



Hot as Hell

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Description: Hemlock's life had finally evened out, steady—until Charlie Rose Cote sauntered into it. He should have known from the first kiss that she'd bring chaos, a roller coaster ride with no brakes and no one in control. One look at her, and he was in too deep. His brothers never failed to remind him of his terrible luck with women, urging him to cut his losses. Maybe they were right, or maybe, just maybe, his luck was finally turning.

Charlie was craving a fresh start when she crossed paths with Hemlock. Everything about him screamed danger—his name, his smoldering dark eyes, that easy, reckless smile. Yet, she couldn't help but fall, drawn into the storm that swirled around him. What started as a spark of curiosity quickly ignited into something she couldn't resist, no matter how many warning signs flashed in her mind.

Hot as hell deals contains contains sensitive subject matter that some readers may find offensive.

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Prologue

Hemlock leaned back in his chair, looking at his hand. He really hated to take his brothers' money. They should know better to gamble with him. Moving a few cards around, he gave nothing away in his expression. Moving a card back to confuse the ones paying attention, he tossed out a comment he knew would shake things up. "Do you think women with small feet have tight pussies?" Still, he kept his face one of boredom as his brothers choked on their drinks.

Vicious slung his foot up, setting his boot on the table. "I mean I'm a size fourteen."

Truck actually spit his beer across the table laughing before falling out of his chair. Drunk ass.

Vicious dropped his foot as he laughed at Truck.

Hemlock remained stoic. "I mean women think men with big feet have big dicks."

"What is wrong with you?" Teller asked, shaking his head at Hemlock as he discarded two cards and picked up two new ones and slid them into his hand.

Looking up, Hemlock shrugged. "What? It's a legitimate question."

"Next you're gonna need a whole new hand." Player added to the conversation as he sorted his hand.

"Now that you mention it." Hemlock laid his hand down and smiled. "Rummy."

The swearing and card throwing started immediately, making Hemlock laugh. He wanted to say sorry, but the pot would cover his car note and that he did not laugh about. Raking his winnings up he thanked his brothers for the donation.

“You’re such a lucky SOB.”

“Maybe at pool and cards, but he sucks with the women.” Truck said, getting up from the floor. He saw the look on Hemlock’s face. The kid might be able to keep a mask up while playing cards, but it had slipped now, and it showed a hint of hurt. “You’ll find the right one kid, and she won’t try to kill you.”

“Maybe she’ll put me out of my misery.” Hemlock snickered, making light of what Truck had said while getting up to his feet. “I think you’re done, old man.”

“Who you calling old?” Truck shot back.

“You.” Hemlock deadpanned.

“I’ll show you old.”

“Maybe another time.” It was an ongoing banter between him and Truck. It started years back when he first started working for food with the chapter. He’d made a mistake referring to Truck as ‘Sir’ and the other brothers jumped on it. The situation had gotten so bad that Hemlock had stopped coming around for a few weeks.

Truck and Vicious had come looking for him in the abandoned building where he lived. They had sat down on the floor, which he kept swept and washed so it would feel like he wasn’t living in a building ready to fall down. He never forgot how they sat down without judgement and asked him to come back to the clubhouse. It had meant more to him than the food he worked for. It made him feel wanted instead of tolerated.

“Where’s the bitches at?” Truck shouted, looking for someone to hit the sack with. Just as he said it, one of the club girls appeared in the doorway. Wynn sauntered over to him; she always did. “Babydoll, you up for some fun?”

“With you, Truck. Always.”

“You got him, Wynn?” Hemlock asked the petite blonde.

“Yeah. I got him.” She gave Hemlock a wink and let Truck drape an arm around her shoulder and headed him towards the private rooms the brothers used. Watching as they walked across the room and disappeared down the hall, he wondered what Truck had meant earlier. “You’ll find the right one kid, and she won’t try to kill you.”

He knew a lot about Truck, but the man bore scars he never spoke about, and Hemlock never asked. Even as a kid. Probably because he never wanted to talk about his own. “You’ve got that look on your face again,” Razor said, breaking into his thoughts.

“Just thinking.”

“You’re thinking about what Truck said.” Razor didn’t need to ask. Sometimes, after a few drinks, the brothers let slip pieces of stories too raw to be shared sober.

No one knew the entire story, just bits and pieces that couldn’t be stitched together with a needle and thread. “Don’t fret over it like some old woman. He’ll be fine come tomorrow. Wynn knows how to put him to rights.” Razor clapped Hemlock on the shoulder trying to get his attention off the dark hallway before his own demons took him down the same road Truck was on.

“Yeah. You’re right. Wynn’s got him, and he’ll be fine.” He’ll be fine.

Saying his good nights, Hemlock pulled his keys from his pocket and walked out into the cool spring night. Glancing up, he looked at the stars shining bright against the stark black sky. His nose caught the smell of freshly cut grass on the soft breeze and took him back to the time spent at Truck's as a kid. Damn, that seemed like a lifetime ago.

Stepping up to his bike, he slid onto the seat and shoved the key in the ignition. A few of the other brothers stepped outside laughing as they walked to their sleds. Hemlock fired his up and shifted into first. Rolling out of the parking lot, he didn't go screaming through the streets. No, he rolled slowly through the streets until all he could hear was the sound of his motor and pipes rumbling against the quiet.

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He came upon a building that barely looked like it was standing. Backing his bike into the alley between it and the building next to it, he shut the bike down. Pulling the key from the ignition, he locked his handlebars so the bike couldn't be moved and eased off it.

Sticking to the shadows, he made his way into the building through a broken door. Sliding his gun from his waistband, he made his way deeper into the building until he came to the steps leading to the second floor. He didn't need more than the moonlight to navigate. He could manage blindfolded. Climbing the stairs, he kept a hand on the crumbling wall for support. The stairs creaked under his weight, giving him pause.

When his foot hit the landing, he second guessed coming. Something in Truck's words had his own demons dancing in the recesses of his mind. He just needed to remind himself where he had come from and how far. The place had changed little. He was surprised there wasn't anyone squatting in it. Probably because it was falling down faster than any of the other abandoned buildings in the area.

He stopped at the back corner and stared at the small wooden boxes that still stood stacked against the wall. Light from outside highlighted something in one box, drawing his attention. Crouching down, he reached in with his free hand. His fingers gripped the item. Pulling the item out, he saw it was a quarter. Tears flooded in as his memories threatened to drown him. The emotions hit him so fast he ended up on his ass, slumped over his knees and shaking uncontrollably.

"Damn it. I'm not that kid anymore," he said as his body calmed down. Wiping at his face, he sniffed and shoved off the floor. He looked at the quarter and remembered how he'd hide money so he could get a candy bar or a bottle of water when he had

nothing else.

He rubbed the coin between his fingers and was about to put it back when he heard a noise from the first floor. “Shit,” he mumbled and moved like a ghost across the floor back towards the stairs.

Using a support beam, he leaned behind it, obscuring his shape some. Flipping the safety off on the gun, he readied himself for whoever was coming.

The stairs creaked, letting him know they were not only on the steps, but exactly where they were. It unnerved him how he remembered every sound those rickety steps made.

“Hemlock,” He heard his name said no louder than a whisper.

“Vicious?” Hemlock clicked the safety back on the gun. “Why are you lurking around here? And why the fuck are you whispering? It’s not like you’re gonna wake anyone up.” Holstering the gun at his waist, Hemlock pulled his shirt over it.

“I saw you roll this way and wanted to check on you. What are you doing, kid?”

“Sometimes I need to remind myself I’m not that scared, hungry kid anymore.”

“Well, did you remind yourself?”

“Yeah. I’m good.”

“Good, because I’m starving, and you stole my money.”

“Won, not stole, and you could’ve left the table at any time.” Hemlock led Vicious back down the steps, instructing him where he should step.

“What’s the fun in that, kid?”

Hemlock chuckled at Vicious. “And that’s why your money’s in my wallet. Come on, I’ll treat you to breakfast down at the diner.”

“Cool. I’m not ready to drag my ass home. Sway and Lottie are having a girl’s night.”

“You scared to be alone, Veep?”

“Screw you. I just don’t wanna interrupt.”

“If you say so,” Hemlock said right before they stepped out of the building. Grabbing Vicious by the vest, he pulled him back behind the broken door as a cop rolled past with his light shining into the building. “Where’d you park?”

“Backed in next to you.”

“Shit, I didn’t hear you,” he mumbled as he watched the cop car slow down almost to a crawl.

Vicious couldn’t see shit from his vantage point. “Are they gone?”

“Fuck no,” Hemlock growled, pissed he’d come there. “How much heat you wearing?”

“Two pieces. You?”

“Same.” They couldn’t search them or their bikes without probable cause.

Thinking fast, Hemlock told Vicious to slowly give him his guns. He was hidden enough by the wall and door he could stash the guns where no one would find them.

Lifting his foot onto the step closest to him, he placed all four guns inside and closed the wooden slate back into place. “Here’s what we’re gonna do. You walk out looking worried while I head out through the side window and come around the corner.”

“And why are we going out instead of waiting?”

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“Because they’ve spotted the bikes and will come in. If we appear first, we can act as if we’re looking for someone.”

“Like who?”

“We can give them one of the club girl’s name and say it’s our sister.” Hemlock leaned around enough to see the cop car stop and the light went straight down the alley.

“Time to move.”

Before they could move, the cop turned off the spotlight and hit the blue lights. They thought they were definitely humped until the cop took off with sirens blaring. Both men let out a breath.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here,” Vicious said as he stepped around the door. He was done with abandon buildings.

Hemlock stepped out and handed him his guns. Vicious thanked him.

Maybe they needed a therapist to talk to. It seemed all of them had some kind of damage from their past that haunted them. Fuck, he was thankful that Sway knew how to handle his nightmares and his moods. Straddling his bike, Vicious waited on Hemlock to saddle up. “I might need a beer.”

“I might need one too,” Hemlock said and rolled out of the alley.

Chapter One

It had been a grueling day for Charlie Rose Cote. Working three jobs was wearing on her. It took everything and then some to pay for her room at the Continental Inn and Suites. She lived there because her ex-boyfriend Crispen lived in the luxury apartment she paid for in Montreal. It wasn't like she had wanted to live in that upscale apartment building. No. She would have been fine with a second-floor shoebox anywhere. But her being young and stupid, she had believed Crispen and his lying, cheating ass when he said, "Charlie, I love you, baby girl."

Two months into the relationship Crispen had talked her into putting the apartment into her name. After three months of living together, she caught him in bed with her now ex-best friend. And she was still paying for an apartment she never wanted and didn't live in at all to keep her credit from being ruined. Seven more months and she would be free of that god forsaken lease and anything to deal with Crispen.

Stepping into the building, she decided she needed a drink. The hotel bar, tucked just off the lobby, was a cozy spot that drew all sorts—from karaoke-loving regulars to trivia fanatics. Tonight, however, was different. It was a quiet Thursday evening at the Oasis Bar, free of karaoke, trivia, or DJs. The dimly lit space buzzed with soft chatter, its usual chaos replaced by a calm hum.

She found a seat at the sparsely filled bar and settled in, glancing around while waiting for the bartender to take her order. The simplicity of the evening felt refreshing—a rare moment of quiet in a place often brimmed with energy.

"What can I get you, miss?"

At least he didn't call me little lady. "Bushwhacker."

"Coming right up."

Taking out her phone, Charlie checked her work schedules. To her surprise, she was off for the next twenty-four hours—from all three jobs. She couldn't even remember the last time that had happened.

Maybe she should celebrate. A long, hot bath, ordering a pizza, and daringly going to bed a whole half-hour later than usual.

She let out a sigh. Gah, she was too young to feel this old.

“Here's your drink. Would you like to open a tab?”

“No, I'm just having the one.” Sliding her credit card to the bartender, she picked up her drink and took the first sip. Delicious. Looking around, she caught the eye of an attractive guy sitting four chairs down. When he smiled and pointed to the seat next to him, she shook her head no with a smile. She watched him smile back as he raised his whiskey glass to her.

Turning back around, Charlie faced the bar lost in thought as she sipped on her drink. A shadow fell across, bringing her attention back to her surroundings. Another guy was leaning into her space, making her feel uncomfortable.

“Looks like you need a man in your life tonight,” the guy four seats over stated.

“No thanks.”

“Come on sweetie, take a chance,” he replied to her as his eyes briefly shifted between her and the man crowded in on her other side.

Charlie stared at him and thought, why not? “You know what? I think I will.”

“Now we're talking.”

Easing out of her seat, Charlie picked up her drink and slung her purse over her shoulder. Without hesitating, she walked straight over to the attractive man sitting alone. Sliding onto the empty seat beside him, she flashed a confident smile, her earlier disregard fading as she met his gaze. “Hello.”

The shit-eating grin that spread across Hemlock’s face couldn’t be contained. He’d been told multiple times that his smile could be deadly. Like a moth to a flame, the pretty brunette was pulled in. “Hello.”

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Mmmm, his deep, sultry voice would be her undoing, she thought. The guy wasn't homely by any means, but damn that voice could make her clothes take themselves off.

"Hemlock."

She was caught off guard when he spoke. "I'm sorry what?"

"I said my name's Hemlock."

"What kind of name's Hemlock?"

"A deadly one." Hemlock looked at the woman with a glint of humor in his eyes, waiting for her next move. "Still interested, doll?"

There was no preamble to what either was looking for.

No, let's sit and talk awhile.

No, would you like me to buy you another drink?

No discussion, just two consenting adults about to get their freak on.

"Sure. I've always been intrigued by danger." It was his turn to be unsure and for a split second she saw his hesitation. Oh, the big bad biker wasn't so bad after all.

Wow, this chick was right up his alley. "Your place or mine?" he asked and winked.

“Mine. That way, right after, I can kick you out.”

“Women do prefer to fuck in their own beds.” He found she wasn’t offended by his words. Scooping up his credit card from the bar, he stood, wrapped an arm around the attractive female and walked them right out the bar and through the hotel’s front door. In turn, she turned and walked them right back inside.

“Forget something?” Hemlock asked.

“No. I live here.” Charlie laughed, pointing upwards. “Upstairs, to be exact.”

“That’s damn convenient.”

“Isn’t it though.” Charlie kept her arm wrapped around Hemlock’s waist as he let out a chuckle. And to think she had thought her night would be boring.

“Hemlock.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m Charlie, by the way. Charlie Rose.”

“Sorry. I thought you wanted this casual.”

“Well, I prefer you not to call me some other woman’s name while I’m being fucked in my own bed.”

Oh yeah, she was gonna be fun. “What’s your opinion about foreplay, Charlie?”

“I think it’s overrated.” She gave him a cocky look. “Complete waste of time.”

“You, my girl, are becoming one of my absolute favorite people.”

“One thing.”

“What’s that?”

“At no time during the evening do I want to be preferred to as baby girl.”

Hemlock busted out laughing at her declaration. “Don’t worry I won’t. Its overused these days.”

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“You can say that again,” she mumbled, stepping into the elevator. Charlie pushed the button for the fourth floor, dropped her purse, and tugged Hemlock down by his shirt collar to kiss him. There was always a way to get over a breakup. It was getting on the next ride. And she really wanted to get over her breakup.

The elevator made it up to the fourth floor in record time. No stops, just a straight shot up. Picking up her bag from the floor, Charlie got a peek at what her new found friend had to offer. If the bulge in his jeans told her anything, it was she'd be sore tomorrow. Either that or disappointed as hell.

Hemlock held the door open so Charlie could step out first. His lips were tingling from the kissing. It'd been a minute since he'd been with a woman, but something told him she was out to prove something. Verified when the question, “You coming?” was called out from two doors down.

“Right behind you,” he said, stepping out of the elevator. Touching his fingers to his lips, Hemlock could swear they were puffy. He then found himself clearing his suddenly scratchy throat.

Following Charlie into her suite, he felt flushed and desperately wanted to throw some water on his face. “Can I use your bathroom?”

“Sure. There's a half bath right there.” Not looking back, Charlie pointed as she kicked off her heels.

Hemlock made quick work of getting to the bathroom. Closing the door, he flipped on the lights and screamed. “What the fuck!” His lips were red and swollen, making

him look like Andrea Ivanova the woman that held the world's record for the biggest lips. His face was splotchy, and he felt like his throat was closing up.

Fuck, he was having an allergic reaction to something. But what? He was only allergic to one thing. Cinnamon. Even the smell was a problem for him. That's when it hit him. Charlie was wearing lip gloss.

The door to the bathroom burst open. Hemlock turned his head to stare at Charlie. He saw the shocked look on her face. "What in the hell?" she said dumbfounded.

"I think I need an ambulance."

Charlie turned around and ran into the other room and grabbed her phone. "Yes. I need an ambulance to..." What was she supposed to say... for her hookup? "My... boyfriend is having..." She looked at Hemlock.

"An allergic reaction," he said, clearing his throat again.

"An allergic reaction," she repeated.

"To Cinnamon," Hemlock added, trying to concentrate on his breathing.

"Oh shit. I kissed him and he's allergic to cinnamon."

"Can you tell me his symptoms?" The 911 operator asked.

"Yes, his lips are enormous." Wow, they are so huge. "His face is red and splotchy." Like a breakout of the worse acne ever. "And he seems to be having trouble breathing."

"An ambulance is on its way."

“Thank you. We’ll meet them in the lobby.” Hanging up, Charlie wrapped an arm around Hemlock and helped get him to the elevator. The entire ride down, she prayed that he’d be okay. She’d hate to go to jail because of her lip gloss. She could see the headlines... young woman kills one night stand with slippery lips. Death by lip gloss.

Charlie’s mind raced as she held Hemlock’s arm, supporting his weight while trying to stay calm. The elevator doors dinged open, and she quickly guided him out, hoping the paramedics would be there soon. Hemlock was swaying slightly, his face still an alarming shade of red, the swelling on his lips almost comical if it weren’t so terrifying.

“Stay with me, Hemlock,” Charlie said, her voice wavering. “You’re gonna be okay. Just breathe in and out.”

Hemlock gave a weak, strangled laugh, his breath hitching. “This is not how I imagined spending my evening,” he managed to get out.

“Seriously, if you die from my lip gloss, I will never forgive myself,” Charlie muttered, half in panic, half in disbelief.

Hemlock managed a strained smile. “I’m sure your lip gloss didn’t mean to be so lethal.”

She wanted to laugh, but the anxiety bubbling in her chest was overwhelming. She reached for her phone again, dialing the lobby to make sure the paramedics had arrived. The lobby was empty except for a few guests, all blissfully unaware of the medical drama unfolding in the elevator. When the doors opened on the ground floor, Charlie saw a couple of paramedics pushing a gurney toward them.

“Thank God,” she exhaled in relief, stepping aside to let them through.

The paramedics quickly took over, one checking Hemlock's airways, the other preparing an EpiPen. Hemlock was still trying to joke through it, though his voice was hoarse.

"Guess I shouldn't have tried to be the adventurous type," he muttered, his eyes half-lidded from the swelling.

Charlie shot him a look. "Not funny. I could have killed you."

Hemlock's lips twitched upward despite his discomfort. "I think the only thing that's in danger of killing me right now is the air."

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One paramedic glanced at Charlie, raising an eyebrow. “Is he allergic to cinnamon or something else?”

“Yeah,” Charlie confirmed, her voice tight. “Cinnamon. I didn’t even know until... well, this evening.”

“Well, he’s gonna need a dose of epinephrine and some oxygen,” the paramedic said, already prepping the injection. “But he should be alright once it kicks in.”

Charlie swallowed, her heart finally starting to settle. The worst was over. Hemlock would be okay. But still, the weight of what had just happened hung heavily on her.

As they loaded Hemlock onto the stretcher, he gave her a wink.

With one last look at Hemlock, still looking ridiculous but at least alive—Charlie followed the paramedics, praying this bizarre, disastrous evening was almost over.

Chapter Two

Hemlock laid in the back of the ambulance on a gurney. From his position he could see Charlie pacing back and forth as she spoke to the police officer that had arrived on the scene. The way her hands moved; he’d love to hear how she was spinning this scenario. He was sure this wasn’t the first time they’d been called to a hotel for an attempted murder. Chuckling at the thought, he suddenly felt bad for Charlie. From where he lay, he could clearly see she was embarrassed.

Hemlock’s chuckle was cut short by a sharp pain in his chest as he tried to shift on

the gurney. His face felt like it had been hit by a freight train, and his lips puffed up so badly he barely recognized himself. It wasn't exactly the most flattering look for a guy trying to spend the evening with a woman.

He watched as Charlie continued to pace, her hair frazzled from her running her hands through it and her face a mixture of stress and frustration. Though she still spoke softly to the officer, her voice had risen enough that he could hear the strain in her words even from where he lay. "It was an accident." She was repeating it like a mantra, probably trying to convince herself more than anyone else.

The officer's face had a look that said I've seen everything, and he seemed to take the whole thing in stride. Hemlock guessed he'd probably dealt with enough bizarre hotel situations to last a lifetime. However, Hemlock bet a man allergic to cinnamon would definitely be one for the books.

What really got Hemlock was the way Charlie moved. She kept wringing her hands, walking in tight little circles as she spoke to the officer, looking like she was trying to manage the world's worst hangover while explaining she hadn't just tried to murder someone with her lips.

She was embarrassed—there was no hiding it. He could see the way her shoulders were hunched, the way her gaze flicked nervously between the officer and him. It was a mix of worry, guilt, and maybe a little disbelief at the absurdity of it all.

Hemlock felt a pang of sympathy. Still, there was a part of him that couldn't help but laugh at the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. Almost dying because of cinnamon. It wasn't exactly the heroic near death experience he'd always imagined.

"Sir, you should carry your EpiPen with you at all times," the medic said in an authoritative voice beside him.

Cutting his eyes at the young guy, Hemlock wanted to roll them in response. “It’s in my bag on my bike.” Which was a lie. The pen was somewhere in his house. He knew he was allergic to cinnamon and was normally careful about consuming the spice. Hell, he didn’t even enter a store that sold cinnamon smelling items during the holiday season.

“What do you do, Mr. Durand?” the EMT asked.

“I’m a medic.” Another lie, he was a nurse practitioner. He saw the shocked look on the guy’s face and wanted to slap it off. “If you tisk at me, I’ll punch you,” he informed the EMT. Moments later, Razor stepped into view.

What the hell was he doing there?

“How’s the patient doing?” Razor asked the EMT as he gave Hemlock a smirk. All it took to know something had gone wrong was seeing the girl talking to the cops and Hemlock in the ambulance.

“What the hell are you doing here, Razor?” Hemlock demanded. There was no way Charlie called him. She didn’t know them.

“He’s hostile,” the EMT snapped, interrupting Razor and Hemlock.

Chuckling at the situation, Razor commented to the EMT while he ignored Hemlock. “Nurse Durand doesn’t have the best bedside manner. Is he good to go?”

“Yes. But he needs to keep his EpiPen on his person.”

Razor nodded as he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of Hemlock. The boys would get a good laugh at this shit. Waving Hemlock out of the ambulance, Razor looked at him and tried not to laugh. “What in the fuck did you eat?”

“Nothing. I kissed her.” Hemlock pointed at Charlie. Later, he would laugh about the entire ordeal... Much later. “You never answered me as to why you’re here?”

Razor shrugged while mentally trying to come up with a plausible reason for why he was at The Continental Inn and Suites. “I heard the call come over the scanner and came to see if I could help.”

Knowing a lot about Razor, he knew the brothers tell from playing poker with him and he was lying his ass off. Scanning the parking lot, Hemlock spotted a cherry red sixty-nine Chevy Corvair. It wasn’t a car you frequently saw like a Mini Cooper. Hemlock had only seen the Corvair a handful of times. Sway’s bestie, Lottie, owned and operated that sweet ride.

“You’re sure there’s no other reason you’re here, Razor?” Hemlock asked as he pointed to the car.

“Don’t be a child, Hemlock. If I were here to see Lottie, I’d say it.”

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Hearing Razor's comment, Hemlock gave a sarcastic response, "Of course you would."

Razor ignored him. In need of a distraction from Hemlock's questioning, he walked over to speak with the EMTs. What were the chances Razor would run into one of his brothers while keeping an eye on Lottie? He needed to get over the female before she became a problem for him.

Once the cops and the ambulance had left, and Hemlock felt his lips weren't about to burst and his face felt less on fire, he walked to Charlie and did his best to tell her it was nice meeting her. It was just too damn awkward. Handing her his club card was the best he could do. "If you ever need anything, call me. I owe you for getting me help."

"You wouldn't have needed help if I wouldn't have kissed you," she said softly. "I'm throwing away all my lip gloss and I'm never kissing anyone again. Not ever," she exclaimed dramatically.

"That would be a damn shame. You're one hell of a kisser." Giving her a smile, Hemlock heard Razor chuckling from behind him. "See ya around." Leaving her standing in the parking lot, Hemlock followed Razor across the parking lot towards where the bikes were parked.

He still wasn't convinced Razor wasn't there to see Lottie. If the brother wanted to keep his love life private, Hemlock wouldn't pry. Not unless Razor gave him a reason to. Then it'd be on like a game of Donkey Kong.

“You think you can ride?”

“Fuck yeah. Even if I couldn’t, I would, so I didn’t have to come back here again.”
Hearing Razor laugh, Hemlock chuckled along with him. Fucking hell, could he not catch a break when it came to women?

Half an hour later, Hemlock waved off Razor as the brother headed out of his driveway. “What a fucking night.”

His phone buzzed at that moment. Pulling it out, he saw he had a message from an unknown caller. Opening it, an image of a small trashcan filled with lip-gloss containers popped up.

Charlie:

Keeping my promise. Sorry about ruining the evening.

Hemlock didn’t know why, but he texted Charlie back:

Hemlock: I’m fine. But I agree it was a hell of a way to get out of sleeping with me.

Charlie: Maybe we could meet up for a coffee down the road.

Hemlock: You never know. Night Charlie.

There was no way he’d be taking another run at the girl. She knew how to kill him. That was practically a suicide mission.

Charlie: Night Hemlock.

Sighing, Charlie shut down her phone, disappointed that her one chance of hooking

up with a good- looking guy had been fraught by her lip-gloss. “That’s just the way my life’s going.”

Hemlock almost deleted her number, then second guessed himself and created a new contact in his phone for her. After staring at the contact info for a second, he shoved his phone away before heading inside. All he could think about was how he enjoyed kissing that damn girl until he glimpsed his face in the mirror.

His lips were still puffy. Not Kardashian puffy, but they looked like they’d been stuck in a vacuum hose for an hour. “Looking good there, son,” he spoke to his reflection.

Tossing his keys in the wooden bowl on the entryway table, he headed for the kitchen. The last time he saw the damn pen it was on the kitchen island. Running his fingers over his lips, they felt waxy. A side effect from being swollen to their maximum capacity.

Opening the kitchen junk drawer, he moved a few things around until he found the EpiPen that should have been on his person. A lot it could have done tonight if he had had it, he thought as he carried it with him to the bedroom—alone.

Unbuckling his cut, he slipped the leather vest off and laid it on his dresser. Wanting a shower, he stripped off his shirt and carried it with him into the bathroom where he finished undressing. When he tossed his phone on the counter, he heard it ping again and smiled.

“Damn girl can’t get enough of my puffy face.”

Opening the text, he saw it was a chat with all the brothers. And right at the top was a picture of him that Razor had taken. “Son of a bitch!” He would kill Razor as soon as he got to work. There had to be something at the clinic he could use to make him sorry for this crap.

The comments kept rolling in until Hemlock turned off his phone. He wouldn't hear the end of this crap. At least the Montreal Chapter wasn't as bad as the Provo brothers with the social media antics.

Reaching into the shower, he turned on the water and waited for it to heat up.

Standing naked and annoyed, Hemlock remembered the shocked look on Charlie's face when she'd come into the bathroom. Laughing, Hemlock wished things would have gone differently. Which would have been a change for him. Something always happened when he got mixed up with a woman.

Still, he never gave up hope he'd one day find the right one, and not another crazy one. Unlike Vicious, who used to like the crazy ones, Hemlock did not. He did, however, agree with his VP about one thing... crazy bitches were great in the sack. At least from what he remembered.

Chapter Three

Truck sat at the bar in the clubhouse listening to Player and Joker arguing over their favorite subjects, beer, broads, and bikes. They sounded like two old women bickering. Shaking his head, he wondered if the duo ever tired of arguing. A large hand slapping him on the back almost sent him off his barstool.

Taking a long pull from his beer, savoring the burn as it slid down his throat. He glanced back at Player and Joker, who were still locked in their usual back-and-forth, neither one willing to back down. He give 'em another hour before they started swapping stories about their 'glory days'. Then they'd get back to arguing about who was the better rider, who could handle the most whiskey, and which of them had the best luck with the ladies.

Truck leaned back, his massive shoulders barely fitting behind the barstool. Watching the two brothers argue was like watching two dogs fight over a bone.

"Truck, where's your sidekick?" The Veep asked him.

Setting his beer down, Truck answered Vicious. "He's been pulling extra shifts at the clinic helping Razor out. You know Hemlock. If he sees someone needs help, he's in. Doesn't matter how much he's already got on his plate."

Vicious leaned against the bar. His gaze drifted toward the back room, but his mind was still on Hemlock. The kid was relentless, like a pit bull that never let go. "Is he still working at the hospital?" Vicious asked, walking behind the bar to grab a beer. He only had a few minutes before he headed back to talk to Teller.

“Yep, and helping me with the detail business when he’s not at the hospital or the clinic,” Truck added.

Shaking his head, Vicious couldn’t believe Hemlock hadn’t gotten burned out yet. One day he’d realize he had nothing to prove. What did he know, Vicious thought, he was still battling his own past.

“The kid’s gonna burn himself out if he’s not careful.” Truck told Vicious.

“Yeah, well, he’s gonna hit a wall eventually,” Vicious said in a low growl. He rubbed a hand over his face, his fingers brushing over the stubble he’d let grow this morning. “Can’t keep running at full speed forever. We’ve all got our limits.”

Truck knew Vicious was right, but it didn’t make it any easier to watch. Hemlock was like family and seeing him burn the candle at both ends was tough. They had all been there, chasing something, proving something—until the day it caught up with you.

Truck picked up his beer as he agreed with Vicious. He gave him a half-shrug, not disagreeing with, but not fully buying it either. “Maybe. Or maybe he’s built differently. You ever think about that? Some guys just aren’t wired to quit.”

Not many knew the kid’s back story like he and Vicious did. Hemlock’s parents had been addicts. When what passed as a father died of an overdose on the street, Hemlock was left with a mother that barely remembered she had a son.

After his mother died, Hemlock ran away from the boy’s home and lived on the streets. That’s when Truck met the kid. Hemlock had come around the clubhouse asking for work in exchange for a meal. Not once had the kid taken food without working for it. Truck took another sip of his beer as he thought about Hemlock.

Vicious stared at the bottle of beer in his hand, then set it down a little harder than necessary. “Yeah, maybe. But I don’t need to tell you, it’s the ones who burn bright that burn out the quickest.”

“Maybe he’s got something to prove,” Truck said, glancing over his shoulder. His voice lowered, not wanting to tempt fate with talk of the kid’s history. Hemlock’s past wasn’t something they usually dug into, unless they had to.

“Maybe,” Vicious muttered. “But he doesn’t need to prove anything to anyone except himself.”

Truck met his gaze. “You’re not the only one trying to keep the demons at bay, Vicious.”

The words stung, but Vicious didn’t flinch. He’d heard worse from better men. Instead, he just nodded, eyes hardening. “I know. The difference is I know when to walk away.”

“Doesn’t always mean you should,” Truck countered.

Vicious let out a breath, the weight of the conversation sinking in. He wasn’t ready to admit it, but maybe Truck had a point. Maybe Hemlock had his reasons for pushing so hard, reasons that even the kid didn’t fully understand yet. Vicious twisted the top of the beer bottle. Tossing the cap in the trash, he took a long pull on the bottle and enjoyed the cold liquid as it ran down his throat. “All I’m saying is he’s gonna burn out.”

Truck toyed with the beer bottle. “I tell him that all the time. He wants to pay off the condo.” Peeling the label off the bottle, Truck balled it up and tossed it into the trashcan behind the bar.

Before he could say anything else, Hemlock walked into the room. Noticing the look on the brother's face, Truck couldn't pass up the opportunity to mess with him. When Hemlock sat down, Truck leaned over and sniffed the air. "What's that smell, Hemlock?"

"What smell?" Hemlock looked over at Truck who was leaning in sniffing him. Shoving the brother away, Hemlock reminded Truck about personal space.

Truck knew how to get under Hemlock's skin. Chuckling at Hemlock, who was smelling himself, Truck sniffed the air again. "Bro, you smell like... cinnamon."

Hemlock tried not to laugh as he shoved Truck again. "Screw you." He didn't need Truck hassling him about Charlie. It had been just another failed attempt on his part to have an uneventful evening out with a woman.

"Oh, wait. You tried that with her and almost ended up dead." Truck busted out laughing.

Vicious held his laughter as he leaned on the bar and watched Truck give the younger brother hell. "Truck, lay off Hemlock. He had a rough night."

"Thanks, Vicious," Hemlock said as he sneered jokingly at Truck.

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“No problem, Lips.” Vicious laughed. Nothing was off limits when it came to giving one another hell. Vicious was all about joining in on some razzing. Especially since they’d all been in on his birthday surprise from Croon and Squatch.

“Hemlock, would you mind doing me a favor?” Vicious asked.

Hemlock knew this was going to be more razzing, but asked anyway. “Sure. What can I help with?” He watched Vicious reach under the bar, then he set an eight by ten photo on the bar. It was the picture Razor had taken of him with his lips swollen.

“Can I get your autograph? This is going up on our wall of shame.” Vicious laughed, handing over a pen to Hemlock.

Knowing the deal, Hemlock grabbed the pen. The wall of shame had at least four pictures of him on it already. What was one more? “I’m trying to get an even dozen on the wall,” he said with a smirk as he scribbled his name across the photo.

“You’re almost halfway.” Hemlock heard the Veep say as he picked up the photo.

“Thanks.”

Hemlock waited for someone else to comment, but Player and Joker had moved to the pool table. And Vicious was heading towards the office holding the photo. Picking through the bowl of Chex Mix on the bar, he waited for Truck to make another off handed comment.

When Vicious disappeared out of view, Truck looked back over at Player and Joker

shooting pool. “Whatcha think? Can we take those two tonight?”

Hemlock scooped up a handful of Chex Mix from the bowl. Tossing a few into his mouth, he accessed the two brothers playing pool across the room. If they played a game of nine ball, he could make ‘em cry.

He chewed thoughtfully, watching the two brothers squabble over their shots, the occasional laugh breaking out between their disagreements. He popped a few more pieces of Chex Mix into his mouth, savoring the crunch. Hemlock had a way of making the game look easy, of getting into people’s heads without saying a word.

Hemlock wasn’t just a killer at nine ball—he was a tactician, a strategist. The way he moved the cue ball, how he set up the shot, how he read the angles, it was all instinct for him now.

But when he was a kid, it wasn’t about finesse or skill. It was about survival. Every ball he sank was a little victory, a small rebellion against a life that had handed him nothing but the lessons of failure. His old man was long gone, but the echoes of his voice—laced with whiskey and regret—still followed him around.

He learned how to play pool at the tender age of eleven. His father had given him a pool cue and taught him everything he knew about the game. Hemlock had learned quickly how to win after seeing his old man get his ass kicked for making bets his ass couldn’t pay. He could still see his father sitting in the corner of that smoke-filled pool hall drinking a six-pack of long necks making bets on a kid that could barely hold the stick over the rail. But Hemlock had learned and became a killer at nine ball. “Don’t make any bets.”

Truck knew how Hemlock felt about being put on the spot and would never do that to him. “No worries.”

“As long as we’re clear, let’s go run that table.” It wasn’t that he didn’t gamble, but tonight wasn’t the night to do it. Hemlock slapped Truck on the back. Picking up the bowl of Chex Mix. Movement behind him had Hemlock looking back as Razor came in.

He was about to holler at the brother when he noticed the look on Razor’s face and decided not to. Instead, he turned around and headed to the bar to grab a beer. As he did so, he watched Razor walk towards his private room. Must have been a shitty day at the clinic.

“Come on Hemlock, Truck said you’re gonna teach us a lesson in nine ball.”

“Yeah, I’m coming,” he said off handed while staring in the direction Razor had disappeared to.

He really should talk to the brother about bringing him on full time and getting rid of the older doctor. The man was more of a headache than helpful. A discussion for another day, he thought as he set down the bowl. “Okay, who’s ready for an ass kicking?” he asked, rubbing his hands together. Like taking candy from a baby.

Chapter Four

Lottie watched the young woman enter the clinic. She looked upset and scared. When she turned her head, Lottie saw the bruising. “Can we help you?”

Charlie knew better than to come to the clinic. They’d want her to press charges on her attacker. She wouldn’t do it. The last thing she needed was Ashley and Crispen coming after her again.

She’d known better than to argue when they started in on her about the apartment. It wasn’t her problem they lived there. “I’m sorry. I’m fine,” Charlie mumbled and

turned to leave.

“Wait.” Lottie gave the young woman a sympathetic look. “We won’t make you file a report, and we won’t call the cops.”

The only reason Charlie was considering staying was because her face hurt like hell. “Ok.”

Taking the clipboard from the receptionist she took a seat. Her knee bounced up and down at a steady rate due to being nervous. She tried remembering the address of the hotel but instead left the address blank. Twice she stopped filling out the form thinking about leaving. Regulating herself that she needed to be seen, she read over the form and jotted down her answers.

Once she’d filled out all her information, Charlie took it back to the little window. Glancing through the opening, she didn’t see anyone.

Turning around, she barely took two steps before someone asked if they could help her again. Looking back, she saw a different woman standing on the other side of the window. “Yes, the other receptionist helped me.”

The woman stared at Charlie with too much attitude. “I’m the only receptionist working tonight.”

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“Black hair. Short bangs,” Charlie said, staring at the woman behind the plastic window.

“That was Lottie. She’s one of our nurses.”

“She had me fill out the paperwork.” She pointed at the clipboard.

“Have a seat and we’ll get to you soon.” The woman slid the window closed leaving Charlie standing in the room alone.

Charlie tapped her fingers absently on the arm of the chair, the rhythmic motion doing little to settle the gnawing unease that had been building up inside her. The sound of the TV was muted, leaving only the faint hum of the overhead lights to fill the space. She squinted at the screen where the Mystery Inc. gang was chasing down a ghost in an old, haunted mansion. The familiar cartoon antics—Scooby and Shaggy hiding behind furniture, Velma losing her glasses—were supposed to be comforting. But today, it just felt... off.

Her fingers paused mid-tap. She hated this place. Hated how everything about it screamed “waiting”: waiting for bad news, waiting for results, waiting for life to change. The sterile smell of antiseptics, the way the chairs were spaced just far enough apart so you couldn’t talk to anyone, even if you wanted to. And the cold. Always the cold. She shivered slightly, wrapping her arms around herself tighter.

The sound of footsteps echoing through the hall made her heart skip with a burst of hope rising before she reminded herself no one came out of those doors with good news. They didn’t. Not here. Not in places like this. When the sound faded, Charlie

forced her eyes back to the muted TV screen, trying to distract herself. But her thoughts kept spiraling, each one darker than the last.?

Scooby and Shaggy ran from a groaning ghost, and Charlie couldn't help but wonder if the two of them were any better off than she was—chasing ghosts, too scared to stop long enough to face them.

With a sigh, she leaned back in the chair and closed her eyes. The ghost on the screen was unconvincing, but the one inside her chest. Far too real.

“Charlie Cote.”

Her name being called had her opening her eyes. Scratching her nose, Charlie got up and walked to the counter. “Yes.”

“I need your ID and insurance information.”

“I don't have insurance.” Pointing to the clipboard she smiled at the woman. “It says that on the form.”

The receptionist slammed her hands onto her hips. “Young lady you don't have to be smart with me.”

Done with the woman's attitude, Charlie shook her head. “I've changed my mind. I don't need to be seen.”

Hemlock walked around the corner and caught a glimpse of the woman at the counter. “Charlie?”

Shit. “Hey.”

“Carmen, I’ll take Miss Cote back to an exam room,” Hemlock told the receptionist. The woman who was normally pleasant seemed to be having an off night. He’d speak with her later about the attitude.

“Thanks, Emile,” the receptionist said while giving Hemlock a sweet smile.

Hemlock opened the door where Charlie could come to the back. Once she was standing in front of him, he brushed her hair back and saw the bruising. His jaw clinched. “Follow me.”

He led her into an exam room and closed the door. “Have a seat,” he said as he walked to the computer cart. “Carmen hasn’t put your information into the system. Can you give me the rundown?”

“Yes.” Charlie gave Hemlock everything he needed to know. She closed her eyes momentarily as the throbbing of her cheek got worse.

“Charlie.”

Opening her eyes, she stared at the guy she’d almost killed with her lip gloss kisses. She knew what he wanted to know, and she didn’t have the energy to get into it. “It’s a long story. One I’d rather not get into.”

“With me?” he asked.

Charlie blinked and tried to focus on Hemlock and not on the throbbing pain in her face. “What?”

“You’d rather not get into it with me,” Hemlock stated.

Sighing, Charlie decided why not tell him. “Don’t judge me,” she started off with.

“My ex-boyfriend and ex-best friend live in an apartment that’s in my name. I went to pay the rent and ran into them. It turned into an argument, and Ashley punched me in the face.”

He wasn’t one to judge anyone. Hemlock was curious about why she was paying for an apartment she wasn’t living in. “Why?”

She knew what he was asking, and she had no real answer other than she couldn’t get the ex out without going to court. Which she couldn’t afford. “There’s a law that states if someone brings so much as a toothbrush into your home, they live there. To get him evicted, I’d have to go to court.”

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The whole sorted affair was embarrassing. She tried staying, but Crispen only made things intolerable for her. When she came home after work one night and Ashley was sleeping in her bed with him, she lost her shit. A full-out fistfight with the police being called which landed her in jail for the night. By the time she'd gotten released and back to the apartment, the locks had been changed and her things were out in the hallway.

“Let me get this straight. You couldn't throw him out, but he threw you out?”

“Basically. I did try to get rid of him. Every time I changed the locks, I'd come home, and he'd be back in the apartment. He and the apartment manager are buddies.”

“And you're paying the rent, why?”

“The lease is in my name. I can't afford for my credit to be ruined.”

Crazy bitch. Crazy bitch. Crazy bitch, his inner voice screamed at him. “I'm sorry you're going through that.”

“Me too.”

She watched him take a seat on a rolling stool and move closer to her. He took out a penlight and asked her to follow the light with her eyes, which she did. Her life was in shambles. She couldn't rent another apartment with already having one in her name. Could she?

“Ouch!” she snapped when Hemlock touched her face.

“Sorry,” Hemlock muttered, his fingers lingering on her jaw for a moment longer than necessary. His eyes were focused, professional, but Charlie could tell he was trying not to show his own discomfort. She wasn’t sure if it was because of the pain in her face or the way her life had seemed to collapse into a pile of unmanageable mess. She’d been a mess for months now. He couldn’t know that, though.

“Let’s try that again,” he said, lifting the penlight a little higher and asking her to follow it with her eyes once more.

She obeyed, her eyes tracking the little dot of light, trying to ignore the sense of disconnection that had begun to bleed into everything—into her thoughts, into the sensation of his hands on her face. Distraction. Focus, just focus.

Charlie felt a sharp pang in her chest, but this time it wasn’t just physical. It was the overwhelming weight of it all. The apartment situation was the latest disaster—her lease, her name still on it, her rent doubled because she couldn’t make the right call in time to find another place. Her credit wasn’t good enough for a fresh start anywhere. Every door felt like it was closing, locking her in this cramped, cold space.

She pulled her thoughts back to Hemlock, who was still moving the light slowly, checking her eye movement. He was one of the good ones, she knew. He wasn’t one of those cold, detached doctors who only saw her as another patient with an issue to fix. Still, she couldn’t shake the feeling of vulnerability—the way her life had become a series of “what ifs,” constantly wondering if she was ever going to find a way out.

“Alright, let’s check the other side,” he said, breaking her thoughts.

She flinched, involuntarily. Another sharp, hot flash of pain in her face as he touched it again, and she couldn’t help but snap, “Ouch!” The word a little harsher than she intended.

He gave her a sympathetic look but said nothing. Just moved to the other side of her face, a little more gently though. She could feel her heartbeat in her ears, the growing awareness she didn't have the answers to anything. Not even to herself.

"Sorry," she said again, quieter this time, but it felt like the apology wasn't just for snapping at him. It was for everything. For the mess she was. For the things she couldn't fix. For all the unknowns that loomed over her.

"Don't apologize," Hemlock replied with a quiet smile. "We're here to figure out how badly you're hurt."

The door opened before Charlie could say anything else. She recognized the guy stepping into the room. He'd witnessed her humiliation when she tried to kill Hemlock.

"Durand, what do we have?" Razor looked at the girl and smiled. "Hello, cinnamon girl."

Charlie sighed wanting to cry. She couldn't catch a break.

"We've had a lot of fun at Hemlock's expense since you kissed him."

"Well, I'm glad I could humor you."

Razor recognized someone in pain and went into professional mode. "Tell me what's going on with the patient."

"Miss Cote was punched in the face by another female. I think we should do an x-ray on her cheek. It might be fractured. She's suffering with pain, swelling, skin discoloration, and a nosebleed." Hemlock pointed to the balled up bloody tissue in Charlie's hand.

Razor repeated the eye exam, touched her cheek, and witnessed Charlie's intense reaction to the slightest touch. "I think you're right. Let's get an X-ray of the cheek and go from there."

Charlie sat quietly as the two men discussed the X-ray of her cheek. Exhaustion had long since set in, leaving her with the desire to leave. It didn't matter what they said. She couldn't afford to go anywhere else for medical attention. She knew by Hemlock's reaction to the X-ray that her cheek was indeed fractured. But she already knew that by the way her nose bled after being punched. It wasn't her first rodeo with a facial fracture.

Rubbing a hand across her forehead, Charlie decided she was done. She stood and pulled her purse straps over her shoulder before thanking Hemlock and Razor. Her hand was barely on the doorknob when they both asked where she was going.

Charlie paused, fingers still hovering over the doorknob. She wasn't sure how to explain. She hadn't even fully processed the fact she'd been x-rayed for a fractured cheek. It wasn't the first time, and with the situation unfolding in her life, it probably wouldn't be the last. She turned, giving them both a half-smile, though it felt more like a grimace.

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“Home. Or what passes for a home,” her voice was low and laced with annoyance.

Hemlock heard the undertone in her words and wanted to help her. “Charlie?—”

“I know. My face is fractured. I’d hoped it wasn’t. But it is.” She was done being looked at like she was pathetic and tired of being ignored. She was more than an

X-ray.

“We weren’t ignoring you. We want to be one hundred percent sure there aren’t any underlying issues to be worried about,” Razor responded.

“Is there?” Charlie asked as her hand hovered over the doorknob.

“Not that we can see.”

“Charlie,” Hemlock’s voice was calm, but insistent. He’d always had that way about him. Serious but compassionate. “It’s not something you can just walk away from. It could get worse.”

“It’s fine. I’ve had worse,” she muttered, turning the knob and pulling the door open. She needed out of there. Out of the sterile smell of antiseptic and the weight of their concern.

Charlie walked out and didn’t stop until she got to the bus stop. If she were lucky, she wouldn’t get mugged before she got home.

Her boots clicked against the pavement as she made her way toward the bus stop. The weight of her bruised, fractured cheek and damaged pride left a dull throb in the back of her mind. She could still hear Hemlock's voice, soft but insistent, echoing behind her, but it didn't matter anymore. There was nothing more to say.

At least the X-ray had confirmed what she already knew: no hidden fractures in her skull, no internal bleeding, just the fracture of her cheekbone. But the ache in her face was enough of a reminder that she'd been on the receiving end of a punch she hadn't seen coming. Not that it was anything new. She'd been punched, kicked, and worse over the years, but tonight had been... different. Maybe it was the way the lights had flickered in the hallway, the way the air had been thick with tension before it all exploded.

She stepped onto the bus, the doors hissing closed behind her. She didn't bother looking around for a seat. The bus was half-empty, the usual collection of drunks and the occasional insomniac heading home from a late shift. Charlie settled into the nearest spot by the window, staring out at the dark streets. Her face throbbed, but the rhythmic hum of the engine and the soft jolt of the bus seemed to settle her, just a little.

Her place wasn't really home—not anymore, not for a long time. It wasn't even a cramped apartment with peeling paint and windows that wouldn't close all the way. It was a cheap suite at an even cheaper hotel. But it was hers. Just like this life was hers, messy and fractured as it was.

As the bus rolled on, Charlie's mind drifted to the fight. The way her opponent had looked at her just before it all went down, that split second where everything had gone cold. If she was being honest with herself, it had been her mistake. She had let her guard down, maybe not physically, but emotionally. She hadn't expected the sucker punch. She had been too busy sizing up the mood, looking for any hint of trouble.

Not that it matters now, she thought, rubbing her hand across her cheek absently, the cool pressure almost soothing.

The bus hit a pothole, jarring her out of her thoughts, and Charlie sat up straighter. She was close now. Another few blocks and she'd be there. The city outside was a blur of lights and shadows, but inside, the hum of the bus was oddly comforting. Even if she had little, she had this, her own way of getting through, no matter what life threw her way.

And if she was really unlucky? She'd deal with that, too.

Chapter Five

Charlie walked into the lobby of the hotel and barely passed the front desk before the manager stopped her. What he said next was unsettling. "What did you just say?"

The manager's face drained of color as his hands gripped the edge of the front desk. His eyes darted nervously to the side, and he swallowed hard. "We've had nothing but complaints about noise coming from your suite since your sister arrived."

Charlie's confusion deepened as she stepped closer. "I don't have a sister, and no one should have been allowed into my room," she informed the man and watched as he paled even more. "You let someone have a key to my room?"

"Not me."

"But someone that works here gave a perfect stranger a key to my room?"

"That's... that's impossible," he muttered so low it was almost as if he spoke for his ears only. "We don't issue keys without proper identification." As he stared at Charlie, he asked, "Are you sure you don't have a sister?"

Charlie felt a chill creep up her spine. The strange, disjointed feeling she'd had when she'd entered the hotel lobby. The eerie sense something wasn't quite right... now it made sense, but it also made everything worse.

"I think I'd know if I had a fucking sister, asshole."

Rushing towards the elevator, Charlie hit the button repeatedly until the damn door opened. Panicked, she rode the elevator to the fourth floor. When she stepped into the hall, she could see the door to her room was cracked. Digging through her purse, she found the pepper spray and flipped it on.

Using the tip of her shoe, she toed open the door. Tears came hard and fast at the disarray inside the room. Furniture was up ended; her clothes were strewn across every viable surface and on the floor. Strips of fabric were everywhere. Everything she owned looked ruined.

"Oh my," the manager's voice came from behind her.

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“I think you should call your supervisor and the police,” she said through the tears.

“Do you think you’ve been robbed?” the manager asked.

Turning on the man, she walked right up to him where they were toe to toe. “I don’t know, but I want you to call your supervisor and the police. Now!”

Hemlock stood in the doorway and stared at the mess spread across the hotel suite. “What in the hell happened to your room, Charlie?”

Charlie closed her eyes. She did not need this shit. She did not need a man that she kissed once and almost killed to watch her fall apart. She’d already had enough humiliation with him for one night. Wasn’t it bad enough he’d seen her beat and dealt with the word vomit she threw at him earlier?

“The hotel gave someone a key to my room. The person in question said she was my sister. But I don’t have a sister, and I didn’t give anyone permission to have access to my room.”

“Don’t touch anything. I’m calling the cops.” Hemlock looked at the hotel manager. “Get your supervisor on the phone or have them meet us up here,” he ordered the middle-aged man.

As he dialed the police, Hemlock made his way across the room and onto the patio. Nothing had been touched outside. Waving Charlie to him, he had her sit down on a patio chair while he went in search of a blanket or a robe. Something she could wrap up in.

Turned out the hotel didn't have working surveillance cameras, so the cops could not see who had come in or out of her suite. The only thing they knew for sure was which employee had given a stranger access to Charlie's room.

After numerous questions making her feel like a suspect instead of a victim, the cops had asked her if anything was missing.

How the hell did she know? She'd been sitting outside waiting for them to let her look around. Picking through her belongings, she found a few items of clothing, and her one piece of nice jewelry was gone.

"Do you know of anyone that might have done this?"

"Yes. The same person who fractured my face. Ashley Case." She watched the cop jot down Ashley's name. When he handed her his card, Charlie rolled her eyes as she took it.

When the door closed, she looked at Hemlock, who was shaking his head. "What?"

"You don't know how to play nice with others. Do you?" he asked with a questioning stare.

Charlie did not need his sarcastic commentary when all she wanted to do was stick her face into a pillow and scream. "You can leave," she said while pointing a finger at the door.

Hemlock folded his arms across his chest and continued staring at her. If she thought he'd leave her there, Charlie was crazy. "I'm not leaving until we pack you a bag."

"Why? I can't afford to stay anywhere else."

“Charlie, you aren’t staying here tonight. Not without knowing who came in here and why.”

“I have work tomorrow. At two different places.”

“No, you don’t.” She couldn’t work with her face fractured. By tomorrow, it would be even more painful than it was now.

“Hemlock, if I don’t work, I can’t afford to stay here and pay for that stupid apartment.”

Even knowing it would bite him in the ass, at some point, Hemlock offered for her to stay with him. His place had an extra bedroom and bathroom. Plus, he primarily stayed at the clubhouse. “Someone helped me once. I’m paying it forward.”

“How many times have you paid it forward?”

“Too many. I’m hoping eventually I’ll pay it forward to the right person.”

Was she actually thinking of accepting his help? She didn’t know him. Other than he was allergic to cinnamon. This was crazy. She was crazy even considering it. Screw it. “I’m taking you up on the offer only because I don’t think I feel safe here.”

“No strings attached. Just a place for you to stay for a while.”

“I can pay you something for helping me.”

“Let’s cross that bridge later.” Hemlock started picking up overturned furniture and clothes. Whoever had come in there had wanted to unsettle Charlie. Some items he picked up had been cut and ripped. This was an intentional attack on her. When he looked up, he saw she held a backpack to her chest.

“I’m ready.”

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“What about the rest of this stuff?”

“I’ll come back tomorrow and sort it out. I’m too tired and my face hurts too much to deal with it tonight.”

“I’m off tomorrow. I can bring you back and we can take care of it together.” Why was he doing this shit again? Oh right, nice guy syndrome.

Scratching his chin, he looked at her attire and thought it wouldn’t do. Unfortunately, he was on the bike and not in the car. “Would you have a pair of sturdy boots?”

Charlie looked down at her well-worn converse, then back up at Hemlock. “No. Why?”

“I’m on my bike.” He saw the instant she changed her mind as she took two steps back. “I take it you’ve never ridden.”

“Nope, and I’m not gonna start tonight.”

He stepped around an overturned kitchen chair and dodged walking on her clothes, even if they were trashed. When he was toe to toe with her, Hemlock looked down, making sure she was paying attention to him. Giving her the most playful smile he could muster, he said two words, “Wanna bet.”

Easing back he waited for her to change her mind. He could see her wavering, but wasn’t sure which way she’d lean until she sighed. Not giving her a chance to decline, he said, “Let’s get going. We need to get some ice on that face of yours.”

Ten minutes later, he stood beside Charlie as she stared at his bike. “How do I get on it?” she asked as she stretched her neck to get a better look at it. “And where do I sit?”

Taking the backpack from her, he stuffed it into one of his saddlebags, then handed her his spare shell. When she just stood there holding it, he took it and slapped it on her head. Quickly he adjusted the straps and buckled it. Next, he slid a pair of clear riding glasses onto her face. “Now, you’re ready to ride.”

Walking around to the left side of his sled (motorcycle) like he always did, he threw a long leg over and settled into the saddle. Pointing a finger, he had Charlie do the same thing, except she didn’t know how to get on. He almost dropped the bike when she attempted to kneel on the saddlebag to crawl on. “Whoa ,whoa, whoa! Put your foot on this peg.” He drew her attention to the foot peg right behind his calf. “Your left foot, push up and throw your right leg over. Once your leg is over, sit down on the seat.”

“You mean this vinyl do-ma-hickie?” she asked, her words laced with concern.

Cutting her a look, he wondered if she was serious. “It’s called a seat.”

“It’s called ridiculous.” Charlie snapped, staring at him.

Frustrated, tired, and ready to be home already, he pointed to the seat. “Charlie. Please get on the bike.”

“Fine, but if my ass hurts when we get to your apartment, I’m gonna need ice for it as well as my face.”

And he would need ice for the massive headache he was getting. When she was finally settled behind him, Hemlock reached back for her hands, bringing them

around his waist. “Hang on tight.”

Firing up the bike, he felt the engine roar to life, the deep thrum of the motor vibrating through the frame, easing the tension that always crept into his shoulders. The noise was a kind of comfort, familiar, steady. When he revved it once, the sound of the engine swallowed everything, but beneath it, he heard Charlie’s laugh.

Crazy bitches are great in the sack.

Shifting into gear, the power of the bike surge beneath him, and the world outside blurred into a rush of wind and speed. His mind cleared. The road ahead, open and endless, was all he needed. Just the hum of the engine and the endless stretch of asphalt lay ahead.

Hemlock could feel the warmth of Charlie’s hands wrapped around him, and despite the tension he’d felt earlier, a flicker of something, maybe concern, maybe a flicker of amusement, softened his grip on the handlebars. He twisted the throttle with a practiced ease, the rumble of the engine beneath them filling the air as they moved forward.

Charlie, for her part, was gripping him like a lifeline. Her fingers dug into his jacket, the leather creaking in protest. Hemlocksmirked to himself. If she wasn’t careful, she might rip the seams right out of it.

“Just hold on,” he muttered over his shoulder, more to himself than to her. But Charlie wasn’t listening; she was too busy trying to figure out how to balance on a bike she clearly had no experience with. “This thing is an accident waiting to happen,” she said, but her voice was tinged with sarcasm.

He snorted, twisting the throttle harder, the bike roaring to life beneath them as they shot forward down the street. The wind rushed past them, and the noise of the engine

drowned out anything else she might've said.

Charlie's grip tightened, and Hemlock could feel the sudden shift in her posture, her body pressing closer to his, as though she were trying to make herself smaller, more compact.

For a moment, it felt like everything around them—the rush of air, the roar of the engine, the blur of the streetlights—vanished. There was just the two of them. The ride, the raw energy between them, it felt almost... right.

Chapter Six

Surprised was the word of the moment. Surprised was an understatement. Once Charlie relaxed behind him, Hemlock barely noticed the girl was there. If her hands wouldn't have been around his waist, he would've forgotten all about her being on the back. If he hadn't seen the fear in her eyes when she'd gotten on, he'd swear she'd lied about never riding before.

He'd ridden with a lot of girls at his back and every one of them had been a pain in his ass, except for the club girls or a family member of one of his brothers. Not this chick, first time on one, and she was a natural. She instinctively knew how to lean when he took curves, how to brace for shifting, and how not to pull back on him.

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Backing into his driveway he surveyed his surroundings. His place was in a great neighborhood, but that didn't mean someone wouldn't be lurking. School was out for spring break, which meant kids would be searching for an easy way to make money.

Dropping the kickstand, he gave Charlie his hand to help her stay steady until both feet were on the pavement. Climbing off the bike, he grabbed her pack from the saddlebag and tossed in the spare helmet she'd been wearing. Carrying his own, he led her to his humble abode.

As soon as he opened the door, doubts hit. His place wasn't the Four Seasons, it wasn't the Motel Eight either. It lacked... personality. At least downstairs did. Downstairs things were dull. Beige walls and brown furniture. He spent little time downstairs when he was there. So it had made sense to start remodeling upstairs first. If she had a problem with it, she could go back to the hotel.

"Come on in, let me give you the tour."

He tossed his keys and wallet in the wooden bowl on the entry table like always, then hit the lights for the kitchen and living room. "The kitchen's not huge, but it's got everything you might need. There's food in both the fridge and the pantry. Help yourself." This is the living room, the remote's on the table. I've got all the channels and then some."

He walked farther into the kitchen and opened the freezer taking out an ice pack for her face. He opened a drawer and pulled out a clean dishtowel and wrapped it around the ice pack. They didn't need her to get frostbite. Handing it to Charlie, he continued the tour.

Taking the icepack from Hemlock, she placed it against her face, which was throbbing like a son of a bitch. “You have a nice place.” She managed without sighing. The coolness of the towel wrapped ice pack felt wonderful.

“Yeah. I like it.” He didn’t miss the relief that washed over her pretty face when the cold pack rested against it.

He led her out of the kitchen. “This is the living room, the remote’s on the table. I’ve got all the channels and then some.”

“Where am I staying?” Charlie asked, breaking into his thoughts.

“Upstairs and to the left. There’s a bedroom and bathroom with your name on it,” he told her, pointing towards the stairs.

“I won’t be a problem. I promise,” she replied. What else was there to say?

Charlie pointed towards the stairs and watched as Hemlock motioned her go ahead. When she reached the top of the stairs, it was as if she stepped into a different place. The walls were a deep navy blue with no decorations adorning them.

When she walked into the bedroom, she sucked in her breath. The walls were the darkest shade of gray she’d ever seen. The queen size bed was covered in a thick oatmeal colored comforter that appeared to be stuffed with fluff. It was so puffy and a mix-matched set of throw pillows in shades of oranges, grays, and creams were stacked against a black leather headboard. Two pictures hung above it. It took her a minute to decipher what they were... waves she realized. Waves in shades of black and orange tones. “Those are cool.”

Holding onto her backpack she moved across the floor and found the bathroom just as intimidating. Blacks, grays, and oatmeal colors made up the pallet of color. “There

are towel's, and wash cloths, in the cabinet." Hemlock's deep voice startled her, making her jump. "Thanks. The upstairs is gorgeous. Well, this side anyway."

"Would you like to see my room?" His voice against her ear had Charlie swallowing hard as she licked her lips. "Not tonight."

"Another time then," Hemlock said, snickering. "I've got a few rules."

"Shoot."

Moving aside so Charlie could go into the bedroom, he gave her the rules. "No guest. No food or drinks upstairs other than water. Clean up your own messes. Do not leave wet items on the wood floors." He sighed, thinking if there was anything else. "Make sure to not leave laundry in the washer or dryer."

"I can handle all of that. Where is the laundry room?"

"Downstairs bathroom."

"Got it."

"I'll leave you to get unpacked."

"Hemlock." She bit her bottom lip as she stared up at him. His smile alone made her nervous. Add in those eyes. God, she could drown in the hazel depths.

"Yes, Charlie?"

"Would you have a t-shirt I could borrow? My pj's were shredded."

Hemlock stared at her. What was he supposed to say, no? What he wanted to say was,

“you can sleep naked next to me.” Instead, he smiled, then said, “I’m sure I’ve got something you can sleep in. Wait here.”

He’d given her the ten-cent tour of the house, given her something to sleep in and laid down the rules where there wouldn’t be any issues. But there would be issues. There were always issues when it came to women.

Hemlock left her at the condo to settle in and get some rest. He rode out to Truck’s place for some solid advice. The brother would settle him down.

Pulling into the driveway, the light from the lamp on his bike illuminated the small garage apartment. He missed living there. Missed having dinner every night with Truck. The man had been a father figure and a big brother rolled into one when he had had no one else. He’d been a scrawny kid living on the streets when he stumbled upon the Royal Bastards’ clubhouse.

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He recognized an opportunity and took it, making sure he showed he could be trusted and counted on. He was fourteen when he started asking to do odd jobs around the clubhouse for a meal. Truck had been the one that gave him more. He'd given him a home and taught him a trade. That was the beginning of a new life for Hemlock, and he'd never be able to explain to Truck how much he appreciated it.

But that was years ago, and the chapter had been through a radical change recently. One that was much needed. Still, those who had been in since the start-up of the chapter were still waiting for the hammer to drop.

After parking the bike he pocketed his keys and headed for the kitchen door. When it opened, he waved at Truck and was greeted with a string of words that to anyone else would be insulting. To him they were words of endearment. "What's up, old man?"

"Who you calling old, asshole?"

"You're older than me."

"Five years."

"Six," Hemlock corrected Truck.

"Get your ass inside. Have you eaten? I've got leftovers."

Smiling, Hemlock chuckled as Truck went into dad mode. "I haven't and leftovers sounds perfect."

“You know where everything is. Help yourself.” Truck watched the man he considered his younger brother make his way around the kitchen. He missed having the kid living right outside the kitchen door. Two years ago Hemlock had put his money to good use and bought a condo in town. He explained it was an investment. Truck had agreed it was a great investment. “What brings you my way tonight?”

“A girl.”

Truck smirked, he should’ve known. The boy had the worse luck with the opposite sex. Last chick he dated had stolen his credit cards and in one day she almost bankrupted the kid. “Finish fixing your plate, then we’ll talk about this girl you’ve gotten mixed up with.”

“I’m not mixed up with her. I’m helping her.”

“Wait, is this cinnamon girl?” Truck saw the sideways glance Hemlock gave him. Shaking his head, he took a seat at the kitchen table and waited for Hemlock to follow suit. When he sat down, Truck smoothed his hands over the top of the wooden table as he waited for his brother to spill his guts.

Hemlock took a bite of food before looking at Truck. The man always knew what was on his mind. Always knew how hard it was for him to talk about his personal shit. “I let her move in with me. Temporarily,” he added before Truck could explode. “She’s in a bad spot, Truck.”

“So kill whoever’s putting her there and let her move along.”

He forked up another bite of food and ignored Truck’s comment momentarily before pointing the fork at Truck and telling him that shit wasn’t cool. “She needs someone to help her with some legal stuff.”

“Hemlock, you’re smart, but you’re not the kind of smart she needs, son.” He knew it was an insult, but it wasn’t how he intended it to sound. The kid was wicked smart. Smart like Sherlock just not with women.

“There ya go sounding like an old man.”

“All I’m saying is if you can’t help her, pass her on to someone who can.”

“She’s not an offering basket. She’s a girl that needs a hand up.”

Truck recognized Hemlock had made up his mind and relented. “Tell me what you know about cinnamon girl.”

Hemlock told him everything he knew about Charlie. How she worked three jobs so she could live at a cheap hotel while her ex-boyfriend and ex-bff lived in an apartment she paid for. How the bff had punched her in the face and the hotel she been staying at had given someone a key to her room. “The place was tossed. Her clothes were ripped and cut up. I couldn’t leave her there, Truck.”

“What did the hotel surveillance show?”

“They didn’t have any.”

Truck scratched at his facial stubble while thinking about the situation. “Get with Sherlock and have him look through the CCTV footage around the area.”

Hemlock stopped eating and glanced at Truck. Leaning back, he set the fork down and pulled out his phone. “That’s a great idea.”

“You might not know who went into her room, but you can possibly see who went into the hotel.”

Chapter Seven

Charlie's bare feet made soft, quick noises as she hurried down the hall, the dim glow of the hallway light offering little comfort against the unsettling remnants of her nightmare. She could still feel the rush of adrenaline in her chest, a gnawing anxiety that refused to let go. Her heartbeat pulsed in her throat as the memory of the knife-wielding woman loomed in her mind.

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The closer she got to Hemlock's room, the more desperate her steps became. She didn't want to disturb him, but the thought of being alone right now was unbearable. She hated to admit she needed him.

She reached his door and hesitated for a moment, trying to steady her breathing, but the slight tremor in her hands betrayed her. With a quiet exhale, she pushed the door open, not bothering to knock.

The faint light from the hallway illuminated the edge of the room, casting a soft glow. Her heart sank as she scanned the room, it was empty.

The empty room swallowed her whole, the quiet a suffocating pressure in her chest. Charlie stood frozen in the doorway, her eyes darting from corner to corner, half-expecting to see Hemlock appear from the shadows or hear his footsteps behind her. But there was nothing. Just her own breaths against the silence.

Her heart raced, and she fought the impulse to turn around and run back to her room. She wasn't sure if it was the aftermath of the nightmare, the dull ache in her face, or the sudden crushing loneliness that had the overwhelming fear gnawing at her.

Her feet moved before her mind could catch up, each step down the hallway toward the stairs feeling heavier than the last. Standing at the bottom of the steps, the room despite its size felt smaller, the beige walls unwelcoming. The leather sofas, dark and uninviting, seemed to mock her, their stiffness reminding her of how out of place she felt.

Charlie paused in the center of the room, looking toward the kitchen. The house was

unnervingly quiet, every soft creak and groan of the old floors making her skin crawl. She thought of the warmth upstairs, and her hand went instinctively to her face again, feeling the tender pressure on her swollen cheek. The throbbing had intensified, pulsing in time with her heartbeat. She winced at the pain, and the cold dread that had settled into her stomach flared up once more.

She stood in the middle of the kitchen, the cold ice pack clutched in her hand, staring at the open cupboard in front of her. Disappointed at the lack of pain relievers, she closed the cabinet door. The throbbing pain in her face was relentless, like a pulse she couldn't escape. Her head felt like it was going to crack open, the pressure building in waves, and the weight of it made her vision blur.

Squeezing her eyes shut, trying to fight back the tears that threatened to spill, the overwhelming discomfort pushing her closer to the edge. Her hand gripped the edge of the counter, knuckles white as she fought the dizziness threatening to overtake her. The pain in her face made it feel like someone had taken a sledgehammer to her skull, and the absence of the aspirin, of something to ease the ache, only made the isolation she felt worse. She wasn't sure how much longer she could keep herself from breaking down completely.

She turned slowly, her feet heavy beneath her, and headed for the stairs. Maybe she could make it back to her room. By the time she reached the stairs, the pain in her face had spread like wildfire, each step upward making her vision swim. She could feel her pulse in her temples now, each beat a reminder of the dream, the panic, and the unbearable ache were all tangled up together and just out of reach. She changed her decision to climb the stairs and headed for the living room.

Charlie curled up on the couch, the familiar scent of the throw blanket wrapping around her like a fragile shield. The cold press of the ice against her cheek was a small comfort, but it did little to ease the storm inside her. She pressed it harder against her skin, the sharp coolness a fleeting relief as she let the tears fall in silence.

Her thoughts spiraled back to the hotel suite. The image of the destroyed room, the overturned furniture, the clothes torn apart and scattered across the floor—all of it burned into her mind.

The worst part was the quiet certainty of who had done it. She didn't need proof; she didn't need a confession. She knew exactly who had been behind the destruction. Without proof, she had nothing.

No matter how hard she tried to figure out why Ashley and Crispen continued to torture her, Charlie couldn't come up with a single reason. They had the apartment which she was forced to pay for. Even the damn utilities were in her name. Even the furniture was hers. As tears ran down her face, she knew until she stopped being a doormat Ashley and Crispen would continue harassing her. Closing her eyes against the bright lights of the living room, she rested her head on the sofa.

The sound of keys jangling, and a door opening had Charlie lifting her head and dragging the blanket up further. Her eyes burned from crying and felt puffy. She could barely keep them open because she was so tired, but every time she dozed off, she'd end up in that damn dream again. She was at the point if it wasn't Hemlock coming home, whoever it was, could just kill her. At least she'd be put out of her misery. She heard the keys hit the wooden bowl on the entrance table and knew it was Hemlock.

Hemlock opened the front door hoping he wouldn't wake Charlie. Dropping his keys and wallet into the bowl he softly swore as it rattled. Glancing towards the living room, he noticed all the lights were on. He stopped in the kitchen to grab a soda from the fridge when he saw her tucked into the corner of the sofa. Her eyes were full of fear and exhaustion. Her face looked worse, and she was most definitely in pain. Grabbing a bottle of water, he headed straight for her. "How bad?" he asked as he took a seat on the sofa facing her.

Charlie didn't know where to start, she just fell apart right there on the stupid couch surrounded by drab walls. She didn't know why the wall color was affecting her, but it was. It was just as sad looking as she was. She whispered, her voice small, barely audible. "Just... my head hurts."

"Okay, it's time for bed and a painkiller, sweetheart."

"Okay," she said between sobs. She didn't even tell him she'd been in bed already once that night.

Some fucking nurse he was turning out to be. He hadn't even offered her a single pain pill at the clinic. On the other hand, she had walked out before they could give her a prescription for them. "Are you allergic to anything, Charlie?" He watched her barely shake her head no.

He moved around the room, as if searching for something, and in a moment, he returned with a glass of water, a bottle of pills, and a new cold pack. His hand moved to her face to carefully apply the new ice pack. The coolness felt like relief and torture at the same time, but it was better than nothing.

"Tomorrow we're going back to the clinic and doing an MRI on your face."

Charlie's gaze flickered between him and the water, and though she didn't want to admit it, the simple gesture was the smallest kind of salvation. "Thank you," she whispered, her voice thick with exhaustion, and her body shook from the pain.

"Alright." Hemlock stood and reached for her hand, helping her off the sofa. When she barely stumbled forward, he reached down and scooped her up into his arms. "Don't fight me, Charlie," he said when she tried stopping him. "You're exhausted and hurting. I'm putting you to bed."

He felt her hand moving underneath her legs and realized her ass was probably hanging out and she was worried about it. “Stop squirming before I drop you on your bare ass.” That got her immediate attention. “I’ve seen plenty of asses, yours isn’t any different,” his voice harsher than he intended.

“Mines perfect,” she mumbled against his chest.

“I’m sure it is.” Damn straight it was. He’d got a good look at it the night she almost killed him. It hadn’t even been bare at that time, but it looked perfect in the pants she had on. They had hugged her perfect heart shape ass as if they were painted on.

Chapter Eight

Hemlock had found himself torn. He’d spent the better part of the night wondering what would be best for Charlie: should he let her sleep alone, or should he stay close in case she needed anything? His reasoning was simple enough, if she were in the spare bedroom, he wouldn’t hear her if something happened. But, if she slept in his room, he could keep an eye on her, make sure she was comfortable, and step in if she needed anything during the night.

Standing at the top of the stairs, Hemlock hesitated. His eyes flicked first to the spare bedroom, where the door was ajar, the room bathed in a dim light from the hall. Then his gaze turned right, to his own room. It was quieter there. More intimate. And though the room felt vast, it suddenly felt too empty with the thought of her being so far away.

Without a second thought, he chose right.

The decision settled in him like a quiet relief, but it was a relief laced with complexity. Hemlock didn't know exactly what would happen tonight, or how things might shift between them after this choice, but the need to be near her—the quiet instinct to provide some kind of security, some kind of presence—was stronger than his hesitation.

He made his way to the room, his steps steady but slower than usual, as though trying to catch his breath before the door was opened. The soft creak of the floorboards underfoot seemed louder than it should have been, but maybe that was just his nerves.

Walking towards his room, the weight of Charlie in his arms grounding Hemlock in a strange, comforting way. He had expected her to protest, she hadn't. He felt a protective instinct coil tightly around his chest.

Carefully, he laid her down on his bed, the soft rustling of the covers barely audible. He pulled the blankets up around her, making sure she was tucked in, her body curling instinctively into the warmth. For a long moment, he stood there, watching her, before he finally left to shower and get ready for bed.

As Hemlock turned to leave the room, the soft glow of the nightlight cast a warm, almost ethereal hue over Charlie's sleeping form. His hand lingered on the doorframe for a moment, his mind spinning with thoughts he couldn't quite put into words. There was a peace in the way she slept—calm, still—and it soothed something inside of him, something he hadn't even realized had been restless.

The protective instinct still clung to him, tight and steady, like a quiet hum in his chest. He could've stayed there, watching her all night, but he knew he needed to step back.

With a slow exhale, he left her resting, and headed into the bathroom. The door clicked shut behind him. Crossing the room he turned on the shower and stripped. The cool water of the shower would give him a moment to center himself.

As the water cascaded over him, Hemlock's thoughts wandered. He hadn't expected her to be so trusting, not after everything that had happened. Her lack of protest had caught him off guard, but he found himself grateful for it in a way he didn't fully understand. Was it trust? Or maybe just the exhaustion of the day? Either way, it didn't matter. The moment of connection, fragile as it might be, felt significant.

When he stepped out of the shower, the cold air hit his skin like a rush of clarity. He dressed quickly, moving with the practiced ease of someone who'd done this routine a thousand times. But tonight felt different. Every motion, every step, was threaded with something quieter, more deliberate.

Hemlock walked back into his room. It wasn't late, but it felt later somehow. The world outside was still, as if holding its breath. Stepping closer he found the bed as still as he had left it. The room smelled faintly of clean linen, a touch of lavender from the detergent.

Charlie hadn't moved much, her face soft in the dim light. He paused, just for a moment, to let his gaze settle on her. Slipping into bed quietly, he laid back resting his head on the pillow, his skin still warm from the shower.

The moonlight slanted through the curtains, casting an eerie glow over the room. Hemlock lay there, his body stiff and tense, unable to find any rest. His thoughts raced, spiraling around concerns for Charlie. He couldn't shake the image of her

shifting restlessly beside him—so small, so fragile in the vulnerable state of sleep.

He glanced over at her, watching the rise and fall of her chest with every shallow breath. Even in the quiet darkness her discomfort seemed palpable. He wondered if the nightmares were getting worse, or if some deeper fear had taken root inside her. Maybe it was the strain from their last encounter, the wounds they'd both taken, the weight of everything unresolved.

A muffled groan escaped Charlie's lips, followed by a soft whimper, and Hemlock's heart clenched. Without thinking, his hand reached out, brushing a lock of hair from her forehead, his fingers cool against her fevered skin. His thumb gently traced her temple, a silent gesture of comfort he hoped would reach her even in her dreams.

"Charlie..." he whispered under his breath, his voice thick with concern, though he knew she wouldn't hear him. He wanted to wake her, to ask if she was in pain or if she needed something, but he feared it would only make things worse.

The night had been a restless one for Hemlock. Between Charlie's soft moans of discomfort and her constant tossing and turning, he barely managed to sleep. Every small shift or sound from her had him wide awake, his senses on high alert. She was so vulnerable in her sleep, and the thought she might be in pain, or something else might be wrong, kept him tethered to the edge of consciousness. He could never quite drift off fully.

Then, something unexpected happened. Charlie, still asleep, seemed to seek him out. She turned and snuggled into his side, her small form curling closer to him instinctively. The weight of her against him, the soft heat of her body, stirred something deep inside him—an awareness he wasn't prepared for.

The moment was simple, yet it felt like everything at once: her warmth, her proximity, the way she fit perfectly against him. He could feel the steady rise and fall

of her breathing as her head rested against his chest.

When he finally managed to pull himself out of bed, the quiet of the morning was almost jarring after the tension of the night. He stumbled downstairs and into the kitchen, still half-dazed, and poured himself a cup of coffee. Leaning against the counter he sipped the dark brew.

The quiet of the house seemed so much more pronounced without the faint sounds of Charlie's distress. While he waited for her to come downstairs, he busied himself by picking up around the kitchen. The tasks were small, simple, but they kept his mind occupied. The clink of dishes and the soft rustle of towels as he wiped down counters became his focus.

As he stood there waiting for her to appear, a strange sort of anticipation curled in his stomach. He wasn't sure what exactly it was, maybe just the quiet hope she'd be feeling better today, or perhaps the unspoken desire to keep her close, to make sure she was alright. Either way, he found himself looking at the stairs, waiting for her to make her way down.

Turning on the faucet, he poured the bitter coffee down the drain and rinsed the cup, setting it aside on the drying rack.

The sound of soft footfalls echoed down the stairs, grabbing Hemlock's attention. He hadn't realized how much he'd been waiting for her to appear, but the moment he heard her coming, a quiet relief washed over him. Charlie emerged at the bottom of the stairs, her movements slow and with a slight hesitation in her steps. The dark circles under her eyes were a silent testament to her restless night. It was clear she hadn't gotten much sleep either.

She looked up at him, and their eyes met for a moment. "Can I make you some breakfast or a cup of coffee?" Hemlock asked, his voice quiet, careful. He had a habit

of wanting to take care of people, but he didn't want to overstep. Still, offering felt natural.

Charlie gave him a soft, almost weary smile and shook her head. "I'm good. Thank you."

He nodded, not pressing further. However, he couldn't ignore the subtle tension in her shoulders, the way her body seemed to move with an effort that was a little too visible. Clearly, she was experiencing more pain. "If you're ready, we can head to the clinic," he said, his tone gentle but steady.

Charlie exhaled a breath that sounded more like a sigh than anything else. "Sounds good."

Holding out his hand he waited for her to head towards the front door. Grabbing his car keys he followed Charlie outside. His bike sat next to his car and work truck for the detail company. Even though he knew Charlie could ride like a pro, she was in pain. He wasn't to add insult to injury by putting her on the back of the bike causing her more discomfort by hitting bumps and avoiding potholes. He'd done that the evening before, which he would bet added to the pain she suffered.

Opening the passenger side door, he waited for her to climb in before shutting the door and walking to the driver's side. Sliding behind the wheel, Hemlock glanced over at Charlie. "How bad's the pain this morning?" he asked.

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Charlie hesitated for a moment, her gaze flicking to her hands as she took a breath. Then with a quiet almost defeated tone, she answered, “About the same.”

Hemlock’s hands tightened briefly around the steering wheel as he spoke again, “We’ll be at the clinic shortly. I’ve already called Razor and he’s going to meet us there.”

Charlie wanted nothing more than to be her normal, cheerful self, to offer that easy smile she’d always given without thinking. But the pain in her face this morning was too much to ignore, each movement sending sharp, electric streaks through her temples, making the effort to smile impossible. She had barely slept, between the never-ending ache in her face and the strange, unsettling dream that had haunted her sleep, she was exhausted.

It always seemed to come when she was on the verge of sleep, drawing her into a place where she couldn’t find any relief. And when it wasn’t the dream keeping her awake, it was the warmth of Hemlock’s body beside hers. Every inch of her body was in tune with his. The way he moved in the bed, the slow rise and fall of his chest as he slept, the quiet murmur of his breath. It made for a very long night.

“Okay,” she finally replied.

Hemlock pulled out of the driveway, his hands gripping the wheel tightly. The engine hummed steadily as he navigated the quiet road toward the clinic. The air between him and Charlie was thick with unspoken thoughts. He stole a quick glance at her from the corner of his eye, watching her profile in the dim morning light filtering through the car’s windows. Her face was pale, drawn tight with fatigue showing, and

though she was trying to mask it, he could see the subtle shifts in her expression. The way she winced when the car hit a bump in the road, told him she was holding the pain inside.

Chapter Nine

Lottie looked up from her paperwork as Hemlock greeted her, her warm smile lighting up the small clinic. Her jet-black hair was pulled into a high ponytail, her signature bang framed her deep green eyes.

“Good morning, Emile,” she said, her voice bright and welcoming. Her eyes shifted toward the young woman from the night before, a friendly look on her face. “I see we’ve talked Miss Cote into returning for more scans.

Charlie gave a small nod, giving Lottie a half-smile but remained quiet.

Hemlock stepped forward, his long, easy stride making him seem even taller than usual. He stared at Lottie; she did not want to start with him. Not this early in the morning. Having Charlie snuggled next to him all night had made it impossible to sleep. Every time she’d gotten closer, he had to turn his body away due to its response to hers.

Charlie looked up at Hemlock smirking, “Emile?”

“It’s my real name,” he said with a little too much bite. It was her damn fault he was in a foul mood. Still, he shouldn’t snap at her, Lottie was the one testing him. Turning his attention back to Lottie, he wanted only one thing. “Is there any coffee made?”

“Yes. And it’s fully caffeinated,” Lottie said with enthusiasm.

“Thanks. Could you please show Miss Cote to an exam room? We’re meeting Razor

here.” He saw the change in Lottie’s demeanor at hearing the brother was headed to the clinic. The duo needed to either get on the ride or not even think about buying a ticket to it. “Everything okay, Lottie?”

“Yep,” she answered curtly.

Seemed the mention of old blue eyes had the pretty goth nurse’s feathers ruffled. Hemlock would take that as them being even. She had one point for using his real name and he had one for getting under her skin with the mention of Razor.

Hemlock stood with his arms crossed, his brow furrowed with concern. “I just couldn’t believe it when I found her. She was so... vulnerable. I’ve never seen her like that before. She kept saying it didn’t hurt too bad, but I could tell something was wrong.”

Razor nodded solemnly, glancing down at the chart in his hands. “Pain like that doesn’t happen without a reason, especially not from something as small as a cheekbone injury. The MRI will give us a clear picture.”

“She admitted getting into an altercation, Hemlock reminded Razor.

Razor gave a tight nod. “I remember. You’ll need to keep an eye on her. But for now, we need to get a clear diagnosis. If it’s just a fracture, we can handle it. But if there’s something else... we’ll be ready to deal with that too.”

While Charlie was brought to get scans done, Hemlock slipped into the office and closed the door. Hemlock leaned back against the door, taking a steady breath. He pulled out his phone and dialed Sherlock’s number, his fingers moving quickly over the screen. They needed to know who had been in Charlie’s hotel room.

“What? There was a pause on the other end, followed by a stream of curses. “Jesus

Christ, Hemlock. It's fucking early," Sherlock's voice was getting sharper, the way it always did when he was switching gears from half-asleep annoyance to full-on professional mode.

Hemlock chuckled despite the tension building in his chest. He could almost hear Sherlock dragging himself out of bed, the familiar grumble of annoyance in his voice. "Sorry," he said, though he wasn't all that sorry. "Didn't know you worked last night."

"I was out late with my girl," Sherlock mumbled into the phone.

When did Sherlock get a girlfriend? And why didn't he know about it?

Hemlock heard a door opening, and Sherlock's bare feet walking down the hall, then another door opening and closing. "Do you have to take me with you to piss?"

"You woke me up, so yeah."

Hemlock waited for Sherlock to take a piss before he continued talking. When he heard the flush, he asked when the brother could be at the clubhouse. "Sherlock," his voice low but urgent, "I need you to investigate who broke into Charlie's hotel room. It happened after she was attacked last night, and I don't believe it was simply a coincidence."

Sherlock's voice on the other end of the line was sharp and efficient, "Send me what I'm looking for and I'll see what I can find."

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“Thanks,” Hemlock said, not bothering with pleasantries. “Be quick.”

“Yep.” Sherlock stumbled back towards his bedroom wondering how the hell they’d gotten home last night.

The line went dead as Sherlock hung up, and Hemlock dropped his phone onto the desk, his mind racing. He knew Sherlock could track down the specifics in no time, but it wasn’t going to ease his growing sense of dread.

He let out a deep breath, the kind that felt like it could ground him if he just held it long enough. The office was quiet for now, just the soft hum of the lights overhead and the distant sound of footsteps echoing down the hallway. Razor and Lottie would take care of Charlie for the moment. The scans would give them more answers than they previously had, and with Sherlock on the case, hopefully he’d have something to go on soon.

For the first time in hours, Hemlock let himself relax—just a little. His head tipped back against the chair, his legs stretched out and resting on the desk in front of him. His eyelids felt heavy, the kind of exhaustion that wrapped itself around you and threatened to pull you under.

Hemlock felt like he’d just closed his eyes when the office door slammed open. Dropping his feet to the floor, he sat up trying to focus on Razor bounding into the small room.

“Did you want to look at these scans, Hemlock?”

Hemlock rubbed his eyes, trying to shake off the remnants of his brief nap as Razor tossed the scans onto the desk in front of him. He focused on the scans Razor had laid out, trying to process the data before him. As expected, the hairline fracture in Charlie's cheekbone was clearly visible in the X-rays. The fracture wasn't deep, but it was enough to cause significant pain. The swelling around the area was pronounced—definitely adding to her discomfort. Hemlock could only imagine how bad it must have felt the night before when she had been curled up on the sofa

Razor was still standing at the desk, watching Hemlock closely. "Well?" he asked, his voice quieter than usual. "What's the verdict?"

Hemlock glanced up, giving Razor a hard look. "The fracture's manageable. The swelling's what's really making it worse. Pain's gotta be unbearable. Best thing we can do right now is ice it, let her rest, and get some pain meds into her."

Razor didn't look entirely convinced. "You think she'll take the meds?"

Hemlock's lips twitched in a dry half-smile. "If I have to, I'll sit on her while she takes them."

Razor grunted, clearly not expecting that response. "Has she said anymore about the fight?"

Hemlock set the scans aside and leaned back in his chair, rubbing the bridge of his nose as the weight of the situation pressed down on him. "She's dealing with heavier shit than just one fight. I've got Sherlock digging into things."

"Keep me and the others in the loop." Razor picked up the scans and walked out, leaving Hemlock to think things through for himself. Something told Razor the girl had a lot of baggage. Baggage his brother might not wanna deal with.

Chapter Ten

Hemlock found Sherlock going through the CCTV footage. When Charlie bumped into his back, he looked at her and smiled. She was wide-eyed taking in the clubhouse and everyone there. He remembered the first time he'd walked through the heavy doors, the same sense of awe and curiosity bubbled up inside him. The air was thick with the scent of old leather, whiskey, and something that always seemed to linger... a mix of belonging and family. It was like stepping into a living, breathing thing.

Charlie's expression—half wonder, half wariness—reflected what everyone had felt when they first crossed the threshold. But there was something else there too, a touch of nervousness, like she wasn't quite sure what to make of the strange new world unfolding around her.

"Don't worry," he said with a soft chuckle. "It's not nearly as intimidating as it looks." Hemlock then glanced towards the man in front of the computers. "Sherlock, how's things going?"

Sherlock paused the footage, glancing over his shoulder at Hemlock then at Charlie who stood there, wide-eyed, taking in the full expanse of the clubhouse. It was still like that for him some days, it always felt like the heart of something bigger. Something wild and unyielding. "First timer, huh?" he chuckled.

Charlie nodded, running a hand through her hair. "Yeah. It's... different than I imagined."

"It always is," Sherlock agreed, his lips quirking into a smile. "But it grows on you." He put his attention back to Hemlock and the CCTV footage. "Hemlock, I'm doing a quick run through to see what kind of quality we have."

Charlie leaned in looking at the large monitor screen. She'd never seen one that huge.

Then she saw a familiar face of a man pop into view walking down the sidewalk and pointed at the screen. “That’s my ex.”

Sherlock’s fingers hovered over the keyboard, his eyes narrowing as he zoomed in on the face in the footage. The image stretched, sharpening into a clearer view of Charlie’s ex. “Hey, I know that guy,” Sherlock said, his voice neutral but tinged with recognition. “I’ve seen him around a few times. He’s Crispin Allen, right?”

“Yes. Who doesn’t know him,” she said with an irritated tone. Everyone knew the Allens. They owned and operated one of the top software companies in Canada.

Sherlock nodded, understanding more than he let on. There was a certain type of person who thought they could control everything. People like Crispin, who believed the world was just a game of moves and countermoves. “He’s been in the news lately. Seems he’s been involved with shady people.” Sherlock had been keeping an eye on the news. Always waiting for something to come back on them for the situation at the Funhouse. That’s why he knew about Crispin Allen and his troubles.

Charlie knew Crispin’s father would never admit that his only son was doing anything wrong. The man had spoiled his son trying to make up for Crispin’s mother running off on them when he was five. “Even when it’s obvious, his father won’t admit his son is in the wrong.”

A string of nannies hadn’t helped the situation, all they did was make Crispin a rotten selfish jerk. However, he was charismatic and could talk anyone into anything. Charlie was one of those people. After all she was paying for an apartment, he and his current girlfriend were living in. “His father always bails him out. No matter what he does it never has stuck to him.”

Sherlock picked up the soda can next to his keyboard and took a drink thinking about Crispin Allen. “One day that rich boy will get what’s coming to him.”

“In the meantime, I’d love to get him and Ashley to leave me alone.”

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“He’s a bum. If it weren’t for his daddy’s millions, he’d be on the streets, probably dead laying in a gutter somewhere,” Sherlock commented. He despised rich people that treated others like crap. Sherlock couldn’t help but notice Charlie was agitated seeing the guy. “Seems he’s under your skin.”

“He’s living in an apartment with my ex-bff that I’m stuck paying for.” After telling Hemlock the sorted tale, Charlie didn’t feel as embarrassed as she had before. “He’s also a rat bastard, a cheater, a user, and a grade-A womanizer. That’s why he doesn’t work in the office anymore.”

His gaze fixed on the screen in front of him, Sherlock tossed the drink can into the trash bin, then clicked the keyboard where they could go back to watching the video. “He’s handsy with the female employees?”

“Any of them he could get near,” Charlie said. Crispen’s behavior had pissed off his father to the point he put his son out in the field doing sales. That hadn’t stopped Crispen from behaving badly.

Sherlock risked a glance at Charlie who was focused on the video. There was more to the story than she was telling them. If she didn’t want to get into it all, then he wouldn’t ask.

“How many videos did you find” Charlie asked, her voice stiff... curious if there were any other angles.

Sherlock let out a low sigh, his fingers tapping out a rhythm on the desk. “Five. Why?”

“Crispen wouldn’t come to the hotel to see me,” Charlie muttered, letting the silence linger for a moment. “Not without there being something in it for him.”

Sherlock’s expression hardened slightly. “You think your ex-bff’s out of view?”

Crispen had played her, he left her for Ashley. A girl who had a string of dead-end jobs and nothing else. She and Charlie were friends only because they grew up together. It wasn’t like they met in school and had things in common. Ashley’s goal in life was to land a rich guy and have them take care of her. Well, Charlie hoped that was working out for her.

Charlie had thought Crispen was a catch. He had the car, the job, hell the way he pitched it he had the mansion. What a damnlaugh that was. All of it was a big fat lie. The job, the car, and the mansion were all his father’s. The worst part was she hadn’t been with him for all of that. She honestly thought he was a good guy until she learned otherwise. The whole thing left her feeling betrayed, sullen, and a little heartbroken with the idea of being left for someone else.

Charlie squinted at the screen, she wasn’t sure, but it looked like walking ahead of Crispen was Ashley. “I think that’s Ashley.”

“You think?”

“Can you bring it in closer?” Charlie asked, as she leaned in staring at the screen, she was struggling to see who was walking ahead of Crispen.

Sure, give me a second,” Sherlock said, stretching a little before clicking the mouse and bringing the image closer.

Charlie’s gaze snapped back to the screen, studying the image. “That’s Ashley, but it looks like she’s colored her hair dark.”

“Looks like she’s trying to be you, Charlie.” By now she thought nothing would bother her. But this was pissing her off. “That’s creepy.”

Sherlock leaned back in his chair, watching her for a moment. She shrugged and Sherlock stopped the video. “Them being at the hotel isn’t enough to press charges,” he explained before he clicked the mouse and let the video play through.

Charlie watched as both Ashley and Crispen walked into the hotel. The hotel doors closed, leaving them with no proof the couple were the ones that trashed her room. Charlie stared at the monitor, her thoughts clearly drifting elsewhere. “Sherlock, can we fast forward to when they come out?”

“Yes. Are we looking for something specific when they come out?” he asked.

Charlie nodded. “A few things were taken. They’d have had to carry them out in a bag of some sort. A tote bag of mine was one of the items missing.”

“Let’s see what we can find.” Sherlock sat silently fast-forwarding the video, scanning for the couple to exit the hotel.

Hemlock stood back letting Sherlock do his thing. He listened and watched Charlie making sure she was good. It took a strong woman to stand there and watch two people she’d trusted and possibly loved to betray her. “Have we found anything?” he asked, letting Charlie and Sherlock know he was still there.

Without looking at Hemlock, her eyes transfixed on the screen, she answered, “Yeah. Ashley and Crispen went into the hotel.”

“What are we looking for now?” Hemlock asked from behind Charlie, looking closer at the screen he watched and waited to see what she saw.

“When they come out, I’m hoping they’ll have something of mine in plain view,” she said firmly, hoping there was something to prove they’d been the ones in her room.

“Stop,” Hemlock snapped.

Sherlock stopped the video and saw what Hemlock had caught. The couple walked out of the hotel laughing, but neither carried anything out with them. Charlie looked closer at the image. “Can you rewind, then slow it down where I can take a better look?”

Rolling his eyes at the absurd question, Sherlock backed it up to the spot when the couple first stepped out the doors, then he slowed the video down.

Charlie watched the couple in slow motion as they walked out onto the sidewalk. That’s when she saw it. Ashely’s hand was playing with a necklace as she stared down at it. “That bitch stole my necklace. My mom gave me that.”

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“It will be hard to prove you didn’t give the necklace to her,” Hemlock brought up, hating that the truth sucked.

Charlie nodded her head. “It would be my word against Ashley’s and Ashley has Crispen in her corner.”

“Do you think she’d pawn it?” Hemlock asked.

“No. She’s always wanted it.” Ashley wouldn’t give it up now that she had it. The necklace was the only piece of jewelry she had left from her mother. “I will get it back. Mark my words.” And she would get it back even if she had to rip it from Ashley’s throat.

Something told Hemlock that Charlie wasn’t kidding. She would get her necklace back. He caught the look that Sherlock gave him. Shrugging, Hemlock thought who was he to tell Charlie what she should or shouldn’t do. It was her business and her life.

“Sherlock, thanks brother for getting us some concrete answers.”

“No problem. Let me know if I can be of any other help.” Sherlock fist-bumped Hemlock before the brother walked away with Charlie.

“Will do.” Hemlock tugged Charlie away from the video and nodded to Sherlock letting him know he’d be calling him soon.

It'd been two weeks since she moved into Hemlock's condo, and Charlie couldn't begin to repay him for all his kindness. On top of letting her live there, he'd also let her borrow his car, sparing her the hassle of taking the bus. She wasn't used to this kind of generosity. After years of scraping by, she felt almost guilty accepting it, like she was taking advantage of him. But Hemlock didn't seem to mind.

After everything Hemlock had done for her, and was still doing for her, Charlie was trying her best to just be grateful. Thinking it might be a small gesture, but one that felt meaningful. Hemlock wasn't the kind of guy to expect grand gestures, so to show some form of appreciation she stopped off at the diner she worked at on the weekends. Going by what she'd seen him eat, Charlie felt pretty certain she knew what he might like from the restaurant.

An hour later, she walked into the house carrying the brown paper bag from the diner. Closing the door, she dropped the car keys into the wooden bowl where Hemlock kept them, then set her purse on the little hall table. She was about to call out his name when she heard female laughter coming from the living room.

Her heart dropped at the realization he had a date. Somewhere deep down she had hoped things would progress between them. Seemed that wasn't the case. Turning around she picked up her purse, scooped up the keys and headed for the door as quietly as she could. Two steps away from the door she heard heavy footsteps coming in her direction from the kitchen and knew it was Hemlock.

"Charlie."

She froze, her hand on the door handle. She wasn't sure whether to turn around or just bolt out of there. Looking over her shoulder she forced a smile. "Hey. I was just heading back out."

His expression was unreadable at first, the flicker of surprise barely visible before it

settled into something softer, almost cautious. “You’re leaving?” he asked, his voice low. “Didn’t you just come in?”

She felt her hands tremble, but kept the smile plastered on her face, knowing it didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Yeah, I... I didn’t want to interrupt anything.” Her voice cracked slightly at the end, betraying her calm demeanor when she said, “Sounds like you’ve got company.”

“I do.” He took a step toward her, his brow furrowing. “Wait, you’re not interrupting anything. It’s not—” he stopped, his gaze flickering to the door, to her purse, to the keys... the bag in her hand.

“I’ll grab a hotel room. I don’t want to disturb your date.”

“My date?” he asked questioningly.

“Yeah. Your date.”

Hemlock let out a low chuckle, the sound rich with amusement. “I don’t have a date here,” Hemlock’s voice had a teasing edge to it, and it felt like he was enjoying this a little too much.

Charlie felt her cheeks warm, unsure whether she should apologize or just ignore the whole thing. “So, you’re not—?” Charlie couldn’t finish the sentence, the words hanging awkwardly in the air. “Isn’t there a woman here?” she asked.

“Yes. But she’s not with me.” Hemlock chuckled. Charlie was too cute. “Vicious and Sway are here along with Truck.”

“My mistake.” Charlie tugged her purse strap higher on her shoulder, trying to cover the way her hands felt suddenly clammy.

“No worries,” Hemlock said, his voice light, but there was something else behind his words. Hemlock’s eyes sparkled as he straightened up and took a few steps toward her, his gaze steady but searching. “Do I smell food?”

Holding out the bag Charlie gave him a weak smile, “It’s from the diner.”

Hemlock lifted the bag from her arms and nodded for her to follow him into the kitchen. He watched as she set her purse down and tossed his keys into the wooden bowl on the hall table. It was starting to be a familiar sight. “How was your day?”

The way he asked about her day made the butterflies in Charlie’s stomach flutter. Her feelings for Hemlock grew stronger every time he asked about her day or checked in on her. As she followed him into the kitchen, she couldn’t help but appreciate the way his body moved. He wasn’t muscular like a body builder. His body was naturally toned and muscular from hard work. “What did you bring home for us?” he asked, snapping her back to the present and away from admiring his body.

Giving him a sheepish smile when Hemlock looked at her, she answered, “Everything.”

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Hemlock stared at Charlie at hearing the word everything, then barked out a laugh. Reaching into the bag, he pulled container after container out and setting all of it on the counter. “Holy cow, woman, did you think I was starving?”

“I couldn’t decide what you’d want, and I wanted to bring you dinner,” she said in a rush. The way he looked at the food containers made her long for him to look at her like that. You want to be looked at as a meal? Yes. She wanted him to look at her like the best meal he’d ever seen, wanted, tasted. All of it.

She watched Hemlock set the last container on the counter, then walked the few steps towards her. Before she knew what he was doing, Hemlock wrapped her in his arms for a hug. She felt his lips press against her forehead and closed her eyes. Wrapping her arms around his waist, Charlie hugged him back wanting to breathe him in. I should have continued sleeping in his bed. What had I been thinking when I moved to the spare room?

The sound of someone clearing their throat had Charlie dropping her arms and stepping out of Hemlock’s embrace. Smoothing her hand down her hair, she moved around him to take down paper plates from the cabinet.

“We’re about to roll, brother,” Truck said to Hemlock while watching Charlie intently as she moved around the kitchen.

“No. Stay. Charlie came baring food.” Hemlock spread his hands out showing Truck all the food.

Charlie leaned around Hemlock adding her own comment, “Please stay. We can’t eat

everything I brought.”

“See. She wants you guys to stay for dinner.” Hemlock handed some of the containers to Truck. When he took them to the dinner table, Hemlock followed him out with more. “Charlie, can you grab the rest?”

“Sure thing.” She tucked her soda under arm, scooped up the plates, silverware, and the last two containers and headed to the table. When she set everything down, Hemlock made the introductions before they dug into the meal.

Two hours later everyone laid around the living room stuffed. Hemlock clicked through the channels stopping on the news. There on the TV screen was the chapter’s clubhouse. Everyone sat up as he turned up the volume. The reporter talked about how the area was about to get a facelift from Wellington Corporation. “Who and what is Wellington?” Hemlock asked.

“Crispen’s father’s company.” Sighing Charlie stood shaking her head and gathering empty bottles and glasses. “I doubt Mr. Allen is buying up the area.”

“Why not?” Vicious asked, watching Charlie clean up. He was curious about what she might know.

Cleaning up the table, Charlie looked over at the small group staring at her. “Wellington is a commodity brokerage firm. They buy and sell raw material or primary agricultural products such as copper, coffee, grain, things like that. Buying buildings doesn’t qualify as a commodity.”

Charlie didn’t want to state the obvious. But seeing the concern on their faces she added her suspicions. “I would bet the few dollars in my purse, Crispen is behind that report.”

She saw the look on Hemlock's face and shook her head. Charlie knew what he wanted to ask but didn't so she answered it for him. "Yes, I wouldn't doubt he knows I'm living here and who you are." She wouldn't be surprised if by end of the week Hemlock asked her to move out. She wouldn't blame him. He hadn't signed up for the headache Crispen could cause.

As she finished cleaning up the kitchen, Charlie heard everyone say goodnight. Walking to the door, she waved as they all left. While Hemlock was outside talking to his friends, Charlie headed upstairs. Tomorrow she'd start looking for a new place to live. It was better to be prepared than to get caught off guard.

Ten minutes later she heard a soft knock at her door. "Come in."

Hemlock stuck his head in making sure she was decent before fully entering the bedroom. "Truck invited us over to swim and to bar-b-q this weekend. What's your schedule?"

Grabbing her phone, she pulled up her calendar. "I'm off from all three places on Saturday. Huh, I can't believe I'm off on a Saturday."

"Are you good with going over while I'm at work?"

"I guess so."

"Cool. I work until three. I'll come straight there when I get off." Hemlock said goodnight closing the door behind him. When he heard the click, signally the door was shut, he leaned his head against it and wished she'd invited him to stay. I should've asked her.

Charlie sat on the bed with her fingers brushing the fabric of the bedspread as the door shut. Climbing off the bed, she padded across the wooden floor. She stood still

for a moment before taking the last step towards it. She was about to open the door and ask if she could stay with him tonight. Instead, she leaned her forehead against the door. If he wanted me, he would say so. Turning away from the door, she went back to the bed.

She sat down closing her eyes, sighing deeply. She knew it was for the best. Less expectations that way, but she couldn't help wondering what would have happened if she'd have opened the door. Would he have still been standing there? Frustrated by her own thoughts, Charlie tossed back the covers and crawled under them. Pulling the blanket up, she tucked it under her chin and tried to think about something other than the handsome man down the hall.

The night felt endless, a quiet endless void where Charlie's thoughts swirled. As she lay there, her heart pounded softly in her chest, a constant reminder of the ache that lingered just beneath the surface. She had stood at the door, so close to making a choice—close to crossing a line she had been tiptoeing around for so long—but something had held her back.

If he wanted her there, he would have come. He would have asked.

Charlie squeezed her eyes shut and willed herself to breathe deeply, to push the thought of Hemlock out of her mind, but it was impossible. She had always been good at hiding her feelings, at keeping things close to her chest, but now, alone in the quiet of her room, the walls seemed to close in on her.

What if he had wanted her to come to him?

A low, frustrated groan escaped her lips, and she rolled over onto her side, pulling the blanket tighter around herself. The warmth of the fabric felt distant, no comfort against the cold knot tightening in her stomach.

She sighed again, frustrated with herself. Stop overthinking it.

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But no matter how many times she told herself that, her thoughts always circled back to him. To the way he had looked at her when their eyes had met, the way his presence had soothed the ache she didn't know she had. And she wondered—just for a fleeting second—if he was laying in his bed just like her, wondering the same thing.

Had he stood there waiting for her to open the door? Or had he simply walked away, content with the distance?

The silence in her room seemed louder now, each second dragging on, and once again she pulled the covers tighter around her, trying to block out the thoughts, the feelings coursing through her body.

It didn't matter how hard she tried, the ache remained.

Chapter Twelve

Leaning over the pool table, Hemlock lined up the winning shot. Truck and Razor should know better than to bet him in pool. "Eightball corner pocket, boys," Hemlock called his shot, stood back, and smiled watching as the cue ball sailed down the rail knocking the eight ball into the corner pocket. He loved the look on his brothers' faces when he beat them. Like it was a shock. The look never got old.

"Son of a bitch," Truck said, shaking his head and laughing as Razor tossed the pool stick on the table. "I swear I don't know why I subject myself to this crap."

"Lucky bastard." Grumbling, Razor dug money from his wallet. One day he would learn not to bet against the kid.

“Luck has nothing to do with it, boys,” Hemlock responded as he picked up his beer. Everyone had something they were good at—pool was his. Well, pool and a few other things. However, luck with the ladies was not one.

Thinking about ladies, he thought about the girl he was currently sharing his home with. Determined not to be distracted by Charlie Rose, he answered Truck’s question, “The answer to your question, Truck. You’re a sucker for a bet.”

Truck laughed and tipped his beer back. Taking a sip, he watched Hemlock rack the balls again. “So, tell me why you’re here and not at the house with cinnamon girl?”

Hemlock knew it would come up at some point with the brothers. It was common when he was involved with the fairer sex. “I gave her a place to stay, it doesn’t mean she owes me anything.”

“Is that because you’re scared of her kisses?” Razor asked before he burst into laughter.

Hemlock saw where the conversation was going. As he slowly sipped his beer, he listened as the brothers ragged on him before commenting. Unless his luck with women changed, he would continue to be the butt of his brothers’ jokes. What was he supposed to say, that Charlie was right up his alley. Having her in his home kept him awake at night. That everything from the smell of her shampoo to the way she walked through a room grabbed his attention.

“Hemlock!” Truck snapped his fingers, bringing the kid’s attention back to the now. He knew that look; Hemlock was into Charlie Rose Cote. It would end like the rest had before her, with Hemlock disappointed.

“What?” Damn, he really needed to get his mind off the girl.

“Break the rack, brother.” Truck pointed to the balls on the table. “Where were you just now?”

Ignoring the question, Hemlock turned his attention to the game. “Hold your horses. Are you in a hurry to lose?” Hemlock set his beer down and chalked his stick. He needed to keep his head on the game. Lining up his stick with the cue ball he shot the stick forward, breaking the rack—badly.

“That was a crappy break.” Razor chuckled.

“You can break next time, asshole.” Hemlock set his pool stick aside and took a seat as he waited for the others to take their shots. Lighting a clove cigarette, he watched Truck and Razor pondering their moves. He could tell they were waiting for him to tell them about Charlie. The question was, did he want to talk about her with them. It was one thing to talk to Truck about shit, but Razor he wasn’t sure about. Not yet.

Truck stood holding his pool stick in front of him as he watched Razor lining up his shot. Glancing over at Hemlock, he worried the kid was falling for the pretty brunette staying at his house. The girl was a pretty thing. Hell, if Hemlock hadn’t met her first, he would think about making a move on her himself.

“Hemlock’s somewhere else tonight.” Truck heard Razor say when he leaned into him.

“He’ll talk to us in his time.” Turning his attention to Hemlock he saw the kid was deep in thought. Truck left him sitting quietly and waited his turn at the table.

“Razor, how’s Lottie doing at the clinic?” Truck asked trying to take the focus off Hemlock.

“She’s a great addition to the staff. If I can keep Dr. Primo from running her off with

his offhanded remarks and insults,” Razor said, sinking the cue ball.

Leaning over, Truck waited for the cue ball to roll out. “I’m sure Lottie can handle herself with the old man,” he commented placing the ball on the table.

Razor chalked his stick. “I think he asked her out and she turned him down.”

Truck choked on his beer. That was an image he didn’t want to have in his head. “How old is the doc? 108?” Truck asked, smirking.

“Nah, he just looks ancient,” Razor commented as he watched Truck sink his shot. Setting his beer on the rail he lined up his next shot. It took Razor three consecutive shots to win the game and take Truck’s money. “Brother you should stop betting on pool.”

“No shit,” Truck mumbled. Putting the stick in the wall rack, he took a seat next to Hemlock.

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“My turn?” Hemlock asked when Truck sat down by him.

“Nope. We played without you. Razor won.”

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Hemlock shrugged. “Sorry.”

“That girl’s got you distracted.” Truck laughed, shaking his head. Before he could ask Hemlock what was bugging him about Charlie, Razor asked if they wanted another beer. “Grab us a bottle of Lalo. We need to loosen Hemlock’s lips.”

“Maybe he needs some lip gloss.” Razor winked at the kid, razzing him before walking over to the bar.

“She’s going to drive me nuts by the time she can move out,” Hemlock muttered.

Truck choked as he swallowed his beer. He coughed trying to catch his breath. Hemlock always managed to say something stupid when he wasn’t ready. “Fucker, you trying to kill me?”

What he wanted to tell Truck was that his dick liked her more than the head between his shoulders, but Truck would probably choke to death hearing him say that. “Nope.”

Laughing, Truck drew Hemlock’s attention while Razor was at the bar. “What’s going on with Razor and Lottie?”

“He refuses to admit he’s into her, but I see Razor watching Lottie all the time. I’ve

even seen text messages between the two.”

“Are they scathing messages?” Truck waggled his eyebrows hoping for some juicy gossip.

“What are the two of you whispering about?” Razor asked as he walked back toward them.

“You,” Hemlock said without hesitation.

“Nothing,” Truck said, staring off like a guilty child as he chuckled.

“Which is it?” Razor said holding the glasses and the bottle of tequila.

Truck tried but failed and busted out laughing. “You and your denial about how you feel about a certain goth girl.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake. I’m not interested in my nurse.” Razor cut his eyes between the two men.

“If you say so,” Truck and Hemlock said in unison.

Setting down the bottle of Lalo and the glasses, Razor dropped down into a chair choosing to ignore Truck and Hemlock curiosity about Lottie. To take the heat off himself, he turned the conversation towards Hemlock and his house quest or guest, depending how the situation was looked at. “How’s Charlie?”

Hemlock lifted his head, which he’d just laid back against the chair’s headrest. “She’s fine.”

“I noticed that.” Razor saw how quickly Hemlock’s head snapped around. Smirking,

Razor stared at the kid and wanted for Hemlock to say something. When he received no response, Razor asked, “No comment?”

Glaring at Razor, Hemlock sneered at him, “Sometimes I think you’re a nice guy. Other times not so much.”

“Don’t be a princess.” Razor chuckled at the brother’s discomfort when talking about Charlie. He knew the feeling. Uncomfortable was one feeling he experienced regularly when talking about Lottie.

“Okay. Charlie’s sexy and pretty. She’s also the type of girl I’d love to be wrapped up in. Unfortunately, I don’t think this is the best time for her.” Hemlock heard Truck chuckle as Razor nodded his head. “Go ahead, tell me how the two of you would take advantage of her.”

“Not me. I wouldn’t take advantage of a girl like Charlie,” Truck said while he crossed his fingers behind his back.

Razor laughed pouring the drinks out. “Liar. You’d take advantage of her quicker than the rest of us, Truck.”

“Yeah, I would. Damn, you know me so well, Razor.” Truck laughed.

Hemlock picked up a glass. “Both of you are shits,” he said before tossing back the tequila.

Truck did the same, hissing as the tequila hit his stomach. “You need to stop worrying about things going sideways and put yourself out there. She did almost kill you.” Truck’s tone serious as he reminded Hemlock of the cinnamon incident.

“I’ll think about it.” There was no way he’d tell them that most nights he showed

Charlie to her room and after closing the door, he stand in the hallway debating with himself before going to his room alone.They'd have a field day with that fact. Tipping back his beer he thought about taking the next step with Charlie. His phone ringing broke into his thoughts. Seeing it was Charlie, he answered it, "Hey, you home?"

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“No. I just walked out the door and found the car has a flat,” tapping her fingers against the steering wheel as she told Hemlock about the tire. She hated making the call, but she didn’t know where to even find the spare.

“Can your boss stay with you until I get there?”

Glancing at the restaurant through the rear-view mirror, she couldn’t go back inside because the alarm had been set. “Everyone’s gone. I closed by myself tonight.”

“Okay, stay in the car and lock the doors.”

She tried for humor. “Not to be fresh, but I’m not gonna stand outside of the car.”

Hearing her words for what they were... worry, he didn’t entertain them. “I’m on my way.”

“What’s going on?” Truck asked seeing the worried look on Hemlock’s face.

“Charlie just walked out of work to find the car has a flat.” Shoving off the sofa Hemlock said off handily, “I just put those tires on the car.”

“Hang on, I’m rolling with ya.” Truck said, getting to his feet. There were no coincidences in their world. And with Charlie’s exes something could be going on.

“Wait, I’m coming too,” Razor said as he tossed back the shot of Lalo. “It’s better to have plenty of backup.”

When they arrived, Hemlock found Charlie sitting in the car with the doors locked. She looked every bit freaked out. He couldn't blame her, the parking lot of her workplace was ill lit. With the large dumpsters and beaten up wooden fence that was partially missing, the place looked like crackhead central.

Walking up to the car, he saw when she noticed him and gave her a little wave. Signaling for her to roll down the window, he told her to stay in the car while they changed the tire. Once the flatten tire was off and swapped out for the spare, Hemlock inspected the tire, searching for a nail or something that would have punctured it. What he found was a large gash in the tire wall.

Hemlock cursed under his breath. A gash like that wasn't something you'd get from a nail or a sharp object lying around. It wasn't just a flat tire; it was deliberately done. Someone had slashed it.

He stood and wiped his hands on a rag, glancing around the parking lot. The shadows were thick, the kind that made you feel like you were being watched, even though there was no one around. The dumpsters loomed like silent witnesses to whatever had gone down.

He turned to the car where Charlie was still staring wide-eyed out the window, her hand gripping the door handle like she was ready to make a run for it.

"Hey," he said, his voice calm but with an edge to it, "you good?"

Charlie nodded quickly; her expression still frazzled. "Yeah, I ... I don't know how it happened."

"Don't worry," he cut her off gently, "it's not your fault. Whoever did this knew what they were doing. It's not random."

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” she muttered, her voice dropping.

Hemlock’s eyes narrowed. He wanted to say something reassuring, but he didn’t know if he could. Something felt off, and it wasn’t just the tire. It was the whole setup, the vibe of the place. The way the air felt too still, too quiet. He wasn’t one for coincidences or random acts.

“Let’s head home.” He’d be right behind her, making sure nothing else happened to her or his car.

Charlie couldn’t sleep. The nightmares came in waves, each one wrenching her from rest with a sharp jolt. Finally, she threw back the covers and slipped out of bed, tugging Hemlock’s oversized T-shirt down around her thighs as she padded into the hall.

At the top of the staircase, she hesitated. The open space below felt vast and watching, so she quickened her steps, nearly hopping across it until she reached his door. She knocked softly, hoping she wasn’t waking him.

His voice came quietly from within.

She opened the door.

Hemlock sat propped against the headboard, a book in his hands, the page mid-turn. His expression was relaxed—until he saw her. Concern flickered across his face, replacing the calm. He set the book aside immediately.

“Charlie?” His voice was low, thick with sleep but lined with instinctive tenderness. He didn’t need to ask what was wrong—he could see it. The tightness in her shoulders, the pale cast to her skin.

“Nightmare?” he guessed.

She nodded, unable to speak past the knot in her throat. Her fingers clung to the hem of the shirt, like holding herself together.

Hemlock moved at once. “You’re cold,” he murmured, guiding her to the bed. His hands were steady as he pulled back the blankets. “Here—climb in.”

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The moment she slid beneath the covers, his warmth reached her.

Hemlock's brow furrowed slightly as he shifted in beside her. Serious, but calm—like always. “I’ll stay right here,” he said gently, helping her settle against the pillows. “You’re safe here.”

And she believed him.

He didn’t rush her. He didn’t press. He just sat with her—his presence solid and grounding as the nightmare’s shadow slowly began to recede.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked softly. No pressure. Just the offer.

Charlie shook her head. She didn’t have the energy to drag the dream into the light. The woman with the knife still felt too real, like if she spoke it aloud, she might summon her all over again.

For now, she just needed the silence. The stillness Hemlock offered.

And that was enough.

Chapter Thirteen

Razor leaned back, enjoying the playful tension in the air as he continued to screw with Hemlock. He could see the younger brother’s eye twitch every time he mentioned Charlie being alone at Truck’s house. Hemlock was too sharp for his own good, Razor thought, always catching the subtle glances, the stray thoughts that

Razor wasn't even aware he was giving off. Like when Lottie caught his attention with that smile of hers. Hemlock had noticed it, of course, and had taken every chance to needle him about it.

In the beginning, Razor hadn't meant to ruffle his feathers, but after the teasing started to get to the brother it tickled him. Normally Hemlock was Fort Knox when it came to his personal shit. Yet something about Charlie was tearing at those thick walls Hemlock had built around him.

And at that moment, watching Hemlock appear uncomfortable at the thought of the pretty brunette alone with their brother had Razor barely able to contain his grin.

"Truck's probably making a move on that pretty brunette. After all it is Truck. And we know how he is with the ladies. He can't help himself."

Hemlock shot Razor a hard look. "Charlie and I aren't an item. And if Truck was going to make a move on her, he's had plenty of opportunities." It sounded good to Hemlock. He and Charlie had been spending a lot of time at Truck's. And Truck had been spending lots of time at the condo with them. Weeks they had all been hanging out. Still, he wondered.

"But you want to be an item," Razor said in a sarcastic tone.

Hemlock couldn't catch a break, if he wouldn't feel bad or want the paycheck he was getting from working at the clinic, he'd walk out. "Razor, you and I know I suck at relationships. Why would I put myself in that kind of situation."

"Keep telling yourself that, kid, but I know you're thinking about Truck getting busy with Charlie." If Razor had stopped ribbing Hemlock, he might have noticed how distracted the brother was beginning to be. Instead, he walked away leaving Hemlock to dwell over what he'd just told him.

Hemlock couldn't help but get caught up in what Razor said. Would Truck make a move on Charlie knowing how he felt about the girl? Would Charlie entertain the idea of being with Truck? His thoughts were on an infinite loop as he thought about Truck and Charlie being together, alone, at the house.

When Razor walked into an exam room, Hemlock stepped away and pulled out his phone. He dialed Truck's number first and got no answer. Hanging up, he tried Charlie and didn't get an answer. Hemlock's jaw tightened, and his eyes moved quickly to the screen, then to the door, thinking about leaving early as the frustration of Truck not answering his phone threatened to choke him.

Razor could tell Hemlock was on edge by the way his fingers tapped on the phone's screen. "Told you, those two are getting hot and sweaty with each other."

Razor's words were right in his ear. He'd been so deep in thought, he hadn't heard him approach. "Shut up, Razor." Shoving his phone into his pocket, Hemlock walked away. He had patients to see. Plus, Charlie wasn't due to go over to Truck's until later that evening.

After an entire day of dealing with Razor giving him a hard time about Charlie and Truck, Hemlock left the clinic heading straight for Truck's house. By the time he threw his leg over his bike and revved the engine, the teasing and prodding from Razor had not only gotten under his skin—it was festering.

With the roar of the engine and concrete beneath him, he probably broke a few laws by the way he rode his bike through the city until he reached the outlying suburbs and opened the bike up. He rode as if on a mission. Then again, wasn't he? Horns blared as he passed cars at high speeds.

When he pulled up to Truck's, Hemlock saw Charlie was already there. In that moment, all the shit talking Razor had done at work came flooding in.

Shutting off his bike he climbed off, and tried shaking off the tension from Razor hounding him all day. Still, it nagged at him seeing that Charlie was already there. The knot in his stomach tightened. Quickening his pace, he made quick work of getting to the door. Stepping inside, he took one look at Truck standing in the kitchen next to Charlie in nothing but a pair of jeans. The brother was sweaty and seemed too at ease as he leaned against the counter with his arms crossed over his chest like he didn't have a care in the world.

And Charlie.

Charlie was standing just a few feet away, smiling. She was leaning against the counter in a way that made Hemlock's stomach twist. She wore nothing but a towel, her hair damp as if she'd just stepped out of the shower.

For a moment, Hemlock couldn't breathe. His eyes darted between Charlie's carefree smile and Truck's oddly comfortable stance.

What the hell was going on? The sudden realization hit him like a punch to the gut: all the teasing from Razor about Charlie and Truck being alone.

Truck looked over when the door opened and smiled at Hemlock. "It's about time you showed up."

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Hemlock knew when to walk away and this was one of those moments. He couldn't stop his mind from going straight to the worse case possible. Shaking his head at Truck, and barely glancing at Charlie, disgusted with how he had let himself fall for the girl and for the trust he had always given his brother, he stepped back.

Truck stared at Hemlock, then at Charlie and back at the confused look Hemlock was giving them. "What's that look for, son?"

"Fuck you." Walking out, Hemlock slammed the kitchen door shut with such force the glass broke.

"Come back here you son of a bitch." Hemlock heard Truck yell as the brother came barreling out of the house behind him.

Hemlock backtracked, turned on Truck, and for the first time in twelve years swung at the man. His fist connected with Truck's chin, splitting it open. Blood dripped down onto his chest as Hemlock threw a second punch. Truck was ready for that one and managed to duck.

He didn't get the chance to throw another one. Truck dove for him, catching him around the midsection and slammed him to the ground. Hemlock fought to get the brother off him. "What is your fucking problem?" Truck yelled while keeping Hemlock pinned down.

"You. You know how I feel about her." The comment caught Truck off guard just enough for Hemlock to toss him off and roll away.

Scrambling to his feet, Truck tried to stop Hemlock from leaving but the kid refused to listen to him. “Nothing’s going on here,” his words fell on deaf ears as Hemlock refused to look at him. “You leave, don’t come back,” he yelled at Hemlock. Regretting the words immediately, Truck tried to take them back, but the kid wasn’t having it. “Hemlock, don’t...”

“Don’t worry, I won’t.” Hemlock fired up the bike and headed anywhere but there. His hands tightened around the bike’s grips with such intensity, his knuckles were white. As he shifted gears his thoughts spinning faster than the wheels beneath him. He didn’t notice how hard his heart was pounding or how sharp his breathing was. All he could think about was Charlie and the betrayal he felt by both her and Truck. Truck... the one person he never thought would stab him in the back. Especially not over a woman.

The engine roared beneath him, but it did nothing to drown out the chaos in his head. Hemlock shifted gears, accelerating hard as he shot down the street, heading nowhere in particular. He didn’t care about the rules anymore, didn’t care about anything except the roar of the bike, the wind tearing at his face and ripping through his hair.

Truck looked over at Charlie who now stood in the doorway, shocked at how Hemlock had reacted at seeing them standing in the kitchen. “I need to go after him.”

“Let me change out of my bathing suit and I’ll go with you.”

“Yeah. Sure. I need to grab a shirt and shoes.”

Chapter Fourteen

Hemlock’s hands gripped the handlebars with a white-knuckled intensity. All he could think about was her—Charlie—and the betrayal that sliced through him like a blade.

And then Truck. The one person he believed he could count on.

It was supposed to be a joke. A stupid razzing. He'd been annoyed at Razor's teasing, irritated at how everyone saw him as the guy who couldn't close the deal with a decent girl. But he never, never thought Truck would cross that line. Not after everything. Not after all the times they'd talked about her. Not after he had told Truck how much he cared about her. How much she meant to him.

And yet, there they were. Charlie, with that smile he thought was just for him, leaning on the counter like she belonged to someone else. Truck, his brother, standing beside her in a way that made Hemlock's stomach churn. Truck knew. He knew how Hemlock felt about Charlie and still went ahead and took what he wanted without even a second thought.

The engine roared beneath him, but it did nothing to drown out the chaos in his head. He didn't care about the rules anymore, didn't care about anything except the roar of the bike and the wind tearing at his face.

He felt like he was on fire, and not the good kind. His heart, his chest, his whole body hurt with a rage so raw and primal it burned him from the inside out. He couldn't wrap his head around it. How could they?

The image of Charlie, smiling at him with that innocent look on her face... He could see it clearly now. He could see her leaning into Truck, her hand resting so comfortably on his arm. She didn't even blink when he came through the door. She didn't even try to pretend it wasn't happening. It was like she had no problem with it. And Truck? The bastard was just as calm as if nothing had changed. He'd known all along, and he hadn't given a damn about how it would break Hemlock.

They were probably laughing at me, he thought bitterly. Probably thought it was hilarious, how he'd been mooning over her while they were already... His throat

tightened, and for a split second, he almost lost control of the bike.

The road blurred past him, the houses, the trees, the streetlights—all just flashes of color in his peripheral vision. But none of it mattered. His mind kept flashing back to the scene in the kitchen. To Charlie's smile. To Truck's ease, the way he'd leaned against the counter like they were the perfect damn pair.

Hemlock gritted his teeth and shoved the throttle forward again, pushing the bike faster. The rush of speed did nothing to quench the fire inside him. If anything, it made the anger burn harder, deeper.

He could feel the weight of the betrayal pressing on his chest, suffocating him. The one person he'd always trusted to have his back. It was the cruelest thing. Not just the betrayal, but the fact that it was so casual. Like it didn't even matter to them.

The images played over and over in his mind. The way Charlie had been standing there, so damn comfortable. And Truck? Leaning in like it was nothing. Like the years of friendship and family had meant nothing at all. Like he was just some dumb kid who didn't know what he walked in on.

Hemlock swerved the bike to the side of the road, his tires skimming the gravel as he slowed to a stop. He threw the kickstand down with a sharp motion and dismounted, his hands shaking as he tugged off his helmet. The world around him seemed too quiet, too still, after everything that had just happened.

Pacing the side of the road, he tried to calm himself down, his free hand clenched into a tight fist as he grappled with his emotions. Every step was an attempt to ground himself, but the anger, frustration, and confusion still swirled within him like a storm he couldn't outrun. His breath came in sharp bursts, the cool night air doing little to ease the fire burning in his chest. He could feel the weight of the decisions he had made pressing on him, suffocating him.

He stopped mid-step, his eyes drifting to the horizon where the faint glow of distant city lights blurred into the night sky. His mind raced, each thought more tangled than the last, the emotions more volatile.

He had always prided himself on control. On keeping his composure, on thinking things through before acting. But now, standing there, it all felt like a distant memory, slipping through his fingers as quickly as he could try to grasp it. His grip on his fist tightened even further, nails digging into the palm of his hand as if the physical pain could somehow quell the turmoil inside.

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Clenching his jaw, he forced the tight fist open and then he tugged his helmet back on. He mounted the bike, shifted into gear and pulled back onto the road and shot the bike into a turn, sending the engine howling through the trees. The wind lashed at his face, his hair flying wildly, but the rage wouldn't subside. The deep, gnawing feeling was eating him alive from the inside out.

He was just... done. Done with Charlie. Done with Truck. Done with the bullshit. He couldn't even look at them the same anymore. He didn't care how they explained it. The truth was, no explanation could or would fix this.

Hemlock turned off the main road, his eyes scanning the streets, searching for something to numb the pain, anything. His thoughts were too loud, too damn overwhelming. He needed to get away. Away from the house, away from them, away from the ache in his chest that felt like it was tearing him apart. Away from everyone and everything.

As the bike revved beneath him, he didn't know where he was headed. But he didn't care. He just wanted to leave everything behind... the betrayal, the pain, the goddamn memories of Charlie's smile and the way she'd looked at him like she cared.

The road stretched out in front of him, but Hemlock no longer saw it. All he saw was the image of Charlie smiling at him with a look that now felt like a lie. She was good, he'd give her that. She had him believing that not only had she cared, but that she was different from the other women he'd dealt with.

Instead all he felt was the overwhelming need to drive until the pain was gone. Until everything that had been was lost to the wind.

Chapter Fifteen

Their first stop was at the condo and they found nothing out of place. Hemlock's work truck for the detailing business was in the drive, but his bike wasn't. Which didn't surprise Truck. Hemlock rarely didn't ride his bike. Knowing the kid would come home sooner than later, Truck took Charlie back to his place so she could pick up Hemlock's car.

But by the next day, neither of them had heard from him and Truck was beginning to get worried. It wasn't like Hemlock to stay gone. Not over a girl. Picking up the phone he called the hospital and asked to speak with nurse Durand. When they said he wasn't at work that was the first red flag for Truck.

His second call was to Razor at the clinic. Razor told him Hemlock hadn't shown up at the clinic, which was unlike him. That was the second red flag. Completely freaking out, Truck got on his bike and started riding all through town and the surrounding areas searching for any signs of the brother.

Exhausted, he stopped by Hemlock's condo to check one more time. Seeing the truck and car in the driveway, he parked, got off his bike, and knocked on the door. When Charlie answered, Truck wasn't ready for the girl to launch herself at him. Wrapping his arms around her, he listened to Charlie tell him between sobs that Hemlock hadn't come home.

"Let's head to the clubhouse and see if anyone's seen or heard from him."

"Okay." She sniffled, trying to gain some control over her emotions. Grabbing her purse and the house key, Charlie locked up, then followed Truck.

"Shit. I can't put you on the back of my sled."

Charlie didn't see the problem, she'd ridden before. "I've ridden with Hemlock."

Sighing, Truck faced Charlie when he realized she had no clue. "I can't put you on the back of my bike because you're my brother's woman."

Staring at Truck, Charlie tried wrapping her mind around the words coming out of Truck's mouth. "I'm what?"

"Charlie. You're his cinnamon girl." He saw the shocked look on her face. "Don't you see that. I mean you're living in his house. Driving his car. He's crazy about you."

She was shocked. Hemlock... Hemlock crazy about her. It was news to her. Did she want it to be true? Yes, damn it, she did. "He hasn't said anything. Hell, he hasn't made a move."

Scrubbing a hand over his face, Truck told Charlie something his brother should have already shared with her. "Hemlock's got baggage. Like damaged baggage that's held together by duct tape. And he hasn't had the best track record with the ladies."

Charlie didn't understand why it mattered that Hemlock had a past. She had a past, it hadn't stopped her... yet. "And?"

"And he's slow to make a move," Truck said with an over amount of frustration. The entire situation had spiraled out of control and he for one, could not figure out how or why.

With her hands on her hips, Charlie stared at Truck. "Then what do you propose we do."

"Take his car. Better yet the truck, I own that bitch." Pointing toward the driveway,

he waited for her to walk before he took a step.

Driving towards the clubhouse, Truck passed a row of abandoned buildings and thought, could it be that simple. Pulling over, he parked the work truck and told Charlie to lock the doors as he climbed out. It didn't surprise him when she got out and jogged up next to him.

“Why are we heading into an abandoned building, Truck?” Charlie asked as she shielded her eyes from the sun.

Honesty was a bitch, he thought. “Hemlock lived here when he was a kid.”

Charlie looked at the building and then at Truck. Surely the place hadn't been abandoned when Hemlock lived there. Had it? “Truck, was Hemlock homeless was as

a child?”

“I think you should ask him that.” He was done digging a bigger hole for himself. He didn't know what had triggered the kid to lose his shit the night before, but Truck did not want to add fuel to the fire by telling Charlie everything about Hemlock.

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“He’s not here, so I’m asking you.” Charlie wanted to cry thinking about a small, scared Hemlock living in an abandoned building. Struggling to find food or any semblance of comfort.

“The kid had it rough. And that’s all I’m saying.” Stopping, he turned to face Charlie. “Please don’t ask me anything else about it.”

She could see by the look on the guy’s face he didn’t want to talk about Hemlock’s past. Knowing when to listen she responded, “Okay.”

After searching the abandoned building, Truck and Charlie headed for the clubhouse. When they arrived, they found Hemlock’s bike wasn’t in the parking lot. “Charlie, I need you to please stay in the vehicle this time.”

“I’ll stay in the truck,” she said and instantly crossed her fingers at her side.

“Thank you.” Truck got out giving her a tight smile before closing the door. Halfway across the lot he waved down Tank, one of the prospects. “Keep an eye on the truck and the girl inside.”

“Got it.”

Heading inside he found Vicious, and Razor, along with some of the other brothers sitting around the bar drinking. “Hey, have any of you seen Hemlock?”

“You haven’t seen or spoken to him yet?” asked Razor.

“No and I’m worried.”

Vicious looked from Truck to Razor like he was watching a ping-pong game until he halted the conversation. “Truck, what’s going on?”

Once Truck told the story, he watched Vicious fold his arms across his chest. “You don’t get it, do you?” The Veep said, sounding annoyed.

Truck didn’t consider himself stupid but as the seconds ticked by, he thought maybe he was by the way Vicious stared at him. “Get what?”

Vicious leaned back in his chair. “You said you had just come in from working out in the garage?”

Truck shrugged, still not getting what his VP was getting at. “Yeah, I was all nasty and sweaty.”

“Where was Charlie?” Vicious asked.

“She’d just come in from swimming and was in the kitchen?”

Vicious almost laughed at how slow Truck was at figuring out what had happened. “In a swimsuit?” he asked Truck.

His mood was going from concern to pissed off as Vicious continued the interrogation. “Yeah, with a towel wrapped around her.”

Dropping his chair back down Vicious did smirk then. “Could you tell she was wearing a swimsuit?”

“I guess so. I don’t know. I don’t see the problem.” Truck was done with the

questioning. He needed to find Hemlock.

“If you would have walked in, not knowing she’d been swimming, what would it have looked like?” Vicious asked Truck, hoping the brother would put two and two together.

“I don’t fucking know. Maybe that she just had a shower.” And it hit him in the face. Using his thumbs he massaged his temples. “He thought we had been together.”

“Bingo. And that betrayal cuts to the fucking bone.” Vicious should know since he’d been on the shitty end of that scenario many years before.

“But why would he come into the house expecting us to have been together?” Truck looked at Vicious who looked at Razor. “What did you do, asshole?” Truck asked Razor, his voice laced with anger.

Razor felt bad for fucking with Hemlock. He had no idea the kid would go off half-cocked. “I was screwing with him at work that day. I had no idea it was getting to him.”

Vicious wanted to throat punch Razor for being stupid. “The kid has abandonment issues.”

“He also has a terrible track record with women,” Truck added.

“Fuck!” Razor could kick his own damn ass. It was time to come clean with his own shit.

“He’s been razzing me about Lottie and not pulling the trigger.” He heard the comments and the grumbling from his brothers and knew one hundred percent they were right. “I turned the tables on him and didn’t let up. Every time he called or

texted and got no response, I told him shit about the two of you probably getting it on while he was mooning over her.”

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“You’re an asshole, Razor.”

“I won’t deny that, Truck.”

About that time Teller decided to walk in. Everyone stared at Razor, but it was Vicious who took the initiative and handled the situation. “Prez.”

The last thing Teller expected when he woke up and stepped out into the common room was a room full of his brothers having a heated discussion. Running over his weekly agenda, he didn’t remember there being a meeting scheduled. “Vicious, are we having a meeting that I didn’t know about?”

Still sitting with his arms folded across his thick chest, Vicious kept his eyes on Razor as he answered Teller, “Hemlock’s missing.”

“It’s my fault,” Razor commented, sighing heavily.

Truck waved off Razor taking the blame for the situation. “Nope, it’s on me.”

Teller stared at the small group of men not knowing where he should even begin. “Is this about to be an episode of forty-eight hours or do we know something.”

“It’s over a girl,” Vicious said, risking a look at the Prez.

“Excuse me.”

Truck closed his eyes hearing Charlie’s voice. Turning around he was about to

remind her she was supposed to stay in the truck. Instead, he stayed quiet as she mouthed sorry to him.

The sound of a female voice coming from the doorway had them all turning around to find Charlie standing there. “If you’re talking about Hemlock, I think it’s my fault and no one else’s.”

Truck immediately walked over to her and hugged the girl. He heard the brothers grumble about how hands-on he was with her. Ignoring them, he walked Charlie inside and settled her down on one of the many sofas. “It’s not your fault. Razor was giving him hell about us.”

“What about us?” she asked Truck while looking at Razor who stood across the room.

“Exactly.” Noticing he was holding her hand, Truck let go and stood up moving back, putting distance between them. That’s when he realized he’d been doing things the wrong way. Hugging her too long, having inside jokes that Hemlock wasn’t privy to, spending too much downtime with her in hopes of helping his brother out with the girl. “It’s my fault.”

“What the fuck?” Teller looked at Vicious. “Do we think Hemlock is in some sort of trouble or just trying to figure himself out?”

Dropping his arms, Vicious stood and stepped next to Teller. “I think he’s trying to figure himself out.”

Shaking his head, Teller headed for the office and a shit ton of paperwork he needed to deal with. “Keep me informed of any developments.”

“Will do,” Vicious said, glancing over his shoulder.

“It’s a fucking episode of the Golden Girls.” Vicious chuckled hearing Teller mumble as he walked away.

Chapter Sixteen

Three days. Three days of endless searching, calling in every favor, checking every damn place he could think of. And still, no sign of Hemlock. Truck’s throat was raw from shouting his name into empty streets, from listening to Charlie’s frantic voice on the phone, from the silence that seemed to swallow them both every time the line went dead.

Hemlock had been like a brother to him. Hell, they were brothers—blood or not. The idea of losing him, of not knowing where he was, or worse—what had happened to him—it was eating at him, gnawing at his insides.

The thought of Hemlock out there, alone, vulnerable—it made his chest tighten. He wasn’t a man to show weakness, but the fear was there, simmering just below the surface, threatening to boil over. If anything happened to Hemlock and he wasn’t there to help him? It would kill him.

Charlie was worried sick over him and had barely worked, wanting to be home if he showed back up. She was a wreck with worry. If he didn’t at least call in the next twenty-four hours, Truck was calling the cops and reporting him missing. It wasn’t what the chapter would want but to hell with them. Hemlock was the only family Truck had, and he wasn’t about to lose him.

“Goddamn it, Hemlock,” Truck growled. “Where the hell are you?”

Pulling up to his house, Truck’s heart leaped into his throat. There, sitting on the front steps in the dimming light of dusk, was Hemlock. His posture was hunched, as if the weight of the world had settled on his shoulders, and his head was down, eyes locked

on the pavement.

For a second, Truck just stared at him. Relief flooded through him, hot and immediate—but it was tangled up with a fire of frustration that threatened to consume it.

He didn't even stop the bike. Before he swung his leg off and planted both boots on the ground, he pulled his phone from his pocket and shot a quick text to Vicious:Hemlock's been located. No details yet. Will keep you posted.

The VP didn't need the specifics just yet. He just needed to know things were in motion, that the kid wasn't dead, and that was all Truck was going to give him for now.

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Taking a breath, Truck approached slowly, deliberately. Hemlock had a way of disappearing when things got too heavy, like a shadow slipping through your fingers, and Truck wasn't about to rush in like a bull. He needed to handle this with care—like he was approaching a feral cat that might bolt at the slightest wrong move.

“Hemlock.” The word was calm, low, but there was a rough edge to it, a mix of concern and anger that Truck couldn't hide. His gaze tracked the younger man carefully, watching for any shift in his posture, any sign he was about to react.

Hemlock didn't look up right away. The silence between them stretched, thick and uncomfortable, until finally, after what felt like an eternity, Hemlock lifted his head. His eyes, sunken and tired, met Truck's, but there was no apology in them. No explanation. Just that same distant look that said he wasn't ready to talk.

Truck took another step forward, but this time, his voice was firmer. “What the hell, kid? Where have you been? We've been looking for you—worried sick.”

Hemlock didn't move; he was more embarrassed than anything. Hemlock's lips twitched, but he didn't respond immediately. He just sat there, shoulders tight, like he was trying to hold everything in. “I fixed the door.”

“I'm not fucking worried about that door, Truck said, stepping closer to Hemlock.

“I hate you right now,” Hemlock muttered, his voice thick with a sadness.

The sound of Hemlock's words made Truck's chest tighten. The words cut deeper than they should have, especially coming from the kid. The kind of words that made

you feel like you'd failed them somehow, even when you didn't know what you'd done wrong.

Truck took a steadying breath, fighting the instinct to snap back. It wasn't the kid's fault. Not entirely, anyway. He hated the hurt in Hemlock's voice, the way it sounded like all the trust he'd built between them was crumbling. He hated that Hemlock had let all the crap Razor had filled his head with take root.

"Don't. You read the room wrong. My question is why. Why would you ever think, me of all people... Why would I hurt you?"

Hemlock didn't answer right away. He just stared straight ahead, picking at the edge of his jeans like he could avoid the question entirely. Truck could see it in his posture, though—the way his shoulders were tight, like he was holding something back. It wasn't just about the misunderstanding. It was more than that.

Truck kept his voice level, trying to keep the conversation calm. "You know me better than that, kid. I'd never do anything to hurt you. Not like that."

Hemlock wanted to believe Truck and Charlie hadn't been together. Why couldn't he? He opened his mouth, then closed it again, like he wasn't sure what to say. "It looked...", he began, but his words trailed off, the doubt thick in the air between them.

Truck's brow furrowed. "What? That we'd been screwing?"

Hemlock nodded, barely a twitch in the affirmative. His face was like a storm cloud, the confusion, hurt, and frustration written all over him. "Yeah."

Truck's mouth twitched. He couldn't help it—he needed to break the tension, if only a little. "I'm a stud but even I don't work up that kinda sweat."

When Hemlock didn't react, Truck took a deep breath, sat down on the steps next to him, his legs stretching out in front of him, trying to give Hemlock some space while still being close enough to make it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

For a long moment, the only sound between them was the soft rustling of the evening breeze.

Finally, Truck spoke again, his voice gentler this time, laced with a kind of weary affection. "I'd been working out in the garage. And Charlie—well, she'd been swimming. She had a bathing suit on under that towel, son."

He glanced at Hemlock to gauge his reaction. When the younger man didn't say anything, didn't even flinch, Truck kept talking, trying to clear the air.

"Look," he went on, the frustration now fading to exhaustion, "I get it. It looked bad. But I promise you, nothing's going on between me and Charlie. Not in the way you think."

Hemlock shifted, still not looking at him directly, but there was a subtle softening in his posture. As if maybe the weight of his own assumptions was beginning to crack a little.

"I just..." Hemlock finally muttered, but he couldn't finish. Whatever was on his mind, it was stuck.

Truck leaned forward and looked at Hemlock's face and saw his eyes were glassy from unshed tears. The kid had a childhood that just kept on giving when it came to abandonment issues. "Emile, look at me."

Hearing Truck use his real name had Hemlock glancing at his brother.

Truck's heart pounded in his chest, a relentless thumping that felt like it might break through his ribs. The moment that had haunted him for days—the fear—hit him full force in the chest, more visceral than anything he had expected. He hadn't realized just how scared he was that Hemlock might've taken things too far—that he might have done something stupid.

That maybe, just maybe, the kid—his damnbrother—wasn't as okay as he pretended to be.

The words tumbled out before he could stop them, raw and real, "I won't ever leave you. I won't ever abandon you. Not for the club. Not for some piece of ass. Not for anything. You're the closest thing I've got to a sibling or a damn kid."

Hemlock didn't react right away, his eyes were back and fixed on the concrete steps beneath him, scraping the toe of his boot against the rough surface. His voice was small, almost hesitant, when he spoke, "Sounds weird when you put it like that."

Truck blinked, surprised by the response. He hadn't thought about it that way, hadn't realized how his words might sound. The truth was, Hemlock was more than just a kid to him—he was family. Realfamily. And for all the times the club had come first, for all the shit they'd been through, Hemlock was the one person Truck would never turn his back on.

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“What, that I won’t leave you?” Truck asked, the confusion evident in his voice. He couldn’t believe Hemlock was still questioning that.

Hemlock’s lips twitched like he was trying to crack a joke, but it fell flat. “No, that I’m both your sibling and your kid.” The humor in his voice was forced, thin, like a mask he didn’t quite know how to wear anymore.

Truck gave a rough exhale, shaking his head as a half-smile tugged at the corners of his lips. “Yeah, okay. It does sound a little fucked up when you say it like that,” he muttered. “But you know what I mean. You’re family, kid. You don’t get to change that. No matter what.”

Hemlock shifted; his face still hard to read. But something softened in his gaze, just a little. The wall he’d put up wasn’t completely gone, but at least some of the cracks were showing.

“Are we gonna get down to why you jumped to that conclusion and where the hell have you been?”

Hemlock stared at Truck sheepishly. “I’ve been hiding in the garage apartment.”

Truck’s eyebrows shot up in disbelief, and the silence between them thickened. He stared at Hemlock like he couldn’t quite make sense of what he was hearing.

“You’ve been hiding in the garage apartment?” Truck repeated, his voice barely contained. “That’s where you’ve been? All this time?”

Hemlock shifted uncomfortably on the steps, his gaze flicking between the ground and Truck. There was a sheepishness in his eyes that made Truck's blood start to simmer again, but he held himself back—just barely. Hewantedto yell. Hewantedto shake him, to knock some sense into him. But instead, he breathed out through his nose and managed a low growl. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I have,” Hemlock muttered, his voice defensive.

Truck narrowed his eyes. “Where’s your bike been?”

Hemlock gave a small, guilty smile. “Inside with me,” he muttered, as if that somehow made it better.

Truck’s jaw clenched as he stared at Hemlock, still sitting on the steps, looking like a kid who’d gotten caught sneaking cookies from the jar. The silence between them was thick anduncomfortable, but Truck wasn’t backing down this time. He wasn’t letting this slide.

“No,” Truck said firmly.

“Yes,” Hemlock shot back, his voice laced with a kind of stubbornness that only made Truck’s frustration boil hotter.

“You’ve been eating myUncrustables?” Truck asked, unable to stop the incredulous edge in his voice.

Hemlock’s shoulders tensed, and he avoided Truck’s gaze. “About that,” he started, rubbing the back of his neck, “you’re out of the strawberry ones.”

Truck stared at him, blinking in disbelief. “What?”

“I love Charlie and when I figured it out...” Hemlock blurted out.

Truck leaned forward, letting out a sharp exhale through his nose. “You got scared shitless.”

“Yeah. Then I tried calling her all afternoon. And you, too. When I rolled up and saw the car...” he trailed off, his voice ending in an uncomfortable silence.

Truck felt the weight of the confession, the raw emotion behind it. Hemlock hadn’t just been hiding from them—he’d been hiding from himself, from the truth. And when the fear took over, it had clouded his judgment, made him see things that weren’t even there. “You assumed the worse before you ever stepped foot inside,”

Truck’s voice was low, a little more tired now, like the fight was draining out of him.

“You let your own damn paranoia screw you over, kid.”

Hemlock’s eyes flickered, guilt and shame evident on his face. “I did.”

Truck exhaled, his shoulders slumping just a little. “Let’s not jump to conclusions anymore. Okay.”

“Okay.” Hemlock’s gaze flickered to the steri-strips on Truck’s chin, and a sharp pang of guilt hit him. It was hard to ignore, especially with how raw it felt now, the way his actions had just hurt someone who’d never done anything but have his back. Hemlock’s voice dropped a notch, the weight of it settling in his chest, “I’m sorry for punching you.” the words thick with regret.

Truck winced slightly as he ran his thumb over the edge of his chin where the cut was still tender. “About that. My chin’s still killing me,” his voice held an almost dry humor, but it was clear that despite the pain, he wasn’t angry.

Hemlock chuckled. “Getting soft on me, old man?”

Truck snorted, shaking his head. “Nope, and once this is healed, we’re going another round.” He glanced at Hemlock with a little glint of mischief in his eyes.

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Hemlock's eyes widened, half in disbelief, half in genuine amusement. "Truck," his voice was a little more serious now that the same vulnerability was creeping back in.

Truck answered, sensing the shift. "Yeah."

"How do I fix things with Charlie?" Hemlock's words were quieter now, almost like he was bracing for something heavy. His fingers laced together, his uncertainty about how to approach the whole situation making his chest tighten.

Truck's expression softened, the tough exterior giving way just a little as he looked at Hemlock. "Your cinnamon girl is worriersick about you. Don't think she's been sitting around with her hands folded. Trust me, she's been pacing, texting, calling, asking me what the hell happened." He leaned back against the porch step, his tone steady, but kind. "But if I were you, kid, I'd start by telling her about your past. Really telling her. All the stuff you've been carrying around."

Just the thought of sharing made Hemlock's stomach twist. He hadn't wanted to go down that road. He hated the idea of digging up all that old shit—the things he'd tried so hard to leave behind. But the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. Charlie didn't know everything, and without that understanding, how could she? How could she see him for who he was, for all the things he was trying to be if he wasn't honest with her about the things that shaped him? Maybe he could just buy her something shiny and apologize.

"I see you plotting and don't," Truck said, knowing exactly where Hemlock's thoughts were heading and he cut that thought process off. "After everything that girl's been through, she deserves more than some trinket and a pitiful I'm sorry."

Truck knew him better than he thought. “Pitiful. I was sincere when I told you I was sorry,” Hemlock said and smiled at his brother.

“It was pitiful.” Truck made sad puppy dog eyes at Hemlock. “Absolutely, pitiful.”

“Jackass.” Hemlock sighed. “I don’t know how to even start,” Hemlock admitted, his voice dropping lower. “I don’t know how to say any of it without... pushing her away.”

Truck gave him a look that was part concern, part challenge. “The truth’s gonna come out one way or another, Hemlock. You can’t hide from it forever. And you sure as hell can’t keep running from her. If she cares about you—like I think she does—you owe it to her to let her see all of you. Not just the pieces you want her to see.”

There was a weight to Truck’s words. It was the kind of truth that was hard to swallow, but necessary. If Hemlock knew anything, he knew that much.

Chapter Seventeen

Hemlock,

Damn, this is hard. I wasn’t with Truck. I wanted to be with you. I guess we’re both gun shy. Maybe it’s for the best. I don’t know. What I do know is I’ve over stayed my welcome and it’s time to get my life back on track.

I’m going to confront Crispen and Ashley. If I come up missing, or dead, hell, somewhere in a coma, you know who to point the finger at.

Thanks for everything,

Your Cinnamon Girl

Hemlock stared at the note for a long second before looking around the first floor of his condo. Everything was neat as a pin just the way he liked it. Dashing upstairs he took the steps two at a time. Hitting the second floor landing he knew instantly she was gone.

He checked both bedrooms and bathrooms. There wasn't a sign she'd ever been there. Walking back into his bedroom, he sat down and hung his head. Next to him was the t-shirt she'd confiscated of his that she slept in. It was neatly folded and set on the foot of the bed. Picking it up he buried his face in the shirt. He inhaled deeply, trying to pull something from the fabric—her presence, her warmth, something—anything. But all that lingered was the sterile scent of detergent. His heart sank.

The words in the note rattled around in his head. "I'm going to confront Crispen and Ashley." His gut twisted. He knew how dangerous they could be—manipulative, cold, and relentless. Was she really serious about facing them alone?

"Fuck this shit." Tossing the shirt aside, he pulled out his phone and called Sherlock. He needed help tracking her down and the brother was the only one that could save him some time.

Hemlock shot a message over to Sherlock before heading back downstairs. He stood and grabbed his jacket, tossing the t-shirt onto the bed and walked out. The condo felt emptier now, the entire space around him echoing with her absence. He had no idea where to start, no clear path forward. But one thing was certain: he was going to find her.

He was headed for the door when it opened. Hemlock froze in the doorway. His heart skipped a beat at seeing her walking inside. "Charlie."

Charlie shifted her weight, her eyes darting to the ground for a second before locking

with his. "I forgot something," she said, barely above a whisper.

His chest tightened. "What?" He stepped forward, quickly closing the gap between them.

Her lips parted and she spoke softly, "To leave my key."

"Oh." He watched her fumble with the keyring and walked towards her not stopping until his hands were tunneled into her long hair, pulling her to him so he could kiss her. It was probably more aggressive than she expected. Hell it was more than he expected. Tired of dragging his feet when it came to her, this was his moment where she would fall into it or push him away, but either way he'd know.

She stood frozen as Hemlock kissed her roughly. Her hands hung by her side still clutching her purse and keys. Dropping them, she threw her arms around his neck, pulling him tighter to her. She fell into the kiss, wanting to feel every glide of his tongue against hers. She wanted to feel his body pressed against her.

Hemlock held her close, his chest pressing against hers as the kiss broke, leaving them both breathless. His forehead rested against hers for a moment, his hands still tangled in her hair, fingers lightly gripping the soft strands as if he was afraid she might slip away again. The world outside the door didn't matter anymore. All that existed was the way her body felt against his, the warmth of her breath, the way she responded to him with a quiet desperation that mirrored his own.

"I want you to stay with me."

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Charlie shook her head slightly, her fingers trailing down his chest, the touch almost tentative, as if she were afraid to believe this moment was real. “I want that too.”

He looked into her eyes, searching for something—some sign she wasn’t just saying the words, that she meant it. And there it was. It wasn’t just the way she’d kissed him or held onto him like she was afraid he might vanish. It was in the way her eyes softened, the vulnerability in their depths. She was all in, even if it scared her.

His hand rested over her sternum as his eyes burned with want, and need. She stepped back as he stepped forward applying just the gentlest of pushes. When her back hit the wall, she swallowed.

The tension between them crackled like static, the air thick with the weight of unsaid words and unspoken promises. Hemlock’s gaze softened, though the fire within it still simmered. He leaned in slightly, the warmth of his body radiating against hers, but he didn’t close the distance completely.

“Staying with me means you’re with me,” his voice was low, but there was an edge to it—a question layered with desire and caution, as though he were offering her a choice she hadn’t yet made.

Charlie’s heart raced; each beat a loud thump in her chest. She could feel her pulse in her throat, in the hollow between her ribs. Why did the sound of her name on his lips make her feel like she was teetering on the edge of something dangerous?

She nodded her head, licking her lips she swallowed again. Why was her mouth and throat suddenly dry? Her breath caught, but she didn’t look away. She couldn’t.

“Charlie.” At the sound of her name, she looked up and locked eyes with Hemlock.

“You need to be sure of your answer, because if you say yes, I’m taking you upstairs to my room and keeping you there until we both can’t walk. Something I’ve wanted since you started staying here.”

“Promise me,” she whispered, her voice barely more than a breath.

“Oh, sweetheart, you’ll be screaming my name until the neighbors call the cops.”

“No. Promise me, it’s not just a hit it and quit it kinda thing.”

Hemlock’s lips parted, but he didn’t respond immediately. Instead, his thumb brushed lightly against the pulse in her neck, sending a ripple of heat through her body. He stared at her through hooded eyes. “It was never gonna be that, sweetheart.” When she reached for him, Hemlock ducked down grabbing her around the waist and tossing her over his shoulder, carrying her upstairs to his bedroom.

Charlie squealed and laughed as she was tossed and carried upstairs. She slapped him on the ass a few times and screamed playfully when he bit her on the butt. But when he dropped her to her feet things got serious.

“Take everything off and put that on.”

She looked at the bed and saw his t-shirt she’d been sleeping in for weeks. The one she’d laundered and returned to him before leaving earlier. Doing what he asked, she stripped her clothes off leaving them in a pile at her feet. When she bent over to retrieve the t-shirt she heard Hemlock groan. Glancing over her left shoulder, Charlie watched Hemlock staring at her. The look was one she had wished for weeks. She was a meal he wanted to devour.

Picking up the t-shirt, she held it against her chest as she turned to face him. “Are you sure you want me to put this on?”

“Oh yeah, I want it on you.” That way it would smell like them when she slept next to him all night.

Charlie pulled the shirt over her head and slipped her arms into the sleeves. She smoothed her hands down the fabric as it slid down her body. Being that it was Hemlock’s the hem hit her mid-thigh. “Take that messy bun down,” Hemlock ordered and doing what he said, Charlie tugged the band from her head and let her hair fall around her shoulders.

“Damn woman, your hot as hell.”

“You’re not so bad yourself, mister.” Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, Charlie didn’t know what to expect from Hemlock. But she remembered Truck telling her the man moved slow. Maybe she should make the next move.

“Hemlock, I’m only wearing this shirt. Maybe you should take some of your clothes off, too.”

Chuckling, Hemlock took a step closer to Charlie toeing off his boots as he did so. Next, he pulled his t-shirt and undershirt off, tossing them aside. He almost back peddled and picked them up, but he stayed focused on the sexy female in front of him. When he stepped up to her, he looked down into her eyes. Leaning in, Hemlock watched as Charlie’s eyes fluttered shut as she leaned up for a kiss, but he didn’t kiss her. Instead, he leaned around her, gripping the bedspread and pulled it from the bed letting it puddle at the foot.

Still he didn’t kiss her, he simply scooped her up causing Charlie to laugh. It took some grace to kneel on the bed with her in his arms. Moving his knees Hemlock got

them into the center of the bed before he laid her down.

Hemlock took his time unbuckling his belt and pulling it from his waist. The swish of leather was the only sound in the room. When Charlie's eyes went wide, he smiled. "Roll over onto your stomach."

Charlie rolled over, folding her arms under her head, and sighed. Then waited for the sound of his jeans being taken off. That wasn't what she heard. What she heard was silence.

Hemlock glided his hands over her thighs making Charlie jump and couldn't help but chuckle at her. When his hands moved over her supple ass, he took his time kneading his fingers into her flesh. The moans of pleasure pleased him. Leaning forward, he moved the shirt out of his way and kissed the base of her spine. It was at that point he knew he couldn't drag things out and moved off the bed and stripped out of his jeans before climbing back onto the bed. Settling next to Charlie, Hemlock went right back to exploring her body.

Charlie sighed as Hemlock's lips kissed all the way down to her butt, then his tongue traced its way all the way back up to her neck. Goosebumps pebbled her skin as cool air met her damp skin.

Reaching behind her, her hand found his hair and began playing with it. She complied with him rolling her over and moaned softly as his mouth found her breast. His tongue pressed against her already hard nipple, sending little shockwaves through her. Arching up into his mouth, she got a nip to the underside of her breast making her jump.

Damn, she loved the feel of him—every part of him. Especially his mouth. Yes, his mouth was her very favorite part at that moment. It only took a little nudge to have him make his way down her stomach, where his tongue toyed with her piercing. Good

Lord, he was driving her crazy.

When Hemlock dipped his head between her thighs, she gripped the sheets. Her eyes rolled back into her head as his teeth raked across her clit. The man was either an angel or a devil, she couldn't tell which, but a few times she called out to God and even did a little begging.

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When Charlie thought she couldn't take much more, Hemlock proved to her how much more she could handle. Crawling back over her body he plunged deep into her, taking her over completely.

The burning need to be inside Charlie bordered-on insanity. It wasn't just her body he wanted to be in, it was her mind, and her heart.

He found his home, between the cries of pleasure that he dragged from her to the sensation of her body gripping his, drawing him ever deeper into her. He loved the feeling of her holding on, not wanting to let him go. As she toppled over the edge along with him, Hemlock heard his name on her lips as his body sagged against hers. His heart pounded in his ears. Right there, in the dark, he pressed his head to Charlie's chest and whispered what he wanted, his feelings and prayed somehow, she would want him back in the same way he wanted her. "I want you to stay here Charlie. With me. Not only in my home, but in my bed."

Hemlock had said downstairs she needed to be sure, and she was. One hundred percent certain she wanted to be right there with him. Still, as his words reached her ears, it seemed to mean more now than before. With her emotions caught in her throat, Charlie answered him, "I want to stay here, with you, Hemlock."

Her whole life she'd wanted a guy to want her. The deep down where it counted want her. It had never happened, and now she knew why. Because none of them were who she was meant to be with. So, right then and there, it meant everything to her.

When he raised his head, his eyes locked on hers, and she knew she'd never want to be with anyone else. In that moment, Charlie understood how other people could fall

in love in the matter of days. Weeks. A month. Because she was in love with Hemlock and had been since he carried her to the bed that first night. It took everything in her to not blurt those three little words out, still she managed.

Chapter Eighteen

There in the dark, Hemlock laid next to Charlie as he asked her to be patient while he found his words. His voice grew hoarse as he spoke, his memories dragging him back to a time when the world had seemed innocent, and his mother had been a hero. He swallowed hard, trying to steady himself, holding nothing back. The feel of Charlie's fingers toying with his hair making him drowsy, but he was determined to get the tough crap behind him.

"My dad... he was a good man before the pills. A hard worker. He used to smile a lot. He got hurt on a job and that's when the pain pill addiction started. After the accident, he was different. Angry. Bitter. He started losing weight, his temper got worse. And my mom? She just... one day disappeared. Emotionally at first, then literally."

He paused, rubbing his hands over his face as if trying to push the memories back into some corner of his mind. His chest felt tight, his heart pounding with the effort of trying to keep his words steady. But the dam had already cracked, causing the words to tickle out.

"My mom was working two jobs and taking uppers to keep going and downers to sleep. My dad spent his days and nights in the pool halls taking me with him. He died when I was ten. That's when mom spiraled out of control, one pill, then another, and then it wasn't just the pills. It was the nights she wouldn't come home, the men who'd come in and out, the smell of stale smoke and cheap liquor..." Hemlock cut himself off, shaking his head.

He didn't always think of her like that. He could remember better times when he was

younger. She wasn't on drugs or whoring herself out to score dope for not only herself but for his father. No, she had been that mom, the one you watched on TV or read about in books. She picked him up from school. Took him to the park, played with him all the time. She'd been present.

"When I was twelve, I found her passed out on the couch with a needle in her arm. She overdosed. That's how I lost her... for good. She never woke up." There was a long silence after that. Hemlock could feel her fingers stilling in his hair. She didn't ask him any questions, didn't rush him. She just waited, like she said she would.

"Social services was on their way to scoop me up when I ran. I had heard horror stories about the boy's home and wanted no part of it." When Charlie remained silent, he continued as her fingers caressed his scalp.

"I snuck back into our apartment and managed to stay there for about a week before having to run again. I kept going back every night, taking anything and everything I could from the apartment. Food, my clothes, my books. I even took the cot I slept on," his voice trailed off, and he finally let himself rest, leaning into her touch.

Hemlock let out a low sigh, his eyes still closed as he let the words come out slowly, like they were being pulled from somewhere deep inside him. He hadn't realized how much it still hurt, how much it still gnawed at him, until he started speaking.

"Where did you go?"

"I moved into an abandoned building not too far from the clubhouse. I learned fast not to ever let someone see me coming or going from the building. That's how your shit got stolen by other homeless people."

"How long did you stay there?"

“I lived there for two years. I found ways to make money so I could eat, I never begged. Not that I was too proud, but I was capable of working. I watched the brothers come and go from the clubhouse, and one day I decided they could help me. I just had to prove I could be of use.

“I started hanging around the clubhouse, looking for work. I knew that was my way out. I knew it was probably the only chance I had to get out of the life I was living.” His eyes opened, staring at the shadows in the room, his thoughts drifting to those early days when he first met the people who would become his family, his brothers.

“I guess I just kept hoping, you know? That maybe if I could prove I was strong enough, tough enough, they’d take me in. They eventually did.” His lips twitched, the smallest of smiles flickering. “But it wasn’t like I thought it would be. Being ‘in’ with them wasn’t a cure for everything that had happened. It was just... another way to keep going.”

“I swept the parking lot, cleaned the kitchen, took out the trash. I had even washed bikes in exchange for a hot meal. It was Truckwho took a liking to me. Started finding things for me to do even when there was nothing for me to do. After a year, he asked if I wanted to move to his place.”

Smiling to himself, Hemlock remembered all too well telling Truck he wasn’t no whore.

“He set me up in the garage apartment and gave me a job with his detailing company. Truck knew how I felt about handouts, so he told me every week he would sit me down and show me what groceries cost, utilities, and on top of that I had to pay fifty dollars a month for rent. I had no idea at the time how cheap that was.”

He exhaled slowly, finally allowing himself to relax a little, as her fingers continued to run through his hair.

“All I knew was that I wasn’t alone anymore,” he added quietly, his voice almost a whisper. “And that was the one thing that kept me going. That, and the fact I knew if I didn’t toughen up, I wouldn’t make it. I wouldn’t have made it, not back then.”

“How long have you been with the club?”

“Fifteen years. I’ve seen the chapter go through some good times and some bad ones.”

He told her he owed his life to Truck and would give his life for the man. Just as he would give it for her. He kept the second half of that in his thoughts not wanting to scare her. “That’s me in a nutshell.”

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“I think there’s more to you, Hemlock. You’re a nurse practitioner and you work at both the clinic and the hospital. You also still help Truck with the detailing business. And from what I’ve heard, you’re uber-smart when it comes to math.”

He never thought about that stuff like other people did. Tired of talking about himself and wanting to hear her story, he said, “Tell me about Charlie Rose.” Hemlock rolled over and scooted up into a seated position against the headboard. Opening up his arms, he waited for Charlie to snuggle into him before wrapping them around her.

Charlie tugged the sheet over them, giving her time to decide where to start. She had a very different life than Hemlock. Laying with her head resting against his chest, she sighed and started at the part that was most important.

“My parents were workaholics; they never gave having children a thought. My mom said they never did any prevention and after years of never getting pregnant they assumed they couldn’t. One day, my mom couldn’t handle a simple glass of wine. It made her violently ill. According to her, she went to the doctors’ multiple times saying she wasn’t feeling well. Each time, they told her it was a bladder infection and gave her antibiotics. My mom wasn’t stupid and knew that wasn’t the problem. Then she was asked could you be pregnant. Her reply was no. She hadn’t missed a cycle in her life, plus she was in her mid-forties. My dad was in his fifties. But it turned out she was pregnant.

“They were great parents. When I was nineteen, I started college in New York. I wanted to be a ballerina. I was two years in when I got the call that they’d been killed in a boating accident.”

With only a year left, she'd chose to stay in school and finish, yet in the end, it hadn't quite worked out that way. She had taken a semester off to handle her parents' estate. Everything had been a blur with no time to really grieve. Then reality hit her in the face; her parents were dead.

"Then the bills started piling up, and although my parents always seemed to be well off. At least to me they did, but they weren't. They lived on credit cards the way so many people do. They put everything on cards and at the end of the month they'd pay some off and others they'd just make the minimum payment. Each month they rotated which one would be paid off and which ones would get the minimum."

She still remembered how embarrassed and floored she'd been sitting in the dean of school's office. "You don't have a scholarship, Miss Cote. Your parents have been paying monthly for your tuition."

"Everything was a mess. I had to leave school because I couldn't afford to stay. My parents' apartment was a rental and not theirs as I had been led to believe. There was a pile of debt, and I thought the only way out was for me to file bankruptcy where I wouldn't be saddled with it. Then I found out that I wasn't responsible for my parent's debt."

Charlie paused, her breath catching for a moment, her fingers tracing a pattern along the fabric of the sheet. Hemlock could feel the weight of her words settle around them, the vulnerability thick in the air. He let her take her time, the steady rhythm of his breath a quiet support.

She glanced up at him, her eyes clouded with memories, before continuing, "I threw myself into working after that. I didn't want to think about it, didn't want to feel it. I thought if I kept moving, kept pushing forward, it would all just... disappear. But it didn't. The grief crept up on me when I least expected it. The nights were the hardest.

“I could never sleep. I’d lie awake, staring at the ceiling, wishing I could hear their voices again. And then one night I had this dream. It was so vivid—my mom was there, laughing, telling me everything was going to be okay. She looked like she did when I was little, when life was simple and... I don’t know, whole. And I woke up, and for a second, I thought maybe it wasn’t just a dream. Like she was really there,” her voice faltered for a moment as she tried to steady herself. She let out a quiet, shaky breath. “But then it was gone. And I was still here. Still alone.”

Hemlock kissed the top of her head; everyone had a story. “I’m sorry that happened to you.”

Charlie closed her eyes at the gentle pressure of his lips against her hair. His words were simple, but they carried the weight of understanding, the kind that could only come from someone who had known loss or carried their own burdens in silence. She didn’t expect him to fix it or offer some grand solution—just his quiet sympathy was enough. “It’s still hard sometimes. The things we lose. The things we can never get back,” she said softly after a long pause, her voice muffled against his chest.

Charlie sat up, crossing her legs Indian style and tucked the sheet around herself. “I was so angry at them. I couldn’t understand why financially they would put themselves in that position. They had great jobs. We didn’t live lavishly. My car was a fifteen-year-old Buick that smoked and wheezed like an old man. I had to roll down the window to open the door. But I never complained. I never asked for a new one. If they would have said, “Charlie, we can’t afford that school.” I would have said okay.”

Hemlock stayed quiet for a moment, letting Charlie’s words sink in. He could hear the frustration, the pain in her voice, the regret she carried with her. It was a different kind of grief—one where the weight of unanswered questions and what-ifs could be just as heavy as the loss itself.

“They did it because they loved you,” he said softly, sitting up slightly, watching her

cross her legs. He didn't move to touch her, not just yet, giving her space to keep speaking if she wanted to. "Sometimes it's not just about what we have or don't have—it's about the choices we think we have to make for the people we love."

She paused, looking out into the dim light of the room as though searching for answers she hadn't found yet. "I miss them. Every day I miss them."

Hemlock was quiet for a moment, his hand reaching for hers. He tugged her back to his side wanting to hold her close. "I'm sure they're proud of you."

Charlie shook her head slowly. "Yeah, because I've been doing fantastic. Getting mixed up with Crispen and believing Ashley was my friend."

Hemlock's thumb lightly traced the back of her hand. "We all get suckered at some point."

She met his eyes then, a soft, vulnerable expression on her face. "I guess that's true." Tired of talking, Charlie eased up and kissed Hemlock. "Let's talk about something else."

"What do you wanna talk about?" He felt her hand glide over his cock and smiled.

"I think something might come up."

Rolling her over, he kissed her until she moaned. He knew better than most how sometimes you needed a distraction when things got too heavy.

Instead of pushing them both to keep talking about their pasts, Hemlock gave them each something else to focus on.

A new exploration of Charlie Rose.

Chapter Nineteen

Charlie stepped into the library's door, and she was on her boss's radar. Moving quickly down the short, tiled floor, she ducked into the office to clock in. When she stepped back out, her manager stared at her.

“Miss Cote, if you can't make it to work on time, we will just have to replace you.”

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So, she was a few minutes late, so fucking what. The old fart acted like it was the end of the world if someone was two minutes late. It wasn't like they let any of them get a full hour lunch, anyway. Charlie looked at it as compensation for her lost lunch minutes. If she wanted to write her up, let her. She didn't care one way or another. The long hours she put in every day whether it be working at the library and diner, or the car wash, Charlie was starting to feel physically worn down.

When the manager just tapped her foot at her, Charlie bit her tongue. Her days of dealing with the woman were numbered. Once she got the extra shifts at the bar and grill, she was out.

The only reason she had stayed at the library was for the meager benefits it offered. A few friends had worked there, and that was how she ultimately got the job. They had all quit months back because of not being able to deal with the manager. With them gone, she didn't feel obligated to remain employed there. Walking past her boss, Charlie sat down at the front counter and began starting her day.

"Why aren't you working yet?" Her boss yelled from behind her.

Whipping around she, glared at the woman. "Are you blind? Can't you see I'm trying to get my day started?"

"This will be put in your file."

Her manager stood there a moment longer, as if waiting for a response. When none came, the woman huffed and stomped away, her heels clicking harshly on the linoleum.

“What’s new,” she muttered under her breath, making a point of loudly tapping away at the computer keys as she logged in. Charlie watched as the old bitch stormed off. One day soon I’ll be able to tell her to shove it. Christ’s sake she wanted to choke the bitch. She needed to face the facts, the library barely paid her ten bucks an hour and after taxes, insurance, etc., she wasn’t making shit there.

Charlie didn’t bother to turn around until she heard the office door slam shut behind her boss. She let out a sharp breath, rubbing her temples. If she wasn’t so worn out, she might’ve told her manager exactly where she could shove that file of hers.

She saw the other girls snickering as the manager stormed off. Charlie wanted to laugh too but she was about two steps closer to quitting already. If Margery came at her again, she’d probably walk out.

The whole situation nagged at her. It wasn’t the lateness that pissed her off; it was the principle. She had given up so much of herself just to survive, and no one ever seemed to appreciate it. A good night’s sleep felt like a distant dream, and with the way things were going, it wasn’t looking like she’d get one anytime soon.

Shaking off the thought, Charlie turned back to her computer and forced herself to focus. There was work to be done. She would get through the shift. But the fire that had simmered beneath her skin all day made her think that once she was out of there, she might just tell her boss exactly what she thought of her. Or maybe she’d simply walk out. Who knew?

For now, though, she had a front desk to man, and the clock was ticking.

Halfway into her morning routine, Charlie was asked to assist putting books back up in the stacks. It wasn’t unusual for her to help when needed. Without hesitation she grabbed a stack of books setting on the front counter, carrying them over to the book cart.

She had barely gotten the cart in motion when a book flew out of a row. Stopping short, she stared down at the book then into the row. This was definitely going to be the day she either got fired or she quit.

“Oh, dear, did that almost hit you?” Charlie stared at Ashley and Crispen who were hanging out in the stacks.

“No, it didn’t come close.”

Ashley sauntered towards the front of the row, smiling at Charlie. “Shame. I’ll have to do better next time.”

Without responding, Charlie started pushing the cart again wanting to avoid any confrontations with the two. “Excuse me, miss. We need some help finding a book,” Ashley said loudly. Gritting her teeth, Charlie stopped the cart and turned back around.

“What book are you looking for? Maybe a ‘how to book’? Such as how to steal from someone. Or maybe how to disguise oneself to get access to their hotel room. Better yet, what about one on how to just be a lowlife piece of shit?” She saw Ashley’s and Crispen’s faces and knew she’d annoyed them. Fuck it, she didn’t care.

“We’re looking for baby books.”

Charlie kept her expression neutral at the word baby. It was a ploy to get a reaction from her. She wouldn’t give them the satisfaction. “Congratulations. The books on everything from conceiving to raising a child are on isle six.”

Turning back around, she once again began pushing the cart only to get stopped again, except this time Ashley was shouting at her. The entire library could hear her screeching.

“I can’t believe you’d flirt with my boyfriend in front of me! What kind of employees do they have working here? I demand to speak with your manager,” Ashley yelled, stomping her foot like a child.

Charlie didn’t know what got into her, whether it was the screaming or the foot stomping. Either reason could be the cause as she started laughing and couldn’t stop. She laughed all the way to the front desk and into Margery’s office. Wiping at the tears the laughter brought on, she managed to tell her manager there was an outraged customer causing a scene in the stacks.

When Margery got up rushing out of the office, Charlie dropped into a chair and continued laughing. The whole thing, the three jobs, her paying for the apartment, her manager, the bullshit she dealt with at her other two jobs and now this crap had finally sent her over the edge.

“Miss Cote, that woman said you were trying to mess with her husband. I demand to know what happened,” Margery stated when she came rushing back into the office.

At hearing her manager, Charlie got up, still laughing, grabbed her purse and clocked out for lunch. If she still had a job when she returned, she’d chalk it up for a win. For now, she couldn’t deal with any of it. The last thing she saw was Ashley and Crispen staring at her in disbelief. Evidently, they thought she would be made to apologize or some shit like that. Wrong.

Charlie walked into the condo, surprised to find Hemlock home early. Dropping the car keys in their normal spot, she set her purse down and walked into the living room. Not seeing him in the living room, she headed upstairs to find him. She hoped his day had been better than hers. Halfway up the stairs she was met by a wet Hemlock wearing only a towel.

“What are you doing home early?”

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The question caught Charlie off guard and made her feel as if she'd interrupted something. She could hear the shower still running, looking up at Hemlock who seemed to be blocking the top of the stairs, Charlie took a step down. "I can leave, but why are you home early?"

She watched as Hemlock glanced back over his shoulder, then back at her. "I got off early from the clinic and I didn't have anything else scheduled."

Going with her gut, she refused to let her past dictate her reaction to his appearance. "Are you going to stand here or go finish your shower?"

"Sorry, you startled me. Wanna grab a shower with me?" he asked with smile, trying to ease the invisible tension between he and Charlie.

"Only if we can order pizza afterwards." Taking his hand Charlie let Hemlock lead her to the bedroom where he watched her strip out of her clothes.

As always when the two were naked and wet one thing led to another as they stood under the hot spray of the shower. Their kisses were more desperate than any other time, they were rough and desperate. Hemlock moved her backwards towards the shower wall when he heard a noise.

Breaking the kiss, he motioned for Charlie to stay quiet as he eased open the shower door and stepped out. Hemlock didn't bother with a towel as he moved across the bathroom floor. As quietly as he could, Hemlock eased open a small cabinet door and retrieved a small caliber revolver.

He almost winced when he cocked the gun. Hemlock looked towards the shower, then opened the bathroom door stepping into the bedroom.

Truck held up his free hand, in his other was a gun. “Whoa, I’m friendly.”

“Truck? What are you doing here?”

“We had plans to eat. Remember? Charlie had to work.” Truck continued staring at Hemlock who hadn’t lowered his gun. “Can you put that away.”

“Sorry,” Hemlock said, lowering his gun.

“I meant your junk.” Truck shook his head.

“Shit. Charlie’s still in the shower. We’ll be down in a few.” As he headed back into the bathroom Hemlock stopped. “Why did you have your gun out?”

“Front door was open when I arrived.” Truck turned for the door. “I’ll be downstairs,” he called out over his shoulder.

Hemlock watched Truck walk away as he turned for the bathroom. He’d have to mention the door being left open to Charlie, he thought closing the bathroom door.

Truck sat with a slice of pizza in his hand with it halfway to his mouth when he heard Charlie say she was suspended from the library. “Let me get this straight. Ashley and Crispin came in and caused a scene and you got suspended?”

Charlie answered Truck around the mouthful of pizza she was eating. “Yes, that’s what happened.” Swallowing the food, she continued, “It didn’t help me that I had words with my manager when she called me after I clocked out and left.” Picking up another slice of pizza, Charlie grumbled about disliking the job before taking a bite of

food.

After the food was eaten and everyone was full, Charlie cleaned up leaving the two men talking as she squared away the kitchen. Truck telling her goodbye startled Charlie. “You guys need to wear bells around your necks,” she joked. Hugging Truck, Charlie walked to the door with Hemlock. As they stood watching Truck fire up his bike, she wrapped an arm around Hemlock’s waist. One more wave and they watched the brother roll down the street.

Charlie leaned into Hemlock, “I didn’t know he had a key to the house.”

“He does, but when he arrived, he said the door was wide open.” Hemlock saw the shocked look on Charlie’s face. “Hey, it happens.”

Charlie shook her head; she knew one hundred percent she closed the door. “I’m sure I shut the door.” She felt like Hemlock didn’t believe her when he kissed her head and walked back inside. Standing in the doorway, Charlie looked around the neighborhood as she ran her hands up and down her arms. Walking back inside, she closed and locked the door.

Chapter Twenty

Around three a.m., an alarm on his phone went off, alerting Hemlock there was activity outside his condo. Rolling over, he expected to see an animal on the screen. Instead, he saw a hooded figure moving around his bike and car. Throwing the covers off, he pulled on his jeans, grabbed the gun from his nightstand, and ran for the front door. He hadn’t gotten the door opened good when he caught sight of the perp moving across the lawn.

His bare feet hit the dew-covered grass as he tracked the figure moving fast across the neighbor’s yard. Hemlock didn’t slow down, and he wouldn’t until he had the asshole

on the ground. He followed in pursuit through multiple yards when he came to the end of the street, he caught sight once again of the individual as they turned the corner. Hemlock barely missed a broken off fence post and slipped on the wet grass. Regaining his footing, he started gaining on his target. He was in range and shouted, “Stop or I’ll shoot.” One chance was all he gave before he’d pull the trigger.

A dark-colored sedan came into view and screeched to a halt as the passenger door opened. It’s now or never, Hemlock thought as he brought the gun up and pulled the trigger. The perp managed to get into the car unharmed. Ready to keep firing at the driver, he watched as the car sped off, leaving Hemlock standing in the middle of the street. Lights were popping on inside apartments along with the sounds of dogs barking. Walking over, he found the spent rounds and picked them up. No need to leave anything for the cops when they arrived on the scene. And they would.

Heading back to his condo, Hemlock stepped down and felt a sharp pain in his foot. “Damn it!” Picking up his foot, he saw a large piece of glass barely sticking out of it. “I must have hit the car window after all.”

Pulling the glass out, he held onto it and hobbled back home. Coming across the lawn he heard sirens and knew he needed to get rid of the gun in his waistband. Charlie stood on the little front porch wrapped in a blanket. “Are you okay?”

“No. I cut my foot. I need you to do something for me.”

“Anything.”

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Hemlock handed her the gun, which she took holding it between two fingers like it would bite her. Then he handed her the spent bullet casings. “Put those in the bedroom. In my top dresser drawer there’s a gun that looks just like this one. It has a red line painted on the side. Bring it to me, please. Quickly.”

Charlie didn’t ask questions; she just ran inside doing what Hemlock asked of her. She came out and handed him the new gun just as blue lights were seen making the corner.

“Go inside and stay there. If I get arrested call Truck. His number’s in my phone.” Hemlock nudged her back inside and closed the door. Walking over to his car, he set the gun on the hood and walked away, putting distance between him and it.

When the police drove up, Hemlock waved them down and made sure to stay clear of the gun. He watched as the police car parked at the end of his driveway. As the cop stepped out of the car he pointed his flashlight at him momentarily blinding Hemlock.

“Evening,” the officer called out, his voice steady but sharp. “You live here, son?”

Son. Damn, the only person who called him that was Truck. Mostly people called him a son of a bitch. “Yes, sir. I’m Emile Durand.”

The cop shined his flashlight over Hemlock. “You’re bleeding.”

“Yes, I am. Stepped on a large piece of glass in the street.” He saw when the cop noticed the gun.

When his flashlight landed on a gun close to the young man, the officer unsnapped the strap holding his gun in his holster. “You got a permit for that gun, son?” he asked, keeping his eyes on Mr. Durand.

Hemlock answered with his normal casual ease, “Yes, and it’s a pellet gun.”

“I need to see some I.D. and the license for the gun.”

“It’s inside.”

“I’ll wait.”

“One second.” Hemlock limped over to the front door and opened it. “Honey, can you grab my wallet from the counter for me?”

Charlie was standing right inside the door when Hemlock opened it. She had pressed herself against the wall trying not to get hit. “Sure, babe,” she said sarcastically. Walking over, she grabbed the wallet and handed it to him. “Is everything okay?” she asked, batting her eyelashes.

Hemlock took the wallet and rolled his eyes at her. Closing the door, he limped back over to the cop. Pulling out both licenses, he handed them over and waited for the cop to call his information in. Glancing back at the porch, he saw the window blinds snap shut and chuckled. When the cop finally came back over, he handed Hemlock the cards and asked what was going on earlier.

“My phone woke me up alerting me someone was messing with my vehicles. I came out here with the pellet gun and chased them down the street.”

“Were you aiming to kill them, Mr. Durand?”

“Not at all. If I wanted to hurt them, they would be bleeding not me.”

“You should know better than to run around barefooted,” the cop said offhandedly.

“You might want to get that looked at.”

“I’m a nurse practitioner.” He saw the smirk spread across the cop’s face and wanted to slap him. Instead, Hemlock kept his hands tucked in his front pockets.

“Did you get a look at the perpetrator?”

“No. They were in all black with a hoodie covering their face. A car pulled up around the corner and that’s when I lost them.”

“If they come back, call us instead of running around with a pellet gun. There are people in the world, nurse Durand, who have real guns, and they will kill you.”

“You’re absolutely right, officer.” Hemlock clinched his teeth, thinking if only the cop knew who he was talking to. Waving, he watched the police car roll away. He stood there alone in the middle of the lawn, thinking about who would be lurking around his place.

Shaking his head, he walked over to the car and picked up the pellet gun. Looking down at his right foot, which was now throbbing, he saw it was still bleeding freely. “Fuck.” If he had to get a tetanus shot, he would be pissed. Those bitches hurt.

Limping back to the house, he swore with every step. Sitting on the little bench on his porch, he looked at his foot, which now was covered in grass and blood. Knocking on the door, he waited for Charlie to open it. “Can you look over the dryer and grab me an old towel? Please,” he asked when she popped her head out.

“Of course.”

Charlie came back out handing him the towel. “What happened to your foot?” she asked, looking down at where he was wiping away grass and blood.

“I stepped on glass.”

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“Come inside where I can help clean it up.”

“I don’t want to bleed all over the floors.”

“Hemlock, it’s blood. It will come off the floors. Now, get inside.”

Grabbing her hand, he let her hoist him up so he could hop into the house. Dropping down into the nearest kitchen chair, he saw the trail of large blood drops he left in his wake. Shit, he would definitely be scrubbing the floors.

When she grabbed his foot, his fist reared back on instinct. He saw her eyes go wide at the sight of it. Feeling like a grade A asshole, he dropped his hand onto the table. “Sorry, it’s a knee jerk reaction when someone hurts me.” The comment said a lot about who he was, whether she realized it or not.

Charlie hid her shock as his fist came up. The only thing that told her he wouldn’t strike her was the wounded look that spread across his handsome face and the sadness in his eyes as he dropped his hand. She had always thought her life had been tough, but wondered what his had been like for him to be ready to strike out at pain inflicted by someone else.

She held his foot up and tried to wipe away some of the blood to see the wound. The pressure only made the foot throb harder.

“Damn woman, a nurse you are not,” Hemlock said through gritted teeth.

“Sorry, I didn’t realize I was hurting you.” Putting his foot down, she didn’t know

what to do for him. “It needs stitches, and you need a tetanus shot.”

Hemlock reached forward, lifting her face with his hand. “I’m sorry. I would never strike a woman.”

“I’m not afraid you’d hit me.” Charlie gave him a small smile. “You wouldn’t, right?”

“Never.”

“Good. Now, who do I call to come here and take care of this wound? Or do we need to go to the clinic?”

“Get me my phone. I’ll call Razor.”

If he could feel any worse than he already did, he would. Most women would have turned from him, not Charlie, he knew she had seen his fear when he had suddenly jerked in response to the pain, and it bothered him he hadn’t managed to keep it hidden.

When would his fucking past stop messing with him?

Chapter Twenty-One

Hemlock breathed in the crisp night air as they rode down the highway. Losing himself in the road and the wind rushing past him, he relaxed against Charlie. Out on the highway, he didn’t have to think about work, the club, not even his past bothered him there. Just the freedom that surrounded him as he rode. His mind had been inundated with memories since telling Charlie about his past. He hated when his mind wandered back in time. The past couldn’t be changed, you had to live in the now, for tomorrow was never promised.

Watching as those in front of the pack signaled, he slowed down to turn into the parking lot. Pulling in, he backed up his bike in line with the others. He felt Charlie grip his shoulder and climb from behind him. Removing his helmet, he set it over the odometer, then got off the bike. He smiled when Charlie hung her helmet from the back foot peg.

When he looked back around, everyone was milling about waiting on them before heading into the restaurant. It was supposed to have been a night out, just the two of them. But instead, half the chapter was in tow. Seemed no one had any real plans and wanted to ride out to Mull-hallow Hall.

Upstairs was a restaurant that had a nineteen fifties vibe. Downstairs had a very chill bowling alley area with leather sofa sectionals and a martini bar. How they had gotten a reservation for a dozen people amazed him, especially since it was last minute. With his hand on the small of Charlie's back, Hemlock walked them into the restaurant. Grumbling to himself, Hemlock thought next time he'd keep his plans to himself. He felt Charlie slip her arm around his waist as they entered the establishment and immediately relaxed.

Three hours later, Charlie lifted the glass to her mouth. She was not alone in her drinking. Oh no, Sway, Vicious' wife and her best friend Lottie, were right there with her and a few of the girls from the club to boot.

They had enjoyed a great meal, afterwards they had managed to snag a lane downstairs. Not much bowling was happening, but drinking was. Especially by the ladies. Now the empty wine bottles lingered on the table as the women toasted to fine men and wine.

Hemlock sipped his club soda, watching Charlie as she laughed. He'd realized early on she was cutting loose, and he stopped drinking. It would be hard enough keeping Charlie on the back of his bike intoxicated much less sober.

She had indulged in everything from Chicago Charcuterie board, which consisted of grilled sausages, assorted cheeses, pimento cheese, pepperoncini's, red apples, Chicago-style bar-b-q sauce, maple mustard, pickles, candied pecans, fried naan to Atlantic cod and Hot Honey Chicken. Charlie rested her chin on her fist smiling at something one of the other girls was saying when she felt that feeling in her gut. And her smile faded. Jumping up, Charlie darted away in the direction of the lady's room.

"I got this," Sway said as she followed in pursuit of Charlie.

That was their clue the night was at its end. Signaling for the waitress, Hemlock asked for the check. Too much wine and rich food sometimes did not go well. He was about to send Lottie to check on Sway and Charlie when they walked back to the table. Charlie looked a lot less chipper than before.

"Are you ready to go, sweetheart?"

Charlie nodded, said, "Yep," which was immediately followed by a hiccup.

Laughing, Hemlock led her back upstairs almost having to carry her so she wouldn't fall down. When they got outside, he decided the best course of action was to carry her. Scooping her up, he made it to the bike in record time. It took him and Truck to get her on the bike. Then he did something he thought he'd never have to do. Using a bungee cord from his saddlebag, he strapped Charlie to the bitch bar of his bike.

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“You think you can get her back to the house?” Truck asked.

“Fuck no. That’s why I’m heading one block over to The Mulberry Inn.”

“That sounds like a solid plan. I think I’ll do the same and roll back with you two in the morning.”

“Keep on my six where you have eyes on us.”

“Will do.”

Turned out everyone had the same idea as Hemlock. No one wanted to make the hour and a half drive back after drinking. Hemanaged to get down the street before Charlie started dancing around on the bike. It was like having one of the inflatable sales-guys moving in the wind. Slapping her on the thigh, Hemlock got her to stop. All he had to do was turn the corner and get to the end of the street. It would have been easier to have walked her there and went back for the damn bike.

Making the corner, Hemlock glanced over catching their reflection in a shop window. He saw Charlie’s helmet had slipped down over her face. He felt it fall off, getting wedged between them. He wanted to be pissed but it was too damn funny the way she was struggling to get it from between them.

Hemlock waited for Truck to park and come to help with Charlie, before backing his own bike into a parking spot. Taking her helmet, he shoved it into the saddlebag and half walked, half carried her into the hotel lobby. The first chair he spotted was where he planted Charlie while he checked them in.

When he turned around, she was sliding out of the chair like melted ice cream sliding from a sugar cone. As she fell onto the floor, he heard her laugh. “She’s toast,” Truck said beside him with a laugh.

“Yes, she is.” Now all he needed to do was get her upstairs and ready for bed. “I’m blaming all of you on her current condition. All he got was laughter and a lot of ribbing from his brothers. Even the ladies laughed when they were the ones behind giving Charlie not just wine but shots.

“Do you think you can get her off the floor?”

“I’m thinking of leaving her there.”

“Stop you two.” Sway stepped around her husband and Hemlock. Staring down at Charlie and thought the boys might have it right. The girl laid on the rug with her eyes closed and a wide spread grin on her face.

It took Hemlock, Vicious, and Truck to get her upright. Once she was on her feet, Hemlock realized getting her to walk to the room was futile. As he scooped her up into his arms, she let out a woo-hoo, which echoed in the hotel lobby. Yep, this is gonna be fun he thought sarcastically.

Late into the night Hemlock lay awake, listening to Charlie softly snoring next to him. As he stared at the ceiling, he thought about Charlie being a part of his life. Seemed he found himself doing that a lot lately. He worried what he was bringing into her life. Baggage, that’s what. Even if she left him tomorrow, he’d had a great time while it lasted. Rolling over, Hemlock wrapped himself around her. Sometimes he just needed to shut his mind off and live in the moment.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Pulling into the driveway, Charlie was exhausted from working a double at the bar and grill. She'd been suspended from her job at the library for a week and had managed to pick up some extra shifts while two of the other waitresses were out for various reasons. She stared at the house, knowing the large tub awaited her along with the leftovers she'd brought home from work.

The entire car smelled like wings and onion rings. To make up for having food in Hemlock's car, she'd made sure to bring some for him. Heaving a deep sigh she opened the car door. Just thinking of the short walk to the door seemed miles away. Grabbing her purse and food bag, she climbed out of the car. Closing the door, she scanned the area. Across the street she noticed a strange car parked in the neighbor's driveway. The older couple had mentioned being gone for a two-week vacation. They hadn't mentioned anyone staying at their home.

Shrugging it off, Charlie knew how neighbors were. It could be someone at another house utilizing the empty drive. Unlocking the door, Charlie reached in, flipping on the lights before heading inside the condo. When she turned around, she expected to see Hemlock home from the clinic. But all she saw was the dim light in the kitchen, and she realized he wasn't there. If she didn't know how much Hemlock worked, she'd think he was avoiding her. Closing the door, Charlie slumped against it. Well, with him being at work, she could take that hot bath and enjoy the silence. Shoving away from the door, she headed into the kitchen to plate up her food.

An hour later, with her stomach full, Charlie sat cross-legged on the bed, counting her tips from work. They were slowly adding up. She still had a ways to go before she could buy her way out of the apartment's lease. Once she paid off the apartment, the noose around her neck would be gone. Trying not to think about the apartment and what it was costing her. One of these days, she would have her say when it came to Crispen and Ashley. And when that day came, she'd unleash all her anger on the couple. She knew they wouldn't stay at the apartment and Charlie hoped she was a witness to their eviction.

Staring at the money, Charlie reminded herself she needed to buy some new clothes, well new to her anyway. The one thing she was good at was being frugal. Pulling fifty dollars from the little piles of money, she put it aside for clothes. She didn't want to go shopping, what she wanted was not to work three jobs. If she could pick up two more shifts at Sudz and Suds Carwash and Grill, she would be golden.

She could give up the job at the library, after all she couldn't make money there like the money she made at the carwash. Hell, even working one double at the dinner didn't equal what she made in a single shift at the carwash.

Charlie reminded herself she had to do her due diligence if she wanted more hours at Sudz and Suds. Climbing off the queensize bed, she stuffed the money into an envelope, then taped it at the back of one of the dresser drawers.

Exhausted from working all day, she stripped off her work clothes and headed to the bathroom and a hot bath. She'd been dreaming of a good soak since the twenty-minute drive from her day job to her evening one. Stretching her arms over her head, Charlie tried getting the knots to relax in her shoulder blades. Rolling dough for bread was taxing on her arms, shoulders, and hands. Then working six hours lifting and hauling loaded down trays at the diner had her lower back hurting. When she'd gotten out of the car, she looked like a drunken sailor from the back spasms that plagued her.

Turning on the water, Charlie walked back out into the bedroom. Grabbing her night clothes and a robe, she was halfway to the bathroom when she turned around and headed for the door. With everything that had happened, sometimes she got weirded out when home alone. Locking the door, she dragged the ladder-back chair over and tucked the back under the doorknob. That would keep an intruder out. For a minute at least.

Quickly turning around, she made quick work of retracing her steps to the bathroom. Dropping her clothes on the bathroom counter, Charlie stepped into the tub and sank

into the hot water. Laying back, she rested her head on the tub and sighed. It was the best feeling at the end of a long day. The only way it would be better was if she had a cup of hot tea, a good book, a little music, and bubbles in the bathe. But she didn't have all of that, so she'd just enjoyed the hot water.

Charlie closed her eyes enjoying the silence. All day she heard miss, honey, hey baby, and every other term customers used to flirt with her at the carwash. It was nothing to have them getfrisky with her. It never failed when she was carrying a tray laden with plates someone would smack her ass or pinch it.

Most of the time she carried a small bar tray and used it as a shield against the unwanted touching. She knew how to handle a crowd; she knew how to handle herself in those situations. She never missed a step when the customers got handsy.

The diner was different. The Tenth street diner had a more laid-back crowd, well, until after the bars closed. Then it got hectic with drunks. Either they were fun, or they were nasty. Still the money was too good to quit.

Pulling the bun out, she let her long hair down. Sliding down under the water, Charlie ran her hands through her hair, loosening it and giving her scalp a good massage. After a few minutes, Charlie pulled the stopper letting the water drain as she turned on the water. Sticking her hand under the water she waited for it to warm up. After which she stood and turned on the shower. It was a quick shampoo and conditioner, then she quickly bathed.

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She had barely stepped out of the shower when a noise coming from downstairs caught her attention. Hemlock must have gotten home. Drying off, Charlie pulled on a pair of lounge pants and a sweatshirt. After wrapping her hair into a head wrap, she stuffed her feet into her slippers and walked out of the bedroom.

Charlie headed downstairs excited to see Hemlock. With their work schedules they barely had time together in the past two weeks. The last time they'd spent time together was when they went out to the Mull-hallow Hall for dinner and drinks. Halfway down the stairs, she noticed the only light on was the one in the kitchen area and she didn't hear Hemlock moving around.

Her foot had barely hit the bottom step when she heard a noise by the front door. "Did you forget your house key again?" she called out as she headed for the door. Halfway there, Charlie stopped in her tracks. No one had answered her, which panicked her. Hemlock would have responded to her calling out to him. She knew this because in the past, he'd done just that. Before she could move, a loud thud slammed into the door then another. Running towards the door, Charlie grabbed the car keys from the wooden bowl, knocking it onto the floor. Everything from the bowl scattered across the floor.

Just then, a loud crashing sound caused her to scream. On the floor of the entryway lay a brick amongst the broken glass. Hitting the panic button on the car's fob, she ran back towards the living room and snatched up her phone. She could hear the car alarm going off as she opened the phone to call Hemlock. The next sounds she heard was screeching tires. Clicking the key fob she turned off the car alarm and ran upstairs, locking herself in the bedroom.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hemlock smirked thinking how things between him and Charlie had settled into a routine. It was kisses in passing, winks and smiles while watching TV. But at night when the house was quiet, they wrapped themselves up in each other. He loved how she snuggled up on the sofa next to him. How she wasn't afraid to argue her point or laugh at him when he did something dumb. Late at night when they went to bed, they were careful navigating the relationship. Neither wanting to make things awkward by labeling what they were.

He'd hoped Sherlock could get him some info on his late-night visitor. There wasn't enough on the surveillance to give them anything. Hemlock brushed it off as a random thief looking for loose change or small electronics they could steal. Charlie wasn't so sure. She thought it was Crispen and Ashley. Without proof, they couldn't do anything about it.

Closing the patient file he had been updating, Hemlock set it on the counter. Checking if there were any other patients, he found out the clinic was quiet for the time being. Wanting to get off his feet for a bit, he headed for an empty office.

Limping down the clinic's corridor, Hemlock ducked into one of the clinic's offices.

Settling into a chair, he rested his aching foot on the desk, trying to get some relief. It hadn't helped that he not only hadn't stopped riding his bike—he'd been on it for sixteen hours and was ready to be finished for the day. The problem was the older doctor had called off once again. Instead of bothering Razor to come in early, Hemlock had seen to the patients. "How's the foot?" Lottie asked as she walked into the office.

Without opening his eyes, Hemlock told her the truth, "Hurts like a bitch."

“Are you making sure it’s not getting infected?”

“Yes, Doctor.”

She wanted to thump him on the foot for being a shit, but a guy like Hemlock was almost like lighting a firecracker. The fuse could be faulty and go off instantly in your hand. Or it could be a dud, and nothing happened. Deciding it was the day to take the risk, she commented on Hemlock’s sour mood, “Someone’s bitchy today.”

“Sorry.” Hemlock moved to set his feet down.

Cocking her head, Lottie stared at Hemlock then at his foot now resting on the floor. “Let me take a look at the foot.” She shrugged casually.

He appreciated the offer, but he didn’t want more than one person touching the damn thing. “Razor’s coming to do just that.”

“Fine, don’t let me look at it,” Lottie joked with him.

“Lottie.” Razor stood in the doorway watching the interaction between his brother and the woman he craved. He saw the death stare she gave him and ignored it.

“Hemlock doesn’t deal with pain well. He tends to lash out.” He watched Lottie step back and snickered.

“Don’t listen to Razor.” Hemlock glared at Razor. “He just doesn’t want you touching me.”

Watching Lottie leave the room, Hemlock gave Razor a shitty grin. “Told you don’t mess with me, brother.”

“You forget I can cause you lots of pain.” Razor sat down on a rolling stool and moved towards Hemlock. “What time did you come in tonight?”

“Try eight a.m.” He saw Razor’s eyes go furious. “Dr. Primo called off. Again.”

“Something has to give,” Razor grumbled, pissed the older doctor had once again not showed for his shift. How did he not realize Hemlock had been there all damn day? When Lottie ducked back in setting down a tray of medical utensils, he knew the answer to that question. He was distracted by his nurse.

Hemlock knew his brother was tired of the older doctor and wanted in on the clinic. If he could get Razor to let him come on as a full-time nurse practitioner, he could cut his hours at the hospital. “You do know with my license I can treat patients on my own.”

“Mmmhmm.” Razor had heard Hemlock, but didn’t want to saddle the kid with being strapped to the clinic full time. They weren’t making a ton of money. Hell, they barely made payroll. It wasn’t like all their patients had medical insurance. And they didn’t turn away those who couldn’t pay. Lately it seemed more and more weren’t able to pay. If Razor didn’t know better, he would think the books were being cooked. But none of them were struggling. At least not enough to steal from the clinic. “Take your shoe off so I can take a look at your foot. Then you’re going home.”

Hemlock had started taking off his boot when his phone rang. “One second, Razor. Hemlock took his phone from his pocket and noticed it was Charlie calling him. “Hey.” He heard the stark panic in her voice as she rattled off a string of intangible words. “Slow down, Charlie. I can’t understand you.”

“Someone threw a brick through the front window,” she said and was trying to control her panic as she blurted out what happened in a rush.

“Charlie, slow down, I can’t understand what you’re saying?”

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With tears running down her face, Charlie sat with her back to the headboard staring at the bedroom door. More so, the doorknob in case it turned. “Someone threw a brick through the window downstairs’,” she repeated.

“Where are you now?”

“Locked in the bedroom.”

Snapping his fingers he got Razor’s attention, who was already on his phone. “I’m on my way. Don’t touch the brick and call the cops. Wait, don’t call the cops.”

“What? Why?”

“Don’t call the cops. I’ll call them when I get there.” The last thing he needed would be some cop snooping around his house while he wasn’t there. After all, they already knew he had a pellet gun, and that would be enough for them to get nosy. “I’m calling the clubhouse. Someone will be there soon.” Hemlock saw Razor pointing at his own phone.

“Truck and Vicious are on their way there now. ETA five minutes,” Razor informed him, which Hemlock relayed to Charlie as he headed for the door.

“Stay on the phone with me.”

Could they get through more than a week without something bad happening? First it was the tire being slashed, then the mystery person messing with his rides. Now, some asshole had thrown a fucking brick through his window. What was next?

Chapter Twenty-Four

Hemlock arrived ten minutes after Truck and Vicious who had already cleared his house of all weapons. Vicious and Truck rolled out of the driveway with the bikes thundering through the quiet streets as Hemlock called the cops. He was never so thankful that his neighbors didn't care that he was a biker.

When the cops arrived, he let them inside. The last thing expected was for Charlie to make it a social visit. She asked the cops if they'd like to have a seat and offered them sodas, coffees, a bottle of water. When she looked over at him, he saw her acknowledge the look on his face. He stood staring at her like she'd lost her mind. He didn't want them there any longer than necessary. All he could think was next she'd ask if they wanted cake or some shit.

After he and Charlie told the cops about all the strange things that had been happening, they thanked the officers and waved as they drove away. Ten minutes later, Truck showed up with wood to board up the window.

"Tell us what happened again and start at the beginning," Hemlock and Truck asked Charlie at the same time. Neither man missed the look of annoyance on her face. They listened as she started from when she got home.

As she started the story they stopped her. "When you pulled up did you see any vehicles that seemed out of place?"

Charlie thought about the question. The only car she thought was different was at the neighbor's house across the street. "I thought the car looked out of place. The couple that lives there has a minivan. They're also on vacation until next week. I thought maybe it was one of their kids checking on the place. Even another neighbor using their driveway for guests," her voice cracking with frustration.

“What did the car look like?” Hemlock asked, trying to keep the anger out of his voice. He wasn’t mad at Charlie; his anger was directed at the person or persons targeting him.

Charlie sighed as she thought about the automobile. “It was a non-descript white car. Four doors with dark tinted windows.” Shrugging, that was the only things she remembered.

“How long from when you came home until you heard the first noise?” Truck knew the entire situation was wearing on both Charlie and Hemlock. The difference was his brother couldn’t find it in himself to place the blame for everything that happened against her. Hemlock would carry the blame until proven wrong.

“An hour,” Charlie snapped.

Truck raised an eyebrow. “They gave you time to come in and get ready for bed before launching their attack.”

Deep down Charlie knew it was Crispen and Ashley. She just didn’t know why. They had the apartment she was paying for, and she paid for the utilities. They’d even stolen her one prize possession. Her mother’s necklace. What else could they want from her?

Months, she had mire months, and the lease would be up, and she’d be free. The whole thing ate at her. Sitting on the sofa, she stared at the ceiling going over everything that had happened since finding Crispen and Ashley together. The attacks by Ashley, the locking her out of her own apartment. Them destroying her clothes and taking her jewelry. What was the point of all of it? Was it all for kicks? Is this how they got their jollies? “Were they trying to get inside?” she asked out loud.

Truck looked at Hemlock, seeing his mood was spiraling down the drain, he spoke,

“You were smart to hit the alarm button on the car.”

Charlie sat up, curling her legs under herself she pulled one of the large throw pillows to her chest. “I couldn’t think of anything else to do.”

Truck nodded listening to her. He could see Charlie, like Hemlock, was dealing with the situation in two different ways. Where Hemlock was struggling with his anger. Charlie was stoic. She appeared to have reconciled herself to accepting these events as part of her life. “You’re still thinking it’s your ex and his bitch.”

Nibbling on her bottom lip, Charlie knew she should be more emotional, but she was worn out from everything that had been happening. “If it isn’t them, then who could it be?”

“Let’s break things down. Since you’ve moved into Hemlock’s the only things that have happened other than tonight have been someone snooping around the cars and the car tire being slashed,” Truck said as he thought about the different things that had happened in the last few months.

“Oh my God!” She turned facing Hemlock. “I thought the tire was just flat. Not slashed.”

Hemlock looked at Truck. “Thanks, brother.”

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Holding up his hands in surrender, Truck tried taking the heat off himself. “Hey, I didn’t keep it from her.” Looking from Hemlock to Charlie and back, Truck decided that was his cue to leave. “I should go. Call me if you need me,” he said, then headed to the door quickly.

When the door closed, Hemlock shrugged. What was there to say? Charlie didn’t look like she wanted to hear his reason for not telling her. She probably didn’t want to know he had put a tracker not only on his car but on her phone as well. He knew where she was at all times. Day or night, he knew. He also knew it was best to keep somethings to himself.

“You know I’m mad right now.”

“Yeah. I’m aware.”

“Is there anything else I should know about, Hemlock?”

This was one of those trick questions the brothers talked about. Questions that women asked when they wanted to trip a guy up. It was the ‘does this outfit look bad on me’ question. He was damned if he told her and damned if he didn’t. The only thing that mattered was if he wanted her pissed at him or when he wanted her pissed at him. Now, when things were calm, or when she was reeling from yet another incident. Then again, was there a right time to have her pissed? Best to get it over with, he thought.

“There’s a tracker on my car.” He held up his hands, shutting her down before she got started. “Before you get all pissy with me, I wanted to make sure you were always

safe. And there's also one on your phone," he mumbled the second part hoping she'd missed it. No luck there, he thought when the throw pillow came whizzing past his head. When the second one sailed towards him, Hemlock simply grabbed it and tossed it on a chair.

"Are you done throwing a tantrum?" he asked her, his voice firm, he was done being pissed at the situation... over worrying about if she would be angry at him or not. If Charlie had a problem with it, she could get over it.

The calmness she'd settled into was gone... replaced with an anger she hadn't known was laying just below. "I can't believe you would track me like some damn animal."

"I've been tracking you to make sure no one kidnapped you or worse, killed you." He saw the look she gave him. "Don't look at me like that. You and I both know your exes are crazy."

He had her there. Crispen and Ashley were crazy. The question was how crazy were they? "I know what you're doing is for peace of mind. It's just intrusive."

Hemlock closed the distance between them. When he stepped up to Charlie, he widened his stance so he could look into her eyes. "You think me tracking you is intrusive? Sweetheart, you have no idea the lengths I'll go to keep you safe."

She wanted to stay angry, but the way Hemlock said he'd go to great lengths to keep her safe had Charlie sighing. No man had ever said things like that to her and meant them. Sure, her high school boyfriend said he'd die for her. But they were fifteen at the time and he clearly wouldn't have died for her. He just wanted in her pants. At the first hint of danger, he would have run screaming faster than she would have.

"I'm not sure what to say, or how to act at hearing you say that," she confessed as he stared into her eyes. Damn, the guy was sexy. When he stood in front of her all

Charlie could do was stare at him.

“I want your word you won’t go anywhere near Ashley or Crispen. I want you to promise you won’t go anywhere near them or the apartment.” Watching as Charlie’s eyes looked away, Hemlock said, “Charlie, look at me.”

“I promise,” she said, her voice heavy as her words came out breathy.

“Thank you.”

She was about to offer to make it up to him when Hemlock silenced her with his finger. Before she balked at him, she heard the faint sounds of someone outside the front door. The heavy knock startled her and made Charlie jump.

Hemlock looked at Charlie. “Stay.” Smirking, he headed for the door. He was sure she’d have something to say about him speaking to her like she was a dog. Snatching open the door, he half expected Truck or the cops to be standing there. Instead, it was Razor. Leaning outside, he looked around. “What are you doing here, Razor?”

Looking at Hemlock, Razor almost chuckled at seeing the brother’s agitation by his intrusion. “I didn’t get to look at your foot.”

“Why aren’t you at the clinic?” Hemlock asked, his voice short.

Raising an eyebrow at Hemlock, Razor stated the obvious, “We close at two a.m.”

Checking his watch, Hemlock was shocked at the time. “It’s that late already?”

Razor shoved off the wall. “Yes, it is. Now are you going to let me in or not?”

“Come on in.” Moving back, Hemlock let Razor inside and closed the door.

When they entered the living room, Charlie stayed long enough to hear Hemlock recount what had happened earlier. She felt like a magnifying glass was hanging over her every time something happened... every time one of Hemlock's brothers looked at her.

Hearing Razor and Hemlock wrapping up about the things that happened, Charlie said goodnight and headed for the door, then upstairs, leaving Hemlock and Razor alone. She needed time to settle her thoughts. There was no proof that Ashley or Crispen had thrown the brick through the window. Just as there wasn't any proof they had been sneaking around the condo weeks ago. Or behind the tire being slashed. Nothing that had happened to the car or around the apartment could be traced back to them.

The diner wasn't in the best of locations. Whoever had been sneaking around the cars could have easily come back and broken the window to get back at Hemlock for shooting at them. All of it could be wrapped up in a nice, neat package that said it was all a coincidence. Not one piece of evidence led back to Ashley and Crispen.

If she took them out of the equation, all she had left would be the apartment, the break in at the hotel, and the scene at the library that had their smudgy fingerprints on. Those few things bugged her the most. She wondered what was the point.

Climbing the stairs, Charlie thought about the 1990s movie *Single White Female*. It was about one roommate's obsession with the other one to the point roommate one starts to pose as roommate two trying to become the roommate. Shaking her head, Charlie went to lie down. Clearly, she was grasping at straws trying to rationalize why Ashley had inserted herself into Charlie's life. *Single White Female*, what ev!

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She barely walked into the bedroom when Hemlock bounded into the room wrapping his arms around her. “What are you doing?”

“Taking control of this situation.” He smirked.

With her heart pulsing in her ears, she knew tonight would differ from before. It was different because whether Hemlock admitted it or not; she had brought trouble to his door. With her heart heavy, she knew come tomorrow she would start looking for somewhere else to live. Not that Hemlock would ever ask her to move. No, he was too much of a sweetheart to be mean. She would have to be the one to take that first step.

With his arms wrapped around Charlie, Hemlock kicked the bedroom door closed. Keeping her pressed tight against him, he moved them deeper in the room. When she said his name, he silenced her with a deep, slow kiss. Everything he wanted was her. The way she responded to him had sealed the deal for him.

Charlie tried telling him she was sorry for all the trouble, but Hemlock silenced her with another round of passionate kisses, anudge of his tongue had Charlie melting into the kisses. Moving toward the bed, he caressed her neck with his mouth. His hands were already easing up her body.

With Hemlock pressed against her, Charlie could feel how much he wanted her.

Slipping out of his arms, she slipped out of her clothes, leaving her naked. He loved the sight of her breasts as her breath hitched. Her trim waist meeting the fullness of her hips had his mouth watering as his eyes traveled lower over her body. Reaching

out his fingers, he toyed with a lock of her long hair.

Leaning down, he moved his mouth over one rigid nipple and pulled on it with his teeth. Charlie moaned in pleasure. Walking her backwards, he pushed her down on the bed, then crawled over her.

“You’re still dressed.” Smiling, she reached between them to unbuckle his belt. Her hands tugged at his belt, unbuckling it and pulling it out of the loops of his jeans.

“I am. Are you helping me out of my clothes?”

“I am.” She loved the way he watched her so intently.

Rolling them over, he brought her on top of him. “I think this would be easier for you.” Slipping out of his shirt, he watched as she leaned forward, ran her tongue over his nipples before scraping her teeth over them slowly. She wanted him naked. Going up on her knees as she straddled him, she smiled as he shoved his jeans down. Slipping off the bed, Charlie stood between his legs and tugged off his pants. Licking her lips, she appreciated the full erection that his hand stroked. Crawling back over him, she moved against him. His hands went to her hips, lifting her, positioning the head of his erection at her entrance.

Easing down his cock, she ground against him. He gripped her hips, pushing deeper into her sex. “Sweetheart,” he gritted out. “You need to get moving.” Watching as she smiled down at him, Hemlock flipped them over, causing her to scream. When she wiggled against him, trying to get him moving, he pinned her down. “My turn, sweetheart.”

“I really need you to get moving, babe.” Reaching out for his hands, Hemlock gripped hers as he started moving against her body. If anyone said she withered, Charlie would have rolled her eyes. But here she was, withering beneath him. She felt

him everywhere. She couldn't get a clear thought in her head. There was a lot to say about begging.

Hemlock slid out of her, moving down her body, lavishing kisses and nipping down along her stomach to the apex of her sex. He felt her hands tangle in his hair. Running his fingers through her folds, he nipped the inside of her thighs. His tongue came close to her sex, then moved away. She moved, trying to get him where she wanted him.

Then he flipped her over. He massaged her ass, moving his hands down her legs as he shoved them apart to accommodate his size. Pulling her up on her hands and knees, he plunged into her wet pussy, moaning deep in his throat at the feeling of her wrapping around his cock.

She arched her back, pressing hard against him. He watched as she looked over her shoulder and watched him fuck her. Her eyes locked on their bodies coming together made him harder. When she slowed, he grabbed her hips and held her firmly against him while he grounded against her. Hemlock felt herbody tremble as she began moving roughly against him. His mind went silent as they fell over the edge together. When his body finally calmed, he collapsed with her on the bed.

Charlie tried to speak. Instead, she just rolled with Hemlock as he pulled her into his side. She had never felt so relaxed in her entire life. If he asked her, she would let him do anything he wanted at this point.

An hour later, Hemlock lay next to Charlie as she stared at the ceiling thinking about how Crispen and Ashley had managed to ruin yet something else in her life. Rolling into a seated position on the side of the bed, Charlie's emotions were getting the best of her. Glancing back at Hemlock, she watched him sprawled out on the bed sleeping. The light that filtered in from outside made him look angelic.

“Are you okay, sweetheart,” he mumbled.

“Yeah, I’m gonna go downstairs and get a drink of water.”

“Mmmm-kay, don’t be too long.”

“I won’t.” Getting up, Charlie picked up her clothes from the floor and carried them with her as she left the bedroom. Standing in the hall she dressed quickly before quietly going downstairs.

She said she wouldn’t go. Promised she would keep her head. But there she was, sneaking out of the condo, heading for a showdown that was a long time coming.

Charlie had laid awake too long thinking about all the aggravation and upheaval Ashley and Crispen had caused her. It made no sense to her, and she wanted answers. She needed answers. Jack Nicholson’s words from an older movie ran through her head. Something about wanting answers, needing answers, not being able to handle the truth. She wasn’t exactly sure on the words just that his voice was the sound she was hearing in her head. Maybe she had a head injury, and all of this was just a figment of her imagination. Stranger things had happened to people.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The ride to the apartment took only thirty minutes. Charlie wished she’d have taken the long way. Although she was ready to confront Ashley and Crispen, she was in no way ready to be involved in another brawl. Pulling into the parking lot, she found an empty spot and parked the car. She didn’t get out, instead she sat there listening to the soft music that played through the car’s speakers.

Glancing over her shoulder, she didn’t see anyone meandering around the parking lot. It was, after all, the middle of the night. Closing her eyes, she leaned against the seat,

thinking about why she had come there? What was she going to achieve by confronting them? Thinking about how much time she had wasted being mad and hurt over Ashley and Crispen's betrayal only irritated her. If she wanted to move forward, which she did with Hemlock, she needed to be free of her exes.

Praying silently this wouldn't be the same situation like the last time she'd been there, Charlie shut off the car and got out. Standing in the parking lot, she stared at the apartment building and second guessed being there. "What am I doing?"

This wasn't her; she wasn't confrontational, and she wasn't a fighter. Climbing back into the car Charlie closed the door, deciding she'd just buy her time until she could get out of the lease. If she were lucky, Hemlock would still be asleep when she arrived back home. Home. What a great thought.

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Charlie made the thirty-minute drive back to the condo, thankful that Hemlock hadn't called her yet. That told her he hadn't woken up to find her gone. Pulling into the driveway, everything was just as she left it. Hemlock's bike was parked next to the work truck. Turning off the car, she glanced around making sure no one was lurking on the street before getting out.

Keeping the keys in her hand, Charlie got out, locked the car, and rushed to the door. It took her no time to unlock it and get inside. Closing the door, she had barely dropped the keys into the wooden bowl when she noticed the lamp in the living room was on. Shit, busted. Setting her purse down, she promised herself she wouldn't lie about where she had gone.

Squaring her shoulders, she made the short walk into the living room and stopped short. She hadn't expected the scene in front of her. There, sitting on a kitchen chair, was Ashley holding a large kitchen knife. Glancing around, Charlie looked for Crispen but didn't see him. Then her eyes landed on the stairway, praying Hemlock was okay. "What are you doing here, Ashley? Where's Crispen?" Again, her eyes went to the stairs.

"I wanted your life. The perfect family. The perfect school. The money," Ashley mumbled.

In hopes Hemlock was somehow still asleep and unaware of Ashley being in the house, Charlie kept Ashley focused on her and not on the stairs. "Why did you screw me over with Crispen?"

"Because you had him. Don't you get it, Charlie. Everything all the way back to your

parents' accident, it's been me. Me holding your hand at the funeral. Me helping you pack up the apartment. Me making sure you got back to school. As long as you were living your best life, so was I. Because I was the one in the background making it so."

Charlie tried to remain calm, but Ashley had snapped somewhere along the way. She had gone off the deep end. "My parents had piles of debt because of my so-called perfect life."

"But you had parents that cared!" Ashley shouted at Charlie. "I didn't and I wanted yours."

Charlie watched Ashley slide the butcher knife across her leg. It had cut through the denim fabric already. Now, red welts seeped blood. "My parents loved you."

"Not enough to give me what they gave you," Ashley said, glaring at Charlie. Her hand glided the knife across her leg over and over again. There was no pain, there was nothing but destroying the one person who stood in her way of having the life she'd dreamed about. She'd taken away Charlie's parents, taken away her fancy school, taken away every boyfriend she ever had. Hell, she was living in an apartment the bitch was paying for. And in about five minutes, Charlie would be begging for her miserable life. "You're still not understanding me."

Done with the whole situation, Charlie lashed out. This time hoping she did wake Hemlock. At least that way he could help her. "Then maybe you should spell it out for me, Ashley!"

"I rigged the boat so it would explode. I killed your parents."

Charlie couldn't breathe. It was an accident. The police said as much. Ashley was lying, goading her to make a move. Still Charlie wondered if what the bitch was saying had any truth to it. "I don't believe you."

She watched Ashley raking the knife over the bloody gash and physically shivered at the sight. It was the maniacal laughter that put fear into her.

“I asked them to love me and not you. They said no.”

Could Ashley be serious? Her parents’ deaths had been ruled an accident. A horrible, horrible accident. This was crazy. How had this happened? Staring at Ashley, all Charlie could think was the girl she knew, the girl she once believed was her friend, didn’t exist anymore. In her place was an evil, hateful person. A waste of space in her world.

If it were true and Ashley had killed her parents, what was the likely hood of Ashley killing her? She needed her to put down the knife. Then maybe they could talk things out. That would buy her some time.

The look on Ashley’s face told Charlie she needed to figure out an exit strategy like yesterday. Where was Crispen when you needed him. Figures he wouldn’t be around for his girlfriend’s mental breakdown. “Where’s Crispen, Ashley?”

“He’s tied up for the moment.”

Well, that didn’t sound good. “Is he tied up in the apartment? Or somewhere else?”

“Would you like to join him? I mean, I wouldn’t mind going upstairs and spending time with yourcurrentboyfriend.”

Charlie took a step to her left, trying to keep the movement nonchalant. When the knife in Ashley’s hand stopped, Charlie stopped. Keeping an eye on Ashley, she took another step butstopped when Ashley’s head snapped up and her eyes locked onto Charlie’s. “Ashley, put down the knife. You’re hurting yourself.”

“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“I just don’t like seeing you hurt.”

Charlie listened as Ashley mimicked her in a childish voice. “I just don’t like seeing you hurt. Ashley, put down the knife. You’re a stupid bitch, Ashley.”

Turning her attention towards a noise coming from upstairs, Charlie worried about Hemlock. With her phone in her purse, Charlie tried calculating how fast she could get to it, open the front door and get out before Ashley stabbed her in the back. Making up her mind, Charlie was about to bolt for the door when the sounds of a door being beaten down could be heard coming from upstairs.

When Ashley’s attention went towards the sound, Charlie took the opportunity to flee and ran for the door. She only made it halfway when the floor lamp came sailing at her. The cord tripped her, causing Charlie to fall to the floor. Scrambling to her feet, she struggled with the cord trying to get her foot dislodged.

Grabbing the doorknob, Charlie had the door partially opened when she felt a stinging pain in her arm. Glancing over, she saw Ashley dragging the blade down her arm as Hemlock tackled her to the ground. Yanking the door open the rest of the way, Charlie slammed into Truck.

“Charlie, where’s Hemlock?”

“Call the cops. Ashley’s got a knife.” Just then, Ashley appeared in the doorway. Blood covered her face and chest. “Oh God she’s killed Hemlock.” Both Charlie and Truck watched as the girl fell face first onto the ground.

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Hemlock appeared in the hallway, a bloody hand holding onto the wall. “I think... I need an ambulance,” was all he said before dropping to his knees. His hand sliding down the wall, leaving behind a bloody streak as he went down.

“Charlie, take my phone and call 911.” Truck tried handing her his phone, but Charlie was riveted to the spot. “Charlie!”

Startled by Truck shouting, Charlie grabbed the phone and called for help. She kept her eyes on Ashley, who hadn’t moved while Truck went to Hemlock. When the 911 operator answered, she rattled off the details.

Listening to the operator, Charlie tried answering the questions the best she could as she skirted around Ashley’s body. Her main focus now was getting over to where Truck had laid Hemlock on the ground.

It took what felt like forever for the emergency service to arrive. In all actuality it was only minutes. Charlie stood watching as the condo filled with cops and EMTs. People bumped into her, causing her to step back into the kitchen out of the way. She could hear chatter throughout the house as orders were barked out. She tried to get back out to Hemlock but was told to stay put so she wouldn’t be in the way.

Minutes ticked by before she saw Hemlock being carried out of the house. His eyes were closed, an oxygen mask covered his face. She could see blood seeping through the white sheet that covered him.

The first of many sobs slipped past her lips as Charlie crumpled to the ground. She watched Ashley’s body being turned over and was horrified seeing the girl’s eyes

were open. They stared at her as if Ashley was still there somehow. She was so transfixed on Ashley, Charlie barely heard Truck speaking to her.

Pissed and worried about Hemlock, Truck searched for Charlie. He found her on the kitchen floor, staring at the dead girl... Ashley. Squatting down next to Charlie, he grabbed a dishtowel from the counter and wrapped it around her arm. "Where's Hemlock?"

"Hemlock's being taken to the hospital. They stabilized him." Truck could tell Charlie was in shock. Flagging down an EMT, he motioned the woman to come check on Charlie.

When an EMT made their way into the kitchen, Truck unwrapped Charlie's arm, allowing the woman to see it.

"She needs to be taken to the hospital," the female EMT said.

Wrapping an arm around Charlie's shoulders, he somehow managed to get her off the floor and out of the condo and into an ambulance. He wasn't even sure where the second one had come, or when it showed up. However, when he went to climb in, Truck was told once again he would have to follow them in his own vehicle. "Charlie, I'll be right behind you." He saw the empty look she gave him, and he wanted to kill Ashley again.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It would take her hours to wrap her mind around everything Ashley had said inside the apartment. Charlie sat in a small room at the ER staring at the white wall. She had thought Truck or one of the other brothers would have come to check on her. No one had showed up. Not yet, at least.

Her eyes bounced around the room looking for a clock, she had no idea how long she'd been there. She didn't know if Hemlock was dead or alive. Running a hand over her arm, she noticed the blood. That was when the shakes started from the adrenaline release. Her teeth were even rattling as she shook.

With no one to tell her how Hemlock was doing, Charlie got off the bed and headed for the door. Her arm would heal with or without medical attention. She was done sitting alone freezing. As she reached for the door handle, a nurse entered the room.

"Did you need the restroom?"

Charlie stared at the woman and shook her head no. "I'm leaving. I need to check on my friend that was injured." She felt the nurse's hands as they touched her shoulders. Exhausted from the ordeal, she closed her eyes and let out a breath. Then did as the nurse asked and got back on the bed.

"I'll get you some warm blankets. I just need to get some information first."

Charlie rattled off answers to all the questions. She wanted to leave, she wanted to find out about Hemlock. "Can you find out about Emile Durand for me? Please."

"I'll see what I can find out for you. Now lay back and try to rest. The doctor will be in shortly to take care of your arm."

Those were the last words Charlie heard for over an hour. When the doctor finally came in, he apologized for the delay. He offhandedly told her they had a knife wound victim come in and they had to stabilize the man. Charlie's eyes welled up with tears as she stared at the doctor. "Is the man going to live?"

She saw the shocked look on the doctor's face as his eyes went from the wound on her arm to her face. "I was brought in at the same time."

“Are you friends with the victim?” the doctor asked cautiously not sure who he was dealing with.

“Yes, he’s my friend. We were attacked in our home.”

“He’s in surgery,” was all the doctor said as he cleaned her wound. Seemed no one wanted to tell her anything substantial. Charlie felt the cold liquid run down her arm and winced when it burned. Every touch the doctor made caused her discomfort. She barely heard what the doctor said, but the pinch from the needle... that she felt.

Her mind kept going back to earlier. Ashley had died laying on that cold floor in front of her. Charlie could still see the pool of blood as it seeped from beneath her. She could still see her lifeless eyes staring back at her. Somewhere in the back of her mind Crispen popped up. Ashley had said he was tied up. Oh crap, what if Crispen was tied up in the apartment? What if he was dying as well?

All done she heard the doctor state. Staring down, she saw a few stitches in two different areas. Most of the wound was taped shut by steri-strips. “Is there an officer still here?”

“Yes. Why? Do you need one?” the doctor asked her.

“I do.”

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The doctor looked over at a nurse, that Charlie was unaware had come in, and nodded to her. Charlie watched her exit the room and close the door. “Can you find out about my friend for me?” she asked for the third time.

“I promise to get you some news,” the doctor answered before rattling off a list of do’s and dont’s that she cared nothing about. When he finally left, promising once again that he’d get her news on Hemlock, Charlie closed her eyes. Laying there she silently cried. Not from the pain she was in, but Hemlock for being unlucky to get tangled up in her life.

When the door popped open, Charlie expected to see the doctor or an officer. Instead, Truck walked in, looking somber. Her heart clenched at the sight of him. Shoving herself into a sitting position, she felt the cracks in her composure widening. “Hemlock?” she asked, her voice trembling.

“He’s still in surgery, Truck’s voice was rough, his usual solid demeanor noticeably shaken. He lingered near the door, as though afraid stepping further into the room might break something fragile. He wasn’t used to this—consoling someone so vulnerable. His world was made of hardened men who masked pain with anger or bravado, not girls who wore their emotions on their sleeves. “How are you holding up?”

Charlie swiped at the tears running down her cheeks. They felt endless, burning tracks on her skin. “Barely. I’ve asked three times for news, and no one will tell me anything,” she said softly, her voice shaky, tinged with fear and frustration.

Truck nodded, but his eyes dropped to his shirt. Only now did he notice the dark

stains—Hemlock’s blood dried and stiff against the fabric. The sight hit him like a punch to the gut, and he pressed a hand to his chest as if to steady himself. “He’s the closest thing I’ve got to a sibling,” he mumbled, his throat tightening. “I can’t lose him, Charlie.”

Charlie’s breath hitched, and her hands clenched the blanket draped across her lap. “I’m sorry.”

Truck shook his head, his jaw clenching against the storm of emotions threatening to rise. “You didn’t do this, Charlie.”

Her eyes brimmed with fresh tears. “I brought my problems to his door,” she whispered, her voice breaking.

“He could’ve just handed you some cash and sent you on your way,” Truck countered, his tone firm but not unkind. “But he didn’t. He chose to bring you—and your problems—into his life. That was his decision.”

“I love him, Truck,” she confessed, her words barely audible.

“I know you do, Charlie.” Truck exhaled, his shoulders sagging slightly as he forced himself to meet her gaze. “And he’ll come out of this just fine.” He tried to smile, to offer her a flicker of reassurance, but the weight in his chest was too heavy to lift.

The silence between them grew thick, oppressive. Finally, Truck cleared his throat. “I need to check in with Vicious and Teller,” he said, his voice more gruff than he intended. He couldn’t stand the idea of breaking down in front of her.

He turned and walked out, his boots heavy against the tile floor. As he made his way to the waiting room, his mind churned with memories of Hemlock—the laughter, the fights, the unspoken bond that made them brothers in every way but blood. He

couldn't afford to lose him now. Not like this.

Truck wasn't surprised when he stepped into the waiting room. The entire chapter was there, scattered across the room like pieces of a fractured puzzle. Some stood, pacing with agitation, while others sat with grim faces. Even Sway and Kennedy, who rarely lingered for emotional displays, were present. Their collective silence was heavy, charged with unspoken fears.

He caught Teller's eye and braced himself as the chapter president made a beeline toward him. Shoving a hand through his hair, Truck mentally prepared for the inevitable interrogation. He wasn't afraid of fines, center punches, or even being stripped of his colors—those were tangible, physical consequences he could handle. But concern? That threw him. He didn't do emotions, not his own and certainly not anyone else's.

“Any news on Hemlock and Charlie?” Teller's tone was steady, but his eyes betrayed the weight of his worry.

Truck scrubbed a hand over his face, trying to hide the crack in his own composure. “Charlie's being stitched up. Last I heard, Hemlock's still in surgery.”

Teller nodded, his lips pressing into a thin line. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Truck hesitated. The last thing he wanted was to rehash the chaos, but he knew he couldn't avoid it. “No. I haven't spoken to Charlie yet. She's an emotional wreck right now. All I know is what Hemlock told me on the phone.”

“And what was that?”

Truck glanced around the room, his eyes landing on Vicious leaning against the wall, arms crossed. He silently willed the VP to come over, but the man stayed rooted,

watching from a distance. With a resigned sigh, Truck turned back to Teller. “Hemlock called me, frantic. Someone broke in while he was sleeping, caught him off guard. He was hit over the head and hog-tied. When he finally got loose, he called me. By the time I got there, Charlie was running out of the house—I figured to get help. Then this girl, Ashley, showed up in the hallway, covered in blood. She collapsed right there. Moments later, Hemlock stepped into view, bleeding all over, and asked for an ambulance before dropping.”

Teller’s face hardened, his jaw tightening as he processed the information. “Anything else you can tell me?”

“No,” Truck’s voice was clipped, the weight of the night pressing heavily on his shoulders.

The silence between them stretched thin, broken only by the hum of fluorescent lights and the occasional murmur of hospital staff passing by. Truck glanced toward the double doors leading to the emergency area, hoping for some kind of update, but none came. He could feel the collective tension of the chapter behind him, their unspoken demand for answers he didn’t have.

Teller clapped Truck on the shoulder, his grip firm and reassuring. “Go back and stay with Charlie. We’ll all be right herewhen she’s released. And we’ll keep pressing them for updates on Hemlock until they give us the answers we want.”

Truck nodded, but before he could turn to leave, Teller did something completely out of character—something that took Truck by surprise. Teller pulled him into a hug. Not a brief, obligatory gesture, but a solid, brotherly embrace. It wasn’t just rare; it was unheard of. Teller didn’t hug people—not his men, not anyone.

“You hear me?” Teller said quietly, his voice steady, but thick with emotion. “He’s gonna be fine. Emile will be up and around, overworking himself like he always

does. You'll see." The words were spoken with conviction, but deep down, Teller was praying they'd hold true.

Truck stood frozen for a moment before returning the gesture, his hands gripping the back of Teller's cut. He didn't realize how much he needed the connection until it was happening. When Teller finally stepped back, his eyes met Truck's, holding his gaze with the kind of strength that only came from shared battles and unshakable loyalty.

"Thanks, Teller," Truck said, his voice low but earnest. He wasn't a man of many words, but the weight behind them said enough.

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“We’re family, Truck,” Teller replied, his tone firm yet warm. “And family doesn’t walk away when things go sideways.”

The words struck something deep within Truck, settling into a place he didn’t often visit. He gave Teller a small nod, the kind that said he understood—really understood—what the man was saying. No matter what, they stood together.

Truck hit the large silver button on the wall, and the doors slid open with a soft whoosh. He stepped into the quiet corridor, his boots echoing faintly against the linoleum. Passing the nurses’ station, he offered a polite nod to a tired-looking nurse before continuing to Charlie’s room. When he opened the door, the sight of her stopped him in his tracks.

She looked so small curled up under a heap of blankets, her trembling frame barely making a dent in the hospital bed. The stark white of the room only made her paleness more pronounced. Truck closed the door behind him softly, his voice low but filled with concern. “Charlie?”

Her eyes fluttered open, the weariness in them tugging at something deep inside him. “Hey. I thought you left,” she managed, her words shaky between shivers.

“Sorry. You can’t get rid of me that easily,” he said, attempting a weak smile. “I went out front to talk to Teller.” He stepped closer to the bed, his brows knitting together as he took in the way her body shook. “What’s wrong? Why are you shaking so badly?”

Charlie gripped the blankets tighter, her fingers ghostly white against the fabric.

“Adrenaline crash,” she said, her teeth chattering. “That’s what the doctor said.”

Truck dragged a chair closer to the bed, the scrape of metal against the floor muted by the heavy silence of the room. Sitting down, he reached out, his calloused hand covering hers. The tremors in her fingers vibrated through his palm, a stark reminder of how raw the night had left them both.

“When they release you,” he said, his voice steady, “we’ll go out front and wait with the others.”

Her brows knitted in confusion. “The others?”

“The brothers,” he clarified, his grip on her hand firm but gentle. “The whole chapter’s out there. Every single one of them, waiting for news on Hemlock.”

Charlie’s eyes glistened, her worry as clear as the tears she refused to let fall. Truck felt the weight of it like a stone in his chest. He wanted to take the worry from her, to shoulder it himself, but he didn’t know how—not when his own heart was heavy with the same fears.

For a moment, they sat in silence, her trembling slowly easing as his steady presence anchored her. He squeezed her hand, a small, unspoken promise he wouldn’t let her face this alone.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Charlie lay staring at the clock, each tick stretching time into something unbearable. The hospital’s fluorescent lighting hummed softly above her, the sound blending with the distant murmur of voices in the hall. She clutched the thin blanket tighter, waiting to be released—or for news about Hemlock.

Truck had excused himself again, muttering something about checking for an update. The door creaked open, and she turned her head, expecting to see his familiar frame or perhaps the nurse. Instead, a woman in uniform stepped into view, her presence commanding but calm.

“Miss Cote?” the officer asked, her tone professional but kind.

“Yes,” Charlie replied, her voice steady despite the tension curling in her chest.

“You asked for an officer?”

“I did,” Charlie said, sitting up a little straighter. “The girl who stabbed me and my friend Emile...” She paused, taking a shaky breath. “Ashley Mills.”

The officer nodded, confirming the name. “What about her?”

“She told me Crispen Allen was tied up. I don’t think she meant it to mean busy. I’m worried she hurt him. He might need medical attention,” Charlie explained, her words tumbling out faster than she intended.

“Was he at the house?”

“No,” Charlie said, shaking her head. “They lived together. I can give you the address.”

She quickly relayed the details—the name of the apartment complex, the gate code, the apartment number. “There’s a keypad to get inside,” she added, giving the code.

The officer scribbled down the information before lifting the radio hooked to her shoulder. “Unit 48, please respond,” the officer said into the device, her voice sharp and clear as she called in the details.

Charlie watched, her heart thudding in her chest as the officer confirmed the address over the radio. A strange mix of relief and dread settled over her as she realized the weight of what she had just done. It was over for now. At least until tomorrow. She knew the police would have more questions—probably ones she wouldn't have answers for.

The officer turned back to her, her expression softer now. “Thank you for the information. We'll let you know if Mr. Allen is okay.”

“Thank you,” Charlie murmured, her voice quieter now. She watched as the officer left, the door swinging open slightly behind her. For the first time in hours, Charlie felt like she could breathe, though her chest still ached with exhaustion and worry.

She didn't mind that the door was left ajar. It felt better this way—less isolating. Less like a cage.

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Moments later, Truck came into view, his broad frame filling the doorway. Relief was written across his face as his eyes met hers.

“Truck?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

He stepped inside, his expression softening as he came closer. “Yeah, it’s me. How’re you holding up?”

“Hemlock, Truck?”

“Hemlock’s gonna be fine,” Truck said, his voice thick with relief as he stood in the doorway. “We got word the surgery was a success. He’ll be heading to recovery soon.”

The weight he’d been carrying finally broke free, and tears spilled down his face unchecked. He swiped at them with the back of his hand, cursing under his breath. “Damn, I was scared to death,” he admitted, his voice cracking as he leaned heavily against the doorjamb, his legs threatening to give out.

Charlie froze for a moment, the words sinking in, then a wave of emotion overtook her. Tears flowed freely as she cried and laughed all at once, a chaotic mix of happiness and relief. The tension that had gripped her chest all night unraveled, leaving her gasping for breath in between her sobs and shaky laughter.

She didn’t care about the curious faces glancing in through the small window in the door or the passing nurses who slowed to look inside. Let them stare. All that mattered was Hemlock—alive and on the mend.

Truck finally pushed off the door jamb, stepping toward her. His eyes, red and watery, met hers, and for a moment, they just looked at each other. No words were needed; the relief, the gratitude, and the shared fear hung heavy in the air between them.

Without thinking, Charlie reached for his hand, and he took it, their grip solid and grounding. They stayed like that, holding onto each other in the quiet room, the outside world fading away for a while.

Early morning light filtered through the hospital's windows, casting faint golden streaks across the floor as Charlie walked down the empty corridor. The soft hum of the hospital came alive around her—distant voices, the rhythmic beeping of machines, and the faint rustle of nurses moving from room to room. She kept focus on the numbers mounted above each door, her breath shallow as she searched for Room 402.

She needed closure. And there was only one person who could give her that: Crispen Allen.

Ashley's rampage had left its mark. Crispen had sustained serious injuries before she tied him up and shoved him into a coat closet. Despite the trauma, the doctors had assured her he'd make a full recovery. But physical wounds were one thing; the rest of it—Charlie's unanswered questions—was another.

Finally, she reached the room just past the nurse's station. The door was slightly ajar. Taking a steadying breath, she stepped inside.

Crispen lay reclined in the bed, a remote in his hand as he flicked aimlessly through channels. The TV droned on in the background, its cheerful chatter a sharp contrast to the reality of their situation. He looked remarkably nonchalant, as if he weren't recovering from an attack—or mourning the loss of his girlfriend, now lying cold in

the morgue.

What struck Charlie, though, was the emptiness of the room. No visitors, no family, not even his overbearing father. For a fleeting moment, pity stirred in her chest. Then he spoke.

“What are you doing here?” Crispen’s tone was sharp, dismissive, as if her presence was an inconvenience.

Charlie’s fleeting pity evaporated. She crossed her arms, her gaze hardening. “Maybe start with ‘thank you’ before you catch an attitude, Crispen.”

He grunted, his eyes darting back to the TV. “Fine. Thanks,” his voice was flat, dripping with sarcasm.

Charlie bit back her frustration. She’d dealt with his self-centered attitude for years—she shouldn’t have expected anything different now. “I’m the one who sent the cops to find you,” she reminded him, her tone edged with steel.

“Yeah, well. Thanks,” he repeated, barely looking at her.

Her jaw tightened, but she pressed on, stepping closer to the bed. “Why?”

That one word hung in the air between them, heavier than she’d anticipated. It wasn’t just about Ashley. It was about all of it—the choices, the pain, the chaos. She needed an answer, something that could make sense of the wreckage Ashley had left behind.

For a moment, Crispen didn’t respond. His thumb hovered over the remote, the glow of the TV casting harsh shadows across his face. When he finally looked at her, his eyes were guarded, his expression unreadable.

Crispen rolled his eyes, his voice dripping with disdain, “Why what?”

Charlie took a step closer, her arms crossed tightly against her chest. “Why did you and Ashley do all the crappy things to me?”

For a moment, she thought he might show a shred of remorse, but then she saw it—the smirk creeping onto his face. It was the same smug, dismissive expression she’d seen too many times before. In that instant, she knew: Crispen was no different than Ashley.

“She was a solid fuck,” he said with a casual shrug. “And she gave wicked head. I didn’t give a shit if she had some vendetta against you.”

Charlie stared at him, the weight of his words crashing into her like a wave. She couldn’t believe she’d ever felt sorry for this man. He wasn’t worth it—not the tears, not the pain, not the energy. He wasn’t worth the air he breathed.

“Well,” she said evenly, her voice cold and steady, “I’ll make sure to tell the cops you knew everything she was doing.”

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Crispen laughed, a harsh, humorless sound. “They can’t touch me. I’m an Allen.”

Charlie turned toward the door, her hand resting on the handle as she glanced back at him. “Funny you say that,” she said, a wry smile tugging at her lips. “Because I don’t see your dad by your side.”

His glare could have cut glass, but it didn’t faze her. If anything, it gave her a sense of satisfaction. Without another word, she opened the door and walked out, leaving Crispen alone with his bitterness.

As she made her way down the hall, a small, incredulous laugh escaped her lips. A Lifetime movie, she thought. By the time the cops were done piecing together Crispen and Ashley’s twisted little saga, they’d have the perfect plot for one.

All she could do now was hope they cast someone stunning to play her part.

Down the hall she entered another hospital room. One she wanted to be in because the man currently in the bed was the only one who mattered to her. “How’s he doing?” she asked Truck as she stared at Hemlock lying in the bed.

Truck stood with his arms crossed over his chest, shaking his head at his brother. “He’s being an ass.”

Charlie walked further into the room. “Cut him some slack, Truck, he almost died. She gave Hemlock a wink.

“Yeah, cut me some slack, brother,” Hemlock mumbled, making Charlie smile.

Epilogue

Charlie closed the door, relieved the cops were done with the investigation. She stared at the pristine floor remembering Ashley lying dead... her eyes lifeless staring up at her.

By the time Hemlock had been released from the hospital, the condo was almost unrecognizable. Truck had handled the cleanup with the precision of someone who had done this kind of thing before. Every trace of the chaos that had unfolded had been wiped away.

Charlie stood at the threshold, eyes scanning the place as she entered. It didn't feel like the same apartment anymore. The bloodstains, the shattered glass, the overturned furniture—everything had been scrubbed clean.

She appreciated the help. She really did. Truck was one of the few people she could rely on. But there was something unsettling about how easy it had been for him to erase the signs of violence that had been so recent.

The door clicked shut behind her as she stepped further into the condo. Her gaze lingered on the spot where Ashley had last been. She had never imagined it would end the way it had.

She had hoped, maybe foolishly, that the cleanup might wipe away the memory. She didn't know if the memory would ever truly go away, but she'd learn to deal with it... like she did with all the other uncomfortable memories. Just like the information the officer had given her. She was trying to wrap her mind around it all. According to the officer, after the accounts of what had happened in the condo, they had reopened her parents' accident. According to the police, their deaths had been ruled suspicious. Now they were being ruled murder. Once they dug into Ashley's life, they found proof she was directly responsible for their deaths.

She leaned against the door, still catching her breath. The weight of the officer's words hung heavy in the air, making the small condo feel more like a prison than a place of refuge. Murder. Her parents' deaths, which had been ruled a tragic accident all these years, were now being connected to Ashley. The name of her friend, once a comfort, now felt like a curse.

She ran a hand through her hair, trying to piece everything together. Ashley had always been a part of the family—almost like a sister. But if the cops were right, everything she thought she knew about Ashley was a lie. Weeks of investigation had turned up proof of Ashley's involvement, evidence that pointed to her being responsible for the deaths of her parents.

The realization their deaths weren't an accident was like a punch to the gut. And now, knowing that Ashley... her best friend, the person she'd trusted the most... was behind it all. Charlie could barely comprehend it.

The officers had mentioned surveillance footage, financial records, and witness statements that tied Ashley to the scene of the crash. But none of it made sense. What motive could Ashley have? Why would she kill the people who had always treated her like family?

They'd informed her Crispen had recovered and was released from the hospital. He had been placed under arrest for non-related things to what he and Ashley had done to her. He hadn't spent more than forty-eight hours before being released. Now, it seemed like he was walking free, no questions asked.

If Charlie had to guess, it was more like Mr. Allen had made a substantial contribution to the police department. Or to some government office. That's when she realized Crispen didn't matter... his father didn't matter. The only person who mattered was Hemlock. She got her answer in the way Crispen had glared at her; the smug look on his face told her all she would ever need to know about him.

Shoving off from the door, she dropped the keys in the little wooden bowl and set her purse on the entryway table. Feels like home. She found Hemlock standing at the kitchen sink, walking up behind him she rested her forehead against his back, and then reached her arms around his waist wanting to be close. Charlie appreciated that he didn't ask any questions. He just continued washing the few dishes in the sink quietly. She would eventually tell him about what the police had told her, she just needed a minute to quiet her mind.

Charlie had promised herself the entire drive home she wouldn't cry. Swallowing hard, she let go of Hemlock, then stepped back and smiled when he faced her. Reaching around her neck, she pulled the long silver chain that held a silver cross, a Saint Christopher medal and a small tear drop half-carat diamond in a silver basket cage. The cops had found it amongst Ashley's things in the apartment.

"I told you I'd get it back." She tried keeping the smile on her face, but the necklace didn't make her happy as it had in the past. Now when she looked at it, it made her sad. It was a stark reminder of not only her parents' death, but that her best friend had been a psycho. Staring at Hemlock, she couldn't help but look at the long scar that ran down his side. It was a reminder that you never really knew a person.

Hemlock leaned against the kitchen counter drying his hands. Setting the dishtowel down he smiled at Charlie. Shoving off the counter, he stepped up to her. Toying with the necklace, he was happy for Charlie. "You did."

Charlie slipped the chain from her neck and placed the necklace into his hand, letting it puddle in his palm. "Can you keep it for me? I don't think I want it right now."

"If that's what you want."

"It is."

Hemlock set the necklace aside, then signaled Charlie to come to him, which she did. Six months it had taken him to completely heal, and she had stayed with him every bitchy step of the way. Gripping her hips, he lifted her up onto the counter.

“You shouldn’t be picking me up?”

Brushing a lock of hair behind Charlie’s ear, “I’m fine. Doc cleared me today.”

Now that everything was behind them and he had been cleared, Hemlock worried she would want to move out. On more than one occasion he caught her staring at the scar and worried she still carried the weight of what happened. “I’ve got a question for you, Charlie Rose Cote.”

“I’m sure I have an answer for you, Emile Durand.” She saw the shocked look on his face at hearing her say his formal name. Did he think she didn’t remember his real name? Silly boy.

“Are you moving out?”

Well, damn, she’d thought about it at one time, for his safety, but when everything was over, she’d forgotten all about, unwilling to give him up. Now, and after everything they’d been through, that wasn’t what she expected he was going to ask her. She’d been under the impression they were living together.

Not knowing what to say she scrambled for an answer. On one hand, she didn’t want him to think she expected to stay. On the other, she didn’t want him to think she didn’t want to stay. Was this the man’s version of the trick question? If she said no, did that make her appear needy and if she said yes, did it make her appear uninterested? What a conundrum.

“I...” she was stumbling over her own words. “I can start looking for a place.”

Truck's words echoed in his ears. "You have the worst luck with women." Shit, he was bungling things up. "Let me reword my question. Would you want to stay here with me?"

Charlie didn't have to think before she answered, "Yes!"

Hemlock moved closer to the counter making her widen her thighs to accommodate his hips. Leaning in he kissed her softly, wanting to feel that connection they had. He'd never had such a visceral connection with another person. Not like the one he had with her.

"Are you good being here?" He watched as she stared up at him. He hadn't asked before, afraid of what she'd say. But in all fairness, he needed to know how she felt about it. They could always move into the cottage style apartment at Truck's. He could rent the condo out.

"As long as you're with me. I'm good."

"If you're sure."

"I am."

Lifting her from the counter, Hemlock set Charlie down, then taking her hand started leading her towards the stairs. The destination was their bedroom, specifically their bed.

Charlie knew where they were headed. It'd been six months since they'd been intimate, and the doctor had cleared Hemlock. "I think we are expected at the clubhouse for a cookout."

"We can be late," he said tugging her towards the stairs.

“Why are we going upstairs?”

Hemlock stopped short, staring at Charlie like she’d lost her mind. “Woman!”

Charlie laughed at his expression and the way he addressed her. “I mean, the sofa’s right there, or maybe the kitchen table.” She saw him glance at both before shaking his head no.

“I want plenty of room to move around. So, it’s the bed or nothing.”

“Then, I pick the bed.”

“That’s my girl.”

Turned out being late for the cookout wasn’t really late. When they arrived, no one had even started cooking. It seemed cookout was code for party. If she’d known, she would have kept Hemlock home in bed. Now that they were there, they would be expected to stay. “We can slip out in about an hour,” Hemlock whispered at her side.

“Half an hour and I’ll do that thing you like so much,” she countered with a wink.

“We’ll say hello and leave,” he said, making her laugh.

The party was laid back, music played in the background as the hum of laughter roused from the crowd that was gathered around the bar.

“Half an hour, huh?” Hemlock raised an eyebrow at her, clearly more intrigued by the offer than he let on. He adjusted his jacket as if preparing himself for the social battlefield ahead. “You really think it will be that easy to leave?”

“I’m sure if you fain exhaustion, they might not give us a hard time,” she teased, nudging him with her elbow. The teasing smile was matched with a twinkle in her

eyes.

“You’re right. We’ll just say hello and then sneak out. No big deal,” he whispered, looking for Truck. The moment of hesitation made it clear that they both were calculating how to make the exit as seamless as possible.

Charlie nodded, her eyes scanning the crowd, already plotting their quick escape. “We’ll just say hi, have a burger and step away.” She laughed. “No one will even notice we’re gone.”

“Hey, look who finally made it!!!” Truck said with a chuckle.

Hemlock leaned over a whispered promise eased from his lips, “Half an hour.”

Charlie smiled...Hard.