the bottom, and put an apartment up top. Get it weatherproofed, so you could consider having renters or something one day.”

“You gonna start paying rent?” Griff said from the porch, a slightly good-humored smile on his lips.

It was funny. For all the ways Griff and Taz fought like cats and dogs, our little golden boy seemed to be more at ease the longer she was in his presence. It was a phenomenon we had noticed back in the Army. If Griff was having a shit day, we’d send Taz to do a task with him, and they’d yell and scream, and cuss. But at the end of the day, Griff would crack a smile, and not wreck the team room.

I stood in the middle of it all, looking at the well-decorated Victorian house covered in ribbons and lights, the red barn, the guest house and the hundreds of acres around me. This might not have been the family I envisioned. None of them had my eyes, or Lotte’s cute little nose.

Still, there was something special happening this season. I could feel it.

Just when things couldn’t get more perfect, I heard the stomping footsteps of another set of boots on the long drive. Mellie was walking up along the

Veder's tire marks, her arms crossed, her cheeks flushed in the cold wind. Her knitted cardigan was raised up to her ears, her eyes red-rimmed. She looked around at the festivities with a sort of frightened surprise.

"You okay, Mellie?" I walked up to her, noticing that Veder had pushed off the edge of the barn door and was coming over.

"Yeah, I'm so sorry to interrupt. I knew I shouldn't come here, but..." She looked around, and seemed to shrink. "But... I don't have anyone else..."

The girl was fighting back tears.

"What's wrong?" I asked, stepping toward her. Veder slowly took a stand beside me, looking at the girl with curious eyes. Like a barn cat sniffing a newcomer.

"Mellie?" Lotte called from the porch door, her fuzzy-socked feet still on the inside of the threshold, and a mixing bowl in her hand. "Are you okay?"

Mellie looked at me. Then at Lotte. She opened her mouth and closed it. Then, opened it again.

"I am so, so, so sorry... I ... oh my God..." She looked like she was on the brink of falling apart.

"You should come inside Mellie," Lotte's brows knitted together. "You look like you're going to freeze to death."

Lotte started to stir whatever the heck was in the bowl and said something to my mother who was holding a glass full of red wine, her cheeks rosy.

"Come in for a drink," Lotte called out. "You'll catch your death. That jacket isn't thick enough for this weather! Good lord. Bring her in, Mack."

"Oh my God, I shouldn't have come. I'm so sorry. I just..."

"What's wrong?" I almost jumped at the sound of Veder's voice.

Her eyes widened, as if she was seeing him for the first time.

Her mouth opened, and she stilled, like a deer on the road. Then her mouth



shut as she remembered how to breathe. She was staring at Veder's green eyes. Holy shit, he still had that effect on women. I had forgotten about that.

"I-I-I..." She looked at me for help.

"Use your words," Veder said, his eyes darkening into a smolder.

If I was a woman, I probably would have handed him my panties right then and there.

"My car broke down, and I have to get food, because I didn't get it earlier. And I know everything will be closed for Christmas. My brother is pissed, and I just don't know what to do." A tear fell down her cheek. "But now I feel so stupid because I'm interrupting you. God, she must hate me." Her eyes turned to the now empty front door where Lotte had been standing. "I don't even know why I bothered to come here, when I don't even know what we can afford to get. Jesus, I just felt like I had to do something, and now I'm here..."

"Momma Mack doesn't hate anyone." Veder's voice was even and authoritative. The kid was right, of course. Mellie and Lotte met under strained circumstances, but in general, my wife wasn't the jealous type. Now that our marriage stood on solid ground, Lotte would go back to the kind, loving woman she had always been.

I looked between Veder and Mellie, and a picture started to form in my mind. Sure, Mellie had come to talk to *me*, but now I felt like I was interrupting something between these two kids.

"I can give you a ride." Again, Veder wasn't really offering a suggestion. Just stating fact, and laying down a plan. "Or you can just take my truck."

He fished the keys from his massive, olive-green jacket. He leaned down and grabbed Mellie's bare hand. They were pale, but the ends were red against the cold.

“And she’s right,” he said, pulling off his jacket. “You must be freezing.”

Without asking for permission, he put his jacket around her shoulders.

“Momma Mack?” Mellie was absolutely confused.

“My wife.” I finally said, knowing that this would be a weird blow for the girl.

“You have a *wife*?” Her eyes went wide in complete shock, her mouth open like a guppy. “Oh my God... I...”

She looked around like she was caught with her hand in a cookie jar. Like she expected cop cars to pop up at any moment. I almost laughed but bit my lower lip to refrain. She didn’t need me embarrassing her anymore.

“We had a misunderstanding about the state of our marriage,” I explained.

“When I told you I was divorced, I meant it. I was just... mistaken.”

Her cheeks went pink, she gasped, as if trying to breathe again. She laughed.

It was such a sad sound of disappointment and defeat. “You have a wife.”

“He sure does,” Veder said in that flat tone, even as his eyes cut to me with a slightly annoyed look. “I’ve got some cash in my bag. Let me just go to the barn and get it.”

He trotted away in his t-shirt, disappearing between the open barn doors.

She brought the collar of Veder’s jacket to her nose, taking a deep inhale. I assumed that he had bathed *and* washed his things, because she didn’t immediately keel over and turn green. I have no idea when he had time to do it, since he had never come in to do his laundry in the big house. He gave the guest house a pretty wide berth. He also never bathed in the main house, or anywhere else, as far as I knew. Did he bathe in the frigid stream or something? Like a fucking caveman? I should ask him one day.

“That’s Greg, by the way,” I finally said. “Greg Veder.”

Veder came back out with a wad of cash in his hand. Green Benjamins. A lot

of them.

“Jesus!” I called out to him, with a laugh. “Have you been stuffing your pension under your mattress or what?”

He didn’t smile. He didn’t do anything, other than keep walking up to us, his head held high. Higher than I had seen it all month, if I was honest. It looked good on him.

And the way Mellie looked at him was like she was staring at an Angel come to save her from the demons that were pounding at her door.

“Is....” Mellie bit down on her lower lip before she tried to speak again. “Is he for real?”

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# Epilogue

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# Lotte

## *CHRISTMAS DAY*

“I’m happy to have them all here,” I whispered as I lay naked on top of my husband after he gave me what he called a “Happy Christmas”.

He was on his back. Our legs entwined, as I rested my chin on his broad chest.

“Who? The kids?” he said, his large arm behind his head, as he traced his hand over my bare back.

“Yes,” I said sleepily. “Can we keep them here forever?”

He chuckled, and I bounced on his chest with the movement.

“The property is so big,” he yawned, stretching his legs, “that if they wanted to live here, we’d never need to see them.”

I laughed, my fingers tracing over the hairs on his chest, grazing them down to his navel.

“I have a present for you,” I finally confessed, suddenly feeling the flutter of anxiety take over my chest.

“Oh?” he gave a pointed look south to his satisfied cock. “You just gave me one.”

“Shut up!” I slapped his pec. Then I groaned, feeling the soreness in my thighs and core as I moved to the nightstand. I pulled out a small box with a single red ribbon and presented it to him.

He lifted a brow and tugged on the little bow. I opened the box to reveal two gold rings. They were simple, matching bands. One in his size, and one in mine.

“It’s customary for the man to propose, you know,” he grumbled, pulling the smaller one and inspecting it in his hand.

“You’ve already proposed. I figured it was my turn.”

He took my hand and placed the ring on that special finger, sliding it on to the dent that had never quite disappeared from the last time I had worn his ring. I took the larger one and placed it on his.

“I thought it was time we wore rings again,” I explained, feebly. “It was feeling... strange, that we weren’t.”

“I agree,” he chuckled, rolling over to his nightstand and opening a drawer.

“Which is why I got you this.”

He presented me a blue velvet box.

“It’s not what you had before,” he explained, before I could touch the soft fabric. “But I think you’ll like it.”

He was right. We had sold the rings, and split the money. It was only fair, we thought.

I opened the box, and what stared back at me was so extraordinary, I almost dropped the thing. It was a huge sapphire with a crown of white diamonds on an ornate band with milgrain detailing on the shoulder.

“I’ve actually had it for a while. It came with the house, actually. I guess, I figured there was a chance you’d... we’d... you know,” he gave a little shrug. “They said it was Victorian. I know how much you like that.”

“No way!” I said, reaching in with a hand to pluck up the ring.

He slapped my fingers away, and tsked. “Bad girl. That’s my job.”

He pulled the ring out, and slowly slid it on my hand above where the wedding band sat. The two rings looked perfect together.

“It comes with papers of authenticity and everything,” he said with a small smile. “I guess the old lady who sold me this house had it passed down

through her family, and now it belongs to you.”

He leaned back again on the bed, a smug smile on his lips.

“So now you’re tied to this property, and you can’t possibly leave.”

I rolled my eyes. “As if I would do that... again.”

He chuckled, pulling me down on top of him. “Whatever. New rings. New House. New marriage.”

“Old rings. Old House. Old Marriage,” I corrected him, leaning down to plant a kiss on his lips. “I love you.”

**The series continues in Fire For Effect (Taz and Griff)**

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