

Chuck versus the Black Swan

by Brat55512

Chuck and Sarah are invited for a relaxing weekend with Ellie and Devon to Oregon. Hiking and relaxing without a mission sounds nice, until a black swan event occurs that turns the weekend upside down.

Rated: T · Genre: Adventure

Chuck versus the Black Swan

By Brat55512

A/N: The premise is something Canon-ish and could be considered a “lost episode”. Takes place after Season 3 and before Season 4 and in some places it has minor artistic freedom, nothing wild though.

The story references “The Day off” which is another short story of mine and comes before this in the timeline.

Disclaimer: I don’t own the rights for Chuck, this is only a fanfic for our entertainment.

Prologue

The Buy More was nearly empty. Only the employees wandered the aisles in the early hours, along with a couple of ambitious shoppers who had somehow decided electronics shopping was a good way to start the day.

Jeff sat behind the Nerd Herd counter with his eyes closed, looking as though he were meditating. Beside him, Lester was trying to duct-tape an action camera onto a remote-controlled car. Together, they'd come up with the brilliant idea that the camera could capture some excellent footage of female customers.

"That feels illegal," Morgan remarked as he stocked a box onto a shelf. He had no idea what they were actually planning, but experience told him it would end badly.

"All innovation feels illegal at first, Morgan," Lester said without looking up.

Big Mike strolled past, carrying a half-eaten hot dog.

"If that little car crashes into the microwave section one more time, Patel, you can both go innovate out on the street."

The automatic doors slid open.

Devon stepped inside with the enthusiasm of a man preparing to conquer nature and then run a marathon before lunch.

"Guys! I need a camera."

Morgan immediately perked up.

"What level of camera are we talking about?"

"Something... serious. We're going to Oregon."

Jeff slowly opened one eye.

"The state of forests."

"That's not an official nickname," Morgan pointed out.

"It could be," Lester said.

Devon smoothed out a travel brochure he'd pulled from his pocket.

"Waterfalls, hiking trails, lakes... I want to document the whole trip properly. Ellie says I take too many pictures with my terrible phone."

"Ellie is a wise woman," Big Mike nodded. The hot dog had somehow been replaced by a donut.

Morgan was already steering Captain Awesome toward the camera display.

"Okay, important question. Normal tourist photography, or 'something comes out of the woods at night' photography?"

Devon stopped.

"What?"

"Morgan, don't start," Lester sighed.

"I didn't start anything! The woods can be full of weird stuff."

Jeff nodded solemnly.

"Most of it lives between the trees."

Big Mike stopped beside them, trying unsuccessfully to wipe a mustard stain off his shirt.

"You know what else lives between the trees? Tourists. Normal tourists."

Devon laughed uncertainly.

"I just want to take a few good pictures."

Morgan's smile faded for a moment.

"Yeah... Well, you guys could use a little time off. I'd recommend this model."

The store speakers crackled softly overhead.

Somewhere in the back, Lester's car collided with something. Boxes crashed to the floor.

"PATEL!" Big Mike shouted.

Morgan sighed.

"This is why we can't have nice things."

The fog still lingered among the Oregon pines like a slow-moving ghost.

The dirt road behind the lodge had turned muddy from the night's rain, and droplets fell from the branches onto the roof of a rusted pickup truck.

June swung a splitting axe.

The log cracked cleanly in half.

Nearby, Russell lay in the damp grass with his head resting on his paws, watching her work. Every now and then he glanced toward the trees, as if hearing something no one

else could.

June set another log on the chopping block.

A Swing than a crack. Her movements were precise. Too precise for an ordinary hermit living in the woods. Judging by the smell of the air, it would rain again soon. The lodge's back door opened, and Hank stepped onto the porch wearing a thick flannel shirt and carrying an enamel mug.

"I've told you before, you don't have to do this so early," he grumbled.

"Couldn't sleep," June replied.

Hank merely grunted. He'd heard that answer enough times by now, though he suspected there was more behind it. Mabel thought the woman might be a veteran. Afghanistan, maybe. Iraq. Hank had never asked. People sometimes came out to the edge of the wilderness looking for something or trying to leave something behind. He respected that.

Suddenly, Russell growled.

June's hand tightened automatically around the axe handle. Half a second. That was all she needed to assess the environment. Distances. Cover. Possible threats. Source of the sound. Then she heard it.

Just a deer moving through the forest.

Slowly, she let out a breath. Of course, Hank noticed.

"Another bad night?" he asked carefully.

June shrugged.

"I've had worse."

Hank nodded. He understood.

What he couldn't know was that the woman standing in front of him had spent years running covert operations, and that even now her mind had already mapped out three separate escape routes.

June set down the axe and gathered the split logs.

Russell immediately got to his feet and followed her.

The trailer sat near the treeline, leaning slightly to one side, its paint weathered and fading.

It was trying very hard to look like a home.

From a distance, it almost succeeded.

Chapter 1

The hotel lobby was quiet, filled with the soft sound of piano music drifting from hidden speakers.

Casey stood behind the front desk wearing a wig and glasses, flipping through the guest registry as if he'd spent his entire life working reception. He never looked up, yet somehow managed to see everything. With a single motion, he straightened the pens lying on the counter so they were perfectly aligned.

Across the lobby, Chuck and Sarah were playing the role of a couple in love.

Chuck sat on a couch with Sarah in his lap. As a guest walked past, Chuck instinctively glanced away before quickly turning back toward her. Their eyes met for a brief moment.

"You look beautiful today," Chuck said softly.

"Focus, Chuck," Sarah replied just as quietly. "We're on a mission."

"Right. Mission. I know. Just... multitasking here a bit."

A faint smile touched Sarah's lips before she kissed him.

Chuck tensed for a split second, then kissed her back. He'd become surprisingly good at telling the difference between a cover kiss and a real one. The real ones were gentler. More emotional. More honest. Sarah's thumb brushed lightly against his wrist, almost imperceptibly.

Chuck probably would have stayed in the kiss a fraction longer than necessary, but Sarah pulled away smoothly, her attention already elsewhere.

"He's here," she whispered.

Chuck instinctively looked toward the entrance, then a second later realized Sarah had been talking to him and glanced back.

"Stop. Yusuf is here," Casey's voice said through their earpieces.

Sarah leaned even closer to Chuck.

"Jealous," she whispered.

"I didn't catch that, Walker. Repeat," Casey replied immediately.

Chuck snorted.

"It's terrifying that he hears everything," Chuck whispered back.

"We're ready," Sarah said calmly.

The doors of a black Mercedes SUV opened.

Two bodyguards stepped out first, followed by Yusuf Al Akhmer, the international arms dealer.

The two large men immediately began scanning the area. Their movements spoke of experience and professional training.

"Showtime," Casey said.

Yusuf and his men approached the desk.

"Good afternoon. Welcome to the Valencia Grand Hotel. How may I help you?" Casey asked pleasantly.

"Good afternoon. I have a reservation," Yusuf said. "Under the name Rashid Labiah."

"Labiah. One moment while I locate it."

Casey never looked up, but from the man's voice alone he already knew the name was fake. A moment later he produced the room key.

"The elevators are to your left. Your room is on the fourth floor. Room 408."

Meanwhile, Sarah jumped off Chuck's lap and pulled him to his feet with a bright smile. Laughing together, they walked past the three men. As they reached the elevators, Sarah suddenly kissed him with enough passion to make it entirely believable.

"Lucky guy," Yusuf remarked.

The bodyguards smiled.

"Probably is," Casey grunted.

To anyone listening, it might have sounded like jealousy.

Chuck continued pressing the elevator button longer than necessary. Sarah gently pulled him closer before he could make it obvious.

The elevator arrived. Chuck and Sarah stepped inside.

Yusuf and his men entered a second later.

One of the bodyguards eyed them suspiciously. Chuck stiffened and Sarah felt it immediately. Without breaking the embrace, she gave his arm a small, almost invisible squeeze. The message was clear. Chuck got it and relaxed.

The elevator reached the fourth floor. The three men stepped out. Chuck and Sarah followed a few paces behind, still wrapped around each other. A television murmured quietly behind one of the doors. As Yusuf reached Room 408, Chuck and Sarah stopped as if fumbling with their own keycard. They exchanged a quick glance.

That was enough. They drew their stun guns and fired. Three bodies hit the hotel carpet with muffled thuds.

"Target secured," Sarah said to her communicator.

Chuck was already unlocking the room and grabbing one of the unconscious men by the ankles.

"Okay... lift with your knees..."

Sarah noticed immediately that he wasn't making much progress.

"What do these guys eat to get this big?"

"Take Yusuf," Sarah said.

He was considerably smaller than the other two.

"Excellent choice."

Chuck immediately started dragging him inside. Sarah said nothing. She simply grabbed one of the bodyguards and hauled him into the room herself. After selecting the most practical spot to leave him, she looked up as Casey arrived carrying the other bodyguard with one hand.

Within minutes, all three men were handcuffed and disarmed. Casey picked up one of the pistols. The weapon was chrome-plated, covered in gold accents and decorative engravings, and noticeably heavier than it needed to be. He turned it over once, then put it down.

"Tasteless."

"That was easy," Chuck said, grinning at the others.

"Average Tuesday," Sarah replied.

Her tone was light, but her focus never wavered. Chuck gathered the phones and immediately began bypassing their security.

"Got it," he said a moment later. "We'll go through everything at Castle."

Sarah made a quick call.

"The pickup team is on the way."

She sat down on the edge of the couch. Chuck looked around the room, quietly pleased with himself. The op went very smoothly.

"Sarah," he began, "how would you feel about watching a movie tonight?"

"A quiet evening?" Sarah smiled. "That sounds nice."

On the drive home, Chuck's phone rang. It was Ellie. She was inviting them over for dinner.

Chapter 2

The rain arrived around noon. Not as a storm. Just that cold Oregon drizzle that slowly soaks into everything from the bark of the trees, the ground, to a person's jacket, even their thoughts.

June knelt behind the lodge beside an old toolbox. She was trying to bring Hank's aging generator back to life. The cover had already been removed, and several greasy bolts lay neatly arranged on a rag beside her.

Russell had taken shelter beneath the porch. Hank watched over her shoulder.

"You don't have to fix it. I'll call Pete and have him come up here."

"Pete doesn't exactly move with a sense of urgency," June replied dryly. "And I like knowing what might explode near me."

The old man snorted.

"I'm starting to think you know how to do everything. Army?"

June didn't answer. She simply reached back into the generator and adjusted a worn wire. The truth was, she wasn't much of a mechanic. But she'd learned how to keep things running in places where help never arrived on time.

Hank gave the starter cord another pull.

The engine coughed. Then roared to life.

"Ha!" he grinned. "Now look at that."

June gave a slight nod. Hank patted the machine proudly.

"Mabel's going to think I'm a genius again."

"Don't tell her."

"Never," he said with a conspiratorial smile.

At that moment, Russell lifted his head.

The dog was staring toward the trees.

June looked in the same direction almost instantly. Hank noticed that, too.

It was always the same.

First the dog.

Then June.

And June always reacted like someone who expected to be hunted.

The forest remained silent.

A few seconds later, June turned back to her tools and fastened the final screws into place.

"That should do it."

By late afternoon, the rain had grown heavier.

The lodge smelled of cinnamon and soup. The fireplace crackled warmly, while old country music drifted from a battered radio somewhere in the room.

June sat at the kitchen counter with a mug of coffee.

Mabel moved busily around the stove.

"Want some more to eat?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry."

"That usually means yes."

Mabel placed a plate in front of her.

Beef stew and fresh bread.

June stared at it for a moment. Things like this always felt strange. She never quite knew what to do with simple, selfless kindness.

Mabel sat down across from her. The old woman didn't look directly at her. She simply stirred her tea.

"Hank says you didn't sleep again."

June slowly took a spoonful of stew.

"Sometimes it happens."

"My husband was the same way after Vietnam."

June's eyes flicked toward her.

"He told you about it?"

Mabel smiled.

"Goodness, no. Hank would've swallowed a grenade before talking about it."

Despite herself, June smiled faintly.

"You know," Mabel continued, "I saw the same things in him. Always listening for noises. Always sitting with his back to the wall. Looking at doors like somebody might kick them in any second."

June's hand stopped halfway to her mouth.

For the first time, Mabel really looked at her.

Not with curiosity. Not with suspicion. With compassion. That was worse.

"You don't have to tell me anything," the older woman said softly. "I just wanted you to know that. I can understand."

June nodded slowly. The crackling fireplace filled the silence. Russell wandered over and lay down beside her feet.

Mabel smiled.

"He looks after you."

"I think it's the other way around."

"Doesn't look that way to me."

June glanced down. Russell was already half asleep, but one ear still twitched at every small sound. Just like her, ever ready. Eventually, Mabel broke the silence.

"Do you have anyone? Family?"

The question came too direct. June's expression hardened instantly. Then she buried it.

"No."

The lie was easier than the explanation. Mabel didn't push.

"I'm sorry. Forgive me. Old age makes me talk too much."

She let the subject drop, and June was grateful for it.

A little later, Mabel quietly packed some extra stew into a container for her to take home.

That evening, Hank headed outside to check the drainage ditch beside the lodge. The rain was starting to flood the yard.

After finishing repairs on a squeaky stair step, June silently grabbed her jacket and followed him.

They trudged through the mud under the beams of their flashlights.

"You know," Hank grumbled, "normal people stay inside on nights like this."

"I'm not a normal person."

"I'd already figured that out."

Part of the ditch was clogged with fallen branches.

Water was barely getting through.

Hank reached for one of the larger branches, intending to pull it free by hand.

June stopped him.

"Wait."

She glanced at the muddy bank.

"The ground's unstable."

Hank stepped back.

Two seconds later, the edge collapsed exactly where he'd been standing.

A rush of muddy water poured downward.

Hank stared at her.

"How the hell did you see that?"

June was already dragging branches out of the channel.

"Just lucky."

Hank watched her for a long moment.

He'd suspected for a while now that she wasn't just some former soldier. But in the end, he didn't ask. People who live in the wilderness understand certain things. Some come looking for peace. Others come because they're running from something.

As far as June was concerned, Hank was becoming less and less certain which one it was.

Chapter 3

Warm lights filled Ellie and Devon's apartment. The smell of garlic and roasted chicken drifted from the kitchen while Devon topped off Chuck's wine glass for the second time, enthusiastically explaining something about Oregon's vast forests.

"And when you're standing out there in the woods, bro..." Devon said with a wide grin.

"I'm serious. It's a spiritual experience. Like your brain gets rebooted."

Chuck forced a smile.

"Honestly? That might be useful."

Sarah sat beside him at the table.

A simple top. Jeans. Minimal makeup.

She looked like an ordinary woman enjoying a normal family dinner.

Morgan, meanwhile, was chewing on a carrot.

"Captain, forests are actually terrifying. I saw a documentary once about people who disappear in national parks. They never find them. Sometimes all that's left is a boot. Or a kidney."

"Morgan!" Ellie scolded.

"What? It's a real thing!"

"*Hunters of the Lizard People*" is not a documentary," Chuck pointed out.

Morgan looked offended.

"It had narration!"

Devon laughed.

"Ignore Morgan. The outdoors are amazing. Fresh air, lakes, mountains..."

"Bears," Morgan added darkly.

"Very few bears."

"That's the dangerous kind of optimism, Captain."

Ellie brought over the dessert plates.

"Sarah, you'd probably love it too. The scenery is incredible."

Sarah smiled faintly, but her attention drifted to Chuck.

His shoulders were slightly tense.

Family.

Normal life.

Sometimes, during moments like this, he looked at her as though he were afraid the entire thing—or maybe she herself—might disappear.

"So?" Devon asked. "You guys in?"

Chuck glanced at Sarah.

It was a tiny gesture.

Nobody else at the table would have noticed.

Sarah knew exactly what it meant.

He's asking me.

For a moment, she didn't answer.

Instead, another memory surfaced.

After Europe.

The trains.

The small hotels.

Chuck's hand resting on hers while they wandered through a Swiss pedestrian street.

That crazy, hopeless escape when they'd honestly believed they might disappear together. Leave the spy life behind.

Then Casey and Morgan had found them.

And after that...

That day off.

Even now she could almost feel the sunshine on her skin.

Hear Chuck laughing outside the ice cream shop.

Remember the comic book store clerk complimenting him.

Those few precious hours when they hadn't needed to watch their backs.

No mission.

No cover identities.

No lies.

Just the two of them.

Until dinner.

The little restaurant with the spicy food Morgan had recommended.

Then the Fulcrum agents.

The black site.

The place where they almost died if Casey hadn't arrived in time.

Sarah blinked.

Ellie's kitchen returned around her.

"Sarah?" Ellie asked gently. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah. Of course." Sarah smiled quickly. "I was just thinking."

Ellie smiled back.

Devon immediately resumed his campaign.

"So! Hiking! Fresh air! Nature! Human sweat!"

"That last one didn't help your argument," Chuck said.

Devon pointed at him.

"You two need to relax."

Chuck laughed quietly.

"Apparently that's becoming a popular opinion."

"I can't go," Morgan sighed dramatically. "Inventory week. Do you know what happens when Lester gets access to a barcode scanner? Civilizational collapse."

"That's... surprisingly accurate," Chuck admitted.

"But seriously, guys, be careful. Forests are full of weird people. Serial killers. Hermits. Bears. Spiritual cults."

Grinning, Devon raised his glass.

"To adventure!"

Morgan hesitated.

"...and bear-proof underwear."

Under the table, Sarah felt Chuck's fingers brush against hers.

Just lightly.

As if making sure she was really there.

Sarah let him.

A few seconds later, she intertwined their fingers.

Because no matter how much these moments sometimes frightened her—this strange, ordinary life—after everything they'd been through, it was the one thing she never wanted to lose.

"To adventure," she said, raising her glass.

The apartment was unusually quiet later that night.

Around nine o'clock, Morgan finally passed out on the couch during a kung fu documentary. Half asleep, he muttered something about "martial-arts bears" before stumbling off toward his room.

Chuck leaned against their bedroom doorway wearing a T-shirt and sweatpants while Sarah stood before the mirror, taking down her hair.

Long blonde strands slowly fell across her shoulders.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Sarah caught his expression in the mirror.

"What?"

Chuck shrugged.

"Nothing."

"Chuck..."

He smiled.

"Okay. Maybe something."

Sarah turned around.

"The trip?"

"Maybe."

She leaned against the dresser.

"You don't want to go?"

"No. I do. I mean... Devon's way too enthusiastic and will probably kill me with a mountain or organic granola or something, but yeah."

Sarah laughed softly.

"Then what's wrong?"

Chuck was quiet for several seconds.

"I just... don't know if you actually want this."

One of Sarah's eyebrows lifted slightly.

"The trip?"

"Yeah."

The room grew still.

Chuck stepped closer.

"I know the whole family thing can be... complicated sometimes. I just don't want you feeling like you have to do it."

Sarah looked at him.

That was one of the things that always surprised her about Chuck.

For all his insecurities, he noticed things other people missed.

"Chuck..."

"I'm serious," he continued quietly. "If you hate this stuff, you don't have to force yourself. I don't want you waking up one day and realizing you're trapped in some suburban dream with me and Captain Awesome's hiking trails."

A faint smile appeared at the corner of Sarah's mouth.

"That's a surprisingly specific fear."

"I've had a lot of time to catastrophize."

"I can tell."

By now, Chuck was standing right in front of her.

"I just want to know if you're actually happy in situations like this."

Sarah didn't answer immediately.

Instead, she reached for his hand.

"Do you remember that day off?"

Chuck's expression changed instantly.

"Of course."

"Before that, I thought this kind of thing wasn't for me."

Her voice was quiet.

Honest.

"I didn't understand people who could sit on a patio for hours. Or go hiking. Or attend family dinners and tell the same stories over and over again."

Chuck smiled.

"To be fair, Ellie could probably set a world record for repeating childhood stories."

"I'm starting to notice."

Her fingers brushed lightly across the back of his hand.

"But when we weren't working... or running... when it was just us..." She paused. "I liked it. I always do."

Chuck watched her carefully.

"Even the dinner?"

A shadow crossed Sarah's eyes.

"Even the dinner."

Chuck pulled her a little closer.

"Well, there's no black site this time. No life-threatening danger. At least I hope not."

"I know."

"Beckman literally told me, 'Agent Bartowski, please try not to get into trouble for at least forty-eight hours.'"

Sarah laughed quietly.

"That is surprisingly close to actual vacation time."

"Casey's in Washington."

"Yes."

"No active mission."

"Currently."

"And according to Morgan, our biggest threat is a bear stealing Devon's protein bars."

Now Sarah was genuinely smiling.

Chuck continued carefully.

"So maybe... maybe this can actually just be a trip. Nothing more."

Sarah studied him.

His face.

His eyes.

Then she slowly nodded.

"I'd like that."

Chuck seemed to release a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Sarah noticed.

"Hey," she said softly.

"I'm not going because I feel obligated."

For a moment, his entire expression opened up.

Relief.

Pure and uncomplicated.

"Really?"

Sarah smiled faintly.

"Although if Devon wants to leave at five in the morning, I may have to kill him."

"That's fair."

Finally, Chuck wrapped his arms around her.

Sarah leaned into him, resting her head against his chest.

She could hear his heartbeat.

Steady.

Calm.

Strangely, that reassured her more than anything Beckman or the CIA could ever promise.

A mission could come at any time.

The world could fall apart again at any moment.

But right now...

Right now there were only Chuck's arms around her, a quiet apartment, and the promise of a weekend that might truly be about nothing except the two of them.

Chapter 4

Vast forests stretching endlessly across the horizon. Towering mountains. Crystal-clear alpine lakes.

According to the brochure, that was Oregon.

Devon had been excited for the entire trip.

The moment their plane landed in Portland, he'd rented a vehicle. Now he sat behind the wheel of a minivan, with Ellie navigating in the front seat while Chuck and Sarah rode in the back.

"Look at that!" Devon pointed enthusiastically out the driver's-side window. "We're barely off the highway, and it already feels like we're inside a nature documentary."

Dark green pine forests lined both sides of the road. Mist clung to the mountainsides above them. Portland's suburbs quickly disappeared behind them, leaving only rain-darkened asphalt, towering trees, and the occasional glimpse of a lake.

"I just hope they have civilization out here too," Chuck remarked, staring out the window. "You know... internet. Electricity. People."

"Chuck, this isn't the wilderness," Ellie said with a smile. "It's Oregon, not Jurassic Park."

"You haven't proved that."

Sarah quietly watched the landscape.

Raindrops tapped softly against the glass.

Traveling as civilians still felt strange to her. They weren't on a mission. They weren't sitting in a car because of some cover story.

They were just...

Traveling together.

Devon turned onto a mountain road.

"The cabin's about two hours away," he announced cheerfully. "And it has its own dock."

"Why do I feel like this is the opening of a Friday the 13th movie?" Chuck asked.

"Chuck!" Ellie protested.

"I'm just saying. Forest. Lake. Remote cabin. All we're missing is a guy with a chainsaw."

"That's Texas, bro."

Sarah smiled faintly.

"Chuck would handle it."

Chuck turned toward her as though she'd just dumped an enormous responsibility onto his shoulders.

"See, somehow that makes me feel even less safe."

Ellie laughed.

Devon just shook his head.

The road grew narrower.

Sometimes they crossed old wooden bridges. Other times they wound along steep cliffs. Eventually, the radio dissolved into static and lost its signal completely.

"Okay," Chuck said. "No civilization."

At that moment Sarah leaned forward slightly.

"Devon... slow down."

Her voice was calm.

But Chuck immediately heard the agent underneath it.

"What is it?" Ellie asked.

Sarah was watching the shoulder of the road.

Fresh tire tracks cut through the mud, leading down an abandoned forest access road.

A black pickup truck sat partially concealed among the trees.

One of its doors stood open.

Devon glanced into the rearview mirror.

“Hey, Chuck... how’s Buy More? Jeff and Lester haven’t blown anything up yet?”

Chuck snorted.

“Almost. Lester built an ‘energy-efficient’ extension cord. For some reason it caught fire.”

“Accidentally?” Sarah asked.

“No. I think he and Jeff were trying to find out what color fire-extinguisher foam is.”

Ellie burst out laughing.

“You talk like you actually miss that place.”

“No way. Sometimes I have nightmares about it.”

Chuck rested his head against the window.

For a moment, Devon studied him through the mirror.

There was something strange about how relaxed Chuck seemed lately.

Years ago he always carried tension around with him.

Now he seemed lighter somehow.

Of course, Devon knew that what everyone once assumed had been an awkward crush on a beautiful girl had turned out to be much more complicated than that.

Things had become a lot clearer once he’d learned that everyone involved was secretly a spy.

Chuck had stepped away from that world at Ellie’s request.

Devon respected that.

He preferred not to ask questions.

“Take the next left,” Ellie said, studying the map in her lap. “After that it’s all mountain roads.”

“Mountain roads!” Devon grinned. “This is exactly why we came here.”

“You know,” Chuck said, “most people go to beaches on vacation. Normal places. Places where there’s less chance of being chased through the woods by an axe-murdering lumberjack.”

“Isn’t that Washington?” Ellie asked seriously.

“Thank you, Ellie. I feel much better now.”

Sarah watched their bickering with an amused smile.

The road climbed higher into the mountains.

Massive pines towered overhead, while ribbons of mist clung to distant ridgelines.

Every so often, a mountain lake flashed through gaps in the trees, perfectly still.

Sarah looked out the window.

This was rare.

No cover story.

No mission.

No surveillance.

Just an ordinary woman on an ordinary trip.

Then her gaze instinctively shifted to the side mirror.

A dark pickup truck.

Still there.

It had been maintaining the same distance for quite some time.

Sarah’s expression didn’t change.

“Chuck.”

He looked at her.

One glance was enough.

He saw it too.

They couldn't see the driver.

But Sarah was already making plans.

Because this was supposed to be a real vacation, she hadn't brought firearms. As usual, she carried a knife. She'd also hidden a stun gun in their luggage without telling Chuck, just in case.

No serious firepower.

Chuck looked at her as if he understood exactly what she was calculating.

Then he nodded.

A few moments later, the pickup turned onto a dirt road and disappeared into the forest.

Chuck continued watching the mirror.

Eventually all that remained was the brown scar of the road vanishing between the trees.

Sarah didn't move.

Outwardly calm.

Internally calculating.

“So?” Ellie asked from the front seat. “What was that secret look between you two?”

Chuck answered immediately.

“Sarah was trying to decide whether we should stop for food. I can practically hear her stomach growling.”

“Not true,” Sarah said with a completely straight face. “I can hold out a little longer.”

But Devon caught Sarah's eyes in the mirror.

He recognized that look perfectly.

Threat assessment.

Sarah gave the smallest shake of her head.

No problem.

For now.

Devon nodded and returned his attention to the road.

"Twenty minutes and we'll be at the lake," he said brightly. "The owner says the view is unbelievable."

"Is there cell service?" Chuck asked.

"Barely."

"Fantastic. So if we die, nobody will even know."

"Chuck!" Ellie exclaimed.

"I'm embracing the authentic wilderness experience."

Sarah shook her head in amusement.

The farther they drove, the denser the forest became.

Sunlight barely filtered through the giant pines. Patches of fog drifted lazily across the road.

The radio crackled once and went completely silent.

"And now we've lost all contact with civilization," Chuck observed. "Classic."

Ellie turned around.

"Can you promise not to turn everything into a horror movie for at least one day?"

Chuck considered it.

"No."

Devon laughed.

Sarah looked out the window.

Far below, through the trees, she caught another glimpse of the pickup.

The same black truck.

It was traveling parallel to them along an old logging road.

She nudged Chuck.

“Idiot.”

Chuck leaned back with a grin.

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Sarah merely shook her head and looked away again.

The truck was gone.

Only endless Oregon wilderness remained.

Towering pines.

Moss-covered rocks.

Deep shadowed valleys.

The sky was gray, but not threatening.

Peaceful.

Clouds drifted lazily above the mountains.

In the distance, a waterfall appeared as a thin white ribbon among the trees.

For a moment, Sarah truly relaxed.

No bunkers.

No surveillance.

No cover identities to maintain every second of the day.

Just Chuck beside her.

Too many jokes.

Not nearly enough self-preservation instincts.

And somehow still Chuck was the only person who ever made Sarah Walker feel safe.

“Wow,” Ellie said suddenly. “Look at that.”

The road rounded a bend and the view opened up.

A vast lake stretched below them, its surface smooth as glass.

Dense forest surrounded the shoreline, while a thin layer of mist floated above the water.

“Okay,” Chuck admitted. “That is actually beautiful.”

“Right?” Devon grinned. “Told you.”

“There could still be a monster in it.”

“Chuck!”

“Okay, okay.”

Devon turned onto a smaller road.

Gravel crackled beneath the tires.

“The lodge should be around here somewhere.”

A few minutes later it appeared through the trees.

The building sat atop a small rise, built from heavy timber with huge panoramic windows.

A narrow dock stretched out over the lake below. An old boat rocked gently beside it.

“This is incredible,” Ellie whispered.

The van stopped.

Devon climbed out first and inhaled deeply.

Cold air.

Pine trees.

Freedom.

“Yes! No work. No stress. Just relaxation.”

Chuck stepped out after Sarah.

“Yeah,” he said. “What could possibly go wrong at an isolated house in the woods?”

Sarah looked at him.

“If you make one more horror movie joke, I’m personally throwing you into the lake.”

Chuck’s grin widened.

“I might freeze to death. This isn’t exactly swimming weather.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t throw you in.”

Chuck looked toward the lake.

The water was dark blue and perfectly still beneath a layer of mist.

“This is literally where a documentary narrator says, ‘The body was never recovered.’”

Sarah laughed.

Not just smiled.

Actually laughed.

A short, genuine laugh.

Chuck stared at her for several seconds afterward.

Ellie was unloading luggage from the back of the van, but even she noticed.

“Okay, I like this,” she said. “Sarah finally laughs at Chuck’s stupidity.”

“Hey!” Chuck protested. “My humor is sophisticated.”

“Your humor is that of a teenage nerd,” Sarah replied.

“And yet you fell in love with me.”

This time Sarah didn’t answer immediately.

She simply held his gaze.

“Yeah,” she said softly.

With exactly the same tone she’d used when she told him she loved him.

Chuck’s grin became a little more genuine.

Meanwhile, Devon staggered onto the porch carrying two suitcases.

“Hey, lovebirds. Little help?”

“Sure.”

Chuck immediately tried carrying three bags at once.

One slipped from his grip.

Sarah caught it before it could tumble down the steps.

Devon froze.

Ellie blinked.

Sarah stood motionless for a second, holding the bag in midair.

Too fast.

Just a little too fast.

Chuck immediately jumped in.

“That’s why she’s Employee of the Month at Orange Orange.”

Sarah slowly turned toward him.

“Oh, come on, Chuck.”

“The yogurt industry is a dangerous world.”

“It absolutely is,” Ellie laughed.

Devon turned away to hide a smile.

“Spies...” he muttered.

“Let’s go inside,” Sarah said dryly.

The lodge was even more inviting inside.

Massive wooden beams.

A stone fireplace.

Huge windows overlooking the lake.

The air carried a faint scent of cedar.

“This is beautiful,” Ellie said.

Chuck looked around.

“Okay, I admit it. If a masked killer murders us here, at least we’ll die somewhere nice.”

Sarah grabbed a throw pillow from the couch and threw it at him.

Chuck caught it.

“Was that an attack?”

“A warning.”

Chuck got the message.

“Understood. No more serial-killer references.”

“Wise choice,” Sarah replied.

In one corner of the lobby stood a small reception desk.

Behind it sat an elderly bearded man hunched over an ancient computer.

The monitor flickered weakly while he pecked at the keyboard with two fingers and extraordinary concentration.

“Come on...” he muttered. “Why does the window keep disappearing?”

Chuck instinctively glanced at the screen.

“Internet Explorer,” he whispered to Sarah in horror. “That’s a crime against humanity.”

The old man looked up.

“Huh?”

“Nothing!” Chuck said quickly. “Just... IT-related Stockholm Syndrome.”

Ellie stepped forward with a smile.

“Good evening. We have reservations under Woodcomb.”

The old man squinted at them before nodding.

“Evening. Sure, sure... just a second. This blasted computer keeps freezing. June usually helps me with it, but she’s busy today...”

Chuck couldn’t resist.

“Can I take a look?”

The old man eyed him suspiciously.

“You know computers?”

Sarah snorted quietly behind him.

Chuck straightened proudly.

“I’m the manager of the Nerd Herd at Buy More.”

“Oh.”

The old man’s expression immediately shifted to complete respect.

“Then you must be a professional.”

Chuck shot Sarah a triumphant look before stepping up to the computer.

Two seconds later he’d closed three pop-up windows, restarted a program, and opened the reservation database.

“There you go.”

The old man's eyes widened.

"Are you... some kind of wizard?"

Sarah lowered her head to hide a smile.

"Not officially," Chuck replied.

Devon laughed.

"This is literally the only situation where Chuck is more dangerous than Sarah."

"Hey," Sarah said, looking at him. "I know how to use computers too."

Chuck glanced sideways at her.

"Yeah, you usually just hit people with computers."

The old man froze.

Silence.

Chuck's eyes widened.

"Right... I mean... in video games."

"Of course," Ellie said innocently.

Sarah turned to the old man.

"Don't mind him. He likes to joke around."

Eventually, the old man pulled a heavy ring of keys from beneath the counter and removed two of them, each marked with a small hand-carved wooden room number.

"Your rooms are upstairs. And... try not to go down to the lake too much after dark."

Chuck immediately looked up.

"Why?"

The old man shrugged.

"The fog. And... sometimes there are strange noises coming from the woods."

Sarah closed her eyes for a brief moment.

Chuck slowly looked toward the ceiling.

"Okay. We are now officially one hundred percent inside a horror movie."

Nobody responded.

"Dinner will be ready soon. My wife, Mabel, would be happy to make something from the menu if you'd like. But listen to me rambling—go get settled in. Here are your keys. Name's Hank."

"Devon." Devon shook his hand enthusiastically. "This is my wife Ellie, and these are Chuck and Sarah."

"Pleasure to meet you." Hank nodded. "Don't get many young folks this far out anymore. Everybody just stares at their phones these days."

"Don't worry," Chuck said. "We're adventurers."

Hank laughed.

"Then you've come to the right place, son."

Meanwhile, Sarah took another look around.

The lodge was quiet.

Too quiet.

The fireplace crackled softly. Somewhere in the back, dishes clattered.

That was all.

No voices.

No other guests.

"Busy season this time of year?" she asked casually.

Hank shrugged.

"Off-season? Not really. Besides you folks, there's only a couple of old fishermen staying in one of the cabins across the lake."

Sarah nodded, filing the information away.

Chuck noticed.

Of course he noticed.

"Sarah's asking because she's a social butterfly," he said quickly. "Loves meeting strangers."

Sarah slowly turned toward him.

"Are you doing this on purpose today?"

"Doing what?"

"This."

"I have no idea what 'this' is."

Grinning, Ellie grabbed one of the bags.

"Come on, Sarah. Let's leave them. The guys will spend another twenty minutes talking about absolutely nothing."

"Hey!" Chuck protested. "Guy conversations are important."

"The last time you and Morgan spent forty minutes arguing about whether Batman could beat the Terminator."

"Because that's an important question!"

Hank considered that seriously.

"Terminator can take a shotgun blast."

Chuck immediately pointed at him.

"See? I like this place."

Sarah smiled and followed Ellie toward the stairs.

Halfway up, she paused.

From somewhere beyond the lodge, deep in the forest, came the faint sound of an engine.

Not a chainsaw.

More like a dirt bike.

Then it faded away.

Chapter 5

Devon and Chuck carried the luggage upstairs. By the time they dropped off the last bag, Chuck was already out of breath as he pushed the door shut behind them.

"Okay..." he sighed happily. "I am officially on vacation."

The room was simple but cozy and quiet. Heavy wooden beams crossed the ceiling. A large bed occupied the center of the room, and two old armchairs sat beside the window.

Outside, golden-orange light filtered through the glass. The sun was slowly sinking behind the mountains, casting long shadows across the forest.

Sarah stood by the window.

The surface of the lake shimmered gold, and wisps of fog were beginning to gather among the trees.

For a while, she simply stood there, taking in the view.

Chuck walked up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Almost automatically, Sarah leaned back into him and rested her head against his shoulder.

"It's beautiful," she said eventually. "In some ways it reminds me of Italy."

"Except there are fewer Italians, and the pizza probably comes with American cheese," Chuck said with a grin.

Sarah smiled.

"Did you really just say that?"

"Sarah, I am a culinary expert, in case you've forgotten."

"Right. You're the guy who once took down a fleeing target in Venice with a pizza tray."

Chuck straightened proudly.

"Exactly. Expert."

Sarah closed her eyes for a moment.

It felt good just standing there. After a while, Chuck spoke again.

"You're still watching the woods."

Sarah didn't answer immediately.

"Occupational hazard."

"The pickup?"

Now Sarah looked at him.

"You saw it too."

"Sarah, after living with you this long, I notice suspicious things before they're even suspicious."

"That's not particularly reassuring."

"For you, maybe. For me, it's personal growth."

Sarah laughed softly and turned back toward the window.

"It was probably nothing."

"Yeah." Chuck nodded. "But if it isn't, there are two of us."

Sarah froze for the briefest moment. He hadn't said it heroically. He was simply stating a fact.

Years ago she had been the one protecting him.

Now, more and more often, Sarah found herself realizing there were situations where Chuck protected her too.

Outside, wind whispered through the trees. Somewhere far below, a dog barked in the distance.

Chuck sighed.

"You know this could still be the beginning of a horror movie."

"You know I don't believe in that stuff."

"I know. Besides, it'd be a pretty low-budget horror movie."

"Chuck," Sarah said softly, almost whispering. "Enjoy this while it lasts. Beckman will probably have another assignment waiting when we get back. Assuming we don't get called home early."

"You're right. I'm done with the bad horror-movie commentary."

"Good," Sarah said as she watched the sunset.

The sun slowly disappeared behind the mountains. The lake glowed in shades of orange and crimson while the surrounding forest faded into shadow.

Chuck stood quietly beside Sarah.

Moments like this had once been either brief or fake. Sarah's fingers slowly intertwined with his.

"Thank you," she said unexpectedly.

Chuck looked at her.

"For what?"

Sarah didn't answer for several seconds.

"For trying to make all of this normal."

Chuck smiled faintly.

"Sarah... I'm the guy who accidentally set a microwave on fire with Morgan while making ramen. My relationship with being normal sometimes is a bit complicated."

"Exactly."

Chuck laughed.

Then, somewhere across the lake, a brief beam of light flashed through the trees. Like a vehicle's headlights sweeping across the forest. Sarah's attention snapped toward it immediately. But the light was already gone.

As evening approached, June finished splitting firewood and carried the last of it into her trailer.

Russell watched lazily from his spot beneath the trailer, occasionally wagging his tail without bothering to lift his head from his makeshift bed.

June carefully covered the remaining logs with a tarp to keep the next rainfall from soaking them.

It had already rained earlier that day, and the forest still carried the damp scent of wet earth and pine.

The sun was setting, painting long bands of light across the woods.

June checked her watch.

"Come on, Russell. We'd better hurry or we'll be late for dinner."

She stepped inside and grabbed her jacket. After locking the door, she added the padlock as well. Not that it would stop anyone determined to break in. Still. It made her feel better.

"Let's go."

She motioned to the dog. Russell barked happily and bounded ahead.

Russell raced down the trail, occasionally glancing back as if urging her to hurry. Wet leaves squished beneath June's boots. The forest was slowly changing from daylight into something darker.

Something belonging to the evening. June inhaled deeply. Pine. Wet earth. Fresh-cut wood.

She liked this. People, not so much.

Yet Pine Ridge Lodge was an exception. Hank and Mabel were good people. They didn't ask too many questions. And their cooking was considerably better than anything she made for herself in the trailer.

Suddenly, Russell stopped in the middle of the trail. His ears stood upright.

"What is it?"

The dog stared into a darker section of the forest. He wasn't growling. Just watching. June looked too. Nothing. Only shadows and drifting fog between the trees.

"Probably a deer," she muttered.

A few seconds later, Russell moved on as if he'd decided the same thing. Eventually the trail emerged onto the main road. Below, through the trees, she could already see the warm lights of the lodge. The glow of the fireplace shone through the windows. Laughter drifted from inside. June smiled faintly.

"See? Told you we weren't late."

Russell wagged his tail. Then she heard an engine somewhere in the distance. Instinctively, she turned. A black pickup truck sat along the roadside several hundred yards away, partially hidden among the trees. The engine wasn't running. And it appeared to be empty. June narrowed her eyes.

"Hm."

Russell growled quietly.

"Relax," June said.

Though she wasn't feeling entirely relaxed herself. After a moment she shrugged and continued toward the lodge. There was plenty of strange stuff happening in the woods. As this was Oregon.

June headed for the rear entrance beneath the lodge's back terrace.

She opened the woodshed door, and Russell happily slipped inside to one of his favorite hiding places. June scraped the mud from her boots before entering. The area behind the back door connected to the storage rooms and walk-in refrigerator. As she passed the freezer, she reminded herself to repair one of the interior shelves.

And hadn't Hank mentioned something about a room door earlier?

Warped frame? Broken lock?

I'll look at it tomorrow.

The smell of spices drifted from the kitchen. Her stomach growled loudly. She adjusted her glasses and pushed through the swinging kitchen door.

"Oh, sweetheart, I was starting to think you weren't coming," Mabel said while stirring a large pot of soup.

"Luckily I made it in time." A faint smile touched June's lips. "I couldn't miss the best dinner around."

"We've got a few guests tonight, but sit down. I'll bring your dinner out in a minute."

"Thanks, Mabel."

June took off her jacket and hung it on the coat rack beside the door. The kitchen felt pleasantly warm after the cool evening air outside. The smell of soup filled the room—a mixture of garlic, rosemary, and something smoked. Meanwhile, Russell had already settled comfortably onto an old blanket in the corner.

"He's spoiled," Mabel observed with a smile, glancing at the dog.

"Only about as much as I am."

Mabel laughed.

"Hank says you're too skinny. Not eating properly again?"

June shrugged.

"I worked today."

"That's not food."

From the dining room beyond the kitchen came the sound of quiet conversation and occasional laughter. New guests. Mabel stirred the soup again.

"One of the boys is funny. Keeps talking about movies."

A faint smile touched June's lips.

"Tourists."

"They seem nice enough. The blonde girl, though..." Mabel tilted her head thoughtfully.

"Hmm."

"What about her?"

Mabel considered the question.

"Very observant creature."

June looked up instinctively.

"Military?"

"I don't think so. Just polite."

June made a face.

"Those aren't mutually exclusive."

Mabel waved a hand dismissively. At that moment, a burst of laughter came through the swinging door.

"No, Devon, bears cannot open doors!" Ellie's voice declared.

"I saw a video!"

"That was a raccoon!"

Mabel shook her head, smiling.

"See? Normal people."

June didn't answer immediately. For some reason, the black pickup truck on the road drifted back into her thoughts. Then she pushed the thought away.

"Yeah," she said at last.

"Normal people."

Outside, the forest had gone completely dark.

June stepped out of the kitchen. Only two tables were occupied in the dining room. At one sat a pair of older gentlemen who seemed content to keep to themselves. At the other, a group was talking quietly and laughing.

Then June saw Sarah Walker.

And Sarah was looking directly at her.

June spun around immediately and headed straight back into the kitchen, nearly colliding with Mabel, who was approaching with a steaming bowl of soup.

The older woman looked startled.

"Goodness, sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just forgot something outside."

June was already grabbing her jacket. Already opening the back door. She had taken only a few steps into the gathering darkness when a voice called out behind her.

"Jill?!"

June swallowed hard. Then slowly turned around like someone who had just been caught doing something they shouldn't.

"Hi, Chuck," she said quietly.

Sarah appeared behind her as if out of nowhere. She'd circled around the building while Chuck came out through the back.

Russell let out a low growl, though nothing about his posture suggested he intended to attack.

"Jill?" Sarah repeated, clearly surprised.

The last time she'd seen her, Jill Roberts had been helping them with a cover of a fake engagement to get intel on Fulcrum. Later together with Sarah, she had broken into a Fulcrum facility to rescue Chuck and Casey. Then Jill had vanished without a trace.

The woman standing before them now barely resembled Jill Roberts. Her dirty-blond hair looked as though it had been cut short with kitchen scissors on a bad day. Her thick-framed glasses were held together with 100 mile tape. They looked like something she'd picked up from a Salvation Army donation bin. The same could be said for her clothes. Worn and ill-fitting, but practical.

June almost seemed to shrink beneath Sarah's gaze. Not because Sarah looked threatening. She didn't. She was simply observing.

The kind of calm attention that made most people feel like confessing things they hadn't even done. Russell moved to June's side and continued his low growl. At the same time, his tail wagged slowly. He seemed confused.

Chuck looked back and forth between them.

"Jill... what are you doing here?"

June swallowed again. The old name sounded strange. Like it belonged to someone else.

"I... live nearby," she said quietly.

Sarah continued studying her.

Her posture. Her hands. Her outfit.

She didn't look like an agent anymore. She didn't stand like one. Didn't move like one. She just looked tired. And for some reason... sad.

"You disappeared," Sarah finally said.

June lowered her eyes.

"Yeah."

At that moment, Mabel's voice drifted through the back door.

"June? Is everything okay out there?"

June flinched as though she'd been caught doing something wrong.

"Yes!" she called back quickly. "I just ran into some old friends."

Chuck was still staring at her in disbelief.

"Wait... you actually live here? Out in the middle of the woods?"

"My trailer isn't far from here."

"You have a trailer?"

Sarah glanced sideways at Chuck.

"That's not the most important part of the conversation."

"I know, but... a trailer? Jill Roberts has a trailer?"

A faint smile crossed June's face. It was a tired smile.

"I'm not really Jill Roberts anymore."

For several seconds, only the quiet sounds of the forest surrounded them. Warm light spilled from the lodge behind them. June, however, seemed reluctant to step any closer to it.

Finally, Sarah broke the silence.

"After Fulcrum, we thought you were dead."

June slowly shook her head.

"I almost felt it too."

The smile disappeared from Chuck's face. Now he saw it too. The dark circles below her eyes. The calluses on her hands from physical labor. She looked like someone who had gotten trapped inside a really bad cover identity... And forgot how to leave it.

Russell wandered over and sniffed Chuck's hand. Chuck cautiously scratched the dog behind the ears. The animal wore a reinforced leather collar with a small metal nameplate attached. The collar looked thicker than necessary, but Chuck didn't

comment on it.

"So..." he said uncertainly. "You're a lumberjack now?"

June shrugged.

"At the lumber yard. I split firewood. Fix things for Hank when they break. Sometimes I fish."

"Wow."

June shrugged again.

"It's a quiet place."

For a brief moment, Sarah's gaze drifted toward the forest.

"Too quiet," she said almost under her breath.

June immediately looked at her. And in that brief moment, Sarah understood. June had noticed something too. She carried herself like hunted prey. Her shoulders were tense.

Her eyes never stopped moving, constantly tracking every sound coming from the woods. It wasn't the kind of vigilance agents learned. This came from somewhere deeper.

Chuck broke the silence.

"My sister and brother-in-law are inside," he said. "We'll head back in, and after dinner..."

He hesitated.

"Maybe we could come by and see you?"

Sarah nodded before turning back toward the lodge. She knew what it looked like when someone was playing a role. She'd built a career on reading lies. June wasn't pretending. She was genuinely falling apart.

Like Juan Diego Arnaldo, the Basque terrorist they'd encountered on a train to Zurich during their runaway honeymoon. He'd lasted two years in hiding.

Sarah said nothing. She simply continued walking, disappearing silently through the back entrance.

Chuck sighed.

"Jill... uh, June..."

He rubbed the back of his neck.

"The thing is... the situation..."

"Let it go, Chuck."

June stepped closer.

"You seem happy."

She gave a small shrug.

"That's all that matters."

Chuck couldn't answer right away. She hadn't said it with bitterness. That somehow made it hurt more. June walked past him. Russell followed with a soft huff.

The dog looked back at Chuck one last time before disappearing through the doorway. Chuck remained standing alone in the twilight. A cold wind drifted out of the forest.

Inside the lodge, voices and clinking silverware floated through the windows as though the entire world were perfectly normal. Eventually Chuck rubbed a hand across his face and sighed.

"This isn't going to be easy."

"What's not going to be easy?"

Sarah was suddenly standing beside him. Chuck jumped.

"Jesus! How do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"The ninja thing! One of these days you're going to give me a heart attack."

Sarah folded her arms.

"You didn't answer."

Chuck was quiet for several seconds.

"Jill... June... she wasn't like this before."

"Neither were you."

Chuck looked at her. Sarah's expression was calm. Gentle.

"People disappear sometimes, Chuck. Some die in the process. Some start over."

"Which one do you think she is?"

Sarah glanced toward the door.

"I don't know yet."

Then, more quietly:

"But she's afraid of something."

A small pause.

"Very afraid."

Dinner passed pleasantly enough.

The two elderly fishermen eventually started laughing so loudly at their own stories that Hank had to shush them twice.

After another round of drinks, they muttered goodnights to everyone and staggered off toward the stairs.

Meanwhile, Devon enthusiastically explained the next day's hiking route to Ellie. Chuck joined the conversation with surprising ease. Sarah noticed immediately. Chuck didn't struggle anymore when he had to play a role. He didn't hesitate. Didn't desperately search for something to say. He simply talked. Naturally. Comfortably. More and more, he blended into whatever situation he found himself in. Like a real spy.

When they finally went to their room, Chuck sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked off his shoes.

Sarah closed the door behind them and spent a few seconds simply watching him.

"You're upset," she observed.

Not coldly. Sympathetically.

"Yeah, you could say that. Not every day you run into someone who's broken your heart multiple times."

"It's okay, Chuck." Sarah gently brushed a hand across his forearm. "We'll figure out what's going on. And after that, we'll still enjoy the trip."

"Yeah... Okay, that sounds good."

He managed a smile, though the subject still clearly bothered him.

"Maybe we'll even go fishing."

"Captain would probably enjoy that."

Sarah crossed the room and opened her suitcase. Then she pulled out a stun gun. Chuck pointed immediately.

"Ha! I knew you were hiding something."

"I couldn't exactly bring a real gun on real vacation."

She shrugged.

"Oh, sure. Because a stun gun is completely normal."

Sarah tucked it into the back of her waistband.

"Chuck, you brought three different multitools."

"That's different."

"Why?"

"They have can openers. And one has a saw."

Sarah smiled. Meanwhile, Chuck pulled on his black hoodie and grabbed his watchcap.

"Okay," he announced. "Let's go visit my traumatized ex-girlfriend in the middle of nowhere."

Sarah stepped closer.

"Chuck."

"Yeah?"

"No heroics."

"Hey, I never do heroics."

Sarah simply looked at him.

"Okay... rarely."

Another look.

"Fine."

Sarah laughed quietly and switched off the light. Outside, the forest had become completely dark. On her way out, she squeezed his hand.

"It's going to be okay."

Then she slipped silently into the hallway and disappeared down the staircase. Chuck followed without a word, carefully pulling the door shut behind him.

Chuck still found it amazing how Sarah could move like a shadow. The old wooden floor creaked occasionally, but she always seemed to know exactly where to step.

She crossed the dim hallway and disappeared down the stairs.

Chuck followed.

Only a few lights remained on downstairs and the lodge was quiet. Hank was probably cleaning up somewhere in the back, and the fireplace crackled softly. Sarah stopped beside a window and looked outside.

"Clear," she whispered.

Chuck automatically looked too, though all he could see was darkness.

"I love it when you say that and all I see is trees."

A faint smile crossed Sarah's face.

"Takes practice."

"I think I'll stick with the 'computer guy who somehow survived' category."

They slipped out through the back door.

In the neighboring room, Devon had unintentionally overheard Chuck and Sarah leaving. He didn't want to know where they were going. It was easier to talk to Ellie if he didn't know. Even then, it still felt too much like lying, and the thought made his skin crawl.

The night air was cold and damp. The forest looked completely different in the dark. Deeper and endless, full of darkness. Fog drifted in from the lake and threaded itself through the trees. Sarah instinctively evaluated their surroundings. Trail to the left. A splitting axe beside the woodpile. Generator shed. Only one floodlight was functioning properly.

Meanwhile, Chuck adjusted his cap.

"You know, normal couples spend evenings like this drinking wine in front of a fireplace."

"And getting bored."

"Fair enough."

They started down the trail toward June's trailer. Gravel crunched softly beneath their feet. For several minutes neither spoke.

Then Sarah broke the silence.

"I'm still curious."

Chuck glanced at her.

"About what?"

"Jill."

Chuck sighed.

"I think what bothers me is that she became June."

Sarah didn't answer immediately.

"People get tired, Chuck."

"She never seemed like the type."

"After Fulcrum?" Sarah shook her head. "Of course she did."

Chuck lowered his gaze. Somewhere off to the right, a branch snapped in the darkness. Sarah stopped instantly. Chuck did too. For several seconds they listened.

Then Russell emerged from the shadows, wagging his tail.

"Oh, thank God," Chuck whispered. "I was starting to think we really were in a horror movie."

Behind the dog, a faint light glowed through the trees from the window of June's trailer. The trailer sat atop a small rise in a clearing barely larger than itself. Dark pines surrounded it on every side, as though the forest were slowly reclaiming the space. Russell happily raced ahead. Chuck picked up a stick and threw it.

"Bring it back, buddy!"

The dog immediately accepted the challenge and bounded off after it. Sarah watched in amazement.

A few hours ago, the dog had been growling at them. Now he behaved as though he'd known Chuck for ages.

"How do you do that?" she asked quietly.

Chuck shrugged.

"People are harder."

"Hm."

"What does that 'hm' mean?"

Sarah smiled faintly as Russell came panting back with the stick.

"It's just strange watching you become best friends with a half-wild forest dog in five minutes."

"It's a gift."

"I've never met anyone else like you."

Russell took off again. Chuck looked absurdly pleased with himself, as though he'd just negotiated an important peace treaty.

They reached the trailer. It was old but well maintained. Rain streaks ran down the exterior walls, and neatly stacked firewood sat beneath a tarp nearby. Farther away stood several empty RV spaces. Hardly anyone came this far out during the off-season. In the darkness, the entire place felt abandoned.

"Knock," Sarah encouraged Chuck.

He took a breath and gave the door three slow knocks.

Silence.

Then movement inside. A drawer closing the footsteps.

Russell returned and sat beside Chuck, tail wagging. June's voice came from behind the door.

"Are you alone?"

Chuck and Sarah exchanged a look.

"Yes," Sarah answered.

A few seconds passed. A chain rattled. A lock clicked. The door opened a crack. Only half of June's face was visible in the warm light spilling from inside. She'd removed her glasses and her short hair was messy. But her eyes still kept darting past them toward the darkness of the forest.

"Come in. Quickly."

They stepped inside.

The trailer wasn't what they had expected.

Or rather, Sarah had already suspected that Jill wasn't putting on an act. Someone who had spent years running could only hide it for so long. The trailer wasn't dirty. Disorganized was the better word. Dog-eared books lay piled across the narrow table. An old microwave sat in one corner beside several boxes of instant ramen. The shelves held a strange mixture of technical manuals, cheap paperback novels, and mason jars filled with supplies. Clothes were scattered around. Dirty dishes sat in the sink. A laptop covered with protective plastic rested on one of the seats.

Sarah noticed it immediately.

Chuck simply swallowed.

Because it suddenly became very difficult to reconcile the Jill Roberts he remembered with the woman standing before him. Jill who had been confident. Dangerous and beautiful. June as she stood before him looked like someone who hadn't felt safe anywhere in years.

"Cozy," Sarah said, breaking the silence.

Not mockingly, just kindly.

"Thanks." June gave a small shrug. "Sit down. Want some coffee?"

"Yes," Chuck answered far too quickly.

Sarah sat on one of the narrow benches.

"I'll have some too."

June nodded and moved toward the kitchenette. Her motions were fast. Practiced. Every few seconds she glanced toward the window.

Russell settled beside Chuck's feet. Chuck scratched the dog's head and spoke quietly.

"So... June?"

The woman stood with her back to them while filling an electric kettle.

"Simple."

"Why?"

For several seconds she didn't answer.

"Because Jill Roberts caused too many problems for too many people."

Sarah watched silently. The tension in her shoulders. The pauses between her sentences. The exhaustion. The fear.

Not fear of Chuck.

Something else.

June finally set the coffee to brew and turned toward them.

"I'm guessing you have questions."

"Yeah," Chuck said carefully.

"Let's start with why you disappeared," Sarah added calmly.

June nodded faintly.

Chuck already knew the answer. After all, he'd been the one who suggested it. He'd given her the engagement ring because she needed money to disappear.

"I couldn't go back to prison. Fulcrum would've figured out I betrayed them, and they would've come after me."

"Most likely," Sarah agreed. "On the other hand, now the CIA is looking for you too."

The trailer walls creaked softly as the wind picked up outside. Beyond the windows, the forest had become completely black. Then suddenly Russell lifted his head. He looked toward the door. And started growling.

"Oh God."

June went pale.

"They found me."

Before Chuck could react, she was already moving. She grabbed the plastic-covered laptop, stuffed it into a worn backpack, then began frantically scanning the trailer.

Sarah was on her feet instantly.

June reached beneath the kitchen counter and pulled out a crossbow.

A second later she'd cocked it and loaded a hunting bolt.

"Whoa!" Chuck exclaimed. "What exactly are you planning to do with that?"

"To protect myself," June said, her voice shaking.

But Sarah wasn't watching her anymore. She rushed to the window, lifted the blind with two fingers, and looked outside. Then her eyes widened.

"Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Two quick strides carried her to the door.

"What happened?" Chuck asked.

"Stay inside the trailer, Chuck."

Sarah was already opening the door.

Cold night air rushed in immediately.

"Cole?" she called out into the darkness.

"What are you doing here?"

Chapter 6

There he stood in all his physical glory.

Cole Barker.

Dressed like a weekend hunter.

His rifle still rested across his folded arms, and he was smiling.

Calm.

Far too calm.

Moonlight glinted across his face.

"Agent Walker." He gave Sarah a wink. "Always a pleasure to see you my dear."

"What?!" Chuck immediately appeared beside Sarah.

"Ah, Bartowski. The gang's back together again?" Cole glanced around. "Major Casey hiding somewhere nearby?"

Chuck didn't answer.

He just swallowed.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah asked.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you that." Cole nodded toward the trailer. "Let's just say there's something in there I need to retrieve. So if you'd be kind enough to let me through, Sarah..."

His smile widened.

"Afterward, perhaps we could have a drink back at the lodge. Reminiscing about old times."

Inside, June visibly tensed.

But after Chuck gestured for her to calm down, she lowered the crossbow and removed the bolt.

"What is this?" she asked. "Who is he?"

Sarah never took her eyes off Cole.

"An old problem."

"That hurts," Cole remarked.

Chuck stepped up beside Sarah.

"Okay. Before anyone disappears, pulls a weapon, or gives me additional emotional trauma, somebody explain what's happening."

"May I come inside now?" Cole asked.

Without waiting for permission, he started forward.

Sarah watched him silently for a moment.

"Behave."

Nothing more.

Her expression said everything.

Cole grinned.

"You know me, Walker."

Chuck instinctively positioned himself between Cole and June. June tightened her grip on Russell, who was producing a deep, threatening growl.

The dog was ready to defend her.

Cole set his rifle aside.

Sarah stepped in after him and closed the door.

"Cozy place," Cole observed.

"What do you want?" Sarah asked.

"Her."

Cole pointed at June.

"And whatever she stole."

He took a step forward.

June flinched.

Sarah immediately stepped between them.

Cole remained perfectly calm.

Sarah knew exactly how dangerous he was.

For a brief moment it felt like two apex predators sizing each other up.

Chuck finally broke the silence after his eyes drifted toward the laptop.

"What did you steal?"

"Insurance."

June sighed.

"To make sure nobody hurt me."

She hesitated.

"Turns out it may have gotten me into even bigger trouble."

Cole glanced at her.

Unhurried.

He was the kind of man who knew his mere presence created pressure.

"Insurance," he repeated. "Interesting choice of words."

June pulled Russell closer.

"I didn't have a choice."

Silence.

"For a while, I thought I did. But both roads led to the same place."

"Sometimes they do," Cole admitted.

Chuck remained beside her.

"Maybe we should start at the beginning. Who's after her?"

Cole looked at Chuck as if deciding how much to reveal.

"People who don't appreciate having their property stolen. We have found something referenced as 'the Black Swan'."

He fell silent for a second.

"And people willing to kill to get it."

"That's extremely vague and certainly not reassuring," Chuck said.

"It wasn't meant to be reassuring."

Sarah still hadn't looked away from him.

"What exactly are we talking about?"

"We've lost assets. So have other agencies."

Chuck shifted uneasily.

"Okay. That's not terrifying at all."

Cole ignored him.

"Every lead ends the same way. Missing files. Dead intermediaries. Burned identities."

Another pause.

"And one name."

"What name?" Chuck asked.

Cole's eyes drifted toward the laptop.

"Black Swan."

Sarah still hadn't looked away from him.

"What exactly did she take?"

Cole slowly nodded toward the laptop.

"Operational data."

June lowered her head.

"I never intended."

"Yes, you did," Cole interrupted. "Otherwise you wouldn't have spent months running across half the country and hiding in a trailer in a forest."

Russell growled again.

Cole looked down at him and nodded thoughtfully.

"Animals are usually excellent judges of character."

Chuck spoke quietly.

"Was that self-awareness?"

Cole ignored him.

Sarah turned toward June.

"What did you find in those files?"

June hesitated.

"Names. Payments. Companies. Foundations. Security contractors."

"Front organizations," Cole said.

June slowly shook her head.

"They didn't look like fronts."

Everyone waited.

"There were transfers to hospitals. Veteran support programs. Port development projects."

Sarah's eyes hardened.

"And?"

"The same names appeared in operational reports."

A pause.

"As if all of it belonged to something larger."

Another pause.

"And older."

Silence filled the trailer.

Chuck and Sarah exchanged a look.

Fulcrum had been dismantled.

The Ring had been destroyed.

This sounded different.

"What kind of operational reports?" Chuck asked quietly.

June took a long time to answer.

"People disappeared. Some wetwork."

Russell whimpered softly.

"Everything was written as if it were completely normal," she continued. "Routine."

"Professional reports," Sarah said.

Not a question.

June nodded.

Cole cut in.

"The sort of people who believe their goals justify their methods. And who've believed it long enough to stop questioning themselves."

He looked at June.

"Fulcrum was only a symptom."

June swallowed.

"There was an audio file too."

Sarah immediately focused on her.

"About what?"

"A man discussing an operation."

June looked uncomfortable.

"He said..."

Her voice dropped.

"Patriotism sometimes requires silence."

Chuck didn't respond immediately.

Sarah noticed.

That half-second delay she'd learned to recognize.

"Chuck."

The Intersect activated.

A ship moving through nighttime fog.

A black file marked with a hummingbird emblem.

An overexposed field of poppies.

A laboratory jar containing a toad.

Images flickered through his mind rapidly.

"Yeah."

He blinked.

"Just..."

"You flashed on something?" Sarah asked quietly.

Chuck rubbed his forehead.

"An old article."

He paused to gather his thoughts.

"Cold War era."

Another pause.

"A senator said something similar."

Then he frowned.

"Casey probably would've loved the guy."

Chuck looked around.

Nobody smiled.

"But I don't understand what it has to do with any of this."

"Neither do I," June admitted. "What I do know is they'd kill for that information."

Her gaze drifted downward.

"They found me in Wyoming."

"What happened?" Chuck asked.

June looked at him.

"I'm still here."

Silence followed.

Outside, rain tapped softly against the trailer roof. Eventually Chuck sighed.

"I'm starting to enjoy this vacation a lot less."

"What if we table this until morning?" Sarah suggested.

Cole nodded slowly.

"As long as she doesn't run."

"She won't," Chuck said immediately.

Then he turned toward June.

"Right?"

June didn't answer at first.

She kept stroking Russell's head, as though the dog's calmness was the only thing holding her together.

Finally she nodded.

"I won't."

Cole watched her for several seconds.

Then he picked up his rifle.

"Fine."

Sarah headed for the door.

"Let's go back. We'll talk at breakfast."

Cole gave a small nod.

"If everybody lives that long."

Then he stepped outside.

Chuck stared after him.

"See? That's exactly the kind of sentence that helps nobody sleep better."

Sarah stopped in the doorway.

"Chuck?"

"Okay, okay. I'm coming."

Outside, the rain had begun to fall harder. And somewhere beyond the trees, hidden by darkness and fog, something moved through the forest.

Meanwhile, back at the lodge, Ellie nudged Devon in the side.

"Are you asleep?"

"Trying to, babe."

"Devon, I'm worried about Chuck. At dinner he looked like he'd seen a ghost, and Sarah got pretty quiet too. It's like something happened."

"Oh, come on," Devon replied sleepily. He didn't even turn toward her. "Everything's great."

"Devon, I'm a doctor. I see people all the time who are supposedly doing fine when they're really not."

"I know, sweetheart, but Chuck's okay."

"Please don't say that, because whenever Chuck is 'okay,' he usually isn't."

The sleep vanished from Devon's eyes. He propped himself up on one elbow and turned toward Ellie.

"Ellie, I really don't think you need to worry. Chuck and Sarah are happy together. They love each other."

"I know, Devon, and I'm happy for them," Ellie said with a sigh. "It's just... My brother tends to get down on himself. I don't know what happened with Sarah back then, when he spent months lying on the couch eating cheese balls, but his eyes looked so empty. I saw some of those same signs tonight."

They were both silent for a moment.

"Don't worry, sweetheart. Whatever's going on, this isn't the cheese-ball phase yet."

Devon knew exactly what Ellie meant. Back then, Chuck had told him he'd been fired from the CIA, and things hadn't been going well with Sarah during those months either. Devon couldn't remember the exact reason for the heartbreak anymore, but Ellie had gotten that part exactly right.

"Devon." Ellie looked at him seriously. "You know something."

The smile vanished from Devon's face.

He hated this feeling. The back of his neck started getting warm. He was sweating again. This was exactly why he never wanted to know anything.

"I don't know anything," Devon said a little too quickly. "Scout's honor!"

"Devon."

"Ellie."

Devon's tone perfectly mimicked hers.

"You were never even a Scout! Seriously, what's going on with Chuck, and where is he right now?"

"I honestly don't know."

Ellie stared at him in silence until Devon cracked.

"I heard them sneaking out earlier. He's not spying again, is he?"

"I'm sure he's not."

"Devon," Ellie said, folding her arms.

"Babe, I'm positive he's not spying. He and Sarah probably just went for a walk together. Looking at the stars or something."

"In this weather?"

"Ellie... I honestly don't know what happened at dinner."

"But?"

"But I think Chuck doesn't want you worrying about him."

Chapter 7

Sarah and Chuck slipped back into the lodge. The rain had eased somewhat, but they were still wet. Sarah took off her top and was already working on her pants when she caught Chuck looking at her.

"What's wrong?" Sarah asked.

Chuck didn't answer right away.

Rain drummed against the roof. The hallway of the lodge was quiet around them, interrupted only by the occasional creak of old wood in the wind. Sarah slowly straightened up. Damp strands of hair clung to her shoulders.

"Chuck?" she asked softly.

For a moment, he didn't answer. Instead, he started untying his shoes... slowly, as if the knot had suddenly become incredibly complicated.

"Nothing. Just... a very weird evening."

Sarah watched him for a second. Then she sat down on the edge of the bed and reached for a towel.

"Cole?"

Chuck shrugged, though not very convincingly.

"Partly."

Sarah dried her hair.

"There's nothing to worry about."

Chuck sighed.

That was the strangest part. He knew that.

It wasn't jealousy anymore. Not the competitive, insecure kind he'd once felt whenever Cole Barker was involved. This was something harder to define.

Cole Barker was the kind of man Chuck used to automatically assume was the hero. The type of guy who walked into a room and everyone instantly knew he was dangerous. A real James Bond.

Sarah had been attracted to him once.

Chuck sat down beside her.

"It's just strange seeing him again..."

Sarah didn't answer immediately.

"That was a serious assignment, Chuck."

Chuck nodded faintly. Sarah looked over at him.

"Do you honestly think that after everything we've been through, and after you saved me from Shaw, I" she paused and placed a hand on his cheek "would ever choose Cole

Barker over you?"

Chuck snorted.

"Oh, come on. The guy looks like he walked out of a spy movie. I almost wiped out on a mossy rock five minutes ago."

"Goof." A smile appeared at the corner of Sarah's mouth. "By the way, I saw that stunt."

Chuck's eyebrows shot up.

"How do you do that?"

"Occupational hazard. Observation."

Chuck laughed, but the smile quickly faded.

"It's not really Cole that's weird."

Now Sarah paid closer attention.

"It's June?"

Chuck slowly let out a breath.

"Yeah."

Outside, the rain began tapping harder against the roof again. Sarah continued drying her hair.

"Seeing here this way was like..." Chuck shook his head. "I don't know, Sarah."

Sarah's hand stopped on the towel. Chuck wasn't looking at her, so he didn't see.

"Chuck..."

"I'm not saying it in a romantic way. It's just... she looks tired, Sarah. Like someone who's been trying to handle everything alone for way too long. Roughed up, broken even."

Sarah was quiet for a long time. Then she lowered the towel.

"Yeah," she said softly. "She does."

Chuck turned toward her. Sarah didn't speak right away. She simply stared ahead at the wall, or somewhere beyond it.

"Hey," Chuck said quietly.

Sarah looked at him. Chuck smiled. He was tired. His smile honest.

"You're handling it a little better than she is."

Sarah sighed softly.

"Only because I explained to her a long time ago that if she ever hurt you, she'd have to deal with me."

"She's like a shadow of herself..."

Sarah let out a slow breath, moved closer, and kissed him. Then she rested her head against his shoulder. Chuck smiled gently.

Outside, the wind swept through the trees.

Somewhere far away, on the other side of the forest, an engine briefly growled to life. Sarah's head tilted slightly, barely half an inch, toward the sound.

Chuck wasn't smiling anymore. Neither of them said a word.

Chapter 8

Morning brought the smell of rain and dazzling sunshine.

Chuck was still sleepy, but he was starting to get used to the fact that spy work sometimes came with very little sleep. Sarah was already getting dressed.

"Hey." Chuck rubbed the sleep from his eyes.

"Morning. Come on, let's not be late."

"Okay, but I'm going to need coffee. A lot of coffee."

Chuck climbed out of bed and started getting dressed.

Downstairs, Ellie and Devon were already waiting for them. The dining room was filled with the mixed aromas of various breakfast foods.

"Good morning!" Ellie greeted them.

"Good morning!" Sarah and Chuck replied with matching smiles.

Chuck immediately started looking for coffee while Sarah sat down with them.

"How was your night?" Ellie asked. Devon made a strange face. Sarah noticed it immediately, then continued smiling.

"Maybe it's the fresh air, but we slept wonderfully."

Chuck nearly choked on his coffee.

"Hm. Yeah. The fresh air. It was definitely very... fresh."

Devon raised an eyebrow.

"Okay, now I'm sure I missed something."

Ellie laughed quietly.

"I was only asking because it poured all night. I figured nobody got much sleep."

"Oh, I slept perfectly," Sarah said calmly while spreading jam on her toast. "Chuck almost fell out of bed once, though."

Chuck stared at her. Sarah continued with a perfectly innocent expression.

"I think he was having a bad dream."

"The edge of the bed was just... it was smaller than expected."

"Don't you have a king-size bed?" Devon asked.

"Traitor," Chuck muttered.

Ellie shook her head, laughing.

"I love that everything is finally normal."

For a brief moment, silence settled over the table. Chuck instinctively looked at Sarah. She was still smiling, but for a single second her expression softened. It wasn't cover-story Sarah looking back at him. It was the real one.

"We should probably get moving soon if we want to reach the lake before the morning hike," Devon said.

"Hike?" Chuck asked cautiously.

Grinning, Devon slapped him on the shoulder.

"Buddy, this is why we came to Oregon. Forests. Mountains. Nature. Rugged masculine suffering."

"I already miss the Buy More air conditioning."

"No one misses the Buy More air conditioning," Sarah said, nudging him.

"Fair enough."

Birds chirped outside, and the scent of wet pine drifted through the open windows. The rain seemed to have washed the entire world clean. Chuck picked up his mug and took another sip.

"Okay. Hiking. What could possibly happen?"

Sarah and Devon looked at him simultaneously.

The two elderly fishermen finished breakfast and quietly headed out. A few minutes later, June appeared. She didn't say anything. She simply sat down at a table farther away and started eating breakfast.

"She looks familiar," Ellie remarked.

"She probably reminds you of somebody you've seen at the hospital," Chuck cut in quickly before taking a large swallow of coffee.

At that moment, Cole walked in. Confident as ever. Without acknowledging anyone else, he crossed the room, sat down across from June.

"Sorry I'm late."

Then he immediately started talking about something completely trivial. Sarah glanced at Chuck. Chuck was spreading noticeably more butter on his toast than usual. Devon suddenly became very interested in his orange juice.

Mabel arrived carrying a stack of pancakes.

Sarah looked at Chuck. Their eyes met.

"I'm going to get some pancakes," she said, rising from her chair.

She almost passed Cole's table when she "accidentally" dropped her fork.

Cole immediately bent down and picked it up.

"I believe you dropped this, ma'am," he said with a smile.

"Thank you. How thoughtful."

Sarah smiled back.

Then, quietly:

"Outside."

For a moment, Cole held her gaze. His smile never changed, but his eyes sharpened. "Of course," he replied in the same casual tone.

Sarah continued toward the buffet as though she really had only gone for pancakes. Chuck watched her go.

Then quickly focused on his plate when June looked up. June's expression didn't change, but she slowly set down her coffee mug.

"Is something wrong?" Ellie asked.

"What? No. Nothing." Chuck answered much too quickly. Devon cleared his throat.

"Chuck is just... extremely focused on carbohydrates."

"My brain needs fuel," Chuck nodded.

Mabel cheerfully stepped over to Sarah.

"Sweetheart, would you like whipped cream too?"

"Yes, please."

Meanwhile, Cole stepped out onto the deck. He wasn't in any hurry. He stopped by the railing, took out a cigarette, but didn't light it. Instead, he watched the forest.

A few seconds later, Sarah emerged carrying a plate.

"Subtle as always," Cole remarked.

"That's rich coming from you. Last night you almost pulled a gun on us."

Cole glanced sideways at her.

"Occupational hazard. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

Sarah set her plate on the railing.

"Then let's be honest. What do you want from June?"

"To save her life."

"Interesting definition of helping someone."

A faint smile crossed Cole's face.

"And what about you two? Tourists? Fake newlyweds? Undercover hikers?"

Sarah didn't answer immediately.

"Personal matter."

Cole took out the cigarette again. Still, he didn't light it. Sarah rested her hands on the railing. For a while neither of them spoke. The forest was still damp from the morning fog.

Finally, Cole broke the silence.

"Seems so Agent Walker."

Sarah looked at him.

"You're different."

She didn't ask what he meant. She already knew.

"Yeah."

Cole looked at the cigarette in his hand. Then put it away again.

"You seem better."

Sarah considered the remark for a moment.

Then:

"Much better."

Cole slipped the cigarette back into his pocket.

"You can see it on him too."

He nodded toward the dining room, where Chuck was currently putting far too much butter again on his toast. Sarah didn't answer. She didn't have to.

Chuck was lurking near the breakfast sausages when Devon subtly pulled him aside.

"Chuck, are those spies?"

"Yeah, but don't worry. There's no danger."

"Bro..." Devon started sweating.

"Devon, just be awesome! Can you be awesome again?"

Ellie looked at them in confusion.

"What are you two talking about?"

"Sausages," Devon answered cheerily.

Ellie just rolled her eyes.

"Boys."

Outside, Cole finally spoke.

"June isn't going to go with them voluntarily."

Sarah's eyes narrowed.

"Them?"

"The people looking for her. And believe me... they're getting close. We need to wrap this up fast."

Then they both heard it.

A moment later, they saw it too.

A motorcyclist at the edge of the forest, sitting on a dirt bike. Just sat there for a few more seconds, then slowly rolled away down the gravel road.

Cole watched until he disappeared among the trees.

"Your friends?" Sarah asked.

"No," Cole replied shortly. "But if I'm not mistaken, they mean trouble."

June carried in an armful of firewood with quick, efficient movements. Sarah didn't say anything. She left Cole where he stood.

Chapter 9

June let out a breath and sat down to rest. Not long afterward, Sarah stepped out from behind the building.

Russell greeted her with a wagging tail.

June simply sat and watched.

"How long has it been since you slept properly?"

A faint smile crossed June's face.

"Assessing me now?"

"No." Sarah leaned against the wall beside her. "Just curious."

They sat in silence for a while.

June broke it first.

"It's good seeing you two."

Sarah looked at her.

"You're happy."

"It could have turned out differently..."

June nodded tiredly.

"Yeah. It worked out for you."

Sarah remained quiet. She didn't argue.

"Not by myself," she said softly. "None of this..."

Silence lingered for a moment between them.

"It could have worked out for you too."

June smiled faintly. She watched Russell.

"With him... maybe."

Russell lay down at June's feet. Chuck's voice drifted from inside.

"Okay, I officially lost my battle with the Oregon coffee maker!"

June laughed quietly. Sarah smiled. For a moment, everything felt normal. Then June slowly stood. Russell got up too.

"Just take care of him..."

Sarah's smile faded. Her expression turned serious. She stood silently for a moment.

"Sometimes..." she began, then nearly let the thought go. "Sometimes he's the one taking care of me."

For a moment, June simply looked at her. Then she slowly nodded.

"Yeah..."

A small pause.

"Classic Chuck."

Inside, Mabel clapped her hands.

"All right, people! If you want to reach the waterfall before lunch, it's time to get moving!"

Ellie immediately grabbed her backpack.

"Finally, a normal activity."

Chuck stood up.

"Yeah. Normal. That always goes well for us."

Sarah came back inside and picked up her jacket. As she did, she looked at Cole one more time. The man gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head.

The trail began behind the lodge. Wet earth. Tall pines. Morning fog lingering among the trees.

Ellie eagerly led the way while Devon walked beside her, trying to explain why fishing technically counted as a sport.

"Devon, people sit in a chair for hours."

"Mental endurance, that's the key."

Chuck and Sarah stayed a few steps behind them.

"Do you think Cole is telling the truth?" Chuck asked quietly.

"Partly."

"That is not a comforting answer."

Sarah was about to respond when the sound of an engine interrupted her. All four of them stopped. Not far from the trail, among the trees, another motorcyclist sat waiting. Black dirt bike. Dark helmet. The rider didn't move. He simply watched them.

Ellie gave an awkward little wave.

"Um... hello?"

The rider slowly nodded.

But his attention remained fixed on them.

Chuck's stomach tightened.

"Sarah..."

Then the rider turned the machine around, twisted the throttle and disappeared into the trees. For several seconds, nobody spoke.

"Okay," Devon finally said. "That was one hundred percent horror-movie behavior."

"Maybe he was lost," Ellie suggested uncertainly.

"Ellie, nobody looks at tourists like that unless they're a serial killer or a tax auditor."

Suddenly Sarah stumbled.

"Ah!"

She lost her balance and grabbed her ankle.

"Sarah!" Chuck caught her immediately.

"My ankle... damn it..."

Ellie hurried over.

"Let's get her seated."

Chuck wrapped an arm around Sarah and helped her sit on a fallen log.

Devon knelt in front of her.

"Let me see."

Carefully, he took hold of her ankle and gently moved it.

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes," Sarah hissed.

Then she looked directly into Devon's eyes.

A little too directly. Devon froze. Sarah's gaze flicked toward Chuck for a split second, then back to him. Devon blinked. Spy stuff. He pressed on the ankle again, completely unnecessarily this time.

"Hm. Yeah. This... this looks like a pretty serious sprain."

Chuck nearly choked. Ellie looked concerned.

"Serious?"

"Absolutely," Devon nodded in his most professional voice. "I'd definitely recommend resting it. I wouldn't continue hiking on that."

"But you're a heart surgeon," Ellie pointed out.

Without missing a beat, Devon replied,

"An ankle is... technically still part of the body." Chuck quickly looked away to avoid laughing. Sarah hissed again, perhaps a little too theatrically. Devon got the message.

"Yep. Wow. Hear that? That was a very ankle-related crack sound. I think you two should head back."

Ellie still looked uncertain.

"Are you sure we shouldn't come too?"

"No, of course not," Sarah said. "I don't want to ruin the hike for you."

Devon stood.

"We'll keep going."

Chuck shot him a grateful look.

"Thanks, Captain."

"Hey, don't mention it. Besides, I don't want an ankle injury turning into something worse."

Chuck slipped an arm around Sarah's waist, and they slowly started back down the trail. Sarah limped slightly while Chuck supported her. They looked back once. Devon and Ellie were already continuing down the path.

Once the others were completely out of sight, Sarah immediately straightened up and resumed walking normally.

Chuck let go.

"Miraculous recovery."

"I had good motivation."

"I'm pretty sure Devon figured it out in about five seconds."

"Yeah."

"That 'ankle sound' almost killed me. Nice improvisation from him."

Sarah let out a quiet laugh, then quickly grew serious again.

"We need to go back to June."

"Because the guy was watching us?"

"Yes. And because Cole got way too tense when he saw him."

Chuck exhaled.

"You know, normal people go on spa weekends."

"We can try that next time."

"Sarah, we'd probably turn a spa weekend into an international incident."

Meanwhile, Devon and Ellie continued down the trail at a slower pace. Ellie stayed quiet for a while before glancing sideways at him.

"Okay. Now I'd really like to know what's going on."

Devon sighed.

"I don't know."

"Devon."

"Seriously."

Ellie stopped walking.

"Chuck and Sarah are acting like they're in a James Bond movie. You two were whispering at breakfast. Then two guys show up on dirtbikes. Sarah gets injured."

Devon nodded with a perfectly straight face.

"Strange? Possibly."

"And you think that's nothing?"

"Ellie..." Devon shrugged. "Chuck got out, and Sarah isn't off somewhere trying to stop a revolution with a fork or whatever it is they normally do."

Ellie narrowed her eyes.

"You're covering for them."

"I don't know anything," Devon said a little too quickly.

Ellie folded her arms.

"That sounded exactly like someone who knows a lot about something."

Devon smiled nervously.

"They're adults, Ellie. Maybe this is how they spice up a vacation."

"With an ankle injury?"

"Maybe they're playing doctor, like we used to."

He grinned.

"Actually, we should do that again sometime. One of us could wear a gown..."

"Devon!" Ellie said, trying to sound stern, though she couldn't stop herself from smiling. Then, from somewhere in the distance, they heard the sound of a dirtbike engine again. Both of them fell silent.

Chapter 10

Chuck and Sarah made it back to the lodge. Cole was already waiting for them.

"June took off. She borrowed the old man's truck, and the bikers followed her."

"Where did she go?" Sarah asked.

"Hank says she could have headed for the lumber yard. A few miles from here. Familiar ground for her."

"We should go after her," Chuck suggested.

Without a word, Cole pulled out a Glock and handed it to Sarah. She immediately took it from him. In exchange, she handed Chuck the stun gun.

One of Cole's eyebrows rose, but he didn't comment.

"We're taking my pickup."

June was pushing Hank's old truck as hard as it could go. The engine wheezed, rattled, and protested, but somehow kept going. She wasn't taking the shortest route.

Deliberately, she made a detour along the main road—where the bikers could easily see her. Then she turned onto the paved road leading toward the lumber yard.

Russell was curled up at her feet on the passenger side.

"I know this isn't the best idea," June told the dog. "But I know that place. They don't."

In the rearview mirror, she saw one motorcycle appear behind her. Then another. A third came up alongside. Then more. The sound of engines echoed across the forest.

June knew that if she didn't reach the lumber yard before they caught her, it was over. The bikers accelerated.

"Don't worry, Russell. Everything's going to be fine."

She didn't slow down when she aimed for the gate. The locked entrance exploded open with a tremendous crash as the truck smashed through it.

She weaved between stacks of logs, beams, and lumber storage areas until she reached the main building.

The truck screeched to a halt.

June jumped out, grabbed her backpack, crossbow, the dog, and sprinted inside. They raced through loading areas, saw stations, and conveyor systems. She hurried Russell into an office and locked the door behind him. Then she pulled the laptop from her

backpack and placed it in a central location.

She cocked the crossbow and started the machinery. Just as the bikers arrived.

The pickup sped down the road. Chuck watched from the back seat. The lumber yard really wasn't far away. After rounding a bend, Cole shut off the engine.

The truck coasted a short distance before stopping completely. From there, they continued on foot. The mill was closed for the weekend. But the chain-link gate stood wide open. Inside, they found Hank's old Dodge. And nine motorcycles.

"Oh boy. Just like the Nazgûl," Chuck sighed after counting them.

"What?" Sarah asked.

"Never mind. I'll explain later."

Inside, a siren suddenly shattered the silence. Then the production line roared to life. Until now they'd been moving quietly from cover to cover, but the noise of the machinery swallowed almost every other sound.

Sarah instinctively slowed her breathing. The metallic thunder of the equipment vibrated through the ground. The screaming circular saws echoed off the walls of the empty buildings.

Yellow warning lights began flashing overhead.

"This isn't normal," Cole said. "Someone started that system intentionally."

Chuck swallowed.

"Great. A gang of psychotic bikers, a paranoid former spy, and now a horror-movie set."

Sarah motioned forward.

"Move."

They advanced from shadow to shadow between pallets and piles of logs. The scent of freshly cut wood mixed with oil and damp earth. Somewhere, a chain rattled.

Then a gunshot cracked through the air. The bullet sparked off a steel support beam beside Chuck.

"Take cover!" Cole shouted.

Chuck dove behind a forklift. Sarah vanished into the noise like a shadow. Cole returned fire with two quick shots. One of the bikers yelled:

"We need the girl alive!"

"That's always a good sign," Chuck muttered from the floor. More gunshots rang out. Splinters exploded from nearby lumber.

Sarah touched a hand to her watch.

"Two are moving around the left side of the building. At least three more are still inside."

Cole glanced at her.

"And June?"

Before Sarah could answer, the machinery suddenly surged louder. One of the conveyors lurched into motion. Chains screeched. Massive logs began rolling along the line. Chuck stared upward.

"Please tell me this isn't automated."

The lights flared brighter. June stood on the upper maintenance walkway with a crossbow in her hands. Her hair whipped wildly in the wind from the ventilation system. She looked like someone who hadn't slept in a very long time but who was finally doing something she actually knew how to do.

One of the bikers spotted her.

"There she is!"

June fired.

The bolt slammed into the man's shoulder. He screamed and fell backward. At that exact moment, June pulled a lever. Something heavy cracked loudly. At the far end of the mill,

an entire bundle of suspended beams broke loose and began swinging across the open space.

"Everybody down!" Sarah shouted.

The beams swept through the building.

Two bikers were knocked completely off their feet.

A third had his motorcycle launched sideways. Machines thundered. Men shouted. Flashing lights threw chaotic shadows in every direction.

June descended on a rope to the lower level and hurried into cover. From behind a log, Chuck stared in amazement.

"Okay... now I understand what she meant when she said she knew the terrain."

A faint, satisfied grin crossed Cole's face.

"She's doing well."

But in the very next moment, Sarah's expression tightened. At the far end of the mill, a large biker stepped into view.

Unlike the others, he wasn't running. He walked forward calmly. A shotgun rested on his shoulder. And he was heading straight for June.

Cole moved forward. Chuck followed. Behind a stack of logs, Cole stopped and looked back.

"You stay behind me."

"Okay."

Cole stared at him for a moment.

"That was surprisingly easy."

"I surprise myself sometimes."

The bikers split up. Sarah immediately melted into the darkness. Cole and Chuck were forced to the right. Two bikers blocked their path.

Cole started to step in front of Chuck to protect him, but Chuck was faster.

A flash.

Kung-fu moves flooded into his mind. And suddenly he was moving. A kick. A right hook into the second biker. Two more quick motions. Both men hit the ground.

Cole blinked twice.

One biker was still falling when Chuck grabbed his arm, used the momentum to flip him over, and hurled him into a stack of pallets.

The other tried to get back up. Chuck instinctively sidestepped and drove an elbow into him. The man collapsed without a sound. Breathing hard, Chuck looked down at them.

"Okay!"

Cole slowly turned toward him.

"I thought you were just funny."

Still running on adrenaline, Chuck pointed at the unconscious bikers.

"Mostly underpaid and underestimated."

Above them, a conveyor clattered loudly. Somewhere in the distance, Sarah's gunfire echoed through the mill. Cole bent down, picked up a pistol one of the bikers had dropped, and offered it to Chuck.

Chuck didn't take it.

Instead, he pulled out the stun gun.

Suddenly they heard Russell barking from deep inside the building.

Then June's voice:

"Left side!"

Cole reacted instantly.

"Move!"

Two more bikers appeared between the beams. One swung a chain. The other carried something that looked like a hunting shotgun. Another flash hit Chuck.

Movements. Distances. Center of gravity.

The man with the chain attacked first. Chuck ducked beneath the swinging links, grabbed a long plank from the floor, and instinctively brought it down on the biker's wrist. A crack echoed. The chain fell from the man's hand.

Meanwhile, Cole dealt with the second attacker with brutal simplicity.

One shot into an overhead chain.

A suspended log swung free and slammed directly into the biker.

"Not bad," Cole remarked.

Chuck stared at him.

"Did you just compliment me?"

Cole said nothing.

In the middle of the chaos, Sarah suddenly appeared on an upper catwalk. She dropped a biker with a strike, then looked down at them.

"The big guy went after June!" she shouted over the noise.

Cole's expression hardened immediately.

"Then we're too late."

Somewhere in the mill, a shotgun fired.

Chapter 11

The deep boom of the shotgun blended into the noise of the machinery, but it was still unmistakable.

Chuck froze for a second but then he started running toward the sound. He rounded a stack of beams and saw two figures advancing on June. There wasn't time to shout. So he did what he always did. He improvised.

A control panel caught his eye. It controlled the ventilation fans throughout the building. Chuck slammed his hand onto a switch. The massive industrial fans roared to life. A powerful wind swept through the mill. Sawdust exploded into the air, reducing visibility to almost nothing. June vanished into the swirling cloud.

Sarah rushed after her... two steps, three...

Then the large biker grabbed her from behind. For a few seconds she disappeared into the dust.

Then two silhouettes emerged. One of them is much larger than the other. They struggled briefly. Suddenly sparks burst from a nearby panel. The entire system shut down. The overloaded network finally failed. The sawdust settled. And that's when Chuck saw it. Sarah was trapped in the bikers' grasp.

"No. No, no, no..."

His stomach twisted. One of Sarah's arms was pinned behind her back by the large biker. Another man held her in place. She fought back, trying to drive an elbow into him, but the man was too strong. Sawdust clung to her face, stuck to the sweat on her skin. The large biker frowned.

"Who the hell is this?"

A few yards behind them, June stood breathing hard, crossbow in hand. Russell barked wildly from inside the office. Fear flashed across June's face.

"Let her go!" she shouted.

The biker pressed the barrel of the shotgun against Sarah's neck.

"Then drop that."

June hesitated. Chuck instinctively stepped out from behind the beams.

"Hey! Hey! Hey! Okay, everybody just calm down! This is... this is exactly the kind of situation where nobody wants."

The large biker immediately swung the shotgun toward him.

"Who the hell are you?"

Chuck stopped.

"At the moment? Honestly? I'm not entirely sure myself."

Sarah saw him.

"Chuck," she groaned. "Don't."

The biker grabbed Sarah by the hair and yanked her head back.

"One more step and I'll blow her brains out."

Chuck froze when the flash came. No combat moves, tactics or kung fu.

But circuits, connections and networks. The overhead rail system, the overloaded power grid. Emergency shutdown circuits. Generator bypasses.

The entire structure of the mill suddenly assembled itself inside his mind as if he'd worked there for years.

His eyes snapped upward. A red industrial control box. Beside it, a yellow warning label: EMERGENCY RELEASE.

Chuck slowly raised his hands.

"Okay... okay. Nobody's going to die."

At that moment, Cole appeared silently from the shadows behind him.

"What's the plan?"

Chuck answered almost in a trance.

"Trust me. Which is usually a terrible idea, but this one might actually work."

Sarah saw his eyes. The flash was still happening. And for a brief moment, even she felt afraid. Chuck suddenly looked at June.

"The crane on the left! Can you reach it?"

June blinked in confusion.

Then nodded.

"Good. When I say run, run."

The biker was losing patience.

"What are you people whispering about?"

Chuck took a breath. Then shouted at the top of his lungs:

"NOW!"

June moved instantly. She threw herself toward the control station. The large biker instinctively turned his shotgun toward her. At that exact moment, Cole opened fire and Chuck charged straight for the red control box. He threw his full weight against the lever.

Metal screamed overhead.

The massive arms of the overhead crane spread apart, and an entire row of secured beams came crashing down. Thick planks and pine logs several yards long slammed into the concrete with deafening force.

The air filled once again with dust and flying splinters.

A bullet struck the wall beside the control box. Chuck instinctively ducked.

"Okay, this is starting to feel personal!"

The bikers glanced toward the collapsing beams. Just long enough for Sarah to move instantly. She drove her leg with full force into the big man's side. Something crunched horribly – or maybe it just felt that way from the brutality of the impact. The biker staggered. Sarah twisted free of his grip, drove an elbow backward, and threw herself to the side.

Cole was already aiming. Two shots rang out. One biker stumbled backward and slammed into a support column. The big man tried to raise his shotgun. Cole's third shot dropped him before he could.

Suddenly, the only sound left in the mill was the clicking of machinery winding down. Sarah braced herself against the floor, breathing hard. Chuck immediately rushed to her side.

"Are you okay? Please tell me you're okay."

Sarah looked up at him. Sawdust clung to her hair.

"I think I rolled my ankle."

Chuck swallowed nervously.

Cole scanned the mill, looking for movement or threats.

"It's over."

At that exact moment, one of the overloaded ceiling lights began to spark.

Chuck looked up.

"Uh... guys?"

Something above the crane system cracked loudly.

Sarah's expression changed instantly.

"Run!"

The crane shifted. Then one of its massive arms tore loose and crashed toward the floor. The concrete shook beneath them. Metal fragments and dust exploded through the air. An entire row of windows along one side of the mill shattered with a thunderous crash.

Sarah instinctively pulled Chuck down beside her as another beam scraped across the floor behind them with a horrible grinding sound.

Then, finally, they made it outside.

The morning sunlight almost hurt their eyes after the dimness of the mill. The air was cold and clean, rich with the scent of fresh pine. A thin ribbon of smoke drifted above the lumber yard. Inside, they could still hear the machinery slowly winding down.

Sarah limped slightly, leaning on Chuck's shoulder. Chuck wrapped an arm around her.

"This is officially the worst vacation I've ever been on," he panted.

Sarah smiled faintly.

"And we haven't even gone hiking."

Cole appeared around the side of the building. He quickly checked both of them to make sure they were alive before stopping in front of them.

"June's gone."

Chuck just stood there for a moment.

"Of course she's gone."

Cole frowned.

"That surprises you?"

"No." Chuck shook his head. "That's what bothers me. It doesn't surprise me anymore."

Cole frowned again.

"June. Jill. Whatever she's calling herself these days. She has a habit of turning everything upside down."

Sarah glanced at him.

"Chuck..."

"If it's true, it's true."

Cole spat into the dust beside him.

"She's a survivor."

"Yeah." Chuck nodded slowly. "I think she is."

In the distance, they heard a dog barking. All three of them turned toward the sound. Chuck smiled quietly. Cole said nothing. He simply nodded once. Sarah listened for another moment.

"Let's go," she finally said.

For a few seconds, none of them moved.

The morning sun shone across the lumber yard, illuminating the scattered motorcycles, the shattered gate, and the partially collapsed side of the mill.

Finally, Sarah turned toward Chuck.

"The ventilation-fan part..."

Chuck looked at her.

"...wasn't bad."

He laughed.

"Seriously? Because I was basically panicking."

"It still worked."

Cole started toward the pickup.

"Let's go. Before the sheriff arrives and starts asking too many questions."

Chuck looked at Sarah.

"Can you walk?"

Sarah straightened up.

"Me? Of course."

She immediately stumbled.

Chuck caught her.

"Yeah. Very convincing."

Rolling her eyes, Sarah allowed him to support her. Together they walked toward Hank's truck. The laptop was still sitting on the passenger seat.

Chuck blinked.

"She just left it here?"

He looked at the computer.

"Then she's storing the data somewhere else."

"Smart," Cole said.

"It took me a year to find the connections. She put the whole thing together in a matter of months."

"She was always smart," Chuck said quietly.

"But she didn't know what she was looking for," Sarah pointed out.

For a while, Cole simply stared at the laptop. Somewhere on the far side of the lumber yard, something still creaked in the wind. Farther away, the faint sound of sirens echoed through the forest.

Finally, Cole closed the truck door.

"MI6 will take it from here."

He picked up the laptop. Chuck looked at him.

"Assuming they get here before the local sheriff."

"One of the guiding principles of British intelligence is to always leave somebody else to handle the paperwork."

Chuck smiled faintly.

"That somehow sounded both incredibly professional and incredibly lazy."

Cole shrugged.

"That's because it is."

Sarah glanced toward the pickup.

"Going back to London?"

"First I have to write my report."

He grimaced slightly.

"That's worse."

Chuck let go of Sarah's waist and shut Hank's truck door.

"So... that's it?"

Cole looked at him.

"Let's hope so."

Silence settled between them. The morning wind swept across the yard. Somewhere, a loose sheet of metal rattled.

Finally, Cole turned toward Chuck.

"Bartowski."

"Yeah?"

For a moment, Cole studied him. Not unfriendly. Not friendly either. Just carefully. He glanced briefly at Sarah. Then back at Chuck.

"I think Walker made the right choice."

Chuck blinked several times.

"I... think that was a compliment."

"Don't get used to it."

Cole turned and walked toward the pickup.

"Barker," Sarah called after him.

Cole stopped but didn't look back.

"Take care of yourself."

A faint nod.

"You too."

He climbed into the pickup. The engine rumbled to life. Moments later, the truck rolled away from the lumber yard and disappeared among the trees. Chuck watched it go for a long time.

"Okay... he's still ridiculously cool."

Sarah raised an eyebrow.

"Even the way he walks off into the distance looks classified."

Sarah smiled.

"Chuck..." she said softly.

He looked at her.

"You still won."

A slow smile spread across Chuck's face. Sarah let him wrap an arm around her again. Then they headed toward Hank's truck. The sun was higher now above the forest. And little by little, the lumber yard began to look like nothing more than a quiet, forgotten place deep in the Oregon woods.

Ellie and Devon returned later, tired and sweaty.

Chuck and Sarah were sitting on the porch. Sarah's leg was propped up on a chair while Chuck was changing the cold compress on her ankle.

"Hey! How was the hike?"

"Great!" Devon smiled.

"Let's take a look at that ankle," Ellie suggested. She examined it with practiced hands. Sarah winced.

"Does it hurt much?"

"A little."

Ellie frowned.

"This looks more like a bruise than a sprain."

Sarah glanced at Chuck.

"It seems to be healing pretty quickly."

Ellie looked at Sarah. There was something in her expression that she chose not to say aloud.

"Sure. Just keep icing it and don't put weight on it."

Meanwhile, Devon pulled Chuck aside.

"What happened, buddy? I thought it was fake."

Chuck smiled.

"Long story..."

Chuck and Sarah sat on the deck watching the sunset.

"You're still thinking about her," Sarah said quietly.

"Yeah," Chuck sighed. "It stirred up a lot of things."

"It's okay." Sarah brushed her fingers across the back of his hand, then intertwined their fingers. "It could have been worse."

"Guess you're right..."

"It happens," Sarah said, then leaned over and kissed him.

EPILOGUE

June Harper died, just as Jill Roberts had died before her. The reflection in the glass of the bus stop showed an elegant woman in a tailored suit. Her red hair, fashionable glasses, and black high heels completed the image. Audrey Smith adjusted her skirt while making sure the leash didn't slip from her hand. The gray mixed-breed dog beside her shook its head, making its collar jingle softly. At that moment, a white-and-blue bus pulled into the bay.

"Come on, Russell."

The dog moved beside her. A black swan engraved on his collar caught the light. The bus doors opened, Audrey looked back on the street one last time.

Then she stepped aboard.