



3 SEAL DADDIES

for Christmas

AVA GRAY

H A R E M H E A R T S

3 SEAL DADDIES FOR CHRISTMAS

AVA GRAY

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BLURB

I swore I wouldn't come back to my hometown. The moment I arrive home, three blasts from the past want to make me their Christmas miracle.

When my brother tragically died, it left my life in a pile of ash. But an unexpected return to Harbank Spring reunites me with his three military best friends who'd do anything to take care of me.

There's **Alexander Hawke**, a veteran widower with a baby girl whom I shared a drunken kiss with years ago, before I skipped town. I broke his beautiful heart... will he break mine?

Axel Ramsey is the town's playboy silver fox, who makes fun of the fact he isn't a father yet, since he's slept with so many women. Except now, he only has eyes for me.

And I can't forget **Eli Pierce**... the single dad of an adorable little girl in my ice dancing class. The tough and gentle man charms with how deeply he cares and how eager he is to show it.

They all want me - the town's wild child who abandoned them all because I felt responsible for my brother's death. But now, the three men from my past will do anything to convince me I belong with them.

When I move back into my brother's house, I suddenly live with three irresistible men... who are totally off-limits, because they're my *brother's best friends*.

As the festivities for the holiday season begin, it becomes harder and harder to resist...

And keep my secret - that one of them is the father of my *secret baby*.

3 SEAL Daddies for Christmas is book 1 in a series of interconnected why choose standalones, and can be enjoyed on its own. Available to binge with KU now!

CLOVER

The picturesque town of Harbank Springs hadn't changed much in the four years since I'd last set foot here, like a snapshot had been taken the night my brother died, and both he and the town existed in an ethereal, snowy limbo.

Harbank Springs was a Tourist town at best, and a dawdy postcard at worst. Nestled into the snowy mountains in Minnesota, Harbank was as festive a Christmas town as one could expect from a place that was covered in a layer of thick snow for five months a year. In the Winter, the entire town glowed from festive Christmas lights, trees lining the streets like glittering statues, and the air would fill with the homey scent of hot chocolate, cinnamon and sugar. Tourists poured in from all over to attend the Christmas markets, ski in the mountains, ice skate on the frozen Lake, and tell us how lucky we were to live in a place like this.

Harbank even drew in tourists in the summer but the numbers were less. That had been my favorite tourist season; mountain climbers and fishermen asked a lot less questions when the town looked like every other lakeside town in America. It really was a bright, beautiful place to live.

And I had never intended to return.

Four years had passed since the worst night of my life. I had placed Harbank Springs firmly in my rearview mirror and out of my mind, trying to leave the guilt behind as well.

Life had a funny way of dragging me back.

“Madison!” I called loudly, attracting the attention of the brunette girl with pigtails who spun in the middle of the ice rink. “Remember to keep your knees together!”

Having spent the past four years scrambling to ensure those years of Ice Skating lessons weren't a complete waste by teaching the *Tinkerbell Troupe* in Saint Cloud, it was perhaps only natural that when the teacher of the *Little Sprinkles Kids Ice Skating club* in Harbank fell ill, it was up to me to fill her shoes.

“You have no family, right? And at this time of year, six weeks until Christmas? You'd be doing me a *huge* favor. It is our sister club, after all.”

My manager had been *exceptionally* persuasive and how could I say no after she'd laid out how empty and pathetic my life currently was. A woman with no children and family to speak of? Definitely didn't have Christmas plans.

Technically I didn't, but I had been looking forward to binging the latest season of *Euphoria* over as much Christmas chocolate that I could get my hands on.

“Lee, lean forward onto your toes when you want to stop,” I called out to a dark-haired boy whose arms windmilled in his weak attempt to end his slide.

Watching as he followed my instructions and came to a stop, it was difficult to keep the smile from my face. It didn't matter where I was or who I was teaching; there was something very satisfying about seeing little faces light up when they realized their ability to do something on the ice. It was the highlight of my day before I would retreat to my room at the Pine Lodge and remain hidden away until my next shift.

This was surely the first time in years that I'd been glad Harbank was flooded with tourists at this time of year. Made it easy for me to slip in under the radar and hopefully slip out again just after Christmas. Assuming Agnes recovered by then.

“Look at me, Clover!” yelled one of the children, a girl with short, curly brown hair and the brightest blue eyes I'd ever

seen. She clung to the safety railing, and as soon as she had my attention, she let go and slid a few meters before coming to a stop again.

“Amazing, Hayley!” I called back, clapping my hands together. “I’m so proud of you!”

She flashed me a toothy grin, then her brow furrowed once more and she went back to focusing on her balance. These kids were not as far along as the children I was used to teaching at Tinkerbell and I had six weeks to whip them into shape in order to perform a dance recital.

It would be difficult, but throwing myself into the challenge would keep my mind off everything else.

Especially everyone in Harbank that I was looking to avoid.

The class wrapped up an hour later and I escorted all the exhausted children off the ice. With wide smiles and rosy cheeks from the cold air, they filed off the ice and into the changing room, where they followed my step-by-step instructions on properly removing ice skates. That part they nailed.

Another day drew to a close and I stretched out my tired legs against the reception desk, keeping my back to the door as Marlene, the second carer, kept an eye on the kids being collected by their parents.

“I swear, no matter how often I do this, chasing kids on the ice is more of a workout than I’m ever prepared for. My legs are throbbing,” I chuckled over my mug of tea. Marlene snorted down at her paperwork, glancing up every time the door buzzed, signalling another child had been collected and swept away into the snowy darkness.

“That’s why I’m firmly behind the desk,” Marlene said.

“Oh, of course,” I nodded seriously. “Not at all because you’re only 19 and a trainee.”

Marlene’s head snapped up and her green eyes narrowed playfully. “Definitely not. That’s all a technicality.”

“Mhmm.” Sipping my tea, my eyes closed briefly as warmth swept down my chest like a gentle caress, soothing any lingering cold from the ice. Marlene was my only social interaction since I’d arrived here; she was too young to know anything about the night I left and I was ninety percent sure she didn’t even know who I was. Not really.

To her, I’m just Clover from out of town.

I left the *Dixon* part out when we first met.

“Any plans tonight?” Marlene asked, cutting through my wandering thoughts.

“Same as,” I replied. “I have a date with a good book and some take-out food, then bed by ten.”

“Ew, I hope I’m not that boring when I’m twenty five,” Marlene snorted, scribbling on the forms in front of her. “You come here during tourist season and spend all your time hidden away? Aren’t you even a little bit curious to see everything?”

“If you’ve seen one Christmas town, you’ve seen them all,” I chuckled dryly, draining the last dregs of my cup. “Trust me.”

“If you *say* so.”

“What about you?”

Marlene dropped her pen and turned to me, her eyes flashing and a cheeky smirk across her lips. “David is taking me to the *Headless Reindeer*, no drinking, of course, but he’s going to buy me dinner and it’s going to be a proper little date!”

“Bar food for a date?” I raised a brow and Marlene tossed her hair over one shoulder.

“You’re just jealous that you don’t have a man to treat you right.”

“Ahh yes,” I sighed dramatically. “My chances of a romantic date at the Reindeer are dwindling. Whatever will I do? Such a cheesy place.”

“No one waiting for you back in Saint Cloud?”

“Not a soul,” I faux groaned. “But the men there, could they even compete with a slightly soggy meal from the Reindeer? I mean, that’s one of a kind.”

“It’s tragic,” Marlene agreed. “Sorry, you’re just past your prime, I guess.”

“Oi!” Playfully nudging her shoulder, we fell into light giggles and laughter. For a second, just a single moment, the crushing weight of guilt that had followed me for four years vanished. My shoulders were lighter and breathing was *easy*.

It didn’t last.

“Hayley’s still here,” Marlene noticed and I swiveled around to see her still sitting on the bench, swinging her legs. I’d usually left by now, avoiding all chances of running into any parent that might recognize me, so I was unfamiliar with the pick-up routine.

“Is she usually collected by now?”

“She’s usually picked up first.” Marlene sighed and reached for the phone, dialling a number.

“Hayley, are you okay?” I called over to her. “Not cold or anything?”

Bundled up in a thick jacket and boots, Haley shook her head, although there was minimal movement with the thick scarf wrapped around her neck.

“M’good!” she grinned at me and I instantly smiled back. She was adorable. Keeping one eye on her, I turned back to Marlene, who chewed on her lower lip as the call rang out.

“No luck?”

Shaking her head, she hung up and tried again. Hayley continued swinging her legs, then tipped her head back and gave the largest yawn I had ever seen. A tightness swept through my gut and I pressed my lips together in a firm line. It was a familiar sight, waiting at the end of a lesson for a parent who is never on time. My parents had been quite a bit older and more often than not, when I was younger, it had been me

in that seat waiting for a pickup that often came late. Timekeeping was a struggle in their later years.

At the time, it never bothered me. I loved spending as much time as I could at the rink. I had big dreams of becoming an ice dancer. Now I make do teaching future dancers.

“Still no answer,” Marlene sighed. “Is there any way you can take her home with you?”

My head whipped around to Marlene, eyes wide. “What? Of course not, that would break so many rules!”

“Okay, look, I know you’re not a registered safe adult but she’s staying with you anyway, so what’s the harm?”

Cold tingles swept up my back and my stomach clenched. “What on earth are you talking about?”

Marele glanced up at me and frowned. “Don’t be silly; she’s staying with you at home, right?”

“Home..?”

Two things clicked sharply in my mind as I slowly glanced back to Hayley’s sweet face.

One, Marlene knew exactly who I was and by *home*, she meant the Dixon Estate.

Two, Hayley was Eli’s daughter... and I had to go home.

CLOVER

The Dixon Estate was lit up like something out of a postcard. The second I turned into the large driveway, nostalgia pulled hard in my chest and my heart began to pound. I had grown up here, spent my entire childhood running around these gardens and carving my name into the snow-covered pine trees that surrounded the gardens. Out back, my brother had built a wooden tree house for me to host tea parties with friends, and I would spend hours playing hide and seek when hosting a sleepover.

In some ways, it hadn't changed. The driveway was covered in thick snow, a glittering Christmas tree hung from the gable, surrounded by streaming white Christmas lights resembling icicles dripping from the roof, and a warm orange glow came from multiple windows.

Even the stonework looked untouched as I pulled the car to a stop and gripped the steering wheel. It looked exactly the same.

Home.

Except for the black jeep and the beat-up pickup truck I parked alongside. Those were new but I knew exactly who they belonged to.

Fuck.

Forcing a deep, steady breath to try and calm my racing heart, I turned to Hayley as she unbuckled her seatbelt and yawned widely once more.

"Come on," I smiled softly. "Let's get you inside."

I would be quick. Knock on the door, hand Hayley over, and leave before any questions could come my way. I was far too tired, and facing the past was not on my list of things to do tonight. Or any night in fact.

“Okay,” Hayley said sleepily, stretching her small arms above her head.

Another forced deep breath and I stepped out into the cold. Even being bundled up in a thick coat was not enough to stop the wind from sending shards of ice straight through me. Goosebumps fled up my arms and down my legs, as I trudged through the snow to the other side of the car and let Haley out. Clutching her gloved hand in mine, we headed for the large wooden front door, and, after a moment to prepare myself, I knocked quickly under the festive wreath hanging from the stained glass window.

“It’s cold,” Haley whined as the wind picked up briefly and a gust pulled at my thick, brown hair.

“I know,” I soothed. “You’ll be inside soon.”

“I don’t care!” yelled a female voice inside the house. “This isn’t one of your stupid military encampments, I’m not a soldier. You can’t treat me like this!”

“I can treat you however I like,” bellowed another voice, this one deeper and infinitely more masculine. “I am your father and it is my *job* to take care of you, so I am telling you right now, young lady, you are not leaving this house!”

“What are you going to do?” the girl screamed back. “Lock me in my room?”

“If I have to!” yelled back the male voice. It was a voice I hadn’t heard in four years, yet it immediately gave me the same reaction that it gave me all those years ago. A slight flutter in my heart and a clench of my gut.

Alexander Hawke, or just Hawke to his friends. One of my brother’s best friends.

“I’m cold,” Hayley whined again, stamping her feet on the snowy step. In a surge of recklessness, I reached for the door handle, and to my surprise, the door opened immediately. An

inviting warmth reached out from inside the house the moment the door swung open and Hayley rushed past me to get inside. With no one on the other side, I had no choice but to follow to ensure Hayley got where she was supposed to go.

As I stepped inside, the subtle scent of coffee and smoke tickled my nose. Closing the door behind me, Hayley reached out to grab my coat for balance while she toed off her snow-covered boots. The hallway looked like a snapshot from my childhood; warm oak walls illuminated with a faux deer antler chandelier hanging above. Paintings of the mountains behind the home hung on the wall, surrounded by tinsel, and a collection of family photographs sat on the small table by the door.

Not my family, though.

Not anymore.

“Isabell, you get back here!” roared that deep, gravelly familiar voice. “We’re not through; we still have to talk about your fight at school!”

“What more is there to say?!” Isabell yelled back. “You’ll make up your mind without listening to me like you always do! I *hate* you!”

The thumping sound of footsteps ascending inside the house echoed down the hallway and I grimaced slightly. This was not a situation I wanted to be in the middle of, I didn’t even want to be inside the house, but dropping Hayley off with an adult was imperative. Hayley scurried down the hall free of her coat, and I had no choice but to follow. I was a ghost in my old home, retracing the steps of a girl who no longer existed.

The hallway opened into a large harvest kitchen, brightly lit by a much more modern ceiling light than the old lamp I’d grown up with. Alexander Hawke stood with his back to me, his large hands on his narrow hips and his head forward, dipping between his shoulders.

Four years.

Four years since I’d laid eyes on this man – or any of my brother’s friends. Four years after a desperate kiss at my

brother's wake and suddenly it was as if no time had passed.

"Hawke!" Hayley sprinted forward and threw herself toward Hawke, latching onto his left leg. He flinched in surprise and half turned, allowing me to see his face from where I lingered in the doorway.

"What the devil— Hayley!"

Time around me seemed to slow. In languid motion, Hawke leaned down and scooped Hayley into his thick, muscular arms as if she weighed nothing more than a sack of rice. His shaggy, black hair fell across his forehead as he moved, and a dark, short boxed beard wrapped around the bright smile that spread across his handsome face and chiseled jaw.

Standing over 6 feet tall with a trim, muscular figure from his time as a Navy SEALs, Hawke was a man to be admired in all ways.

And admire him I did, in the pocket of slow time that formed around me. A bubble that popped the moment Hawke spoke.

"How did you get home? Fu— damn it, I was supposed to pick you up, but Isabell..." A lick of anger graced his words and my eyes narrowed. "I'm sorry, Hayley, you know how she can get. She's turning into a tyrant but not you, right? You would never act like that to Uncle Hawke, would you?" He ticked his fingers across Hayley's belly and she squealed with laughter.

"That's hardly the way to talk about your own daughter." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, shattering the illusion before me. I should have just turned around and left, slipped away and driven into the night like I was never here since Hawke hadn't noticed me. But I couldn't keep my mouth shut.

Some things really never change.

Hawke lifted his head, and the moment his steel gray eyes locked onto mine, time caught back up with me. His lips pressed together and the sharp line of his jaw pulsed into existence when his jaw tensed.

My heart flew wildly in my chest and all cold from the snow was promptly swept away by a pulse of heat flushing through

my system.

How was this going to go? Were we going to argue like he had just done with Isabell? Would he be cold and scarcely acknowledge my existence? Would he thank me curtly and send me on my way?

I couldn't settle on a preferred greeting, instead watching with bated breath as he sat Hayley back down on the ground. Then, with the swiftness of the wind outside, Hawke swept forward and scooped me right up into his thick, warm arms.

"Holy shit," he gasped, almost crushing me to his chest. "Clover!"

"Language," I croaked out, muffled against his broad chest as he hugged me so tightly that my bones creaked. There was scarcely any room to breathe and for a moment, I was jerked right back to that terrible day.

Hawke had cuddled me all night while I sobbed out every pain in my soul for my brother's death.

The heat radiating off of Hawke was incredible, especially for a man dressed in jeans and a black tank top. It soaked into me through my coat, like heat searing down to my very flesh, and I leaned into it as if no time had passed between us at all.

But that was a fantasy. The alluring heat from Hawke turned almost painful and I drew back, immediately pulling away, and he let me go without an ounce of hesitation. I was almost disappointed.

"Clover, what are you doing here?"

"I..." Telling him where I worked was a bad idea. I had returned to Harbank with the intention of avoiding Hawke and the others, and now here I was in the middle of their kitchen, trying to think of an excuse.

"She teaches me," Hayley piped up from behind, ending my internal struggle.

"Uh— yeah. Yeah, I'm filling in for Agnes."

"How on earth did they rope you into that?" Hawke lifted one jet-black brow while Hayley attached to his leg once more.

“I’m hungry,” she whined and Hawke chuckled softly.

“Alright monster, let’s see what we have.” With Hayley balancing on the top of his foot, Hawke walked to the fridge and began pulling out a few ingredients while I stood there searching for a way to excuse myself quickly.

“Well?” Hawke looked at me and when he did, I was instantly rooted to the spot. His gaze, his stance, his entire *aura* pulsed control, and there was no way I was leaving without giving an answer.

“I work at a sister Troupe,” I explained, “and when Agnes fell ill, I was closest to fill in.” It was a half-truth, but I knew telling Hawke that I was here because I had *no family and no commitments* would be like pouring gasoline on embers that have been smoking for four years.

“How long have you been back?” he asked, deftly chopping up some tomatoes and chicken pieces on the board in front of him.

“Not long. In fact, I really should be—.”

“You came back, and your first stop wasn’t here?”

Words died in my throat and the fluttering nerves lingering in my heart immediately hardened. There it was. That slightly sharp edge to his voice and that tone; I’d been avoiding it all because I knew it would come with demands and questions.

Where have you been? Why did you run away? How could you leave after everything that happened?

Questions I have asked and answered over the years in my mind, to little satisfaction.

I pressed my lips together and jutted my chin out slightly. “I was busy.”

“Too busy to come here and let us know you were okay?” The knife snapped down on the board, cleaving a tomato in two. “Too busy to pick up the phone and call? Too busy to send a letter explaining... *anything?*”

“Yes,” I replied sharply. “You know how it is.”

“Do I?” The knife landed sharply once more.

“Isn’t that how the Navy rolls? One day you’re here, the next you’re gone.”

“Hardly comparable,” Hawke remarked.

“Not to me.”

Hawke lifted his gaze and fixed me with a steady stare. One that made my knees weak and my heart leap up into my mouth simultaneously. Only this time, there was a flurry of irritation that followed.

“I don’t owe you anything,” I said firmly. “We’re not family.”

Hawke’s knife didn’t stop moving. “Aren’t we?”

“Just because you moved into my house doesn’t make us anything.”

“You think so? We moved in here for *you*, to take care of *you* after Ricky—.”

“Clover?!” A warm voice, croaky from too many years dragging on cigarettes, rose up from behind me, and suddenly thick arms encircled me from behind. I was hugged so tightly that I was lifted clean off the ground, and a squeal of surprise escaped my throat.

“Daddy!” Hayley unlatched from Hawke and launched herself across the kitchen. I was placed on the ground just in time for Hayley to pass by me and throw herself into her father’s arms, Eli Pearce.

Stepping aside, I turned and just like with Hawke, no time had passed at all. Hayley buried her face into her father’s thick brown beard and his chocolate brown eyes locked onto me from across her head.

“As I live and breathe,” Eli chuckled. “Clover, I didn’t expect to see you here; how are you?! It’s been far too long.”

“I’m good.” I forced a smile, moving another step to allow Eli’s muscular bulk to pass by as he play-wrestled with his daughter. Her squeals of delight filled the air and I opened my

mouth to quickly explain why I was here when the third member of their group stepped through the door.

“Clover...” Axel’s voice was like smooth honey and his blue eyes sparkled as the corners of his eyes wrinkled with his smile. Once again, I was swept up into a tight, bone-crushing hug, and all the air was squeezed out of my lungs. I told myself I was irritated by the attention, but deep down, I missed it the second each hug was over.

“She works at the ice rink,” Hawke spoke up over his chopping. “She brought Hayley home.”

“You’re replacing Agnes?” Eli asked with his daughter upside down in his arms. “Does that mean you’re back?”

“Eli,” Axel warned immediately, then he grasped my shoulders. “It’s so good to see you.”

“You too,” I smiled. I’d fake smiled so much that my cheeks were starting to ache, and all I could think about was escaping as soon as possible. This was too much, too fast. I didn’t want this. I didn’t want to be reminded.

Seeking a distraction from the attention, I pointed to Axel’s pure white hair. “What happened here? Sick of the blond?”

“Oh! What do you think?” Axel raked a hand through his short silver hair, and his handsome face lit up when he smiled.

“He saw one gray hair and had a crisis,” Eli laughed, finally setting Hayley down on a counter.

“That’s not strictly true,” Axel replied. “I saw a gray, and being this close to forty, I decided to embrace my inner silver fox, that’s all. It works; the ladies love it.”

“What ladies,” Eli snorted. “Your bed is as barren as mine.”

Through the humorous exchange, Hawke remained quiet. There was a sharper edge to his silence like a clock ticking down the last few seconds before the explosion.

“Asshole,” Axel remarked, throwing a punch through the air toward Eli, who air-blocked and snorted.

“I speak the harsh truth.” Then he turned to me and his gaze landed with the force of a blow. “So, are you back?”

The million-dollar question.

My mouth ran dry as a desert and I cleared my throat, seeking moisture so I could say anything that would get me out of this but there was nothing. Eli and Axel stared me down, their muscular bulks filling the air around me like unmoving knights while Hawke kept his head down and chopped.

“She’s not back,” Hawke said finally and he lifted his gaze, fixing me with a cold stare. “After all, we’re not family, right?”

“What?” Eli scoffed. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I—...” The urge to correct Hawke rose, but I had no strength. He was just repeating my words back to me. “I have to go, I’m sorry. Make sure someone picks up Hayley next time, I don’t want to have to do this again.”

Brushing past Axel, I rushed from the kitchen with Eli’s surprised reassurance following me. None of them tried to stop me, why would they after what I’d said? And yet as I ran through the door and back out into the biting cold, part of me yearned for that. It was easier to ignore all three of them when I was two cities away and they existed only in my memory.

Seeing them in the flesh, right in front of me – feeling their arms around me like the old days; I was weak. A buried part of me ached to go back inside and reclaim my place in the cobbled family I had run away from, but that wasn’t my future.

It was a mistake to come here. I had to focus on work and nothing else, not even how incredibly more attractive they had all gotten over these past four years.

I could leave it all behind again in a few weeks and never return. For real this time.

CLOVER

Try as I might, I could not get *any* of them out of my head. Eli's warm smile, Axel's twinkling eyes, and even Hawke's steely glare had haunted me all through the night. At no point in the past four years had the urge to run back to them ever been stronger. One visit, and it was as if every wall I had built around me to protect myself had been torn down with minimal effort. They plagued my mind as I tossed and turned in my bed, invaded my dreams, and lingered in the corner of my psyche when I awoke and dressed.

It reached the point where I was so tempted to call one of them that I had to resort to emergency measures, my best friend, Kate.

"What was it like?" she asked with her mouth full of breakfast. "Seeing them again?"

Trudging through the snow toward the town's main street, I kicked along in the snow piled up high on the sidewalk. There'd been times in the past when the snow had gotten so deep people had to resort to sledding but thankfully, it wasn't that bad, not yet. I contemplated my answer for a long moment, tucking my mouth into my fluffy scarf to protect against the bitter wind, and groaned.

"Come on, it's me," Kate coaxed. "I've seen you covered in puke with your thong around your ankles. You can tell me anything."

I snorted out a laugh. Kate worked with me at the Tinkerbells and was the one to see through my lone-wolf bullshit. She was

the only soul in the world I had given any time to these past four years, and she was right. I could trust her.

“It felt like nothing had happened,” I admitted softly. “Like I had never left. Some things were different, like Axel. His hair is white now, not blond. And I think Hawke’s muscles have gotten bigger, and Eli’s daughter is a real person now and not a tiny baby. There was a moment when they were laughing and joking and it felt like everything was okay, and Ricky was just upstairs—.”

A lump of cotton filled my throat, cutting off my words, and I blinked quickly to fight against the prickling of tears threatening behind my eyes.

“Fuck,” I muttered thickly, “this is why I wanted to avoid them.”

“Awh, sweetie,” Kate soothed. “Maybe this is a good thing? I mean... if anyone could understand your pain, it would be them. They all served with him, right? In the Navy Seals? They lost a brother too.”

“That’s exactly it, though,” I replied, sniffing and telling myself it was just the cold. “I felt like I was balancing on this blade, and if I tipped the wrong way, it wouldn’t be hugs I was getting. It would be anger, accusations, and everything I’ve been trying to avoid.” Just the thought of any of them looking at me the way I viewed myself was sickening. I had enough guilt to carry on my own without their blame on top.

“You don’t know that,” Kate sighed with the inflection of how many times we’ve had this conversation. “The only one that blames you for that night is you.”

“That’s not true.”

“It *is* true,” Kate stressed. I came to a stop outside the Pharmacy and dragged up the mental list of things I needed in my mind.

“We can agree to disagree.”

“You’re a stubborn fuck, you know that?” Kate remarked and I snorted with laughter.

“So I’ve been told. Hold on, I need to grab something.”

Half an hour later, my bag was filled and hunger gnawed at my stomach while Kate filled me in on the latest goings on with the Tinkerbells. I missed them, but the few days I had spent here had definitely been worthwhile, at least from the children’s perspective.

“So,” Kate said, smacking her lips together. “Not to be a bore, but the guys...”

“Ugh, Kate, please. Can’t we drop it? I don’t have anything else to say and I don’t plan on seeing them ever again. I called you so I’d *stop* thinking about them.”

“All I want to know is, are they hot?”

“What?!” Kate’s question brought a flare of heat to my cheeks.

“Hey, you said they were all ex-Navy Seals. Shit like that builds muscles. And they’re older, right? Like your brother?”

“Yes. And yes, but ew, Kate, no!”

“So they’re hot.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Sweetie, you would have told me every detail if they were hot and you weren’t interested but here you are, hiding details from little old me.”

“That’s not what is happening at all,” I remarked hotly. The very idea that I felt – or had ever felt – anything but annoyance toward my brother’s friends was insane.

“Really? So tell me what they look like then. I’ve always fancied myself an older man.”

“Kate, please.”

“Look, if you want to stop thinking about them, let’s tear them apart. Strip them down to their undies and make them so sickening that they never touch your thoughts again.”

“I would but...”

“But you can’t,” Kate declared proudly. “Because you are feeling something. Something other than hatred, right? Which

is fine, babe. I'm not judging, I'm just trying to get perspective."

"On what, exactly?"

"You flee this absolutely gorgeous town—."

"Basic, at best, but go ahead."

"*Gorgeous* because of some deep dark trauma, and I get that. But when you come back and are faced with three hunky men, you suddenly can't get them out of your mind even though these are men you've known since you were a teenager."

"And?"

"The line between love and hate is very thin, I'm just saying."

"Kate—."

"Trust me, if we tore into them like we do other guys, you'd never think about them again, and the next six weeks will be a breeze. But you're not going to because part of you is still protecting them because part of you still cares, even if you think they hate you."

"I know they hate me."

"You decided that for yourself."

"You know what I did." My tone chilled slightly. "You know what I'm responsible for."

"And you know we disagree," Kate said softly. Despite the warmth of my coat and her voice, an icy chill swept down my spine. This conversation wasn't going the way I had hoped. I wanted Kate to support my feelings, not try and give me advice – advice that, deep down, I knew I needed.

"Can we drop it? I need to head into a store."

"Okay," Kate sighed. "I love you, y'know."

"Love you too."

The world around me remained a little warmer with Kate's voice in my ear and it gave me the chance to resume shopping and get the last bits and bobs I needed for the hotel room. She filled my head with stories from the dancing that I'd missed to

the happenings with her husband and her cat, all the while I dodged every single glance and question that came my way. Cashiers who recognized me as Clover Dixon, Rickey's poor younger sister, to older customers who tried to stop me and pry information out of me as quickly as possible.

It seemed the news of my return had spread faster than a wildfire in Autumn, and I was no longer living in the secrecy I craved.

Clover Dixon had returned to Harbank Springs four years after her brother died in a terrible car crash while on his way to pick her up.

Every glance held the same accusation I held in my heart, every whisper caused the hairs on the back of my neck to prickle, and every hand on my arm to welcome me back may as well have been a hook to ensure I never left again.

The smothering perks of a small town.

By the time night fell and Kate had excused herself from our 5-hour-long call, I was ready to crawl into bed and forget the day had even happened. That, however, was too much like defeat and the urge to show everyone that no matter what they asked or how they stared, I was here, and they would have to deal with it, was strong.

At least for the next six weeks.

My route eventually took me to the Reindeer bar, affectionately called the Headless Reindeer after one terrible storm ripped the head right off the wooden Reindeer sculpture above the front door. The moment I stepped inside and was met with an enticing warmth and the familiar smell of alcohol, I was jerked right back to my teenage years.

Scraping dollars together to try and bribe the doorman or buy a fake ID never really worked in a small town like this but damn if I didn't try. Some nights we were lucky and I'd sneak in with friends but it never lasted long.

The bar was filled to the brim with people in various states of drunkenness. Alcohol flowed and the mouthwatering scent of steak and fries drifted through from the open kitchen behind

the bar. Wood carvings of different animals decorated the walls every few feet and faux antler chandeliers, similar to the one back at the Dixon Estate, hung from the ceiling. Tourists went crazy for the rustic theme, but to me, it just reminded me of home.

The hours spent watching my dad whittle those wooden sculptures from nothing into gorgeous pieces of art. It warmed me, even now, to see them still gracing the walls here.

I chose a seat at the back, tucked away into the corner, and unwrapped myself from my winter layers.

“Hey doll, can I getcha somethin’ to drink?”

A woman in her late forties appeared by the table, notebook in hand and a piece of gum flying between her teeth each time she spoke. There wasn’t an ounce of recognition in her eyes, so I offered her a warm smile.

“Cranberry and Vodka, please,” I asked, poised to pull out my ID. Instead, the woman scribbled something and vanished as quickly as she had arrived. A younger girl who set it down without a word delivered my drink a few minutes later and slipped away to the next table along, a booth filled to the brim with tourists.

Taking a sip, I closed my eyes as the tartness of the cranberry juice exploded over my tongue and the familiar burn of the Vodka followed. I didn’t need to look around to know that half the people I had dodged in town today were likely here. Well, let them stare, I decided.

None of them could make me feel worse about that night than I already do.

Scratch that.

My heart sank into a dark pit in my gut when I opened my eyes.

“Hey Clover.” Justin Cooper, my ex-boyfriend, sat in front of me. Hawke and the guys weren’t the only people I had vanished from that night. I’d dumped him via text at the wake and he hadn’t responded kindly but I hadn’t cared. He’d been fodder in the mess I left behind.

“Justin.”

“You didn’t tell me you were back?” His watery green eyes narrowed at me. “I had to find out from my *mother*.”

“Oh.” Of course. Mrs. Cooper at the pharmacy couldn’t keep her mouth shut on the best of days. “How is she?”

“Fine.” Justin’s gaze slowly dropped down my body, lingering rather pointedly on my chest, then back up. “You’ve got some nerve coming back here.”

“It’s for work,” I replied shortly. “I won’t be here long.”

“How long?”

“Not long.”

Justin scoffed wetly. “Fuck. You never could give me a straight answer, could you?”

“You never asked straight enough questions.” I tightened my grip on my glass and took a large gulp. “What do you want?”

“I had to come and see for myself, see if it was true. What you did was fucked up.”

“Excuse me?” Pinpricks shot up my spine like the sharp claws of a squirrel tearing through my shirt. Was this how it would happen? Justin, of all people, would sit and tell me what everyone thought about that night?

“You dumped me by *text*,” Justin spat. “That’s fucking cruel, Clover. Even for you.”

Oh. Of course. Even after four years, Justin was so two-dimensional that he was still fixated on that. Nothing else could breach that pee brain of his.

“I’m sorry,” I replied as unenthusiastically as I could manage. “It was a hard time.”

“Bullshit.” Justin sniffled and leaned back in the booth, draping his arm over the work patchwork seat. “You have no clue how much you hurt me, do you? Laid up for weeks, I was, fucking heartbroken because I loved you, Clover. You’d never get someone as decent as me but that’s the problem with

you women, isn't it? You're always chasing the wrong thing, never able to see the nice guy right in front of you."

As Justin rambled on, the glint of a glass being cleaned at the bar caught my eye. I glanced over and every nerve in my body suddenly punched alert.

Hawke stood behind the bar, checkered towel in hand, polishing the glass in his hand within an inch of its life. His fierce gaze was fixed upon me and the warmth that rushed through me was like a spark of ignition. He was staring at me like he had a hundred things to say and a hundred things I didn't want to hear. I found myself unable to look away, and my drink never quite reached my lips.

"Hey!" Justin suddenly rapped his knuckles on the table. "I deserve that much, don't you think?"

"Huh?" I scarcely registered what he was saying, suddenly enthralled by the way the muscles of Hawke's forearms flexed with each movement and how his jaw could cut glass even from away over here.

"A *date*," Justin whined, although I was only half listening. "I deserve that after what you put me through; quite frankly, it's the least you can do."

"Sure, whatever," I replied absently as the warmth swelling inside me reached its peak. I finally dragged my gaze away from Hawke and grabbed my purse. "I'm sorry, I have to go."

It wouldn't hit me until I was halfway back to my motel that I had just agreed to a date with my sleazy ex.

HAWKE

Clover was the spitting image of Ricky.

They had the same thick, tightly curled brown hair, the same turquoise-blue eyes, the same heart-shaped lips. Of course, Clover wore those features with a more feminine elegance than Ricky ever had, and she enhanced her beauty with a makeup skill I could never hope to understand, but the similarities were there.

That's what made it so painful to see her standing in the kitchen four years since she'd walked out of our lives, not a week after Ricky had been ripped away. We had mourned them both. There was no other way to explain it. We had carried the grief of that loss with us every day while trying to tackle a world that had become infinitely colder without them in our lives.

In my life.

Ricky had been the kind of best friend that you just needed to think about him and he was there for you. With a laugh that seeped deep into your soul and a snort that never failed to make you chuckle, he had been a fine Seal and an even finer friend.

That was why it had hurt so badly when he was taken from us by a simple traffic accident. The man survived two tours only to be taken out by a natural, everyday occurrence.

And Clover? I had missed her more than I could ever put into words. It was difficult for me to admit my emotions at the best of times, having grown up in a household that was as strict as

the military and then signed up myself as soon as I was of age. I valued respect and order; feelings rarely made it into the equation but when it came to Clover, everything rushed to the surface like I was drowning, and she was my air. It was the reason I had kissed her at Ricky's wake.

And the reason the glass in my hands was polished beyond recognition as I watched Clover sit at a table with her disgusting ex, Justin. He was a greaseball of a man, a waste of space that spent his mother's hard-earned cash on bottomless drinks and tried to get into the pants of every woman within earshot. He demanded respect, didn't understand that it was earned, and came naturally to those who deserved it.

Clover deserved better.

Much like in the kitchen, my heart stopped in my chest when her sparkling turquoise eyes landed on mine from across the bar. Silence fell, the crowd faded to nothing but shadows, and all that existed was Clover. Her twinkling eyes, the sparkle of a silver earring peeking out through her curls, and her rosy pink lips parted slightly.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry. Sorry about Ricky, about the kiss, about everything. But just like clockwork, she had pushed all the right buttons yesterday, and irritation at her very presence simmered under my skin like burrowed ants. We'd known the second she had come back into town, and we had respected her decision to stay away.

I didn't respect her cold comment about us not being family, as if we meant nothing to each other. Even after four years of absence, that couldn't be further from the truth. My attention remained focused on her until she gathered her things and left the bar, leaving Justin and his smarmy face behind.

He sidled up to the bar with an empty beer bottle in hand and draped himself against the wood.

"Guess who just bagged himself a date with Clover Dixon?" he stated with a wide smirk. My shoulders tensed and I bit down hard on the inside of my cheek.

“Bullshit,” said Candice, my staff, as she wiped her cloth along the bar. “She has too much self-respect to go anywhere near the likes of you.”

“Say what you will,” he sneered gleefully. “But she said yes. She’s going to make it up to me for how she ditched me all those years ago.”

The glass weakened under my grip, the grooves of the cut design pressing sharply into my palm.

“You mean how she freed herself?” Candice laughed heartily.

“Candice, baby—.”

“Don’t call me baby.”

“—she wants me. It’s clear. Even now, she recognizes a real man and when I get her alone, I’m going to make her miss up for all the time she missed with me, so get me another beer and—.”

“*Get out.*” The words ripped from me like a bark and it took me a half second to realize I’d said them out loud. The thought of Clover with Justin in *any* capacity flooded my mouth with ash and I refused to let him continue prattling on like she was nothing but some sort of game.

“Huh?” Justin straightened up and threw me a look but it was far from intimidating. He resembled a cub trying to stand up to a lion. Candice made herself scarce with another customer; she knew better than to question me.

“You heard.” Each word was sour and sharp. “You’ve had enough to drink; get out of my bar.”

“This ain’t your *bar*,” Justin mocked, “so how about get me another like you’re *paid* to do and shut up?”

The world flashed red, and Justin’s panicked apologies when I crossed around the bar and grabbed him by the scruff of the neck fell on deaf ears. I dragged him with me like he was nothing more than a sack of rags right to the front door, held it open with one hand, and threw him out into the snow.

He landed in a heap, tripping over himself as he tumbled in the white and slipped.

“What the fuck!?”

“You heard,” I growled. “And don’t you dare come back until you’ve learned to respect the women that work here.”

“Hey, fuck you, man!” Justin yelled. My answer was closing the door in his face. Inside, the crowds in the bar stared at me for a few seconds but it wasn’t the first time I’d thrown someone out and it wouldn’t be the last. It was my first time doing it for personal reasons, though.

“My apologies,” I said firmly, and everyone returned to their drinks.

“Don’t you think that was a bit of an overreaction?” Eli asked me several hours later while he drove me home after closing.

“Nope,” I replied immediately. “Little punk was running his mouth.”

“Candice can handle that sort of shit, though,” Eli replied. “I agree that she shouldn’t, but alcohol brings out the assholes.”

“It wasn’t... just that.” I glanced out into the darkness, catching glimpses of snow-covered trees like subtle lighting strike in the dark along the side of the road as we drove home. Without fail, my mind lingered on Ricky like it did every time we drove this road.

“What was it?” With one hand on the wheel, Eli reached for the heater and turned up the warmth.

“He has a date with Clover.”

“What?! How the fuck did he manage that?”

“I have no idea, but knowing him it probably wasn’t her idea.”

“I thought she wasn’t staying.”

“A date doesn’t mean anything. Not with him.”

“Meant enough for you to kick him out of the bar.”

“Fucking twerp deserved it,” I sighed and rubbed at my eyes. “Just, the way he was talking about her... I don’t care how long it’s been. She doesn’t deserve that.”

“Is that all it is?” Eli sent me a sidelong glance.

I lifted my head. It wasn't like him to dance around the bush. He wasn't as direct as me when it came to discussions but usually, when he had a point, he made it.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I know it's been four years but it took you a long time to get over that kiss."

Right. The kiss, fueled by alcohol and grief, gave Clover a glimpse into the true feelings I had harbored for her and likely contributed to her running away. I had told Eli and Axel immediately, fearing I was the sole reason she had vanished.

"I am over that kiss," I stated firmly. "It's not that. She's back and everyone knows she's back. The stares and the comments? You remember what it was like just after she vanished. Well, she's experiencing that all now, made worse with time. She deserves some respect from chumps like Justin, that's all."

"Alright, if you say so Boss. Just strikes me as more of a jealous reaction, that's all."

"Wouldn't you be?" I shot back.

Eli had that look on his face like he wanted to say more but thankfully, he didn't press the matter. I was tired and frustrated; the last thing I wanted to do was hash out the complicated surge of feelings that had risen upon seeing her again.

"I'm just frustrated that she didn't come to see us until she had to," I admitted, offering Eli slightly more insight. "That's all."

"I know," Eli sighed, "but at least she's back. That's further than we've gotten in four years."

Arriving home, I immediately headed for Isabell's room. She was fast asleep, snoring softly with her dark hair spread across the pillow like a spiderweb. She hadn't said a word to me since our fight but that didn't stop me from checking on her. Isabell was another complicated girl in my life, as complicated as her mother and filled with as much disdain as Clover seemed to be.

Maybe it was a sign.

Retiring to my bedroom, I stripped off my clothes and stepped into the shower to wash away the lingering stink of work. I enjoyed working in the bar; meeting people from all over the world without the threat of death was a nice change but I hated the smell. Thinking about the bar inevitably led back to Clover, and her sweet face filled my mind as I soaped up my chest.

Who was she to stand here and say we weren't family? Who was she to act like we meant nothing to her? We'd been by Ricky's side ever since he joined the military. We became a team - a family - and she was part of that every time we had a visit home. Now she had the cheek to act like four years was enough to erase that?

As my mind ran, my slick hands stroked further and further south.

She had no idea what we'd done for her, upending our lives to come and stay here to support her. The care we'd taken of this old house so it was still standing when she came home. The effort Eli put into tracking her down so we knew she was alive.

If I had my way, I'd teach her a lesson.

My eyes fluttered close, and my hand wrapped around my rapidly hardening cock while Clover's face melted in my mind to her on her knees in front of me, her eyelashes fluttering from the shower droplets.

Fuck. I needed to teach her a lesson.

I began to stroke my hand up and down my hard cock, gripping tighter at the crown and twisting slightly at the base just as I liked. In my mind, it was different. My hand was Clover's hands, her lips parted in awe at how thick I was, and her eyes wide. She was naked, her beautiful body on display just below but that wasn't my focus. I gripped her hair, her thick curls tangling around my fingers and clinging under the water as if she never wanted me to let go. I jerked her forward and my hand became her hot, wet mouth.

I moaned, a sound washed away with the force of the water and pressed my free hand against the slick tiles while stroking my cock vigorously.

Her mouth was perfect, hot and wet and the exact fit for my cock, but it wasn't enough. I pulled her closer, thrust deep into her perfectly silken throat and the noise of her choking was music to my ears. I held her there, squeezing just under the crown with my thumb and forefinger to mimic throat compression, and then I stroked myself faster while I envisioned fucking her mouth as deep as I could get.

I wanted her to claw streaks into my thighs, to paint her lipstick on my balls, and for her moans and sounds to be the only music I ever heard. I wanted her on her knees, apologizing for acting like I meant nothing to her.

I wanted *her*.

With a final stroke, I came hard against the tiles and barely managed to smother the cry that ripped from my chest as pleasure exploded through me in a powerful wave. My knees knocked together and my chest seized for a moment while cum painted up the tiles and my fantasy of Clover shook and melted away to nothing.

Reality came crashing back with the heat of the shower against my raw skin and the absence of lipstick on my balls.

Reality also granted me one clarity.

I was not over that kiss.

CLOVER

The watery early afternoon sun peered through the clouds, casting an opaque light onto all the gravestones I passed as I walked slowly through the cemetery. Each one, whether it be marble, stone, or slate, was lovingly hand-carved by the curator, and each one was embellished with the love of those left behind. The gravestones stood like silent soldiers, each one unwavering and watching over each other in an eternal last watch.

I hadn't planned on coming here. I'd called Kate last night to vent about how Hawke's presence had distracted me, and I'd ended up somehow agreeing to a date with Justin. I'd never heard her laugh so hard. After detailing how many looks and questions I was getting just for existing, Kate persuaded me to see the one and only person who deserved to give me any judgment.

Ricky.

Snow crunched under my boots and no matter how far I huddled into my coat, an unnatural chill seeped deep into my bones while goosebumps became a permanent fixture on my arms and legs. I followed winding paths and bouquets of flowers in various states of snow coverage until I reached the Dixon family plot.

Two slate gravestones stood proud with swirling gold lettering detailing my mother and father's names and death dates. They had both passed within a few months of each other, not long after I'd turned eighteen, natural causes due to their age. With fourteen years between me and Ricky, I had been the

unexpected lucky child that appeared long after my parents thought they were capable.

Also why they named me Clover.

“You’re my lucky charm,” my dad used to say.

It was almost romantic, now that I think about it, that they had passed away so close together. True love, one could say.

The pain of their passing had dulled over the years, but as I stood there and pressed my toes into the snow, they were merely a distraction from the third gravestone in front of me. This was one dark marble with silver lettering that swept across the surface, detailing all the wonderful things my brother was.

Son. Brother. Soldier. Lifesaver.

Ricky Dixon was beloved and I had taken him from the world.

“Hey Ricky,” I said softly, acutely aware of how loud my voice was in the unnatural silence of the graveyard. As if every standing stone was waiting to hear what I had to say and the back of my neck prickled uncomfortably.

“I...” Words failed me and I sniffed while heat began to sting behind my eyelids like tiny needles. I blinked quickly, seeking to avoid the sensation but another blink, and my vision blurred.

“Fuck,” I whispered, clasping my cotton-clad hands together. “What do I even say? I’m—.”

That fateful night was the clearest memory in my mind. Stupidly following Justin to a party on the edge of town to celebrate being legally allowed to drink. I’d ignored Ricky’s calls all day, mad about something I couldn’t even remember now and my attendance at the party was my stupid attempt to show him I knew better. Then someone had called the cops and I had been carted off to a holding cell for being drunk and disorderly. No charges, the cop had said, on account of your brother’s service. I’d been so *angry* hearing that, trying to persuade the cop that I deserved the consequences of my own actions.

Ricky had driven to collect me, but on his way there, his car had skidded on a patch of black ice and he'd crashed into the forest, erupting into a fireball. Ricky had died that night, on impact, according to the coroner.

And it was *my* fault.

If I hadn't been out, Ricky never would have been on that road.

"I'm sorry," I gasped out, shuddering. Hot tears spilled over my cheeks, turning to ice as they tracked down my cheeks, and I hurriedly wiped them away but they kept flowing. Over and over in my mind, I replayed the conversation with the cop who sat me down and tried to explain that Ricky was dead. That conversation hadn't felt real. Sometimes, it still didn't.

"I'm sorry I didn't listen to you. I'm sorry I was such a bitch. I'm sorry I caused all this... I'm just... sorry." Pressure built in my chest, pressing outward and making my next few breaths tight and rapid. The strong urge to sink into the snow and sob rose and my knees shook.

Snow crunched behind me and I froze right up, quickly wiping at my tears and forcing myself to re-bottle all the emotions that had bubbled up the second I had shown a lack of control.

I whipped around and my heart jumped to see Axel standing a few feet away, dressed in a heavy leather jacket and his hair almost as white as the snow around him. He carried a large bouquet of purple flowers and the moment our eyes met, he gave a small smile.

"Sorry," Axel said softly, "I didn't mean to disturb you."

"What are you doing here?" I asked, almost accusatory before I could stop myself. That defensive edge cropped up in me when I was so raw.

"Well..." Axel resumed walking forward and shook the flowers in his hands. "One of us comes here every week to lay flowers. It's our tradition. Let's us keep Ricky up to date on how things have been going."

"Oh. Of course. Sorry." *Reign it in, Clover.*

“No need to apologize,” Axel said, stopping next to me.

“Any trick to getting him to talk back?”

“Not that I’ve found.” Axel crouched down and set the fresh flowers down next to another snow-covered bouquet that must have been from the previous week. They showed minimal signs of decay, likely from the cold. The one’s I had placed sat awkwardly, like they didn’t belong.

“Damn.”

“I’ll leave you to it.” Axel stood and flashed me a warm smile.

“You don’t have to,” I said hurriedly as he turned to leave. Axel spun back to face me, one brow raised. “I mean, this is your routine, not mine. I won’t be here long so - no point in accommodating, you know?”

For some reason, every glance at his striking blue eyes made my stomach twist and I had to glance away constantly. His eyes were even brighter in a world draped with a white blanket.

“Not long, huh?”

“Yeah... six weeks. Just here for the troupe.”

“Ahh. Poor Agnes.” Axel nodded but no longer was he trying to leave. He towered over me, the leather jacket doing nothing to hide the muscles hidden inside as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I heard she’s on the mend, though.”

“Yeah. Bed rest though, so I’m here to see through to the recital.”

“And then you leave.” Axel’s gaze was unwavering and even though I forced my gaze onto the gravestone, my cheeks flushed with the intensity of his presence.

“Yes.”

“What if Agnes is still sick?”

“I have... other responsibilities.”

“Your other troupe.” Axel nodded. “I’m glad, Clover, that you’ve managed to find something you enjoy.”

“Really?” That was unexpected. Deep down, there was a thread in my soul just waiting for Axel, or any of them, to snap and unload exactly how they felt about me. How they also blamed me for Ricky’s death. After all, how could they not, given what happened?

“Of course. You deserve it.”

“Do I?” Lifting my gaze, I half-turned to Axel and studied the golden color of his skin, the strong slope of his jaw, and the adorable way his eyes crinkled when he offered me a small smile.

“Of course you do. Unless... you’re not enjoying it?”

“Oh, I am!” I reassured quickly. “It’s amazing. Not quite how I thought my future was going to pan out but I love teaching the children. It keeps me on the ice so the... the lessons don’t feel wasted.”

“Of course,” Axel smiled. “You always were a work of art out on that ice.”

“Oh please,” I scoffed, unsure why Axel was being so nice but it was easy to go along with it. “I was good by Harbank standards but not the world.”

“I don’t believe that. Agnes is a stickler; she wouldn’t have allowed any old skater to come and teach her class.”

“Speaking of old,” I smirked, pointing to his white hair. “Was this really a style choice?”

“Hey!” Axel lifted a hand and stroked through his short hair, ruffling the soft strands. “It really was. The upkeep is expensive but worth it, I say. I decided to embrace my increasing age, owning it before it owns me. Plus, it looks good.”

“Mhmm,” I hummed with faux disbelief. “If you believe that, then it’s all that matters.”

“Trust me, you should see the house. Boxes of dye everywhere, Isabell mocks me relentlessly but she just doesn’t understand true style.”

“Ahh, a familiar sight in that place,” I chuckled. “The boxes of hair dye I’d leave lying around when I was convinced I had the skin tone to go red. Ended up looking like a washed-out clown.”

“Oh shit, I remember the pictures,” Axel laughed. “Ricky kept one in his pack, used to pull it out any time someone was struggling.”

“No way!?”

“Oh yes. He had a bunch but that was definitely the little pick me up picture.”

“What an asshole!”

“You should come home sometime, I think it’s around somewhere. You’ll love it.”

And just like that, the allure of the familiar warmth of chatting with Axel turned to ice and the unexpected smile that had crept onto my face froze, then started to slip.

For a moment, things had been easy. Familiar. Like life was normal. But it was fake and the weight of guilt returned swiftly to my shoulders. The light vanished and I dropped my gaze away, clearing my throat and huddling deep into my coat.

“Yeah,” I replied awkwardly. “Dropping by your home couldn’t be awkward at all.”

“Clover.” Axel’s voice dropped a few tones. “It’s your home too.”

“Axel, let’s not.”

“But it’s true. We maintained it for you; we *came* here for you —.”

“Don’t,” I snapped, turning to face him fully. “Let’s... let’s not pretend that everything’s alright. I— I have to go. I’m sorry, bye.”

I managed two steps before Axel’s hand caught my upper arm in a tight grip and he jerked me back half a fraction. His blue eyes had become a storm, clouded and dark as he stared me down.

“Clover, you can’t avoid us forever. You can’t think that just ignoring us and what happened is the best thing for you.”

“You don’t know what’s best for me,” I snapped, jerking my arm in his vice-like grip. My heart started to race and warmth flooded my cheeks.

“Ricky would want us to take care of you, we *want* to take care of you.”

“You don’t know what Ricky would want because we can’t fucking ask him,” I snapped. This time when I jerked my arm, Axel released his grip and I stumbled backward. “I’m not your responsibility, understand?”

Spinning on my heel, I strode back up the bath at double the speed I arrived with my heart flying and my skin flushed so hot it may as well have been summer.

What the fuck was that?

Why was I so bothered by what Axel had said? It wasn’t the first time it had been implied they felt responsible for me.

It wasn’t until I reached the wrought iron gates of the graveyard that I realized it wasn’t what Axel had said that had gotten me heated but the way he’d said it. The grip on my arm, the weight in his voice, the darkness in his eyes.

It was *hot*.

Fuck, what the hell was wrong with me?

CLOVER

“Can I get you anything else to drink?”

The pretty blonde waitress stood over us, pad in hand and the sweetest smile on her face, while Justin, in his typical sleazy way, eyed her like a piece of meat.

“Another beer for me please, and she’ll have another water.”

“Are you sure?” she asked pointedly at me but before I could get a word in, Justin answered for me like he had been doing all night.

“I’m the one paying the bill, so yes, she’ll have another water.”

I gave her a slight nod, and the waitress scurried away while Justin returned to his greasy burger and I toyed with the pasta in front of me.

“Honestly,” Justin remarked, smacking his lips. “What, did she think I was made of money?” Another large bite and grease dripped with sauce all the way down his chin. Regret was not a strong enough word to describe how I felt about coming here.

A few hours ago I’d considered canceling because there was nothing at all about Justin that appealed to me anymore. However, after Axel had left me hot and bothered, Kate had advised that maybe I needed to get laid and using my ex for that wasn’t such a bad idea. Especially since I was only here for a few weeks.

Watching him devour his falling-apart burger, I knew for a fact that his greasy fingers weren’t getting anywhere near my

pants. The waitress returned with our drinks and flashed me a sympathetic smile when she retreated.

“So what most people don’t understand,” Justin said, chewing openly to give me a perfect glimpse of the masticated cow flying around his mouth. “Is that it’s all about having your finger in as many pots as you can. Tech comes and goes but if you want it to grow, you need to be involved, you know?”

“Of course,” I replied flatly, popping some pasta into my mouth.

“In a few years, I’ll be so rich, bitches will be paying *me* to get into bed.” He burst out laughing as if he had just said the funniest thing ever, and a mouthful of beer joined the greasy mess in his mouth. “Trust me, what you women don’t understand is that men like me are just drawn to the opportunities, you know? It’s a male thing but don’t worry, play your cards right and you can reap the rewards too.”

I raised a hand and caught the waitress’ attention. “Bottle of red, please.”

“I’m not paying for that,” Justin scoffed, sending little bits of food flying from his lips.

“I know. I am,”

“What the fuck,” Justin snarled and his watery eyes narrowed. “Are you trying to embarrass me?”

“Excuse me?”

“What will people think, that I can’t afford a bottle of wine? You’re trying to show me up, aren’t you? Trying to make a fool out of me as if you haven’t fucking done that already.”

“Don’t swear at me,” I snapped back. “I came here as a courtesy but if you really want me to embarrass you, I’ll happily tip this pasta onto your lap and make a big show of leaving.”

That quietened him down for the next half hour and Justin resumed telling me the intricate ins and outs of stocks in the tech market and the incredible power behind bitcoin. Half of it went over my head after two glasses of wine and by the third,

my world was a little more rosy. If I drank the whole bottle, maybe he would look good enough to get me off.

And that was a tough maybe.

“So,” Justin sneered, wiping his face on the napkin when he finally finished his meal and another beer. “It’s time you came home with me.”

“Oh, is it?” I drained my glass and reached for the bottle. The alcohol wasn’t making him look any better.

“I’ve wined and dined you, put up with your snarky remarks and I put up with your disrespect before you left, so yeah. You owe me.”

Halfway through pouring my next glass, I paused. “I *owe* you.”

“Date’s come at a cost, sweetie.”

The door to the restaurant swung open, sending the tinkling of the doorbell ringing through the air.

“Justin, I don’t owe you anything. And I *wined* myself.”

“The fuck you don’t. Listen, I’ve put up with your attitude all evening, acting like you’re better than me. You owe me, so I’m going to pay, you’re going to act grateful and then we’ll go home and I’ll fuck a little gratefulness into you.”

“Is that how you think it works?” I scoffed, setting the bottle down. Even with the alcohol warming my blood and my stomach full of good pasta, I had enough sense remaining to see right through him. “You think a woman owes you her body because you buy her dinner? You think you can claim sex like it’s some kind of transaction?”

“Of course it is,” Justin scoffed. “I mean, look at you, wearing a dress so tight I don’t need to imagine what your body looks like. You came here because you wanted me to look at you. You came because you knew where this was going, don’t lie to yourself. There’s no point in dancing around it. You know, you woman act so fucking cocky but really, the moment you’re on my dick, you’ll reveal your true colors.”

Never had I recoiled so far into myself in disgust. Had I really been attracted to this kind of macho mess attitude when I was younger? Fuck, I was almost ashamed of myself.

“I came because I pitied you,” I replied. “And I wanted a free meal. I had – and still have – no intention of letting you anywhere near me. In fact, paying for my dinner is the least you can do after the shit you put me through all those years ago.”

Justin’s face switched several shades of purple. “You rotten little bit—!”

His words ended in a surprised squeak as Justin was dragged right out of his chair and held an inch or two off the ground by two strong hands wrapped into the collar of his off-white shirt.

Hawke stood next to the table, his shoulders heaving and his face as dark as thunder as he shook Justin so hard that he rattled like he was nothing more than a puppet whose strings had been cut.

“The fuck are you doing!?” Justin squeaked, wrapping his wiry hands around Hawke’s thick wrists.

“There is no way,” Hawke said in a voice so deep that the vibrations of his tone swept through me like a delicate touch. “-that you were about to disrespect a beautiful woman in my presence.”

He thinks I’m beautiful?

Hawke’s eyes flashed dangerously like the lightning strikes from the storm clouds rolling over his face and his muscular arms bulged clear through his jacket. From his stance to his show of power, the tingle left from his *anger* and his voice was settled hot in my core, and my mouth ran dry.

Okay, this was fucking attractive. Hawke was *hot*.

It had to be the alcohol talking, at least that’s what I told myself when Hawke shook Justin like a rag-doll once again and someone called from the bar to take it outside.

“Apologize,” Hawke snarled, and warmth beaded between my thighs.

No, I warned myself quickly. If I let this happen, Hawke would surely claim that I needed protecting and it would leak back to Axel and his insistence that I was their responsibility. No, I couldn't let this happen.

The moment I did, I would be in trouble.

"Let him go," I snapped, rising from my seat and biting back the pleased noise that threatened when my core clenched while I moved. "I don't need your help."

Hawke glanced over his shoulder to me and for a second, his eyes flicked down the red, figure-hugging dress I had thrown on. Heat licked across my skin, following the darting glimpse of his eyes, then he looked away and threw Justin back into his seat. He landed with a clatter and the chair skidded back a few feet.

"What the actual fuck?!" Justin yelled, "I'll have you done for assault you crazy old man!"

Hawke took a step forward but I moved faster, sweeping my wine glass from the table and dumping the contents straight into Justin's lap.

"Justin, I came here out of pity and there is absolutely nothing you can do, not even if you were the last dick in a thousand miles, that would ever make me contemplate getting into bed with you. You're a sleazeball, an asshole and frankly, I'm pretty sure I dated you in the past purely because you were the only one dumb enough to pay for everything I asked for."

Justin was so visibly furious he could scarcely get any words out, only indignant noises of anger.

"No woman owes you a single fucking thing, and I sincerely hope you end up alone." I snatched up my shawl and purse and turned, pausing to glance over my shoulder. "And next time, pay for the fucking wine."

I stormed out of the restaurant before Justin could say another word and was immediately struck by the bitter cold in the snowy air. I only made it a few steps, huddled in my shawl, before a heavy, warm jacket landed over my shoulders, and I stumbled slightly. Hawke's hand grasped my arm to keep me

steady, though I jerked away the moment I regained my footing.

Of course he had followed me.

“I don’t need protecting,” I snapped, wobbling over snow and ice toward where I’d parked my rental.

“Sure,” Hawke scoffed, striding alongside me, “You’d never let anyone close enough to protect you.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I snapped, glancing across at him. Wearing only a thin shirt, he seemed unaffected by the cold, but considering the warmth that lingered within his jacket, I wasn’t all that surprised.

“You know what it means,” Hawke snapped back. “You bite any hand that comes close to you.”

“I do not.”

“Then what was that in here?” He jerked a thumb back toward the restaurant as the wind picked up and the pins in my hair threatened to come undone.

“I don’t need you fighting my battles. I had it handled.”

“Sitting there getting insulted was all part of your plan, huh? What the fuck were you thinking, going on a date with that guy?”

“What was I thinking?” My rising anger toward Hawke made it easier to stomp over the snow and I tossed my head. “I’m not some damsel in distress, first of all. And second, he wasn’t that bad a few years ago so how the fuck was I to know he was some sleazeball now.”

“I’ve never seen you as a damsel,” Hawke remarked. “A lot changes in four years, Clover. If only you had people to talk to, who could have *told* you.”

Reaching my car, I began hunting through my purse for the keys.

“Oh because the first things out of your mouth if I’d come to find you would have been *oh, your ex is a dick*, right? Like hell would that ever have come up in conversation.”

“Well we’ll never know, will we,” Hawke snapped. “Because you didn’t come and see us.”

“What would be the point?” I spun to face him, keys in hand and heart flying wildly beneath my chest as my cheeks hardened from the cold. “Did you want us to sit in a circle and reminisce about Ricky until we were all withered and tired?”

“Did it ever cross your mind that we would have asked about you?” Hawke barked, leaning closer. In the dark, illuminated by only a few street lights overhead and surrounded by the early sprinkles of falling snow, Hawke was an intimidating shadow that seemed to grow with every passing second.

“What else would there be?” I snapped.

“You!” Hawke replied. “Did it never cross your mind that we were concerned and cared about you, beyond Ricky?”

“After what I did?” I laughed sharply. “Don’t try and act like —!”

Hawke surged forward, silencing whatever I was trying to say by crashing his mouth into mine. The force of the kiss shoved me back against the car and I raised both hands to his shoulders as if to push him back. Instead, I was frozen in place. Hawke’s mouth was warm, his lips soft and the subtle scrape of his beard against my chin wasn’t entirely unpleasant. His strong hand caressed my cheek and his hot fingertips thawed the cold from my face. His body was a hard, solid line pressing against mine, and his kiss was just as firm as the force used to keep me against the car.

He kissed me deeply, his other hand gripping my waist through his jacket and all thoughts fled my mind. It was a kiss that was achingly familiar and my pounding heart sped up, battering against my ribcage as if trying to free itself and throw down in mercy at Hawke’s feet. What chill had taken over me in the walk melted away and a raw, burning heat consumed me from head to toe. My gut twisted, my core clenched and a moan scraped up my throat, resting on the back of my tongue as I refused to let it free.

He kissed me, all-consuming and completely, until my lungs burned and finally, we parted with a gasp.

My thighs trembled and I sagged, weakly, back against the car. The urge to push Hawke away died suddenly, and I grasped onto the collar of his shirt.

Before I could stop myself and consider the consequences, I dragged him in for another kiss.

Sense be damned.

CLOVER

Hawke grunted against my lips when I pulled him close, and all sense fled from my mind. Maybe it was the alcohol or his incredibly sexy display of power in the restaurant; I couldn't be sure but whatever the cause, I was definitely turned on.

Too long had it been since I last felt the contact of another person, too long since I had allowed anyone close enough to kiss me. Hawke's surge of dominance had unlocked that box just for a moment and I was powerless to resist.

Hawke continued to press up against me, pinning me against the car but I barely felt the cold as the heat from his body overwrote any other sensation in the air around me. The chill of the pretty snowflakes drifting down around us didn't touch me.

His tongue slid against the seam of my lips, enticing his way inside, and I opened my mouth with a soft, needy moan. Hawke claimed my mouth with a hot intensity, keeping the kiss as our tongues danced together in a fight for dominance that we won in seconds. One hand slid up to my neck and his palm was so large that his thumb ran parallel to my jaw, keeping my head tilted up into the kiss. He towered over me, a firm line of solid muscle, and I was weak to all of it.

Just like I had been during our kiss all those years ago.

My heart ran as fast as a rabbit, stars danced behind my eyelids and my lungs ached with the need to take in air, but I refused to be the one to break the kiss. That determination

lasted until Hawke's other hand slid down from my hip and grasped the hem of my dress. The ruffled material bunched against his palm, and he dragged the silk up to my hip, teasing the hem of my panties with his thumb. Only then did the kiss break.

I gasped loudly, panting heavily against his lips and Hawke lingered in my space, not moving back.

"Can I?" he asked deeply. Unsure what he was even asking, I nodded vigorously and Hawke claimed my mouth in another deep kiss as he slid his hand inside my panties and cupped my pussy. My entire body jolted back against the car but with nowhere to go, I was at the mercy of his wandering fingers and strong tongue.

Seeking balance, I draped my arms around his thick shoulders and slid one hand into his thick, dark hair. Hawke growled against me and the rumbling swept down my own throat to join the static excitement building in my chest.

I was already soaked. Hawke's display in the restaurant had taken care of that but I didn't expect such an honest, surprised sound to escape him when he pressed three digits through my slick folds and felt for himself just how slick I was.

"Fuck," Hawke growled, breaking the kiss and leaving me gasping. He sucked up all the air around me, and no matter how frantic I gasped, it was never enough. My heart pounded fiercely and heat flushed through me in a rolling wave from head to toe.

"What?" I asked, rocking down on the stroke of his fingers.

"You're wetter than I expected," Hawke said. His hand slid from my neck to my hair and then my world exploded into light and color. Hawke's hand gripped my hair, jerking my head back so his mouth could latch onto my neck, and at the same time, he thrust two thick fingers deep inside me.

"Holy... shit," I gasped, caught between him and the car.
"Fuck—fuck!"

"I got you," Hawke growled, kissing and nibbling up the column of my throat, his lips writing that promise into my

very skin. His fingers thrust deep, over and over, while the heel of his palm ground up against my clit.

It had been so long, too long and I was weak to every single touch, every stroke and thrust. I couldn't move, but I didn't want to. I was safe in Hawke's arms, blocked by his bulk but even the thought of being caught only crossed my mind fleetingly. Pleasure, raw and pulsing, began to grow in my gut with every pump of his fingers. His teeth grazed over my fluttering pulse and his grip on my hair kept me open and exposed. I was at his mercy and I adored it.

"Hawke," I moaned, tugging sharply at his hair as my core tightened and every sensation pulled south. Hawke merely growled against my throat and shoved his fingers deeper, stroking every sensitive part of me without a second thought. I moaned openly, whined raw, and wriggled against him and the car until it was too much.

The contact, the heat, the pleasurable sensations.

It was too much.

Rising onto my tiptoes, my lips parted in a silent cry as I came harder than I'd ever come in my life. The world around me blurred and all my focus dropped to the explosion of sensation through my body, and still Hawke continued to thrust his fingers until I was a weak-legged, trembling mess. Only then did he pull back and press a firm, warm kiss to my gasping lips.

"Let me drive you home," Hawke said, gently removing himself from my body and lowering my dress. "You're in no condition."

I opened my eyes, gathering my legs underneath me as he stepped an inch away, and licked my lips.

"The motel," I corrected, trying to collect my mushy thoughts. "You can drive me to my motel."

"Of course." Hawke smiled at me, and for a moment, framed by snowflakes and illuminated by the street lights, he was beautiful. My mind was strangely at peace, and a warm

lightness spread through my chest in the wake of my orgasm, even as slickness gathered between my thighs.

Fuck.

True to his word, Hawke drove me back to the motel in his truck. It gave me time to gather my thoughts over what had just happened and reality had settled back in by the time he parked right up at the walkway. Turning the engine off, he rested one hand on the wheel and stared out of the window.

“Clover—.”

“Thank you,” I said firmly. “For the lift and...” I pressed my knees together and bit my lip. “This changes nothing between us, understand?”

Hawke looked at me with those intense eyes and nodded once. “Fine.”

I slid from the truck and didn't look back. Not until I was safe in my room with the door locked. Peeking through the curtains, I watched Hawke linger in his truck for ten minutes before he left.

Had that really happened? Did I really just let Hawke finger me in the parking lot?

“Fuck,” I groaned softly, tossing my purse onto the chair and trudging into the bathroom. “Clover, what are you doing?”

In the mirror, my lipstick was spread around my lips, my cheeks flushed and my hair definitely missing a few pins. Just thinking about Hawke's hand in my hair made my core throb and I bit my lower lip, trying not to focus on how fucking good that had all felt.

I failed.

Unzipping my dress, I turned on the shower and let the fabric pool by my ankles. Skimming my fingers over my abdomen, Hawke's hand flashed into my mind and my core throbbed once more. Not even the shower's heat could distract me and as I soaked up the water and warmth, washing away the night's events, I was fixated on Hawke.

The way he had swept in and torn Justin straight from his seat was one of the most attractive things I had ever seen in my life. That was the difference though, between boys like Justin and men like Hawke. Justin acted like I owed him things, like my very presence was something he could use for his own gain. And Hawke? Hawke had held me close, given me pleasure, and driven me home without asking for anything in return.

He definitely wouldn't let me pay for my own wine.

And it complicated everything.

Hawke was still on my mind when I retired to bed that night. The impression he had left on me was unlike anything I had experienced before and the ache in my core refused to fade. Sleep was pointless as I lay in bed; before I knew it, my hand was between my thighs, stroking the path Hawke's fingers had taken hours earlier.

Rolling onto my stomach, I closed my eyes and slowly inserted my fingers inside myself and as I did, I concocted a scenario where I'd invited Hawke inside instead. The way he had been so assertive in the restaurant, it was easy to imagine him throwing me down on the bed, pinning my thighs, and devouring my pussy with his tongue. God, with how talented his fingers were, his tongue would surely be ten times better. I arched my hips into my thrusting fingers and shoved my other hand between my thighs to stroke my clit over and over.

In my dream, it was all Hawke. His rough palms caressing my body, his strength pinning me down as he fucked into me with enough power to shake all thoughts from my head, his deep voice ringing in the air as he chanted my name over and over.

Axel's face burst into my thoughts as I moaned, and his soft voice filtered through my moans to praise me. I could take him. I could take him and Hawke at the same time. And Eli. All three of them wouldn't know what to do but I would. My fantasy turned filthy, with Hawke and Eli splitting me open while I showed Axel just how talented my mouth could be. All I could think about was them touching me, kissing me, fucking me hard until we were all an exhausted tangle of limbs—

I came hard around my fingers, shuddering into the pillow while I gasped and moaned for men who were miles away from me. As my orgasm wove through me, caressing my body with liquid desire, I sagged down onto the bed as one thing became crystal clear even as my body still twitched around my fingers.

That orgasm was good but didn't compare to the one Hawke gave me. My fingers were familiar but they were now ghosts in comparison to his.

Fuck.

In one night, Alexander Hawke had ruined me.

ELI

The world was my own when I focused on work.

Moving to Harbank Springs left me with little option in terms of employment. I didn't have Hawke's drive when it came to managing a bar or Axel's heroic determination to take on one of the volunteer enforcement positions. With Hayley to take care of and her young age being the most pressing factor, I'd settled into the role of a skilled laborer, and over the years, I'd come to love the role.

People paid well for someone willing to climb up to the gutters and repair the roof or help rebuild the floor of a cabin after an unexpected storm. Today was no different; Agnes hired me a few weeks ago to build the set pieces for the upcoming dance recital and I had jumped at the chance since it gave me time to watch Hayley as they threw her tiny heart and soul into the ice dancing.

She complained I was definitely one of those dads that took far too many pictures but I justified it since Hayley's mother was missing all of this. She was almost five, and I wanted June to have as many memories of Hayley growing up as I could give her while she traveled. We'd split amicably and while it made more sense for Hayley to grow up in the stability I could provide, I knew June missed her greatly.

Just as the last wooden tree slotted into place, I pulled the earphones from my head and caught the tail end of a cheer rising up from the ice, followed by lots of giggling and clapping. Brushing the sawdust off my hands, I stood and stepped out into the ice rink.

Clover stood in the middle of the ice with both her hands raised, surrounded by her gaggle of students. Each one was beaming, eyes sparkling, and Clover slowly lowered one hand to her lips, encouraging them into silence.

“Okay,” Clover began, her voice drifting across the ice to where I leaned against the railing. “Now, I want you to pair up and practice, okay? Keep those arms up high and keep your balance. Once you’re able to do a full route around the ice, come back to me, understand?”

“Yes!” chorused the children. I immediately honed in on Hayley, who had already grabbed the hand of the girl next to her and appeared to be in a deep discussion about something.

Either the skating instructions or world domination, I couldn’t be sure.

“Hey Eli.” Marlene appeared at my elbow and held out a steaming mug of tea. “For you. Since you’ve been working back there for hours.”

“Thanks, Marlene.” I shot her a smile and accepted the cup, ignoring how her fingers caressed the back of my hand when I took the cup.

“How’s it coming?”

“Pardon?” Slightly distracted by how elegant Clover looked on the ice while herding the children, I almost missed Marlene’s question.

“The set, how is it coming?”

“It’s nearly finished,” I assured her, hugging the cup with my hands. “You can let Agnes know that I haven’t let her down. It’ll be ready by next week, bar any last-minute changes.”

“Oh, Eli,” Marlene laughed and her hand landed on my elbow. “Agnes knows you wouldn’t let her down. You’ve become quite the pro at building the backdrops.”

“All part of the job,” I smiled. Marlene chuckled once more, her hand still on my elbow. Behind her, Clover skated up to Haley and provided gentle instruction that had Hayley thrusting her arm higher with a bright smile. My heart

clenched faintly in my chest. Seeing them together, smiling and laughing, was unexpected. When Hayley was born, I'd always imagined Clover and Ricky being pillars in her life.

Fate had other ideas.

Now here they were, skating together, and it was like I was back in time, in one of my dreams while waiting to hear how Hayley was after being born prematurely.

“Well?” Marlene asked again, cutting through my thoughts, and it was then I realized she had still been talking to me and I hadn't quite caught it. A pang of guilt shot through my chest; Marlene was a sweet girl, too young to have such an interest in guys like me, but she flirted relentlessly every time I was here.

“I'm sorry,” I chuckled, lifting the mug and draining it in three gulps. “I was miles away.”

“Thinking about anything exciting?” she asked with a wink.

I handed the mug back and smiled politely. “Paint and glue, Marlene. That's my thoughts these days.”

With that, I returned to the back room and resumed construction. All while I worked, Clover slipped into my thoughts like a whisper. The way her thick curls drifted behind her as she skated, the elegant curve of her body, her gentle smile and tone when talking to the children. It was difficult to keep my thoughts straight; in truth, it had been ever since I'd walked in on her in the kitchen but as the days passed and information about her trickled in from Hawke and Axel, it worsened.

By the time I was finished for the day and the kids filtered off the ice to get changed, I had to talk to her.

I located Clover in the reception area, leaning against the wall with one eye covering the corridor with the changing room. She straightened up the moment she heard my footsteps and I flashed her a smile when her blue-green eyes locked on mine.

“Evening.”

“Hi. Hayley should be right out.”

“Sure.” I stopped a few feet away and a sudden pulse of nerves swept through my gut, taking me by surprise. It was like I was a teenager again, trying to approach a girl I liked. Sensations I was sure the Navy had stamped out of me.

Clover rocked back and forward on the balls of her feet, her gaze constantly flicking down the corridor.

“How is it?” I asked. “Being back?”

Tension swept through Clover like a spring and her eyes flicked to me. “It’s alright, I suppose. Teaching here is different than I’m used to but the kids are absolutely lovely. Hayley is adorable. Did you see that she nailed her first spin? It was slow but she completed a full three-sixty.”

“Yes,” I replied softly. “I saw it on the app.” Clever Clover, giving me an answer and a non-answer at the same time. I almost admired it if it wasn’t so frustrating. “Must be strange teaching the kids of people you used to know.”

“The kids are great,” Clover replied with a light smile, dodging my question once again. “They’re fast learners. Although not as far along as my other group, they’re getting there. Very excited to see how The Nutcracker comes together.”

“Me too.” I bit back a sigh, studying Clover’s face. Hawke was right; she was similar and yet completely opposite of Ricky. Her stunning eyes, the soft curve of her jaw, and those heart-shaped lips were utterly distracting – if I could get something real out of her.

“I suppose managing multiple troupes in Saint Cloud can get tiring. Just one here must be a break.”

Clover turned to me slowly and those gorgeous eyes narrowed. “What?”

“I just mean, it must be a nice change to only focus on one class.”

“How do you know I work for more than one troupe?” She pressed her lips together. “I didn’t tell anyone that.”

Fuck.

Honesty was the best policy, or so they said.

“A little research could tell anyone that,” I replied.

“You’re not the type to do a *little* research,” she snapped.

“Did you really think you could up and vanish one night and we wouldn’t look for you?” The giddy nerves vanished, replaced by a molten heat in my gut as Clover turned to face me fully. “I did everything I could to track you down and make sure you were okay. I just respected your clear desire not to be contacted.

“Are you serious?” Clover’s voice pitched slightly. “You freaking stalked me, is that it? How long? How long were you following me across the country?”

“Grow up, Clover,” I snapped back as the heat spread up to my chest. “Don’t throw such accusations around. It wasn’t stalking. We’re trained to track down people that don’t want to be found.”

“I’m not some *terrorist*,” Clover hissed.

“I never said that,” I replied sharply. “But you are Ricky’s sister and we cared about you – we *care* about you. I had to make sure that nothing happened to you, that you hadn’t ended up dead in some ditch somewhere because we couldn’t lose you too, not after Ricky.”

“Oh please,” Clover scoffed and her cheeks flared pink. “We both know you all would have preferred me dead in a ditch.”

The rising, heated irritation immediately turned to ice and my heart seized briefly in my chest. “*What?*”

“You think I don’t know?” Clover’s voice rose once more, and all color washed from her face. “Out of the two of us, I know you’d prefer me wrapped around that tree instead of Ricky, right? After all, it’s my fault he’s dead. I could see it in everyone’s eyes at the funeral, could hear it in the whisper’s behind my back. I knew what you all wanted and I understood. It was my fault. He’s *dead* because of me!”

Suddenly, all those years made sense. Why’d she ran. Why she never contacted any of us. Why she avoided us the best she

could.

“You think we *blamed* you?”

“I *know* you did,” Clover snapped, growing more heated by the second. “But I get it! I blame myself too. After all, he never would have been out on that road if it wasn’t for me; he never would have died if it hadn’t been for me but you know what?” Clover stepped forward, her eyes flashing dark with anger. “I don’t need your judgment. Nothing you can do or say will make me feel any worse, so either get it over with or leave me alone!”

“Clover, we never blamed you.” Unable to believe what I was hearing, my mind tripped over itself with a hundred thoughts trying to make sense of this. “Never for a moment did any of us blame you. What happened to Ricky was a terrible, *terrible* accident, but it was just that. An accident.”

“Bullshit,” Clover snapped. “I know how you guys work, talking amongst yourself. Military buddies share everything, right? And Ricky—.” Her voice broke at his name. “—he died because of me and I know you all must have talked about it. It’s what guys do, right? It’s easier to deal with when there’s someone to blame. You share everything, Ricky told me. I bet you’ve all had a nice chuckle about Hawke fingering me in the parking lot, too, huh?”

I had Clover by the arm and pressed up against the wall before I could stop myself. Her breath shunted from her body from the force, and her tirade ended abruptly as I crowded her space, my heart pounding from anger and upset as every word from her needled sharply into my skin.

“Clover,” I said sternly. “Let’s get one thing straight. We’re not *teenagers* gossiping about our exploits or seeking to blame anyone for something that wasn’t anyone’s fault. You might be used to being around boys like Justin but we are *men*; *is* that clear? We have respect for you so you can show us the decency of having respect for us, understand?”

Clover’s jaw clenched and she glared up at me.

“Second, we’re men that know what they want because we know life is short, and we want to take care of you. All we have *ever* wanted to do is take care of you, no matter how often you throw dirt in our faces.”

Clover’s face softened slightly and her throat clenched as she swallowed. The door at the end of the hall creaked, so I released her and stepped back just in time for Hayley to come sprinting up the hall.

“Daddy!” she yelled. I held out my hand and Hayley took it the moment she arrived, but I kept my eyes fixed on Clover for a long, hard moment.

“We’re here for you,” I stated firmly, fighting to keep the emotion out of my voice. “We’ve always *been* here for you, if you would just stop running.”

CLOVER

First Axel in the cemetery, then Hawke and the restaurant, and now Eli at the ice ring? Just thinking of any of those three men got my temperature rising and my heart skittering in my chest. I had been gone for four years; how dare they even think they had the right to come into my life and try and act like it was for my own benefit?

Claiming to care about me, stalking me across the country, but *respecting* my desire to be left alone. The more I lingered on everything Eli had said, the more heated I became, and yet at the same time, just when I convinced myself that I hated all three of them, a voice would pipe up in the back of my mind saying otherwise.

That Axel's concern in the cemetery was heartwarming, that Hawke was as hot as sin and Eli shoving me up against the wall was exciting. That my anger was misplaced – and misread as something else entirely. It was a constant circle, fueled by the separate war in my mind of the guilt I carried and Eli's stark denial that I had anything to blame myself for.

How could he say that? Ricky wouldn't have been on that road at that time of night if it hadn't been before me.

Nothing else mattered.

I shifted on my bed, staring at the opposite wall while drumming my fingers against my left thigh. It wasn't until my sixth consecutive sight that Kate gave up on trying to tell me how excited she was for Christmas and cleared her throat so sharply that I jumped.

“What the hell?”

“Are you even listening to me?” Kate asked, her eyes narrowing on our FaceTime call.

“Yes!”

“Okay then, what did I just say?”

Shit. “Something about uh... lights and— and a... pumpkin?” Kate was right. I hadn’t been listening. My mind was miles away, replaying everything with those guys over and over. “Shit. I’m sorry, Kate. I’m just distracted. Please, tell me again?”

“Oh no, clearly my cinnamon disaster is too boring for you,” Kate remarked, her face twisted in faux disappointment.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Tell me what you were thinking about, and maybe I will forgive you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

Sighing, I dragged myself into an upright position and fixated on the camera. “*Fine*. Yesterday.... yesterday I bumped into Eli at the Ice Rink and he was... he was trying to make small talk like all the others. And I told him how I felt, that I was to blame for Ricky, and he basically said that was bullshit.”

Kate, with her faux irritation gone now I was talking, smirked slightly. “That’s what I’ve been saying!”

“Whatever. Anyway, he was saying the same stuff about how they wanted to care for me, and he fucking—he told me they’d been tracking me. They knew I was in Saint Cloud. They knew I worked with multiple dance troupes. They fucking stalked me.”

“Clover,” Kate sighed softly. “I wouldn’t class that as stalking.”

“What? Kate, you’re supposed to be on my side.”

“I am on your side,” Kate replied immediately, “But I don’t know if there’s quite... sides here. Sure, you could look at it as creepy, but on the other hand, how you left? Right after Ricky’s funeral? They were probably really worried about you. I don’t exactly think it’s a bad thing that they wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“It’s creepy,” I remarked stubbornly, even as my own mind denied that instantly.

“Maybe. But they never contacted you. They never invaded your space. They just waited for you, right? They all said they wanted you to come home. I dunno, I just think that maybe, given the situation, it’s actually kind of... sweet?”

“Sweet?”

“Yeah. I mean, I know I’d love three hot guys tracking me across the country.” Kate sighed dreamily and draped herself back in her chair. “Keeping an eye on me to make sure I’m safe. Three ex-military guys to say the least.”

“I—.” I wanted to argue, the stubbornness in my heart demanded it, but for a moment, I couldn’t. Indeed they had kept their distance; I never would have known they knew where I was. And they hadn’t sought me out even though they knew I was here, once again giving me space. We’d only run into each other because work and things out of our control had demanded it. “So why can’t I stop thinking about them?”

Kate leaned up and squinted at me. “What is it you’re thinking about?”

“Ricky, sometimes. I feel like I’m waiting for them to yell at me, blame me for what happened.”

“But Eli told you they don’t blame you. Maybe...” Kate pursed her lips and puffed out her cheeks. “Maybe you just want them to yell at you and blame you, so you can tell yourself that your feeling of guilt is justified. When it really isn’t.”

My gaze fell away from the phone.

“It would be easier for you, wouldn’t it?” Kate asked softly. “If they blamed you too? Because then you could tell yourself

that it truly was your fault and you were right to blame yourself all these years. But they don't blame you. They don't blame you so much that they're fingering you in parking lots."

"Kate!" My eyes darted up and I covered my face with my hands as she burst out laughing.

"It's true though, right? Tell me I'm wrong."

Kate spoke sense. Annoyingly, it made a *lot* of sense. Like she'd ripped out a part of my soul and unrolled it right in front of me to expose a hidden part of me, and I was almost mad at her.

Almost.

"Maybe, you're right," I admitted softly, dropping my hands. "It would be... *easier* if they blamed me."

"But they don't," Kate replied softly. "And you shouldn't either."

"Maybe."

Kate grunted but didn't fight me on that. Thankfully.

"There's also..." I glanced up at her once more, studying the screen. "There was a moment when Eli shoved me against the wall. Nothing awful, he was just firm, kind of like Axel was and it was... well, it was *hot* and I was so shocked I forgot to be mad at him for a second."

"Ohhh?" Kate purred a little and grinned at me. "Well, well, well, I'm jealous. Not only have they worked so hard to keep an eye on you, they can't keep their hands off you and you can't keep your mind off them. What I wouldn't give for a real man to be into me, never mind three."

"They're not into me," I retorted hotly.

"Bullshit, you don't finger someone you're not into," Kate laughed. "I mean, the grungy fucks we see on dating apps might because they're obsessed with sex but real men like these guys? They don't."

"But it's... I don't... fuck, I don't know. I can't stop thinking about them and I thought it was because of Ricky because they

were his best friends but then I think about Axel holding me or how Hawke ripped Justin out of the chair, and when Eli pressed me up against that wall I— god,” I groaned and threw myself flat onto the bed. “What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you,” Kate chuckled. “Well, you’re a little fucked up but being attracted to three people isn’t that strange. Not these days. Plus, you already have an emotional attachment to them which, in my experience, makes things easier.”

“But they’re older,” I whined, though the moment those words left my lips, I knew I didn’t care. If anything, that made them more attractive.

“Older just means more experienced,” Kate pointed out. “I can just imagine how much they must know about a woman’s body. All the right places to touch and press. God, having a real man like that working on me would be—.”

“Kate!” I sat up abruptly as she burst into giggles.

“Sorry, I’m sorry. I’m just trying to help you see the positives here. They clearly care about you and there’s definitely something going on with all the—,” she waved her hands about, “— touching and whatever so what’s the harm in embracing it?”

My thoughts drifted back to the powerful orgasm Hawke had given me against my car and how my own one later had paled somewhat in comparison. There was no way he knew my body better than me and yet he’d played me like a fiddle and left me craving more. Even my fantasy had included all three of them.

Biting my lower lip, I groaned softly. “I hate you sometimes.”

“You love me.”

“You don’t let me wallow.”

“I’m your best friend, I’d let you wallow if it was appropriate but this isn’t one of those times. You’re a beautiful, stubborn mess, Clover. And you deserve someone – or someones – to take care of you how you need.”

We talked for another half hour and this time and with a calmer mind, I was able to hear the end of the cinnamon mess story. Just as we blew kisses to one another and the call came to an end, a text message popped up on my screen from an unknown number and I frowned, tapping it.

Hey, it's Axel. We're having a family dinner and it would mean a lot to all of us if you would come. I know there's a lot of emotions up in the air right now, but since we're all back in the same place, just one dinner can't hurt. For Ricky? Or for yourself. Please, we'd love to have you.

I stared down at the text, reading it repeatedly as I slid from my bed and slowly padded into the bathroom to run a bath. Kate's advice swam through my mind, mingling with Eli's sharp words about not blaming me.

Dinner, with all of them? And their children? If Ricky was alive, it wouldn't even be a question. I would be there in a heartbeat.

As the water filled the tub and steam warped the air around me, I debated back and forth until my fingers took on a mind of their own.

Sure, I texted back. When and where?

One dinner couldn't hurt, right? For old times sake.

And for the more selfish desire to see them again, to taunt one of them into putting their hands on me like before.

Just like Kate said, where was the harm?

Yet, as I turned back to the bedroom and caught sight of myself in the fogging mirror, I paused.

Did this make me twisted? Entertaining the idea of sleeping with Ricky's best friends when I was the reason he died?

Only one way to find out.

CLOVER

Choosing what to wear to a family dinner was a challenge. With the deep snow outside, it was reasonable to wear something cozy but I had debated back and forth all morning about what was appropriate since it was just dinner and I would be inside for most of it.

In the end, I settled for thick, woolen leggings and a buttoned shirt decorated with pretty red flowers and splattered with various different splodges of color. Upon arriving at the Dixon residence, however, dinner was not on the menu.

Not until later.

“We’re going ice skating!” Hayley had yelled, scrambling down the front steps and throwing herself into my legs in greeting. Standing at the front door, Eli shrugged and offered an apologetic smile.

“Sorry. Axel didn’t think you would come if you knew it was more than dinner.”

“I would have dressed slightly differently,” I’d replied. It was irritating but it was difficult to remain annoyed when we arrived at the frozen lake not far from the house and piled out of the truck like a real family. It didn’t escape my notice how Isabell kept to herself, a dark cloud hanging over her while Hayley babbled away with scarcely any space for a breath.

The lake stretched out as far as the eye could see, touching the horizon and glittering like a thousand crystal jewels in a sun that fought to break through the fluffy clouds above. Surrounded by snow-laden pine trees, it was a picturesque

place and where I had spent much of my youth tearing up the ice and gaining more than my fair share of bruises. I had skated here for hours, from the moment the ice was thick enough in Autumn to the second it warmed up in the spring. My childhood was spent out here, dancing and training without a care in the world.

Now, it had lost some of its sparkle. Ricky no longer graced the lake in his boat for summer fishing sessions; we no longer had picnics by the shore, watching tourists drift back and forth.

So much had ended when Ricky died.

I must have sighed too deeply as Eli suddenly appeared before me, casting a warm shadow.

“Everything okay?”

“Hm? Oh, yes. Sorry. I’m just cold.”

“Can I get you anything?”

“Oh, no.” I shook my head, then it dawned on me how abrupt that sounded, so I gave a soft smile. “I’ll warm up when I’m on the ice.”

“Makes sense.” Behind Eli, Axel was already on the ice, with Hayley on his heels. Just further down the shore stood Hawke with his back to us. Judging by the sullen look on Isabell’s face, the talk was not going well.

“What’s that about?” I asked, crouching down to lace up my skates.

“Oh. Hawke is...” Eli paused, sucking air through his teeth. “Isabell has been out past curfew, talking back, and she was caught drinking the other day there. She’s grounded but she skips out of school.”

“Whatever!” Isabell’s shrill remark cut through the cold air and she turned around, stomping onto the ice.

“Isabell!” Hawke snapped but she ignored him, skating away as fast as she could.

“Jesus,” I snorted. “I can’t imagine having Hawke as a father.”

“He tries his best,” Eli replied. “When Tanya died, he dropped everything for Isabell but the transition for both of them was tough. We’re taught how to fight a war, we see the dangers out there and they follow us home. We’re not trained to be parents.”

“You do alright with Hayley.” I nodded in her direction. “No arguments there.”

“She’s nearly five and she grew up with me. For them... Hawke is the absent father and Isabell is the daughter he barely knows. They butt heads because they’re both strong-headed. It’s tough.”

I straightened up and watched Hawke. He placed his hands on his hips and his shoulders rose as his head fell forward.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s alright,” Eli replied. “A lot’s happened since you’ve been gone.”

“So I keep hearing.”

“Daddy!” Hayley yelled from the ice and waved both hands in the air, signaling the end of the conversation.

“Duty calls,” Eli smiled, waddled over to the lake, and stepped onto the ice.

I clapped my gloved hands together and followed at a slightly slower pace, and when I reached the edge, Axel was there to help me. I didn’t need it but I accepted his outstretched hand anyway; they were making an effort, and so should I.

“So, dinner huh?” I remarked, sending Axel a glance as we pushed off together. He laughed dryly, wobbling slightly as we fell into pace together.

“There was a last-minute change of plans.”

“Oh really?” I cocked a brow. “You sure it wasn’t because you thought I would say no?”

“Eli told you huh,” Axel chuckled. “Honestly, I’m surprised you’re here at all, so the day was planned as usual and I hoped

you would be here. Eli told me what happened at the rink. Just know we're happy to see you."

"Ahh, the clinging threads of a burned bridge," I murmured.

"You didn't burn the bridge," Axel replied. "It was just down for maintenance. And we're patient."

"I keep hearing that, too."

"Because it's true."

"It's crazy how things have changed, yet everything is the same."

"How so?"

"Well, just walking through town," I explained as the chill slowly left my body, replaced by warmth seeping through as my muscles worked. "The place is beautiful. The trees on the streets, lights on every pole, the decorations on every corner. Every window is done up to look like the coziest Christmas scene, the smells from the market... it's all the same."

"It is the town trade, after all," Axel chuckled.

"I know. It's just surreal. Because at the same time, Hawke has a grown-up daughter, Eli's baby is no longer a baby, and you —" I paused and smirked. "You've got grey hair."

"Ice white, actually," he replied indignantly. "And I have new flowers." As we skated, weaving past Eli and Hayley, Axel rolled up the thick sleeve on his right arm to reveal a full, intricate floral tattoo that covered every inch of visible skin.

"Holy shit," I gasped, skidding to a stop. Axel halted too, and after hesitation, I touched his arm. "The last time I saw this, you just had vines here." I brushed his wrist and Axel's hand flexed.

"I've had it built up over the years," he explained, "and up here too." He patted his clothed upper arm. "It's a full sleeve now."

"It's beautiful. The colors are insane. I didn't know a tattoo could get this bright?"

“If your artist knows what they’re doing, you can look amazing but it’ll need some touch-ups in a few years.”

“Wow...” I traced over petals and blossoms, along winding vines and then I snagged my glove with my own teeth and pulled it off. Rolling up my own sleeve on my left wrist to show off my own delicately inked tattoo.

Ricky’s name was scrawled on the inside of my wrist.

“I got this not long after I... left.”

Axel hummed in his throat and when I glanced up at his stunning blue eyes, they were slightly glassy. Axel bent his arm, and on the outer curve of his forearm sat Ricky’s name in thick cursive. Seeing that caught me off guard, and my heart leaped into my throat, forming a lump. Woven through the letters were green shoots leading to several four-leaf clovers.

“We all miss him,” Axel said softly. “And we miss you too.”

It was possibly the softest his voice had ever been, and a chill stole down my spine, setting in a cold ache that was forming around my legs from a lack of movement.

“I know,” I managed to say. “I’m... I’m working on it.”

It was all I could say. The only words able to squeeze past the lump in my throat. Shoving my glove back on, I pushed off on the ice and settled into a strong skating rhythm to rebuild the heat lost from standing still. Around me, Eli and Axel were having fun with Hayley while Hawke, to his credit, was still trying to argue with Isabell.

“You act like you’re in some kind of prison,” Hawke snapped, his voice carrying across the ice to me just behind them.

“Because you act like a prison guard!” Isabell complained. “You don’t let me have any fun. You’re always on me about my studies and my grades. There’s no room with you!”

“Because they’re important. Without them, you’re not getting anywhere in life.”

“You never went to college,” Isabell snapped. “Mum told me you were a dropout.”

“And look where that led me. And she shouldn’t have told you that when you were young.”

“It’s not like you were there to tell me.”

“Isabell, that’s not fair.”

“No, what’s not fair is how you’re smothering me. I can’t wait until I’m old enough to move out and be away from you!”

“Well you’re grounded until then, so you better at least study!”

“I hate you!”

“So you’ve said!”

They parted ways abruptly on the ice, with Isabell doing a one-eighty and skating toward me. Having had little interaction with her, I wasn’t sure what to expect, and my pleasant smile was met with a death glare on her way past.

Okay, not friendly.

Funnily enough, Isabell reminded me of myself and the arguments I would have with my own parents. Being in a small town like this, it was easy to feel trapped and smothered. There was no real distance to place between you and people who had known you since you were in diapers, so I empathized with her.

Saying that would likely get me shanked, though so I kept it to myself as I skated on. Hawke headed for the group and I skidded to a stop. Just as I was about to push off and head toward them too, I paused and watched.

Isabell had stormed off back to the car, Hayley was spinning slowly on the ice and Axel and Eli were glowing with laughter. Even Hawke’s thunderous gaze softened when he reached them. They were a cobbled family; that much was clear. Without a doubt, they had each other’s backs just like they did back in the Navy Seals, only now the war was taxes and parenting. The struggles of normal life that they were lucky enough to embrace because they had survived war.

A tense ache formed in my chest, wrapping around my lungs and tightening with each beat of my heart.

That was the family I had cut myself off from, so convinced I could never be a part of it after what happened with Ricky. Even now, it struck me that he should be here, among the laughter but he wasn't.

Slowly the ice and trees melted together, and my vision blurred, heat building behind my eyes as I watched them.

Did I belong there? Could I fit there, even now?

"Clover!" Hawke's voice boomed across the ice and I sniffled, quickly blinking away the tears.

"Yeah?!"

"Time to go!"

I almost wanted to tell him he couldn't tell me what to do but there was a sharp, commanding edge to his voice that made my gut flip, so I nodded and held up a thumbs up.

Time to go home.

The drive back to the Estate was quieter with Isabell giving her father silent treatment and Hayley so tired out from the skating that she'd fallen asleep in Eli's arms. It was adorable. When we reached the house, darkness had fallen quickly, and with it, a heavy burst of snowfall had all of us darting inside the house before Jack Frost could steal any noses.

"I hope everyone's hungry," Axel called, heading straight for the kitchen.

"I'm going to put Hayley to bed," Eli whispered, scooting away up the stairs, followed by a grumpy Isabell who stated she'd take her dinner in her room like the prisoner she was. Hawke vanished into a deeper part of the house, toward the study if memory served so I joined Axel in the kitchen.

"I didn't know you cooked." The warm aroma of Roast Chicken and some kind of spicy sauce flooded my senses, making my mouth water as Axel busied himself at the stove.

"I didn't used to," he smiled over his shoulder. "But I learned. I used to live in the city so it was all takeaways but moving here, I was forced to learn to cook and I fell in love."

“Oh true. I swear I put on so much weight when I moved to the city,” I joked.

Axel turned and pointed a wooden spoon at me. “And yet you’re as beautiful as you ever were, so shut the fuck up.”

“Hey, I wasn’t complaining!” While laughing, my cheeks warmed at the compliment and my gaze dropped to the table in front of me. Life had been scored into the wood. Countless knives that missed the mark, plates that were too hot, fiddling forks, and more had all carved their history into the table and my heart pounded sharply, just once, to see that it was still here. I smoothed my fingertips over some of the grooves.

“Good,” Axel replied. A moment later, a plate laden with chicken, potatoes, veg, and some sort of salsa was placed in front of me. “Eat. It’ll warm you right up.”

“Thank you.” Taking a seat at the table, I crossed my ankles and Axel passed me with another plate. “Better take this to Prisoner six-two-six,” he joked on his way past.

A warm silence fell around me as Axel left, but it was a homely silence. Food bubbled on the stone, the home was heated to perfection and footsteps and voices could be heard above. All the good signs of life.

Of family.

Seeking out a fork from the drawers – it was in the wrong drawer – I settled in to eat and as the first mouthful passed my lips, it kicked in how utterly starving I was. Axel was one hell of a cook and sweet, morish flavors danced over my tongue as I ate like it was my last ever meal. By the time I finished, Axel was back and he chuckled at my empty plate.

“Good?”

“So good. Can’t remember the last time I had a home-cooked meal. Or any kind of cooked meal.”

“What, you mean Justin didn’t sweep you away with a home-seared steak?”

“No,” I scoffed. “He’ll throw a burger on the grill and call that a steak.”

“Fuck,” Axel grinned. “What a dick.”

The floor creaked to my right and I glanced up at Hawke standing in the doorway. The cloud from earlier had passed and he looked more like his normal self.

“Isabell had hers?” he asked. Axel nodded and jerked his thumb upward.

“She was shoveling it down when I left.

“Good. Clover?”

“Hawke.”

“You’ll have to stay here tonight,” Hawke said, his tone brisk. There was no room for argument. Somehow that made me want to push back just a little.

“That snow came from the mountain and the storm is not far behind. No way in hell I’m letting you drive out in that.”

“Well,” Axel said with a smile. “We better set up a bed.”

CLOVER

“**N**ever thought I’d ever be sleeping here again.” The guest room had notes of familiarity in the ocean blue wallpaper and black carpet, with teal drapes over the window, but it also rang clear with changes made after I’d left.

The large bed in the middle of the room was on the opposite side, the dresser had been swapped out for a lit-up walk-in wardrobe, and a dressing table covered in sparkling blue lights sat in the far corner where there used to be a stiff back chair.

“Sorry.” Axel shot me a sorrowful look. “June stayed here for a little while, near the beginning, before work took her away. Since then, it’s been the room people sleep in if they’re home late and don’t want to climb the stairs and wake everyone.”

“You don’t have to apologize. It’s not my house,” I replied without thinking. Immediately, I turned away from running my fingers over the curtains and held up a hand. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that how it sounded.”

“It’s okay.” Axel’s handsome face melted into a warm smile. “I know what you meant. I can understand why it’s strange. I just hope you’ll be comfortable.”

“Oh definitely.” Turning back to the curtains, I parted them slightly and peeked out at the storm raging through the air. It had swept in so rapidly that if I hadn’t listened to Hawke, I would have been likely stranded in the middle of nowhere, frozen until morning. Such a thought made me shiver and I closed the heavy curtains, silencing the wind altogether.

“I’ll be back with your sheets.” Axel turned the light down low and vanished, leaving the door ajar. Taking a deep breath, the air was slightly musty and if I really focused, I could detect the old scent of home that pulled at the yearning in my chest. Old familiarity of a place and a life long gone.

Knuckles rapped against the door and I turned as Hawke walked inside with sheets and pillowcases in his hands. “Here.”

“Oh, thank you. Axel went to get some as well.”

“Huh. Well, you can take your pick, I suppose.” Axel tossed the sheets onto the unmade bed and slid one hand through his jet-black hair. The movement pulled all his back muscles upward, visible through the body-hugging muscle tank he wore. I averted my eyes immediately before my brain could run with that thought.

“It’s going to be weird trying to fall asleep here,” I said softly, “in this house, I mean. Even being here feels... weird.”

“I can help you with that if you like.” Hawke turned to me, grey eyes twinkling like pools of moonlight.

“What?” Heat rushed up to my cheeks and south to my core at the deep, grating way he spoke, and I rocked a half step backward.

“I can help you sleep.”

“What, with alcohol?”

“No, something much more fun.”

“Hawke,” I exclaimed, pressing a hand to my chest to try and fight the flutter of my heart. “You can’t talk like that.”

“Why not?” He took a step forward, his hips tilting to the left as he shifted his weight.

“Because— because it’s not right. What if someone heard you talk like that? What would they think?”

“No one here would care if they heard me,” Hawke scoffed. “It’s just an offer. You don’t have to be so prude about it.”

“I’m not being a prude,” I shot back as warmth continued to pulse through me. “This... this isn’t the right place. And your daughter is upstairs.”

“First, you are being a prude. Second, Isabell is at the far end of the house, so I could fuck you so hard that you screamed, and she wouldn’t hear a thing. Did you forget how thick the walls are in this place? We can’t even hear the storm and it’s right outside.”

“Hawke!” My tone was more indignant than my desire. I could barely fathom how he was able to stand there and so confidently say those things as if there was any chance I would take him up on that offer.

“Yes?” He took a single step forward.

“You shouldn’t say these things. We’re not— I told you it wouldn’t change anything between us.”

“What happened in the parking lot?” He scoffed lightly. “It hasn’t changed anything for me.” Another step forward.

“Well, we’re not—.”

“Not what? We’re both single, both adults, and I can tell by how flushed your cheeks are and how your eyes are darting over me that you’re already entertaining the idea of me fucking you.”

“Fuck you,” I snapped hotly. “You’re so off base.”

Suddenly Hawke was shoving into me and my back collided with the wall behind me. As I bounced forward, he crowded up against me and created a cage with his arms, locking me in. My heart rate soared and I started to pant but each breath just pushed my breasts against his solid, muscular chest, and suddenly I was struggling to speak.

“Am I?” Hawke’s voice rumbled low through the air between us. “Tell me right now that you want me to leave.”

“I want— I want you to leave,” I forced out around a dry mouth, quickly licking my lips in a vain attempt to regain some moisture as Hawke’s presence seemed to soak up all air around us. It was the worst lie I had ever told. This had turned

so quickly, not that I was complaining and now that he had me pinned to the wall, warmth beaded between my thighs and I swallowed audibly.

Hawke leaned in close, his beard gently brushing over my cheek as he placed his lips to my ear.

“Tell me you don’t want me to fuck you.”

“Hawke,” I choked out.

“Tell me you don’t want to feel my tongue on your pussy. Tell me you don’t want to feel my hands on your skin, clawing my name into your heart as I fuck you with my thick cock. Tell me you don’t want to cum so hard you black out. Tell me that and,” Hawke paused and when he spoke again, his lips grazed my cheek. “I’ll leave.”

Fuck.

Fucking fuck.

My core clenched painfully and it took every ounce of my will not to lean forward and press my legs together. I flushed hard as if dunked into a sudden hot shower and I repeatedly tried to wet my lips.

“I don’t want,” I began hoarsely, “to feel your tongue on my—my...”

Hawke leaned back, and the moment he looked me straight in the eyes, I crumbled and a soft moan escaped with my next breath.

It was like the gunshot at the start of a race and Hawke surged into action.

He claimed my mouth in a powerful, biting kiss that robbed me of air and sent my head spinning. The floor vanished as he swept me up in his arms, and for a few intense seconds, there was nothing but his strong arms around me and his mouth devouring mine. He kissed life into my very soul and when we broke apart, I instantly craved him again.

Hawke threw me down onto the bed, soft blankets creating a nest around me as I bounced. He didn’t pause. His hands clawed at my leggings, and the material ripped somewhere,

exposing my bare legs to the overheated air around us. As they landed somewhere on the floor, Hawke grasped my panties and pulled them taught, forcing the material to tighten and press up against my pussy, rubbing sharply against my clit. He held them there and I moaned desperately, shooting one hand down to grasp his wrist, and when I looked up at him, his attention was on the door.

Tipping my head back on the bed, Axel stood in the doorway holding sheets and pillows, his blue eyes as dark as a lake basking in the moonlight.

“Care to join us?” Hawke asked and he pulled my panties tighter, forcing another desperate moan from my lips as the cotton brushed harder against my clit.

“Please,” I gasped out.

Then my panties snapped, freeing me from the pleasure-pain of the strain, and suddenly Axel’s mouth was on mine, claiming me in a deep, upside-down kiss. His soft beard brushed my nose and the cool metal of his dog tags brushed against my forehead while his hands cupped either side of my face.

The kiss broke and I could only scream as Hawke’s face shoved between my thighs and his mouth buried hard against my pussy. Both his arms curled around my hips and over my thighs, forcing me to spread wide open for him and leaving me utterly powerless against his strength to pull away. I was locked against his face and he buried deep against me. His tongue lapped eagerly through my soaked folds, repeatedly brushing over my clit in an array of patterns that I had no hope of anticipating where he would touch next.

I writhed on the bed, shifting back and forth as pleasure assaulted my body, and I reached out for Axel, who ripped my shirt from my body so suddenly that I didn’t have a chance to be surprised. Buttons clattered around us, pinging off of surfaces I couldn’t see and my bra quickly followed. Then his rough, war-worn hands grasped at my breasts, teasing my stiff nipples into harder peaks and massaging the flesh in rhythmic strokes.

“Fuck!” I cried out when every muscle in my abdomen and lower. Hawke kept up his determined licks over my folds and often, his tongue dipped into my core and thrust deeper than I had ever experienced. The pleasure was hot and intense like the heat was searing against my very pussy and I had no escape, not with Hawke’s hands hooked around my hips.

That restricted sensation only turned me on more.

Then Hawke circled his lips around my clit and started to suckle hard. My torso jolted upwards as I cried out, both hands reaching for Hawke in some way, but Axel, now mostly naked, grabbed my arms and pushed me flat back onto the bed, holding me down.

“Oh my god,” I cried out, tears forming in the corner of my eyes. The pleasure was too intense and not enough all at the same time. I gasped for air, tossed my head back and forth, catching strands of my hair with the sweat gleaming on my skin, and positively writhed against Hawke’s intense, pointed tongue.

“You’re doing so good,” came Axel’s voice above me, his hands still firm on my upper arms, keeping me pinned. “Good girl.”

When my orgasm hit, my world exploded into light and color. Hot, intense pleasure swelled at my clit and remained there for a good few seconds, then I crashed over the edge and came with a scream that should have woken the entire house. My hips convulsed and my core rippled around Hawke’s tongue. I fought against every hand keeping me in place but only on instinct. Waves upon waves of ecstasy crashed through me and the sultry pulses of pleasure lasted for a few long minutes.

I was utterly high and utterly blissed out.

As I came down, Hawke was still lapping at my pussy, drinking down my juices with strong, flat strokes of his tongue. Axel’s face swam above me, a warm smile curved on his lips and when I smiled up at him, he leaned down and kissed my lips firmly.

Then the pressure against my pussy vanished and I glanced down to Hawke, who was watching me with eyes as dark as his hair, and his beard glistening with my juices.

“Again,” was all he said, like a command, then his tongue was back on my pussy and I whined desperately.

Only this time, when I blinked, Axel’s thick cock came into view and he slid a thumb over my lower lip.

“Open up, baby,” he coaxed sweetly. “Let me fuck that pretty mouth of yours.”

I parted my lips with a moan and Axel coaxed my head back a little further until it was draped over the edge of the bed. I wanted to taste him; I wanted to feel his cock in my mouth, stretching my throat. I needed to show him I could do it so he would call me a good girl again because those words had sent my heart skipping too many beats to count. Axel stroked my jaw and then pressed his thick length between my parted lips. My world darkened, blocked off by his strong, muscular thighs, and his musk filled my nose. I closed my mouth the best I could around his cock but sucking was too difficult. My focus was constantly pulled to Hawke’s mouth between my thighs but luckily, it didn’t matter.

Axel’s strong hands gripped my breasts and teased my nipples, then he began to fuck deep into my mouth with slow, controlled thrusts. He started shallow but as Hawke built up the intensity of his tongue movements, Axel thrust deeper and pressed into my throat. The first time I choked, he moaned deeply above me, and pride bloomed distantly through my chest.

I did that. I made him make that sound.

His massaging hands on my breasts began to grip tighter and after a few lazy thrusts, he started to fuck harder into my throat. His thighs flexed, and his body draped over me like a cloak, all the while, Hawke lapped, kissed, and sucked every inch of my pussy, thrusting his tongue deeply. My second orgasm was fast approaching, creeping up on me as I tried to regulate my breathing between each thrust into my throat. Axel’s cock regularly cut it off, leading me to pant desperately

each time he pulled out, but the gaps between breaths became less and less.

As breathing became more and more infrequent, my focus pulled to my core became more and more intense. The less I could breathe, the more my head spun and Hawke's tongue felt more intense.

Did they plan this? Did they take one look at me and know how to play my body like an instrument, which keys to stroke and strings to caress?

I was at their mercy, and yet their punishment was my ecstasy and I had never soared higher.

CLOVER

The urge to tell them I was close to orgasm rose, but when I lifted my hands to try and touch Axel or Hawke, Axel's hands left my breasts with sharp pinches of my nipples and grasped my hands. Our fingers threaded together and I choked harder around his cock. Then Axel pressed deep and didn't pull back.

My head grew fuzzier by the second, my senses dulled and the only constant was the tightening of my core and the deliciously torturous stroke of Hawke's tongue. I tried to twist and writhe like I had before but I was trapped and powerless, which only made everything hotter. I tried to whine, and just when the first flame of panic licked at my heart, Axel pulled all the way out of my throat.

I gasped in the air once and came blindingly hard as the rush of oxygen threw me over my cusp of pleasure. I didn't have the voice to cry out. Every muscle was locked up, every limb quivering uncontrollably, and my pussy flexed harder and harder with every passing pulse of pleasure. They had thrown me into a seat of utter pleasure, yet I wasn't drifting alone. Hawke's hands slid over my stomach, freeing my hips from his iron grasp. I followed the sensation and finally gasped again, panting heavily.

"F-Fuck," I croaked out.

"Axel isn't finished," came Hawke's commanding voice in my ear. With no thought, only action, I let my head fall back and parted my lips. Axel's cock sank home in my throat and Hawke's heated mouth bit a mouthful of my breast. I moaned

and Axel came instantly, spilling his seed down my throat in four powerful pulses while he moaned and whimpered above me.

I made him whimper.

“Swallow, pretty thing,” Axel moaned and I did, obediently. Axel pulled his cock free and suddenly, I was surrounded by solid chests and warm arms.

“Such a good girl,” Axel praised in my ear. My head lolled back onto his shoulder and I smiled lazily up at him.

“Holy shit,” I croaked.

Hawke cupped my face, tilted my head down, and kissed me hard, sharing my own taste with every swipe of his tongue and the greedy press of his lips.

“Look who joined us,” Hawke said. When he pulled back, Eli came into view with that soft smile of his and the teddy bear warmth that poured off his bulk. “Think you can take all three of us?”

“Easy,” I panted. “You don’t stand a chance.”

They chuckled, and a satisfied warmth bled from my heart right down to my soul. With trembling limbs, I was shifted around in Axel’s lap and passed over to Hawke, who settled me down straight onto his thick, aching cock. My back arched, I tossed my head back, and a moan of pure delight pulled from the depths of my chest. Hawke’s hands grasped my waist, and something cool and slick pressed against my ass. I yelped and surged forward into Hawke’s chest and he wrapped his thick arms around my body.

“Too much?” Hawke asked, his voice strained.

“No,” I gasped, “just surprised. I’m okay.”

“You sure?” His dark eyes searched for mine and when they locked on, I nodded quickly.

“Yes.”

The cold press was back and Hawke held me in place, rocking his hips into me while Eli slid one strong hand into my hair

and tipped my head to the side. His plush lips pressed softly against mine, deepening the kiss the longer we shared air, and as he kissed me, Axel, a slicked digit into my ass.

I yelped into the kiss, then moaned as Hawke shifted his hips and ground his cock deeper into my core. I lost count of how long I was held and caressed, how often loving hands wandered my body and eager mouths kissed me breathlessly. By the time Axel had three fingers deep inside me, I was completely smitten and lost.

Eli vanished, and his hands slid over my back, then down to my waist, gripping and holding me steady.

“Deep breath,” came Axel’s voice. I obeyed, and Eli’s thick cock, slicked with lube, slowly pressed into my ass. Deeper and deeper he slid, spearing me wide, and the breath I had taken was effectively fucked right out of me. This time, I wasn’t given any time to prepare. Strong hands gripped me; thighs shifted under me, then Hawke and Eli began to fuck into me with deeply powerful thrusts.

They worked in tandem with one another, one thrusting in when the other pulled out. I bounced between them, scrabbling for balance against Hawke’s thick shoulders, but I shouldn’t have worried. They held me close and kept me safe as they pounded into me with more force and speed than I could even fathom. I was a willing puppet, filled to the brim by their cocks and drinking up every single stroke.

Every kiss was mine, every brush of fingers and grip of palms, every bite and graze of teeth, every whispered gasp and moan. All of that belonged to me.

They belonged to me.

No sooner did I have a grasp on their rhythm than it started to falter, and each man fucked into me wilder than before. My core throbbed, pulsing in time to my pounding heart, and pleasure swelled inside me, unlike anything I’d known possible. My entire body was burning up from my heart to my core, and I rocked into the sensation.

When I came, heat rushed inside me as Eli came and my breathless panting sang with moans on each desperate breath. As Eli took his pleasure and filled me deeply, my mind went blank and I only existed in sensations. On and on, the waves crashed over me in a constant, never-ending orgasm that tingled from my core to my fingertips. When Eli pulled free with a moan, Hawke threw me down onto the bed and held me down with his hands, fucking into me with fierce abandon. If he was working to get me through my orgasm, it was never-ending, and soon, Hawke was kissing me hard as he devoured my mouth in a hungry kiss that left my lips throbbing for more contact.

The night dissolved into fucking, and I lost track of how many orgasms were pulled from me. When Hawke pulled free, Axel filled me and fucked me hard and deep. Every mouth gave me a kiss when I asked, every hand clutched mine when I sought it out, and each cocked filled me deep in either hole, flooding my guts and leaving my hips and legs a numb, quivering mess.

By the time exhaustion took us and I had been wrung out of my sixth orgasm, Eli, Axel, and Hawke were spent and satisfied. The bed was a mess and Axel kicked all the soiled sheets away, wrapping me up in the sheets he had brought. They all climbed into the bed, creating a nest of warm limbs, and settled me in the middle, plying me with water and some chocolate to help combat crashing energy levels.

I was utterly content. They never stopped touching me, constantly in contact with some part of my body, and with it came a deep sense of calm in my soul.

“That was... fucking amazing,” I finally croaked out, to their amusement.

“You were right,” Hawke murmured with a softness I had never heard come from him. His fingers lazily stroked through my hair. “You really could take us all.”

“I’m in awe,” Elis remarked, tracing patterns in my calf. “You’re incredible.”

“Agreed,” Axel sighed, caressing my abdomen. “Are you okay?”

“Better than okay,” I groaned. “Although thank fuck I don’t work tomorrow. I don’t think I’ll be able to move.”

“Mission success,” Hawke smirked.

I wanted to stay like this, in a blissful sexy bubble with just sensation and warmth, but already sense was teasing back into my mind, and I shifted against Hawke.

“I... I don’t want to ruin the mood...”

“You never could,” Eli assured.

“But what does this mean?”

“The sex?” Hawke asked, earning a shove from Axel.

“No, dumbass. She means us.”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “I-I mean, if it means nothing, just sex, then that’s okay.”

“Not on your life.” Hawke straightened up slightly. “I think I speak for all of us when I say that... we have always cared for you, Clover. In so many different ways, and deeper as of late. This is just the next stage for us, and if you want us, any of us, for whatever you want or need then we are here for you. No pressure.”

“Yes,” Axel and Eli agreed in unison.

“But,” Axel continued. “We must make something clear. If you want this, if you want us, whether that be one or more, then it is just us. We’re men, we’re not to be fucked around like Justin. You need to be honest with us and communicate what you need. We will accommodate. I’m happy to share you with the others if that’s what you want, but no one else, understand?”

“Me too,” Eli said and Hawke grunted his agreement.

“I understand. Can I think about it?”

Axel nodded slowly and I licked my swollen lips as I settled and closed my eyes. Was this real? I hadn’t stumbled into some crazy dream because of the storm, had I?

No... this was definitely real.

As was their proposal.

Could I have this? Could I finally give in and let this kind of warmth and security into my life? Such a thing was so strange, so unexpected, and yet at the same time, it was easy.

If they wanted me, why couldn't I have them?

But deep down, a dark, cold voice was still latching onto my heart.

I didn't really deserve security, not when the guilt about Ricky still swarmed my heart.

Sleep came terribly easy that night and I woke in the early hours with the desperate urge to pee and a terribly yet pleasant ache between my legs. Sliding gently from the nest of sleeping men around me, I wrapped myself in a sheet and padded out into the hall, seeking out the bathroom while taking slow steps. Each press of my thighs sent aching sparks through my tired core and I now understood very meaning of the term *well fucked*.

After relieving myself, I detoured to the kitchen with the intent on making coffee for everyone but as I stepped inside, Isabell was already there pouring some orange juice into a tall glass. Tugging the sheet tighter around myself, I forced a smile while subtle nerves wove through my gut.

“Morning.”

Isabell didn't even acknowledge me. Moving deeper into the kitchen, I turned on the lights under the cabinet, giving the kitchen a warm orange glow. Isabell was between me and the coffee maker so I hung back until she was finished. She shoved the carton back into the fridge, picked up her glass and when she turned to me, she was scowling.

Her lips curled in distaste and she looked me up and down.

“I heard you last night,” she muttered sourly.

Oh shit. My heart sank and prickly heat swept up my spine.

“Isabell—.”

“I don’t want to hear it,” she snapped, pushing past me. “Just stay the hell away from my dad, and we won’t have a problem.”

Fuck.

AXEL

“**Y**ou ever think about changing to a better job?” Hilary’s voice crackled over the radio and I lifted my hand to fiddle with the device, clearing up her words as she spoke.

“A better job?” I asked, walking slowly down the main street.

“Yeah, a better job.”

“Are you trying to tell me that you’ve just realized being a volunteer law enforcement officer in a place like this isn’t all it’s cracked up to be?”

“Maybe,” Hilary chuckled. She was a volunteer officer just like me and I had pulled the short straw for the cold patrol tonight. “I just mean... imagine having a good job at this time of year.”

“I like keeping unruly tourists in check,” I replied, sidestepping a small crowd of awe-filled faces as they clutched a map in one hand and pretzels from the market in the other.

“Okay, but imagine a fun job.”

“What counts as fun at this time of year?” Christmas was only a few weeks away and the visiting tourists grew more and more excited by the day. I’d experienced it my first few times visiting Ricky when we were on leave; the town had a charm for people who had warmth in their hearts. Over the years, though, with a heavy belt around my waist and the keys to the jail cells, the magic had dulled.

“I don’t know. Santa?”

“Too many bossy kids.”

“You’re so un-festive,” Hilary laughed. “What about the market?”

“I’d eat all the food.”

“Then you really would be Santa.”

“It’s a vicious cycle.”

“So true. Oh, hold on. Mrs. Avery is calling again.”

“Good luck!”

The radio clicked and Hilary vanished, away to deal with elderly Mrs. Avery’s latest complaint that was likely raccoons or squirrels in her bins. That’s what it was two nights ago, at least.

Satisfied that no one was acting uncouth in the middle of town, I took a left toward the outskirts to check on local businesses. As I walked, I dialed the number of the one person who had been on my mind ever since the storm passed.

“Hello?”

My heart pulled up as Clover answered the phone, and her sweet voice chased away any lingering chill from the freezing cold.

“Clover.”

“Axel! Is everything okay? You’re not about to invite me to dinner again, are you? Because honestly, I’m still sleeping with an ice pack.”

“Oh fuck.” My heart plummeted. “Are you okay?”

“Yes,” Clover chuckled. “I’m sorry, that was a bad joke. I’m sorry.”

“Oh.” Relief followed like a gentle wave and I puffed out my cheeks. “I was worried for a second.”

“My bad.”

“I actually wanted to talk about that. I wanted to ask how you were, see how you were feeling, and make sure we didn’t

come on too strong or make you feel pressured. Anything like that.”

Clover remained silent for a moment as I crossed the road, trudging through slush and raising a hand in greeting to a truck that stopped to let me cross.

“I definitely didn’t feel pressured,” Clover replied finally. “I think I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed, but in a good way. That night, what we all did, it was fantastic and sometimes doesn’t even feel real but at the same time...” She sighed deeply down the phone and I hummed in my throat, not wanting to interrupt while also indicating that I was listening.

“I feel... dirty.”

“Oh.” A subtle stab of alarm shot through my mind. “Because it was all three of us?”

“Oh! No, no, not at all,” Clover explained hurriedly. “Because of Ricky. I feel... so conflicted. I’ve blamed myself for his death ever since it happened, and that hasn’t stopped. I feel so fucking guilty all the time and now I feel even guiltier because I slept with all of you. You were his best friends, his comrades and here I am, spreading my legs when he’d still be here if it wasn’t for me.”

Nothing I had said, nothing any of us had said, seemed to have eased Clover’s guilt. Maybe it was the sort of thing that would never pass; like grief itself, it would only become more manageable.

“Clover, you’re not the only one who feels responsible for Ricky’s death.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The night he died, I was...” I took a deep breath. “I should have been there.”

Clover didn’t reply. It wasn’t exactly a secret but I had to tell her. I would have told her after the wake if she had stayed.

“I was supposed to fly out that day to come and visit. I was going to be there for Christmas but I was delayed. I missed my flight because I picked a girl up at the airport and decided a

night with her in the hotel was worth missing my flight because Harbank wasn't going anywhere. It would all still be there in the morning and I would fly out later."

My confession swept into the night air, carried in clouds of condensation up to the twinkling stars above.

"I woke up in bed with her to a message from Hawke telling me... telling me what happened."

"Oh, Axel," Clover said softly, her voice pained.

"So if I had gotten my original flight, I would have been there. I would have been in the car with him, and I— I'm a medic. I could have saved his life if I'd just *been* there."

It was a pain and guilt I had carried with me for four years, something that had fueled a stint at the bottom of a bottle and plagued my nightmares for even longer. Over the years, I'd grown used to carrying it with me alongside the pain of loss but saying it out loud to Clover revealed how raw that wound still was.

"Axel." Clover's voice was a gentle caress, seeping through the phone and warming my aching heart. "That isn't your fault. Ricky... died instantly, according to the coroner. If you had been there, in the car with him, then there is nothing you could have done. If anything, we probably would have lost you too, given how quickly his car... exploded."

Her voice thickened slightly and an unexpected warmth prickled behind my eyes hearing the emotion in her voice.

"Logic doesn't ease that guilt, though, does it?" I prompted.

"It should. We wouldn't have survived losing both of you. So no, it isn't your fault. And even if you were here, we know how stubborn Ricky was. He would have sent you straight to bed to combat jet lag and come to get me himself because I was a fucking tyrant back then, and he would want to handle that himself."

"That is true," I chuckled softly, coming to a stop where the road forked into the forest and turning on my heel. "My point in telling you this, Clover, is that sometimes it can look like our decisions have a direct effect on certain things, that if we

had done one thing differently, then things would be vastly different. War teaches you pretty quickly how dangerous the *what-ifs* are. Your instinct there, to reassure me and approach Ricky's accident from a different way? You need to use that same kindness on yourself."

"It's different," Clover said softly. "I was the reason he was on the road."

"And he could have been there to pick me up from the airport on a later flight or to head into town for any reason. He'd driven that road a hundred times. He also could have been an asshole brother and left you in the cell all night. My point is that it was a terrible, terrible accident, and we lost someone we love. But Ricky wouldn't want you to blame yourself. Not even for a second."

Clover remained silent for a long moment and I fought the urge to keep talking. She was processing, hopefully, and I needed to give her that.

"I've spent... so long wrapped up in that, blaming myself night after night, pushing people away. I don't know how to accept any other truth and believe it."

"Believe me," I replied. "Believe us when we tell you that you are not to blame. You need to forgive yourself, Clover."

"I don't know how."

"Self-kindness is a good place to start—."

Suddenly, an almighty explosion erupted behind me and every nerve in my body burst into flames. Light exploded through the sky, raining sparks all around me, and the phone nearly slipped from my grasp. I skidded in the snow and my heart punched into my throat. The explosion was followed by another, then another, and Harbank Springs vanished from view.

Snow turned to sand beneath my feet, the cold air turned to molten heat and I couldn't breathe through the mask smothering my face.

Were we under attack? Here in Harbank?!

“Axel?!” Clover’s voice sounded from somewhere terribly far away and I spun around, glancing from sandstone building to piles of rubble, seeking her out, but I couldn’t see her anywhere.

I couldn’t see, I couldn’t breathe and the weight of my pack bore down painfully on my shoulders.

Another explosion blinded me, and heat seared into my face as the bombs fell around us.

The cozy Christmas town of Harbank melted away and I was back in the Middle East, surrounded by the terror of war.

CLOVER

“Axel!”

Another firework crackled over the line, then the call went dead and I was left in the smothering silence of my motel room with Axel’s pained whimper ringing in my ears.

What the fuck was that? What the hell just fucking happened?

Part of me was trying to persuade myself that it was nothing, that Axel probably just came across something he had to deal with that was part of his duties as a volunteer officer, and a larger part of me knew that was bullshit. With trembling fingers, I called his number but the line simply rang out, shrilly echoing around my head.

Each painful thump of my heart caused my fingers to tremble harder, and while I repeated internally to breathe and stay calm, it was not working.

I called Hawke next, twice in a row, but both times he didn’t answer and leaving a voicemail felt useless at this time of night. He was probably working and I had no idea if he kept his phone on him at the bar. So, I called Eli. It rang out the first time, and a frustrated cry slipped from me as I hung up and tried again.

“Why the fuck does no one answer their phone!” I snapped, pressing the device to my ear.

Finally, there was a click and Eli’s breathless voice came over the call. “Clover, sorry I was in the shower. Everything alright?”

“No, everything’s not alright!” I snapped, raking my free hand through my hair and wearing a line into my carpet with my frantic pacing. “It’s Axel!”

“What?” Eli’s voice snapped to serious. “Talk to me, Clover, what happened?”

“He called me and we were talking, just hashing shit out, y’know but then there were all these fireworks suddenly going off, and Axel just stopped talking. He said my name once but he sounded too weird and then he made this like— this like *scared* sound, and the call ended and I don’t know what happened.”

Eli grunted on the other end of the call and I rambled on.

“Maybe it’s nothing, he’s a cop, right so maybe he’s fine but he sounded strange and I didn’t know who to call, or if I should call anyone because what if I called the Department and he got into trouble for being on the phone with me while working, right? I don’t know what to do, he didn’t answer when I called back and Hawke didn’t answer either and—.”

“Clover, take a deep breath for me and hold it, okay?” Eli ordered. Instinctively, I did just that.

“Isabell, watch her, please,” Eli said, his voice fainter. He must have turned away from the phone. I couldn’t hear what Isabell said in response but from the tone, she wasn’t happy. “I don’t care,” Eli snapped. “Watch her please!”

A door slammed and Eli’s phone scuffled against something, then his voice was clear in my ear once more just as my lungs started to burn.

“Okay, let that breath go.”

“Fuck,” I gasped, mildly irritated, but surprisingly, my thoughts were no longer piling over one another.

“Feel better?”

“No,” I replied stubbornly. “Look, what do we do about Axel?”

“You’re at the motel, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Stay there. I’ll come pick you up.”

The wait for Eli to reach me was excruciating. I tried Axel’s number several more times but it repeatedly went to voicemail. I tried Hawke once more as a courtesy but he didn’t pick up either, and by the time Eli pulled up outside and honked the horn, I had nearly worked myself back up to the same panicked state.

The cold didn’t even touch me as I raced down the steps and dove into Eli’s car. He greeted me with a tight smile.

“What’s going on?” I panted.

“I called the station. Hilary gave me Axel’s last location, so we’re going to pick him up.”

“Is he okay? Eli, what *happened*?”

“Depends on your definition of okay,” Eli muttered as we wove through the streets. “There are rules here about fireworks. They’re only allowed on certain days at designated times because there are children here, the forest too, and—.”

“Ex-soldiers,” I breathed out as realization hit my chest like a brick. “Soldiers with PTSD.”

“Exactly.”

Shit. No wonder Axel had sounded so strange. I couldn’t fathom the fear and pain something like a trigger would bring to men like Axel, but Eli’s white knuckles on the steering wheel as he drove gave me a hint.

When we arrived at the scene, Axel was leaning against his squad car while another sat nearby. Another cop was hauling a handcuffed male with him and when I climbed out of Eli’s car, my heart thumped into my throat.

“Justin!?”

Justin looked up at his name and frowned, then he was shoved into the waiting car and the door slammed into his face. I rolled my eyes and hurried after Eli to where Axel was standing. His hands were braced on the hood of the car and

when I was close enough, his audible deep breaths reached my ears.

“Axel?” Eli approached slowly and Axel flinched ever so slightly.

“That *prick* and his mates thought it would be funny to set off fireworks in the forest,” Axel said, his voice strained.

“Are you okay?” I reached out without thinking, but the moment my hand landed on Axel’s arm, he flinched violently and I snatched my hand back in shock. Eli stepped forward, grasping my shoulder and coaxing me back a step.

“Don’t,” he warned gently. “We all deal with triggers differently and most don’t like to be touched.”

“Okay,” I nodded hurriedly. “I’m sorry.”

“Can you count for me?” Axel lifted his gaze to Eli and a look passed between them. A look of fear and trust, a secret that only people who had shared their bond in war could ever understand. Eli nodded and began counting backward from one hundred while Axel breathed in a pattern known only to him. His shoulders, bunched like two knots on either side of his head, slowly began to relax, and I kept my distance, watching closely. Every so often, a tremble worked its way through Axel as if he was about to shake apart at the seams, and my heart ached.

This was a glimpse into a part of their lives I had only considered in passing. They had fought for their country, given more than anyone could ever understand, and retirement had brought them home with scars filled with pain. Where I saw three strong, confident men sure of what they wanted and firm in their beliefs; underneath that armor stood three men lucky to be alive, making the most out of a future they likely never dared to consider.

Their hidden pain was raw and open, like a bleeding wound that would never heal.

And Justin, in his stupidity, had ripped Axel’s wound a little wider.

Fucker.

I understood now why having things like fireworks at designated times made so much sense. It was likely easier for them to prepare, especially Axel given his job.

After ten minutes, Axel appeared calmer and he finally leaned up from the hood of the car. Eli still kept his distance, so I did too.

“You good?” Eli asked, his head tilting slightly.

“No,” Axel groaned, “but better.”

“I’m sorry,” I said softly, “that this happened. And that I touched you.”

“You couldn’t have known,” Axel replied. There was a shadow in his eyes when he looked at me and my heart clenched.

“I think... The only time Ricky’s PTSD ever became clear was when I dropped all the pots and pans in the kitchen,” I chuckled wryly, seeking a way to distract Axel’s thoughts. “He came sliding into the kitchen in his boxers with the shower head, ready for war.”

“Fuck,” Eli chuckled. “I can picture that.”

“Damn,” Axel murmured, “he always acted so unaffected.” He smiled and then chuckled, running a hand through his hair. “Fuck.”

“You remember when Ricky was on watch and he climbed all the way up that rock only to slip and roll to the fucking bottom?” Eli laughed, following my train of thinking and leaning into what made Axel smile.

“Oh fuck,” Axel nodded, his chest still rising rapidly despite his amusement. “Doesn’t compare to Hawke slamming his belt in the jeep though. Covert leader my ass.”

Their laughter lacked the normal lightness but it was a start. With it, hearing their stories, it dawned on me that there was a whole part of my brother I never knew, accessible through them.

Maybe talking about him, beyond this, wouldn’t be a bad thing.

“You ready for home?” Eli asked. “Hilary said she’d send someone to pick up your car. Doesn’t want you driving like this.”

“I already drove it,” Axel remarked but something about Eli’s stern look made him nod. “Alright. You drive.”

“Excellent.”

As we piled back into Eli’s car, with Axel in the back seat for the space he needed, Eli nudged my shoulder.

“You should stay with us tonight,” he said, almost like an offer, but when I glanced at him, he snuck a pointed look at Axel who was staring out the window.

“Sure,” I nodded. If he wanted me there, for any reason, to help Axel, then I was down. “The more the merrier, right?”

“Exactly,” Eli chuckled and he grasped my thigh, squeezing affectionately as we drove away. The drive was quiet and I kept one eye on Axel all the way back to the Estate. By the time familiar stonework came into view, he looked back to his normal self but I still kept my distance as we climbed out of the car.

I glanced up at the beautiful tree on the way into the house, warmed by how it definitely looked like my old tree. Embracing the warmth, Eli shrugged off his coat.

“Hayley, I’m home!”

Her adorable face appeared at the top of the stairs and she raced down them into Eli’s arms.

“Clover!” Hayley yelled, bouncing in her father’s arms and beaming at me over his shoulder.

“Heya,” I grinned.

“Are you sleeping over?” she asked, yawning immediately after. At the top of the stairs, Isabell appeared with her arms folded, glaring daggers down at me.

“Yes,” I replied with a smile. “Yes, I am.”

CLOVER

The next day, Hawke accompanied Hayley and me to the ice rink. I was more than happy to take her since Eli wanted to stay with Axel and make sure he was okay, and Hawke's company made the lesson all the more sweet. He lingered on the sidelines, caught between his phone and watching my gaggle of children learn the next steps in the dance routine. With Christmas drawing ever nearer, I was placing more pressure on myself to make sure the dance was perfect. In reality, the parents would just be happy to see their kids perform.

Letting them settle into their routine, I skated over to the barrier and stopped next to Hawke, who greeted me with a small smile. Ever in touch with his emotions he was.

"I'm sorry," he said after I caught my breath, cheeks numb from the cold.

"For what?"

"For Isabell. I didn't miss how she was giving you daggers all last night over dinner. Usually, I'm the one she wants to torture."

I waved one hand and shrugged. "It's alright. I suppose it's strange for her having me around. We have a lot of history but to her, I'm a stranger."

"That doesn't give her the right to treat you with minimal respect," Hawke said flatly.

"She's a teenager," I pointed out. "She doesn't respect anyone."

“Much to my chagrin.”

“Besides...” Was now the right time to tell him? “She heard us. The night we were all together, Mr. *The walls are so thick.*”

Hawke stared at me in silence for a second and then he barked out a laugh. “Oh, crap. Just another thing for her to hate me for then.”

“Actually, she warned me away from you. I think I’m the object of hate in her eyes.”

“Really?” A dark brow lifted so sharply it was almost comical and I patted Hawke’s leather-clad arm.

“She’s clearly protective, in her own way.”

“I try to reach her,” Hawke sighed, “but ever since her mother passed, nothing I do is good enough.”

“I wish I could give you advice,” I soothed softly, “but my specialty is small people in smaller doses.”

“I know.” Hawke sighed deeply, then glanced at his phone and groaned. “I have to get to work. Have a good day.”

Like it was part of our regular routine, Hawke leaned forward and pressed his lips to my cheek in a swift kiss, then he strode away with just enough swagger that my gaze dropped to his perfect ass hugged in those tight jeans.

Fuck.

We were kissing in public now?

“Before I forget!” Hawke turned at the door and called out to me. “There’s a bunch of Ricky’s stuff at the house. Stuff we didn’t feel right going through because it was his home things. If you want to go through it, even just to see what’s there, please do.”

“Oh... thank you!”

I hadn’t given much thought to what had happened to Ricky’s old things in my absence, much like I hadn’t thought about my own old things. But the guys had kept them, boxed them up, and added them to the pile of things for me if I ever came back.

They really kept that hope.

Returning to the ice, I threw myself into the rest of the lesson but in the back of my mind, my thoughts ran like a hamster wheel. In just a few weeks, Hawke, Axel, and Eli had slotted back into my life like the old days, only with the added bonus of apparently caring deeper about me than I ever could have imagined. It was difficult to marry that with the twisted thoughts of self-hatred I had wrestled with since Ricky's death. It was alien to consider that no one had seen me the way I was so convinced they did.

Even that fleeting kiss with Hawke all those years ago hadn't ruined anything, and yet in my grief-stricken mind, it had been the worst thing I could have done in that moment. Processing my grief and accepting that my pain had warped things in my mind was difficult. Axel's story of his own guilt, however, was definitely helping me shift my perspective.

I wasn't the only one carrying misplaced blame.

As the dancing came to an end, my gut suddenly pulled south, and warmth swept up my throat. A sick sensation washed over me like a lukewarm wave and I clasped a hand to my mouth.

"Alright team, you've done amazing! Pop your skates off and leave them on the side for me, then hurry off to get changed." I darted toward the edge just as Marlene walked through the door, so I flapped a hand to get her attention.

"Marlene, could you—?"

The nausea was so strong I couldn't finish my sentence and as soon as my skates were off, I fled to the bathroom and hurled. The sick sensation was stronger but after nothing came up, I retreated to the sink for some water to swirl around my mouth.

"Fuck," I gasped softly, splashing water on my face. What was that, I wondered. Stress? Tiredness? My thoughts were sluggish as I left the bathroom.

"Clover."

"Hm? Oh."

Justin stood in front of me, leaning on the wall with his hip cocked, and I glanced down his denim jacket to his tracksuit, then back up. “What the hell are you doing here? Wait, you don’t have a child here, do you?”

What a haunting thought.

“What? No, the fuck?” Justin snorted. “I came here to see you.”

“And you’re waiting for me outside the bathroom?”

“I saw you go in. Marlene said she was going to get you.”

Oh, that was why she came into the rink. Sighing deeply, I placed my hands on my hips. “What do you want?”

“You haven’t been returning my calls or answering my texts.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Well, what the fuck is that all about?”

“I thought you could take a pretty clear hint,” I replied. “Ghosting is what they call it these days.”

“You can’t fucking ghost me if we live in the same town,” Justin sneered.

“I can try.”

“People care talkin’, y’know? About you and Ricky’s mates.”

“Well, Ricky is dead so they hardly classify themselves as his mates anymore,” I replied sharply. “Everyone talks in this town, what of it?”

“Saying twisted things. How do you think that makes me look? We dated; there’s a reputation there.”

I scoffed dryly. “Not one you should be proud of. First, it’s none of your business what I do or who I spend time with. And if it was, then sure, they were my brother’s closest friends, so it’s not all that unusual that we have a bond.”

“It’s fucking weird.” Justin pushed up off the wall and took a step forward. “After everything we went through, you’d think you’d have the decency to—.”

“To what?” Eli, having come in the rear entrance, swept up behind me and stopped just in between Justin and I. As with Hawke, the urge to push him aside and finish this myself rose, but this time I held back. I was curious to see how Justin would act, squaring up to someone who could bend him like a paper straw.

“I wasn’t talking to you,” Justin remarked, straightening his posture and jutting his chin out.

“It sure sounded a lot like you were talking *about* me, so how about you lay that out right here and we’ll see just how true those rumors are?”

Justin glanced at me and I cocked a brow, daring him to do just that.

“Fuck you, man—.”

“No, fuck you,” Eli growled suddenly, and a pulse of tension shot through me. Justin’s eyes widened as Eli stepped forward. “You’ve got a reputation for treating people like shit and I’ve not stepped in your business but here you are, harassing Clover.”

“I wasn’t *hara*—.”

“Not another word, do you understand me? She doesn’t want to hear it from you, she doesn’t want to see you, especially not in her place of work, and if I see you here again, where *my* daughter comes to learn, I won’t hesitate to show you how dangerous the cold can really be. Are we clear?”

“You can’t—.”

“Are we clear!?”

I had *never* heard Eli speak like that before in my life. Maybe it was the protectiveness he felt over his daughter, I wasn’t sure but it was fucking hot. Justin’s lower lip wobbled and for a moment, I was certain he was going to cry. Instead, he turned and fled, and only after he was out of sight did Eli turn to face me.

“Sorry about that. Are you okay?”

“I’ve got fucking chills,” I breathed out, and the pulse of tension inside my chest shifted inside me. Without thinking, I grabbed Eli by his soft blue shirt and dragged him into the bathroom.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped,” Eli tried to say but I was too caught up in the desire that had taken hold of me. No one had ever spoken up for me like that before – aside from Hawke – and knowing that kind of primal protection existed in Eli too?

“Shut *up*,” I grunted, shoving him back against the tiles. Within twenty seconds, I had his jeans by his thighs and I sank down to my knees, taking his thick, glistening cock into my mouth before he could even finish his next sentence.

“Holy—!” Eli gasped above me, jerking back against the tiles, but I followed the motion and filled my mouth with his cock, sucking eagerly. I couldn’t fully understand why that possessive display had turned me on so much but all I knew, all I could focus on was showing Eli some intense appreciation. After a few bobs of my head, gentle hands slid into my thick hair and curled just enough to grip a little and my eyes fluttered closed.

Eli’s cock throbbed in my mouth as I rhythmically bobbed my head, taking him deep into my throat every couple of strokes. Deep muted moans drifted down from above and Eli’s hips stuttered occasionally into my mouth, interrupting my rhythm, but I didn’t care. I was completely in the zone, determined to make him feel good, and it was working. His thick thighs trembled under my hands, his breath escaped in short, sharp pants, and his hips jutted forward, giving in to chasing his pleasure.

He came a minute later, shoving his cock down my throat, and I swallowed each sudden pulse of cum that burst over my tongue. When I opened my eyes, looking up at him through my lashes, his face was flushed and his eyes sparkled. I suckled hard for a few more seconds, then slid off his cock with a pop and licked my lips, breaking the string of saliva that clung from my lip to his cock.

“Holy shit,” Eli gasped. “What brought that on?”

“Just saying thank you,” I smirked, my core clenching deeply at how open and innocent Eli looked in this moment.

“You— you’re welcome,” he gasped. I started to tuck his softening length back into his pants until he caught my wrist. “But you...?”

“Later,” I smiled. “I just couldn’t resist.”

Eli stared at me in disbelief and then he surged forward and kissed me hard, cupping my jaw to keep me close for the duration of the kiss. My heart skipped up into my chest and I moaned softly until we broke apart, and he zipped himself up.

“Fuck,” he murmured under his breath. I patted his cheek and led the way out of the bathroom, only we stumbled to a stop when I spotted Hayley standing in the hallway.

“Daddy!” Hayley exclaimed. “Where were you??”

“Sorry, sweetie,” Eli apologized, sweeping her up into his large arms. “I had to use the bathroom.”

Hayley started to whine, her big eyes filling with tears, likely because she was so tired, and her whining quickly turned into wailing.

“Don’t have kids,” Eli joked, shooting me an apologetic glance, and he carried her down the hall.

That was a complication. All this time, my feelings and urges for these three men had been growing steadily but now that I was entertaining actually enjoying all of this, there was one detail I had overlooked.

I wouldn’t be dating just them.

Eli and Hawke were fathers, and my presence in their children’s lives, for whatever reason, definitely complicated things.

CLOVER

Out on the ice on the lake was the only place I ever felt like I could be myself. Out here, it was just me and my skates, the chill in the air and the ice keeping my secrets. There were no parents pressing me about school, no coach to watch my every move and no friends to turn this into a mess.

There was just me.

I hadn't meant to make coming back here a regular thing but this was my third time back on the lake since the day I came here with the guys, and I was loving it. It was so different from the rink. The wind was colder, the ice sang smoother as I carved lyrics onto the surface, and the scent of cold pine added to the feeling of home that being on the ice, on this lake gave me.

I danced, twirled, and spun like no one could see me, like I was back in my teens training for ice dancing to take me far. My parents were home with dinner on the stove, waiting by the phone for a call from Ricky, my chores were completed and school was out for the winter.

In these moments, I was just Clover. Free of pain and guilt, not a tear to be shed other than one of impact if I misjudged a twirl.

It was different now. My body was different, my soul was darker but the ice still provided me with the same security it had always done. I closed my eyes and let the wind stroke its icy fingers through my hair, let Jack Frost kiss my nose numb,

and let my skates guide me. I moved my body with the classical music humming in my ear, swayed like I was wrapped in silk, and even dared to launch myself up onto the ice.

I opened my eyes as I landed, and the very fact that I nailed the landing had me laughing out loud to myself through frozen lips while my heart raced and blood pumped. Three weeks ago, I never would have set foot up here. Now, I didn't want to leave.

And yet, just as I reached real happiness, a storm cloud rolled onto the ice in the form of Justin, who apparently hadn't taken Eli's warning to heart and tracked me down. I didn't even want to fathom how. I slid to a stop, panting, and watched as he stumbled uncertainly over the ice. He gave up quickly and waved me over. I groaned internally and contemplated skating to the other side of the lake just to avoid him but then I would have to hike all the way back.

Dying to the cold wasn't worth it for Justin.

With a deep sigh that sent clouds spiraling into the sky, I skated over to him.

"What is it?" I asked the moment we were in earshot. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to talk to you, just you."

"Just me?"

"Every time I try, one of your new boyfriends shows up," Justin sneered, sniffing hard and glancing around. "Are you alone?"

Immediately alarm bells rang in my ears. Eli, Hawk, and Axel had driven me here but they had hiked into the woods to check old traps and ice fishing holes to replace what had been used when the last storm rolled through. They had only told me they'd be back before dark.

"No," I replied.

"Looks like it." Justin's watery eyes scanned me up and down, then he scoffed. "What are we doing, Clover?"

“Huh?” I tried to calm myself by slowly winding up my earphones. “How did you find me?”

“You’re predictable,” Justin scoffed.

“Huh. What do you mean, what are we doing?”

“You come back here, you go on a date with me, and then... what. You think you can just let your fucking dogs treat me like shit, and I’d take it lying down?”

“They haven’t treated you like shit,” I replied, my heart sliding up to pound in my throat. “They’ve *tried* to educate you about respect and boundaries.”

“Sounds like they never learned the war was over,” Justin sneered.

“You’re a fucking child,” I scoffed and I shoved past him, skating an inch toward the shore before he grabbed my arm and jerked me back.

“Oh really?”

My hand itched and I barely registered the thought when I turned and slapped Justin so hard across the face that his head snapped back, sending his baseball cap flying off his head and skidding across the ice.

“Yes, *really*. You were a shit lay back then and now? Now you’re a sleazeball who spends too much time drowning in Bitcoin and treating people like garbage. And who the fuck sets off fireworks in the middle of the forest, you fucking arsonist?! Never mind what it did to—.” I caught myself and jerked my arm free. “You’re fucking delusional if you think I want – or ever wanted – anything to do with you because, yes, now I’m being fucked by real men, and let me tell you, it’s fucking glorious!”

The words spewed like vomit and I couldn’t stop myself. By the time I finished, Justin was beet red but I turned and swiftly skated the few feet back to shore. When I turned back, he was following.

“I didn’t come here to talk,” Justin yelled. “I’m here to take what you owe me—.” Half a foot away from the frosted grass,

all color bled from his face. Grass crunched beside me in time to my pounding heart, and a warm hand landed gently on my shoulder.

“Clover,” came Axel’s voice. “Are you okay?”

I nodded quickly, and the relief that they had arrived precisely at this moment was smothering. I wanted to throw myself at their feet and thank them until I was hoarse. Goading Justin like that while I was alone?

Stupid.

But it was freeing as fuck.

Hawke and Eli walked forward, stopping a foot from the shoreline and standing like two statues ready to welcome Justin to hell. They stood between him and the safety of the shore and the road. He swallowed audibly.

“We meet again,” Hawke growled. I hadn’t thought his voice could get any deeper but his words were dipped in treacle, slow and powerful.

“Did you think I was joking?” Eli asked slowly. “I’m curious how you thought this would go. Did you think Clover would suddenly realize you’re everything she ever needed?”

“That your limp celery dick was what she craved?” Hawke asked.

“Did you think she would get on her knees right here on the ice, wow’d by your ability to stalk her into the middle of fucking nowhere?” Axel asked.

Justin did not say a word. He stared them down and then glanced at me.

“Don’t look at her,” Hawke barked. Justin jumped.

“Maybe you were going to force her,” Eli asked. “Was that it? After all, she made herself pretty fucking clear, but if your sludge for a mind-brain didn’t pick up on it, let me spell it out for you.”

“She doesn’t owe you anything,” Axel snarled.

“She doesn’t want you,” Hawke growled.

“She certainly doesn’t need you,” Eli added. “And if I see your snotty face again even on the same *street* as her, I’ll make sure you never walk again.”

“You—you can’t say shit like that!” Justin stumbled over his words. “You’re fucking insane!”

“Who’s going to believe you?” Hawke cast his thick arms wide. “No witnesses out here.” He lowered them and pointed straight at Justin. “Now get the fuck out of here.”

The fear Justin had instilled in me fizzled out completely. Eli, Hawke, and Axel stood before me like three guardians defending me from a monster, and in that moment, that single moment, I knew.

It wasn’t a crush or infatuation that warmed my chest each time I thought of them.

It was love.

Justin stumbled forward but just as he shoved past them to head up the hill, Hawke grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and hauled him backward.

“And remember,” he growled dangerously. “We know exactly where to hide your body so that no one will *ever* find it, even after the lake thaws.”

An audible squeak of fear escaped Justin when he was shoved forward and he immediately broke into a sprint, racing up the hill and not looking back even once. I watched him go, deeply satisfied.

Never again would his slimy name leave my tongue.

“Are you okay?” Eli approached me and gently touched my arm where Justin had grabbed me. I nodded and smiled warmly up at him, then at the other two.

“I’m fine, really I am,” I assured. “So fine in fact...” I glanced between the three of them and slowly bit my lower lip. “All that little display there?”

“Yeah?” Hawke nodded, his steadfast gaze on me.

“It was fucking *hot*.”

CLOVER

Hawke's mouth collided with mine, crowding me back into the truck while I grasped at his collar and pulled him deeper into the kiss. My heart pounded with desire, my skin flushed hot and all I could think about was getting one of them, any of them, inside me as soon as possible.

Their display of dominance against Justin, even hearing that threat spill from Hawke, had turned me on in the most unexpected way, and I needed to be satisfied.

Immediately.

Hawke's hands dragged up my shirt, exposing my body to the chill air, and I gasped into his mouth. The truck door opened behind me and hands hauled me into the back seat. I landed on top of someone, unsure who at first. Hawke followed, barely detaching from my mouth, and when his solid, heated body draped over mine, I moaned loudly.

"Please," I gasped, "I need—."

Hawke broke the kiss and leaned up, his hands on either side of my head.

"What do you need, Clover?"

"You," I gasped, "all of you."

Hands I couldn't track pulled at my clothes, and my top was discarded quickly, as were my skates and leggings. When Eli moaned beneath me, I realized it was him I was lying on, and even with the slight chill in the air around me, the heat from both their bodies kept me warm.

Hawke kissed me again, deep and intense, while Eli's mouth grazed the back of my neck, and his hands stroked over my abdomen. Up to my breasts, he grabbed and pulled at my tits, massaging my nipples through the fabric of my bra.

I clutched at Hawke's shoulders. He shoved one hand down between my thighs and stroked his knuckles against my pussy, teasing me through my panties until impatience got the better of him, and he tore them free of my body.

He was going to run me out of underwear at this rate.

Heat fogged the windows around us, blocking out the world and creating a bubble of just me and my men. Axel was nearby, in the front seat, I think, judging from the angle his face came when he leaned over to kiss me. Hawke thrust two thick fingers through my slick folds and right into my core. I arched back into Eli with a gasp, tipping my head back as Hawk filled me so deliciously. Eli tugged my bra down, exposing my stiff nipples to the cool air, and one was immediately consumed by the liquid heat of Hawke's mouth.

"Think you can take us both?" Eli groaned in my ear.

"Easy," I gasped as an itching need swept across my over-sensitive skin. I needed to be fucked, and I needed it now. "Please~."

Hawke's teeth snapped over my nipple and I yelped while a flash of pain shot through my chest. His thick fingers continued to pump into me, two becoming three, and with a scissoring motion over a few minutes, three became four.

I was impossibly full and yet it wasn't enough. Beneath me, Eli's hands slid away from my breasts to his jeans underneath, and Hawke surged up to kiss me hard. Lips and teeth collided and he thrust his tongue deep into my mouth, stealing all the air from my lungs. I rocked my body up into his and ground my hips greedily down on his fingers as pleasure coiled through me, building like tension in a band.

Suddenly Hawke's fingers slid free and he sat up the best he could in the cramped back seat. His silver eyes flashed at me while his lips pulled into a sly smirk.

“You asked for this, baby,” he said. Suddenly, a thick cock shoved into my pussy, splitting me open, and I tossed my head back against Eli’s shoulder with a cry. Eli groaned in my ear, and his hands slid across my ribs. Before I could take a breath— before I could ask who was there, a second cock nudged impatiently at my hole, and it clicked in my mind what they had meant.

I could take them both. Easy. Horny determination surged through me and thanks to Hawke’s earlier tricks with his fingers, the head of his cock could press tightly in alongside Eli’s.

My brain was mush. I couldn’t think, I couldn’t trust myself to move, and every shift of Eli or Hawke’s clothed chests around me sent shivers of delight all across my heated body. Hawke pressed inside me, slowly and carefully and by the time he was bottomed out, I was so full I swear their dicks were nudging the bottom of my ribcage.

Hawke grasped my jaw and forced me to look him in the eyes. I grasped at his shoulder and dug my nails in.

“Too much?” Hawke asked huskily. I shook my head. It wasn’t nearly enough.

“Please,” I whined hoarsely. They gave me my wish. When Eli and Hawke started to fuck into me, my world melted into nothing but the sensation of being split open by two men I adored. Hawke kept himself braced with one arm on the seat and his other hand slid between our bodies to toy over my clit. Eli’s hands grasped at my breasts, teasing and pulling as they fucked into me in tandem, building a smoother rhythm as my muscles relaxed.

I was full, so incredibly full, and every shift of each cock inside me hit every hidden nerve deep inside my core. Shocks of pleasure burst through me repeatedly while I dragged my nails down Hawke’s shoulders. Red trails flared on his skin, written across his chest and following my fingers while my moans very quickly became screams.

Screams that were swallowed by Axel, who was right there to kiss me tenderly and stroke my face. I was utterly at their

mercy and there was nowhere I would rather be.

Hawke grunted above me, his dog tags slipping from his shirt and glinting in the light. With each gasping cry they fucked out of me, I tried my best to keep my attention on either of them, but it was impossible. All that existed was pleasure so intense I was certain I would burst. My orgasm swept up quickly, a throbbing that shuddered through me and the urge to bear down onto their cocks grew with each passing second. Hawke continued to play with my clit, stroking in circles, then back and forth and when he slammed deep in a particularly hard thrust, I was lost.

I yelled out my pleasure, my muscles shuddering and my entire body locked up. My toes curled, sweat flushed across my skin, and the tension in my core held for a second longer, then released in a flash through my system. My mind silenced and my heart raced as I came, each moan kissed away by Axel and each clench of my core fucked away by Eli and Hawke.

Then Hawke's hips stuttered, and he came with a low cry, followed swiftly by Eli, and a rush of heat and wetness spread inside me. They continued to fuck into me, milking their orgasms and ensuring I felt every last second of mine. It was exhilarating.

And not over.

Firm hands and strong arms moved me around the back seat, bodies changed, and then I was in Axel's arms with his cock filling me to the brim. Every inch of my pussy was incredibly sensitive after being filled with two, so every thrust of Axel's cock was ten times as intense. Eli shifted over me, my head resting back on the seat, and he pressed his slicked cock to my panting lips.

"Clean me up; there's a good girl."

I parted my lips obediently, and Eli slid his cock into my mouth but he didn't press deep. Just enough for me to follow his instructions. With soft suckles in between moans and sure licks of my tongue, I cleaned up the combined cum that coated his cock until he was satisfied. Hawke was next, and he pressed more insistently into my mouth. I did the best I could,

blearily riding the high and when Hawke was satisfied, he vanished, Axel draped over me like a heated blanket and fucked me hard.

My next orgasm was pounded out of me in a series of frantic, desperate thrusts and when Axel came inside me, adding his cum to the marks inside me, I was completely and utterly satisfied. Axel let his cock rest inside me for a few long moments, then he pulled himself free, and Hawke used some old towels in the truck to help clean me up. With no desire to move, I remained in the back seat with my head in Hawke's lap and a blanket covering me. Eli turned the heat up on the truck to keep us warm as hearts started to calm, and Axel passed around some jerky from the glove box.

"Shit," Hawke groaned. "We should threaten people more often, huh?"

Everyone chuckled lightly and I groaned softly.

"My poor pussy," I whimpered. "Justin has no idea how often he gets me laid."

"Fucking asshole," Eli grumbled from the front seat. Hawke's hand, which was draped across me, flexed slightly.

"I meant what I said," he admitted. The others murmured their agreement, and I nuzzled into Hawke's thigh.

"No complaints from me," I said softly.

"You're okay?" Eli asked, his eyes wandering down my body as if he could see every detail under the blanket. "That was a lot."

"You're always so concerned," I smiled lazily. "I'm amazing, thank you."

"With all this sex, you'll get a reputation," Axel chuckled.

"Only with you guys," I remarked. Soft laughter rose once more and I settled, content until Axel deemed it was time to go. Dressing quickly, I remained in the back seat with Hawke, who fixed me with a steady stare as he clipped my seatbelt in.

"Let me take you on a date."

My heart jumped slightly. “Doesn’t that usually come before the sex?”

“Depends,” he smirked. “A real date. Let me make up for that sorrowful show Justin put you through.”

“Alright,” I agreed with an excited smile. “Wine and dine me, Hawke.”

HAWKE

I stood before Clover's motel, my heart in my mouth. The world around me glittered with the latest flurry of snowfall and behind me, the Christmas lights decorating every street from here to the highway twinkled against the night sky like fallen stars.

My stomach churned and the collar of my shirt pressed a little too close for comfort against my throat but it was worth it. I had promised Clover an old-school date and that's what I would give her, even though my stomach churned like a nest of snakes. It had been years since I went on a date, but the basics were surely the same and it was an excuse to air out my black suit that hadn't seen action in years.

Clearing my throat, a cloud escaped my lips and drifted up into the darkness while I waited.

I blinked, and suddenly Clover was there, descending the stairs in a dark green floor-length dress that rippled like a pool of emerald water with every movement. The plunging neckline drew my eye to her ample chest, where I lingered for a second. Her thick brown hair was swept up with a few curls hanging loose, framing her face, and her turquoise eyes struck me down, enhanced by the silver eyeliner gracing her lids.

She was *beautiful*.

Eli was right. It wasn't lust I felt for her.

It was something much stronger.

"Cat got your tongue?" Clover grinned up at me, her pink lips sparkling, and she tugged the woolen shawl tighter over her

shoulders.

I snapped my mouth closed, cheeks heating slightly that I'd been so visibly gawking at her, and gave a smile in turn.

"Something like that. You look amazing."

"You did tell me to dress up." Clover lifted a hand and stroked the lapel of my dinner jacket. "You don't look so bad yourself."

"Thanks." My stomach continued to churn as I stepped back from the truck and opened the door for her, guiding her in with a sweep of my arm.

"Thank you," she giggled, taking her seat while I darted around to the driver's side.

"We'll have to make do with the truck," I explained as we pulled out of the motel parking lot. "I wanted Axel's car but he needed it."

"I don't mind," Clover replied easily. "Some good memories here." She winked at me, and my heart leaped like I was a fucking teenager again. How could I be so confident in fucking her and yet so nervous to take her out to dinner?

The emotions were conflicting, and I shoved them down deep while we conversed lightly on the way to the restaurant. Harbank didn't have much in the way of fine dining, but there was a gorgeous Chinese restaurant that, if memory served, had been one of her favorite places to eat in her youth.

The way her face lit up when we turned the corner and it came into view told me I'd remembered right.

"I can't believe this place is still here," Clover chuckled. "Every time I ate here, the place was dead, and I never understood why. The food is amazing."

"Sheer determination." I chuckled, sliding from the truck. When I opened her door for her, offering a hand to help her step out into the snow, Clover hesitated.

"What's wrong?"

She glanced from me to the restaurant and pressed her lips into a thin line.

“This is a thing. Like a real thing.”

“A date. Yes.”

“People will see,” she said softly. “I’m nervous. About people seeing us together and what they’ll say.”

“Let them talk,” I replied softly. “Maybe it’ll get back to Justin, and I’ll get to do the town a favor.”

Clover snorted and held her black clutch to her chest. “Are you sure about this?”

“Me?” I’d never been more sure of anything.

“Yeah, I mean... you live here. These people know you.”

“And they’ll learn how much I adore you. I want to treat you, but... if it’s too much?” I wouldn’t put Clover in a situation where she would feel uncomfortable. “I would be proud to have you on my arm.”

Her cheeks flushed a light pink and finally, she took my hand, sliding from the truck.

“I’d be proud, too,” she said quietly. I offered her my elbow and Clover looped her hand around, cuddling into me. Together we trudged through the snow, and she kept her dress raised up, away from the slush until we were inside.

Just like everywhere else in this town, the restaurant was decorated with festivities everywhere you looked. The multi-colored lights sparkled in Clover’s eyes as she looked around, taking in everything from the glittering streamers to the multiple Christmas trees and reindeer dotted around the floor. Our table was draped in festive green cloth with mini angels holding the candles, and the wine glasses were frosted with snowflakes.

Clover took in every detail and all the while, I simply watched her. The awe in her eyes, the nostalgia in her smile; she was utterly stunning, and I was smitten. There was no other word for it.

“As beautiful as I remember,” Clover gasped softly.

“You can say that again,” I murmured, my eyes never leaving. Like the old days, the restaurant was quiet, with only a few people around to stare at us. Our food arrived quickly and we tucked into noodles, spring rolls and eagerly shared a platter of Chinese pork ribs.

“Is this how you treat all your dates?” Clover asked, licking sauce from her long fingers. It was mildly distracting.

“Only the important ones,” I replied with a wink.

“You seem different tonight.” She cocked her head, and strands of hair gently brushed her bare shoulder.

“Different?”

“Usually, you’re a bit uptight. In a need-to-be-in-control kind of way,” she explained. “Which, don’t get me wrong. That’s hot. But tonight you seem...” She trailed off and picked up another rib. “You seem more like the real you and less like the Navy Seal you. That’s all.”

“Maybe it’s the company,” I said, sipping my beer. Clover laughed and the sound warmed my soul.

“Maybe. It’s nice and not a complaint at all.” She looked at me over the rib and I fought the urge to lean over and kiss the sauce from her plump lips.

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know. A lot about all of us.”

“I know,” Clover nodded, and she clasped her wine glass, swirling the red inside. “But I think... for the first time in a long time, I’m looking forward to learning that.”

Tilting my head, I eyed her curiously. “Does this mean you might stay longer than just Christmas?”

Her eyes sparkled at me over the edge of her wine glass as she drank, and as she set it down, she slowly licked her lips. “I’m thinking about it.”

“That’s all I could ever ask.”

I couldn’t deny how much I wanted her to stay. Clover was under my skin like a craving, and I knew Axel and Eli felt the

same way. There was just something about her, something I desperately wanted to hold onto.

We finished up our meal and I paid it swiftly, then offered my arm to her as we stepped back out into the brisk nighttime air.

“Take a walk with me?”

“In this dress?” Clover laughed, smoothing her hands down the silky material. “Sure.”

She hung onto my arm and we started to walk through the town, weaving slowly between crowds of excited tourists and stepping between piles of snow carefully scraped up to make the sidewalks less dangerous.

“I’d forgotten how beautiful this place can be,” Clover said as we stopped off at a cart for some hot chocolate to chase away the cold. “So much happened here and it was so easy to demonize this place. But now, being back here?” Clover hugged the paper cup, her eyes closing as she soaked up the warmth.

“You have a fresh perspective,” I offered and Clover nodded, glancing up at me.

“Yeah. I think that’s it.”

Hot chocolate in hand, I made one more stop at a local flower stall and Clover beamed brightly at me when I purchased a bouquet of white roses covered in silver glitter and dotted with red holly.

“What’s a date without flowers?”

“You’re a real romantic, you know that?” Clover teased, tucking herself against me. I draped my arm over her shoulders and held her close as we walked.

“Just don’t tell anyone. I have a reputation to uphold.”

“Oh, Mr. dark and dangerous. I understand.” Clover nodded seriously and then laughed. “You should let this side out a little more. Might make breathing easier.”

I mulled over her words as we wandered through the town, pausing only to discard our cups. We walked until coldness

started to seep through my suit and if I was getting cold, she definitely was. We stopped in the middle of the small stone bridge leading to the forest and I gently squeezed her shoulders.

“Cold?”

Clover turned into me and lifted her face, shaking her head. “I feel like I should be but, with the walking and the hot chocolate, I’m okay.”

The two street lights overhead wrapped in streamers cast a light orange glow down onto Clover’s face. Her earrings sparkled, catching the light. Clover was staring past me toward the sky. Snow began to fall ever so gently around us and she watched in awe as the flakes started to settle around us. Her eyelashes fluttered, catching a few of the flakes, and she laughed.

“Does it ever stop snowing here?”

I answered her with a kiss.

Pressing my palm to her warm neck, I slid my thumb across her jaw and tilted her head up, then pressed my lips to hers in a deep, slow kiss. The sweetness of hot chocolate still lingered on her lips, and her cold nose pressed into my cheek. Clover leaned into me, her gasp drifting past my own lips and I swallowed her air like a promise. Between us, her flowers bent slightly but nothing like that mattered.

I closed my eyes. Clover was my one and only focus.

Gone were the nerves. Gone was the uncertainty of how this date would go.

In its place was a confident acknowledgment.

I was falling in love with her.

I kissed her breathless. When we broke apart, her cheeks were rosy and the snowfall was thicker.

“This,” she said softly, her voice slightly rough. “Is the best date I’ve ever been on.”

“Don’t tell Eli and Axel that,” I chuckled. “They’ll try to outdo me.”

“I look forward to it,” Clover grinned. A subtle shiver passed across her shoulders and I drew her against me.

“Let’s get you home.”

The path back through the town was quieter as the late hour and new snowfall had sent most tourists scurrying back to the safety of their lodges and motels. My heart was light for the first time in a long time and I liked it.

Taking a shorter route back to where I’d parked my truck, the door to the local club burst open and pounding music spilled from inside. The club was popular among teenagers and made most of its money from the tourists who were always excited to see something so ‘modern’ in an idyllic festive town like this. Two people stumbled out into the snow, laughing heartily and nearly tripping over themselves.

I immediately tightened my grip on Clover and put myself between her and them as we passed until one of them spoke and my heart dropped.

“Holy shit,” gasped a familiar voice. “He’s never going to live that down!”

I spun on my heel, cold anger gripping my heart, and locked eyes with my impossible daughter, who was supposed to be safe at home.

“Isabell?! What the hell do you think you’re doing here?”

CLOVER

“Dad?!” Isabell stumbled to a stop before us, her eyes wide and her mouth agape. Hawke’s arm vanished from my grip, and he lurched forward, his face hard.

“What the hell? You’re supposed to be at home? What the hell are you doing here? Who is this?” Hawke indicates to the pale teenage boy next to Isabell, who looked thirty seconds away from puking his guts up on the street.

The date was officially over.

“I was just out,” Isabell replies sharply. “What’s the big deal?”

“The big deal is that it’s after midnight, and you’re *fifteen* years old; how on earth did you even get in there?”

“Psch, it’s easy,” Isabell snorted. “So many crowds. I don’t see what the big deal is!”

“Isabell, you’re supposed to be at home, safe, not out in the middle of town with strange boys and—.”

Hawke surged forward suddenly, grabbing Isabell by the arm and jerking her forward. She stumbled and whined in complaint, then her eyes went wide, and she glared up at her father.

“Have you been *drinking?*” Hawke’s voice was so tight and angry that I was almost too cautious to step forward. However, their argument had drawn the attention of a few people out on the street, and Isabell’s friend looked to be searching for the confidence to get in between them. Not a good idea.

I approached and touched Hawke's arm, his muscles rock hard with tension under my fingertips.

"Hawke," I said as calmly as I could manage. "This might not be the best place for this."

Hawke looked at me; his silver eyes were near dark with fury and his jaw so tense that the nerve jumped under the skin. I tightened my grip further and tried to implore him with my eyes. A public scene like this wouldn't do either of them any favors.

Finally, his shoulders relaxed a fraction.

"You're right." His attention snapped back to Isabell. "You. Home. Now."

"What? No!" Isabell started to struggle, but Hawke was having none of it. His grip on his daughter didn't relax, and he dragged her away from the club.

"Call me?" called her friend. I sent him a withering glance.

"What's your name?"

"Robert," he grinned drunkenly.

"Get home safe, Robert." Then I turned and hurried after Hawke and his daughter. He released her a few feet from the truck, and she flew into a fit of rage, yelling and screaming about how much she hated him, how terrible a father he was, and how she would never forgive him for embarrassing her in front of her friend.

Hawke gave as good as he got, yelling back about trust and respect, all things she chose to ignore. With a scream of rage, Isabell threw herself into the truck and slammed the door.

"Don't slam the door!" Hawke yelled. I paused on my approach, my gut twisting. This wasn't the first time I'd witnessed the tension between them, but it was certainly the loudest.

"Hawke?"

He flashed me a grim look, ripping the tie from his neck. "Don't. Please."

I nodded in understanding, and when Hawke slid into the truck, I chose to sit in the back seat with Isabell to give Hawke some space. Part of me hoped that I could, in some small way, even comfort Isabell but she shot me a poisonous glare and huddled against the opposite door.

Hawke started to drive and with the heated blasting, the lingering chill in the car was quickly forgotten about. Snow continued to coat the world around us and when Hawke drove past my motel, I understood that he wanted me at the house tonight.

After such a fantastic date, I certainly wasn't opposed.

The tension in the truck was so thick I could cut it with a knife if I had one on hand, and after we left the town behind, I glanced over at Isabell. Maybe I could find some common ground?

"I like your dress," I said softly. "The sparkles? I used to have one like it except... except mine had tassels at the end. Those were cool back then. Maybe not now."

Isabell slowly turned to face me and for a moment, I thought it had worked. I thought reaching out to her about fashion would have been a good gateway.

I was wrong.

"Why are you fucking my dad? Isn't he a bit old for you? Is it true that it's all downhill after twenty-one? That would explain why the only attention you can get is from dusty old men like my dad and his friends. I'm surprised you're not too dried up to fuck them all."

My mind short-circuited. I couldn't believe what I had just heard and Isabell spat it at me with such venom that it almost hurt.

Almost.

Through her pained words, I was also surprised to see familiarity in the anger that existed in one's soul that caused them to lash out. Hawke had mentioned the passing of his wife and for Isabell to lose her mother; well, it made the anger understandable.

Hawke was not as understanding.

“Isabell Hawke, you apologise at once!” Hawke roared from the front seat. “How dare you talk to Clover that way? How dare you talk to *anyone* that way! You were raised better than that.”

“How would you know?” Isabell screeched. “You didn’t raise me!”

“I have done my best.” Hawke’s knuckles turned white on the steering wheel. “Your mother would be absolutely disgusted by that behavior. What part of you thinks it’s okay in any capacity to say such cruel things?”

“Why?” Isabell yells, tears filling her eyes. “It’s not like she’s family.”

“You don’t talk to anyone that way!”

The argument raged on all the way home, repeating itself once or twice, and by the time we pulled up to the house, it hadn’t calmed. Isabell stormed inside and sprinted up the stairs but Hawke was close on her tail.

“You’re grounded, you hear me? You’re grounded until the day you turn twenty-one and I don’t want to hear a single peep out of you until then! No phone, no socials, and certainly no internet unless it’s for school.”

“I hate you!” Isabell screamed and she slammed her door so hard the house almost shook.

Hawke’s fists clenched at his side, and his jaw snapped shut, glaring fury up the stairs. Then he turned and stomped off to the kitchen.

All of that happened before I had time to close the door.

I toed off my shoes, set my shawl and clutch down on the table by the door, and padded after him.

“Hawke?”

He stood in the kitchen, his back to me and his hands spread out on the counter in front of him. Deep, slow breaths were audible and I decided against touching him just in case.

Slipping around his side, I sat beside him and waited until he lifted his head. His eyes were still dark, but there was sadness there too and after a moment of hesitation, I placed my hand over his clenched fist.

“Clover, I’m so sorry for what she said.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him.

“No, it’s not,” he snapped, then he forced a deep breath. “It’s not. You do not deserve to be treated that way by anyone.”

“I appreciate that,” I smiled warmly. “But I also understand that she’s just a teenager. A teenager growing up with a dead mom who now has to deal with a strange new woman in her dad’s life. It’s bound to be a difficult adjustment for her.”

“That’s no excuse,” Hawke replied tightly. “That kind of talk is just cruel. I don’t care what else is going on. That can’t stand.”

“It can’t,” I agreed with a slight nod. “But it didn’t hurt me. If anything, it showed me how hurt *she* is. I know what it feels like to lose your parents when you are young. She has you, of course she does but there’s pain there.”

Slowly Hawke’s fist uncurled beneath my hand, and he twisted until we were palm to palm, then his fingers gently threaded with mine.

“Sometimes I don’t know how the hell to handle her.”

“Well, grounding until twenty-one probably isn’t the way to go. You should go a little easier on her. She’s an angry, rebellious fifteen-year-old who snuck out to a club and got caught. She’s not a soldier, y’know?”

“I don’t treat her like a soldier.”

“Mmm, you kinda do,” I teased gently. “It’s in your blood and how you tackle life, so it’s not a bad thing, but... she’s a kid. And you’ve done an amazing job. But with everything she’s been through – the both of you – pushback is expected, right? She’s a teenager missing a parent in a place like this. It’s natural to want to rebel against the rules and escape a town like this.”

“Is that why you left?” Hawke asked, and when I looked up at him, slivers of silver had appeared back in his eyes.

“Partly,” I nodded. “My parents died here. Ricky died here. I felt... guilty and trapped, completely suffocated. Leaving was freedom... even if it was running away.”

“I would have done everything to make you stay,” Hawke replied, his voice softer.

“I probably would have let you.” Grinning softly, I leaned up on my tiptoes and pressed a gentle kiss to his cheek. “If I’d given you the chance.”

“Ah, that’s why you left so abruptly,” Hawke nodded.

“Partly. Just... take some of that understanding and apply it to Isabell. You’re in her corner but it sounds like she doesn’t believe that.”

“Maybe grounded until twenty-one is a bit too harsh,” Hawke relented. “But she still snuck out, got drunk, and the things she said; they can’t go unpunished.”

“I agree, and that is up to you. Just maybe not years.”

Much calmer now, Hawke nodded and gently pulled me into his arms. I sank into the heat of his chest as his arms circled me and held me close. Breathing in his woody scent, I closed my eyes.

“They don’t teach you this stuff,” he groaned softly. “I thought war would be the hardest thing I would have to face. I was wrong. It’s a teenage daughter.”

“We’re tyrannical,” I mumbled into his chest. Hawke pressed a lingering kiss to the top of my head and stroked his hand up and down my back.

“So true. Seriously, you’re lucky you don’t have kids.”

“So it seems.”

“I’m sorry it soured the end of our date.”

Pulling back, I squinted up at Hawke and smiled. “There’s time to make it up to me.”

“Really?”

“Sure. Just let me get changed. This dress was not designed to be worn for so long.”

“You can borrow something of mine,” Hawke offered. “Clean will be in the wicker basket in the bathroom.”

With a kiss, we parted, and halfway to the bathroom, a sudden strong pull of nausea flooded through my system. My stomach clenched and hot sweat flushed across my skin so I hurried my steps, all but sprinting to the bathroom. Despite some aches and a cold chill down my spine, there was no sickness once again and I sat on the closed toilet seat, massaging my temples.

Tired, I put the nausea down to the sudden stress of the evening and exited the bathroom to search for the wicker basket Hawke had mentioned. Opening the door, I bumped into Isabell, who was now dressed in her pajamas and looking much more like the fifteen-year-old she was.

I offered a tired smile and got a glare in response.

“I’m looking for a wicker basket. Hawke said it would be in the bathroom but I couldn’t see it.”

“It’s in the other bathroom, down the hall,” Isabell replied snippily.

“Thanks.” Looking to avoid another fight, I slipped past her but Isabell spoke again and I paused.

“My dad said he wasn’t going to ground me forever anymore. Just a month. Because of you.”

Slowly I turned to her, unsure what to expect. “I’m glad,” I replied. “He reacted that way because he cares, you know that, right?”

Isabell stared at me silently for a few long moments, then tossed her head. “Whatever. Just because he listened to you doesn’t make us friends. I still don’t like you.”

Isabell flounced off to her room, and I headed for the second bathroom with a small smile, my heart lighter.

That was progress, at the very least.

CLOVER

“Honey, are you okay?”

Kate’s concerned voice drifted through the open bathroom door to where I was once again huddled over the toilet after throwing my guts up. Three days in a row, I had been hugging porcelain and it was getting slightly irritating.

“Yeah,” I called back hoarsely, hoping my voice carried to the phone. “Be there in a sec.”

The next wave of nausea thankfully didn’t turn into vomit, and I groaned softly while flushing the mess away. I hadn’t had much to eat that morning, thankfully, so only my coffee and usual contraceptive pill were lost to the water. Rinsing my mouth out with water, I trudged back into my motel room and flopped onto the bed.

“Oh, sweetie, you look gray.” Kate’s face, pinched with concern, filled the screen.

“I’m fine.” I waved a hand. “It must be food poisoning or something from that restaurant which *sucks* because I loved that place. Maybe that’s the real reason it was always so empty, and I just got lucky.”

“Maybe,” Kate agreed. “Is Hawke the same?”

“No, actually, When I asked him, he said he was completely fine. He has my luck now. Man, I loved that place.” I clutched a pillow to my abdomen and groaned. “What a date that was, though.”

“Awwh, I’m glad you had a nice time. When was it?”

“Uhm... three days ago.” Hugging the pillow, I rocked slightly to ease the cramps assaulting my stomach and watched Kate as she scribbled something down on her pad.

“And you said you’d felt sick that day at the ice rink with Justin and Eli?”

“Well...” I paused, running my mind back. There had been weird nausea that day too. “Yeah, I guess. But I didn’t eat there that day. It must be some sort of symptom of stress or something.” Suddenly my suspicions were raised as Kate’s gaze stayed down.

“Kate?”

“So the uh...” She lifted her head and smiled slightly. “The crazy, amazing sex orgies you’ve been having with those soldiers—.”

“Navy Seals,” I corrected immediately.

“—whatever. You’ve been using a condom, right?”

“Of course not,” I scoffed. “I’m allergic to latex, remember? But I’m on the pill, so it’s not been an issue. Barely even a thought.” Kate frowned, and I paused. “Why?”

“You know the pill isn’t always effective, right?”

“Today it isn’t because I just spewed it up,” I scoffed. “But apart from that, it is.”

“No, Clover. It’s not. It’s a strong preventative measure, but it’s not perfect.”

Already I can see where this is going, where Kate’s train of thought is leading her, so I leaned closer to the phone and smile.

“Kate. I am not pregnant.”

“You have the symptoms!” She claps her hands together. “And you’ve been having a lot of sex. Not a judgment, just an observation but there’s been a lot of baby-making juice in your vajayjay, and sure, the pill could maybe fight it but now you have cramps and regular sickness—!” Kate gasped for air after pouring all that out to me before I could interrupt.

“But I’m on the pill and it has never caused me issues before,” I chuckled, trying to ease her concerns.

My answer wasn’t good enough for her, though and she prodded the screen. “Clover, take a test.”

“Do I look like I have that kind of money to waste?” I scoffed. “Kate, it’s just food poisoning.”

“And I was a kidney infection until I popped out of my mother,” Kate replied immediately. “Just take a test to be on the safe side? If it’s negative, it might actually be a kidney infection.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re not going to drop this, are you.”

“I’m a concerned citizen,” Kate shrugged. “Humor me.”

“You know what, fine. When I prove you wrong, I expect an expensive and chocolatey apology present.”

“Deal,” Kate laughed. “So, tell me about the date.”

I spent the next hour filling Kate in on every single detail of the date with Hawke. From how handsome he looked in his suit to how gentlemanly he was the entire evening – including paying for my wine. He made me feel like the most beautiful and most desirable woman on the planet, but with that came even more complicated feelings. Talking this out while trying to casually browse the baby aisle in the pharmacy in a small town like this was tough.

“Are you falling for him?” Kate asked, unable to hide the glee in her voice.

“I don’t know,” I replied. “What I feel for him and the others is like... it doesn’t feel like falling, y’know? It feels like I’m just finally registering something that was always there to begin with.”

“It’s so romantic,” Kate singsonged. “Warped by guilt and trauma, you return to your hometown and the loving arms of three hunky men. You’re living a fantasy.”

“Sure,” I scoffed, eyeing the pregnancy tests. “If you ignore the bratty teenager that hates me, the five-year-old with an

oversea smother, and the crippling guilt I feel every time it snows. Sure. Fantasy.”

“You know what I mean,” Kate chided.

“Mhm. Sure. Okay, which one will satisfy you?”

After showing Kate each test in turn, I followed her advice on which one to buy and was luckily able to purchase it quickly without any hassle. If a rumor started about me and the test, then I would deal with that later. Returning to my motel room, I set Kate on the counter and squatted over the stick.

“There’s also something easy about it. Something I can’t explain,” I said while concentrating. Why was it so hard to pee on a stick?

“Easy in what way?”

“Well... none of them make me feel pressured. They’re just there being sweet and attractive, and oh my god, the protective instinct they have. Is it bad that I almost want to run into Justin again just to see them get all hot and riled up?”

“Not really,” Kate laughed. “We all love a protective Alpha male.”

“I hate that word,” I scoffed, “but yeah. It’s like all the good stuff without the bad like bills, work stress, and everything.” Stick peed on, I straightened up and set it on the counter. “Alright, start the timer.”

Kate did as instructed while I sorted my clothes. “And I’m dancing again. The kids are coming along amazing and I’ve got them performing with the props now but I’m dancing myself.”

“Oh?” Kate’s eyes widened. “I’m so happy to hear that! When you told me you won championships but would never dance again, I was so sad! Look at you now.”

“The lake behind the Estate is just... I mean it’s huge so it’s not even *my* late but that section; it’s so nice to be back out there and skating. Everything is feeling a little easier if that makes sense.”

“Complete sense,” Kate agreed. “It must be the spirit of Christmas.”

“Oh, don’t,” I chuckled. “This place is like a giant advert. Although... walking with Hawke through the town, seeing all the lights and decorations, even the fresh snow— I’ve never realized the appeal until now.”

“Are you returning to your roots?” Kate smirked. “Falling for that small town festive vibe.”

“Maybe.”

“I’m proud of you. A few weeks ago, you would have been a hermit in this room and now you’re going out, you’re doing things and expanding. I love it.”

“Awwh, thank you.” I picked up the phone and leaned against the counter. “You having my back definitely helps.”

“So, how are you feeling about... Ricky?”

The million-dollar question. “Axel told me that he shared similar guilt. His story of why got me thinking about how misplaced guilt can be. And I... I watch them all. They loved him as much as I did, and no matter how hard I pushed, they didn’t blame me. It got me wondering if I really was just forcing it upon myself or looking for validation.”

Kate gave me a knowing nod.

“I still feel guilty, but it’s not as...” I pressed one hand to my chest. “It’s not as crushing anymore. And the guys kept Ricky’s stuff at the house for me to look at if I ever want to.”

“Are you going to?”

“Maybe.”

The timer rang out from Kate’s phone and she held it up with a pointed look, her lips pursed.

“Okay,” I laughed. “Just remember. Expensive and chocolatey.” I held up the test.

My smile vanished.

Two pink lines stared back at me.

I was pregnant.

CLOVER

Pregnant.

Two days and that word had consumed me. Convinced it was a mistake, I'd ended the call with Kate and bought three more, but they all gave me the same result.

Pregnant.

Kate did what she always did and offered her kind advice and support, but part of me simply couldn't acknowledge it as real. The very idea that me, Clover Dixon, was having a baby simply wasn't something I could compute. I was on the pill and it had always worked for me.

I was in denial.

Part of me knew it wasn't something I could ignore, but a larger part of me, the part that had slowly been healing with Hawke, Eli, and Axel, was determined to make sure it vanished from my thoughts. It was far too easy to convince myself that it was a mistake and the texts were defective

So when Axel had invited me to their yearly Winter BBQ, I had agreed easily and headed straight there after work, arms laden with store-bought coleslaw. The only rule was that I couldn't arrive empty-handed and I was determined to be a good guest.

I didn't want this bubble with them to burst yet. I was finally starting to deal with the guilt that had plagued me for years and allowing people closer than arm's length.

A baby would ruin everything.

“It’s a tradition,” Axel explained, taking the coleslaw from me and setting it on the table organized on the back decking of the house. “It started when we were deployed because a BBQ is so easy to set up, and one of the cooks we had with us did a mean BBQ under the right conditions. After that, we tried to do it every year.”

“I think it’s cute,” I replied. “I remember Ricky mentioning it once or twice, but it’s awesome that you’ve kept it going.”

“Clover!” Hayley, dressed up in an outfit that resembled a Christmas tree, came rushing toward me and threw her arms around my legs.

“Hey, don’t you look adorable!”

“Thank you!”

“That’s the other thing,” Axel chuckled, handing me a beer. “This BBQ starts our official countdown to Christmas, doesn’t it, Hayley?”

“Yes!” she screeched. She released me and flew back across the deck toward her father, Eli, who was deep in conversation with Hawke. Isabell sat by herself near one of the heaters, glowering at anyone nearby.

“Eat what you like, relax, have a good time,” Axel smiled, handing me a beer. “I’m glad you’re here.”

His words stayed with me as I retreated to a seat next to one of the other heats, beer in hand. I didn’t drink it, I couldn’t.

Not knowing what was inside me.

Before me, Axel continued to cook while Hawke moved to try and talk to his daughter. Whatever he said made her roll her eyes, slam down her book and stomp to her feet. Then she followed him down the decking to the snow where Eli and Hayley had already started gathering snow.

They were a family. A real family.

I’d always know, but it was suddenly much sharper and more obvious now. The beet bottle dangled from my fingers while I watched the start of a snowman-building game, which seemed to be a contest considering how father and daughter worked

together and threw taunts across the snow. Even Axel fit in here, dancing to the music blaring from a speaker and flipping slabs of meat.

Where did I fit in? With a baby?

This was supposed to be easy, no strings attached. My feelings had grown for each man and Hawke's date had pretty much secured my realization that I loved him, loved *them*. I planned on keeping that to myself now but could I do that while pregnant? How could I bring a baby into this and shatter the fragile home I had slipped into?

I couldn't. No strings attached didn't include a baby. I couldn't do that to them, regardless of who the father was. Especially given that they were all much older than me with their lives together. They'd already lived; they'd already battled nappies and 2 a.m. wake-up calls to a screaming child. With how often they had joked about children being too tough, I couldn't in good conscience add to that.

The weight in my gut settled heavy, dread resting inside me as I eyed the beer I couldn't drink and listened to the laughter dancing over the snow. Even Isabell was into the contest after a few minutes. I had no idea what I would do, and pushing it out of my mind once more seemed like the only logical thing to do.

Maybe I could deal with it once I was back in the city. A sudden cold shard lanced down my spine following that thought, and heat prickled behind my eyes.

I would need to return to the city and leave all of this behind.

How could I have been so *stupid*.

Buzzing in my pocket alerted me to my phone and I set the beer aside to answer it. A text from Kate flashed on the screen asking how I was and if I had come to any sort of decision. I stared at the phone until my eyes blurred, and eventually replied to her. I told her I was fine and that I wasn't sure what I was going to do, that I was planning on ignoring it until I returned to the city after Christmas. Kate asked me if I would tell them before I left and I said no. How could I?

Sitting there, watching them have the time of their lives, I couldn't upend that. I had only just allowed myself to feel good around them, I didn't want to see disappointment or regret in the eyes of either of them.

Kate disagreed, but as I was replying to her, another message came through from my Boss from the *Tinkerbell Troupe* and my heart lurched in my chest. She told me that she missed me and that the Tinkerbells were nearly all ready for their Christmas showcase but they couldn't wait to have me back. Just thinking about them was strange, like they were from a distant part of my life, even though it had only been a month.

I replied and filled her in on the progress of the Sprinkles and how proud I was of how far they had come. Then I told her that I missed them all and couldn't wait to be back.

Another reason to return to the city. Was this reality knocking? A reminder that the warmth and relations I had been building here were nothing but a dream?

I groaned softly and closed my phone, unwilling to discuss work or the baby with Kate. I just had to get through the next few weeks and then I could return to my apartment and decide what to do.

One thing I was sure of; I couldn't tell anyone. I didn't want to ruin this and become Ricky's stupid sister who fell pregnant.

"Hey, Clover. You okay?" Axel's shadow fell over my lap and I glanced up. Framed by the lights above, his white hair was more silver than ever, and his brow was pulled down, his eyes concerned.

"Yeah, yeah I'm okay," I reassured him. "Why?"

"You just seem a little... quiet. No interest in the snowman wars?"

I glanced past him to where two very decent-looking snowmen were being built and honestly, I was impressed.

"Nah. They look like they have it handled. I just have some... work things on my mind, that's all."

“Ah,” Axel smiled. “Not long now until the recital, right? Hayley can’t stop talking about it.”

“She’s a star,” I grinned. Axel gently squeezed my shoulder, apparently satisfied by my answer, and returned to the grill. A cluster of emotions swirled in my chest, from guilt to upset and eventually, I couldn’t stand to watch the happy family in front of me any longer. Rising, I headed into the kitchen and poured the beer down the sink.

I made it as far as the hallway before Axel was on me, a hand on my arm and his body crowding me up against the wall.

“Axel?”

“Clover.” His breath was warm against my skin, his muscular torso cutting a hard line against my own and immediately my heart flew into my throat.

“I can tell something is wrong,” Axel said quietly. “Work. Life. I won’t force you to tell me but know you are not alone.”

If only he knew. Staring up into his gorgeous blue eyes, the urge to immediately confess rose. I could tell him. Right here, right now, I could tell him I was pregnant and shatter this bubble forever.

I wasn’t ready to lose any of them.

Instead, I slid my arms around his thick neck and pulled him in for a sudden, deep kiss. It was the best distraction from questions and selfish on my part. If I focused on them and the physicality, my brain would switch off and I could forget for a while.

Axel rose to the occasion, pressing me hard into the wall and his hands roamed over my body, from ribs to hips. Sinking my teeth into his lower lip, I shoved my hips forward against his strong thigh and moaned sweetly against his mouth.

“I’m okay,” I lied when the kiss broke. “Just horny.”

That part was the truth.

“You could have just asked,” Axel smirked, kissing me lightly. I slid my hands into his hair and gripped, pulling sharply with a low, soft groan.

“Where’s the fun in that?” I kissed him again, arching my entire body into him and Axel hugged me firmly against his chest. Then the kiss broke and he dropped to his knees so suddenly that I almost fell forward. He placed one hand on my abdomen, palm flat and fingers spread, then disappeared under my skirt. My thick tights didn’t stand a chance against his fingers. I clutched at his forearm with both hands and bit back a moan when he shoved his face between my legs and his mouth claimed my pussy.

Buried between my thighs, Axel’s tongue darted through my folds and my core clenched, flooding my system with slickness that Axel lapped up early. His lips and tongue danced over my clit and I rose up on my tiptoes as if trying to escape the rush of pleasure. It didn’t matter. Axel followed my movement and pressed his mouth harder against me. Strong, flat strokes of his tongue across my entire pussy mingled with short flicks and suckles around my clit. It was all sudden and intense. I dug my nails into his forearm and pressed my head back against the wall as heat flushed through my body, igniting a fire in my belly.

And my mind was silent.

I followed the path of his tongue with my thoughts, focusing completely on my core and the increasing tingles as he ate me out with a greedy intensity. His tongue dipped inside me, caressing my walls and teasing me. My core clenched sharply and I fought to keep my moans and whimpers quiet. Then, just as I reached the cusp and tightened my thighs around his head on the brink of orgasm, Axel pulled away completely.

I whined and sagged against the wall, frustrated and deflated. “The heck?” I gasped.

Axel surged forward and kissed me and then his grip on my waist flipped me around to face the wall. I had half a second to register my skirt being pulled upward, then Axel kicked my legs apart and thrust his thick cock deep inside me in one powerful thrust. My cry of desire was silenced by his large hand sealing over my mouth and his chuckle warmed my ear.

“Can’t let everyone hear,” he said huskily. My eyes rolled back in my head and Axel began to fuck me hard and fast against the wall. Short, sharp thrusts pounded into me and I was completely at his mercy. Pressing my hands to the wall, my fingers dug into the groove in the wood seeking anything to hold onto as he fucked into me with wild abandon. From this angle, his cock speared me deep and filled me with such satisfaction that I could barely focus on anything other than my desperate breathing around his fingers. His other hand slid around my abdomen, holding me close against his broad chest while he panted in my ear and sloppily kissed my neck. With each grunt came a harder thrust and my close orgasm roared back to life.

I was desperate and hungry, and Axel gave me everything I needed. My heart raced, my head spun and nothing mattered but Axel and his cock.

As his thrusts became rapid and jerky, losing all rhythm, I knew he was close and a deep satisfaction settled into my chest.

I did that. I made him feel like this.

He came with a cry and sank his teeth into the juncture of my shoulder. I followed suit a second later, cumming hard as he flooded my core with heat. My pussy rippled around his cock, milking us both for every drop we could give and just as I desired, I was happy and sated.

And my mind was quiet.

CLOVER

The BBQ lasted well into the late hours, with lots of food and alcohol flowing between everything. Hayley drank her body weight in apple juice and I glimpsed Hawke allowing Isabell half a glass after some careful discussion. It seemed they were making a little progress, and I was warmed to witness it. Hayley was eventually carted off to bed, and Isabell followed a few hours later when I was collecting my bag and coat, intent on leaving until Hawke stopped me in the kitchen with a smile.

“You’re not leaving.”

“I’m not?” I paused, my jacket halfway across my shoulders.

“Nope. It’s late and far too dark. I can’t let you drive in that, especially with all the snowfall from earlier,” Hawke said. His voice was light, but we both knew what he really meant. Dangerous things happened in the snow when driving at night. Slowly I lowered my jacket and nodded, setting my bag back down on the counter. Eli and Axel were outside, quickly cleaning up the deck and the BBQ.

“Okay,” I agreed. “Should I take the spare room?”

“I can set it up for you,” Hawk said, brushing close to me as he moved to the sink.

A flutter of anticipation rushed through me, and I nodded, catching his eye with a smile.

“Can I shower?”

Hawke's hands paused on the tap and he fixed me with a soft look. "Sure."

Ten minutes later, I was undressed and standing in the powerful blast of Hawke's pressure shower and it was amazing. The water hit my shoulders with just the right force and the heat was on the right side of scorching. It was heaven, and as I started to wash, I found myself retracing the path of Axel's hands earlier that night. Sex with him had quietened my mind enough that pregnancy hadn't crossed my thoughts until I was alone in the shower.

Only then did it creep back as my fingers caressed my abdomen. Just like that, *baby* came charging back into my thoughts, and I groaned softly.

Fuck.

Just as I started to spiral, the glass shutter to the shower opened. On reflex, I covered my breasts with my arms, unsure who was stepping in with me. Then Hawke appeared through the clouds of steam and I blew out a calming breath.

"You scared me!"

"Did you think someone was sneaking in to have their way with you?" Hawke asked with a light smile. His naked body glistened as the water poured between us and my mouth ran dry.

"I wouldn't be opposed," I replied.

"Not yet." He leaned forward and under the hot spray, he pressed a warm kiss to my lips. It was different from the others, with a different passion burning in his eyes. "Plus, this saves water."

"Oh, sure," I chuckled.

Hawke took the shower gel, and then, in a way that reminded me of my fantasy all the way back in my motel room, Hawke lathered up his hands and began to wash me. It wasn't something I'd ever experienced before but it was incredibly tender and I found myself leaning into every gentle touch and caress. He massaged my shoulders, swept suds off my breasts, and gently washed my abdomen and back without a word.

Even my usual urges to make a joke and comment didn't rise like normal. Instead, we shared this incredibly intimate moment that hadn't even needed a conversation.

As Hawke worked, his hands leaving trails of heat across my body, I repaid the favor and allowed myself to lose myself in the curves and rise of his muscles. Across his broad chest, down his strong arms and up his muscular back; he was mouthwatering. My heart skipped a beat each time I washed over one of his numerous scars, each one a story of what he suffered during the war but what caught my eye the most was a collection of twisted scars across his back and the right side of his ribcage.

Sex had always been frantic and heated, I'd never had a chance to explore before and my fingertips paused over the scar.

"Shrapnel explosion," Hawke said quietly when my hands lingered. "A rookie bomb that nearly killed me. There are a few pieces still embedded inside me but... it was the explosion not long after Tanya died that had me retiring. Couldn't let Isabell lose both, y'know?"

War was twisted and dark, my heart ached for the horrors Hawke and the others had surely seen but even more so for the reminders they carried with them. Slowly, I turned Hawke to face me and as the water washed away the soap, I cupped his cheeks, studied his face, and then kissed him deeply.

Our skin was still dewy when Hawke laid me down on his bed, my back against his warm sheets. We'd kissed before, too many times to count, but this was different.

Hawke's lips moved slowly against my own and he kissed me deeply. His lungs gave me air and vice versa. He braced one hand on the bed while I caressed his neck and slid one hand into his dark, wet hair. Hawke's body slid down against my own and his other hand slid around my waist, arching me slightly off the bed to hold me close. His cock, stiff and hard, brushed against my thigh but this time, it wasn't an instant desire.

Just being close to him, holding him, and kissing him was where my focus was. Even the pounding of my heart was different. It wasn't the frantic, excited punch I was used to but something more slow and powerful. Love swelled in my chest and subtle emotion prickled behind my eyes. I wanted to stay in this moment forever.

Hawke's hand on the bed relaxed and his full, muscular weight dropped down onto me like a weighted blanket and I moaned softly, like a whisper against his lips. Lifting one leg, I pressed my thigh to his hip and hooked my leg around his waist. His wandering hand caressed me everywhere, from a soft brush against my neck then down to grasp at my breast. His thumb teased firmly over my stiff nipples and I moaned deeply. Then his hand continued down over my abdomen, and he gripped my hips firmly.

The kiss broke and he trailed his lips down my jaw to bury in the crook of my neck. Then his thick cock slid into me and filled me to the brim so suddenly that I arched off the bed and gasped. My world narrowed to nothing but Hawke but where I was used to fire and frantic movements, this time it was deeply passionate. He held me close and peppered kisses over my throat while his hips slowly began to fuck into me.

Deep, rolling thrusts that held power in force rather than speed. Each thrust was like honey, sweet and strong. I rocked my hips down to meet his thrusts at the same speed, and each time he slid deep and filled me completely, I gasped against him. Hawke lifted his head and pressed his mouth to mine, claiming my mouth in a deep kiss while his tongue slid into my mouth and teased along my own. He mapped out every inch of me, his arms cuddling me close like he was protecting me and I was utterly and completely smitten.

My nipples grazed against his chest with every thrust and the pleasure that was building around his thrusts was new. It sat deep in my core, a clenching heat that was building slowly rather than the sudden, fiery heat I was used to. It was addicting and while I had urges to bear down harder onto his cock, I ignored them. Together, we focused on fucking each other like a slow dance. Each time our kiss broke, Hawke

didn't pull away and he kissed around my lips as I gasped for air. The moans pulled from each of us were deep and breathy, passing like a shared secret.

Flames of desire licked across my skin from head to toe, turning every point of contact with Hawke into a sharp, electrical charge. Unable to control myself, I started to writhe slowly against him just to enhance that sensation and Hawke moved with me. Gradually his thrusts increased in pace but not by much, just enough to please the growing ache in my core, and still that strong, clenching tension inside me crept toward the cusp.

"Hawke," I moaned out, my voice thick with emotion I hadn't realized was there. He kissed me sweetly, whimpering into my mouth, and a second later, I came.

My orgasm poured through me like molten fire and I was suspended in a cage of pleasure, clinging to Hawke for dear life. A falling sensation fluttered through my chest as I came, and my core continued to clench and ripple far past what I was used to. My heart pounded and Hawke whimpered once more, cumming deep inside me with a full-body shudder and still, I was suspended, wrapped up in an all-consuming pleasure.

I never experienced pleasure like this, or an orgasm that lasted so long. By the time I came down, I was panting and covered in sweat but I didn't care. Nothing mattered but Hawke.

We cuddled afterward, wrapped up in Hawke's sheets, and settled into a comfortable silence. His fingertips traced patterns and affection over any patch of bare skin that he could find and I drank up the contact with a mind that was completely and utterly at peace. I had intended on dressing and heading to the spare room for sleep, but the heat of the shower and the intensity of the sex left me limbless and tired, and sleep came quickly.

I slept deeply, lost to dreams of Hawke and the others surrounding me and declaring their love. A deep-seated fantasy I wasn't ready to accept. Sometimes Ricky was there, telling me he was proud of me and that he loved me, and the ache of grief crept into my chest even in my dreams.

Then my dreams turned cold. I was no longer pregnant but aware that my baby was somewhere in the house only I couldn't find them. Room after room was empty, and corridors stretched out infinitely in every direction. I ran and ran, starting to pant desperately. I even tried to cry out but I was voiceless, yet as my heart raced, I knew my baby was somewhere close by and in danger. The further I ran, the harder it became to breathe and tension swept up my throat with the taste of iron exploding over my tongue.

Then I couldn't breathe.

My eyes snapped open and a strangled wheeze escaped my lips as my throat restricted under intense pressure.

I can't breathe!

Hawke was above me, a dark shape in the dark and his hands were sealed around my throat.

CLOVER

I can't breathe!

Hawke's hands sealed like iron around my throat, tightening a fraction with each passing second. A strangled gasp escaped me, and I immediately began to struggle like a wild cat. Thrashing my arms and legs, I fought to get my knees under his body in order to push him off but his weight on my hips kept me pinned. His eyes were closed, sweat pouring from his brow and my chest *burned* with the terrified, desperate need for air.

I tried to speak, tried to spit his name past my lips but not a sound escaped me. Through the thunder of my strained heartbeat in my ears, scared whimpers drifted from Hawke's lips, adding to my panic. I grasped his wrists, digging my nails into the soft flesh in an attempt to drag him back to reality, but it didn't work and his grip only tightened in reflex to the pain I caused. I kicked and thrashed, threw my body this way and that, and even tried to hit him in the face but nothing was working.

I threw one hand out to the side and my fingers came into contact with the nightstand. Scrabbling for anything I could use against Hawke, my fingertips brushed against the bottom of the lampshade. Straining, I fought to reach it as my chest swelled like it was about to explode, and bright spots danced across my eyes. Each passing second without air, I grew weaker and despite grasping the cable for the lamp, I was unable to pull it closer.

It slipped from my grasp, and the shattering of the glass lamp was dulled to my ears, distant as my thundering, sluggish heartbeat consumed me. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move, and Hawke was lost to whatever nightmare had consumed him.

Suddenly, light flared to my left and a dull cry reached my ears. A shadow flew across the room and collided with Hawke on top of me and together, the two of them crashed to my right and vanished over the side of the bed. His hands ripped free from my throat, and I dragged in a desperate, much-needed gasp of air.

The flow of air scraped along my throat, and I erupted into a flurry of desperate coughs and gasps for air while more light flooded the room and suddenly Axel's blurred face appeared in front of me.

"Clover! Clover, are you okay? Look at me, look at me, darling." His voice was distant, fogged around the blood pounding through my skull, and all I could do was cough and retch. Axel scooped me up into his arms and carried me out of the room – as we left I glimpsed Eli and Hawke wrestling on the floor, then they vanished from view and my world dulled. Everything spun until Axel seated me in the lounge and began to check me over.

"Clover?" he asked again once I had the coughing under control. "Clover, I need you to say something."

Through tears, I stared up at him and curled my trembling hands against my abdomen.

"I'm sorry," was all I could think to say, and Axel's face crumpled slightly.

"No, Clover. You have nothing to be sorry for," he said softly. "Can I?" Axel indicated to my neck and after a pause, I nodded. His warm fingers very gently pressed against my throat, and I flinched sharply, then the tears fell. Due to Axel's past as a medic, I knew he was trained enough to treat injuries but I still struggled to understand what had even happened.

What did I do to make Hawke act like that? And why did he sound so scared?

My mind raced with a hundred thoughts crashing into one another while Axel examined my throat and then pressed a bottle of cool water into my hands.

“Open your mouth,” he asked gently and I obeyed, staring past him as tears spilled down my cheeks. Only when he was satisfied did he wipe tears away with his thumb, then he grasped one wrist and observed my pulse.

“Drink,” he instructed. “Small sips.”

I obeyed, and after three small sips, Axel scooped me into his arms and held me close. The moment I relaxed against him, my silent tears turned into sobs.

“I don’t know what happened,” I gasped wetly. “We were just sleeping and then I—.” Talking burned more than breathing but I pushed through it. “I woke up and he was on top of me and I couldn’t—I couldn’t get him off, and I—.”

“Shhh,” Axel soothed, rocking me back and forth. “You didn’t do anything, I can promise you that. Something must have triggered his PTSD. I’m so sorry, Clover, I’m so sorry.”

Hawke’s PTSD. Of course.

I’d witnessed their pain in small portions, through things with Ricky and even Axel a few weeks ago with the fireworks. Triggers were difficult, but me? How could I be a trigger?

My thoughts continued to run rampant and I sobbed desperately against Axel’s shoulder, unable to make sense of the guilt, pain, and even fear that swirled in my chest. Axel rocked me through it all, keeping me close to his warm chest for what felt like hours. By the time my tears stopped, my entire face was raw and the tremble in my hands had died down.

When I glanced down, I spotted blood under my fingernails. Hawke’s blood. I’d hurt him?

“Drink,” Axel coaxed. “You’re dehydrated, and the action of swallowing will help your throat. How does it feel?” He

studied me with dark eyes.

“Raw,” I answered honestly. “And hot. Like I’ve got food stuck or something.”

Axel stroked a hand through my hair, then the door to the lounge opened and I jumped. Eli’s face appeared at the door, his lips pressed in a firm line.

“Clover?” he asked softly. “Are you okay?”

“No,” Axel replied while I nodded that yes, I was.

“How is Hawke? Is he okay?” I croaked. “What did I do?”

“Oh love.” Eli stepped further into the room, the shadow of a bruise forming on his jaw. “You didn’t do anything. Not a thing, okay? It’s important you understand that.”

I nodded shakily and fought past pain as I swallowed.

“Hawke is...” Eli glanced over his shoulder and sighed. “He’s cleaning up. He’s a wreck, he wants to apologize but we understand if you don’t want to see him.”

Immediately I frowned. “Why wouldn’t I want to see him?”

Eli and Axel exchanged a glance.

“It’s common not to want to see someone after they’ve attacked you,” Axel said quietly. “What happened... you need to process it.”

It hadn’t even occurred to me that I wouldn’t want to see Hawke. The fear that existed in my chest wasn’t *of* him. I was scared I had done something to hurt him and caused that reaction.

“I’m okay,” I assured them, sniffing. “Really, I want to see him. I want to understand.”

Eli and Axel exchanged another glance, then Eli left the room.

“Are you sure?” Axel asked, keeping me close in his lap. I nodded, and the water bottle crinkled under my grasp.

“I’m... I feel sick and shaky and sore but I... I need to know if I did something. I know you all, and I know about PTSD. I just... I need to know.”

“Okay.” Axel took in a deep breath and slowly rubbed my back.

Ten minutes later, Eli returned with Hawke in tow. He had a bruise under his eye and his gaze was down, his shoulders slumped. The moment we locked eyes, pain flashed across his face and his eyes dropped to my throat.

“Clover... fuck. I’m so sorry, I’m so fucking sorry.” Hawke sat at the opposite end of the room beside Eli, who rubbed Hawke’s shoulder.

“It’s okay,” I croaked when he settled. “I’m okay.”

“It’s not okay.” Hawke shook his head and slid both hands into his hair, tugging at the strands. “It’s not okay at all. I’m so sorry.”

“What happened?” I asked softly and Axel’s grip on me tightened.

“I...” Hawke hung his head. “Earlier, because of the snow and the dark, we talked about you not driving in it... I dreamed of Ricky.”

My heart sank.

“I knew he was out there but I couldn’t get to him, I couldn’t warn him in time and by the time I found the wreck, somehow things twisted into something from the war and I...” Hawke lifted his head and glanced at Eli. “Do you remember Istanbul?”

Eli nodded.

“I was back there and I couldn’t... I couldn’t do anything. And then I think I woke up and someone was next to me— you were next to me, Clover but in my mind, it wasn’t you, it was my captor and I just wanted to escape...”

Hawke trailed off and quickly wiped at his eyes.

“We had a mission,” Eli explained. “Hawke ended up in enemy hands in Istanbul.”

My mind couldn’t dare to imagine what he had gone through in captivity.

“That’s why I always sleep alone,” Hawke croaked. “But we fell asleep together and I... I’m so sorry, I’m so fucking sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

Hawke dissolved into desperate, tearful apologies and my heart *broke* for him. He wore the guilt and remorse like an open wound. Slowly I slid from Axel’s lap and padded over to him. Eli watched me closely as I approached. Gently, I placed my hand on Hawke’s shoulder and he flinched, then lifted his head.

“I’m so sorry,” he wept. Tears filled my own eyes once more and I stepped forward. Hawke’s forehead pressed against my abdomen and I hugged his head to me, letting my own tears fall.

“It’s okay,” I cried softly. “It’s okay. We’re okay. It’s okay.”

I hadn’t done anything. It had been a terrible combination of triggers, from the past to Ricky and the snow. I couldn’t blame Hawke. It wasn’t his fault.

It was just a terrible, terrible incident.

Hawke sobbed against me while Eli gently rubbed his shoulder, and apologies spilled from Hawke until he cried himself hoarse. This was the Hawke underneath all that cockiness and strength. The broken part of him left over from the war.

Shards that existed inside all of them.

“I’m sorry,” I said as Hawke’s tears calmed. “I don’t blame you, Hawke. It was an accident and I’m okay. See?” I cupped his damp cheek and lifted his head to face me. “I’m okay.”

“I’m sorry,” he said weakly. “I honestly... I didn’t even know Ricky was such a trigger.”

“He’s a trigger for us all,” Axel replied, having moved to sit on the table nearby. “I always get antsy when it snows like this. And Clover nearly going out in it... it’s easy to see the connection. That thread of pain, the fear of loss.”

Guilt, sharp and smothering, rose in my chest and my legs wobbled. Ricky. His death was my fault and here I could now

see just how deeply it had affected everyone. Their pain was as raw as mine.

“I’m sorry,” I managed to say. “For Ricky, I’ll never forgive myself for what happened to him and I’m sorry it hurts you all so much and that it feeds into a trigger.”

“Hey now,” Eli scolded softly, and he took my hand, pulling me into his lap. “That was not your fault. Not ever. It was just a terrible accident, a terrible set of events that resulted in him dying... kind of like all the terrible pain in Hawke that resulted in this.”

Hawke grunted softly and wiped at his face.

“But it was an accident. No one blames you, Clover. No one at all and we never have.”

“But I understand,” Hawke added quietly. “I can’t forgive myself for what I just did.”

“I don’t blame you,” I said hoarsely.

“And we don’t blame you,” Axel said.

The similarities weren’t lost on me, even with the throb in my throat. It didn’t ease my guilt but their desire to make me feel better was suddenly more understandable with how I desired to make Hawke feel blameless.

“Honestly,” Eli sighed softly. “I’m so fucking glad you’re here, Clover. You being back with us, even with everything, it feels like we’re complete. Like the family is right back to where it should be.”

Hawke murmured another apology as Eli spoke and as I took his hand, my pained heart sank a little deeper.

I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

They really believed that I belonged here. That I was part of this family and the fact that we could all sit here and talk about Hawke’s pain in a safe space, that I could be treated so quickly, was a testament to that.

But it did make one thing painfully clear.

A baby couldn't be brought into this equation, and I had no clue what I would do.

CLOVER

They let me sleep in the next day, wrapped up in Eli's room, where the comfort of his scent lulled me into a restless sleep. I was woken by Hayley, who came bursting in, excited to see that I stayed the night. Isabell was less than excited to see me, but other than a glare, she didn't say anything. After a breakfast of toast and tea – and countless further apologies from Hawke, each one I accepted while repeating my understanding – everyone left for work and school, leaving Eli and I to ourselves.

After asking me ten times if I was okay, Eli escorted me to the attic, where they had packed up and stored Ricky's stuff. Seeing his name scrawled over the cardboard lips pulled my heart south as the dusty warmth of the attic flooded my lungs.

"Clover?" Eli appeared beside my shoulder and held out a warm cup of tea that I accepted with a warm smile from the spot I had cleared on the floor.

"Thank you."

"How's your throat?"

"Sore." I briefly touched my fingers to my bruised throat, hidden away beneath a silk scarf to prevent any of the kids from asking questions. "I know Hawke feels terrible. I wish I could ease it somehow."

"That's not on you," Eli said firmly, sitting cross-legged beside me. "Hawke needs to work that out on his own. He feels guilty, yes, and hearing that you don't blame him helps, yes. But he needs..."

“Time?” I offered. Eli laughed softly and nodded.

“The point is, in this situation, it’s not your responsibility because you are the victim in this situation.” Eli leaned across and lightly patted my knee. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes,” I nodded, then slid one hand over the cardboard boxes. “Although I’m not sure I’m okay about going through all of these.”

Eli drank from his own cup and nodded. “We can do this later if you like? This isn’t going anywhere.”

“No, I... after what happened, I’ve been thinking about Ricky and I— well, I’d like to see what’s here.”

It took several sips of tea before I could handle opening the box. The first item inside was a framed photograph of a young Ricky and our parents taken out near the lake. Smiling faces peered up at me and I found myself brushing lightly over Ricky’s face.

“Oh. I haven’t actually seen a picture of us in so long,” I murmured. Underneath that were a few of his favorite books, a few more family pictures, and then a leather bound notebook atop several old t-shirts. Setting the notebook aside, unfolded one of the t-shirts revealing a local band Ricky had supported as a teen.

“Oh god,” I groaned, unfurling the t-shirt. “I remember this. I thought they were awful but he loved them. I think mostly because one of his old school friends was the drummer.” Bundling up the shirt, I pressed it to my nose and closed my eyes. Underneath the musk of age and dust, his scent clung to the fibers and my heart clenched in my chest.

“I think I remember him mentioning them once or twice,” Eli chuckled. “If I remember, I think he brought some of their music with him when deployed. The amount of times I had to listen to Metal Rai—.”

“Metal Raindrops! Yes!” I laughed. “Glad to know you suffered too.” Keeping the t-shirt in my lap, I unbound the leather journal and opened it. Immediately Ricky’s dog tags fell out onto my lap, along with a couple of Polaroid photos.

“Oh,” I murmured softly. “His tags.” I turned them over gently, examining his name and vital information. Eli, Hawke, and Axel all wore theirs and I hadn’t thought about where Ricky’s were. After a beat, I draped them around my own neck. Next were the photographs and my heart skipped a beat to see they were all of me. Inside the journal, Ricky’s handwriting scrawled across page after page, detailing vague missions he couldn’t discuss and the life and family he often feared he would never return to. It felt rude to read more than a few pages and I passed it over to Eli, returning my focus to the pictures.

“I didn’t realize you were serious when you said he kept pictures of me,” I said softly, turning them over to see the dates on the back. “He never told me, but... it makes me a little happier to know I was with him, sort of.”

“He spoke about you a lot,” Eli said. “Stories mostly. And the reason to return home. He loved you a lot and I think he could have been very proud of you.”

“What was he like?” I lifted my gaze to Eli. “Over there? He never spoke about it.”

“There’s not a lot any of us can talk about other than with each other,” Eli said. “But Ricky was... he was good. At a glance, you wouldn’t think he was cut out to be a Seal but after spending five minutes with him, you could see the strength. He had a good heart and a keen eye, gave Hawke a run for his money, that’s for sure.” Eli chuckled affectionately. “He always put others first, always did what he could to minimize things like civilian casualties. Broke a few rules doing it too.”

“Sounds just like him.” My chest ached, like pressure was building inside, and part of me wanted to cry. The other part of me wanted to soak up every detail. Eli flipped through the journal, an affectionate smile gracing his handsome face as he read Ricky’s accounts of memories they likely shared.

I returned to the boxes and found more and more clothes and items he had brought back with him in more boxes. There were more pictures and even some boxes of my own clothes. Going through them all was a trip down memory lane and by

the time I opened the last box, my fingers were dry from the cardboard and there was surely a layer of dust in my lungs.

Inside the last box, right on top of ornaments and knick-knacks, sat a photo album. I pulled it out and sat back down, flipping open the pages. My parents had been eager about photographing everyone and each page was another chapter in our lives.

“They had been so happy to have me,” I murmured. “Called me the lucky child ‘cause I arrived so late.”

“Name fits,” Eli murmured from his corner, still nose-deep in the journal.

“I wonder what they would think about...” I trailed off, losing confidence in voicing that thought out loud.

“Clover.” Eli closed the journal and scooted closer. “You *have* to stop blaming yourself for what happened to Ricky. I know it’s hard, but the advice you gave Axel? Even what you said to Hawke last night? You have to use some of that forgiveness on yourself.”

“I try,” I murmured. “But each time I try, it’s like my mind works against me.” Flicking more pages, I arrived at the smaller section where Ricky had tried to take over after our parents died. There were a lot fewer pictures and a lot less happy ones.

“Ricky would be the first to tell you that it wasn’t your fault. It was a terrible, terrible accident and if he hadn’t been running to you, he would have been running to someone else because that’s the kind of person he was.” Eli’s hand landed on my arm and squeezed gently.

My world blurred, and I lifted my tear-filled eyes to Eli.

“I miss him,” I said softly. “I miss him so much and I just... I wish he was here.”

“I know.” Eli slid his arm around my shoulders and pulled me close, pressing a kiss to the top of my head. “He would have kicked Hawke’s ass.”

“True,” I chuckled. “And then made sure he was okay and done... everything that we did only with a little more flair.”

“Exactly.”

“How do I forgive myself?” I lifted my head and locked onto Eli’s vibrant eyes. “How do I actually do that?”

“Time,” Eli answered with a sigh. “And not telling yourself that it was your fault. Recite that it was an accident, or repeat what we have told you and replace the self-hatred with our love. Then, time will ease it. Look around you, Clover. You have a good heart and we adore the fuck out of you. You have a place here, a family. What happened was a tragedy and we will miss him every single day but... we cope. And we won’t forget him.”

Eli’s free hand slid down my arm and landed on my wrist, brushing lightly over my tattoo of Ricky’s name. His touch was warm and comforting, leaving my skin tingling and I leaned tighter into him.

“I’ll try,” I promised, tilting my hand to take Eli’s hand in mind.

“That’s the start,” Eli smiled and his warm lips landed on my temple. “I try to make Ricky proud. I find that helps. I look at myself, or Hayley, and tell myself that Ricky would be happy for me, proud of what we do and what we’ve overcome.”

“I think so too,” I agreed softly. “Though I’m not sure he would be happy I gave up dancing.”

“He’d support you regardless,” Eli pointed out gently. “In fact, I can prove it.”

Eli leaned away to snatch up the journal and when he settled back next to me, he flicked through a few pages to an entry from years ago. There, in blue pen, was Ricky’s writing.

—in fact, I just want her to be happy. I hate leaving her alone, but there’s not much else I can do. What our parents want for her is one thing, but I know that feeling, that want to escape. I’d kill her if she signed up but the last we spoke, she told me she didn’t want to dance and was too scared to tell Mom. Next time I’m home, we’ll tell them together—

I read and re-read the passage, searching through the depths of my memories for what he could be talking about. Then, like a bolt through my mind, I recalled being on the phone to him ranting about dancing. I couldn't remember the details but he had listened and told me to follow my heart.

Our parents had passed before we had that talk.

Tears stung at my eyes, and the pages crumpled under my grip. Eli tightened his grip and pulled me close.

"Ricky had your back," Eli said softly. "Always."

That made the tears fall harder because deep down, despite his support, I couldn't decide how far that support would go. If he was here now, I wouldn't be pregnant, that was for sure. And if, somehow, things had turned out the same way, would he be disappointed at my recklessness? Would he support this cobbled relationship?

Would he drive me to the city and help me make the best decision?

"Come on," Eli coaxed softly, rising and helping me to my feet. "This was a lot today. Let's get some food."

I sniffled and wiped my eyes, packing up the boxes quickly and as I placed the journal back inside for safekeeping, something struck me cold, a new fear that I couldn't talk myself out of because I will never know.

I couldn't help but feel Ricky would be more ashamed of me for the pregnancy than anyone, and I was almost relieved he wasn't here for me to find out.

AXEL

“A balloon!” Hayley exclaimed from the front seat as I unbuckled her.

“You want to get your dad a balloon?” I asked, careful to hide my amusement.

“Yes!” Hayley declared. “I like balloons.”

“I know, but do you think your Dad would want a balloon for Christmas?”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Hayley pouted up at me as I placed her down in the snow, her little face serious.

“She has a point,” Clover chuckled, appearing beside me as she tucked her scarf a little tighter around her. “Wouldn’t you want a balloon for Christmas, Axel?” She winked at me and offered her hand to Hayley, who took it immediately.

“Sure,” I murmured. “I’m just the Uncle.”

Clover and Hayley began to walk toward the Christmas market. I turned and knocked on the window of my car to get Isabell’s attention.

“Are you joining us, or are you going to be a right muppet this entire trip?”

Isbell glared at me, then shoved the door open and climbed out with a dramatic groan.

“I don’t *want* to get my Dad a present.”

“Sure you don’t. And like every year, by the time we reach the Hot Chocolate cart, you’ll be less grumpy and ready to pick

out a gift. Now quick march, missus.”

“It’s not like last year,” Isabell scoffed. “Last year, he didn’t have a *girlfriend*.” She trudged after Clover and Hayley with her nose buried in her phone and I followed after locking up the car.

Girlfriend.

We hadn’t put a label on anything that was happening but if that was how the kids saw it, then maybe it was true. All I knew was that I was happy for the first time in a very long time. I had no intention of doing anything to jinx it. Life had a funny way of doing that for me.

Taking the kids out for Christmas shopping had become a bit of a tradition for me since it was an easy way to get presents for Eli and Hawke without anything being spoiled. Having Clover with us this year warmed my tired soul, even if she was just here to pick up a few things for herself.

After a few minutes, Isabell and I caught up with Clover and Hayley, who were deep in discussion about Christmas.

“It’s a shame Santa won’t come to Daddy,” Hayley said. “he must have been bad this year but it’s okay.”

“It is?” Clover asked with a smile.

“Yes! ‘cause I’ll get him something and then we won’t be sad.”

“He definitely could never be sad with you around,” Clover chuckled. “Have you sent your letter off to Santa?”

“Yes! An’ I signed it with hearts and—and smiles so he will know I was good all year.”

“All year?” I asked with a teasing smile. “You think Santa will forget about what you did in the Summer?”

Hayley stopped abruptly and turned to me, her cheeks beet red.

“Why?” Clover glanced between us. “What happened in the summer?”

“Nothing.” Hayley immediately stomped away, sending up a spray of snow and slush as she walked.

“She got into a fight with another kid at school just before the holidays. All because the other kid won the egg and spoon race and Hayley dropped hers.”

“Oh god.” Clover pressed her hand to her lips to hide her smile. “Important battles are fought in preschool.”

“Indeed,” I laughed. “Hayley! Don’t go too far!”

Clover immediately broke into a light jog to catch up with Hayley and after a few minutes, Hayley stuck her hand back into Clover’s and we resumed our walk. Upon reaching the market, Clover had successfully persuaded Hayley that a balloon wasn’t a suitable present for her dad. We stopped by the handmade crafts store run by one of the local families, and I was greeted with a bright smile.

“Not on duty tonight?” Mrs. Brown chuckled, rubbing her hands together.

“Not tonight, no. Tonight is family.”

“Clover Dixon, as I live and breathe!” Mrs. Brown’s eyes glazed past me to Clover and she beamed. “Come to check out my creations? Not as detailed as your fathers, I’m afraid.”

“They’re beautiful,” Clover smiled, examining one of the hand-crafted deers. “I’m sure my father would have been very impressed.”

“Oh, I hope so!” Mrs Brown chuckled. “We do miss seeing his yearly creations.”

“Where is your dad?” Hayley turned her face up to Clover, her eyes filled with the open innocence of a child. My heart clenched slightly as pain flashed over Clover’s beautiful face, then she smiled warmly.

“He’s with the angels,” she said. “But he used to make things like this with his hands all the time. Maybe when you’re older, you’ll see them in the pub.”

“When you’re much older,” I laughed.

“Your dad would like these?” Hayley picked up a hand-crafted stag, and Clover nodded.

“He’d love them.”

“I want one!” She spun to me and thrust the stag into my hand.
“For Daddy.”

“Are you sure?”

Hayley nodded eagerly and I passed the stag over to Mrs. Brown, then glanced at Isabell. “Anything for you?”

She grunted and didn’t look up from her phone. Casting an eye over the wooden animals, I selected a bear and handed that over too. They’d be perfect for Hawke and Eli.

We walked away from the stall with the presents clutched eagerly in Hayley’s hands and headed for the textile stall where we purchased hand-knitted scarfs and gloves for them too. Clover also bought some for her friend back in the city and as we left that stall, Hayley grew bored of carrying the bag and thrust it into my hand.

“So this is a tradition for you?” Clover asked, falling into step beside me. “Taking them out?”

“Yep. It gives me a chance to spend time with them and lets them buy presents. Even if they’re stubborn.” I cast a glance back at Isabell, who was finally free of her phone and had started glancing at some of the food stalls as we passed.

“It’s cute. I’ve walked past this market a few times, but I think I avoided it because... well, I used to come every year with Ricky and it felt weird.”

“I know. It can be strange but we make do.”

A loud, audible yawn came from Hayley and she leaned a little more into Clover.

“Speaking of strange, Hayley’s mother should make an appearance at Christmas.”

“June?” Clover asked.

“You know her?”

“No. I’ve just heard Eli mention her.”

“Ah. Yes, she’s a contract lawyer. She travels all over the world overseeing contracts between international businesses. They had an amicable split and decided Hayley needed the stability here with Eli rather than traveling the world with her mother.”

“Makes sense.” Clover nodded. “That’s good for Hayley.”

“Definitely,” I nodded. “Hers is the last name I need for my tattoo, actually.”

Clover glanced at me, her eyes wide. “You have everyone’s names there?”

“Of course.”

“What if someone turns out to be an asshole?”

“Well... it’ll serve as a reminder. But family is family and I want everyone there. June just never settled on a flower but this year, maybe she will.”

“That’ll be exciting,” Clover smiled. “I like that idea. Having family in your tattoo like that.”

“War shows you how easily people can be lost.” I sighed softly. “I want to remember everyone, even the assholes.”

We walked in silence after that, checking out the rest of the stalls, and Isabell finally spoke up and bought some homemade fudge for her father. Despite the grumpiness in her tone, it was nice to see her getting into the spirit of things, and by the time we reached the Hot Chocolate stall, her phone was firmly in her pocket.

“Four Hot Chocs, please, with all the trimmings.”

“Oh, no cinnamon for me.” Clover wrinkled her nose. “I don’t like that anymore.”

“Coward,” I smirked and amended the order, then we took our drinks and sat on one of the benches next to the heaters to drink. Hayley cuddled up to Clover, sipping her drink while Isabell sat next to me on the other side.

“Is there anything you’re excited about for Christmas?” Clover asked Isabell, swirling her peppermint straw around her drink.

“Peace and quiet,” Isabell replied dryly.

“Oh come on. No cool presents you’re asking for? No trendy clothes or the latest iPhone, hmm? Santa might be good to you.”

“Santa isn’t—.”

I cleared my throat sharply and glanced pointedly at Hayley.

Isabell scrunched her nose and sighed. “Santa will bring me what I deserve because I’ve been good.”

“No, you haven’t,” Hayley piped up with a loud laugh. “You’re *grounded*.”

“Hayley,” I warned softly. “Drink your chocolate.”

Isabell glared at Hayley, then down at her drink. “Whatever.”

“Seriously though, I know Christmas can be a struggle; getting the latest cool things away out here is like trying to find a needle in a haystack,” Clover chuckled. She was trying to find common ground with Isabell but from the look on Isabell’s face, it wasn’t working.

“And yet you’re here,” Isabell muttered. “Maybe Santa will be nice and bring sense to my dad so he gets bored of his current *toy* and things go back to normal.”

“Isabell!” I barked so loudly that Hayley jumped and sent cream spraying across the table. “What an awful thing to say!” I rarely got angry at the children, but Isabell referring to Clover as something inhumane like a toy, was infuriating. “What the hell is wrong with you?!”

“It’s okay.” Clover held up a hand and smiled, seemingly not feeling the same anger I was. “You’re struggling, I understand that. Suffering a loss and then seeing the world move on from that can be really jarring, especially when parents are involved. What’s happening between your father and me, and the others... It’s unconventional. You’re right.”

“It’s weird and wrong,” Isabell snapped, discarding her drink and crossing her arms firmly across her chest.

“Is it? Death certainly puts things in perspective. You find yourself reaching out to people in any way you can, especially those who share your pain and unexpected connections just happen. Life teaches you that following certain rules that make you unhappy just isn’t worth it.” Clover shrugged and wrapped her hands around her cup. “And sometimes, a cobbled-together family becomes home. I bet people would think it strange that you have three dads. But is that wrong?”

Isabell glanced at me, and her shoulders sagged a little. “No.”

“Because that’s your family and you love them all, don’t you? You have three dads and a sister. That’s your family cobbled together through grief but you wouldn’t change it, would you?”

“No,” Isabell says quietly.

“And you certainly didn’t choose it. But love is weird. So maybe, if you think about it, your dad being happy is important, isn’t it?”

Isabell didn’t reply, and Clover smiled warmly.

“Just think about it.”

Just like that, my anger melts away. Clover handled that a lot better than I did and when our eyes met, she winked at me with a light smile. It seemed, in some regard at least, Clover had found her peace about our unconventional relationship and that warmed me greatly. In the beginning, her apprehension was clear and now she was placing herself as part of our cobbled family.

I love that.

I love her.

Our drinks were finished in silence and when Hayley’s eyes started to droop, our trip came to a close. Clover carried Hayley in her arms on the way back to the car while Isabell and I shared the bags. Piling back into the car, Clover tucked a

sleeping Hayley into her seat as I loaded up the bags, then my phone flared into life with a jingle.

“You don’t have that on silent?” Clover chuckled, softly closing the door.

“Nah. Too many important things,” I said, scrolling through the text. “I’m proud of you, Clover.”

“Oh?”

“For how you handled all that.”

“Thanks.”

“And,” I grinned as I read the text from Eli. “Speaking of June, Eli says she’s changed her plans, and she’s coming here early. She wants to be here for Hayley’s Ice Dance recital apparently!”

I lifted my eyes to Clover, whose eyes widened slightly and she nodded quickly.

“That’s— that’s great! So soon...”

“This year’s just filled with good things, huh?” I kissed her cold cheek and then climbed into the car, but as I started to drive, Clover caught my eye in the rearview mirror. She stared out the window, chewing on her lower lip and tapping her fingers against her knee.

Was she nervous about meeting June?

CLOVER

Tea in hand, I bundle the duvet around my body to protect from the cold and hit dial on Kate's number.

Yesterday was amazing. Christmas shopping with Axel and the kids gave me the perfect glimpse into what family life could be like if I decided to keep the baby, but like with everything else in this town, reality quickly came knocking.

June was coming to visit. Eli's ex-wife. Hayley's mother.

From Axel's story, she was a lovely person who had split amicably with Eli but that wasn't my concern. What had kept me up all night and distracted me all through the final dance practice was the reminder of how *complete* their family already was. They had already gone through finding someone to love, having babies and family. Disrupting that by revealing my own pregnancy just didn't seem like an option.

"Hey lovely!" Kate greeted me with a wide smile. "I have been on my feet all day." She groaned and slouched back in her chair, revealing the large glass of red in her hand. "How are you? Are you all ready for the recital?"

"I think so," I replied. "The kids have been amazing and considering the age range I'm actually really impressed with the talent levels."

"Kids that young are fearless," Kate chuckled. "Trust me."

"Oh I can believe that. Busy day?"

"I did all my Christmas shopping today. I know they say you're supposed to pace these things out but once I get started

I can't stop. I even got your gifts and I'm so excited!" Kate bounced in her chair slightly, then she leaned closer. "Sweetie, are you okay?"

"Yeah." I nodded once, then I shook my head. "No. I don't know."

"Talk to me."

"Well.." Taking a deep breath, I sipped my tea. "Yesterday I went shopping with Axel and the girls. I got some presents and it was really nice. I even had a semi-good chat with Isabell at least from my perspective and for a moment I thought about how strong that family is. They just care for each other, they don't care that they're not all related, y'know?"

"Army bonds are strong," Kate agreed. "But...?"

"Well... Axel filled me in on June, Hayley's mother. She's some fancy lawyer that travels the world which is why Hayley is here with Eli."

"Are they still together?"

"Oh no, they broke up years ago. But she's coming to visit and I... I don't know." Another sigh crept up as I toyed with the edge of the blanket between my fingers. "For a second I contemplated telling Axel I was pregnant. Everything about the market and the snow and Christmas spirit everywhere, it felt like the right thing to do and then he told me June was coming to visit and it just reminded me how each of them had already done this. They've lived their lives, they have their families."

"The downside of an older guy," Kate mused, sipping her wine.

"Exactly."

"But... you've been thinking about keeping it?"

I glanced up at Kate's curious eyes and nodded. "Just.. briefly. I know I said I would wait until I was back in the city but every so often this urge rises to tell them. They take such good care of me and I think... I think I love them. All of them and I

can't stop thinking about the baby so then it seems like a good idea."

I groan loudly. "But then something else happens that reminds me that it's a bad idea and I should keep my mouth closed and leave quietly before I ruin anything."

Kate was silent for a moment, then she moved the camera closer.

"Okay, let's consider your options. There's abortion. You could carry to term and put the baby up for adoption or you could come clean and keep the baby."

"It sounds so clinical," I muttered.

"I know but it's important. First thing you have to decide is, do you even want this baby?"

My heart stilled briefly in my chest and I tipped my head back to look up at the ceiling. "I don't know. When I think about raising a baby by myself, I don't want to. But then if I think about raising a baby with them, every dream is perfect."

"Okay. So, say you decide to keep it. Can you realistically raise a child with three older men who already have their own children and family to tend to? Would they even want to raise a baby with you? Or at all?"

Her words stung and I pressed my lips together, fighting the rising emotions in my chest that flooded through me like static.

"I don't know," I replied hoarsely, blinking rapidly to fight the tears. "When you say it like that, it makes me feel like I'm not important to them or that I'm just some piece on the side that they're happy to fuck."

"I'm sorry."

"It doesn't feel like that when I'm with them." I lift my head and turn back to Kate. "When we're together, I feel... happy. Like everything is easy. We've had dinners and gone through Ricky's boxes and I can talk about him and my guilt. I adore Hayley, and I like Isabell. I love all of them and they treat me like I'm something precious."

“But that’s you,” Kate pointed out gently. “Not you and a baby.”

“So you think they’d just kick me to the curb?”

“I’m not saying that.” Kate swirled her glass. “I’m your best friend and it’s up to me to ask the tough questions you try to avoid in your own head. And you’re dealing with a lot. Being back in your hometown, all this stuff about accepting Ricky’s death and more – all of which I support because girl, you deserve to heal. But adding a baby into the mix makes things tough. And you need to be sure. Too often a girl falls pregnant and finds out the guy was just after sex and a good time.”

“They’re not like that,” I reply stubbornly.

“Aren’t they? Have you ever talked about what happens after Christmas? Ever spoken about life beyond this?”

“They tell me they’re glad I’m here, glad I’m back. That they love me and care for me.”

“And that’s great,” Kate sighed. “But have they ever spoken about the future? About an actual life with you? Anything to indicate that a baby wouldn’t be some nuclear shock?”

“They’re not like that!” The static swelled hotter in my chest and a burst of irritation swept through me. “They’re not sleazy boys like Justin. They’re men. Men who know what they want, who are in charge of their lives and no, we’ve never talked about the future but that’s maybe because I haven’t even told them I considered staying. They’re military people, they take each day as it comes because it’s a gift and the future is a risk.”

“Okay,” Kate nodded. “So why don’t you tell them and make the decision together?”

My lips parted but no words came.

“I’m not trying to be an asshole,” Kate said. “I’m just trying to help you get to the bottom of what you really want. You say such nice things about them and I’m so *so* happy that they treat you right but a baby is huge, Clover. And you need to make sure you make the right choice for both of you, y’know? I don’t want you to get your heart broken.”

The irritation melted away, replaced by a quiet sadness.

“I know,” I replied softly. “The truth is... I have no idea. I don’t know how they would react. I entertain the idea of us all being a family but if I’m honest with myself... They’ve joked about never having more kids. Have told me I’m lucky I don’t have to deal with things like tantrums and stroppy teenagers. They’ve all moved past that... I don’t think I could drag them back.”

Kate drained her glass and set it down, her face soft. “Then I think all you have to decide is what is best for you. Do you keep the baby?”

“I have no idea.” My head fell into my hands and I groaned. “Fuck. This is so hard.”

“I know sweetie, I’m sorry. Whatever you choose, I am here for you. Whatever happens, I have your back. You know that, right?”

I lifted my head. “I know. Thank you. And... Thank you, for making me think about the hard stuff. It’s so easy to get caught up in the magic here.”

We chatted for another hour about other things in life, namely Kate’s family and her Christmas plans but always, the baby lingered in the back of my mind. I was torn between focusing on what I wanted, and what the guys might want, and by the time the call ended, I was no clearer.

My dream was keeping the baby with them but the reality was, I had no idea what they would want. Would they look at me the same? Would they love me and raise the child?

Or would they just see the reckless girl who carelessly got pregnant and turned their lives back into screaming babies and diapers?

Groaning, I flopped back onto the bed and buried under the covers. I couldn’t even imagine what Ricky would advise me to do but one point from Kate kept cropping back up.

What did *I* want to do?

A buzzing dragged me from my thoughts and I stuck my hand out of the blanket to grasp my phone, answering without looking as I expected Kate simply had thought of another thing to say.

“Hello?”

“Clover?”

“Eli!” I bolted upright and raked a hand through my messy hair. “Hi. What’s up?”

“Hey, I wanted to give you a call and let you know that June landed an hour ago. My ex-wife?”

“Hayley’s mother.” My heart flipped. “Do you need me to stay away?”

“What?” Eli chuckled. “No, no. She wants to meet you before Hayley’s recital.”

“Because I’m the teacher?” I squinted slightly as Eli chuckled again.

“I mean, partly. But she also wants to meet you.”

“What? Why?” My tired heart started to pound and nerves coiled heavy in my gut. “Wait, is this a test?”

“A test?” I could hear the frown in Eli’s voice. “No, Clover. It’s not a test.

“Meeting the ex-wife feels like a test,” I muttered. “That’s a pretty big thing, right? I mean it’s one thing to go out in public but it’s another to present me to the mother of your child.”

“I...” Eli paused. “That’s one way to look at it I suppose. Clover, I’m not ashamed of you, none of us are. But June simply wants to meet you because you’re Ricky’s sister, and she likes to know who is involved in Hayley’s life when she’s not here. It’s not a bad thing at all.”

“So she’s not going to call me a whore?”

“No, Clover. She isn’t going to call you a whore. Are you okay? Where is this coming from?”

“I’m sorry, I— I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Is this too much? June knows we’re a quiet thing, she knows everything because, as Hayley’s mother, she has a right to know about other women who are close to her daughter but if it’s too much for you...?”

“No no, it’s... I’m sorry. You’re right. June does deserve to know and I would love to meet her.” I pressed my hand to my forehead and tried to massage the growing band of tension growing around my skull. “I’m sorry.”

“You’re okay,” Eli replied softly. “This is a big change y’know? A new thing for all of us and I just want to make sure everyone is informed and knows where they stand. June is lovely, I think you’ll like her.”

“I’m sure I will,” I replied. “I’m happy to meet her. I can’t wait.”

“Excellent!”

When the call ended, I stared down at Eli’s name on the screen and groaned. If *dating* was considered a big change, what on earth would they think about a baby?

Fuck.

The nerves continued to churn as I settled back down onto the bed. All I could focus on was how the lives of every person I cared about would shatter and change forever, the moment I told them I was pregnant. Even June’s, a woman I had never met.

Just like lives changed the night Ricky died.

I couldn’t tell them. I couldn’t.

My only option was to leave, just like I did four years ago.

CLOVER

A few days later, the day of the dance recital dawned bright and crisp and I spent most of the morning hugging the toilet bowl purging my guts up. As much as I tried to put the baby out of my mind, my body had other ideas. It couldn't forget so why should I?

I called Kate and talked over my concerns once more, revealing that the more I thought about it, the more I was certain that I would be ruining lives if I told them about the pregnancy. Keeping it a secret moving forward seemed like the best thing for all involved and later, when I was back in the city, I would decide what was best for me in terms of keeping the baby or seeking other solutions. Kate did ask me how I felt about leaving and I admitted that part of me wanted to stay, that home felt like it was here but the baby changed all of that. Later, when I had decided the best course of action for me, I could always come back, but until then, I was certain.

I would enjoy these last few weeks with the men I had come to love, and then I would slip away, leaving nothing but happy memories. For the rest of the day, I threw myself into the dance recital and made sure all of the props and costumes were designed to perfection. By the time the kids started trickling in for the final dress rehearsal, I was teetering on raw nerves, but it was exciting too. Seeing so many happy, eager faces ready to perform and show off to their parents warmed my heart and there was even a planned surprise visit from Santa to give each of the children a present as a well done for a fantastic show.

It was slightly more extravagant than the excitement back in the city but things here were much more intimate and personal. That was what part of me clung to. As we wrapped up the final dress rehearsal with only two mistakes, I knew the night was going to go swimmingly and my heart soared as I sent the children off to the community center for a mini Christmas dinner. I passed on the meal myself because dinner time for the children meant that June, Hayley's mother, would be arriving at any moment, and I was *scared*.

I'd never experienced nerves like this in my entire life. My stomach churned, my heart raced and my hands shook as I reset the stage props ready for the real recital later that night. I tried to tell myself there was no need to be nervous. After all, with my plans to leave after Christmas, I was only a fleeting drop in Eli's life and hardly anyone to be concerned about.

But that wasn't strictly true. As I studied myself in the bathroom mirror and smoothed my hair, I realized that I wanted to make a good impression. I wanted to show her that Hayley was in good hands and that I was a good fit for Eli, despite my younger age. These thoughts and feelings churned like acid in my chest and tears of frustration threatened at my eyes.

I knew, right then and there, that if it wasn't for the baby, I never would want to leave.

Maybe... that was the answer. My heart belonged here, and the baby would ruin that for sure. Maybe, just maybe, the trip to the city could fix my problem and then I could come back here and be with men who treasured my existence.

Maybe.

Suddenly knuckles rapped on the bathroom door and Marlene's head popped through.

"Clover? There's a woman here to see you. I think her name is June?"

I smoothed my hands down my Christmas sweater and flashed Marlene a smile. "Thanks."

"Are you okay? You look a little gray."

“Oh, I’m just nervous about tonight. I want to put on a good show, y’know? Show everyone that their kids were in good hands.”

“You’re amazing,” Marlene smiled. “But I understand.”

She left me alone and I double-checked my makeup. I took a deep breath and held it for a few moments even as my heart pounded painfully beneath my chest, then I blew it out.

Show time.

Outside, near reception, a tall woman dressed in a business suit with tightly curled blond hair stood admiring the children’s drawings attached to the wall. She carried a briefcase in one hand and a phone in the other. I approached cautiously and clasped my hands together when I was close enough to catch the soft fragrance of her perfume.

“June?”

June turned to face me, and my breath caught in my throat. She was beautiful, with vibrant green eyes that crinkled at the corners when her red lips pulled into a gorgeous smile, showing off her perfectly white teeth. She looked like she’d stepped right out of a business fashion magazine and I instantly understood Eli’s attraction to her. An aura of power seemed to fill the air between us as she passed her phone to her opposite hand and offered out a perfectly manicured hand.

“Clover! It’s fantastic to meet you!”

So formal. I shook her hand briefly, then squeaked in surprise when she used that grip to pull me into a brief, yet tight hug. When we parted, she squeezed my shoulder and continued to smile like I had delivered the best news of her life.

“Oh Eli was right, you do look so much like Ricky.” Her smile faltered then and sadness washed over her face. “I was so heartbroken to hear of his passing. It really hit Eli hard. It’s tough for them, isn’t it? Losing one of their own. They go through such horrors over here and then it’s a simple accident of life that takes them. We can only imagine how much that hurts.”

Not only was June beautiful, she was friendly and warm, too and while my gut churned like a blender, I forced a warm smile.

“Thank you. Yeah, I... it felt almost cruel that he survived all of that just to die to some... ice.”

“Oh goodness.” June shook her head and her curls bounced. “And you were so young. I’m so terribly sorry you had to go through all of that alone.”

“I wasn’t... strictly alone,” I replied. “Eli and the others got here pretty quick.”

“That’s one army thing we can be glad about, right? Punctuality,” June chuckled. “I wanted to be there but I couldn’t fly with Hayley being so young.”

“I understand,” I nodded. “It’s okay. I barely remember the funeral, if I’m honest.”

“Grief does that,” June mused. She glanced over my shoulder to Marlene, then looped her arm into mine and guided me outside. The chill of the evening air and the snow around us barely registered over the heat of nerves flushing through me in waves. Sweat clung to my back and I was certain my sweater would be damp by the end of this.

“I remember Eli’s insistence that they didn’t want to leave you alone. Not just because of Ricky, but because you were all alone in that massive house, and they’d know you for so long.” She tutted softly, her black heels crunching effortlessly through the snow. “It was so heartbreaking to learn that you’d left.”

“I know. At the time it was the best idea. I felt so *guilty*..”

“We tend to do that, don’t we?” June said softly. “As women, we just soak up responsibility whether it’s ours or not. As I understand it, Ricky’s death was a terrible accident and nothing more.”

“I... Yeah.” She was right, and there was something so strangely comforting about hearing those words from her. I couldn’t put my finger on why but there was an air of softness around June that I was drawn to. She was beautiful and lovely,

and knowing how she flew around the world facing down corporations, I could only envy the strength that existed inside her.

“I don’t do that anymore. Running away, I mean.”

“Oh?” June chuckled and her laugh was light and tinkling. “You’re better than me. All I do is run away. Country to country, life to life, all the while missing the most important years my daughter has to offer.” She sighed suddenly and affectionately squeezed my arm. “That’s why I was so *happy* when Eli told me about you. Having a feminine influence back in their lives, in my daughter’s life... I was over the moon.”

My steps stumbled slightly. “Really?” I gazed up at her as her eyes crinkled once more.

“Of course! I put up with Eli’s whining for *months* about how he wanted to take care of you, how they all adored you but couldn’t ease your pain. They shared it with one another and you were alone. They’ve always had a soft spot for you and with everything I know, from Ricky and the others, I knew Hayley was in good hands.”

June... was happy that I was here?

“It’s tough to be a working mother. God knows the money is good but I miss everything. Eli sends me videos and pictures but it’s hard, y’know? Balancing both.” June sighed and we came to a stop under an awning where icicles twinkled above us, reflecting the stars. “But now Hayley has you!”

She released my arm and turned to face me, her smile forever warm.

“Hayley is a delight, you should be proud.”

“Oh I am. And I’m even more happy to see that you’ve come back to a family that loves you. It’ll be so nice to have another woman around!” she laughs. The phone in her hand blares into life and she rolls her eyes. “How about we get a bite to eat after the recital, get to know each other properly?”

“I’d like that,” I replied easily. “I’d really like that.”

“Amazing! I better get this.” June wagged her fingers at me and then answered her call, resuming her walk around the building. I stared after her in awe and tension pulled through my gut. I had been so nervous to meet her, so scared that I would be buried under questions about intentions and parenting but she had simply accepted me. With a warm smile, she treated me as if we had been friends for years. My heart soared and I watched her until she turned the corner.

Then the cold bit at my fingers and nose and I huddled into my sweater and headed back inside.

June had only just met me and yet she had used the word *love* so easily. A family that loved me. Despite the calming of my nerves, the tension in my gut didn't fade. Too often, the guys had been clear about asking for my honesty, for being truthful with them about everything because that was how relationships worked.

Could I really flee to the city, handle the baby, and then return? The guilt would surely eat me alive. My early confidence in my decisions crumbled, all thanks to June, and her kindness and thoughts of the baby plagued me for the rest of the night.

It got worse as Eli, Hawke and Axel arrived for the recital, and all greeted me with warm hugs and kisses. They did love me. And yet, each time the urge rose to confess my secret, I instantly reminded myself that they were men who had lived their lives and didn't need another baby to care for.

I ended up pushing all thoughts of the baby from my mind and I threw myself into the recital. Parents sat around the ice rink and waited patiently while the props slid into position and I did a last check on skates and costumes. Then the lights went up, the music started to play and fourteen excited children skated onto the ice with their hands above their heads and their toes pointed inward. I remained on the sidelines, skates on in case there were any disasters but the dress rehearsals filled me with confidence.

Parents clapped and cheered, and I held the music for a little while longer to give all the excited children the chance to

wave at their parents. Then the song started and my hard work paid off.

The children danced their little hearts out, skating and weaving around the ice as they told their story, acted and even sang along to the lyrics every so often. The set pieces, lovingly handcrafted by Eli, held their own and my heart soared watching each child perform their mini solo. Hayley definitely got the loudest clap and cheer. When she stepped forward, Eli, Hawke and Axel all surged up with yells and June flung her arms up, yelling her delight.

Hayley's face was beet red, but nothing could remove that smile from her face. She danced to perfection and tears prickled behind my eyes. I was so proud of her.

Halfway through the dance, however, I caught sight of June answering her phone and she quickly excused herself. Ten minutes later, Eli answered his phone and followed. When he returned, the smile wasn't as bright on his face and the tension in my gut returned. Focusing on my children was my priority, so I put it out of my mind and kept my attention on my dancers. The finale went off without a hitch and the parent's cheers were drowned out by excited screams from the children when Santa skated onto the ice and handed out presents.

Then I herded fourteen excited but tired children back to the changing rooms, helped them out of their skates, and sent them off to their parents. Hayley was last, chattering my ear off about how good she was on the ice and constantly asking if I had seen each move she performed while I cleaned up.

Eventually, I was finished and taking Hayley's hand, I led her out to the entrance expecting to see Eli and June ready to praise their daughter.

"And did you see my twirl?" Hayley asked, jumping along at my side.

"I did! It was amazing, I'm so proud of you!"

"I know," Hayley chattered, then she yawned big and loud. I chuckled and slowed as Eli dropped to his haunches and held out his arms.

“There’s my little star!”

“Daddy!” Renewed energy surged through Hayley and she ran forward into his arms. “Where’s Mommy?”

Eli glanced up at me and his face fell, his dark brows furrowing.

“I’m sorry, sweetie. Mommy had to go. There was an emergency with her work and it was such a mess that only Mommy can sort it.”

Hayley pulled away from Eli, her face twisted into a frown and her big eyes filled with fat tears.

“What?”

“I’m sorry, sweetie,” Eli soothed. “She’s very sorry too and she will try her hardest to be back for New Year.”

“But... but it’s Christmas,” Hayley wailed and she pushed away from Eli. “I want Mommy.”

“I know baby, I know but—.”

“No, no I want Mommy!” she screamed and threw her jacket on the floor as the dam burst and the tears spilled. Out by the truck, I glimpsed Hawke and Axel standing side by side, their faces slightly pained as Hayley’s distress reached their ears. Eli tried to reach for his daughter but she yelled and shoved him away, stomping her foot. Then she turned and ran full pelt into me, crashing against my legs.

My heart broke.

“Oh sweetie,” I said softly as I kneeled down to her. “I’m sorry. I know your Mommy would be here if she could.”

“It’s not fair!” Hayley yelled, caught up in the ropes of exhaustion and disappointment.

“I know. I know it’s not. Sometimes, even when we really want something, it’s not enough and things get in the way.” I pulled Hayley into my arms and she curled her tiny fists into my sweater, sobbing into my shoulder. Eli stooped and picked up her jacket, his face twisted with sympathy and I flashed him a comforting smile.

“But I spoke to your Mom before the show and she was so, so excited to see you dance. She’d told all her friends about it and everything. And I saw her in the crowd; she was cheering louder and harder than *anyone* else.”

“Really?” Hayley hiccuped and when she pulled away from me, her cherry face was streaked with tears.

“Really really. I know you want her, I’m sorry she can’t be here but she’ll be back soon and when she gets here, maybe we can do another Christmas just for you and her, hmm?”

Too upset to say anything else, Hayley simply wailed and flopped back into my arms, so I scooped her up against my chest. The strangest, strongest urge swept over me to comfort and protect Hayley until she was no longer upset. It wasn’t something I’d felt before. Was it because I was pregnant?

That had to be the source of these sudden maternal feelings, surely.

I carried Hayley and followed Eli out to the car where Eli then tried to untangle her from me so he could put her in the vehicle. She refused and after a minute of trying, I nudged Eli out of the way and did it myself. She went easily and I pressed a kiss to her overheated forehead.

Closing the door muted her cries, and Eli grasped my waist, pulling me in for a kiss.

“Thank you for that, I’m sorry,” he murmured against my lips.

“It’s no problem,” I smiled. “Honestly.”

He parted quickly and slid into the car to try and comfort his daughter, so I turned to Axel and Hawke who both offered me comforting smiles.

“The recital was fantastic,” Axel said. “You should be proud. Really proud.”

“I am,” I grinned, “thank you. I’m glad you guys liked it.”

“Do you want to come back with us?” Axel asked.

“I’d love to but I have things to tidy up here and then a date with a... a large bottle of wine.” A half-truth at least.

“Okay.” Axel kissed my cheek and slid into the car, then Hawke pulled me into his arms and nuzzled my temple.

“The dancing was great,” he murmured, “but how you handled Hayley? You’re a natural, huh.”

“Oh,” I chuckled. “It was nothing.”

“Mhmm.” Hawke kissed me deeply, making me forget about the growing cold and when we parted, Hayley was fast asleep in her car seat.

“Drive safe.”

Another kiss and Hawke climbed into the car. I wrapped my arms around myself and waved them off, watching the red light retreat into the darkness while Hawke’s words played through my mind.

A natural, huh?

Maybe I could be.

CLOVER

Driving up to the Dixon Estate never failed to take my breath away. Growing up here did nothing to dull the awe that would overcome me and even now, being much older, that awe still struck me on that last turn past the pine trees and the house came into view.

Maybe it hit harder now that my plan was in motion.

The dance recital was complete. All that was left was Christmas just around the corner and then I would return to the city and try to tackle this pregnancy with a clear head. Heading back to the city for an unknown amount of time was what spurred me to head up to the house late in the afternoon. I wanted to take some of Ricky's stuff with me, including the journal I hadn't read in full. Leaving with what remained of my brother this time felt like the right thing to do.

Eli had already given me permission and a set of keys as he had been unsure who would be in the house at that time of day, although he had joked that I should have keys anyway since it was technically my house. I had agreed, just to keep things sweet.

I couldn't tell him the truth. As I slid the keys into the lock and stepped into the warmth of the house, the scenario of telling the truth replayed through my mind like it did every time I wavered and considered spilling the beans.

They would be shocked, all of them. Maybe angry too that I had never told them of my allergy, maybe shocked that the pill wasn't enough. I couldn't imagine any of them vocalizing the

decision to get rid of the baby, but I couldn't settle on whose eyes I would see it in. Then they would tell me that they cared for me, they were here for me and if I asked, they would probably raise the baby with me.

But everything I knew, everything I loved, would be gone. Casual sex would never happen again. I could picture their exhaustion of having to deal with another baby, I could see how it would wear them down after already going through it with two other children. Their entire lives would change and it would be all my fault. I had already caused so much trouble.

The scenario plagued my mind all the way up the stairs, spiraling back and forth between who would be more disappointed in me, and I was so caught up that I didn't see Axel until I walked smack bang into him with enough force that he stumbled back a step. Shooting out a hand, Axel grabbed my shoulder to stop me from falling.

"Clover!"

"Axel! Oh god, I'm so sorry, I was miles away."

"Yeah, I could tell," Axel chuckled. His other hand clutched at the fluffy blue towel around his waist. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, of course. I'm sorry." It was difficult to look away. Axel's muscular torso was dewey from his shower, and his silver hair stuck up in all directions. His dark brows dipped as he glanced me over.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm here to collect some of Ricky's stuff," I explained. "Just some stuff that I wanted to keep with me, y'know? A reminder."

"Oh, of course." Axel nodded, but his hand didn't leave my shoulder. "Are you sure you're okay? You look a little off."

"I just..." I could tell the truth. In this moment, I could spill the beans and end my internal turmoil, opening myself up for whatever existed behind the dam in my mind. Axel's eyes ran over me once more and I tore my gaze away from his glistening muscles.

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

“Anything I can help with?”

“No. No, thank you though.”

Still, he kept me in place, his hand firm on my shoulder, and a quiver stole down my arms.

“Have you talked to anyone about what’s bothering you?”

“Yes, I’ve chatted to Kate.”

“Okay. As long as you’re not suffering alone.”

Oh he had no idea. “I’m okay, just... tired, y’know? When the mind runs and stuff.” I puffed out my cheeks and laughed, lifting my hands slightly.

“Need some help with that?”

“With what?” I lifted my gaze to his piercing eyes, and Axel’s soft smile turned into a light smirk.

“With switching your mind off.”

I cocked my hips slightly and smirked back. I shouldn’t. I had told myself I would distance myself to make it easier to leave and yet, somehow, that promise to myself melted away.

“What are you offering?”

Axel stepped forward, heat radiating from his bare torso.

“What do you need?”

“Anything,” I said breathlessly, glancing down to his plush lips and then back to his dark eyes.

Once more couldn’t hurt, right?

We crashed into Axel’s room, a tangle of limbs and desperate kisses as we fought for dominance over who would lead the kiss. I put up a good fight but Axel’s hands roamed my body and pulled aggressively at my clothes, so the moment I gasped, I opened my mouth and lost the fight. His tongue slid deep into my mouth while his hands found their way under my sweater, and his nails grazed hot lines up to my chest.

His towel had fallen in the hall, meaning there was nothing between me and his glorious body. I broke the kiss by sliding

my hands into his wet hair and tugging sharply, pulling him backward. Axel retaliated in kind by sinking his teeth into my lower lip, and my yelp was muffled by him pulling my sweatshirt over my head. As he tossed it on the floor, he surged forward and shoved me up against the dresser. Brushes and bottles clattered and fell over, but I was blind to it all, consumed by each hungry, biting kiss Axel pressed met me with.

One hand unclipped my bra, freeing it from my body and Axel groaned low. Both his hands cupped my breasts, squeezing the flesh tightly and pinching my nipples in the spaces between his fingers. I gasped as he used that grip to hold me against the dresser, and when our kiss broke, his eyes flashed.

“Take off your jeans,” he growled. Heat surged through me, ignited by the flames in his voice and I obeyed, all the while meeting as many eager kisses as I could. Eventually, my jeans and underwear pooled on the floor and Axel turned feral. He kept one breast in his firm grip, massaging my flesh with his palm while his other hand shoved between my thighs. His fingers slid through my rapidly sickening folds, and two thick, rough digits thrust deep inside me.

I yelled, arching away from the instruction, but Axel kept me pinned, following the roll of his hips with a thrust of his hand. His lips traveled a heated path down my throat, where he paused at my collarbone to lick up a bead of sweat, then he kissed down and took my free stiff nipple into his mouth.

I clutched at his air and his shoulder, gasping for air as he fingered me quickly, roughly. He wasn't treating me like I was precious; he was treating me like he couldn't get enough. His fingers plunged deep repeatedly, the heel of his palm ground up against my swelling clit, and his fingers and tongue teased at my nipples. He pulled a harmony of moans from my throat and I struggled to keep my balance around his hand, never mind my hands in his air. Axel was like a man possessed, and I drank up that fire like dry wood.

“Fuck,” I yelled when his teeth bit into my nipple and he tugged the flesh away from my body. Pain, subtle and tight, flashed through my breast as my nipple escaped his teeth and

bounced back against my body. He surged up and claimed my mouth in a biting kiss. His fingers continued to pump furiously into me and each time I lost my balance against the dresser, his rock-hard cock brushed against my bare thigh.

“Axel,” I gasped, “Axel, I’m— I’m so fucking—.”

Fire ignited deep within my core and heat pulsed through my body in waves, all accumulating in my gut where my muscles tensed. My orgasm was being dragged from me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. As I spiraled closer and closer, I pulled at his hair and dragged my nails down his back, clutching Axel close to me as I gasped and panted.

Then I came.

I *screamed* out my pleasure as my body convulsed through wave after wave of sensation, but just as I was clamping down on those fingers and moaning, things changed. Axel pulled his fingers free from me, gripped my shoulder with one hand, and slammed his thick cock inside me in one smooth move.

I screamed myself hoarse as my orgasm ramped up. Axel’s hand slid up to my throat and he paused, balls deep and grabbed my chin.

“Can I?” he gasped, his fingers stroking down to my throat.

I knew why he was asking. Later, I would appreciate it. But now, I was too turned on, halfway through an orgasm so I could only moan and press my throat into his palm.

His grip tightened and he shoved me fully up onto the dresser and I yelped as the over-sensitive skin on my back collided with the cold mirror, but it didn’t matter. Axel pinned me in place, gripped my hip, and started to fuck into me with wild, desperate abandon.

I was in heaven. I was seeing stars. His cock pounded deep into my core and hit every single button on the way in. His grip on my throat was firm enough to send my heart fluttering through my chest and reduce my breaths to gasps, but it only heightened my focus on the sensations pouring through my core.

I was in safe hands. I knew that for a fact.

“Fuck, you’re pussy’s so tight,” Axel gasped. “Did I not turn you on enough?”

“You’re just... too big,” I moaned in response. I held onto his forearm with one hand, and the other gripped the back of his neck as I desperately held on to his violent thrusts.

Already a second orgasm was crashing through me as if the first one had never ended and I couldn’t keep my thoughts straight. I wanted more. I wanted everything he could give me and I never wanted to stop. Axel panted my name like a prayer while his hips pistoned into me, and just when I was certain he had wrung every drop of pleasure from my body, his hand released my hip and his fingertips found my clit. I wrapped my trembling legs around his waist, locked my ankles together and pulled him deeper inside me.

I was floating above the clouds, basking in the warmth of his body and the fire he had ignored inside of me. Every nerve was lit with desire, my very breath begged him for more and Axel did not disappoint. He fucked me like he meant to leave an impression on my very soul, and a third orgasm cascaded through my body like a tsunami wave, leaving my muscles quivering and useless and my mouth open.

Axel came a minute later, buried as deep inside of me as he could get while whispering his love between kisses along my shoulder. I clung to him, unable to do anything else as his warmth spread deep inside me and his hips, finally, fell still.

My heart hammered so fiercely in my chest it created a numbing sensation and when Axel pressed a much more tender kiss to my lips, I tasted iron.

“Sorry,” Axel murmured, “I think I bit you a little too hard.”

Panting, I curled my lower lip into my mouth and ran my tongue over the small slice from his bite. It didn’t phase me at all.

“Shhh,” I murmured, my body still twitching. “I love it.”

Axel beamed down at me and nudged my nose with his. “Think you can walk?”

“Nu-uh. Can’t even feel my legs.” My thighs were trembling with a mind of their own. As Axel pulled his cock free and stepped back, it became much more evident.

“I was that good, huh?”

“So good,” I groaned. Axel gathered me in his arms and lifted me from the dresser, then he carried me toward the bed and set me down by his pillows.

“Don’t move, let me get you a towel.”

I merely groaned. Where the fuck could I go?

His sheets were impossibly soft against my skin and I buried my face into his pillow, breathing in his scent as he vanished.

Holy. Shit.

Men really knew what they were doing.

Axel returned with a towel that he pressed between my thighs and I moaned softly. He helped me up and placed a cool glass of water in my hands.

“So, did it work?”

I drank greedily, then licked my lips. “Did what work?”

“Did your mind shut up for a moment? Did I fuck amazing clarity into you?”

I laughed, then paused when I realized he was right. My body was singing and my mind was silent.

“It worked,” I smiled. “Thank you. I should have you on speed dial.”

“Any time,” Axel chuckled. “Now stay here. I’m going to make you some food, okay?”

I nodded and drank more as he left the room clad in a pair of black boxers. Closing my eyes, I bundled up in his blankets and nestled into his pillows, enjoying the tingles running through my body. Every part of me ached in the best way.

But, before long, my mind kicked back into gear. Musing over how great Axel made me feel collapsed into how leaving wasn’t a good idea. That morphed into scolding myself for

falling pregnant and for ruining the one good thing I could find in my life.

My smile faded, and reality crept back in with its cold, clinging fingers. I tried to bury my thoughts in the duvet but it didn't work. The doubt was almost overpowering.

And then my chest caved painfully as I cast my eyes up to the ceiling.

Painfully, desperately, I found myself praying for a sign or any kind of Christmas hint that would tell me what to do. A hint of what the best path for me would be.

Caught between the men I loved and the greatest sex of my life, and a soul-crushing, life-altering baby. I should be happy, in reality I should be able to embrace this baby.

But I stood to lose too much.

What I could give just to have Ricky by my side, giving me the straightforward advice my own mind lacked.

As fantastic as Axel was, this was just a dream.

My reality was much different.

CLOVER

“...*C*hestnuts roasting on an open fire...” I hummed to myself, moving around my motel room and rummaging through the clothes I had scattered across the bed and chair. I’d deny that I was a messy person but sometimes places did get rather *cluttered* when I was around. Christmas was less than a week away so, being the proactive person I was, I decided to plan out my outfits for the next few days and pack up the rest, ready for my trip back to the city.

I convinced myself it would save me time in the long run but as I stood there torn between a silver halter top for Christmas dinner and a green ruffle dress, indecision became my enemy. Both colors were festive, but silver was sparkly. Was it too sparkly? Maybe the top screamed *New Year* more than Christmas.

I was still heavy in the debate when my phone vibrated on the nightstand. If I was lucky, it would be Kate and I’d be able to get her fashion advice. Otherwise, I’d be stuck here planning two outfits with no idea which one to choose. Dropping the dress, I held the top up to the light and turned it back and forth as I picked up my phone.

Unknown number?

Hm.

Justin? I hadn’t seen him since the guys had scared him away at the lake but that didn’t mean I could trust that he was gone. Guys like that always had a slimy way to crawl back. My face twisted slightly and I answered cautiously.

“Hello?”

“Clover?”

“Isabell?” Of all the voices I expected to hear on the line, Isabell didn’t even make the list. I lowered the top and glanced at the clock. She was calling me so late at night.

“Clover—.” her next words were stolen away by a surge in background noise and I winced, pulling my phone away from my ear to save my hearing.

“Isabell? Where are you? What was that?”

“Fuck you, Jake!” Isabell yelled distantly then her voice became clearer as she returned to her phone. “Clover, can you hear me?”

“I can hear you now, yeah.”

“I... fuck. Can you come pick me up? I fucked up.”

My heart lurched. On one hand, this late at night, Isabell was clearly somewhere she shouldn’t be. On the other, she was reaching out to me, likely because I was the only adult in her life who wouldn’t ground her until the next millennium.

“What’s happened?” Already I was moving, searching out my car keys and jacket as Isabell spoke.

“I... I snuck out and went to a party with Jake.”

“Who is Jake?”

“My—my friend but we got busted and the guy hosting... his parents came home early and they shut everything down. I didn’t want to call my dad because... well, he’ll be furious and I didn’t want to get yelled at by anyone, so I... I dunno, I called you.”

Too many questions surged forward at once while I wrestled into my jacket but I didn’t want to ask the wrong thing and scare Isabell into hanging up before I got her address.

“I understand. His parents are just kicking everyone out? At this time of night when it’s this fucking cold?” I took the steps two at a time, skidding on the ice at the bottom, but I managed to hold in my surprised squeal.

“They said we had to get our own lifts and anyone left, they’d call the police. I don’t want to go to jail!”

“Oh honey, you won’t go to jail,” I promised, trudging through the thick snow. “Tell me where you are and I’ll come get you.”

“You won’t tell my dad?”

“I won’t lie to your dad,” I replied honestly, “but I won’t tell him unless he asks.”

Isabell was silent.

“Isabell?” I stopped, my hand on my car door as I waited.

“Isabell?”

“Fine.” Thankfully Isabell reeled off an address and I slid into my car.

“Thank you. How’s your battery?”

“Uh... four percent.”

“Okay, I want you to hang up and save battery okay? I’m on my way and I’ll call you when I’m close. Understand?”

“Yes,” Isabell replied. Then, after a short pause. “Thank you.”

“You got it.”

The call ended, and I raced out of the parking lot, my heart hammering. I didn’t know what the right thing to do here was. Should I call Hawke? Isabell would see that as a betrayal, and whatever had made her reach out to me would fizzle into nothing.

But if I was a parent, wouldn’t I want to know where my daughter was? My stomach clenched faintly as I considered what it would be like for me but my feelings around children were too complicated to unravel this late at night.

In the end, I decided getting to Isabell and getting her safely into my care was the priority. Anything else could come later.

I raced through the town toward the address she had given me. It was a house on the far edge of town, tucked in near the mountains and the closer I got, the worse the snowfall around me became. Anger bubbled under my skin as I ran through the

actions of the parents in my mind. Sure, they probably wanted the kids to face the wraths of their own parents, but to chuck a bunch of teenagers out into the freezing cold like this just screamed reckless.

Isabell needed some new friends.

When I reached the address, a small house absolutely bathed in Christmas lights came into view. Even through the swirling snow falling from the sky, the decorated roof and flowing reindeer were like guiding stars. I parked in the driveway and stumbled from the car, bundling tighter in my jacket against the biting cold.

“Isabell?!” Despite the lights, the snowfall was so thick I could barely see a foot in front of me. Hunting out my phone, my fingers turned numb by the time I hit redial.

“Hello?”

“I’m outside,” I shivered. “Whereabouts are you?”

“Be right out.”

The door to the house opened and I puffed out a cold breath. At least they let her wait inside. Isabell, surrounded by golden light, was nodding furiously at the two adults beside her, then she turned and ran out the door. Two steps, and she promptly skidded and fell in the snow.

It took all my effort not to laugh. Hurrying toward her, I held out a hand and hauled her up, brushing the snow off her the best I could.

“Fuck,” Isabell grumbled. “So embarrassing.”

“Come on, it’s warm in the car.” Helping her toward the car, I made sure she was safely inside before I headed around to the driver’s side and cast one last distasteful look at the house.

Maybe I’d feel different if it was my own house.

Once seated, we left the house behind and I turned the warm air up as I drove. The windshield wipers worked furiously, trying to clear the snow building on the glass. Next to me, Isabell shivered and rubbed her hands together.

“So,” I said, sending her a glance. “You want to tell me what really happened?”

“I was telling the truth,” Isabell said, her cheeks rosy. “Only part I left out was that Jake didn’t want to give me a ride home. Everyone’s too scared of my dad.”

“Really?” I scoffed, then I pressed my lips together. To me, he was a protective teddy bear but to teenagers, I could definitely see why they would see him that way.

“Yes, really,” she replied sharply. “You’ve been there when we’ve argued. He treats me like a soldier instead of a daughter and he does it to my friends too. He’s interrogated all of them so much that they don’t even want to come over anymore. I always have to go to them and I hate that.”

“Why?” My grip tightened slightly on the steering wheel, my eyes narrowing as I peered ahead.

“Because everyone has a mom.”

Oh.

My heart dropped to a pit in my gut and I swallowed, then glanced at Isabell. Her head was down and she toyed with one of her gloves in her lap.

“That must be really hard,” I said softly. “Being around people that have something like that, that you no longer have is... it’s a really strange pain, isn’t it.”

Isabell grunted.

“I...” Clearing my throat, I tried again. “I had the same, in a way. When my parents died it was really weird to live in a place like this because everyone here has massive families and then there was me. No parents, my brother miles away fighting a war. It was just me. It’s so isolating.”

“Everyone stares,” Isabell said quietly. “At school. Everyone knows and everyone stares. No mom and a crazy dad.”

“Hey now, your dad isn’t crazy. He’s just very protective. He loves you a lot, more than he loves anything else. He’s just...” I breathed out slowly, searching for the right word.

“Crazy?” Isabell offered.

“Pained,” I corrected. “He fought in that war and missed you growing up. That’s painful. Then he lost his wife, also painful. He nearly died and then went from soldier to parent. Then he... he lost one of his best friends. That... that’s a lot of pain for someone to carry and I know, I do know, that he tries his best.”

Isabell shrugged, the fabric of her jacket scraping against itself. “He’s so mad. All the time.”

“He’s firm. But he’s not mad at you. He’s mad at the world.” The memory of his PTSD trigger flashed in my mind, and how pained he was afterward still broke my heart. “He does what he thinks is best the only way he knows how. But... talking to him would help.”

“He doesn’t listen.”

“Doesn’t he? Or do you only try and talk to him when you’re arguing? Listen, I won’t tell you what to do but... you should try and talk to him. Tell him about your day, about school... maybe you’ll be surprised.”

“Maybe.” Isabell sighed deeply and kicked gently at the floor. “I... I want to talk to him about mom. I miss her. *So* much but I’m scared he’ll... he won’t want to.”

“Oh he will,” I replied quickly. “I know because... well, when I came back and started talking about my brother, your dad was so happy to talk about him. I know that sometimes your dad, and the others, can forget that not everyone is trained to handle things like loss the same way they are but when it came to Ricky... I was utterly devastated. I couldn’t understand how something like that could even happen. It all felt like a really bad dream.”

I slowed the car a little as the snow continued to blanket us.

“I was so sure it was my fault. I blamed myself for years but then I came back here and finally talking about him, with your dad and the others, I’ve learned that it’s not my fault. Talking brings closure.”

Silence fell, and I kicked myself internally. I wanted to reach Isabell but her silence suggested I had said the wrong thing.

Then she spoke.

“I’m scared he’ll blame me.”

“Who? Your dad?”

Isabell nodded.

“Blame you for what?”

“My mom.” Her voice was soft. “What if it was my fault?”

“Sweetie, how would it be your fault?”

“I was mad. We argued before she went in for the operation and then she...” Isabell’s voice wavered. “What if that’s what made the mistake happen?”

Isabell... blamed herself? She had carried that pain, that misplaced guilt for so many years and she was so *young*. My heart immediately went out to her.

“I can promise you right now,” I said firmly. “Your dad would never blame you, not even for a second. I know that... when you’re there and maybe part of it, the guilt easily falls on you but I can promise you it is not your fault.”

Words that echoed in my own mind.

“Sometimes... sometimes awful things happen and we’re just left on the sidelines. It’s shocking and painful and all we can do is pick up the pieces and keep those we love close to us.”

“I don’t want to pick up the pieces,” Isabell muttered.

“That’s what your dad is for. Talk to him, Isabell. Tell him how you feel. Talk about your Mom. It will make everything feel better, I promise.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpsed Isabell lifting her head and nodding.

“Maybe.”

Maybe was a start.

“Though maybe wait until after we’ve snuck you back inside your house,” I chuckled.

“How?”

“There’s a route I used to use when I was a kid. Is there still a trellis at the back door?”

“Yeah.”

“Then it will be easy as—.”

The words died in my throat as the car suddenly skidded an inch to the left. I turned the wheel right, trying to correct us back on the road but despite the pull of the wheels, the car didn’t listen. We went from driving down the long, dark road to gliding like we were hovering just above the ground.

I turned the wheel left, trying to find any kind of traction but the car continued to slide, skimming across a large patch of black ice that was impossible to see in the thick snow.

I slammed on the brakes, hoping to bring us to a stop.

The wheels screamed, the car lurched violently, and we spun sharply.

Isabell screamed. I reached out a hand to catch her as the car whipped around. We hit the verge and for a moment, we floated, weightless.

Then the car crashed down the incline.

The last thing I saw was a sea of incoming pine trees.

CLOVER

I'm late.

My alarm beeps distantly, incessantly demanding that I wake up and get out of bed, but I was far too tired. My limbs were heavy, my head ached from too little sleep, and I just wanted to keep my eyes closed and rest. My alarm continued to beep, over and over, like a screaming mantra. Louder and louder, the sound rang in my ears, so I tried to lift an arm and seek out the snooze.

Between this and the yelling neighbors next door, it was a wonder I'd fallen asleep at all.

My arm didn't move. I tried again, fighting to open my eyes so I could see where my alarm had ended up, but weights pulled against my eyelids, and the warm, inviting darkness of sleep was too alluring.

Five more minutes couldn't hurt....

“Clover!”

My eyes snapped open, and I gasped in a lungful of frozen air. Pressure, tight and painful, locked around my chest, restricting my gasp to nothing more than a wheeze. The sound I had been convinced was an alarm was the seatbelt warning beeping incessantly and the yelling from the neighbors was actually Isabell.

What the fuck!?

Fuck!

We were hanging upside down, twisted in seatbelts, surrounded in complete darkness but two red lights flickering on the dashboard. Isabell was screaming, her voice hoarse and dry. A terrible cold had breached the warmth of my coat and an icy chill stole over every inch of my body. My head spun. Hot pain radiated from my thigh and stomach but by some twisted stroke of luck, the cold was almost numbing.

“Isabell,” I croaked, using all my strength to move my arms toward her. Just like me, she was locked into her seat, hanging upside down. My car was on its roof and slowly, the crash came back to me.

The car lost grip on the ice, my attempts to break sent us careering off the road and into the trees.

Fuck.

Fuck!

“Clover!” Isabell screamed. “Clover!”

“I’m here!” I forced out. “Isabell, it’s okay, I’m right here.”

“We crashed! We crashed, oh my god, we crashed!”

“I know, I know.” Iron coated my tongue and my nose, almost completely numb, throbbed sharply with each breath. “Are you hurt?”

“I don’t know,” Isabell wailed. As the fog around my head faded, I could hear her sobs more clearly.

Think, Clover. Think!

“Okay,” I gasped, reaching out my other hand to grasp at the door. “Isabell, listen to me.”

“We crashed,” she wailed, her breaths coming thick and fast. “I can’t believe it—we crashed!”

“Isabell!” I yelled and she whimpered into silence. “Focus, sweetie. Arms, legs, head – does anything hurt? Anything feel broken?”

“Uhm,” Isabell gasped. “Cold, I feel cold, but I... I can move everything.”

“Okay, that’s a good start.” My attempts to move were prevented by the steering wheel pressing painfully into my abdomen and I bit back a groan, not wanting to scare Isabell.

“Can you reach your phone?”

“Uh... yeah, yeah, I have it. I have it.”

“Okay, I need you to call someone for me. Your dad, your uncles, it doesn’t matter.” A shock of pain pulsed from head to toe and I winced, staring around in complete darkness while I tried to get my bearings. We had to get out of this car.

“It’s dead!” Isabell screeched. “My phone—my phone is dead. Oh god, oh god!”

“It’s okay!” I gasped. “Mine is... mine is...” Where was my phone? Lead limbs patted at my pockets and I groaned softly, battling against the cold trying to lock me in place. My pockets were empty. My phone was nowhere to be found.

Suddenly light filled the car. Below me, resting against the roof and buzzing away loudly, sat my phone. Eli’s name flashed up on the screen and each time the call alert came through, light bloomed through the car, highlighting the blood streaked across Isabell’s forehead and the snow piling in through the broken windows.

“Eli!” Isabell screeched, writhing in her seat. “Oh god!” Her wriggling drew a loud, complaining screech from the car and I lifted my hand to her.

“Isabell, please. I know you’re scared but please, please, just be still. Can you do that for me?”

“Mhmm,” she mumbled, hiccuping through her sobs. I reached down to my phone but half an inch away, the restriction of the wheel and my seatbelt prevented me from reaching any further.

“Fuck!” I grunted. My fingers were numb, my teeth chattering from the freezing cold and as the call rang out, I had mere moments until Eli decided to hang up. I gritted my teeth and reached again. Straining against the wheel, a dull pain flared through my gut as pressure increased and my fingertips brushed against the cracked screen of my phone.

But my fingers were too cold for the device to register.

“Fuck,” I gasped, tears smarting in my eyes. “Fuck!” I shoved my fingers into my mouth, puffing my cheeks and running my tongue over my icicle-like digits to try and warm them, then I reached out once again.

“Come on!” I yelled through the pain of the strain, and after two misses, my middle finger connected with the button, and the call answered.

“Hey Clover—.”

“Eli!” Isabell and I screamed at the same time.

“Eli,” Isabell sobbed desperately. “Help me, help me!”

“Isabell? What the— Clover? What’s going on?”

Never had I been happier to hear his voice. “Eli, fuck. I’m so sorry, it’s a long story but Isabell is with me, and we crashed —.”

“What!?”

“We crashed. I-I don’t know where we are but I was driving toward the Estate from the—the East of town and there was ice—.”

“Oh my god. Okay, I’m coming. I’m coming. Are you hurt? Isabell, are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” I gasped. “Dizzy, and we’re upside down and it’s so fucking cold but we’re okay, I think.”

“I want to go home,” Isabell sobbed. I reached for her with my frozen fingers, clutching at her arm.

“Okay, listen to me.” Scuffling came through on the other side of the phone. “Keep your phone on, I’ll find you, okay? I’ll *find* you. If you can, try to get free from the car and move. You need to keep blood flowing and your heart beating against the cold, okay? I’m on my way. I will find yo—.”

My phone beeped, and two soul-numbing words flashed up on the screen.

Call Failed.

“Nooo!” Isabell wailed, and she resumed her panicked thrashing, tossing her head back and forth.

“Isabell. Isabell! It’s okay, it’s okay,” I sniffled. “Eli... he’ll know what to do but he’s right. We need to get out and we need to move before we freeze.” My words, slightly slurred from my frozen lips, did little to calm Isabell.

Fuck it.

Scrambling across my abdomen, I pressed the detach claps on the seatbelt and... nothing happened. Was it broken? I pressed it again, then again and again while tugging as hard at the belt as I could. Each time it clicked, the seatbelt failed to ping free. I was rapidly losing feeling in my hands, and even the pain from before had been numbed into nothing. There was just cold, sharp and biting. I sucked in a breath and then used all the strength I had left to wrench the seatbelt back and forth. The car squeaked and rocked, then the belt snapped, and I fell hard against the steering wheel, then around to land hard on the roof of the car.

I scrambled around and grabbed my phone, tapping the redial button, but Call Failed was my only answer. Grunting, I turned on the light and aimed it toward Isabell, who calmed a fraction when she saw me.

“Clover,” she wailed.

“It’s okay,” I gasped. “I’m getting you out of here. It’s okay. It’s okay.”

It took too long to work with Isabell’s seatbelt but eventually, it snapped free, and she landed on the roof next to me.

“Okay, we have to get out of the car, okay?” My body was far too cold to register the snow against my skin or the shards of glass that prickled against my hands and knees as I crawled out of the broken side window. Thick snow closed over my shoes as I finally escaped the car, and my legs moved like sludge when I turned and helped drag Isabell out of the car too.

My phone torch illuminated a sea of trees around us and as I cuddled Isabell to my chest, I was struck suddenly by the

thought of Ricky.

Was this what happened to him? Did he feel any of this numbing cold in his last seconds, or was he lucky and felt nothing but peace?

“What do we do?” Isabell sobbed. “Ow.”

“Ow?” My attention snapped to her. “What’s ow?”

“My ankle. It’s all weird when I step on it.”

“Okay, let’s not do that. “Come on, we need to get away from the car.” Scanning our surroundings with the light, I spotted broken branches and upturned snow from where my car had crashed over the ridge. That must be the way back to the road.

“Okay, Isabell.” I turned back to her and cupped her face. “Lean on me, okay? We have to walk now and get the blood pumping and if we can—if we can climb back up to the road, then maybe Eli will... he’ll find us.”

“How?” Isabell wailed. “He doesn’t know where we are!”

“He’s a Navy Seal,” I said firmly. “He’ll find us.” I had to believe it. Anything else was too horrible to think about. With Isabell under my arm, we started the long trudging walk away from my overturned car and back up the incline to the road. As we climbed, slipping and sliding in the snow, there was a strange jelly sensation in my thigh and an occasional burst of warmth through my gut. I told myself it was just the exertion of trying to climb in the snow.

Eventually, I landed on the road, rolling onto my back as I panted desperately and clung to Isabell, who landed next to me. Her tears had stopped; she was too cold and too exhausted to cry anymore. Our breaths clouded the air above us, and even the few minutes lying on the road had a biting chill seeping bone deep.

“Come on,” I panted. “Up. We... we need to get up.”

Isabell whined but obeyed when I stumbled to my feet and pulled her up with me. Using the phone light, I briefly examined the split on her forehead. The cold had long stopped the bleeding, and she sagged into me.

“It’s so cold.”

“I know, sweetie. I know.”

Frozen to the bone, numb and tired, we slowly stumbled along the road with the light turned outward. Snow continued to fall around us, covering my crashed car and turning it into nothing more than a lump in the landscape. We walked slowly, step after step and then, like the glow of an angel, headlights flared to life on the road.

My tired heart pounded in my chest and I tucked Isabell behind me, just in case as the single blurry light split into two and then a truck screeched to a stop next to us. A creaky door flung open, heavy boots landed on the ground and, like some Christmas miracle, Eli’s face appeared.

“Clover! Isabell!”

“Eli,” I gasped. The tears that had been stinging at my eyes finally welled up and I sagged forward as his thick arms wrapped around me and Isabell. “You found us.”

“Told you I would,” he said softly. “Are you okay? Are either of you hurt?”

“Isabell’s ankle,” I managed to say. Suddenly the ground vanished as Eli scooped me up and deposited me in his truck. Isabell joined me in the back seat and an uncontrollable shiver stole over me as the warmth of his truth surrounded me. He climbed into the driver’s seat and turned the heating up, then slammed on the accelerator.

“I’m taking you both to the hospital. Isabell, your dad will meet us there.”

“Oh no,” Isabell’s sobs resumed. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Hush,” Eli soothed. “Everything is going to be okay.”

I huddled in my seat and tried to wipe my own tears of shock and relief away but it was pointless. I couldn’t stop crying even if I wanted to.

The drive to the hospital was frantic but careful. Eli’s truck did a lot better at staying on the road than my car had and by the

time we reached the hospital, feeling had returned to my hands and feet to the point that they were almost burning up.

“How did you find us?” I asked as Eli helped me down from his truck.

“GPS,” he replied. “On your phone.”

“You can do that?”

“I have my ways.”

Eli gathered Isabell up into his arms and carried her into the hospital. I followed at a slower pace and watched as he went up to the desk and quickly explained the situation. Isabell was taken onto a trolley and Eli dug his phone out, then turned to point at me as the second victim.

His face paled, and his lips moved but strangely, his voice didn't reach me.

The feverish warmth in my hands had spread through my entire body, and I sluggishly pulled at my zip to try and remove my coat as if that could help. Then Eli ran closer.

“Clover! You're bleeding?!”

I followed his gaze down to where crimson soaked into the crotch of my jeans and turned my thighs dark.

“I...” Nausea rose in my throat and I swallowed hard. “I don't... I don't feel well.”

The world tipped and my last thought was of my baby.

Stress is bad for a mother, they say.

The baby too.

HAWKE

Was history doomed to repeat itself? Were we really that unlucky?

The call from Eli telling me my daughter had been in a car accident was one of the most terrifying of my life. Even more so when he'd told me Clover was in the car too. I'd never been more scared for the fragile family we had built than in those moments.

Now, watching Isabell's sleeping, nothing else mattered. A sprained ankle and a few superficial lacerations were all Isabell had to deal with but due to how long she had been out in the cold, I had insisted that she stayed just in case. I was taking no risks when it came to my child.

She had been so apologetic, telling me about a boy and a party but none of it had mattered. She was alive and safe and that was all I could ever hope for. It was all I ever wanted for my daughter. When she had fallen asleep, I stayed by her side and held her hand until the nurse dropped by and suggested I get a coffee. Those chairs weren't good for long stints, apparently.

Leaving Isabell asleep did give me a chance to register the other feelings of fear that had their talons in my heart.

Clover had collapsed, soaked in blood, and been whisked off to surgery or some other dark depth of the hospital with very little information. Eli had been distraught, filling me in and I could only comfort him briefly. My daughter was my immediate focus.

With her safe and healthy, now it was Clover.

Tar-like coffee in hand, I trudged toward the waiting room with a yawn. Eli and Axel were spread out on the chairs, faces pinched and eyes down. Axel's leg bounced and Eli had clearly run his hands through his hair far too many times.

"Hey."

"Hey!" They both jumped alert.

"How is Isabell?" Eli asked.

"She's okay. Nothing serious. They're keeping her overnight for observation, mostly because I might have threatened the doctor."

"Understandable," Axel chuckled and he dragged a hand down his face. "I'm glad she's okay."

"Me too," Eli said.

I dropped into a chair next to them and nodded. "You think war is scary but getting that call was the scariest moment of my life."

"I'm sorry." Eli frowned and rubbed his hands together.

"Don't be. Have..." I cleared my throat and glanced between them. "Do we know anything about Clover?"

"No," Axel sighed. "Not a peep."

My heart sank. We were here, we were fucking here this time, and Clover—

I couldn't finish the thought. My heart couldn't handle it.

Silence fell between us until Eli groaned softly.

"I should have seen something."

"What do you mean?" I asked, draining the awful coffee.

"She was in the car with me all the way to the hospital and I didn't notice any blood or anything. How did I not notice?"

"She was frozen," Axel pointed out. "Blood flow would have been extremely minimal and limited until she warmed up."

"Still, I didn't see anything and when I turned around, she was just..." His voice wavered and his words died. He waved a

hand, and his head dipped.

“You did all you could,” I said, discarding my cup and moving closer to him. I placed a hand on his shoulder. “You found them. You *saved* them, Eli, and I can’t ever tell you how grateful I really am. And Clover, she’s in the best place for her.”

As long as history didn’t repeat itself.

My stomach churned once more, so I leaned back in my seat, continuing to rub Eli’s back in the best attempt to soothe him as I could manage.

“Mr. Pearce?”

Eli’s head snapped up. A doctor had joined us in the waiting room and he stood there, clipboard in hand.

“That’s me.”

“You’re with Clover Dixon, correct?”

“Yes.” Eli surged to his feet and we followed.

“How is she doc?” I asked, bracing myself for the answer. Anything less than *okay* was going to be crushing.

“And are you the father?” the doctor asked Eli, ignoring my question. A chill stole down my spine, and Eli visibly tensed.

“The father?” Eli asked. “No, no, Hawke is Isabell’s father.”

“Not Isabell.” The doctor sighed and shuffled the papers on his clipboard.

Something sharp clicked in my mind, like the smooth snap of the final piece of a weapon slotting into place and I glanced at Axel. From the look on his face, he had come to the same realization as I had.

“Clover’s... pregnant?” I asked. “Yes. Eli is the father.” I had no idea if that was the truth but if that was what we needed in order to get to see Clover, then I would do it. I slapped my hand to Eli’s back and he stumbled slightly, catching up slower.

“Uh... yes. I am.”

“Well, Clover is fine. There’s internal bruising that we’d like to keep an eye on but the bleeding was from minimal internal injuries reacting with the heat, that we’ve since taken care of. Her injuries aren’t life-threatening and from what we can tell, the baby is fine, although I’d like to keep her in for a day or two just to keep an eye on her.”

“That’s amazing,” Eli breathed out. “Can we see her?”

The look the doctor gave the three of us was mildly distasteful and I fought the urge to push past him and see her anyway. He couldn’t keep me from Clover even if he wanted to but I didn’t want to get kicked out of the hospital my daughter was at.

“Yes, for a short while.”

We didn’t even say thank you. Together, we surged down the hall toward Clover’s room, and none of us said a word.

Clover was pregnant? Why wouldn’t she say anything? I could scarcely wrap my head around it and when we burst into her room, Clover flinched in fright against the fluffy pillows supporting her.

“You’re pregnant?” I barked out without thinking. Eli turned and punched me hard on the shoulder.

“Fuck sake, Hawke,” he snapped. “Some fucking finesse wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Shit. Sorry.”

“What?” Clover’s red-rimmed ocean eyes darted between all three of us as we settled around her bed. Her hands trembled faintly, tearing pieces from the tissue in her hand. “You know?”

“The doctor told us,” Eli said softly, seated on her left. “He thought one of us was the father and I... I said yes, just so we could see you.”

Clover turned ashen, and she worried her lower lip with her teeth.

“Is it true?” Axel asked gently. “Are you... pregnant?”

Fat tears welled in Clover's eyes and she gasped, then quickly nodded her head. "I'm so sorry!" She burst into tears, and my heart clenched painfully. Eli shot me a firm look and I grimaced slightly – I shouldn't have been so abrupt. I picked up the tissue box from the table and carefully handed it to Clover, but it seemed to make her cry harder.

"Why... didn't you tell us?" Eli asked softly.

Clover whimpered and pressed handfuls of tissues to her face. "I—... I didn't want to ruin anything!"

"What would you ruin?" Axel asked.

"Us!" Clover dropped her hands. "What we have— what we were doing, I loved it. I loved it so much and I didn't want it to end and then suddenly I was pregnant and you all... you've all lived your lives. You've been married, you've had kids, you've *lived*, and I didn't want to ruin that. I didn't want you to hate me and I didn't want to lose what I had so I... I didn't know what to do. And you all kept talking about *never again* with kids and all I could think was that a baby would ruin everything I'd just gotten. I love you, all of you and I didn't want to lose any of you. And with being here, and Ricky and *everything*, it was just too much!"

Clover wailed and buried her face in her tissues once more, sobbing her poor heart out.

She had been struggling with that, all alone, and I hadn't noticed.

A baby.

"It's one of ours, isn't it?" Axel asked softly.

Clover nodded so hard her curls bounced.

"I'm sorry."

Our baby. In the week's Clover had come back into our lives; her light and softness had taken years off my soul. I found myself eager to see her, desperate to spend time with her, and our date had been the best of my life. Now, here she was, pregnant and too scared to tell us in case we left her.

Eli glanced at me, then Axel, and a silent conversation passed between us. Eli's lips parted, but I got there first.

"Clover... this is *amazing* news."

Clover slowly lifted her head and looked at me.

"Unplanned, yes and one hell of a surprise but Clover... we adore you. I know we all feel the same. I *love* you, and even accepting that is a little alien for me but I think I have always loved you and now I know for sure. There is nothing in the world that you could do that would make me walk away. The jokes about kids, I think they're just things we say but in hindsight, they were thoughtless."

Eli and Axel murmured in agreement. I moved to sit on the edge of the bed and took her trembling hand.

"This changes nothing. We are here for you. I am here for you." I tightened my grip slightly. "Remember when we told you that we are men, not boys like Justin who think they're owed the world? Time with you is a fucking gift, and I will care for you as long as you will let me."

"You're not mad?" Clover whispered through her tears.

"Only at myself that you didn't feel like you could tell me sooner," I said softly. "But not mad at you. I won't lie. It's a shock, but... whatever you want to do, whatever you choose to do, we will support you."

"We will," Axel and Eli repeated.

"You don't have to choose. Not with us. You never have to choose."

"Even if I want to keep it?" she whispered.

I leaned forward, cupped the back of her head, and pulled her in for a gentle kiss. "Whatever you want to do, we are here."

"Fatherhood always made me look good," Eli chuckled.

"I love you too," Clover gasped wetly. "Oh my god I do. I was so scared. I... fuck, I love you."

"I love you too."

And I did. The deep love that had been caged up thanks to seeing Clover as just Ricky's sister, had melted away weeks ago. She was her own woman, a powerful force who spent more time thinking and worrying over others than herself.

I was going to take care of her and love her for as long as she would have me.

Because Clover was ours, and we are hers.

Eli and Axel repeated their love for her too, and together, we held Clover until she no longer had a tear to shed.

Our family was complete.

CLOVER

“**W**hat do you think?” Axel held up two wallpaper samples against the wall, a few feet away from where Hawke was sanding down the unpainted wall. One sample was baby pink and the other was a warm peach.

“The peach,” I said, tucking a little tighter into Eli’s side on the couch. “I think neutral is the way to go until we know for sure.”

“I don’t want to know,” Eli said softly. “I want to be surprised.”

“Peach it is.” Axel discarded the pink and returned to his laptop. With Christmas music filling every corner of the house and a picturesque snowy landscape beyond the windows now that the blizzard had stopped, Christmas Eve was *perfect*. None of them would let me lift a finger though since I’d come back from the hospital, and honestly, I couldn’t complain. I was still in shock that they all knew my secret and hadn’t done the run for the hills like I’d expected.

Our minds really are our own worst enemy at times.

Cuddled up to Eli, I had my tablet in hand and together we were scrolling through possible baby cribs that could hold the new arrival. None of them had asked about who the father was. There seemed to be some sort of understanding that none of them cared. They were here for me regardless.

I half wondered if I’d died in that crash and this was my heaven.

“What about this one?” Eli reached over my shoulder and tapped on the picture of a wooden crib that looked simple but upon a closer look, it had an attachable changing station that made me wrinkle my nose.

“Ew, no. Too many latches for small fingers to get stuck.”

“Agreed.”

“Okay,” Axel said, standing back up at the wall with a peach and a soft teal green. “Which one?”

I squinted, trying to picture the room fully decorated with either color.

“If we do the green,” Hawke said, wiping his brow as he stepped off the ladder. “We could get a whole jungle theme going on. Lots of animals over the walls, a starry night sky on the ceiling, that sort of thing.”

The picture Hawke painted was beautiful and I smiled. “I really like that idea. Animals are amazing, and it’s important to teach them about bears from an early age, especially out here.”

“Indeed,” Axel laughed. “Teal it is.” He discarded the peach and returned to his laptop.

“This one?” Eli tapped another crib and again it looked simple but as I glanced over the swirling wooden design, it wasn’t catching my eye either.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “We can add it to favorites and look back later?”

“So indecisive huh?” Eli chuckled. He cuddled me close, pressing a kiss to the top of my head.

“Could always use your old crib.” Hawke peeled off his gloves and began sweeping up the old strewn wallpaper on the floor.

“My old one?” I frowned and then glanced upward to the attic. “It’s still there?”

“Yep.”

“Oh, of course!” Eli exclaimed. “We used it not long after we arrived here for Hayley.”

“I didn’t even know it had survived that long,” I chuckled.
“Do you think it’s still in good condition?”

“We can check after Christmas if you want,” Hawke offered.

“I’d like that.” It would be adorably poetic if my baby could get their start in the same crib as Ricky and I.

“Okay, so teal walls, we’ll get animals and paint the jungle. Dark blue on the ceiling for the sky and a dark carpet to hide stains. A crib, we’ll have a bed too until the baby is old enough to sleep alone...” Axel scribbled on his notepad, tapped his laptop once, and straightened up. “We’ll have this place sorted in no time.”

My heart swelled slightly in my chest and the smile on my face couldn’t be removed. This was far beyond anything I had hoped for that night in the hospital, trying to fall asleep while knowing they knew everything. Hours we had talked with each of them assuring me that I didn’t need to worry about choosing and a baby would spoil nothing other than our sleep schedules.

They had understood my fears though, given how they were older than me and already had family and responsibility but Hawke had been incredibly insistent that I was a part of all of that, not a side addition.

Speaking of family, I glanced at the clock and shifted carefully against Eli. “Do we need to pick Hayley up from her school Christmas party?”

“Isabell is doing it,” Hawke said, binding old paper into bin bags.

“What?” My brow shot up in surprise. Isabell’s ankle had been a light sprain thankfully but I was still concerned.

“Yeah we...” Hawk shrugged one shoulder. “I thought about what you had said a few weeks ago, about giving Isabell more responsibility and freedom. The crash was fucking terrifying, but it did force my shit into perspective. Isabell and I actually had a good chat and I decided she’s capable. She’s going to take Hayley for Hot Chocolate then to the market, and I’ll pick them up in a few hours.”

“Oh, Hawke,” I smiled warmly. “I’m so proud of you. That’s a huge step.”

“I don’t care about her friends finding me scary but... I do care about what she thinks and being overbearing doesn’t protect everyone from anything. I just look like a dick.”

“You got that right,” Axel snorted. “But we all know you mean well.”

“Aye, doesn’t translate well to a teenager, though,” Hawke laughed. “But... yeah. This is good. Part of me feels a bit sick at her being there without any supervision but I have to trust her.”

“And she’s fifteen,” Eli pointed out gently. “Responsibility at that age helps her grow.”

“Especially since two more years and she’d be able to sign up,” Axel added.

“Oh fuck,” Hawke chuckled. “The enemy wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“The daughter of Alexander Hawke fully clad in military gear scolding the ear off of some terrorist,” I chuckled. “I’d pay to see it.”

“Let’s not tell her that,” Hawke groaned. “I don’t need the pain of my kid in the army.”

“No military children, got it,” I teased. Hawke rolled his eyes and laughter filled the room, even drowning out the Christmas music. I placed one hand on Eli’s knee and shifted forward but before I could stand, Eli’s hand curled around my waist.

“What’s up?”

“I have to pee. I can walk to the bathroom without my guts falling out.” I flashed him a smile, and while his brows pulled together slightly, he nodded.

“Okay.”

Their over-protective streaks had been running a mile a minute since I’d come home from the hospital. My injuries weren’t severe, a lot more blood than there needed to be but the doctor

had explained something about how the freezing cold had affected that. I didn't fully understand it – all I'd needed to know was that I was going to be okay, but the small surgery had left me with an incision to keep an eye on, and the guys were doing an amazing job of doing that for me.

After relieving myself, I sent a few response texts to Kate wishing her a Merry Christmas and giving her an update on the room. Then I tapped through to my emails.

The day after the accident, an email came from the head of the Little Sprinkles Kids Ice Skating Club offering me a full-time position. Apparently, the recital had been their most successful in years, and Agnes' poor health had led her to consider retirement.

If that email had come even a day earlier, I would have sent my refusal immediately but now?

Now it was tempting.

Axel, Eli, and Hawke *loved* me. They wanted me to stay; wanted to care for me and our baby. The family I had yearned for, that I had been so scared of losing, was now completely mine. Having a job here would be the cherry on top. Kate had been advising me ever since I told her – and by advising, she had been yelling at me in texts to say yes before they gave it to someone else.

It was the last slice of my life that remained uncertain. I returned to the spare room and lingered in the doorway, watching. Hawke was faux exercising with the trash bags while Axel and Eli collapsed into laughter about some joke I had just missed. The entire room had been stripped in two days and would likely be decorated by New Year at this rate.

They wanted me. They were my family.

I returned to my phone and typed out a quick email response.

I would be honored.

Two hours later, we settled around the kitchen table as the door clattered signaling Hawke's return. Thunder shook through the house in the form of Hayley bolting down the

hallway, and she clattered into the kitchen with a pair of reindeer antlers on her head.

“Dad!” she screeched happily. Eli turned from the stove and swept toward her, gathering her up in his arms.

“Hi sweetie! Did you have a good day?”

“So good,” Hayley exclaimed. “Santa was there an’ I got presents and ate ice cream and I won at musical chairs!” Her rosy, happy face was a beacon, and I couldn’t help but grin. Hawke arrived a moment later, clapping his hands together for warmth with Isabell in tow.

Our eyes met as she stepped around her father, and we smiled. There was a lightness about her that hadn’t existed a few days ago and while the accident had been terrifying, it was so good to see that positive things had come from it. Isabell was being trusted more, and that had to mean the world to her.

“Come, sit,” Axel declared. “Pizza’s almost ready!”

“Wait!” Hayley wriggled in Eli’s arms. “We have to do the decorations!”

“The what?” I chuckled.

Isabell, halfway sitting down, stood right back up. “The decorations!” She pulled off her scarf, draped it over the back of the chair, and vanished.

“She’s right,” Hawke chuckled and he held out a hand to me. “Come on.”

Confused, I took his hand. Hawke led me through to the lounge where the massive Christmas tree twinkled in the corner. Axel and Eli joined us, with Hayley bouncing happily when she spotted the tree. Isabell returned a moment later with a cardboard shoebox in hand that she opened and passed around. Each person, in turn, pulled out a handmade Christmas decoration and I admired them all. They were made out of clay and somewhat badly painted, but there was a nostalgic charm to them.

“We made these years ago,” Hawke explained. “And every Christmas Eve, we put them on the tree.”

“It’s how Santa knows we’re ready,” Hayley said matter-of-factly, and she turned to me after placing her star on the tree. Her hand shoved deep into her jacket pocket and then, to my surprise, she pulled out a clay blob attached to some shiny tinsel and completely drenched in glitter.

“Santa won’t know about you so I made you one at the party!” Hayley held the decoration out proudly, and my heart clenched painfully in my chest. Tears welled as I slowly crouched and took the ornament.

“Oh god,” I whispered. “That’s so thoughtful, Hayley. Thank you!” My voice grated slightly with emotion and I blinked furiously to try and hide my tears. “It’s beautiful!”

It really just was a ball of clay covered in glitter that we would be finding for months to come but I loved it. Around me, warm faces smiled, and Hawke gently patted my lower back.

“On the tree,” he coaxed.

I approached the tree and briefly studied where everyone else had hung theirs, then I set mine up a little higher on the tree where it immediately sparkled brightly amongst the lights.

“Yay!” Hayley declared, clapping her hands together.

My decoration slotted right in with everyone else’s and once again, the warmth of family settled over my shoulders like a blanket.

I was at peace.

CLOVER

Christmas Day dawned early. Too early in fact. A groggy glance at the clock showed it was only 3 a.m., yet the door to Eli's room was ajar. I curled one hand around the pillow and propped myself up, casting an eye over the shadows. Axel was still asleep on the other side of me, and Hawke's body was just visible on the couch at the other end of the room.

It was a huge step for him to sleep in the same room as us and I adored that he was trying.

Eli was missing and I glanced at the clock again, debating if I should look for him but just as I considered it, his shadow filled the doorway and he crept back inside.

"Everything okay?" I whispered.

"Hayley," Eli murmured, sliding carefully back into the bed. "She thought she heard Santa."

"Damn," I murmured, cuddling into his warm chest. "Santa hasn't come yet, huh."

"Nope," Eli murmured, wrapping his solid form around me. His warmth was intoxicating and when I huddled in close, a stiffness brushed against my thigh and I paused. Opening my eyes with a skip in my heart, I slid my hand down Eli's torso, and when my fingertips came into contact with his growing cock, I smirked.

"Someone *else* is looking to cum though, huh?" I teased in a whisper. Eli groaned softly.

“Sorry,” he whispered against my cheek. “You have that effect on me.”

Still half asleep, I didn't pull my hand back. Sliding into his boxers, I gripped his thick cock and stroked slowly as it swelled against my palm. Eli grunted and buried his face into my neck.

“Tease,” he grunted quietly, and his teeth grazed my throat as I worked him over. Straight to full mast, his cock stiffened fully and I moaned breathily. Just that touch and the soft way he nuzzled into my neck had sent a flush of heat straight through me and while the doctor had warned against strenuous exercise, this hardly counted, right?

“Think you can get me off without waking Axel?” I whispered. Eli raised his head and his eyes glinted in the dark, reflecting the light of the clock.

“That a challenge?”

“Oh yes.”

Eli claimed my mouth in a lazy kiss, tiredness ringing thoughts and movements. He slid one hand down my body and dipped into my underwear. Two fingers slid against me, stroking through my pussy and then gently pressing inside me. I arched slightly and bit back a moan, continuously stroking Eli's cock and using the small burst of pre-cum to slick up his length. After a few minutes of teasing, Eli's cock slipped from my grasp as he moved up and over me. He held himself up and pushed my panties aside then his fingers were swiftly replaced by the thick, mouthwatering stretch of his cock.

Just as I started to moan, Eli placed one hand gently over my mouth to silence me so air rushed out of my nose and my eyes rolled back as his thick cock sank deep. Shifting carefully on the bed, I lifted my legs and wrapped them around his waist. He hovered above me, careful of my stitches, and lazily started to fuck me. Each press of his cock shoved air out of my lungs, but any sounds were trapped behind his fingers. I pressed back into the pillow and rocked my hips up to meet each thrust. Pleasure lazily started to build inside me, coaxed to life by

each thrust and rock of my hips that applied teasing pressure to my clit.

“Shhh,” Eli murmured and his hand left my mouth. I sucked in a gasp, then whimpered as his hand slid alongside his cock and his thumb started to tease my clit. In soft circles, he stroked and I pressed my own hand over my mouth while my other clutched at his thick shoulder. Each movement was delicious, and the attempts to stay quiet made it all the more exciting. I lasted until Eli fucked me right over that cusp and my orgasm crashed over me in a tidal wave. I moaned, unable to stop myself. Eli’s lips landed on the back of my hand. His moans reached my ear, and then a rush of heat flooded through me as Eli came too.

He said something but the words didn’t breach my pleasure-filled fog. Ripples moved through me, pulse after pulse and I whined as Eli pulled his cock free. I wasn’t ready for it to be over. As if hearing me, his thick cock suddenly sheathed back inside me, and I arched up with a whimper. Opening my eyes, it was Axel looking back at me. He smiled down at me, then he started to move.

His thrusts were a little more insistent than Eli’s, and his sleepy voice was incredibly sexy as he moaned above me. I clutched at his arms, cupped his face, and drew him down for a deep kiss. Our tongues battled lazily as he fucked into me with a steady yet powerful pace, and with each thrust, my heart jumped up a beat. Still, we tried to stay quiet so as not to wake Hawke, and Eli, not to be left out, slid his hand up my negligee and gripped at my breasts. I whimpered as Axel’s hips pistoned in harder and harder, powerful deep strokes that sent shockwaves through my over-sensitive pussy. I threw my head back into the pillows, breaking the kiss with Axel, but then Eli’s lips found mine, swallowing my restrained moans.

I was a mess. Every nerve was infinitely more alert due to how sleepy I still was, so every sensation was heightened. The slick drag and plunge of Axel’s cock, the teasing pull of Eli’s fingers over my breasts and the sweetness of the kisses; it was too much for me. My second orgasm swelled quickly and burst through me like a firework. I grazed my nails over Axel’s

shoulders and tightened my thighs around his hips to keep him close but just as I closed my eyes and soaked up the pleasure, Axel came with a grunt and vanished.

Again, a third cock slid into me almost immediately and Hawke's breathy voice drifted down to me.

"Merry Christmas."

Then he started to fuck me *hard*. My entire world lit up like a fire and I cried out in surprise at the speed and force that his hips pounded into me. My heart raced, heat burst across my skin and my head swam as he fucked into me with wild abandon, no longer needing to be quiet. Eli on one side and Axel on the other body caressed my body with their hands; squeezing my breasts, teasing my nipples, and occasionally dipping between our bodies to tease at my clit.

It was a dream. A full sensational dream that I could scarcely focus on. I writhed back and forth on the bed, my legs now jelly and unable to hug Hawke's hips as his cock repeatedly dragged inside me, stroking nerves already burning from two orgasms.

And a third was sweeping up so fast that I barely had time to catch my breath. Then Hawke kissed me and stars danced behind my eyelids. I wanted to escape the over-stimulation his cock brought me but the sensation was addictive. A throbbing heat between my legs that dialed up in temperature with each thrust.

Every muscle in my body locked up when my third orgasm crashed through me like a rocket. I was held in their arms, fucked as Hawke chased his own end, and I locked down on his cock like a clamp. Hawke grunted against my lips and his moan washed over me. Then a third pulse of heat flooded inside me like lava as Hawke came. We all sagged down, panting on the bed. My limbs quivered, nerves twitching back and forth as Hawk finally pulled free of my pussy and pressed a gentle kiss to my lips.

"Mmm," I groaned. "I can't move."

I was boneless, twitching without control and Hawk chuckled above me as I closed my eyes.

“I’ll... I’ll miss Christmas.”

“Rest,” came Eli’s voice.

“Go back to sleep,” Hawke coaxed.

“It’s still early.”

I tried to fight it. The lingering sleep latched onto the exhaustion of the sudden sex and I was pulled swiftly under as if this had been nothing but a dream.

“I love you guys.”

“We love you too,” came distant responses as sleep took me.

CLOVER

Christmas came once again at the more respectable time of 11a.m. Every part of my body ached when I rolled over and buried my face into the pillows. The small bubble of doubt I had that the amazing sex was just a dream, burst the moment movement flared the throb between my legs. It definitely wasn't a dream.

It was a very sexy reality.

I stayed lying face down for a few minutes longer. When I finally lifted my head, a glass of water sat on the nightstand next to a Christmas card with four glittering Reindeer on the front. Smiling, I grabbed the card and lazily flipped it open.

To Clover and baby,

Merry Christmas from all of us.

We love you.

Never forget.

Axel, Eli and Hawke.

“Dorks,” I murmured affectionately, re-reading the message. It was ridiculously cute, there was no denying that. It was strange to accept that this was my life.

After ten minutes of laying in bed, squeals from deeper in the house roused me up properly. I took a quick shower to wash away the lingering stickiness from our early morning fuck, then I dressed and sent out some Christmas texts to Kate and headed downstairs. Christmas music swelled the closer I got to the lounge and laughter rang out.

A shiver of apprehension wove down my spine, concerned that I was interrupting but when I pushed open the door and five grinning faces turned to me, I knew those anxious thoughts were misplaced. This was my family and there was nowhere I would rather be.

“Merry Christmas!” Hayley yelled and she flew at me, latching onto my leg with tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, honey!” My heart clenched and I leaned down, unable to scoop her up so I patted her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Horses!” Hayley wailed and I noticed the leaflet she had clutched in her hand. “Horses!”

I glanced up at Eli for an explanation and his own eyes were misty. “Santa brought Hayley a two-week starter trip at the Ranch in the next town so she can start learning horse riding.”

“Oh Hayley, that’s amazing!”

“Yes!” Hayley wailed and she clung tighter to my leg. “Horses!”

“Horses,” I soothed. The floor was covered in wrapping paper, and unwrapped presents were piled high. Hawke winked at me when I caught his eye and even Isabell had a grin ear-to-ear.

“Santa was good to you?” I asked and Isabell nodded.

“My birthday is in February and Da— Santa is going to let me start driving. I can also start early as long as we keep it on the Estate!” Her face was positively glowing, and I glanced across to Hawke.

“How very kind of *Santa*,” I said. Hawke shrugged.

Sitting down on the couch, Hayley finally detached from my leg and her tears dried. She darted back over to her presents and started playing with a sparkling Barbie doll while Isabell buried her face in a book. On the mantelpiece, the wooden figures that the kids purchased at the market were on display and I smiled warmly. How *adorable*.

Axel settled next to me and set a wrapped present in my lap.

“Surprise.”

My brows darted up. “What’s this?”

“A surprise,” Eli chuckled. “Also, thank you for the sweaters and phone cases. I’m sorry, Hayley found them and opened them thinking they were for her.”

“Sorry,” Hayley called, distracted.

“It’s okay,” I grinned, waving a hand. “I’m terrible at presents.”

“Open it,” Hawke urged, moving to kneel next to me. I glanced at all three of them and ripped the paper open. Inside was a booklet, and when I turned it over, the ownership papers fell into my lap, revealing the picture of a light blue Toyota RAV4.

“A car?!”

“Since your rental got totaled in the crash,” Axel chuckled. “And you’ll need a safe way to travel that will protect against the snow and ice *while* being safe for you and the kids.”

“It’s also great off-road, so you will be safe even if you go up the mountain,” Hawke pointed out.

Tears flooded my eyes, and the booklet shook in my hand. There was no way this was real, was it? My mind raced at how extravagant this gift was, especially compared to my present of *sweaters*. Words failed me, and all that escaped me was a sob.

Axel grabbed my hand and squeezed while Eli approached, his face worried.

“Is it too much?” Eli asked. “We wanted to get you something important for you after everything that has happened.”

“It is too much,” Hawke said, his eyes on me. “I’m sorry.”

“No, no!” I clutched at them all, anywhere I could reach and quickly shook my head. “No, no it’s amazing. Absolutely amazing. I’m just... I’ve never had something like— or had a Christmas that feels like this is *years* and I just— thank you, thank you so much!”

Relief flooded through the three faces in front of me, and Hawke leaned up, kissing my wet cheek.

“You are *absolutely* welcome,” he said softly.

“Here.” I hadn’t noticed Isabell step forward until she was right there, holding out a set of pink dice. “For your mirrors.”

“Oh my god,” I laughed and I stood, pulling Isabell into a tight hug. “Thank you!”

The rest of the day passed much like that morning. More presents, too much chocolate, and a fantastic Christmas dinner, thanks to Axel and his stunning cooking skills. Into the evening, we all settled with snacks and nibbles and watched *Muppets: A Christmas Carol* until the exhaustion of the day had Eli and Hawke sweeping their respective children off to bed. I tried to help Axel with the clean up but he flapped his hands at me and sent me away before I could lift a single plate. With time to myself, I poured a single malt and a glass of soda, then headed out onto the decking.

Cold nipped at my fingertips and I settled onto one of the deck chairs. The world glittered before me, snow as far as my eye could reach and the mountains gleamed against the bright moon in the sky. What a Christmas. I hadn’t had one like this since before my parents passed and I had thought maybe it was an age thing. Yet here I was, giddy about family and presents, and for the first time in a long time, I was looking forward to the future.

I slid the malt toward the empty chair opposite mine, then clinked my glass against it.

“Merry Christmas, Ricky.”

Seven weeks ago, I had come here with the intent of getting in and out as fast as possible. Everything since then had been a complete whirlwind and now I was back home with three men who loved me and a baby inside me.

Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined my life going this way, yet here I was.

So caught up in my thoughts I didn’t notice Hawke and the others arrive until a hand landed on my shoulder. I glanced up

and smiled, admiring how handsome Hawke looked with the icicle lights above sparkling around his head.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” he smiled down at me, then he placed a square black box in front of me. Eli and Axel sat in the chairs opposite, but when Hawk approached the empty chair with the glass in front of it, he paused and touched the chair.

“Ricky?” he asked. I nodded.

Hawke took the chair next to it and glanced at the box. I lowered my glass and studied it, then sat forward. It was wide and square with gold leaf around the edges.

“I don’t think I can accept more,” I said hoarsely. “The car is already... already so much.”

“This is different,” Eli said softly. “Trust me.”

I set down my glass and picked up the box. My heart started to race as all sorts of thoughts burst into my mind. The box was too big for a ring but too small for a bracelet. The cold nipped at my fingertips as I opened the box.

Inside sat a golden locket. It twinkled up at me, with colorful gemstones making out the shape of a heart on the face. As I picked it up, Axel started to speak.

“Clover. It might come as a surprise or not, but I love you. And I know we’ve said it before but I need you to understand that... well, I thought myself past it, in a sense. I never pictured myself with anyone and now I can’t picture myself without you.”

“It’s a tough thing for men like us to say it,” Eli continued. “So we need you to know just how deeply we feel when we tell you that we love you because we do. I love everything about you and I didn’t even know it was happening.”

“You crept up on us, one might say,” Hawke said. “Although I admit the kiss at Ricky’s wake was my yearning for you making itself known. I never thought you’d come back, never thought I’d get another chance but you’re here, and I love you.

I love *you* and we don't know what the future will hold. But this is a symbol of our commitment to you and our baby.”

As they spoke, I opened the locket and my heart burst in my chest. Inside was a picture of Ricky and I on one side and then all four of them on the other. I couldn't speak. I could scarcely breathe. As I examined the locket, the date of the BBQ we shared was etched on the back alongside the words *the day we knew we loved you*.

“I don't know what to say,” I croaked, my voice trembling. Eli reached across the table and grasped my hand.

“You don't have to say anything. It doesn't change anything. We're here to care for you, to love you, and raise our baby together. This isn't a game or a trick. We're too old for that. We want to spend the rest of our lives with you, building this family and this locket symbolizes that.”

“I...” Slowly closed the locket and pulled the chain from the box. “After Ricky passed, the guilt I felt, I never thought I deserved anything like this ever again.”

“Ricky never would have wanted you to punish yourself like you did,” Axel soothed. “Not for a second.”

“I... I regret leaving the way I did,” I admitted softly. “Might have saved myself four years of pain.”

“We've got plenty of time to make up for it,” Eli promised. “Just... stay with us.”

I lifted my gaze and slid my fingers around the chain, seeking out the clasp.

“Of course. I'm done running. I love all of you, more than I thought I could ever love anyone.”

Hawke stood and with gentle hands, he helped me clasp the locket around my neck. The metal sat heavy against my chest and when Axel leaned in and kissed me, my heart thrummed just enough to remind me the locket was there with every beat. I kissed Eli and then Hawke, too as warmth soared in my chest and the lights twinkled above.

Life was good. Finally.

* * *

The next day Isabell and Hayley sat before me, yawning slightly and rubbing eyes. We'd just finished breakfast and now felt like the best time to break the news of the secret we had been holding. Eli and Hawke sat nearby, their eyes on their children as I clasped my hands together and focused on the comforting weight of the locket against my chest.

"I have some news."

"You're not leaving?!" Hayley asked and I chuckled, giving her a small smile.

"No, I'm not. In fact, I'm going to be taking over from your old teacher but that's not quite the news." I sucked in a calming breath and glanced at Axel, who gave me a strong, supportive smile.

"I'm going to have a baby!"

Isabell's eyes darted straight to my stomach.

"It's early days right now, so we have to be careful and keep it a secret but I couldn't keep it a secret from you guys any longer. Since it's Christmas and everything."

Silence fell. We had agreed last night that telling the kids was the right thing to do but there was no telling how they would react. Would there be tears? Upset? Anger? My heart raced as I stood there, studying their faces for any hint of what would come next. Hawke cleared his throat and Axel shifted against the door frame as we waited for the news to sink in.

I wracked my brain for anything else to add, anything that might spur a reaction, when suddenly Hayley exploded in a cheer and rushed toward me.

"Yay!" she yelled, "I'm gonna have a baby brother!"

"Or sister," I laughed, leaning down slightly to cuddle her. Hayley likely wouldn't understand much about the baby but it warmed me so completely that she called the baby her brother,

without questions. Tears smarted at my eyes and I glanced at Isabell to see her smiling.

“That’s why the spare room is being decorated with animals? That’s awesome,” she said softly.

“Really?” I asked, bracing myself for sarcasm. Thankfully there was none and she nodded.

“Really really. I think you’ll make a good Mom.”

“Thank you.” My smile wobbled. “That means a lot.” I offered out an arm and Isabell stood, then crossed over to join the hug. Relief flooded through me as Eli, Hawke and Axel joined in the group hug and for the first time in a long time, there wasn’t a trace of guilt to be felt in my heart.

Only certainty and I laughed softly, my voice thick.

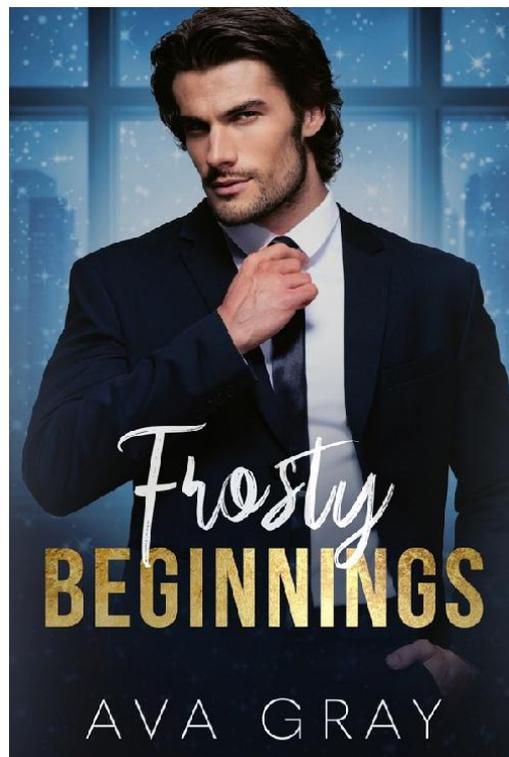
“While it’s uncertain what will happen, I do know one thing,” I said.

“What’s that?” Hawke asked.

“If it is a boy, I’m calling him Ricky.”

Hayley, as it turned out, knew before all of us and Ricky Dixon was born at three minutes past four on a warm July evening.

EXCERPT: FROSTY BEGINNINGS



Drake shattered my heart right before I was about to tell him I was pregnant.

I'd be silly to fall in love with him again.

Especially after not having seen him for five years.

But fate has an awful way of shaking you up and testing your willpower.

Turns out, Drake has a three-year-old daughter and I'm her new nanny.

He has no clue that the boy I carry in my arms is his own flesh and blood.

And yet, I roam the streets with him like we are a family.

We may have spent five years apart but the sparks between us are very much alive.

His arms around me as we shop for the holidays in the snow melts my heart.

If only I were an ice queen and could resist his charm...

Drake will find out my secret sooner or later.

Kira

Present

The double beep of a car horn had me scurrying faster across the street. I twisted and waved at the driver. I hadn't seen them, and I didn't recognize the car, but odds were good I knew them. Besides, it was my fault for being in the street.

Too lazy to walk to the end of the block and cross at the intersection, I took a chance and dashed across the street. I flashed a quick glance around to see if one of Millers Glen's finest police officers were around. The last thing I needed this week was a ticket for J-walking.

I pulled my red puffer jacket a little closer together. It didn't fit as well as some of my other jackets, but today I wanted to look good, leave my interviewer with an impression. Even if it was that I was the one in a puffer jacket.

I yanked on the front of my jacket and adjusted my scarf. I loved the way it framed my shape, made me look a little curvier. I looked cute, but it didn't close in the front. The curves I had were too much for that. The weather was getting colder, and I had worn the jacket for fashion not for function, and I really needed its function right now.

The aroma of freshly baked something with cinnamon caught my attention. Rolls? Cookies? I didn't care. It smelled good, and that was followed by the allure of freshly brewed coffee. I certainly hadn't planned on stepping into the café.

I only had a few more blocks to walk before I got home, and with the dropping temperatures, I really wanted to get home.

But the cinnamon and coffee made me think of warmth and comfort, and I was in need of both.

A bell over the door jingled as I stepped inside.

“Hi, Sunny,” I called out and waved as I stepped inside.

A shiver ripped through my body before I was able to relax into the warmth.

“Hey, Kira. How ya doin?” she asked from behind the counter.

The café was practically empty. I crossed the space from the door to the cash register and leaned on the counter as she continued to wipe down surfaces on the other side in her work area.

“Eh, I’ve been better. You know how it is.”

“Tell me about it.” She tossed the rag in her hands down and leaned her hip against the opposite side of the counter.

“I plan on it. But first what smells so good? I swear it reached down the block and grabbed me by the nostrils and dragged my cold ass in here.”

Sunny chuckled. “Steph is baking again.”

I leaned farther into her space and made grabby hands in the air. “Gimme!” I demanded.

“Kira, you don’t want any, trust me.”

I collapsed what was left of me on the counter in a pitiful heap. “I just had a crappy interview. Please give me one of the cinnamon yummys,” I whined.

“Only if you get your body off my clean counter. Now I have to disinfect it from your germs.”

With a humph and some toddler-like behavior, I righted myself. It was nice to be able to just let go of everything around Sunny. She understood me better than most and had the distinct honor of being my best friend. Or maybe it was my honor to be her friend? Either way, we could be juvenile without judgement when feeling less than successful and succumbing to the pressures of being an adult in the world.

Apparently appeased by my standing up, she pushed off the counter and stepped through the doorway that divided the front of the café from the kitchen. She came back with a long-twisted pastry on a plate. Setting the plate in front of me, she turned and grabbed a paper cup, pulled the lever to pour me a coffee.

“Steph made these twist things. They smell better than they taste.”

“Anything that smells this good can’t be bad.” I picked up the treat and took a large bite. Immediately all moisture in my mouth was gone. It was dry. Dry and bland, and... I started coughing. It was like my mouth was suddenly full of cinnamon flavored sand.

“Are you okay?” Some man asked.

A napkin appeared before my eyes. I snatched it and hacked out the twist. It was obviously one of Steph’s dog treats that she made from time to time.

Sunny handed me the coffee.

I took a long slow sip. I didn’t want to burn my mouth, but I wanted that cinnamon monstrosity washed away.

“Thank you,” I said with a dry groggy voice.

I looked at the man, but I couldn’t really focus. My eyes were watering, and the tears combined with my contacts made for blurry vision. He was tall, and his voice seemed familiar.

“I tried to warn you,” Sunny said. I think she had a smirk on her face.

I had to blink a few times before I could see that, yes, she was pleased with what she would consider a joke. I continued to blink, and the tall man came into focus.

I started coughing again.

He reached around and patted me on the back.

“Are you okay, Kira?” he asked again.

This time I couldn’t blame Sunny’s demented sense of humor or the dog biscuit for my reaction. This time it was all my own

fault. Or maybe it was his.

“Drake,” I managed to choke out. I shook my head and held up my hand. This coughing choking fit of an embarrassing situation was not over. I needed to clear my head and my windpipe if I was going to be able to talk.

The riot going on in my heart and my gut were a completely different issue and set of mortifications I was choosing to ignore at the moment. I had priorities, and breathing was at the top of the list.

Freaking out that Drake Schriver stood in front of me was low on that list. Or at least that’s what I was screaming at myself.

What the hell was Drake doing here? I should have ignored the siren lure of cinnamon and just gone home. I’d be home by now. No doggy treat stuck in my molars, and no knowledge that Drake was back.

“Breathing?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. I’m breathing.”

“What are the odds of running into you here?”

“It’s the only coffee shop in Millers Glen. So, it’s not all that weird,” I said.

I had to swallow down my heart as it threatened to beat straight up my throat. I may have been acting like a whiny brat only moments earlier, but I was a grown woman. I wasn’t going to let this man fluster me by his unexpected presence.

“I meant us both being in town at the same time. Are you back visiting family for the holidays? Wait, I shouldn’t just bombard you with all these questions. We should catch up sometime. Unless you’ve got time now.”

I cut a quick glance over at Sunny. Her eyes were wide, and she was making little flickering motions with her fingers. She wanted me to go sit and talk with him.

“I’m not doing anything.” I smiled and handed the cup of coffee back to her. “Can I get topped off, and maybe a human cookie this time?”

“Sure thing. Why don’t you two go and sit down; I’ll bring it right over,” she said. She had her fake customer service smile on.

Drake held out his arm and guided me toward a table next to the window. His coat was already hung over the back of a chair, and a tablet rested on the table next to a coffee and a plate full of crumbs.

Had he been looking out the window? Did he see me cross the street and walk past the window before coming in here?

I clenched my teeth together and sorted through the jumble of thoughts crashing around in my head. This couldn’t be any more embarrassing than chomping down on a dog biscuit and choking in front of him. Of course, that had never crossed my mind as to how I would meet him again after all this time.

That fantasy involved a strapless dress with a hip high slit that exposed my thigh and being surrounded by a bevy of really hot men all clamoring for my attention. And then there would be Drake, in the middle of a group of men who would make him look plain, begging for my forgiveness.

I sat and watched as he adjusted his items and sat across from me.

Who was I kidding? Men who were better looking than Drake didn’t exist. He was the pinnacle when it came to attractiveness. And I certainly never attended the kind of parties that my fantasy required. The short of it was, I had wanted to look good. Better than good. And I had wanted him to not be so important. Apparently, I hadn’t gotten over that yet.

“Are you in town long?” he asked.

I smiled as Sunny slid a plate of cookies between us and put my coffee in front of me. “I put some extra on there. Sorry about the prank. These are on me.”

“Thanks.” I wanted to reach out and grab her hand for some moral support. Instead, I reached out and took a snickerdoodle. My favorite.

“I think you must have gotten somewhat confused. I live here. I haven’t left,” I told him.

“Oh, well, I guess I must have assumed with your studies. You were in university, right?”

My stomach twisted. That was a loaded question.

“Yeah, I was. I believe I have to thank you for the grant that paid for my first semester.”

The slightest curve of a smile graced his lips and he nodded.

“That program was completely online, except for a couple of summers where I had to do clinicals on the parent campus,” I explained.

“So, you graduated?”

I nodded. “Yeah. I finished the program in three years. I took summer classes. But you can’t be interested in whether I finished college or not.”

He sat back, resting his wrists on the table. The slight grin turned into a full smile.

I plastered a fake smile on my face and tried to breathe. It was really hard when his smile sucked all the air out of the room. I had tunnel vision and all I could see was him and that smile.

“It’s really good to see you. How long has it been?”

Six years, two months, and twenty-eight days. But who was counting?

“Oh, it’s been a while. What? At least five years?” I shrugged and pretended that I wasn’t painfully aware of exactly how long it had been since I had last seen his smile, heard his voice, looked into his eyes.

[Read the complete story HERE!](#)

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