

My LUCKY CHARM



♥ A
HOLIDAYS
WITH HART
ROMANCE ♥

New York Times bestselling author

COURTNEY WALSH

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My LUCKY CHARM

A HOLIDAYS WITH HART ROMANCE

COURTNEY WALSH



Sweethaven
Press

*For everyone who loves a grumpy hero.
I tried to make this one the grumpiest. ;)*

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Chapter One

Eloise

I've never kissed a stranger in my life. Not in high school. Not in college. And certainly not as an adult. I may be a lot more outgoing than either of my sisters, but I have limits. A moral code. An internal compass that keeps me from going a tick too far.

Tonight, that compass broke.

I'm out at Sully's with my friend Meredith partly because she's heading back to her fancy life in New York City tomorrow, but mostly because I didn't want to spend New Year's Eve alone in my apartment. I like going out. I like being with people. No way I was going to ring in a whole new year by myself.

Some would say that being alone on New Year's Eve isn't the end of the world.

Those people probably have boyfriends.

Or a cat.

But it felt like the end of the world to me. I'm not the kind of person who dwells on what's wrong in my life. I have big feelings, but the only one I focus on is happiness.

So, when Meredith called, I answered. And now, here I am. At a bar, doing my very best to play my usual role of "life of the party." Nobody wants to hang out with a Debbie Downer, after all.

When I arrived, I noticed there were a lot of people at the bar who weren't paired up. A group of women laughing loudly with the bartender. A

creepy guy sitting outside the women's restroom. A drunk woman yelling at people to "*move so I c'n make this, I can do this, juss watch*" near the pool table.

Her stick missed the ball completely, and the small group around her erupted in hoots and hollers.

And then there's the mysterious, brooding, very attractive man sitting at the bar watching a hockey game who has been nursing the same drink for the last hour.

Oh. And me.

My cheeks hurt from over smiling. But this is the best way I know to get over disappointment. Yes, I just had to watch my most recent relationship go up in flames, and yes, I also got fired from the first job I've ever actually liked.

But there are better days ahead. Even if I'm currently not wanted romantically *or* professionally.

Like I said, I don't like to dwell.

Besides, Meredith is only here for a few more days. And my best friend Dex showed up with his new girlfriend. In fact, all my friends showed up with their significant others.

And they needed a designated driver.

Enter me. Eloise Hart. Eternally volun-told.

Single but not ready to mingle.

"You look miserable." Meredith has pulled herself away from her boyfriend, Seth, and is now giving me a pitying look.

"What? No, I'm not," I say, wondering when I allowed my smile to fade. I paste it back on. "I'm fine."

"Look, El, that guy was a jerk," she says with a pursed look.

I nod. I know it. I think I always knew it. But Jay was par for the course for me.

If there *are* nice guys out there, they certainly aren't crossing my path. And if they *are* crossing my path, I'm certainly not noticing them.

Because my type, apparently, is *first-class jackwagon*.

Jay absolutely fits my type. So did Brandon. And Eric. And Kyle.

First. Class. Jerks.

"Don't worry about me, Mare," I tell her, reapplying my smile like it's part of my make-up routine. "I'm so good." I give my shoulders a little shimmy. "So good." Then, because I'm over being scrutinized, I say, "You

and Seth are cute.” I nod across the room, where Seth is standing with a small group. He glances our way, his gaze catching on Meredith, and it’s like for a moment, he can’t look away.

I’ve never been privy to this silent language only lovers seem to share. For whatever reason, my soul simply doesn’t seem to connect with anyone else’s this way. And it’s not for lack of trying. I’m the *queen* of trying.

After all, this is all I really want in the world.

“Seth’s cousin is in from out of town,” Meredith tells me, with a bit of a lilt in her voice. “He could keep you company . . . ?”

I glance over at Seth’s cousin, currently close-talking to a woman who looks like a rabbit contemplating gnawing off one of her own limbs to make a three-legged run for it.

“I think he’s hit on just about every woman in this place,” I say.

Meredith winces.

“I’m really fine,” I say. “I swear.”

“I know, El,” she says. “You’re always fine. I just worry that one of these days you’ll wake up and all these upsetting things are going to bury you at once.”

I frown. “You’re such a downer!”

“I’m sorry!” She laughs. “You’re right. Enough of that!”

The door to the pub opens, letting in a rush of cold Chicago air. The entire bar lets out a raucous cheer, a tradition here every time someone walks in. But this “someone” isn’t just a random person off the street.

My heart races, and I turn away, helplessly searching for a place to hide.

“What’s wrong?” Meredith asks, following my gaze. “You look like you’re going to throw up.”

Why don’t Irish pubs come equipped with better hiding places? “It’s Jay,” I whisper-yell at her.

Meredith looks back at the door. “That’s Jay?”

“Don’t look!”

She whips her head back around at me, eyebrows raised in a question.

I frown my silent answer back at her.

“The guy who cheated on you?”

I slowly close my eyes, trying not to relive it.

“And then fired you?”

I snap open my eyes and wince a harried smile at her, shaking my head slightly. “Hey! How about we don’t rehash all the fantastic details?”

I look over. I can't help it.

Tall. Wiry. Good-looking. Totally unfair.

Jay is preppy and put together. And smart. Smart enough to convince me to date him even though he was my boss, which goes against pretty much everything every woman stands for these days. I made it clear I thought it was a bad idea because I needed the job. And he knew that.

He knew that. That explains everything anyone needs to know about this stain of a human being.

He was not smart enough, however, to hide his cheating. In that department, he was reckless, though it seems the brunette now attached to him doesn't care.

Meredith's eyes go stony, like a bull eyeing a red cape, and I have to reach out and stop her before she marches straight across the room and throat punches him with a beer stein.

"Don't," I say. "I'm playing this one cool."

She straightens. "You're here on New Year's Eve. Alone."

"Gee, thanks."

Her face softens. "Oh. That's not. . . You know what I mean."

"I know," I say, smiling back. "And I'm not alone," I clink her glass with mine. "I'm with you."

Meredith looks around the bar. It's noisy and getting noisier.

"Who are you looking for?"

"Someone for you to kiss." She says this without looking at me.

"Uh, what? No." I frown. "Absolutely not. Are you nuts? I'm not kissing anyone tonight. I mean, I'm all for getting back out there, but maybe with someone who buys me dinner first?"

She turns to face me full on, as if ready to give a *Braveheart* speech, and puts both hands on my shoulders. "Do you want to ring in the New Year alone? Do you want to be the pathetic single girl everyone feels sorry for? The only person in this entire bar with no one to kiss on the only night of the year when it is *imperative* that you have someone to kiss . . ."

I start to respond, but she cuts me off.

"Or! Do you want to be the hot, wanted woman who's already moved on?" She strikes a pose as she says this, and I roll my eyes, even though I'm smiling.

"Did you practice that in the mirror, or . . . ?"

She holds up a hand to stop me mid-sentence. And then she grins. It's a

glimmer-of-an-idea-turned-epiphany grin, and I really do not want to know why.

I dare a sideways glance in Jay's direction and see he's met up with a group of other young professionals, but he's still connected to the brunette.

This is humiliating. Jay pursued me. He was charming and flirtatious, and he assured me my job was safe—no matter what.

And I fell for it. For him. And because I'm very loyal, I was all in. We could make it work, right? And for a few months, we did. We were good together. I made him laugh, and he grounded me. He made me feel like a grown up, which is saying something because until I dated Jay, most of my relationships felt like meeting under the bleachers during recess.

Working for—and dating him—changed that for me. Changed *me*. I started to see that my sisters weren't the only ones who could be smart and successful. I started to believe that I could be too.

Yes, I'm a little aimless, and maybe I don't want to own a restaurant like Poppy or run a big company like Raya, but that doesn't mean I don't have goals.

It's just that my goals aren't the kind you publicize. I don't want to be a girl who runs the world. What I really want is a simple life with people I love.

But Jay, like so many other men, proved that putting on a suit doesn't make a man an adult. His behavior reeked of college frat boy. I caught him with the brunette—*Amber*—on a Tuesday in December. The week before Christmas, in fact.

Merry Christmas to me!

He fired me that Friday, leaving me boyfriend-less, jobless, and depressed right before the holidays. Which really sucked because Christmas is my favorite time of year.

"Him."

"Him who?"

She nods toward the bar. "Him. He's perfect," Meredith says. "He's probably close to our age, right? He's hot, and alone, and not obnoxiously drunk."

"You can't be serious."

I look at her and realize that she's serious.

"Meredith. No. No!"

She starts smiling and slowly nodding her head rhythmically.

“He’s a stranger!” I say, incredulous.

“Haven’t you ever kissed a stranger?”

I frown. “No! Have you?!”

She shrugs.

“Meredith!”

“What? It happens.”

I shake my head. “Not to me! Or because of me. I’m not in college anymore! I don’t need to revenge kiss some guy in a bar on New Year’s Eve. I really *am* good!”

Even though I’m the definition of a people person, kissing means something to me. It’s simple and sweet and intimate and—

“El.” She takes my hand, interrupting my train of thought. “*Eloise*. Don’t be dramatic. It’s just a kiss. And it’ll be enough to send a message to Creep Face and his side piece that you’re perfectly fine without him. Done. Over. Moved on.”

She’s starting to make a good point. I can’t believe I’m even considering it.

It’s just a kiss.

She looks at me. “When they do that countdown, do you really want to be the only person in this place who doesn’t have someone to kiss?”

No. I don’t. I *really* don’t. I didn’t before Jay walked in, but I *really* don’t now. Now I’m contemplating hiding in the bathroom until well after midnight. But I’m not a person who runs away. I want Jay to think I’m doing just fine without him.

Because *I am*. I’m good. Breakups happen. I’ve learned to move on. It doesn’t change the way I feel about love. I still believe it’s out there.

But logistically, this makes no sense. “What am I going to do, walk up to that extremely good-looking and very intimidating guy and ask him to take pity on me?”

She shrugs. “I mean, I wouldn’t take that approach. You don’t want to sound desperate.”

I draw in a breath, staring at the back of the guy’s head. He could be married for all I know. Or in a serious relationship. Or gay.

He could be a serial killer.

He could be a married, gay, serial killer in a serious relationship.

This is why you don’t kiss strangers in bars on New Year’s Eve. You just never know.

But then, Jay turns, and when he does, my eyes dart over, as if they've been trained to seek him out. When he spots me, his grip on Amber loosens. It's not lost on me that if I hadn't caught him, he'd still be dating both of us, which actually makes me feel bad for her. Does she even know the truth?

I bet he thinks he could win me back just by flashing that ridiculous trillion watt smile. I narrow my eyes, noting the way he's still watching me. Then Amber whispers something in his ear and I lose his attention completely.

And it feels like getting dumped all over again. There's a chink in my positivity armor.

"We're less than ten minutes from midnight, El," Meredith says. "Game on." She nods toward the guy at the bar, whose hand is still wrapped around his glass. Now there's a basket of what looks like mozzarella sticks sitting in front of him, and his eyes are still glued to the television hanging up in the corner, which is still playing a hockey game.

I take one last look at Jay, and then, without giving it a second thought, I walk over to the bar and sit down next to the guy. How hard can it be? I have a knack for winning people over.

The bartender makes his way over to me. "What can I get you?"

"Just a Coke," I say. "I'm the DD."

He nods, fills my glass, and slides it over to me. "On the house."

Even this very small act of kindness stirs something inside me. I know it has nothing to do with this bartender or this free Coke and everything to do with the feelings I've refused to let myself feel since the Jay Mistake and the fact that he's standing behind me with someone else.

Another chink.

But I'm not going there. I will not dwell. Not tonight.

Not ever.

"Thanks." I smile, summoning *pick-myself-up-by-the-bootstraps-Eloise*.

Just like always.

I draw in a breath, as if to seal in this reminder. No sense wasting time on something that wasn't right for me anyway, right?

The bartender nods and walks away. My eyes drift over to the man I'm sitting next to. Physically, he's the opposite of Jay. He's broad and muscular, and his hands are big and strong. His hair is sandy-colored, not quite brown and not quite blond, and now that I'm close to him, I can smell his woody, masculine scent over the stale alcohol-tinged aroma of the bar.

Also unlike Jay, this man seems disinterested by the women in the bar. In fact, he seems disinterested in everyone in the bar, period. He's watching the game, drinking a beer, and letting really delicious mozzarella sticks get cold.

"Aren't you going to eat those?" The question is out of my mouth before I can overthink it, but there's perfectly good junk food on the bar, and the cheese won't be as gooey if he doesn't eat them hot.

He looks at me, and it's obvious he hadn't even realized I sat down next to him. This whole interaction isn't going to be good for my self-esteem, I can already tell.

He doesn't say anything, just pushes the basket toward me and goes back to watching the game.

"Oh, no, I wasn't asking because I wanted them," I say.

Without looking, he pulls the basket back toward him.

"But, I mean, if you're offering . . ."

His shoulders slump, as if he's exercising a large amount of self-control, and slowly slides them back to me again.

All of this with no verbal response at all.

Over my shoulder, I catch Meredith's eye. She gestures at Mr. Hot and Broody, and then taps her watch.

"So, uh . . . are you here alone?" I ask, mentally facepalming.

I'm a talker. I'm extroverted. I love people. But this guy is a little like talking to a potted plant. And I would know because for months, I had a potted plant in my house that I called Martha, and we had great chats every morning.

It was easier to talk to Martha because she didn't look back at me with a quizzical expression on her face, like the one this man is wearing. Also, she didn't have a sexy scar above her lip like Mr. Hot and Broody does.

There's a story there, and for some reason, I want to hear it. In detail.

When our eyes meet, I instantly lose my nerve. "Sorry." I look away. "I'm not usually this weird."

Poppy's the quirky one. Raya's the forceful one. I am *supposed* to be the charming one. The adorable one.

Right now, I'm about as adorable and charming as a packet of mustard.

I blame Jay.

I blame me.

I blame me for getting involved with Jay.

I sigh, shoulders sagging as I do. I take a deep breath and open the faucet

that is my mouth.

“Okay, so, full disclosure, my ex is here with the woman he cheated on me with. I didn’t think I was ever going to see him again, but voilà! Here he is, and he’s with some tall brunette over there wearing half a dress.”

I make a half-hearted attempt to point.

“They’re a thing now, I guess. My ex and the brunette, not half-dresses. Those have always been a thing.”

I pause, but only long enough to take another breath and continue blathering, all the while remaining emotionally detached from what I’m saying.

“Honestly, maybe they were dating first. Maybe *I* was the other woman.” This hadn’t occurred to me before. “Oh, man. What if I was the other woman? I’ve never been the other woman. Is that scandalous? That feels scandalous.”

Another pause.

I shake off the thought and go on. “Regardless, he’s here, and I’m totally over him, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want him to be a little jealous, right? He’s here with her, and this whole thing is being rubbed in my face. And my friend Meredith said I should find someone to kiss at midnight because how pathetic is it that he’s here with her and I’m here with no one, just completely alone? I mean not alone because I’m here with Meredith and our other friends, but they’re all paired off. Not one of them is single. But also, I don’t kiss strangers. I mean, as a rule.” I pause for a beat, and then, realizing, I say, “But also, I really do want to show him that I’m fine. I’ve moved on. Someone else might actually *want* to be with me, even if it’s all for show.”

I stop talking, not because I don’t have more to say, but because I think I’ve used up all the words in the English language.

I wince. The man beside me hasn’t so much as twitched, and he certainly hasn’t said a word. I conclude that his scent must’ve cast a spell on me, because complete delirium is the only explanation I can think of for my ridiculous outburst.

I’m aware of this, but because his silent stare is making my skin tingle, I take another breath and, of course, keep talking.

“So, that’s why I sat down. Because you’ve been here a while, and you seem to be alone, and you’re not wearing a wedding ring, and plus, you look like—you know, like Thor.”

He makes a noise that I think I’d describe as half-laugh, half-scoff.

I start to bounce in my seat. “This is far more humiliating than hiding in the bathroom during the New Year’s countdown. And while nobody else would notice if I did that, I think Jay might. Maybe. And then I’d definitely look like a pathetic, wallowing ex-girlfriend.”

The bartender rings a bell hanging behind the bar, and the room goes quiet.

“We’re a minute away from midnight, people!” he calls out, and everyone starts pairing off and murmuring.

I glance over and find Jay watching me. I quickly look down at my untouched Coke.

“Which one is he?”

My eyes shoot over to the no longer silent giant sitting beside me. “Um, he’s over by the windows in that group—” I motion with my head. Now that this man is looking at me, it’s hard to concentrate. He’s even better looking straight-on, and I’m pretty sure I just felt my stomach do a backflip that would at least win silver at the Olympics.

I clear my throat. “He’s, uh, the one with dark hair, and he’s wearing a blue turtleneck.”

“Your first problem was dating a guy who wears turtlenecks,” Hot and Broody says under his breath.

His eyes flick over to the group behind me, and I use this lapse in his attention to notice that they are the coolest shade of turquoise I’ve ever seen.

He faces me, one arm resting on the bar, and frowns. “So, you came over here to ask me to kiss you?”

My eyes dip to his lips at the mention of the word kiss, and I quickly force them up. I nod. “Dumb, right?” Because even though it sounds ridiculous now that it’s out there in the ether, it also sounds delicious, and my skin heats at the thought.

“All right, everyone, let’s count it down!” The bartender shouts this, and everyone joins in.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!”

“You really don’t have to—” I say.

“Seven! Six! Five!”

“I hate cheaters.” He slides off the stool. He takes a step toward me, and my muscles tense. He’s tall, I see now, and he doesn’t bother keeping his distance. He pulls me up off the stool, and presses my body against his, heat radiating off of him.

“Four! Three! Two!”

I think I hear shouts of “Happy New Year” as the world goes to slow motion and this man, this beautiful stranger, takes my face in his hands and kisses me without an ounce of hesitation.

But he doesn’t just kiss me. He *kisses* me. Pins me in place with the kind of kiss that will ruin me for all future kisses.

My entire body rises to meet him, and I slide my hands up under his jacket, pressing against his firm, taut back, and giving in to the sheer delight of it all. The din of the rowdy bar fades as he deepens the kiss, making me think that every other man I’ve ever kissed has been doing it wrong.

My rib cage isn’t enough to contain the pounding of my wild, excited heart.

I kiss him back, this stranger in a bar, thinking that the only things I know about him are that he smells good and he hates cheaters, and somehow, that’s enough.

His hands move deeper into my hair, then rest at the back of my neck, and when he finally pulls away, his eyes search mine.

Good. Lord.

Did he feel that? Did he feel the fireworks?

I’m breathless and so dazed I’m not sure I could tie my shoes right now if I had to.

I don’t think I could even find my shoes. Or remember my name.

He looks unfazed, like everything about this is normal. Like it’s no big deal. Like he’s done this a million times, and maybe he has.

That’s why you don’t kiss strangers in bars on New Year’s Eve. You just never know.

His eyes drift from mine to something behind me. “I think he noticed.”

“What? I’m sorry . . . what? Who?” I try to focus and breathe, wondering if it would be greedy of me to ask him to kiss me again.

His brow quirks in the same direction as his gaze. “Your ex.”

“Oh,” I say, nodding as if that will help put the room back on its axis. “Good.”

He pulls his hand away, and I want to grab it and put it back.

“Um. . .” I clear my throat, and mindlessly fix my hair. “Thank you for your service.” *Thank you for your service?* I turn away, looking for a rock to crawl under.

He reaches into his pocket, pulls out his wallet and drops two twenty

dollar bills on the counter, nodding at the bartender. He looks at me and says,
“Happy New Year.”

And then he leaves.

Yes, I think, touching my lips, wondering if what just happened actually
happened.

Happy New Year.

Chapter Two

Gray

Two weeks later

“I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Not a babysitter,” Coach Turnrose says. “A tour guide.”

“I don’t need that either.” My muscles tense. “I can find my way around Chicago.” I resent the implication that I can’t.

“You’ve been here two weeks already,” Coach says.

“What’s your point?” I’m annoyed.

“My point is that there’s friction, and we think this might help.”

I look at him, more annoyed now.

“Look, we’re not trying to tell you how to live your life here. It’s not about finding your way.” The captain of the Chicago Comets, Dallas Burke, is sitting in the chair next to me, both of us across from the coach. He leans forward, probably trying to take control of this conversation. “It’s about acclimating.”

I scowl at Dallas. This is all his idea, and he can shove it.

Acclimating. Whatever. I’m not happy about any of it. About being here in Chicago, about getting traded, about being assigned a babysitter because my team captain doesn’t think I can *acclimate*.

You think there’s friction now?

“We just want to make this transition as smooth as possible,” Dallas says. “For everyone.”

“I’m here to play hockey. That’s it,” I say. “I don’t need some stupid tour guide or nanny or whatever.”

“Not sure that’s true,” Dallas says, wincing a bit.

“Yeah, it’s not,” Turnrose adds. “This isn’t up for debate. And it’s not all our idea, even Rosen agrees.”

They looped the owner of the team in on this? Great.

“Rosen thinks I need a chaperone?” I snarl.

“*Not* a chaperone,” Dallas says. “Think of her as . . .” He seems to be searching for the least offensive word . . . “an assistant.”

I sigh. Big. And then shrug like there’s nothing else I can say or do here. “Can I go? I need to get in the weight room before the game tonight.”

“You can go after you agree to be nice,” Coach says. “And to listen to what she says.”

I groan. “Whatever, man. If this is what it takes to play hockey, then fine. The rest of it doesn’t matter to me.”

“Look.” Turnrose says. “She’ll make your life easier if you let her. She’ll handle the day to day tasks—errands, shopping, fan mail—stuff you definitely don’t need to be wasting time on. And she’ll be your liaison with the stuff you *have* to do—charity events, community parties, press conferences.”

My skin crawls at *charity events and parties*.

“Great.”

“Sending you to these things on your own doesn’t seem like the best idea,” Turnrose says. “We know you’re not happy about this trade.”

Everyone knows I’m not happy about this trade. It’s been all over the news.

Same *I don’t care* look, same shrug. It’s pointless to protest because nothing is going to change. “What do you want me to say?”

“Say you’re going to play nice.” The voice comes from behind, and it makes me sit up a bit straighter.

I don’t have to turn to know that Mark Rosen has made an appearance. “Because this is how it is.” He strolls in, shakes hands with Dallas and Coach, then faces me. “Look, Hawke. You’re talented. One of the most talented players I’ve seen in a while. But your attitude sucks.”

I bristle. I hate what he’s saying, but I like people who don’t mince words.

“Burke thinks you’re something special. Heck, you’ve been something

special since you were thirteen.”

“Is that supposed to motivate me?” I sneer up at Rosen.

His eyebrow raises so subtly I almost miss it. I get the hint.

“Burke came in with a whole case about how *you* are exactly what the team needs. Fearless. Strong. Proven track record. And you work harder than anyone out there.”

“Yeah, no kidding, and—”

“But you’re a jerk.” He cuts me off. “And a hard teammate. Everyone knows it.” He leans in slightly toward me. “*You* know it.”

I shift in my seat. He’s not wrong.

“I don’t want there to be any mistake about who’s calling the shots here. That understood?”

My molars could crack under the pressure of my jaw. “Understood.”

“On the ice,” he points, “Burke calls the shots. Period. Off the ice,” he points again, “Turnrose is in charge. I know you’re used to having people cater to you, but that’s not going to happen here. Here, community comes first. So, you attend the charity functions. You come to the social events. And you do the press conferences.” He pauses. “And you’re not a jerk about it.”

“Got it.” This feels like after-school detention.

“Good.” He looks at Dallas. “When’s this sister of yours get here?”

“You hired your sister?” I look at him.

“She’s not my sister,” he says. “She’s my girlfriend’s sister.”

“Well,” I say. “That’s not going to work.”

“Why not?” Dallas asks.

I lean toward him. “Because when I go off on her—and you know I will—you’re going to make it personal.”

He leans back, his brow raised. “You’re right. I am. So you better make sure you don’t do that.”

I turn and grit my teeth, hoping it makes the point that I’ve been trying to make since I sat down in the coach’s office. I’m not okay with any of this.

But it clearly doesn’t matter.

I was traded. I’m practically starting over. New team. New city. New everything.

All of it sucks.

I’m not afraid of hard work—but not like this.

I don’t like to repeat myself. Or prove myself again. I’ve been playing long enough that they should know I don’t need to do any of this. I’m not the

guy for charity events or parties. I'm not the one to talk to the drooling idiots in the media after a game.

I score. I win. That's it.

What more is there?

"I think we're done," Rosen says.

I clap my hands. "Great. Good talk. Go team." I stand and bolt out the door, aware that the three of them are probably exchanging pointed looks.

The Comets are a decent team and yeah, I can definitely make them better. I guess on paper, it makes sense, but nobody asked for my opinion before any of this happened. I walked into the locker room in Philadelphia and my stuff was gone and my name was stripped off my locker.

We're professionals. We're supposed to just accept that this is part of the game. The business part.

Screw that.

I was drafted by Philly when I was nineteen. First pick of the draft. Worst team in the league. It only took us two years to turn it around and win the Stanley Cup.

Ten years on the team and we've been back to the finals four times. Won twice.

They were calling us a dynasty.

And I walk in and find out I'm traded? Me? For what, a bunch of no names and some future draft picks?

I can't wait to play Philly this season. I'm going to show them exactly what they traded.

I storm down the hall and into the locker room, and not even a minute later, Burke walks in.

He doesn't say anything, just walks over to his locker, pulls off his shirt and starts changing for a workout. If the rumors are true, Burke is as dedicated as I am. That should make me happy—lord knows that wasn't the case in Philadelphia.

But it doesn't. None of this does.

I clamp my jaw shut. I know I'm being a tool, but a part of me doesn't care and can't switch it off. I know there's a chance that he and I could take this team to the playoffs, and maybe even make a run at the finals. I know because I've played against him. I've studied him. He's one of the best, and he probably wants this as much as I do.

But I don't say any of that.

“Are you free Sunday?” Dallas asks without looking at me.

I don’t respond.

“Figure since you’ve only been here a couple of weeks, you might not have anywhere to go, and you’ve got an open invitation to come have dinner with us. My girlfriend’s family has dinner together every Sunday, and her dad’s a huge fan.”

“I’m good, thanks.” I pull my own shirt off and toss it into the locker.

“Did I mention she’s a chef?”

“Awesome, then it would probably be a bunch of goat cheese and tofu. No thanks,” I snap.

I would really love to stop being a total jerk, but all I see is red.

“She could probably make goat cheese and tofu taste like steak,” he chuckles to himself, not giving me the satisfaction of rising up and snapping back at my jab.

“I’ll text you the address anyway,” he says. “Just in case.”

I stare into the locker. “Is my *babysitter* going to be there?”

“Eloise?” he asks, still not bothered. “Yeah. She’ll be there.”

I toss the rest of my stuff in the bottom of my locker.

“Pass.”

I walk past him toward the weight room, and he stops me. “Look, I know you think everyone has it out for you. And I know you think you’re God’s gift to this game. But neither of those things are true.”

I stand and wait for him to be done talking but don’t look at him.

“What’s true is that you and I could make this team great.”

A pause.

He turns back to his locker. “We’ve had guys like you before.”

I glance at him.

He turns to me and pointedly says, “They didn’t last.”

I look away and cross my arms.

“The way I see it,” he says as he hangs up his shirt, “you can make yourself and everyone else miserable, or you can accept that this is your team now. And this city is your home. Eloise can make that happen quicker.”

Heat rises up my neck. “I don’t need—”

“I know,” he says, and claps me on the shoulder. “But you’ve got one.” He pulls out his phone and starts typing. “I’m texting you the address for Sunday dinner. You should come.”

“I’ve got other plans.”

He hits send then looks up. “No, you don’t.” Dallas walks away, leaving me standing there, staring at the nameplate over my locker. *Hawke*. Next to it, the Comets logo.

This really happened.

I was traded. I’ve got a new team.

And a babysitter.

I clench my jaw and decide I’ll channel all my frustration about all of it into tonight’s game.

Chapter Three

Eloise

“So, do you want the job or not?”

I’m standing in the kitchen with Dallas Burke and my sister Poppy, while my mother and my other sister, Raya, bustle around us in preparation for Sunday dinner.

I mostly want to sit down with an entire pan of brownies and a carton of ice cream, but I guess we’re talking about adult things now.

Like being responsible and paying rent and getting jobs.

However, what Dallas has just proposed doesn’t sound like the kind of job I would submit a resume for. Or a *punch the clock* type of job, either.

Actually, it sounds a lot like the job I had and loved and totally screwed up just a month ago.

My eyes flick over to Poppy’s, then narrow. “Was this your idea?”

“Poppy, how long are the potatoes supposed to be in for?” Our mom insists on making Sunday dinner, even though Poppy is a chef. But today, she did allow her to make the potatoes.

Poppy walks over to the oven, opens it, shakes her head, and closes it. “They’re not ready.”

Mom’s face falls. “I need more oven space.”

Dad appears in the doorway of the kitchen, having just set the table. We all know he wants to go watch the Bears game, but he’s making himself look available because otherwise Mom might implode.

“What else can I do?” Dad sighs as Poppy speaks his words aloud. Dallas

is learning ASL, but he's not fluent, so we sign and speak everything when he's here.

Mom turns away from the kitchen and surveys all of us, standing there, in her way. She starts making shooing motions with her hands. "Out, out, out!" she says, then switching to actual sign language she adds, "It's entirely too crowded."

Dad looks wide mouthed at me and winks, then badly moonwalks out of the room.

Somehow, I feel like this was all part of his plan. Overcrowd the kitchen, drive Mom batty, get to watch the game.

It tracks.

We all make our way into the living room, waiting on Dallas's grandma and whoever else my sisters invited today. I only invited Dex, but he's been getting serious about his girlfriend, Belinda, and he spends most of his free time with her. I get it. I mean, I love Belinda too, but I do secretly hate that he chooses her over us.

Meredith went back to New York, but she and Seth are still going strong. It seems like everyone has someone. Except me.

And Raya. But I really don't want to be lumped in the same single category with her. I'm single by choice. She's single because her resting face looks like that.

"So, El?" Poppy is even less interested in the football game than I am. "The job?"

"I'm back at the animal shelter," I say. "I'm good." I'm not good. I know I'm not. But the attempts to "fix" my life make me uncomfortable.

"This is a *good* opportunity," Poppy says. "And you're perfect for it."

"Recap it for me again?" I grab a chip from the bowl on the coffee table and dunk it in the salsa she made. Her salsa is to die for. Chunky but not overloaded, just the right amount of heat, and fresher than anything you'll find in the grocery store.

"The Comets got a new guy—Grayson Hawke—and he's . . ." Poppy trails off, looking for Dallas to finish her thought.

"A little intense," Dallas says.

I frown. "Intense. I don't do intense." For some reason I think about the New Year's kiss I shared with the mysterious stranger.

Maybe I do, in fact, do intense. Because that is exactly how I'd describe that kiss.

I glance up and find Dad looking at me, so I quickly fill him in, and when I sign the name *Grayson Hawke*, he jumps to his feet.

“They want you to work for Grayson Hawke?” he signs as I ask out loud, both of us focused on Dallas.

“I take it you’re a fan,” Dallas says to Dad with a grin. Then, Poppy signing: “Mick, maybe I should’ve gotten you the job.”

Our dad waves him off, but then his expression changes, and he points, as if to say, *ooh, maybe*.

“So, what, he’s a big deal or something?” I ask, signing.

Dad’s eyes go wide, and he starts signing frantically while I speak his words out loud, though not with the same inflection as he would, I’m sure. “Eloise, are you kidding? Don’t you know who Grayson Hawke is?”

I shoot him a *seriously* expression and sign, “No, Dad, I couldn’t care less about hockey.” I glance at Dallas. “No offense.”

He frowns. “I’m highly offended. Hockey is my life.”

“Excuse me?” Poppy straightens. “I thought *I* was your life.”

He smiles at her, kisses her on the cheek and stands. “Nope, just hockey.”

He scoots away just in time to dodge the *thwap!* from Poppy’s towel.

He laughs. “You’ll have to be quicker than that.”

Poppy narrows her eyes in mock anger and Dallas responds with a smitten grin. “I’m going to get a drink. Anyone want anything?” He attempts to sign this while he says it, but only manages *Anyone drink?* and I have to hold back a snarky reply.

Dad nods that he’ll drink whatever Dallas brings and goes back to his game as Poppy looks at me. “Maybe don’t think of this as a job, Eloise. Think of it as a way to help someone in need. Like a stray dog at the shelter.”

“Right. A rich and famous hockey player is exactly like a stray dog.” I grab another chip and pop it in my mouth.

“He didn’t want this trade,” Poppy says. “He’s miserable. And, since Dallas is the team captain, he wants to do whatever he can to make his transition a smooth one.”

I frown. “I still don’t understand what it all has to do with me.”

“Gray is alone here,” Poppy says. “No family, no friends. It’s a whole new place and a whole new team. And frankly, he’s a little . . . crabby.”

“Crabby?”

“Eh . . . salty.”

“Salty,” I repeat, dryly. “Can you describe him by using words that aren’t

related to food?”

She shoots me an unamused look. “He’s . . .” she seems to be searching for the right words. “He’s . . . just . . . hard to know.”

“So basically, you’re sticking me with a crabby, salty, hard-to-know guy who doesn’t want to be here,” I say.

Poppy grimaces. “Well . . .”

I give an exasperated sigh. “Where do I sign up?”

“I’m sure he’s a great guy once you get to know him.”

“Oddly, you don’t sound sure.” I pull the bowl of chips into my lap and eat them one after the other.

Poppy frowns. “You’re going to ruin your dinner.”

“I’m a bottomless pit,” I say, thankful for the change of topic. Poppy and Raya don’t know the whole truth about why my last job ended, but the job itself wasn’t all that different from what they’re asking me to do now.

I really liked that job.

And I was surprisingly good at it.

After years of searching for the right fit, I thought I’d found it. While my own life has lacked direction, it turns out helping other people organize their lives is a talent of mine.

If only I could organize my own life as efficiently.

Poppy and Raya (and probably our parents) assumed I quit because I got bored, but I didn’t quit.

The truth is so much worse.

And that truth led to the New Year’s kiss. After the guy left the bar, Jay made his way over to me. Acted like he wasn’t interested at first, but then poured on the charm and kicked the flirting into high gear.

Ugh. What a jerk. Meredith was right—it had made him jealous. But, it gave me the chance to ignore him, which was a gift all on its own.

Surprisingly, it didn’t make me feel any better. I was still jobless. Still single. The only difference was that my lips were tingling, and I was wrestling the urge to run out into the cold after the guy who was responsible for that.

What I wouldn’t give to kiss him again.

“Are you taking the job or what?” Dallas reenters the room, holding two bottles of water. “Because I already told them you are.” He hands a bottle to my dad, who takes it without looking away from the game.

“You what!?” I glare over at him, and when he smiles, I have to look

away. Because he's a little too charming to be mad at, but in a big brother sort of way.

Still annoying.

"I don't understand what you want me to do." I crunch another chip. "I've never chaperoned a full grown adult." *Crunch*. I look at Dallas. "What do you people do all day?"

"Eat, mostly." He smiles.

"Well, that I could handle." I think it over, still crunching. "But I've never been a very good babysitter."

At that moment, Raya walks in the room. "That's an understatement. Do you remember the time you were supposed to be watching the Larson kids and they snuck outside in their pajamas and took your car for a ride around the block?"

I roll my eyes. "That was one time."

"Right, because nobody would hire you to babysit after that." Poppy and Raya laugh. This is how it goes almost every time our family gets together. There are countless *Eloise* stories to entertain.

Normally I don't mind it, but losing my job puts a damper on everything.

It's harder to laugh at myself now. I don't like it. If I'm not careful, my sunny personality is going to disappear. And that is not okay with me. I don't dwell.

Bootstraps and everything.

"This isn't babysitting, exactly," Poppy says. "It's like . . ." she searches for a word. "A companion."

My eyes go wide, matching Dallas's and Raya's.

"A *companion*?" I ask. "Like on *Doctor Who*? Or are you guys trying to pimp me out?"

"No!" Poppy's cheeks turn pink. "That's not what I meant!" She pauses. "And who is *Doctor Who*?"

"Oh my gosh, I'm emancipating myself from this family," I say deadpan.

"It's an assistant," Dallas says. "Someone to help make the transition easier. Handle the finer points, and keep him from saying things he shouldn't. And most importantly, to make him feel welcome. I'll handle the team stuff, but we want Chicago to feel like home to him." He moves a bit closer and reaches for a chip. I initially pull the bowl away from him, then slowly offer it so he can take a handful. "And," he continues, "Poppy said you used to be a tour guide in the city."

“One of her *many* jobs,” Raya quips, reminding me, as usual, that I don’t have a big, fancy career like her. I wonder if she ever considers I don’t *want* a big, fancy career. All I’ve ever really wanted is a simple life. And for someone to look at me like I’m the reason they get out of bed in the morning.

Preferably someone who looks like an Avenger, loves dogs, and has a heart of gold.

“An assistant.” I eat another chip. “So, I would get him coffee and stuff?”

“You’re going to ruin your dinner,” Raya says.

I shoot Poppy a look, and she grins at me. And I wonder if these two will ever see me as anything but the baby of the family.

“He’s going to have a lot of engagements,” Dallas says. “Press. Parties. Public appearances, that sort of thing. And given his . . . uh . . . demeanor . . .” He draws this last word out so it sounds like *de-meeeea-nor*, and then looks at Poppy, a bit helpless.

“He’s a jerk, isn’t he?” I say. “Don’t sugarcoat it.”

“I mean . . . he’s not the easiest guy to get along with,” Dallas says. “And he doesn’t want to be here.”

“Yeah, Poppy mentioned that.”

She chimes in. “Dallas thought maybe you could help him see some of the great things about Chicago. Change his perspective a bit. Maybe help navigate the parts he hates. You’re a people person, El. You get along with everyone.” Poppy takes the bowl of chips away from me.

“If anyone can ease him into this, it’s you,” Dallas says.

“Aw, Dallas, I had no idea you were so sweet on me.” I reach over and take the bowl back.

He thunks a huge hand on the top of my head and messes up my hair like an older brother would and steals a chip from the bowl.

“I don’t understand why this decision is taking you so long,” Raya says. “Your professional life could use an upgrade. I mean, I’m sure they love having you back at the animal shelter, but is playing with dogs really what you want to do for the rest of your life?”

I pray for a Tardis to transport me to an alternate universe. Because the last thing I want is to start another conversation about my lack of a career.

The doorbell rings, and my mother calls out from the kitchen, “Someone get that!”

“Probably my grandma.” Dallas starts to stand.

I jump up. “I’ll get it!” I need to get out of here, and this feels like a way

to escape. I walk into the entryway, and when I pull open the front door, I let out a gasp.

There, standing on my parents' porch, in the light of day, is the guy who kissed me on New Year's Eve.

Chapter Four

Eloise

I stare.
Did I summon him here by replaying that kiss over and over in my head?

Now that I'm looking at him in daylight, I see that he's not just good-looking. He's devastating.

Wavy hair. Eyes the color of the Caribbean Sea. Broad shoulders.

And a scowl on his face that looks like he'd rather be anywhere in the world than standing on my parents' front porch on a Sunday.

I manage to remember parts of the English language. "You."

He frowns, and that's when it becomes obvious—he doesn't recognize me.

Fabulous. Am I really that forgettable?

"Hi, uh, is Dallas Burke here?" he asks, his voice low.

I study him. I may not like hockey, but I've been around Dallas and Poppy enough to know the other players on the Comets. This guy isn't one of them. So, either he's a long lost relative Dallas forgot to tell us about . . .

Or . . . *oh no* . . . he's the new player they want me to babysit.

This is Grayson Hawke.

What is it about hockey players? They could give calendar firemen and football quarterbacks a run for their money.

And given the piercing way he's looking at me right now and the gentle hum of excitement buzzing through my body, I have a feeling babysitting this

man is a very, very bad idea.

“This was stupid.” He turns and starts to walk away.

I narrow my eyes, pushing aside my humiliation at the fact that our kiss didn't seem to have the same lasting effect on him as it did on me. I'll pretend I don't remember.

What else am I going to do? Confront him? I'm not *that* desperate.

“You must be Grayson.”

“Gray.” He turns back, his face empty of emotion.

“Gray,” I repeat. I don't mean to give him a once-over, but how can I not? I need looking at him to become common and boring as quickly as possible.

Somehow I think it's going to take a while.

He shoves his hands in the pockets of his jacket and stares at me.

“I'm Eloise.”

He lets out a sound I can only describe as a grunt and looks away.

I lean against the door jamb and study him. “Ohhh, I get it now.”

His eyes dart to mine. “Get what?” he snaps.

I nod in realization. “Why you need me.”

He scoffs, shaking his head. “I don't need anyone.”

“Really?”

I feel like he's just issued a challenge simply by showing up at the door. All at once, I want to accept this job, make Grayson Hawke fall in love with Chicago, and single-handedly save the Comets' season.

Especially knowing how he kisses.

Intense. Isn't that how Dallas described him? It's the perfect word.

“Really.” He levels my gaze. “Especially not a babysitter.”

“Just someone to act as a buffer, right?” I ask. “Between you and . . . oh, I don't know, the entire human race.”

His frown deepens, and I smile. Uh-oh. This could be fun.

I cross my arms over my chest, leveling his gaze. “Here's the deal. Your team wants me to make you more likable.”

“That's not what they want.”

“And for me to make sure you don't say or do stupid things.”

“Not it at all.”

I wonder how far I can push. “Or, at the very least, make you less of a jerk.”

His eyes flash to mine. Not exactly anger there. Maybe . . . amusement?

Or respect? Weird.

“That’s the crux of it,” I say. “I’m very likable, so I know a few things about this.”

He doesn’t respond, but I can see the muscles in his jaw twitch.

“You don’t want me around. You don’t want to be here. You didn’t want to get traded. I get it. But frankly, I need the money, so if you just do what I say, we’ll be fine and I can make rent.”

I’m putting up a good front, right? Sounding like a take-charge sort of person, even though I feel one hundred percent the opposite?

Even though what I really want to do is pull him into the coat closet and play seven minutes in heaven.

I *do* need this job. And I *will* be good at it. I have to prove to myself that I’m not doomed to repeat my terrible mistakes over and over again.

“Not gonna happen.”

I brace myself for a stand-off, and I pull out the fighting words. “Then you don’t get any pie.”

There’s a flicker of a change on his face, but he quickly reels his emotion in. “Maybe I don’t like pie.”

I lean in, ready to die on this hill. “*Everyone likes pie.*”

“Gray?” It’s Dallas’s voice behind me, but Gray and I are having a staring contest, and he doesn’t want to lose.

For my part, I’m simply trying not to melt into a puddle right here on the porch.

Mercifully, Dallas steps into the space beside me and reaches out to shake Gray’s hand, giving me an excuse to look away and mentally regroup.

“I see you’ve met Eloise,” Dallas says.

Gray shrugs and grunts in lieu of an actual response.

“Come on, Gray. Use your words,” I tease.

He turns, unamused, looks at me full in my eyes, and it’s almost too much. I smile big to cover up the fact that I’m not breathing.

I might’ve met my match.

If he can leave me feeling this undone with a simple stare, how am I going to feel if I ever have an actual conversation with him? Or literally do get locked in an enclosed space with him, like a coat closet or an elevator or the back seat of a car . . . ?

“Let’s go inside,” Dallas says, his voice switching off my inner monologue. “I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

“Actually, uh, maybe I should just head out.” Gray hesitates on the porch. “This was stupid.”

For some inexplicable reason, I blurt out, “Oh, please don’t go!” and it hangs there for what feels like a week.

What do I care if Grayson Hawke eats Sunday dinner with my family or not? I do my level best to affix a nonchalant expression on my face.

“I mean. . .” I try to recover, “you, uh, you. . .”

“You came all this way,” Dallas says, saving me. “At least have some pie.”

Gray’s eyes land on mine, and I smirk. “Oh, he doesn’t like pie.”

“I love pie,” he says, looking incredulous. He does this without breaking eye contact.

Ooh. He’s good.

Or bad.

Both are viable options for me. I’m not picky.

Dallas looks at me, then back at Gray, and then steps out of the way, motioning for him to come inside. I’m honestly shocked the man showed up here, since he knows nobody except Dallas and seems like he’d rather be having a root canal than eating dinner with a bunch of strangers, but who am I to complain?

I close the door as Dallas leads Gray away, and before he disappears into the kitchen, he glances over his shoulder back at me.

He looked back at me.

I must be blushing because when I turn, I find Raya standing there, glaring at me. “Are you going to be able to handle this?”

“Who? What? Of course. Pssh.” I wave a hand. “Piece of cake.”

Raya sets her face in that trademark Raya expression, eyebrows up, neck cocked, arms crossed.

I shake my head and point a finger at her. “Stop it.”

“You get attached to people, Eloise,” she says, and then a bit lower, she adds. “You cannot get attached to that guy.”

I know why she says this. It’s unprofessional. Everything Raya does, says, and thinks is the opposite of unprofessional.

Sometimes I feel sorry for my oldest sister. She’s absolutely brilliant in business, but her love life? Nonexistent. She could really use someone to help loosen her up.

“This is a job, Raya,” I say, matching her surly expression.

“A *good* job,” she says.

“I know that.”

“Maybe the best job you’ve ever had,” she says.

I eye her. “You don’t think I can do it.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You didn’t have to.” I look away.

She takes a step toward me. “Eloise, you couldn’t be more wrong. I think you’re perfect for this.”

I look at her face and find only sincerity.

“You do? Really?”

She nods. “Yes. I can’t think of anyone better. Talking to people on his behalf, being a sort of buffer for him in awkward social situations. Showing him around the city you love.”

If she only knew that her words are like sunshine to me.

But then my shoulders drop. Raya is almost never complimentary.

At least not to me.

Mostly, I think she thinks I’m a first-class disaster. She doesn’t know how hard I worked at my last job.

Or how genuinely good I was at it. I planned events and kept Jay’s calendar and talked to all kinds of *professional* people. And I excelled at all of it. And I felt good because of it.

But my stupid heart got in the way.

“But . . .”

Ah. There it is.

“. . . if you get *personally* involved with that man, it all goes up in flames.”

“*That man* is so not my type. What would even possess you to say that?”

She gives me a knowing look, and a horrible thought zaps my insides. Does she know? She couldn’t possibly. I hid my Jay Mistake perfectly.

“Every man is your type, Eloise,” she says.

I frown.

“I just mean you see the good in *everyone*. Remember Cody . . . what was his last name?”

“Taylor,” I say, knowing where this is going.

“You’d think bailing him out of jail—twice—would’ve been enough to knock some sense into you, but you never want to believe anything bad about anyone.” Raya snaps her fingers, remembering— “And that other guy, the

one with the neck tattoo—”

“Buck.”

She winces. I wince. Buck had zero redeeming qualities.

“And that *super* boring gamer guy who lived in his mom’s basement.”

“I get the point.” Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I look away. “I won’t mess it up.”

“Good,” she says. “Because I do think you’ll nail this job. It’s a great opportunity. Do it, Eloise. I believe in you.”

The words are so simple, they shouldn’t affect me the way they do. But it’s Raya. I’ve always wanted her approval.

“There you two are,” Poppy says. “Are you hiding?”

“No,” I groan. “Raya is just reminding me of all my dating disasters.”

Poppy’s eyes light up, like this is a fun game and she wants to play. “Did anyone mention Joey Amato yet? The one who smelled like feet and garlic?”

Both of my sisters start laughing, and I try to be a good sport, but honestly, the older I get and the more broken relationships I collect, the harder it is. My theory that everyone could possibly be “the one” hasn’t worked out so well.

“I’ve made a decision about the job.”

At that, Poppy goes still, a hopeful look on her face. “And?”

“And I’m going to do it.” I glance at Raya, whose face is encouraging and only slightly concerned.

I make up my mind right there that I’m going to be the best *companion* that man has ever had—and kiss or no kiss, I’m not going to let my heart get even slightly involved in any of it.

Not at all.

Nope.

Not even a little.

Chapter Five

Eloise

Typically, I don't get nervous.

But this guy, sitting across the table from me, is making me nervous. Or maybe it's not Gray. Maybe it's the fact that I'm currently in a conference room in the offices of the Chicago Comets practice facility, staring at a photo from the last time the team won the Stanley Cup.

I know that's exactly what Dallas is hoping happens this year and part of the reason he lobbied so hard to get Gray on the team. I know because it was the topic of conversation at Sunday dinner.

A conversation Gray hardly participated in. If at all.

I can't tell if he's introverted or distracted, or just plain rude, but he left only moments after his plate was cleared, and I could count on one hand the number of words he said the entire time he was there.

When the door shut behind him, I think the rest of my family breathed a heavy sigh of relief.

Everyone did a good job of including him—or trying to—but it wasn't a secret that he didn't want to be there. Which had all of us wondering why he'd come.

And it made me wonder why he took pity on me that night at Sully's because he seems to care so little about other people. The fact that he kissed me at all is something of a mystery.

Maybe we should do it again. You know, for research purposes.

"It's obvious why they hired you, Eloise," Raya had said after he left.

“But you’ve got your work cut out for you.”

Dallas had apologized, and my parents commended him for trying to help Gray feel included, and I spent the rest of the evening wondering if all of this was a big mistake. Never mind that I’d spent the previous two weeks back at the animal shelter, walking, feeding, and cleaning up after dogs and cats and knowing the professional step back was my own stupid fault.

On the plus side, there was almost zero chance of me repeating The Jay Mistake. My old boss, it turned out, only hired me for one reason—and it had nothing to do with my skills.

The fact that I fell for it still gnaws at me.

But that was clearly not going to be an issue with Grayson Hawke. Not only is he the polar opposite of flirty and charming like Jay, but he seems to loathe people in general.

And I’m a people person. We couldn’t be more different. We’re not apples and oranges, we’re apples and cactuses.

He’s the cactus in that scenario.

And while the fact that he doesn’t seem to remember me or my lips still bothers me a little, I’ve resolved to forget it ever happened and focus on this job.

Still, I’ll be lucky if I can get him to say two words to me the entire season. I now feel like it’s my personal responsibility to make sure this man not only acclimates well, but that he sees how amazing life in Chicago can be.

But *not* with me. Romance is off the table, no matter what the guy looks like.

Or how good of a kisser he is. (And for the record, he’s very, very good.)

The door opens and a man I recognize as Dallas’s coach walks in, followed by Dallas, and a predictably intense-looking Gray.

His name sure fits his mood. You’d think that would make him less attractive, but it doesn’t. Not even a little.

I sit up straighter because even though I already have the job, I feel like I’m a fraud for being here. Imposter syndrome in full effect.

They could find out at any second that I’m not really qualified to be anyone’s assistant.

Wait. Stop. That’s not true. I *am* qualified.

In spite of Jay Jerkface, I was an excellent assistant.

I remind myself of this silently because for reasons I can’t understand, I

can't stop thinking about the scar above Gray's lip.

"Miss Hart." The coach extends a hand toward me, and I shake it. "I'm Coach Turnrose."

I smile. "Eloise, please. Good to officially meet you."

"Dallas speaks very highly of you." He nods in Dallas's direction.

I shoot Dallas a surprised look. "Really?"

"Very highly." He raises a brow. "So, don't let me down." When he smiles, I take his teasing for what it is, but he's just spoken my fear out loud.

Ack! What if I can't do this job?

I clear my throat in a futile effort to chase the fear away, but when my eyes settle on Gray, I'm a tabletop globe that just fell off its axis and rolled into the hallway and down a flight of stairs.

I quickly look away, trying to get back in orbit, but I can feel him watching me with his quiet, serious expression.

He doesn't want me here, and he has no problem showing it. I'm not sure how to change his mind.

Yet.

I imagine myself as a lawyer and almost ask the coach for permission to treat the hockey player as hostile.

"We wanted to bring you in to go over the job expectations," Coach Turnrose says. "It's important to lay it all out for *both* of you." He glances at Gray, whose scowl only deepens.

"Can we clear the air first?" I ask.

The coach looks surprised. Dallas, however, does not. He's probably used to me by now. After months of dating my sister, he really has become like an older brother to me. And my tendency to say whatever pops into my head is well-documented.

Like the time I told him on live television he had spinach in his teeth.

That took our friendship to a whole new level.

"Of course, Miss Hart, er, Eloise," the coach says.

I smile at him. I figure if I can make the coach love me, then Gray will have a harder time getting rid of me.

"He obviously isn't on board with this," I say, nodding at Gray.

"Understatement," Gray says.

I look at him, tilt my head and narrow my eyes. "I'm going to try not to be offended by that."

He shrugs as if to say *I. Don't. Care.* and the message is clearly received.

“So is it a habit to assign someone a . . .” I realize I’m not sure what to call myself in this position. I’m sure as heck not using Poppy’s word: *companion*. The last thing I need is to conjure images of anything other than professional behavior where this man is concerned. Because boy, oh boy, that could set off a string of fireworks I am wholly unprepared for.

Still, this job doesn’t sound like a straightforward assistant job. I never helped Jay acclimate to a city or ran interference between him and the entire human race.

“Sorry.” I clear my throat. “I know he’d say ‘babysitter.’”

He huffs his seeming agreement.

I continue. “So, if he isn’t on board with this—” I don’t look at Gray this time— “then why do it?”

“That’s a great question.” Gray says, annoyed.

I look at Dallas. “You lobbied to get him on your team?”

“Yes,” Dallas says, without hesitation. “He’s the best scorer in the league.”

“With the worst attitude.” I shoot Gray a look. His expression changes, and again, I see a flash of something that reads like *I’m impressed*.

Maybe he prefers the direct approach.

He certainly did at the bar. *Whoa, buddy*.

“Some players need a little help adjusting to a new team,” Coach Turnrose says. “New city. New team. New staff. New everything, really.”

For a split second, I put myself in Gray’s shoes and wonder what—and who—he left behind in his old city.

The coach continues, “A lot of guys rely on their families, but Gray isn’t married. And his family’s out of state.”

Good we got that cleared up, though an earlier Google search told me as much.

And that’s about all it told me. Except that he has a bad temper, likes to pick fights on and off the ice, and isn’t easy to work with. Oh, and apparently, he’s incredibly focused and currently one of the best players in the league.

Other than that, he has zero social media presence, seems to have gotten out of all public appearances and once, when someone photographed him working out, he grabbed the camera, set it on a weight bench, and dropped a forty pound kettlebell on it.

He’s a *lovely* human being.

“Okay, so what about a manager or something?” I look at Dallas. “Alicia is around a lot, isn’t she?”

“Yeah, but Gray is represented by a different firm,” Dallas says.

“He’s with Malcolm Crane,” Coach Turnrose adds.

Whoa. I don’t know sports, but I know who Malcolm Crane is. Top tier celebrities and athletes.

“And Malcolm knows I don’t need a nanny.” Gray glares at the coach, and I begin to see just how hard this job is going to be. If he talks this way to his coach, how is he going to treat me?

All right. Let’s try the direct approach.

I turn to Gray. “Why’d you come to our Sunday dinner?”

His eyebrows raise, surprised. “What?”

“I assume Dallas invited you,” I say. “But you didn’t talk to anyone, you ate, and then you left right after it was over. So . . . why did you even come?”

He pauses for a beat, then quips, “I was hungry.”

I nod, as if pondering this. “I don’t think that was it.”

“You don’t think I was hungry?”

“No, I think you were hungry, but I don’t think that’s why you were there.” I lean forward in my chair just a little. “I think you want to try to make this whole thing with the Comets work. I think you know that together, you and Dallas could get that championship cup thingie. And I think you might even be sick of being the guy no one wants to be around.”

“Champion cup thingie?”

“You know what I mean.”

He sucks his teeth. “You figured all that out from one dinner, huh?” he asks.

And one kiss.

“Yep. I can help you, but you have to drop the act, quit pretending you hate everything and everybody, and start being honest.”

He stares.

I stare right back.

There’s a tense moment, and I wonder if he’s dreaming up ways to get me to quit this job before I even start it, but somehow I believe he knows that’s not going to happen.

He sits back in his chair, and wordlessly holds up his hand as if to say *Okay, fine. You win.*

Oh. Wow. I really didn’t think that was going to work. I try to hide my

pride as I turn to the coach. “So, about this job.”

Chapter Six

Gray

This sucks.

I'm literally in the principal's office. I'm a kid, sitting in the principal's office, being told all the reasons why I got in trouble.

And I didn't even do anything yet.

In reality, I'm in a conference room. Which also sucks.

Come to think of it, I don't know what would've happened if my dad really had been called into the principal's office. I suppose the one upside to this trade is that it puts more distance between me and my father.

The more miles, the better.

Eloise seems irritated with me. I don't blame her. I showed up at her family dinner, responded to questions in grunts and mumbles, then left like I was being chased.

Thinking about how I acted just makes me feel more stupid. It's like I know the right thing to do, and then I turn around and do exactly the opposite.

Stupid pride.

And now she's looking at me, not believing my answer to her "*Why did you come to dinner in the first place*" question.

She shouldn't. I'm lying.

I'm not sure why I took Dallas up on his offer in the first place. Maybe after our win Saturday, I felt some sort of strange debt to the guy.

He's so sure I belong here.

Nobody's ever really gone to bat for me like that. Mostly people just stay out of my way. Another reason Eloise is interesting. She almost seems to *want* to get under my skin.

Doesn't matter. The point is, I'm not off to a great start here.

We might've won the game Saturday, but it wasn't because of me. I could practically hear my father shouting from the sidelines, that unmistakable whistle when he wanted my attention.

The memory of his face makes me shudder.

I give Eloise a cursory glance. I recognized her the second she opened that door. *New Year's Eve*.

Never thought I'd see her again, but here she is—the woman I haven't been able to stop thinking about since I walked out of that bar.

Which is why I absolutely cannot have her working as my assistant—not if I'm going to have any chance of staying focused.

What were they thinking?

What am *I* thinking?

Crap. I'm still thinking about her. People are sitting here, talking, and I'm not even listening to whatever they're saying.

Because it wasn't just a kiss. It was . . . a connection. And I don't have those.

She seems highly unimpressed by my name, my stats, or the fact that I play hockey at all.

And that only makes her more attractive.

I learned a couple of things about Eloise sitting at that dinner. She loves her family. And she loves to talk. She never sat still. She was in the kitchen, in the living room, back at the table over and over again. And she uses her hands when she talks. A shoulder squeeze. A hug. A hand on an arm.

And now, they've stuck her with me.

Great.

"Here's a list of engagements over the next couple of months." Coach Turnrose slides a small stack of papers over to Eloise.

"Can I see that?" I ask. Because *no unnecessary going out* is one of my rules.

Her big, blue eyes jump to mine. "I think it's my job to keep your calendar."

"I don't go out during the season," I say.

"Like, at all?" she asks.

“Nope.”

She looks at Dallas, then back at me.

“No people, no dinner out, no nothing? What in the world do you do all day?”

I admit, she’s a bit like Rosen. She doesn’t mess around, gets straight to the point.

I like that.

I stare right back at her. “Train. Practice. I go over every mistake I made the night before and I work my . . .” I stop myself from swearing. I heave a sigh, because explaining all of this always feels so stupid. “I work. Hard. That’s it. I don’t have time for anyone or anything else.”

She taps the stack of papers on the table in front of her and frowns, like I’m speaking a foreign language. “No dating?”

“*Especially* no dating.”

Why do I feel like she isn’t asking that question for a friend?

The coach looks at Dallas, who turns toward Eloise and talks about me like I’m not there. “That’s why Gray is the best. He’s focused, and it should stay that way. However, there are a few events Rosen expects us to attend.”

She holds up one of the papers. “A Meet the Press night on the ice, a charity gala to support the Comets foundation—” She looks at me and practically sings, “Ooh, a *gala* . . .”

I force a smile while the rest of my face says *Yeah. Great. Awesome. Can’t wait.*

“A St. Patrick’s Day fan meet and greet, a Kids’ Autograph appearance. Which of these events will be your favorite, you think?” The way she grins tells me she’s enjoying my misery a little too much.

“I don’t do events during the season,” I say, as firmly as I can. “Period.”

“You do now,” Coach Turnrose says. “You’re a Comet. And every single one of those guys goes out of their way to get involved in the community. It’s why our games sell out, and that makes Rosen happy.”

“And when Rosen’s happy, we get things. Like new gym equipment,” Dallas says.

“And new players.” Eloise smiles, indicating to me.

I hate that I’m annoyed and attracted at the same time.

“So, Eloise,” the coach says. “We all know Gray is going to hate all of these events—”

And everything that isn’t hockey.

“So that’s where you come in.”

“Great,” she says brightly. “I worked at an animal shelter for a long time, and this really isn’t that different.” She tosses a glance my way. “All bark and no bite.”

Dallas chuckles and shakes his head. “Oh, Gray, you’re going to be *just* fine.”

I hold her eye and don’t let a single muscle flinch.

Finally, she looks away, but she seems unflustered.

“So, you’ll keep Gray’s calendar, but also attend these events with him. Help navigate the demands on his time, his interactions with fans and the press. Make sure he spends an acceptable amount of time at each event, acts accordingly, watches his mouth—” a glance at me— “that sort of thing.”

“We’ll get his full calendar to you with practices and games,” Dallas adds.

“Do I attend those?” Eloise asks.

“No,” I blurt out, as if I have a say in any of this. But the last thing I need is her stupid, beautiful face in the stands when I’m trying to concentrate on the game.

“Negotiable,” Coach counters.

“Good, because I hate hockey,” Eloise says without a trace of humor.

When she looks up and finds us all glaring at her, she puts on a smile. “Just kidding.”

“You’re not kidding,” Dallas says to her, then to the rest of us, “She’s not kidding. She really does hate hockey. But it’s fine. This job is about people, not hockey.”

“Well, it’s a *little* about hockey,” Coach Turnrose says. “Maybe watch a game or two.”

“I can do that,” she says.

Coach nods, then slides a folder toward Eloise. “There’s some paperwork in here that you’ll need to fill out to get paid, along with information on how to get your ID badge, that sort of thing. You’ll have to stop by the HR office. Talk to Beverly—”

I tune him out.

I shut my eyes and put my hands on my head. They’re really doing this. They’re hiring this woman to be my . . . what?

“What are we calling her?” I interrupt.

It’s not until everyone looks at me that I realize I’ve asked the question

out loud.

Eloise's eyes seem to be twinkling as she says, "Most people call me Eloise, but I'll also answer to Your Honor, Princess Eloise, or Lady Hart." She cracks a smile.

I manage not to, though I admit, I have to work at it. "Her job title? What is she?"

Her smile fades.

"I'm thinking 'personal assistant' makes the most sense," Coach Turnrose says. "Even though your duties aren't as straightforward as most assistants'." He gives Eloise an apologetic look.

"And how many other guys on the team have personal assistants?" I ask.

"Several of them, actually."

"Paid for by the team?"

"Yes. Think of it as a perk," Coach Turnrose says.

"I've never been anyone's 'perk' before." Eloise wags her eyebrows.

Dallas's face tightens. "This is a special circumstance."

"Because I'm a jerk, right?" I scoff. "With a bad reputation?"

She smiles. "Well, that's a horrible way to talk about yourself."

"Tell me that's not what you think," I say. "And you don't even know me yet."

There's an audible silence as my words hang in the air for a moment.

Dallas clears his throat, and after a pause, he adds, "I was going to say it *was* because you're a jerk with a reputation, but I like what she said better."

"I seem to remember a time you had a reputation too, Burke," I snap.

"You're right," he says.

"Nobody stuck you with an *assistant*." I realize as I say this that Eloise is sitting right here, and judging by the drop in her shoulders, I've just offended her.

I don't *mean* to be a jerk. It just happens.

"This doesn't have to be a big deal," Dallas says to me.

"And it won't be," Coach Turnrose says, with the finality to indicate the conversation is over. "Because this is how it is. Now, Eloise, I think you've proven to me—and everyone else here—that you're perfect for this position. I'll walk you down to HR. I already gave Beverly a heads-up that you were coming."

Eloise stands. I make a point not to look at her. As she walks around to the other side of the table, she says, "See ya later," to Dallas. Then, she turns

and looks at me. “I’m really excited about this. I know we don’t know each other yet, but I can already tell that your life needs a little fun in it.” A pause. “And I am the queen of fun.” I can hear the smile in her voice when she says it, but I don’t respond.

Once she’s gone, I lean back in my chair with a sigh and find Dallas looking at me. “What?” I let my head fall against the headrest and close my eyes.

“You really want people to hate you, don’t you?” he asks.

“You shouldn’t be surprised,” I say. “I made it clear how I felt about this whole thing.”

“I stuck my neck out for you, Hawke,” he says. “So do me a favor and don’t screw it up.”

He stands and walks out of the room, leaving me sitting there, staring at a giant canvas of the last great team to play for the Comets.

Burke has more natural talent than just about anyone playing the game, but what he didn’t have was a center to match his skill.

Now, he does.

And Eloise’s last words to me play like a record in my head.

Fun, I think as I shake my head.

This game—and my life—haven’t been fun in a long, long time.

Chapter Seven

Eloise

“You’ve got your work cut out for you,” Coach Turnrose says.

I draw in a breath and stare straight ahead at the closing elevator doors. “That’s an understatement.”

He hits a button, and then turns to me. “Listen, Miss Hart, Gray may not be excited about any of this, but the fact is you don’t technically work for Gray. Not really. Your job isn’t to keep him happy, or to make sure he has fun. It’s to take on the daily tasks to make things run more smoothly and to help him stay out of trouble.”

“Like you said, I’ve got my work cut out for me.” The elevator doors open to another floor of the Chicago Comets administrative offices, located in the brand new training facility the team recently built. I pause for a brief moment to note how ridiculously cool this is. Even a non-hockey lover can admit that.

“I don’t want to mess this up,” I say. “And I don’t plan on it. But I’m not sure how to do my job if Gray is, well, the way he is.”

“Beverly has a list of duties for you,” he says, leading me down a long hallway, the black, turquoise, and silver Comets logo painted on the wall. “He’ll probably fight you on all of it.”

He glances over at me as he stops in front of a closed door. “He is not your boss.”

I give a definitive nod, aware that Gray is going to hate this. It’s one thing to be assigned an assistant, but something else entirely to have that assistant

answer to someone else. It almost seems unfair, like we're going behind his back. "But part of the job *will* be making him happy, right?"

"I'm not sure it would be fair to give you that particular task," the coach says. "Something tells me Grayson Hawke is determined to be miserable. He's been here three weeks already, and he's just . . . off."

I frown. What a horrible way to live. But also, it would be really hard to walk into work one day and find out your job had moved hundreds of miles away with a whole new group of people and no warning.

"He really didn't want to leave his old team that much?"

"There's more to that story than I've got time for, but we'll get him on board," Coach Turnrose says. "He and Burke are a dream team. You just need to sell him on the rest of the package. Chicago is a great city. He just doesn't know it yet." He opens the door and a middle-aged woman with cropped dark hair and bright red lips looks up with a smile.

"Good morning, Coach," she says.

"Morning, Bev," he says. "This is Eloise Hart, the new employee I told you about."

"Oh, yes," Beverly says. "The one who's going to assist our new player." Her face turns serious. "I'm afraid you've got your work cut out for you."

"You know, I've heard that somewhere . . ." I say with a half-smile toward Coach.

"Now, let's not scare her off," he says, whoa-ing his hands.

"Oh, I don't scare easily," I say, welcoming the challenge of making Grayson Hawke love this team, this city, his life.

Me.

The thought is bordering on intrusive, so I bury it by flipping a mental switch.

"I've already started a list of fun things to show him in the city." I grin, but I don't miss the doubtful expression that passes between them, and I feel my smile fall.

Maybe I'm naive, but I'm ready to embrace this task. I don't believe Gray is as cranky and terrible as he presents himself to be. I just need to figure out how to sell him on a whole new life. And I need to do it without romanticizing that kiss.

No big deal, right?

"I've got to get to practice," the coach says, looking at his watch. "Beverly will take good care of you."

I shake his outstretched hand, and then he walks out the door, leaving me with Beverly, who already seems like a person I'll be happy to know.

"Had Grayson Hawke in here last week, and let me just tell you," she says, shuffling papers and leaning in like she has a secret, "I hope you've got a magic wand in that purse." She raises her eyebrows as if I should know just what she's talking about.

And I do. Gray is miserable here.

A picture of him sitting at the bar on New Year's Eve, all by himself, nursing a beer and watching hockey highlights on the television enters my mind.

"It must be hard to be traded," I say, suddenly feeling empathy toward him. "I'm sure he had a whole life that he had to leave behind." I wonder what exactly he *did* leave behind. I know he's not married, and he said he doesn't date—or leave his apartment, apparently—during the season. But that doesn't mean there weren't people he cared about.

Now, he's all alone.

Well, except for this entire team of hockey players. And fans. And me.

The thought squeezes something inside me. Not that I expect to be Grayson Hawke's "person," but it's now my job to ease this transition.

I will absolutely figure out how to do it.

Without making the same mistake I made at my last job, of course.

Beverly walks me through all the paperwork, having me sign my name in all the proper places. When she tells me what I'll be making, I'm floored.

Are there are two extra zeros at the end of that number?

"You didn't ask about salary before you agreed to take this job?" She shakes her head, chuckling to herself. "Given the task in front of you, you probably could've negotiated for more."

"After my last job didn't work out, I went back to working at an animal shelter," I tell her. "I knew that no matter what this job paid, it would be better than that." I pause. "But a lot less cuddly."

I didn't really take the job for the money anyway. I'm looking for redemption after the mistakes I made with Jay. And I suppose I'm trying to figure out my life.

And yeah, maybe I wanted the challenge.

"What are the duties, exactly?" I ask, doing my best to push aside the reemerging imposter syndrome I'm feeling right now.

Beverly opens a folder holding the papers I just signed. Inside is a stapled

stack, and she flips a few of the pages, as if reciting my job description from memory. “Running errands, managing his calendar, handling his social media, coordinating his public appearances and charity events, that sort of thing.” She points at another empty line waiting for my signature, and I sign. “You’ll also organize his fan mail and any other special projects or personal appearances that come up.” She looks at me. “The contract doesn’t specify, but you’ll also handle grocery shopping, dry cleaning, booking travel, basically anything Mr. Hawke is too busy to bother with.”

I nod. “Got it.”

“Oh, here—” She flips the page. “NDA.”

I raise a brow.

“You can’t talk about your work or your athlete,” she says. “He needs to be able to trust you implicitly. These boys need us on their side. You’re a part of the team now.”

Something inside me squeezes at that. I sign the NDA and hand the pen back.

Beverly slides the paperwork into a file folder. “I hope you can make him love it here so he sticks around and helps us get that cup.”

I frown, aware there is a line of worry etched into my forehead. “I’m not sure anyone can do that.”

She studies me. “I think you can.”

Her belief in me bolsters me more than it should.

She doesn’t wait for me to respond. “This is the off-site practice facility, but you’ll be at the arena sometimes too. At both places, there are lots of spots where you’ll be able to set up shop if you have things to do while he’s in practice. And of course, you can come to any of the games you want to.”

I don’t bother telling her that Gray practically banned me from practices and games, because I have a feeling he would ban me—and everyone else with a pulse—from every aspect of his life if he could.

I take what the coach said to heart. I work for him, not Gray. And if that means going around him, or behind him, then I will.

“There’s really no way for me to do all of this without actually talking to him, is there?”

Beverly laughs. “Unfortunately, no. You’ll need a list of his favorite foods, any schedule he has for laundry and dry cleaning, and probably a bunch of other personal details I’m forgetting. Once he accepts that you’re part of his team, hopefully he’ll let you in.” She lets out a slight gasp. “Oh!

That reminds me, you'll need a key."

"A key?"

"To his apartment," she says.

A what? To his *what*?

"I'm pretty sure he's not going to let me into his apartment," I say.

"For now, just do your best." She hands me a folder with the words *Welcome to the Team* printed on the front.

I wince a smile. "Right."

Beverly taps the folder. "Everything you need to know about working here—pay schedule, benefits, protocols, rules—it's all in here."

I look down at it, like it's a baby with two heads. *Benefits?*

"Would you like a tour?" she asks, standing. "Are you a hockey fan?"

I stand, forcing my brain to get with the program. "I'd love one! And . . . not really."

"Well, we won't hold that against you." She comes out from around her desk, and only now do I realize how short she is. "This place and this team have a way of winning people over."

I think of Poppy. She was definitely won over by this place and this team. And I decide I'm open to being won over. By the team. By the sport.

By Gray.

I have a sinking feeling that in order to do this job, *really* do this job, I'm going to have to get him to at least tolerate me.

Can I do that while remaining entirely professional?

The jury's still out on that one.

I don't really believe there's any danger of anything but a purely professional relationship between me and him, anyway. I'm not in the habit of falling for guys who treat people like garbage.

Oh wait. I kind of do.

I only realize it after the fact. And I'm trying to be better about that.

After a full tour of the administrative offices, Beverly looks down at her FitBit. "Whoa! Got my steps in already! I should head back to my office." She nods at my lanyard. "That'll get you in just about anywhere you need, both here and at the arena, but for obvious reasons, it will not open the door to the men's locker room." She lets out a cackle. "If you need Mr. Hawke for anything, I suggest finding a spot in the stands so you know exactly when he's done with practice. Otherwise, he'll duck out and you'll miss him."

"Noted," I say.

“You might be here a while.” She punches the button to the elevator. “But I’m not sure how else you’re going to get your job done.” Once the elevator opens, she tells me the way to the ice, and then says, “Stop by my office any time. I’m here to help.”

“Thanks, Beverly,” I say.

“My friends call me Bev.”

I smile as the doors close, whisking her back up to her office several floors above where I’m now standing.

I hold up my lanyard and run my fingers over the glossy barcode. Is this real life? I’m working for the *Chicago Comets*! And I have *benefits*! I pull out my phone and snap a selfie of me and the lanyard, then open my text chat with my sisters:

ELOISE

You guys! It’s happening! Your girl is official!

POPPY

Eeek! I won’t lie, I’m a little jealous!

RAYA

Stay focused, Eloise. This is a great opportunity.

I send a .gif of Rachel Dratch’s wide-eyed Debbie Downer from SNL and try not to roll my eyes at the fact that Raya doesn’t seem to have a fun bone in her body as I tuck my phone away.

Following Beverly’s instructions, I find the rink, and when I walk in, I’m struck by the sheer enormity of this facility. It’s owned by the Comets, but it’s open to the public, and is home to junior hockey, public skating, and all kinds of fun community events. Part of the team’s commitment to Chicago, I suppose.

Some of the practices are open to the public too, and off to the side, there’s a whole group of boys, watching the men glide with ease and power on the ice. Their faces are full of the kind of awe and wonder only kids with big pro hockey dreams can have.

I find a seat a few rows behind them when Dallas comes over to the group, removes his helmet, and flashes that smile that probably made Poppy fall in love with him in the first place.

The boys crowd forward, handing him hockey sticks to sign, and Dallas asks, “You guys have your skates?”

A collective response of excitement washes through the small crowd. A few minutes later, Dallas is leading them out onto the ice.

The other guys on the team join their captain in a good-natured, if very gentle, scrimmage. As my eyes drift around the ice, I notice that Gray isn't participating. He's standing off to the side, watching.

As his assistant, not his PR manager, this is not my job. I shouldn't even care about this. It doesn't matter to me if he's a jerk to a bunch of kids.

But also, it kind of does. It says a lot about his character, in my opinion.

Because who's a jerk to a bunch of kids?

After about ten minutes, he skates over to Dallas. I hear him say, "Can we get back to practice now?"

"In a few minutes," Dallas says.

Gray looks like he's about to punch Dallas, and one of the kids skates over to him. "Can you sign my stick?"

Gray pulls his attention from Dallas to the kid, scribbles on the stick, then skates off the ice.

"Practice isn't over, Hawke," Dallas calls after him.

"This isn't practice, *Captain*." He practically spits the word, killing the entire mood on the ice.

Thankfully, Dallas seems unfazed. He and the rest of the guys on the team go back to what they were doing, and I get up and march off in the same direction as Gray.

I don't know my way around, but I follow the tunnel off the ice into a hallway. I know if I look like I'm *supposed* to be here, I'm less likely to get questioned. I make sure my lanyard is visible and channel my inner Raya.

I can see Gray up ahead, and just before he pushes open the door to what I assume is the locker room, I call his name.

He stops and turns, sees me, and it's like his whole body rolls its eyes. I'm pretty sure my mere existence is on his last nerve.

"Hey," I say.

"What? What now?"

For a split second I try to decide how to approach this, and instead of having a long debate, I just pick a direction and leap.

"Look, I know you've got a chip on your shoulder, and you're mad at the world . . ."

"You do, huh?" He sighs and shakes his head.

". . . though I honestly don't understand why, considering your life seems

to be pretty charmed—”

He cuts me off. “You really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

I stop. He’s right.

“You’re right. I don’t. Why don’t you make me understand, then?”

He scoffs and turns toward the door.

I blurt, “This is exactly why you have the reputation you have.”

That stops him.

He turns to me, leans in, and says, “This. Isn’t. Your. Job.” He starts to walk away again, and I instinctively grab his arm.

“Gray. Wait.”

He stops, then looks at my hand. I pull it away and soften, seeing something like angst flash behind his turquoise eyes. “I’m sorry.” I take a step back. “I just—” I shake my head and turn.

To my shock, he says, “You just what?”

I turn back. I check his tone. It’s not angry. It’s not even annoyed. It’s almost like he wants to know what I think. Or maybe that’s just what I’m telling myself. Maybe I was right, and this really isn’t who Gray wants to be. Maybe he just needs permission to be kind.

Still, I won’t bully him into it. That’s not who I am, and frankly, I’ve never been a fan of tough love. So, instead, I draw in a breath and force myself to smile. “Are you okay?”

He frowns and looks over my head. It was stupid to ask. What’s he going to do, pull me into the corner and tell me his feelings?

“I just . . . think this is important,” I say as kindly as I can. “The kids? On the ice? For the team and for them. *Especially* for them. And going out there, teaching them how to do things, just showing up . . . it’ll go a long way. I mean, you’re their hero.”

He stiffens suddenly and grabs the door. Something hit a nerve.

I’m certain the next words out of his mouth will be “You’re fired.” But instead, he levels my gaze and says, “Yeah, well, you know what they say—”

I frown.

“Never meet your heroes.”

And with that, he slams the door behind him.

Chapter Eight

Gray

Hero. Yeah, right.

Eloise's words follow me into the locker room. They weren't angry or meant to shame me. They were concerned . . . and kind.

I don't even know what to do with that.

Suddenly I'm not an adult in a locker room, I'm six years old, wearing inline skates on the patio my dad built in our backyard just so I could practice. I hated skating until he put the stick in my hand, and once I had it, I never wanted to let it go.

I loved it because it was fun.

But to my dad, hockey wasn't a game. It wasn't even a sport. It became everything that mattered. A way of life. A means to an end, but what that end was, I didn't know at the time.

And I only mattered to him when I was the best at it.

I hit all the benchmarks he set for me—from playing minor hockey in the CSS Hockey League, one of seven kids in history to enter the Junior Hockey League at age fifteen, multiple championships in the under-18 league, first round draft pick at age nineteen, Stanley Cup Champion and league MVP—but somehow, for him, it was never enough.

Never.

And boy, did he make that clear.

If he saw mistakes, I spent the rest of the night doing drills. If I missed an opportunity to score, he had me ripping shots from fifteen different

designated spots on the ice for two and a half hours.

You have to be the best, Grayson. If you're not the best, what's the point?

I shake away the memory.

I messed up with the kids out there.

But the way Eloise disagreed with what I did, and the way she talked to me about it, was foreign. Seeing her sitting in the stands was hard enough, but if she's going to start telling me what she thinks, that's going to be a problem.

It dawns on me that her speaking her mind is most likely *not* in her job description. Which means, I *could* tell her not to do it.

I can hear my dad's voice echoing in my head. "Distractions are for other players, Grayson. You let your head get turned once and look at what happened. Never again. Stay focused. Forget everything else. Nothing else matters."

That voice drowns out Eloise's without even trying.

There's a reason he's not a part of my life anymore.

I head back out onto the ice, this time alone, thank God.

We've got a game tomorrow. I've been playing like garbage ever since the trade. I wish they'd just let me do my thing out here, but they don't trust me to do what needs to be done.

I need more practice time.

I think I'm the only one left in the entire arena, but something catches the corner of my eye.

Eloise. She's back in the stands. Watching.

Fantastic.

I skate around for a few minutes, aware that her eyes follow me as I do. And while someone probably instructed her to stay until I leave, I'm surprised she did after our conversation in the hallway.

I don't mind that she's watching me.

I also realize I don't mind that she told me what she thinks. People don't often do that.

But I shouldn't even be thinking about her. This is going to be a problem.

As I skate down to the end of the ice where she's sitting, she straightens.

I stop at the edge and pull off my helmet. "What are you still doing here?"

"Waiting for you," she says simply.

"Go home," I say.

“I’m on the clock,” she says.

“I’m giving you the rest of the day off.”

“I need the key to your apartment.” She stands.

I didn’t see that coming. “What the heck for?”

“Because I need to stock your fridge.”

I grit my teeth. *This* is her job? Getting into my stuff, sticking her nose in every bit of my business?

“No, you don’t.” Although, it is practically empty.

She reaches into her bag and pulls out a sheet of paper. “List of duties—” she points at it— “complete grocery shopping for athlete.”

I shake my head. “This is stupid. I don’t need—”

“Yeah, I know.” She stands and walks right up to me. She’s several inches shorter than me, but her energy is ten times bigger. “You don’t need me.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “But you know what? I need this job, so if you’d stop thinking about yourself for three seconds, maybe you could do something nice for someone else.” She glares at me.

And then, her face falls. “Shoot, I really tried to keep a straight face on that one. *Dang* it. Sorry, I didn’t mean to be that rude.” She looks away, visibly flustered, then pushes a hand through her wavy blond hair.

I can’t help it. I smile.

I snap my mouth into a straight line before she looks back at me. I’m about to remind her that I did something *very* nice for her on New Year’s Eve, but choose instead to keep that to myself.

Making her aware of the fact that I actually do remember her? That I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her? Bad idea. Especially in our current circumstance.

This way, she’ll assume I’m just a jerk, and it will be enough for her to keep her distance.

I need her to keep her distance.

She sighs. “Look, I’m not here to annoy you, or to make your life harder, or whatever. I’m *supposed* to make things easier. That’s my job. So, maybe we could go over this list and decide what things on it you’ll actually let me do.”

I don’t want another person poking around my life. Period. But I notice she’s mentioned she needs this job a couple of times. I might be rude, but I’m not completely heartless.

There’s just one problem. How do I stay focused on hockey when she’s

around? How do I let her in without *actually* letting her in? My father wasn't wrong when he threw my mistakes back in my face. I was the one who made them.

I ignore her suggestion. "I still have an hour here. Do you want to—" It feels weird asking her to do things I'm perfectly capable of doing on my own.

She finishes my thought without me giving her any indication what I was going to say.

"Food. Yep. What do you need?"

Wow.

She goes on, "I could run down to Paradise and pick something up. Or I could grab a pizza? Have you had Chicago style pizza yet?"

"No," I say. "I don't eat pizza."

"Oh. Right," she says, and her face kind of falls. "Stupid. I should've thought of that. Training probably, right? It's unhealthy?"

Something inside me snags. Why am I making this so hard for her? She obviously wants to help. "I can, uh, do pasta though," I say. "Maybe with some grilled chicken?"

Her eyes go wide, excited. "Yeah! Totally. I'm on it. I'll be back in like, an hour. Ish." She pulls out her phone. "Might be longer because I'll need an Uber."

"You didn't drive?"

"I took the train," she says. "Then an Uber. I thought it would be easier, but obviously not. I should've thought of that, too. I'll get better, I promise."

Before I think, I say, "I have a car."

"You do? Is it fancy? Like a rich, fancy car?" Her smile could power the lights in this entire facility. I pretend not to notice.

I shake my head. "It's just a car."

She squints at me. "And you're going to let me drive it?"

I shrug. "Are you going to crash it?"

"No."

"Then why do I care if you drive it?"

A pause. "You don't . . . care if I drive it. Because I'm your assistant."

I frown. "Yeah."

"And I'm a responsible adult who has her license."

"I would hope so."

She raises her eyebrows. "It's like our first bonding moment."

"It's not."

She hitches her bag over her shoulder. "Says you."

I don't understand this woman. Or the fact that this whole display makes her more attractive. It shouldn't. She's kind of a weirdo.

Good grief. In a different world I could see us being friends. I think I kind of *like* her.

And I don't like anybody.

"Also, everyone else is gone," she says.

"So?"

"So, why are you still practicing?"

"You don't get to be the best by leaving when everyone else leaves," I say.

"And you're the best," she says, a trace of a question in her voice.

I look away. She really has no idea who I am.

"Where is your car parked and how do I get the keys?" she asks.

"In the parking lot out back, and I'll have to get them from my locker," I tell her. "Unless you want to go into the locker room and get them yourself."

She holds up her lanyard. "Only place I can't get into," she says.

"Probably for the best."

I start skating off, and she calls after me.

"I don't know how to get anywhere from here."

I lift a hand. "I'll be right back." I don't turn around to see if she heard me. I'm too busy trying to reconcile the fact that I have to spend time with a woman who's way more "girl-next-door" than "beauty queen."

And I've always had a weakness for the girl next door.

About an hour later, I'm walking out of the locker room, expecting Eloise to walk in with dinner, when my phone buzzes.

It's Burke.

"Hello?"

"Okay, the first thing you need to know is that everyone is fine."

The bottom drops out of my stomach and my chest goes hollow. "What? What happened?"

I can hear noise in the background, including a woman who sounds like she's crying. "He's going to kill me. Tell him I'm so sorry."

“Burke?” My voice is sharp.

“There was a little accident.”

“Is she okay?” I realize I’m racing toward the parking lot, but my car isn’t there. Because Eloise took it.

I also realize the car doesn’t really matter to me at all.

And that’s the part I don’t like. I just met her. Why am I worried about a woman I just met?

“She is,” Burke says. “She’s fine. A little bruised, that’s all. And worried you’re going to be mad.”

I sigh, turning a circle like a tiger in a cage. “It’s just a car.”

“Right,” Dallas says. He covers the phone, but I can still hear him when he says, “He said ‘it’s just a car.’” I picture the look of relief on Eloise’s face.

I don’t know her. At all. But in that moment, I’m relieved she’s okay. I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Uh, how can I get there?”

“I already sent my driver to get you,” Burke says. “He’ll be in our parking lot in about three minutes.”

I nod, and when I get off the phone, I’m reminded all over again of the dangers of caring about people. I’m not open to that. There’s one person in the world I care about, and that’s enough for me.

Stay focused. The game is all that matters.

A few minutes later, I’m sitting in the back seat of an Escalade as a man named Gerard drives me through the unfamiliar city. Mercifully, he doesn’t try to make small talk, almost like Burke told him I’d prefer to ride in silence.

Smart guy, that Burke.

After about fifteen minutes, Gerard pulls the car over and motions up ahead to where the lights from a squad car flash. There’s a car in front of mine, both pulled over, and as I get out and start toward them, I can see Eloise pacing.

When she sees me, she rushes over, meeting me halfway between Dallas’s car and the scene of the accident. “This guy is a huge hockey fan. But once he finds out this is your car, I’m afraid he’s going to try to squeeze more money out of you.”

I stop moving and shove my hands in my pockets to keep from reaching out and hugging her. “Are you okay?”

Her shoulders slump and her bottom lip quivers. “Yeah . . . yes, I’m fine. But I’m really sorry about all of this. About your SUV—” She turns and points to the windshield, covered in marinara. “And the food.”

I crack a smile but hide it again before she looks back at me. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not,” she says. “It was my fault. I’m not used to city driving, and it’s like the Wild West out there, and I thought it was safe, so I made a left turn on a yellow, and—” she claps her hands together. “Blam.”

“Blam?”

It’s dark, but we’re standing under a streetlamp, and as she *blams*, she turns, and that’s when I see the red mark. I again instinctively want to reach out and touch her cheek, but clench my fist in my pocket instead. “Your face.”

Her hand goes to her cheek. “Oh. I didn’t realize . . . the air bag.”

“Geez,” I say. “You look like you got punched.”

“Awesome.”

An uncomfortable pause, and I try to fill it with “Are you sure you’re okay?”

She manages a smile. “I think so.” She watches me. “Although I guess I lied to you.”

I frown.

“You asked if I was going to crash your car, and I said no.” She shakes her head. “It’s like I jinxed myself.”

I’m not sure what to say, so I look around and see pieces of a shattered taillight in the intersection. “Well, the car stuff—” I pull out my phone— “will be taken care of.”

“You’re sure,” she says.

“It’s just a car.”

She nods. “Okay. Will your insurance cover it?”

I don’t have the heart to tell her that even if it didn’t, I could pay for the repairs out of pocket. It’s not the kind of thing I like to flaunt. “I’m sure they will. I’m just glad no one was hurt.”

“Right.” She nods, like she’s putting a puzzle together. “You know what this whole thing means?”

I don’t respond because I can tell she’s going to answer the question whether I do or not.

“It means . . .” A smile crawls across her face. “The next time you pretend to be a complete jerk, I’ll know better. Because now I have proof you’re not.”

Chapter Nine

Eloise

I'm going to get fired on my first day.

Fabulous.

After the police finish the paperwork, Gray poses for a photo with the guy who hit me.

Surreal.

They determine the SUV isn't drivable, and when the tow truck has it loaded up, everyone else leaves, including Dallas, who had a dinner to get to, but who didn't want to leave us without a ride.

So, it's just me and Gray. And Gerard.

"The worst part of this whole thing is that you aren't going to get to eat that food," I tell him, trying to make light of what could've been a much worse situation.

"That's the worst part?" He quirks a brow. It's the first sign of amusement I've seen on his face since we met. I like it.

"Aren't you hungry?" I ask.

He looks away and shrugs. "You should probably head home now. I can have Gerard drop you."

I turn and look out the window of the Escalade, my neck starting to remind me that I just got in an accident, and my cheek is on fire. I feel like a dodgeball that got thrown against a barbed wire fence.

I realize there will be no "making light" with Grayson Hawke. No chit chat. No small talk. No conversation. I'd be smart to learn this now.

Stop trying so hard, Eloise. Not everyone has to like you.

“I still need to shop and pick up your dry cleaning,” I say.

He frowns, confused. “I’m capable of getting my own food. And I don’t have any dry cleaning.”

“Don’t you wear suits to away games?”

“My suits are already clean.”

I nod. “Okay, well, you’re on the road for the next three days, so maybe I could go to your apartment, stock the fridge and—”

“No.” He cuts me off. “I mean . . . it’s fine. You don’t have to do that.”

“Beverly said—”

“I don’t care what Beverly said,” he tells me. “You told me I could let you know which things on that list are fine, and that’s not fine.”

“I asked if you wanted to go over the list, and you never responded,” I counter.

“I just did.”

He’s so difficult. Ugh.

“I don’t need this kind of . . .” He seems to be searching for the right word. “Assistance.”

I eye him. “Won’t it make your life easier?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t want to worry about there being another person in my space.”

“Well, maybe just tell me what you *would* be okay with.” I wince when I turn too quickly. “I’m not trying to be difficult, but I could be really good at this if you let me.” I feel like I’m holding my hat in my hand.

Or like I’m on *The Bachelor* hoping the rose he’s holding is for me.

Either way, it’s vulnerable and slightly humiliating.

I need to succeed at something. Won’t you let me try?

He holds my gaze a fraction of a second too long, then says, “I know. I understand. But I don’t know how to have this kind of help. I’ve never . . .” He purses his lips together and shakes his head. “I’ll just have Gerard drive you home.”

I frown at the abrupt change of subject. “I can take the train.”

“No,” he says, firmly. “Gerard, can you take Eloise home?”

“Of course.” Gerard meets my eyes in the rearview mirror. “Still on Cupid Lane, Eloise?”

“That’s right.”

Gray looks at me, as if he hadn’t made the connection that Gerard is

Dallas's driver. And Dallas dates my sister. And unlike Gray, I *like* to go explore the world.

Gerard slowly pulls away from the curb.

Gray lets out a sigh. "And I don't know what Beverly told you, but you don't need to make a habit of staying for practice," he says.

"I told you, I needed a key," I say, and then add, "and I wanted to make sure you didn't scare any small children."

He makes a noise like he knows he should respond but doesn't want to put in the effort to come up with actual words.

This conversation is like a seesaw with one person.

"Do you not like people around when you practice?" I angle my body slightly toward him.

He shrugs.

"Why?"

"I don't know, it's just . . . weird. Invasive. Especially with people I know."

"What about when you play?" I ask. "There are thousands of people watching you then."

"It's different," he says.

"Why?"

"Because I don't know any of them." The car comes to a stop at a red light, and I shift in my seat.

"Do you have anyone? I mean, who'll be at the games?" I'm fishing, and I know it.

The light changes, and the car starts to move again.

"Look, Eloise, I'm sure you're a great person, but maybe let's keep the personal details personal, okay?"

I glance up to see Gerard watching me again, then back to the road.

I stare out the window. "Got it."

My plan to give him the silent treatment lasts about three seconds because we're driving over the Chicago River, and it makes me think about one of Chicago's coolest and strangest traditions. "Okay, I know you're not wild about Chicago, but there are a lot of really cool things that happen here all year round."

He doesn't say anything.

"Did you know they dye this entire river green for St. Patrick's Day? Originally, a group of plumbers used the dye to identify leaking pipes. It

turned the entire river green for a week, and the tradition was born. Now they use an orange vegetable dye, which is better for the environment, but they do it every year. It coincides with a St. Patrick's Day parade, which is an even older tradition here in the city." I know this because when I was a tour guide, I had to learn a lot of historical facts about the city, and St. Patrick's Day is a big deal in Chicago. I remember the spiel as if I'd recited it yesterday.

I glance over. He's looking at me, but he makes no attempt to engage.

Some people would be deterred by this, but not me. I take it as a cue to tell him everything I love about the city.

Because when it comes to taking hints, I absolutely suck.

"We've got great restaurants, the *best* pizza, forget New York, I don't care if you can fold it. We've got incredible museums, and personally, I think the theatre scene here rivals Broadway." I pause and reassess who I'm talking to. "Not that someone like *you* is probably that into theatre, you know . . . but . . ."

Open mouth, say stuff, apparently.

And I just keep going.

"But you haven't lived until you've seen Chicago at Christmas time. The windows are my favorite. The lights, the decorations . . . and the markets. I mean, it's freezing, but it's worth it."

I look at him. "I don't know if you're one of those people who can celebrate Christmas without snow, but I'm not. Christmas and winter are meant to be white. And the weather here . . . I mean . . . it gets *really* cold in the winters. Can you stand it? The cold?"

"I lived in Philadelphia," he deadpans.

"Right." I mentally smack my forehead. "This weather probably isn't a big deal to you."

I glance at him and he looks . . . amused? Entertained? Weird. He's not annoyed.

I'm not sure why I'm still talking. He hardly seems to be listening. He's probably regretting getting into this car with me, but the alternative to my babbling—silence—is even less appealing.

"My favorite thing about Christmas is finding the perfect gift for someone," I say. "Raya, my oldest sister, is the hardest. She's like you—cranky." I chuckle to myself, but don't give him a chance to respond since I already know he won't. "Poppy is easier, but I never want to be obvious about it. I mean, she's a chef, so you might think it would be a good idea to

get her, like, kitchen utensils or things to make her work life easier, but I try to go deeper than that. A person is so much more than just what they do, don't you think?"

Still no response.

Still not deterred.

"And I think I'm easy to shop for. I mean, I like everything. Usually, my sisters go hunting for snow globes because I collect them, and they have a contest to see who can find the most unique one." I go quiet for a minute, aware that while I'm filling the space because I can't stand silence. I'm probably driving him nuts.

I tell myself to try to be quiet for a minute, just to see if I can stand it, but after thirty skin-crawling seconds, I'm talking again.

"Finding the perfect Christmas gift is an art. I used to think I could start my own gift-buying business because I'm so good at it. And I don't say that in a cocky way. As talents go, it's a pretty lame one." Another pause.

And then, to my utter shock, Gray says, "I don't think so. It's a good talent."

The words hang there in the space between us, and I'm wholly unprepared to be complimented. Even on something so meaningless. I have a feeling he's not in the habit of giving compliments, and even though I shouldn't, I find myself wanting him to tell me other good things about myself.

I always do this. Always.

I want to be liked. And the less a person seems to like me, the more I want to prove to them that I'm worth liking.

It's not what I should be wanting with this guy.

I have a job. A good one. With benefits and my own lanyard.

Focus on that.

Still, that tiny little compliment felt like a cup of hot cocoa on a cold, winter day. In front of a fireplace and a Christmas tree. While wearing pajamas.

Warm. Fuzzy. Cozy.

"Well, if you have anyone you ever want to shop for, I'm your girl." The words are out of my mouth, sounding a little desperate and presumptuous, before I can stop them. "I mean, I'm your assistant. Your girl assistant."

Control+Z my life.

And if I could rewind, would I go back to New Year's Eve and repeat that

kiss? If I knew I'd be working with this man just a few weeks later, would I still ask him to kiss me to make my cheating ex-boyfriend jealous?

It takes barely a second for my brain to answer that question with a resounding "YES and YES."

Which is somewhat pathetic, because he doesn't even remember.

And wait. How does he not remember? It was dark in there, but not *that* dark. I look the same. I didn't wear a wig. He'd been drinking, but not really.

I look at him. Is he just pretending to not remember so we don't have to address it? To help me save face?

I'm *this close* to asking him when common sense kicks in.

We drive through the twinkle-lit city and onto the interstate, heading toward my hometown, Loveland. It would be easy for him to ask me questions about it. Why'd I choose to live in the same town where I grew up? Did I ever want to move to a big city? What's life like in a suburb that feels like a quaint, quintessential, small town?

Gray asks me none of those things.

He asks me nothing.

He doesn't say a word.

The entire drive.

And while the quiet is awkward and strange, I'm out of things to say. With a directive not to ask personal questions, what am I supposed to ask? When should I report to work when you get back from your trip, boss? What should I do when you're gone?

I already know what his response will be, so I say nothing.

The GPS leads us to my apartment, which is above a bakery on Cupid Lane right downtown. Downtown Loveland is much different than downtown Chicago, and if I had to guess, my apartment is much different from his.

"You live here?" he asks as Gerard brings the car to a stop.

I point. "There's a loft space above the bakery." I look at him. "It smells amazing. Like bread and doughnuts all day long. Not great for the hips." My laugh sounds nervous, even to me.

While I've got windows that stick and hardwood floors, I'm imagining Gray's place is all straight lines and modern metallic fixtures. If he'd let me inside, I could even make a place like that feel homey, another one of my unimpressive talents, but the odds of that happening are most likely zero.

I reach for the handle, but stop before opening the door. I'm overcome with emotion, and I think the accident is catching up to me. I've put on a

brave face until now, but the trauma of it is starting to spill over.

“I’m . . . I’m really sorry about the car.” I say, my voice shaking a bit. “Not a great first day of work, right? Especially when you didn’t want them to hire me in the first place.”

“It’s fine.”

I pause. It really isn’t, but I don’t argue. “And I’m also sorry for the rambling. My sisters say I’ve always been like this.”

“Like what?”

“Chatty.”

He stares out the window. “It’s fine. It was—” He stops.

“It was . . . ?”

A shrug. “Nice.” He’s still not looking at me, so he doesn’t see me smile.

“Nice, huh?” I say, because why would I accept this comment like a normal person when I can draw attention to it like a weirdo? “Nice.” I shimmy my shoulders a little. “I feel like this was a breakthrough.”

“It wasn’t.”

“We just had a moment.”

“We didn’t.”

“You’re going to warm up to me. I promise.”

He leans toward me, eyes fixed on mine, and my stomach flip-flops at his nearness. But when he opens my car door and nods for me to get out, it’s like a smack back to reality. Still, I’m smiling at him like a dolt.

“Okay, well . . .” I draw in a breath and let out an exaggerated sigh. “I guess I’ll see you when you get back from your trip.” I swing my legs over and look back, the dome light casting a shadow on his face. “And good luck with the hockey thing. Hope it works out.”

It’s slight, but I see the corner of his mouth twitch. Is he holding back a smile?

Surely not.

But all at once it feels like my mission to see it, to be the reason for it. An authentic Grayson Hawke smile.

I don’t linger because I’ve made enough of a fool of myself here, but when I get out of the car and close the door, I hear him say, “Eloise?”

I turn and find he’s rolled the window down. I take a step back toward the SUV, wishing he’d say my name again and then immediately wishing I would stop thinking things like that.

And yet, somehow the way he handled my crashing his forty bajillion

dollar car—with kindness—has managed to make my resolve to keep him at an arm’s length a little wobbly.

“Hey, yeah?” I say because I’m trying to cover up for the fact that I’m actively working to not look at his lips.

He reaches into his pocket, finds a key ring, removes a key, and hands it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Key to my apartment,” he says. “I’ll send the address.”

My eyes go wide. “You’re going to let me go to your apartment?”

“I will absolutely take that back,” he says.

I snap my face back to neutral.

“Come by tomorrow before we leave.” A pause. “For, uh . . . groceries. And whatever.”

I grin. “You won’t regret it.”

He responds with a grunt and rolls up the window.

I hold the key in my hand like it’s a golden ticket I’ve just unwrapped from a bar of chocolate.

Chapter Ten

Eloise

I wake up the next morning to a message on my phone.

GRAY

650 W. Adams Street

An address. That's the whole text from Gray. At 4:30 a.m.

He was up at 4:30 a.m.?

I was thinking my workday would start at nine, but if he's that early of a riser, I may need to reconsider. This thought sends me into a panic.

I rush to get ready, not sure how to dress or what to bring for this job.

I settle on black jeans, a pink sweater, and my favorite cozy boots, hoping that whatever I'm doing today doesn't require me to look professional.

I drive my own car into the city today, with my foot hovering over the brake pedal and my head on a sore-necked swivel, looking for potential accidents.

Following the GPS to a building in the West Loop district of Chicago, I navigate through the neighborhood to an industrial style building, one of those old warehouses that someone converted to residential spaces, and all at once, I can't wait to get inside and look around.

I find a close parking garage around the corner, take my ticket, and pray Gray's building validates. I won't get a paycheck for a couple of weeks, and I'm basically living on my credit card.

I briskly walk to the front of his building and see a doorman standing outside. He looks up and smiles. "Good morning!"

"Good morning, I'm here to see Grayson Hawke." I have a key, but it feels like I should check in. Let him know I'm here. Anything other than the familiarity of taking the elevator up to his floor and opening the door like I belong here.

"Ah," he says. "You must be Eloise."

I smile, shocked that he'd know my name. "That's right."

"Mr. Hawke let us know you were coming, and he asked that you be given this." He reaches inside his coat and pulls out a card. "It's an ID badge that will allow you to park in our garage and give you access to and from the building." He smiles and holds open the door. "You can head right up."

I look at the card. It's got my name on it, so clearly Gray had to give them my information in order for them to make and issue it. And that means he had to think about me. And that makes me feel warm on the inside in a way that it really shouldn't.

This is purely business. He doesn't even remember the kiss.

I start to head inside, and then turn back. "I just realized I'm not sure where I'm going."

"Oh!" He points down the hall. "Elevator on the right, all the way to the top floor."

"And what's the apartment number?" I double check my phone, realizing Gray didn't tell me.

He gives me a quizzical look. "It's the whole floor. You'll have to swipe the card before you hit the button."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Really?"

"And it's under the name Marcus Aurelius. We take our tenants' privacy very seriously."

I switch my bag from one shoulder to the other as the weight of this whole situation finally begins to sink in.

I'm working for a professional athlete. Maybe since I don't watch or like hockey, this didn't seem like as big of a deal as it is, but this is a very big deal.

Like, a whole top floor, penthouse kind of deal.

His job puts him in the spotlight. He could have press outside. Or a stalker.

Don't a lot of hot athletes have crazy women after them? Like the pitcher

who had to play in Japan because some woman made up a story about him?

It dawns on me that it's my job to make sure that kind of thing doesn't happen. I switch my bag again.

I step inside the elevator as the realization works a number on my nerves. I swipe the card, hit the button to the top floor, and say a silent prayer that is basically just *a little help here, a little help here, a little help here* over and over again.

When the elevator stops, I look down at my feet and inhale a very deep, very slow breath.

The doors open, and I'm not in a hallway. I'm in his apartment.

It's not really an apartment. It's more like a condo. It's huge.

And he's nowhere to be seen.

"Hello?" I call out in hopes of avoiding any additional awkward run-ins, like, oh, say, crashing into his bare chest after a shower or something.

The loft is quiet, and there are boxes piled along the perimeter. If I had to guess, I'd say this place came furnished, and while the apartment itself is oozing with character, there are no personal touches in here at all.

I'm surprised that he doesn't live in the sleek, modern, fancy building I expected him to live in, but not surprised there's nothing about this space that identifies it as his. He did just move here, after all.

Though, I'd be willing to bet that this is exactly what it'll look like a year from now.

Maybe I can make it a little homier for him. Having a quiet, relaxing space to come home to would go a long way in making him like it here.

Right?

The exposed brick is accented by wood beams across the very tall ceiling and shiny black fixtures around the space. From where I'm standing in the living room, I can see the kitchen, an area with tons of bookshelves and beyond that, I assume, Gray's bedroom.

Heat rushes to my cheeks, and I turn away, the memory of the way Gray's lips moved across mine too easy to recall.

"Gray?" I call out again, but there's still no answer.

Maybe he already left.

I'm alone in his apartment because this is my job, and I'm supposed to take care of details, not fantasize about my boss. I set my bag down on an oversized cream-colored sofa and walk into the kitchen. I open the refrigerator and find two bottles of water, a carton of milk, and nothing else.

Groceries will be the first thing I take care of. Maybe Poppy can help with ideas, he's probably on a regimen of some kind.

I glance at the bare shelves inside the fridge as I close it. What has the man been eating?

"Gray?" I head out of the kitchen and move through the open space, where further down, it's broken up into actual rooms. There's a very sparse, very clean bathroom to my immediate left, and across from it, what seems to be an empty bedroom.

I take another step and hear a rhythmic sound I can't quite place. You could keep time to it, but it's not familiar. A dryer? With shoes in it? I'm not sure.

I gingerly take a few more steps, looking around, following the noise. I poke my head around a corner, and I'm standing in the opening of a fitness room.

And there, running on the treadmill—shirtless—is Gray.

He's wearing nothing but a pair of black shorts, running shoes, and a baseball cap, and he's staring out the large wall of windows at the incredible view of the park across the street, set against a beautiful Chicago skyline. I take it in—my view, not his—for a long moment. Gray's job requires peak physical shape, but I wonder if his teammates take their fitness as seriously as he does.

While Gray hasn't set up anything in the living spaces of his house, he seems to have taken great care with this room. In addition to the treadmill, he has a rowing machine, a stationary bike, a set of dumbbells, and a weight machine with barbells positioned over a bench. Weights lined up by size, bands attached to the wall, exercise balls, yoga mats, a large, see-through cooler stocked with water and electrolyte drinks, everything in its place and all laid out perfectly.

I know he has access to the team's gym but apparently, this is important enough to have in his living space too.

He's got AirPods in, and obviously didn't hear me call out.

In the rhythmic padding of his feet, for a brief second, I forget that he's usually unpleasant to be around. A bit of admiration seeps in at the back of my mind because Gray's commitment is evident—and impressive. I start to daydream about what it might be like to come in and out of this space freely, as something other than his assistant.

But then the rhythmic pounding of his feet stops, pulling me back to

reality, and my skin shocks hot and my whole body freezes in place. He steps off the machine and sees me, and it's too late for me to run and hide.

And I really want to run and hide.

He pulls the AirPods from his ears and looks at me. "How long have you been standing there?"

I stutter something that doesn't even remotely resemble a coherent thought, and then look at the floor, at the ceiling, anywhere but at his glistening chest. Why is he tan? It's the middle of winter!

"Sorry. I just, uh, just got here, actually. I wasn't sure what time you needed me. Not that you need me, but what time you wanted me, uh, for work. Things. You know, assistant things. Groceries and things."

How many times can a person use the word "things" in the span of thirty seconds?

He picks up his T-shirt, which I only now see was hanging on the railing of the treadmill, but instead of putting it on, he uses it to wipe the sweat from his face, which means I'm still standing here speaking gibberish because I'm still fully entranced by his six-pack. Again, I look away.

"Okay, well, I should shower and pack," he says. "You can look around or . . . do whatever you need to do."

When I look back, I see that he's taken a few steps toward me, and those few steps have taken me out of the safe zone.

"Do you have a list of things I should tackle while you're gone or . . . ?" Is he flexing his abs or do they just naturally look like that? I know, in theory, what it takes to have this kind of muscle definition, and I'm starting to understand why Gray doesn't date during the season. He's serious about his regimen, his sport, his fitness—so serious that he doesn't have time for anything else.

It's why he's the best.

But it's also why he's alone.

"Look, I don't want to be rude—"

A nervous laugh escapes me, interrupting whatever it was he was going to say.

He raises his eyebrows.

"Sorry, I just—" I look away. "It's just that you've been rude since the day we met."

Not counting the kiss. That was very much the opposite of rude, but since I'm resigned to pretend that never happened, this is accurate.

He watches me, and my nerves feel like they're dancing around outside my body. Why is he staring at me like that?

"I don't want to be rude," he repeats. "I'm focused. That's all." He walks past me, and I follow him into the hallway, aware that even though he's just run a marathon on his treadmill, he still somehow smells like a Colorado forest.

I'm not a gym person. I don't make myself sweat *on purpose*. But the times I've been forced, I smelled more like compost.

"Eloise."

"Huh?" *Oh, no.* He asked me a question, and I missed it because I was thinking about evergreens and mountain air.

"I said I tried to write out a grocery list, but that's about as far as I got," he says. "There's a store down the block, or you can have them delivered or whatever."

We're standing in the kitchen now, and he opens the fridge and grabs a bottle of water. When he closes the door and meets my eyes, it's almost like it was an accident, and he's not sure what to do next.

"Are you excited?" I ask because I haven't gotten the ten thousand hints that he hates small talk. "For the games? Traveling with the team, all that stuff?"

He inhales, but I don't know where the breath goes because as far as I can tell, he never lets it out. Instead, he walks past me and back into the hallway. "I have to shower."

I forbid my imagination from thinking a single thing about that statement and focus on finding his grocery list.

"I'll leave my credit card for you. I've got a pretty specific diet, and I don't need much."

I nod and resist the urge to salute.

He disappears down the hallway, leaving me standing in his kitchen. When he comes back twenty-five minutes later, he's wearing a suit, rolling a small suitcase, carrying a garment bag, and looking like he just stepped out of my greatest fantasy.

Or into my greatest fantasy. Either. Or both. Like I said before, I'm not picky.

"I'm leaving now," he says.

"Okay," I say.

He stands there, watching me, almost like he's not exactly sure how to

walk out the door, which is a good thing because I realize I still have questions.

“Am I allowed to unpack boxes?” I ask.

He frowns. “Why?”

I shrug. “I don’t think you’re ever going to acclimate to this place if you don’t set up your living space.”

He looks around the loft, then back at me. “Fine, but I don’t want a bunch of unnecessary junk in here. I don’t like clutter.”

In his apartment and in his life. No unnecessary things. No unnecessary people.

“Got it,” I say.

“I have to go.” He starts toward the elevator.

“Okay, but—” I step in front of him and nod toward his tie. “May I?”

He grunts, but doesn’t back away, so I reach out and adjust the knot, pat down his shoulders, then stand back and look him over. In truth, I’ve done very little to fix his tie, but I’m trying to make myself seem useful. I nod. “Now, you’re ready.”

His expression doesn’t change, and he doesn’t thank me. Instead, he turns and hits the button for the elevator. It’s coming from the first floor, taking a minute to arrive, so he just stands there.

“Guess you can’t make a quick exit from this place, huh?” I joke.

He glances back over his shoulder and gives me a look that suggests he is not amused.

“Oh, thanks for the key card thing,” I say, walking toward him, because again, I can’t stand the silence. But also because I’m in his apartment. He doesn’t even seem comfortable here, so what hope is there for me?

“Figured you’d need it.”

“Now I have free rein of the arena *and* your apartment.” I grin. “Jackpot.”

The elevator doors open, but he doesn’t get inside. I look over and find him watching me.

“Free rein?” he asks.

“Are you scared?” I give him a little push toward the elevator, and he reluctantly steps inside. “What secrets will I uncover while you’re gone?”

His gaze flicks to mine, and as the doors close, I raise my hand in a wave. “Good luck with the hockey!”

I realize I’m going to have to brush up on my hockey lingo if I ever expect him to take me seriously.

But more importantly, I'm standing in his apartment. Alone.

I look around the space. I may not be an interior designer, but I already have ideas on how to make this place feel like a home.

Gray will be gone for three days, and I'm going to use that time to set up his personal space. Because frankly, I don't know what else to do with myself, and they're paying me too much for me to just sit around.

I pull out my phone and open my chat with my sisters.

ELOISE

Anyone want to go shopping?

RAYA

You have time to go shopping?

POPPY

Comets are on the road for three days. :(

ELOISE

Yeah, which means I've got three days to unpack Gray's apartment and make it feel a little less like a fancy prison cell.

RAYA

You're in his apartment?

I open my camera, snap a photo and send it.

POPPY

Nice!

ELOISE

Nice, but boring. No wonder he hates it here. This place feels like a museum.

RAYA

Is it part of your job to make it feel like a home?

I think about this for a second. No, it's not in the job description, exactly. But I need to do whatever I can to make him fall in love with this place. I tap an answer.

ELOISE

Yes.

It's about helping him acclimate.

I can't think of a better way to do that than making his apartment feel like a home, can you?

POPPY

Food would help. Let me guess, the fridge has like two things in it.

ELOISE

Milk and water.

POPPY

Oh, well, then, he's set.

ELOISE

So . . . shopping?

POPPY

I'm at the restaurant all day. All week actually. I'm sorry!

RAYA

I'm working too, but maybe I can meet you for lunch. I'll text you a place.

POPPY

Well, now I feel left out. Can we do this tomorrow?

ELOISE

Apparently, I make my own schedule now, so I'm game!

RAYA

Sure, I can make it work. See you both tomorrow.

I click my phone off and take another look around this amazing space. This is real, this is happening, and I have a job to do.

I shut my eyes, take a breath, and all I see behind my eyelids is Gray with his shirt off.

Good grief.

Chapter Eleven

Gray

After playing like garbage, my all-time favorite thing to do is sit in front of a bunch of microphones and cameras and answer stupid questions about why I didn't play better.

Marshawn Lynch once answered every single post-game question with "I'm just here so I won't get fined" and nothing else. "*Can you describe that 75-yard touchdown run?*" "I'm just here so I won't get fined." "*What about your stomach bug before the game?*" "I'm just here so I won't get fined."

That guy is my hero.

Tonight, after my third consecutive lousy away game, everyone in hockey is criticizing the Comets for bringing me here in the first place.

And they're not holding back.

This is pretty standard. The sports media in Philly was even harsher than here. You play a professional sport, you open yourself up to criticism.

It's why I prefer being private. Scrutiny takes a toll.

Thanks, Dad.

I'm sitting behind the table next to Dallas, facing the media, the lights, the cameras—clenching my fists and willing myself to stay calm. I told Turnrose putting me out here was a bad idea, but he insisted.

He also told me not to lose my temper. Signs point to "fat chance."

"We won the game," he said. "Focus on that."

"Yeah, no thanks to me," I told him. "And they're going to point that out."

“Take the high road, Hawke,” he said.

High road. Whatever.

Sitting here, facing this crowd of reporters who have never played the game, the high road feels like the other side of the world.

“Burke, it was widely reported that you were largely responsible for bringing Grayson Hawke to the Comets,” a small guy in a white button-down asks. “How do you feel about that decision now?”

A smarter man would remind himself there are cameras trained on him. That any muscle twitch is going to be replayed over and over on the internet. But not me. I glare at the reporter, waiting for Burke’s well-rehearsed answer.

Burke’s gotten this public relations thing down pat. He’s gone from bad boy to golden boy practically overnight. I could ask him for pointers if I cared enough about how these people saw me. But I really don’t.

“You mean because Hawke and I aren’t clicking the way we need to yet, or . . . ?” Burke asks.

“Uh, yeah,” the reporter says. “Sure. Clicking together, let’s go with that.”

And then Dallas leans back in the chair, smirking. “I know what you’re trying to do, Bernstein.”

“What? I’m just. . .” the guy starts backpedaling.

Dallas cuts him off. “It’s fine. It’s a fair question. It’s going to take a bit to work things out, out there on the ice. We expected that. We just haven’t found our groove. I believe the man sitting next to me is exactly what was missing from our team. There’s no way we can win without him.”

I’m uncomfortable with the compliment. It’s not what he rehearsed in the locker room. Still, I remain stone faced.

“What about you, Gray?” The reporter looks at me. “Is it a groove thing?”
Click, click. Cameras on me.

“A groove thing?” I repeat back to him.

“You’ve been vocal about not wanting this trade.”

I pause, and then ask, “Is there a question?” doing nothing to hide my disdain.

“Do you feel like you’re letting your new team down?” he asks.

Click. Click, click.

I feel heat rise up the back of my neck. “You obviously have an opinion about this, so why don’t you tell me—am I letting my new team down?”

The reporter looks at the guy next to him, then back at me. “I think the

numbers would bear that out, yeah. Productivity down, penalty minutes up, power play kills down, all compared to this time last year.”

I make a motion as if to say *there’s your answer*.

“So, what, just not a good fit? Are things going to work here in Chicago?” another reporter asks.

“You have no clue, do you?” I snap at him.

“I’m sorry?”

“It’s easy for someone like you to sit there and make assumptions. You’ve never played this game? Have you?”

“I don’t think—”

“No, you don’t think,” I say. “You’re all useless. Nobody cares what you have to say. So, why don’t you just—”

“Thanks, everyone, that’s all the questions we’ll take for tonight,” Burke says, cutting me off. He pushes my microphone away and stands. “Let’s go.”

“I told Coach not to put me out here,” I mumble as we head out the door.

“And I told you to play nice.” Coach Turnrose walks in behind me and is in my face the second I walk into the locker room. “What the heck was that?” I shrug him off.

“Hey. *Hey*.” He steps around me, face to face. “It was a valid question.”

I hesitate before finally turning to face him. I know the other guys are listening. I can practically feel their eyes on the back of my head. I stare past him, off at nothing, making it more than obvious that I don’t want to be here.

And there, at the back of my mind, is the loudest voice of all—my dad’s.

You’re worthless, Gray, you know that? You don’t make those shots, those easy shots, you might as well pack it up and go home. You’re wasting everyone’s time.

If you’re not the best, what’s the point?

WHAT’S THE POINT?

“Are you ever going to start being a part of this team?” Coach asks. “Are you ever going to quit whining? Philadelphia was going to trade you whether we wanted you or not.”

My eyes flick to his.

“Yeah. Sorry to let that little nugget out, but a trade was going to happen,” he says. “No matter what. You were gone.” He points at Dallas. “This guy saved you from ending up in Carolina.”

I look at Dallas, and he shrugs.

Turnrose is hot. “You’ve been lucky to be in the same place for a few

years, but trades happen. It's a *business*. It's part of the game. So, figure it out, get on board or you're on the bench. I don't care how good you think you are."

He storms off, leaving me standing there staring at the slammed door of the locker room.

I grit my teeth. Everything I'm doing, or not doing, or saying, or not saying is just making things worse.

I punch the heel of my right hand against the locker. Hard.

In the haze of my anger, there's an image that breaks through everything else.

Eloise.

Why her? Why now?

She said I want to make this work. That Dallas and I could be great together. That I'm sick of being the guy no one wants to be around.

She's right. I am sick of it.

She's right about all of it, but I don't have the first clue about how to change.

I walk over to my locker, avoiding everyone's stares. I yank my bag off the hooks, grab the rest of my stuff, and walk out without saying a word to anyone.

I don't say a word on the way to the airport, as we board the plane, or the whole flight home. And everyone is content to leave me alone. I watch as the guys interact with each other, fresh off of what is arguably a successful road trip. We won two of the three games. The guys played great, but they did that despite me—not because of me.

If you're not the best, what's the point?

It's late when we land in Chicago. I'm grabbing my luggage when Burke walks up to me, the only one stupid enough, or brave enough, to try to talk to me, I guess.

"Not going to give you some big speech about how we need you," he says.

I don't respond.

"But the thing of it is . . . we need you." He's got a large bag slung over his shoulder, and he sighs. "I meant it when I said I think you're the key to this whole thing. I guess I just need to figure out how to convince you."

Still, I say nothing.

"I'll be in early tomorrow," he says.

After a pause and without looking at him, I say, “Can I go now?”

He shakes his head, seemingly fed up. “Yeah, go.”

I storm off. I’m not even sure why I’m still irritated. I’m stuck in this spiral of no one getting it, me not wanting to explain it, and needing everyone to leave me alone.

But as I get in my rental car and turn on the GPS, I remember. I don’t even know how to get back to my place without a computer giving me directions. This isn’t where I belong.

Not when *she*’s in Philadelphia.

I make my way through the streets of Chicago, imagining my route home back in Philly. That route was familiar. It made sense. The guys were like family. Way more than my own parents.

I pull into the garage, park, lock the car, and head inside. I don’t look at anyone as I push the button for the elevator, and when I’m finally safe inside the four walls of the little box that will deposit me in my apartment, I close my eyes and let myself feel it all.

Only for a second.

Here, in the silence, without any reporters or prying eyes, I can finally admit what’s really going on.

I’m losing everything that matters.

And it’s my own stupid fault. I’m too dumb to get out of my own way.

Nobody works as hard as I do to be the best in this game, and Philly—well, they just threw that away like it meant nothing.

Years of dedication and loyalty . . . for what? A couple of draft picks and salary cap space?

And now, I’m here, starting over, in a city that doesn’t want me, with guys I don’t know.

The elevator dings, and the doors open. I angrily step out into the loft, ready to chuck my bag, but I’m stopped by a smell I don’t recognize. I pause and draw in a deep breath. Cinnamon and . . . apple?

There’s a dim light on in the kitchen, and another in the living room, and my boxes are gone. I lay my bag over the back of a chair and notice there’s a blanket hanging over the arm of the couch and . . . are those throw pillows?

A large painting over the fireplace. Three potted plants. A rug. A vase of flowers on the kitchen counter. A stack of books on the coffee table that was here when I moved in. A postcard of the Chicago skyline with the words *Sweet Home Chicago* stuck to the refrigerator.

I open the fridge and find it completely stocked with the foods I wrote on my list. Fruit. Vegetables. Fitness water. But in addition to that, there are stacks of containers and jars neatly arranged on the refrigerator shelves.

I pull one out and open it to find a full homemade chicken and pasta dish, and . . . oh man, it smells amazing.

I close the door and walk over to the counter, where I find a small notepad. On it, Eloise has written:

Gray:

There are meals in the fridge. I read that hockey players eat a lot of pasta, so it's a lot of pasta.

Lotsa Pasta. Great restaurant name, if you ask me!



Heat it up in the microwave or, if you're like me and think microwaved meat tastes weird, take the lid off and heat in the oven. I used glass containers to make it easy. Plastic leaks toxins into your food, did you know that? So, 350 degrees for 15-20 minutes or until warm.

There are more instructions for a dozen other meals. This took time to write.

At the bottom she signed the note:

I hope you like the new décor!

Your Amazing Assistant,

Eloise

My belligerent anger in the face of her unwavering kindness doesn't stand a chance.

The entire trip was a disaster. I walked in here feeling like I wanted to

punch a hole through the wall. But now, seeing her name on that paper and holding this meal in my hands, something inside of me softens. Breathes. Relaxes.

I preheat the oven and set the container on the counter, then hang up my coat and start the process of undressing as I walk toward my bedroom. The guest room hasn't been touched, but as I pass by the bathroom I see rugs, hand towels and a little vase with a fake plant in it on the back of the toilet.

And I'm not sure why, but there are night lights everywhere.

I should thank her when I see her tomorrow. I should express my gratitude for everything she's done in here.

I know myself, though, and I won't mention it. I'll feel stupid.

Plus, the less familiar I am with Eloise, the better.

Distractions are unacceptable, Gray. Stay focused on what matters—your game. Everything else is just noise.

If you're not the best, what's the point?

I enter my room, but don't turn on the light. Instead, I walk over to the opposite wall, which is almost floor-to-ceiling windows with an amazing view of the city. I stare out over the park, and further, the Chicago River.

It's pretty nice.

It's a lot different than my view in Philly. And for the first time since the trade, I wonder if this place could ever—ever—feel like home.

I think about what the coach said, that Philly was looking to trade me regardless, and while I don't want to believe it, it's most likely true. He's right—this is part of the game. I knew that when I signed up to play.

I want to be the best. That's all I've ever wanted, and I need to find a way to do that wearing a Comets uniform. I pull my phone out of my pocket and text Burke.

GRAY

I'll be at the rink by 6:30.

I'm surprised when a reply comes in almost immediately:

BURKE

See you then.

I throw my shirt in the laundry basket and unbutton my pants as I walk over to my dresser. I'll pull on sweats, eat the pasta, and try to sleep. And tomorrow, hopefully, I'll wake up with a new attitude.

I'm about to strip down when I turn and face the bed.

And that's when I see her.

If it weren't for the fact that there are no window coverings, I probably wouldn't have known Eloise had fallen asleep in my bed until I climbed in with her.

Oddly, that idea has the opposite effect on me as it should.

I *should* be upset that my assistant is sleeping in my bed—it's a huge violation of our professional relationship—but all I can think is that it's really nice to see her here.

And she looks peaceful. Beautiful.

I quietly grab a hoodie and my sweatpants and start out the door. But before I leave, I take the new throw blanket from the foot of the bed and spread it out on top of her.

She's holding the television remote, and I assume she came in here to watch on the only TV in my apartment. I stare at her for a few long seconds, and in a flash, it's New Year's Eve, and I'm remembering how it felt to pull her body close to mine, to kiss her like I needed to kiss her.

She'd asked me to kiss her that night to make an ex jealous, but the kiss was just as much for me as it was for her. A connection to another person after years of closing myself off. A very rare moment of weakness when I forgot all of my own rules.

My father's rules.

For those few moments, those brief, delicious, exciting moments, I wasn't Grayson Hawke, the pro hockey player. I wasn't a guy with a tumultuous past, or someone who refuses to even entertain the idea of a relationship.

I was just a guy who wanted to kiss a beautiful girl.

And it felt good. It felt right. *She* felt right.

In the dim light, I see her stir, and I quickly escape into the hallway and close the door, wondering how I'm going to sleep knowing she's right down the hall.

Chapter Twelve

Eloise

The moment I wake up, I will myself back to sleep.

It doesn't work, of course.

I'm not sure I've ever been as comfortable as I am right now.

I draw in a breath before I even open my eyes and smell the sweet apple cinnamon scent of . . . candles. *Not* muffins or donuts or fresh bread.

Wait. I'm not at home.

I sit straight up and look around the room.

Gray's room.

I fell asleep on his bed. I came in here to add the vase and the new afghan and the throw pillow that's now staring at me from the armchair in the corner, and then I turned on the TV to see if the Comets were still playing.

They'd just finished, but there was a press conference, and I watched Gray lose it on one of the reporters. To be fair, the reporter was kind of a jerk, but Gray did a bad job of staying calm.

I stood and watched, inches from the TV screen, willing him all the serenity I could muster, but he didn't get the message. He looked so angry, a storm raging behind his bright blue eyes.

I reached out and touched his image on the screen, whispering, "Who hurt you, Grayson Hawke?" I got roped into the commentary after that, trying to follow along as people in the know discussed the state of the Comets roster now that Gray was a part of it.

The consensus was basically, "Mark Rosen is probably rethinking this

trade right about now. Because Grayson Hawke has gone from the guy who gets it done to the guy who's not doing a thing."

It wasn't quippy or catchy or clever, and they all dissected the game at Gray's expense. My heart sank. I couldn't imagine my workplace mistakes being splashed all over the television for people to comment on and judge. I don't know if it upset him or if "upset" is simply his natural state, but regardless, it stunk.

At some point in watching the chatter, I must've laid down, and at some point I must've realized Gray has the most comfortable mattress I've ever laid on, and at some point I must've . . . unfolded the afghan and spread it on my sleeping body? I reach down and touch the blanket. How did this get here?

I turn fast to make sure no one is lying next to me, and feel relief and disappointment simultaneously.

He was due home last night.

Is he here? And if so . . . where did he sleep?!

I slip out from under the blanket and pull the baggy sweatshirt I stole from Gray's dresser down over my leggings. I really need a toothbrush and a shower. And my own clothes.

So many violations!

I open the door and tiptoe out into the hallway. I filled the place with apple cinnamon candles, lit them until I got a headache, then blew them all out. But the spicy fragrance lingers in the air.

As I approach the kitchen, I hear a low, deep voice.

I freeze.

There's no way this isn't going to be awkward. Everything about it feels wrong. I wish I could grab my shoes and run straight out the door.

But the door is an elevator.

That takes forever to get up here.

Wait. Stop. I'm a grown-up, and grown-ups do grown-up things. Grown-ups confront their mistakes.

They also sleep in their own beds.

Never mind that. I'll tell him I'm so sorry I passed out on his bed—it'll never, ever, ever happen again.

And then I'll grab my shoes and run straight out the door.

Which is an elevator.

That takes forever to get up here.

I take another step and hear Gray walking across the kitchen floor. I can smell coffee brewing, and I realize I have no idea what time it is.

“I know, hon, I miss you too. A lot.”

The words stop me. *Oh, lord.* I should not be here. I should not be hearing this.

“I’m not sure, but when I find out I promise you’ll be the first to know.” His voice is steady, calm, and quiet. It’s almost soothing and nearly gentle. It’s a side of him I haven’t heard before. “Yeah, it’s nice. The place they found for me is great.” A pause.

I’m a burglar and the light’s just been flicked on. Totally caught. I can’t keep going toward the kitchen, but if I turn around and go back to the bedroom, he might hear me.

So, I stand there, like I’m carved in marble, my expression chiseled in stone.

“Yeah, I know. I love you too.”

Retreat! Retreat!

I turn as quietly as I can, but I hit a creak in the floor that purposely lay dormant and silent until the most effective time to embarrass someone. I hear Gray stop moving in the kitchen.

I freeze. Again.

I’m not even here. I’m not dropping any eaves. I’m a ghost.

And then a thought hits me in my rigid panic.

Oh my gosh. I *kissed* someone else’s boyfriend.

Because Gray is so ridiculously private, my *strictly for work* Google searches turned up nothing about his romantic life. Like, nothing. It’s as if the man has never dated anyone in his life.

There are plenty of articles about his hockey playing, about how he was a childhood phenom, about how he started playing when he was three and hasn’t stopped since. About accolades and awards, and yes, plenty about his temper and his mistakes.

But now I have my answer. And that answer has me frozen. Because if I had known, I never, ever would’ve asked him to be the one to help me make Jay jealous.

“Hey, I gotta go, Scarlett. I’ll call you back later, okay?”

Scarlett? Who is this woman? Is she holding a candlestick in the billiard room?

I can tell he’s no longer in the kitchen. He’s in the hallway. And I don’t

have to turn around to know he's looking at me.

I slowly—very slowly—turn around, but I don't meet his eyes. I can't. The bed thing was bad enough, but listening in on his private conversation? I'm so fired.

Should I volunteer to pack my things and go, or will he have them sent to me via messenger?

"Good morning," he says.

"Uh," still not looking at him. "Hey. Hi. Morning."

He doesn't say anything else, and I *have* to look at him because I can't tell by two simple words if I'm done for.

When I meet his eyes, I see him watching me—really watching me—and my stomach swoops like it just took a flying leap off a skyscraper.

I start to pull the sweatshirt down even lower, hoping it will encase my whole body, turn into a teleportation pod, and zap me to the other side of the planet.

"I wasn't listening, I just—"

"Slept in my bed."

I snap my jaw shut. I open it just enough to squeak out, "Yeah, I did do that" and then clamp it shut again.

His eyebrow quirks ever so slightly.

"I was—" I wince. "Do you want to hear the reason why?"

He crosses his arms over his chest. "Sure."

Crap.

"Oh. I didn't think you'd say yes."

Another slight raise of his eyebrow.

"So, I got some things for your apartment."

He nods. "I noticed."

I want to pause and ask how he likes them, and did he think the throw pillows warmed up the place as much as I did, but I figure this probably isn't the best time.

"And a few of those things were for your room," I say. "And then I was curious about the game, so I flipped on the television and—" I realize in that exact moment that silence would've been a much better option.

He straightens his shoulders, and his face draws back a little.

"You saw the press conference."

"Just a bit of it." It's a lie, and I assume he knows that by the look on his face. "Okay, so maybe all of it. And then I wanted to see what other people

were saying about it, so I started watching the post-game, then I guess I dozed off? My mattress has a spring sticking up out of it, so I have to sort of curve my body around it so it doesn't poke me all night. It's been a while since I slept on something so comfortable." I look away. "Gosh, that sounded pathetic." Then, back to him. "I'm really sorry I slept in your bed. It will never happen again."

He narrows his eyes, gives me a once-over, shakes his head, and then turns and walks back into the kitchen.

"Wait, are you angry?" I follow after him. "I wouldn't blame you if you were. It's a big invasion of your personal space. I crossed a line. A big line." I glance down in the sink and see the empty glass container from one of the meals Poppy prepped for him. "Oh! You ate the pasta!"

It makes me infinitely happy that he ate one of the meals I packed up for him. "How was it?"

He looks at me. "You talk a lot."

"And you don't talk at all," I quip, and then I go quiet.

The silence lasts all of four and a half seconds, and I blurt out, "I didn't mean that to sound mean. I know you don't talk. A lot. Or ever. And I know I talk a lot, it's the only way you can get to know someone, you know? It can be annoying, or whatever, but I talk when I'm nervous or when I really want someone to like me."

He tilts his head with a question on his face.

I want to crawl in a hole.

"I . . ." I stutter, "I didn't mean . . ."

He pours a cup of coffee and hands it out to me. I look at it like I'm an alien who's never seen coffee before.

He's . . . wait. I look at the cup again. He's giving me a cup of coffee?

"Do you like coffee?" he asks.

"Uh, please don't hate me . . . but no, actually," I say. "My sisters think I'm crazy, but I don't drink it. I never have."

He pours the coffee down the drain.

"Wait! You could've—"

"I don't like it either," he says.

I frown. "Then why did you make it?"

He shrugs. "In case you wanted some."

This simple, polite act shouldn't have any effect on me at all. But it does. Because I get the impression that Gray isn't in the habit of being polite or

kind or thoughtful.

But maybe he is.

Is this really him? Not the angry, rough, push-everyone-away guy . . . but a guy who thinks “she might want coffee”?

I try—very hard—to erase the memory of our kiss from my mind and focus on getting to know him as the person I’m working for. It only half works. It’s hard because his lips are still *right there* and they’re attached to *that body*.

And I’ve seen enough of that body to make forgetting it impossible.

I look away. He’s taken. By *Scarlett*, whoever that is. That’s a line I will not cross, because that was a line that was crossed on me.

He walks over to the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of water. As he does, he spots my contraband, hidden in the door. He looks at it, then at me, and then he pulls the bottle of Dr Pepper out from behind the jar of mustard. “I know this isn’t for me.”

“It’s my emergency Dr Pepper,” I tell him.

He makes a face.

“I’m not trying to take over your apartment, although it *is* way nicer than mine, and if you were to ever have a moment of temporary insanity and want to trade, I wouldn’t say no.”

If it weren’t for the girlfriend thing or the work thing, I’d happily move in here and stick around *for as long as we both shall live*.

Taken, Eloise! And I kissed him, and now I’m wracked with guilt. And I can’t even ask him how he could do such a thing because he *doesn’t remember kissing me*.

I groan. Out loud. And he stares at me.

“Sorry, I was just thinking about . . .” I find the willpower to mentally nail my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “Never mind. Can I . . . ?” I reach out and take the bottle from him, crack it open, and then take a long drink. The carbonation stings the back of my throat, and I feel the cold liquid travel all the way down to my empty belly. “I was thinking since you have the day off, maybe we could go explore your neighborhood.”

“Why?” he asks.

I lean against the counter. “Because you live here now.”

“But it’s not permanent, so why bother?” He takes a long swig of his water.

“You know, you could look at the positive here,” I say, sounding like a

bossy teacher.

“Oh, could I?” His sarcasm does nothing to shut me up.

“You get to live in one of the best cities in the country! Whether it’s for the rest of your career or just for this season, you still get to live here. And it has a lot to offer.”

“You actually think *Chicago* is one of the best cities in the country.” His tone is incredulous.

“I do,” I say. “And I can show you why.”

“Is it the crime or the corrupt politicians?”

I roll my eyes. “Stereotypes are so boring. You don’t really get to know a place until you’re in the heart of it. Eat its food. Walk its streets. No place is perfect, but it’s unique and special. And if you give it a chance, I think you’ll love it.”

“You sound like an ad.”

“I sound like a fan.”

He brushes me off with a shake of his head, and stares out the window across the room.

“Oh. You never answered me about the pasta,” I say.

“It was good,” he says, then smiles a little, maybe remembering how it tasted. “*Really* good, actually.” The smile fades, and then he looks at me. “Thank you.”

And those two words are everything.

And that’s how I know I’m in trouble.

Good manners are to be expected. But they shouldn’t make someone feel like the inside of a toasted marshmallow.

Goopy on the inside and *burning* on the outside.

But that’s exactly how I feel and all he did was say thank you.

“Poppy made it,” I tell him, getting my ridiculous brain under control. “I asked her to put some meals together based on your preferences.”

“She’s good. Tell her thanks,” he says.

I nod. And then, because I’m full of guilt and shame and curiosity and zero tact or ability to filter or read a room or have a sense of timing, I ask, “Is your girlfriend going to visit you soon? I could map out some romantic things for you to do together.”

His forehead pulls in confusion. “My . . . *what?*”

I dump out all the small words I know in a pile. “I mean, the, if you, if you’re not, it’s . . .” Then, in fantastic fashion, I start to leave and trip over

that word vomit pile on my way out of the room.

“I’m going to just go into the room, back here, where the shower is and look for a spare toothbrush, and then we can, you know, figure out the thing, with, if it’s not. Wait. Hey. Can I use your bathroom? I’m just going to go use your bathroom.”

“You already helped yourself to my sweatshirt and my bed,” he says. “The bathroom is all yours.”

I smooth a hand over the stolen sweatshirt as heat rushes to my cheeks. And then I shuffle off, like a Roomba, starting toward a direction and then changing when I face a wall, wondering if dunking my head in the toilet can be the first thing on my agenda today.

Chapter Thirteen

Gray

I t's been almost two full weeks since Eloise started working for me. She sits in the stands during practice, waiting for me to finish, and then afterwards, gives me an update on what she's done that day.

I only half listen when she gives me her progress reports, mostly because I never wanted an assistant in the first place, but my apartment is spotless, my suits are dry cleaned, my fridge is stocked. When I run low on protein powder, she replaces it without me having to say a word. She just knows. She also communicates with the team trainer, the chiropractor, and the nutritionist, setting up appointment alerts for each in my phone.

But we don't talk much, which I think is hard for her.

Actually, I know it's hard for her. She talks. A lot.

Unlike me.

Also unlike me, she enjoys conversation. I catch her chatting with people during and after practice—other assistants, other players, even the coaches. It seems like Eloise Hart has never met a stranger.

There's something about the way she interacts with people. She has a way of making a person feel like they're the only one in the room.

I shouldn't want that, but sometimes, I do.

I hate having anyone's attention on me for whatever reason—but I don't mind hers.

It even makes me want to be nicer to the people around me, including my teammates.

She's made a point to tell me what great guys my teammates are. In fact, she seems to know more about each player than a real hockey fan, and she's quick to point these details out.

Oddly, it's helped on the ice.

I now know that Kemp doesn't pass to his left side as often as his right. Krush is slower skating backward than forward. Meyer is sneaky good, and basically unhittable when someone is crashing the boards and launching to check him.

But what I've learned about Burke, I've learned all on my own. Ever since my outburst during the press conference, he and I meet early on the ice before practice. And his dedication matches my own.

He's got my respect.

It's Saturday, and I'm at the rink by 6:45 a.m. It's supposed to be an off day, but we've got a game tomorrow, so it's a modified practice.

A lot of the guys won't come in until later, but Dallas is already there when I get there. It sends a message.

Something twists inside of me. I owe it to him to return the favor.

"Morning," he says. "Ready for this?"

I nod, put my helmet on, and we don't say another word. We start with conditioning, then do some skill training. Then something called the Swedish overspeed drill—which is supposed to push our skating speed past what feels comfortable. We spend an hour on the ice, just the two of us, and when we finish, we head toward the locker room.

"Ready to hit the gym?" I ask.

"You have to ask?" He smirks. "It's like you don't know me at all."

In Philly, I was an anomaly. The only one who chose sleep over bars, practice over partying. Celibacy over women.

I get the impression Burke and I have more in common than hockey.

We walk into the locker room, still the only ones here. "Listen, Burke. I'm—"

He turns and faces me, and it's like he already knows what I'm going to say. "It's cool, man."

"No, it's not," I say. "I have a lot on my mind, but I know I've been . . ."

He raises a brow, waiting for me to finish.

"Difficult," I say through clenched teeth.

We pull off our practice gear, and Burke sits down on the bench in front of the lockers. "It's not easy to come to a new team. Most of us have been

playing together for a long time, and you had a life back in Philly. I get it.”

I think about that life. Walking away from it was the hardest thing I’ve ever done.

Nobody here knows just how hard.

But maybe dwelling on it isn’t the answer. Maybe trying to make the best of it is.

Whoa. That thought couldn’t have been my own. I’m not a “make the best of it” kind of guy. Eloise and her toxic positivity must be rubbing off on me.

“So, uh, your girlfriend’s dad—” I say as we head toward the weight room. “Was he born deaf?”

Burke frowns over at me. “Weird question.”

It is a weird question. There are a thousand things I want to know about Eloise, and this is what I ask? “Yeah, sorry if it’s personal.”

“No, it’s not.” He pushes open the door to the weight room and I follow him inside. “And yeah. Since he was a kid, I think. He’s a great guy. Huge hockey fan—and a huge Grayson Hawke fan, too. He was pretty stoked to hear we got you.”

I think about that Sunday dinner and wish I could have a do-over. Mick Hart is a huge fan, and I’d made a terrible impression.

I need to do better. I’m just not sure where to start.

“Probably doesn’t feel that way anymore,” I mutter as I sit down on a weight bench.

I lay back, telling myself to stop prodding Burke about Eloise’s family. I do a set of ten bench presses, then position the barbell back on the rack. “Do you know sign language?”

Burke and I trade places, but as he lays back for his set, his forehead pulls in a frown. “Why are you asking?”

“Just making conversation,” I say, spotting him for his set.

“Yeah, no you’re not. That’s not like you.” He puts the bar back then sits up and looks at me.

“I’m trying to do better. Don’t make it weird.” I half-laugh as we move over to the trap bars. We each load our bar with the right amount of weight and do a set.

“I’m learning,” he says. “It’s not easy. I mean, it’s a whole language.”

“Right.” I keep my eyes focused on a spot on the wall, trying not to think about the magnitude of that.

“But Poppy’s whole family knows ASL.” He grabs a bottle of water and

shoots a stream in his mouth, then points it at me. “Including Eloise.”

My eyes jump to his. “Your point?”

“Just making conversation,” he says, wryly. “And these are things you could talk about with her.”

I frown. “We don’t really talk.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “*She* doesn’t talk?”

“Okay. Yeah. She’s a talker.”

“Yeah, I’d say.” Dallas laughs. “It’s usually hard to shut her up.”

I nod. That’s what I thought. So, it’s me.

Eloise talks to everyone, but she doesn’t talk to me. With me, she’s stand-offish.

I’m sure I sent her the message that’s the way I want it to be. I’m not sure how to undo that now.

Do I want to undo it? Is that what I’m thinking? If I am, then what the heck for?

As if talking about her summons her into existence, Eloise appears in the doorway. “Oh, hey guys, I thought I smelled something.”

Dallas whips a towel at her, and I get the dynamic right away.

Big brother, little sister.

I frown over at her. I can’t let on that seeing her unravels the knot in my stomach.

“What are you doing here on a Saturday?” Burke asks. “Don’t you have the day off?”

“I’m not sure . . .” She looks at me. “Do I?”

I shrug. “Ask Coach. You work for him, right?”

Her shoulders drop. “Ugh. You know about that?”

“He made it clear I have no authority to fire you, so yeah.”

“Oh, you wanted to fire me?” she asks, hands on hips.

“No, I . . . uh—” but I’m not sure what else to say. Coach mentioned it, unprompted on her first day. *Why don’t I just say that?*

So I do.

“Coach mentioned it the first day, so . . . I just figured.”

She looks at me, fake hurt, mouth open. “That cuts deep. I thought I had this big secret!”

No, Eloise. It’s me with a big secret.

We stand there for a few seconds, staring at each other, and when I realize I’m not going to win this contest, I raise a brow. “Why are you here?” I try to

keep my tone light, but I'm not sure I succeed and worry it comes out accusatory.

If it does, Eloise doesn't seem to notice.

"Oh, right," she says brightly. "You got some fan mail!" She's holding a stack in her arms and says this like it's something to be excited over. She shuffles through the envelopes and drops half the stack on the floor. Instinctively, I kneel to help pick them up, and she does the same, a quizzical look on her face.

"Sorry," I say, as if helping her was the wrong move.

She narrows her gaze and takes the envelope I'm holding, then gathers the rest and stands back up.

I turn away from her to find Burke watching us, smirking, amused at the exchange. I walk over to the stationary bike, mostly because I need some distance from her.

But she follows me. "Do you have a stack of autographed photos or anything?"

"Uh, no," I say, wiping my forehead with a towel.

Eloise pulls out her phone and sends off a text. "Great. I just asked Beverly to set up some promotional shots of you in your Comets uniform."

Her phone buzzes before I can respond.

"Oh! Great! She was already on it. I guess they need promo pictures for banners." She looks up and pumps her eyebrows. "Your face is going to be on a *banner*."

I don't respond.

She draws in a breath, as if to reset, and says, "It's scheduled for Monday, and once I have the photos, I can take care of these." She holds up the stack of mail and shakes it. "You were also invited to be on a hockey podcast—" She is scrolling on her phone again.

"No podcasts."

Her eyes dart up, and when they connect with mine, I look away. I feel like she has direct access to my thoughts when she looks at me right in my eyes.

"Okay, so a blanket 'no' for all interview requests," she says.

"Yes."

"No," Burke says. "If ESPN calls, it's a yes."

She frowns. "Right."

Coach Turnrose walks in on the tail end of the conversation. "Oh! Eloise,

I'm glad you're here."

So, I guess she does work Saturdays.

"I'd like you to come to the game tomorrow," he says to her.

My stomach dips. "Why?" I blurt, even though no one was talking to me.

He looks at me and makes a face. "Because I asked her to, and because there will be reporters, Hawke. We've all seen how well you handled them." Back to Eloise: "Will this be a problem for you?"

He's not wrong. I've managed to avoid the press since the debacle on the road, but I should've known that wouldn't last forever.

She looks at me, then back to Coach. "Not at all. I'd love to come to the game."

"Beverly will have a pass for you and a guest," he says. "But after the game, your guest will have to make themselves scarce, because that's when we need you the most."

"Sounds good," she says, then, to Dallas, "Maybe Poppy will come."

"I think she's already planning on it," he muses. "You two can sit together."

But then, her face falls. "Oh wait. She'll be sitting with the wives and girlfriends, and I'm—" she stops. "Uh. Never mind. It'll be fine. I'll make it work."

That was weird.

"Good. Burke, you have some time?" the coach asks. "I want to run something by you before practice."

Dallas nods and follows him out, leaving me sitting here, pedaling a bike that goes nowhere and facing Eloise, who looks a little lost.

She takes a step toward me and hugs the stack she's holding to her chest. "I know you don't want me at the game."

I didn't say that. Did I say that?

"No, I . . ." I trail off then shut down. Good grief, why is this so hard? Just say what you mean, you idiot.

"No, I get it. Annoying assistant now in your *space*," she waves one hand about the room as she says it. "But honestly? I'm really excited about it." She smiles.

"But you hate hockey," I say.

"But I get to see you play," she says nonchalantly. Then, with a flirty shrug, "Maybe I'll finally figure out why you're such a big deal."

If my face registers emotion at that comment, it isn't intentional. But

whatever expression I'm now wearing has her frowning at me.

"You look stressed," she says.

"I'm fine." I start pedaling faster.

She looks down at my feet.

"I'm fine," I repeat.

And then she watches me. A little too intently. "It's a lot of pressure, isn't it?"

I stare at the wall behind her.

"I mean, you don't have to answer. I know it is. I mean, your face is going to be on a banner in the arena. That's a big deal." She starts fussing with the envelopes. "But you know, I was thinking—I read an article about you."

My eyes find hers. "Why?"

A shrug. "You're a mystery." I have to look away. She's really cute right now.

"In the article, you talk about how when you found hockey, it was like magic. Like, all of a sudden, you figured out why you were here."

I let the bike coast.

"I said that?"

"Yep," she says. "And then you said that everything about it felt right, from the day you picked up your first stick."

It was true. But a lot has changed since then. Since my dad discovered my natural ability.

Since he decided to market me as some sort of hockey prodigy. And with my mom out of the picture, there was no one to balance his intensity.

I did love it once. Didn't I? When playing the game actually felt like playing a game?

All the years of grinding and being worked to the bone and chasing titles and accolades had changed everything.

Eloise wouldn't understand that. Nobody would.

I start to feel my T-shirt sticking to my back, but there's no way I'm taking it off with her standing this close to me.

"I was just thinking—" she stops, almost like a warning bell had gone off inside of her. "Ah. It's dumb, never mind."

I can't explain why, but I want to know what it is she isn't saying.

"What?"

She looks a bit shocked at the question, and it's true, I don't really ask

many questions. Not to know more about what someone's thinking.

She takes a step closer, like she's about to tell me a secret.

I absently pedal slower. I can smell the lotion on her skin, some kind of vanilla. All of a sudden, I want to know all of her secrets.

"I know it's dumb for me to try and give you any advice," she says. "Because I know nothing about hockey, but—"

"But you're going to anyway," I say dryly, keeping up the pretense of not caring.

She smiles, brightening. "So, you're under all this pressure, right? All these people with all their dumb opinions—and you have something to prove."

"I do?"

"Sure seems like you think so," she says.

"Yeah. This isn't helping." I start pedaling faster. Maybe I liked it better when she was stand-offish with me.

She waves me off. "You don't strike me as the kind of guy who cares what other people say. At least, that's what you want everyone to think." She pauses.

She's spot on.

"I'm waiting for your life-changing advice."

Heck with it. I tug my shirt off and toss it on the floor.

She takes a step back, and it's subtle, but I see her eyes widen, then she looks away.

Eloise clears her throat. "So, uh, what if you went back to that place? The day you picked up your first hockey stick. The day you skated across the rink, holding it in your hands? What if you stopped trying to be the best and remember why you loved it in the first place?"

That place. The first place. I wince at the memory.

"Eloise, no offense, but this isn't some documentary with me playing hockey on a frozen creek in the backyard."

Her face falls, and I instantly regret what I said.

"Right. Of course." She absently taps a fist on the handles of the bike, defeated. "I just thought that if you played like you loved it and not like you're being punished, maybe the rest would fall into place."

The door opens and a few of my new teammates stroll in.

She takes a step back and moves to leave before I can make it right. "I'll be upstairs in one of the common spaces if you need me."

And then, she walks away.

A guy they call Gump (because he has a Southern, drawn out drawl) looks at me and shakes his head. “What do I have to do to get the team to give me one of those?”

He hops on the bike next to me. “Tell the truth, Hawke. Are you . . .” He takes his fist and slowly punches the air.

“He’d be an idiot not to—” another guy says.

“If you’re not going to, can I take a run at her?” one of the other guys says from across the weight room.

“No way, I call dibs,” Gump says.

“Knock it off.” I stop pedaling and get off the bike.

The whole room responds with *whoas* and whistles.

“Touchy subject?” Gump asks. “Did she shoot you down?”

“It’s not like that.” I grab my water and shoot it down the back of my throat. “Just . . . don’t talk about her like that. It’s not cool. She’s practically related to Burke.”

He smacks the guy next to him. “I’ll get his blessing then,” Gump says.

I bite the inside of my cheek and storm out of the workout room, ready to hit something or someone.

But I don’t know why.

Why does Eloise stir things up inside of me?

And how am I supposed to stay focused knowing she’s in the stands tomorrow night?

Chapter Fourteen

Eloise

You'll be fine. I'll be there.

Poppy is signing this to me over Sunday dinner.

But she's only half right. She'll be there, but I won't be fine.

"You're obviously sitting with me," Poppy signs. Sometimes, when it's just us, we sign without speaking.

It's hard to believe I've only been working for the Comets—with Gray—for two weeks. I spent the rest of Saturday working in one of the cubbies on the administrative floor of the practice arena, which is where I spend most of my time when I'm not running errands.

It would be easier to do my job if Gray was a little more accessible.

As it is, I've been keeping my distance because honestly, talking to him is a little like poking a bear. His responses are almost always gruff, and he makes me feel stupid for suggesting anything.

I don't think he means to . . . but it's hard not to take it personally.

Beverly sent me the details for Gray's photoshoot, and then I went through the rest of the week's schedule. Mostly it's games and practices and workouts, but there are community and charity events on the horizon.

It's still part of my job to make sure Gray is pleasant and engaging with the public, and I'm no quitter, but even I know when something seems impossible.

With all his extra workouts and practices, I can see why he didn't care about setting up his apartment or getting to know his city—life outside of

here probably feels like an afterthought.

I'm trying to find ways to change that.

It'll be my first time attending a game since I started this job, and part of me is nervous, though I'm not sure why. I'll be working. I *have* to go. I tried to get Dex to come with me, but between work and his new relationship, I never see him anymore.

I suppose that's how friendships go—we grow up and they change. We see each other less. I can't fault him for falling in love.

"I'm not sitting with the wives," I say and sign. "That's a terrible idea."

"I'm not a *wife*," Poppy signs, but doesn't even bother to speak it.

I cock my head and shoulders back and forth while my hand does the *Shoulda put a ring on it* move. She raises her spoon like she's going to launch the mashed potatoes at me.

"It's fine. I'll sit wherever Beverly puts me," I say, signing.

"What if Raya comes too?" Poppy asks, signing the question.

"Oh, that's a great idea!" Mom says, with both her hands and her voice. "Raya, you could use a break. You work so hard, honey." She reaches over and squeezes my sister's hand.

"You do look a little rundown, Ray," I say. "No offense."

How is it? Dad signs with an expectant look on his face.

"How is what?" I sign and say back.

Working for Grayson Hawke. His eyebrows are lifted, anticipating my reply.

I shrug. "Fine, I guess."

"Your father is having a hard time reconciling the man he thought Grayson Hawke was with the man who grunted his way through Sunday dinner," Mom says, signing.

He was a jerk, Dad signs.

I can't argue that point. He was a jerk.

I feel like Gray is misunderstood. There are traces of *good* in him, I can feel it. But thinking that makes me feel like Luke trying to turn his father back from the Dark Side.

Plus, I'm not going to say that out loud. Or sign it. Raya will jump all over me and accuse me of having feelings for the guy.

Which isn't the case. I'm his assistant. Employed by his team.

And I'm ninety-eight percent sure he has a girlfriend.

But that two percent took over for about five minutes, and I dug a bottle

of red nail polish from my bag and painted the tiniest heart on the end of his hockey stick—not a romantic gesture, just a small reminder that this game is more than a job. Or a burden.

It's a game that he loves. That he was born to play.

The odds of him even seeing it are next to nothing, and I practically had to scale a wall to get in and out of the locker room without anyone seeing me.

I tell myself it was me trying to be a supportive assistant, but my feelings for Gray are a mess. I think I'm going to have to institute a "no shirtless around Eloise" rule if I ever hope to get them sorted. He is off limits and involved with someone else.

Maybe.

Probably.

Only now does it occur to me that this heart-painting gesture could be misinterpreted, and my stomach twists at the thought.

"I think it would be hard to be traded," I say, signing. "He had a home in Philly. A team he really liked. A girlfriend."

Across from me, Poppy frowns. "I don't think he has a girlfriend."

"I heard him on the phone with her."

Her frown deepens. "Dallas asked him if there was anyone they could set aside tickets for, at home or on the road, and he said no. If he was involved with someone, wouldn't she come to at least some of the games?"

"He said he loved her," I say, signing. "Her name is Scarlett." I spell out her name letter by letter. When I see Poppy still looking at me, I add, "And don't ask Dallas about it. The last thing I need is for Gray to think I'm talking about his personal life."

"You *are* talking about his personal life," Raya interjects.

I roll my eyes. "You know what I mean."

"Well, whoever it was, I don't think it was a girlfriend," Poppy says, disbelieving. Then, to Raya, she says, "Ray, come to the game with us! You can wear those sexy leather pants you bought on a dare and that off the shoulder red top. You look so good in red."

"Why would I wear something sexy to go to a hockey game?" Raya deadpans.

Stop using the word 'sexy', Dad signs.

Poppy ignores him. "You *are* sexy, and you *should* wear it, because maybe you'll finally go out with one of the players." Then to me, she asks, "Have you met Finn Holbrook yet?"

I shake my head.

“Huge crush on Raya,” Poppy says. “He flirts with her shamelessly, but she will not give him the time of day.”

“He’s a child,” Raya says, above it all. “And I’m not dating a *hockey* player.” Then, to me, she adds, without signing, “And neither are you.”

Point taken, but only because the point was shoved in my face.

After dinner, Poppy spends a good half hour pleading and cajoling and debating, and finally convinces Raya to join us at the game. Even before she started in on her, Poppy had texted Dallas to make sure our seats were with her.

I guess when you’re connected you can make things happen.

We ride to the arena, courtesy of a car Dallas sent for us, and even I can admit that when we arrive, and I walk inside, a burst of excitement shoots through me. Excitement and . . . nervousness.

I’m nervous for Gray.

These games are a huge deal, and while it’s all fun for the fans, it’s pressure for the players. And he carries that pressure like Atlas holding up the world.

I just want him to feel like he fits here. I know that playing well will help.

I spent a little too long looking up videos of him yesterday while I waited for him to finish practicing. I don’t even think he knew I was still there, but I didn’t want to leave until he left. So I Googled. And YouTubed . . . if that’s even a verb. Seeing him play in his rookie season was like watching a magician. There were plays where I didn’t even know where the puck was.

The other team didn’t know where it was either—until it was in the back of the net.

He played with passion, with fire, like he had something to prove. And you could tell by the way he moved that he loved it.

Twice, he even smiled after his goals.

His more recent games? Those were like watching a different guy. He was sluggish and made a lot of mistakes, but the thing I noticed most was that there was no joy. No life.

It was like he was skating through the motions.

The arena is loud and full of energy, all flashing screens, loud music, a sensory overload. We make our way through the lobby, surrounded by Comets merchandise and concession stands. I glance up at the large banners featuring the faces of Comets' players and realize this is what the promo shoot this week is really for. Not printed photos to send to fans. I was right to be wowed by this, regardless of how annoying the whole thing seemed to Gray.

He's a really big deal. *How is this just now hitting me?*

We find our seats, right next to two rows of empty ones.

"Where is everyone?" I ask.

"In the wives' room," Poppy says.

Raya looks at her. "Why aren't you back there?"

Poppy smiles and takes both our arms. "Because I'm with you guys!"

I only know what Poppy had told me about the "wives' room." You have to be invited. As an employee, it's not a place I'll ever get to go, but the wives made sure Poppy had a standing invitation.

The magnitude of this stage, the one where Gray is a star, becomes clear. The pressure makes sense. His insane schedule and superhuman focus also make sense. There are thousands of fans, and though they want you to be the best, they have no problem telling you when you're not. It's Chicago. The media and fans are brutally honest.

The guys are on the ice, warming up, and I try not to zero in on Gray. But it's like he has this strong magnetic pull, and I'm helpless to look away. From over here, though, I'm safe. I can watch him and nobody will know.

I could even replay The Kiss in my mind if I wanted to. Which I do. Only for a minute, and then a voice speaking common sense kicks in.

Not surprisingly, it sounds like Raya.

About twenty minutes before game time, the wives and girlfriends appear in the stands. They find their seats all around us. I've met most of them before, and even though I haven't seen Monica, Jericho's wife, in a while, she's one of those people who instantly feels like an old friend.

"Eloise! How were your first couple of weeks?" Monica asks as she takes her seat on the other side of Poppy.

"Good," I say. "I mean, I'm still getting my footing. It's not easy to, um—" I don't want to talk badly about Gray "—to navigate. But I'm getting the hang of it!" I smile, but instantly feel like I've said too much. Gray is cranky and acerbic, but I already feel this odd sense of loyalty to him.

If I am going to help him love this place, I want to get everyone else to love him, too.

“Well, here’s hoping he has a good night,” Kari, Junior’s girlfriend, says, leaning forward. “For all of our sakes, but especially yours.”

“Is he as big of a jerk as he seems?” Krush’s wife, Lisa, asks.

And the loyalty kicks up a notch. “I don’t think so. I think he’s just quiet. Maybe a bit misunderstood.”

I don’t even have to look to feel Raya turn her head toward me, like a stone gargoyle guarding a forbidden entrance.

“He wasn’t quiet when he freaked out on that photographer back in Philly —” Lisa says. “Did you see that clip on YouTube? Broke the guy’s camera.”

My gaze drifts across the ice and over to Gray. He’s standing with the rest of the team, holding his stick, and I absently wonder if he spotted the heart.

I should’ve made a big poster that said, “Do it because you love it.” He would’ve *loved* that.

While the others prattle on about how horrible he is, recounting all the stories they’ve heard and then asking Poppy why in the world Dallas lobbied so hard to get him on the team, I silently repeat the words over and over—*Do it because you love it*—while staring intently at Gray.

“El?”

I hear Raya say my name. I turn, and yep, as sure as the Lord made little green apples, there she is, watching me. I smile and turn back to Gray. The team starts to filter off the ice back into the locker room for what I can only assume is a pre-game pep talk. As Dallas skates away from him, Gray glances up into the stands. I lock eyes with him for a split second, and it knocks me off-kilter.

He gives me the slightest nod, hits the stick against the ice twice, and skates off, disappearing through a doorway behind the rest of the team.

Did we just have a connection? Was . . . was that for me? There’s a very real possibility that I imagined it.

But then Raya leans in closer and practically hisses the words, “What. Was. *That?*”

I freeze. “What was what?”

“He’s your *boss*, Eloise,” she says.

“He’s technically not. I *technically* work for the coach.”

I glance up to catch her incredulous look before she slow-turns back to face the ice.

Her words resound in my head like cannon fire, but not even Raya can take away that look and the elation I feel.

For the first time, regardless of New Year's Eve kisses or shirtless workouts or fumbling words, I feel like I'm making a difference in that man's life.

Chapter Fifteen

Gray

Eloise is in the stands.

It shouldn't matter, but it does. I tell myself I'm not sure why, but I think I have a pretty good idea.

It matters when I'm listening to Coach's pre-game pep talk.

It matters because she's the only person in this entire place who is here for me, whether I play like crap tonight or not.

And it matters when the DJ plays "SexyBack" by Justin Timberlake to usher me into the arena.

What the heck? I didn't ask for that.

I can't shake her face out of my mind. So what if she doesn't like hockey?

She reminded me of what's really important—I didn't start playing this game because I wanted endorsement deals, or records, or banners, or fans.

I started playing this game because I loved it. But years of my dad's critiques had shifted my feelings more toward resentment than love.

I can still see him, standing on the sidelines, arms crossed, glaring disappointment at me over the ice.

I learned very quickly that this game, to him, would never be "just for fun". It became my obsession to be the best.

Shooting around after practice with a bunch of my friends, without the prying eyes of coaches or parents or scouts, became a thing of the past. And as the stakes grew, the pressure increased. The gravity of my position

weighed heavy. I discovered that when you're on top of the world, it's awesome, but when you mess up, it's ten times worse.

And no matter what I do, I still hear my dad after every missed shot.

It's the first intermission, and he's been in my head the whole first period.

Stupid offside penalty—I got turned around on defense, I couldn't get out of the box quick enough on the line change.

We're down 2-1. All I can focus on are mistakes. I can't see past them.

We clomp into the locker room, and I chuck my gloves on the floor. I need to figure this out.

During the break, like a lot of guys, I have a ritual.

It's only fifteen minutes, but Jericho still strips down and jumps in and out of an ice bath, the lunatic. Junior eats a mound of salty snacks and drinks an Alani Nu energy drink. Burke's on the tablet, watching game video. I sit on the bench in front of my locker and begin the process of retaping my stick.

The guys are loud. Gump wants to know if the hit Crosby took to the jaw just before the period ended was dirty. Kemp insists it was and they start to talk about tactics to check the guy to the boards first chance they get.

I put the chatter in the background.

As I pull the old tape off my stick, I notice a red dot on the blade.

What is that? Blood?

I flip the stick around and rub my fingernail over it, trying to chip it off, when I realize it's not just a random dot or a scratch.

It's a heart. Someone painted a tiny heart on the bottom of my hockey stick.

Eloise.

I close my eyes and try to imagine what hoops she had to jump through to put this on my stick.

It makes me think back on what Eloise said before the game. Here she was, a person who admittedly knows nothing about my sport, and she said exactly what I needed to hear.

I then visualize her in the crowd, watching me. The way it felt to connect with her out there surprised me. I tossed her a little nod of acknowledgement, but it's only now that I begin to process her words.

First period, I didn't play like I loved it.

Time to switch that.

"You good?" Burke's question pulls me back to the present. I'm guessing he's got thoughts on the second period.

I nod.

"We're only down by one," he says.

I turn to him, confident. "Not for long."

I stand up, grab my gloves, and as I make my way back out to the ice, I try to summon the younger version of myself. The player who loved the way the stick, the puck, the speed, and the art of this game made him feel.

Do it because you love it.

Her words. I feel a shift inside of me. Like a light coming on.

In this moment, for the first time since the trade, I embrace the idea that I'm a Chicago Comet. I find the section where I spotted Eloise at the beginning of the game. My eyes scan the other women, and then settle on her.

She's wearing a Comets hoodie and jeans with a black stocking cap, and even from here, I can feel the moment our eyes connect again, just like before the game. She's like a touchstone, a harbor in a storm, a safe place to land.

And she is the reason my focus shifts.

Do it because you love it.

Her words weave through my head, the exact reminder I need. The thing that shifts my gameplay.

And boy, does it shift. Three goals in the period, two by me. On a breakaway I checked their guy so hard he fell down, then I sauced an absolutely filthy pass to Burke to score. As I skated back around to the guy on the ground, lamp lit, horn blaring, crowd in a frenzy, I shouted, "*See you on ESPN tonight, buddy.*" Burke points at me, shouting "*Let's GO!*" and I point back.

Man, it feels good.

4-2, Comets. And I'm not even close to done.

I really hate the mid-game interviews. Second intermission, a reporter snags me, asking one single question.

"Gray, you're on fire out there. Something changed in your game after that first period. Did Coach Turnrose give an especially motivational speech or was it something else?"

I hate these questions, and I'm ready to give just a stock "we're just trying to get the puck in the net" answer, when I can *feel* Eloise's words in

my head.

Not my dad. Her.

I look at the microphone, then at the reporter, then at the camera pointed at me. “Just decided to play for the love of the game.” I stare one more moment into the camera, give the reporter a nod, and walk off down the tunnel.

We add three more goals in the third period and win 7-2. I end up with a hat trick and three assists.

And after the first period, I loved every second of it.

Post-game, there’s a press conference. Eloise doesn’t approach me, but I do see her chatting up a few of the reporters. They’re probably her best friends by now. I have no idea what she said to any of them until they start asking questions. They start with gameplay. The way I gelled with Burke and the rest of the team.

The tone of the media has changed. Winning does that.

“Did the extra practices help?”

“Do you feel like you’re finding your footing here?”

“How does it feel to be the one responsible for the win here in Chicago?”

But then, a man standing a few feet away from Eloise raises his hand, and Burke nods in his direction.

I keep my eyes steady on him and not on the beautiful blonde standing off to the side.

“Gray, we’re told that it was important to you to have your theme song play as you took the ice tonight. Tell us, do you feel that you really did bring sexy back?”

Burke leans forward into the microphone and says, “Uh, maybe we should ask the ladies in the room to answer that question.”

There’s a ripple of laughter in the room, and I catch Eloise’s sly smile as she slips out the side door and into the hallway.

I don’t embarrass easily, but even I know my face is red.

The subject changes—thankfully—and I answer all their questions without wanting to hit them with my stick.

That’s new—me, not wanting to hit them with my stick.

Afterwards, Burke asks if I want to go out with some of the guys.

When I hesitate, he lays it on thick. “You just had a huge win. We should celebrate. Chicago is on their way to loving you.”

“I don’t go out during the season,” I say.

“You gotta eat, right?” he asks. “Just come for dinner.”

I think about the containers Eloise stacked in my refrigerator. She made it possible for me to go home and do exactly what I always do after a game. Shower. Soak. Stretch. Eat. Sleep.

“Come on, man, we won’t stay out late,” he says. “It’s important. I think it’ll go a long way with the other guys if you’re there.”

He’s right. The reason I loved my old team was because those guys were my friends. Just because making friends isn’t easy doesn’t mean it’s impossible.

It goes against everything I want to do, but I relent. “Fine.”

“Yeah?” He grins and slaps me on the shoulder.

“Yeah. Let’s go before I change my mind.” We walk out into the loud hallway along with some of the guys. There’s a noisy group waiting there, wives and girlfriends and some of the other players who came out early.

The men are greeted like heroes and for a flicker of a second, I almost wish I had someone standing out here waiting for me. Wearing my jersey.

That’s never been something I’ve ever wanted. I was always told it would only be a distraction.

But when Poppy moves out of the way and reveals Eloise standing there, leaning against the wall, looking a little—I don’t know, lost—I’m not so sure. Something in me settles at the sight of her.

Something I can’t articulate.

When she sees me, she grins, then makes her way over to me. I can practically feel the electricity humming inside of me as she approaches.

She’s special. It’s only been a couple weeks of regular interaction, and I already know that.

“Uh, good game, I *guess*.” She adjusts her stocking hat, her blond hair falling around her shoulders. Man, she’s pretty.

“Thanks,” I say, smirking.

She grins. “I think the consensus out here was that you did, in fact, bring sexy back.”

“Oh, you’re funny,” I say dryly, though I actually think she is. She makes me feel lighter, just by standing here. “That was your idea, I take it?”

She shrugs. “I asked the DJ for a favor. Everyone needs a theme song.”

“Yeah? And what’s yours?”

Without hesitation, she says, “‘Girl on Fire’ by Alicia Keys.” And then, another grin.

Her joy is infectious. Maybe I'm just lucky to be around it.

She takes a step toward me. "If you were the kind of guy who smiled, I bet it would've made you laugh."

I feel the corner of my mouth twitch, but I tamp down the smile before it gives me away.

"Oh my gosh! One almost popped out! I saw it!" She points at my face.

I turn my head and a smile *does* pop out.

Dang it.

"The real question is—did you have fun out there?" She leans closer. "Did you love it?"

She doesn't know what I said to that sideline reporter. She doesn't know how much her words affected me.

I can smell her shampoo. It's like pineapple and sunshine. I remain stone-faced, but then I notice her red nails. The same color of red as the heart on the bottom of my hockey stick.

"Yeah. You could say that."

Before I can continue, though, Junior bear hugs me from behind and lifts me off the ground. "This guy!! What the heck, dude!? Can you play like that for the rest of the season?!"

I nod, just waiting for him to let go, and say, "I'll try, man." He goes off hooting and hollering down the hallway to his girlfriend, who shuts him up with a kiss. He backs her against the wall where they start fully making out.

Eloise and I both turn away from them and exchange a winced look.

She clears her throat and says, "Okay. So. That's happening."

There's a small awkward pause, and I know she's going to fill it with words, so I just wait.

"My sister Raya and I were going to tag along tonight, but we don't have to. You know, if it's weird for you to be out with your assistant. Socially. In a group."

"It's fine," I say. "I might not even go."

She gives my shoulder a playful punch. "You're going."

When I look at her, her expression shifts.

"Geez. Sorry. I don't know why I did that." She stuffs her hands in her pockets. "I promise I'll figure out how to treat you like I work for you."

"You treat me fine," I say. I don't really want her to think of me as someone she works for anyway.

Her eyes flick to mine, and the electrical current buzzes.

Jericho's wife, whose name I don't know, walks up. "We were going to go to Bianchi's, but they can't get us in. So, maybe Tudor's?"

I don't know either of these places, but I'm starting to wonder if this is a bad idea. Being out in a social setting with Eloise might blur one too many lines. After all, the last time we were out together, I had her body pressed up against mine while the clock struck twelve.

"Also booked," another one of the women says.

"Did you tell them we're with the Comets?" a third woman asks. "And we just won?"

And while they start chattering on like a group of clucking chickens, I glance over and see Eloise on the phone. I contemplate going home, but she hangs up and returns to the group before I can make a decision.

"Got us in at Bianchi's," she says, like it's no big deal.

The others stop talking, most of them mid-sentence, and stare at her.

"How?" a brunette asks.

Eloise shrugs. "I used to give tours of the city, and I know the owner, Angelo. He said he'd get the back room set up for us."

The chatter starts again, and again, I consider leaving. But then Burke slaps a hand on my back. "It'll be the welcome dinner we wanted to have when you first got to town."

I glance at Eloise. The night I got to town was New Year's Eve, and I went to have a drink in a bar to watch highlights from my old team's game.

Before we walk out into the parking lot, Eloise stops in front of me. "Do you need anything before we head out?"

"You're off the clock," I say, without looking at her.

She gives me a mock salute, which I catch out of the corner of my eye.

She's right. If I was the type of guy who smiled, she would make me laugh.

Chapter Sixteen

Gray

I prefer crowds to be on the other side of the plexiglass.

It's a Sunday night, but there's a lot going on in the city, so much so that a bunch of hockey players walking into a restaurant doesn't seem to faze anyone. On our stage, we're known, but as pro athletes go, we're not really recognized that much off the ice.

Eloise talks to the host like they're old friends, and he ushers us to a large room in the back. There are three members of the wait staff ready to take our drink orders, and Eloise greets them by name.

I watch as she makes her way around the room and wonder if she realizes she doesn't work here. It seems to be her personal mission to make sure every single person in our group has everything they want.

I could say I'm not anticipating her move to my side of the room, but I'd be lying. But before she can get over here, Gump, whose real name is Jimmy, intercepts. He steps in front of her, blocking my view of her face. I don't know what he says, but I can imagine it's something that would make me roll my eyes. He made it clear what he thought of Eloise in the weight room yesterday.

The hair on the back of my neck stands up when she throws back her head in a laugh that fills the entire room. I clench my hand into a fist at my side and start to sweat.

She doesn't belong to me. So why do I want to throttle my own teammate just for talking to her?

I turn around and step toward the bar.

“You good?” Burke asks. “You should be on cloud nine, but you look like you want to kill someone.”

“I’m fine,” I say, not meaning it. “I’m just . . .” I shake my head. “Maybe I shouldn’t have come out.”

He frowns, but Jericho moves into the space beside him, and they start talking about the game, and I zone out, eyes wandering across the room to where Eloise is still standing, still talking to Jimmy.

“What’s his deal?” I nod over at the two of them, interrupting Jericho mid-sentence.

They follow my nod, then exchange a look.

“Gump?” Jericho asks. “He’s mostly harmless. I’m sure she’s used to guys hitting on her.”

“Why? Are you concerned?” Burke leans against the bar.

“No, I just—” I bite back what I’m thinking. “Aren’t there rules about dating employees?”

Burke raises an eyebrow. “You’re bothered.”

“I’m not bothered,” I say. “I just—”

Jericho raises both eyebrows. “You like her.”

“I feel protective is all,” I say, defensively. “Like a sister.” *Not at all like a sister.* Why am I still talking? I do better when I keep my mouth shut.

“She practically *is* Burke’s sister, and I don’t see steam coming out of *his* ears,” Jericho says.

Eloise glances over and waves at us, probably because we’re all looking in her direction. Gump follows her wave, but when he makes eye contact with me, I glare at him. I want to throat punch him just for looking at her.

He lifts his chin in recognition, then the two of them start toward us like a regular couple.

I brood. I don’t want to be here anymore.

I can’t date her, but that doesn’t mean I want her dating one of my teammates.

“Hey guys,” Eloise says. “Jimmy was just explaining what a slapshot is.”

“She doesn’t care what a slapshot is, you idiot,” Jericho says with a laugh.

“Aw, she said she did!” Jimmy says, in his stupid Southern drawl. Sometimes I think it’s fake. He sounds like a cowboy. He looks at Eloise. “You would’ve told me if you didn’t care, right?”

She gives him a playful shrug, and I can hardly stand it. Watching him flirt with her is one thing—watching her flirt back is its own kind of torture.

“Hey, I’m going to go.” I glance at Burke. “I’ll see you tomorrow.” I push past him and walk out the door, into the hallway, when I realize someone took our coats and hung them up. I have no idea where.

I turn back just as Eloise walks out of the room. “You okay? You were doing so well at being social.” She smiles, and I have to look away.

“I just need to go,” I say.

I catch her frown, but I don’t acknowledge it.

Her expression shifts. “I’m so sorry. I thought this would be a good idea. Are you missing your girlfriend?”

“That’s the second time you’ve mentioned a girlfriend,” I say before I can stop myself. “I don’t have a girlfriend.”

Her frown is back. “But . . . I heard you on the phone.”

It takes me a second. When would she have . . .

Then I remember.

Scarlett.

I ruefully chuckle once to myself. “That wasn’t my girlfriend.”

Her entire body posture changes. To . . . relieved?

I want to shake this entire conversation away. This is personal, not professional, and not something I need to discuss with Eloise.

“Do you know where my coat is?” I say it more briskly than I mean to.

“I can get it for you, but—” she pauses.

We’re standing here in this dark alcove of the restaurant, and the second my eyes reach hers, I feel a shift inside of me. I have to ball my hands into fists to keep from reaching for her. I search her eyes, just a flicker of a moment, where I can fill in the blanks of my own brain.

I want her.

She doesn’t move for a few long seconds. Then, she presses her lips together, and it almost kills me. My head is screaming for me to take a step back. To walk away. To resist. But I can’t think of a single reason why I should listen.

“Are you—” she whispers it. Does she remember the kiss? Is she replaying it? Does she want to do it again? “Okay?”

Someone drops a plate in the restaurant behind me, and I hear it shatter. It’s enough to wake me from this trance. I look away.

“Gray?”

I can buy another coat. I can't stand here another second. But as I turn to go, I stop moving and say over my shoulder, "Don't go out with Jimmy. His accent is fake."

And then I walk away.

Eloise

What was that?

I'm frozen in the dimly lit space outside the back room at Bianchi's, watching a coatless Gray maneuver through the restaurant and out the door.

My entire body is pulsing, every nerve inside of me on high alert. My head, in Raya's voice, is telling me to let him walk away. I'm his assistant.

I will not repeat the Jay Mistake.

But I remember how it felt to have Gray's hands tangled in my hair. I remember the way he looked at me the second he pulled away.

And while I know it's illogical—stupid even—I grab his coat and mine from the nearby coat rack and follow him out into the parking lot.

The blustery winter air shocks my skin the second I open the door, but I ignore it. I scan the lot, and when I spot his car, I hurry over, slipping my coat on as I do. The lights of the car come on as the engine starts, and I freeze like a criminal under the harsh white lights of an interrogation room.

What am I doing?

I'm blocking his exit, and I can feel his eyes on me. I can feel the heat gathering at my core.

This is a mistake.

I should run the other way.

I shouldn't be thinking about him—not like this.

But then the car door opens. His face is shadowed, but I can make out enough of it to know that Gray isn't happy. He pauses, one hand on the roof of the SUV, the other on the door, but says nothing.

I should just give him his coat and run back inside before anything stupid happens.

But I can't. It's like I've got cinder blocks for shoes.

I draw in a breath as he slams the door shut and walks toward me, straight into the lights from the car behind him. Without a shred of hesitation, he reaches for me and then his lips are on mine.

The first kiss was a favor to me. But this—this is all for him.

And it's clear by the way he pulls my body into his that he's been thinking about this for a while. I drop the coat and wrap my hands around his back, pulling his body closer as I give in to the kiss, admitting to him that I've been thinking about it too. My knees want to buckle as his hands move from my face into my hair, and I let every logical thought drain from my mind.

The kiss is full and exciting, passionately frenzied and yet he's in complete control. It sparks something inside of me, something intoxicating. I note the way he holds me, the way he kisses—firm and purposeful, but with a contradictory gentleness that makes my stomach somersault.

The sound of people exiting the restaurant shatters the beautiful bubble we're standing in, and Gray pulls back, searching my eyes. I'm out of breath, my lips tingling, raw and wanting. But I can see reality washing over him. This was a mistake.

He shakes his head, loosening his grip on me. "I'm sorry—we can't do this. Not again."

I frown. "What do you mean—not again?"

He pulls his hands back and looks away, an admission he didn't mean to slip.

"You do remember," I say, realizing.

He pushes a hand through his hair. "I have to go."

I reach out and grab his arm before he can leave. "Why did you pretend not to recognize me?"

He swallows, gaze dipping to my lips, then back to my eyes, but then, to my surprise, he takes a step toward me. "Because I knew this would happen." He steadies my gaze, but my heart is beating like a herd of wild horses. "And this *can't* happen."

He looks like someone strapped with a backpack parachute in a plane, muscles all twitched and tense, unsure when to jump.

"Eloise. I can't. I . . . just can't."

And then, he's gone. He gets in his car and drives away, leaving me breathless and bewildered, and really, *really* wanting more.

Chapter Seventeen

Eloise

The next day, a loud, incessant knocking wakes me up.

The smell of blueberry muffins and freshly baked bread lingers in the room—and I hear my sisters call my name from the other side of the door.

“Don’t you have a key?” I hear Raya ask Poppy.

“No, but I bet she keeps one out here,” Poppy replies. “I’m sure she has a backup in case she locks herself out.”

“How many times a week do you bet she has to use it?” Raya asks.

If I were more awake, I’d be more offended. As it is, I don’t move—just blink. I hear them shuffling around and wonder how long it will take for them to locate the spare key on top of the door jamb.

When I hear the lock rattling, I think, *Wow, I need a better hiding place.*

From my bed, I have a clear shot of the door, and when they push it open and burst inside, I sit up. “Is someone dead?”

“Someone is about to be,” Raya says, striding in my loft like a principal bursting into a classroom of unruly kids.

“I told you not to get involved with *your boss*, Eloise! When are you going to learn this little lesson? How many times do you have to make this same mistake?”

At that, my heart drops and I pull my knees up to my chest. “So, you do know. About Jay.”

“Yes, I know about Jay. I got you that job, remember?” she says. “I’m

friends with his girlfriend.”

“You are?” I can still see Jay and Amber together in Sully’s. The way she claimed him, the way he let her—that was never our story. In hindsight, I realize I was more of a dirty, little secret.

Raya lifts a brow, and I get the answer to the question I’ve been too afraid to ask.

Jay was with Amber long before our little fling. My stomach roils. I drop my head into my hands. “Oh my gosh. I was the other woman.” And then, back to Raya: “I swear I didn’t know he had a girlfriend.”

“But he was your *boss*, Eloise,” Raya says. “What were you thinking?”

I wish I was a snail and could retract my entire body into a cozy shell. I see Poppy reach out and put a hand on Raya’s shoulder, giving her a *hey, lighten up* look.

“Jay is a creep,” Raya says, straightening a bit. “It’s not all on you.”

Poppy drops onto the end of my bed and hands over a paper bag. “I brought you an apple fritter.”

I open the bag, tear off a piece and stuff it in my mouth. “What are you guys doing here at this hour?” I look at Raya. “And were you flirting with Finn Holbrook last night?” I swear I saw her flirting with Finn Holbrook.

“No.” Raya is dressed in a slick black pantsuit, ready to go be corporate and do whatever she does with numbers all day. “And we aren’t here to talk about me. Or about Jay.”

“Can we talk about Finn?” Poppy asks, shooting me a conspiratorial grin.

I grin back.

Raya does not. “No.”

“Fine, so why *are* you here?” I tear off another piece of the fritter and pop it in my mouth. “What time is it? Gray has a photoshoot today and—”

“Eloise.”

Uh oh. Raya is using her Big Sister voice. Do they know?

“We talked about this.”

My mouth is half-full of fritter, but I get defensive. “No, *you* talked about this. There are things you don’t know.”

“You were making out with your boss last night! In the parking lot!” Raya says.

“Actually, we don’t know that for sure,” Poppy, ever the voice of reason, says. “Lisa told us that, and she could be mistaken. Not all rumors are true. That’s why they’re called *rumors*.” She faces me. “So, El. Were you making

out with Grayson Hawke in the parking lot of Bianchi's last night?" Then, her eyes brighten, "And if yes . . . how was it?"

Raya smacks her across the arm. "We are not supporting this, Poppy!"

"Ow! Ray!" Poppy moves away. "She doesn't have the same kind of job that you do. She doesn't technically work for him. He doesn't sign her paycheck. There's no HR department that's going to fire her if she gets caught."

"Actually," I say, "I think there is. I mean, no one ever specifically said so, but . . ."

"So, it's true," Raya says.

Dang it.

"Yes!" I groan and fall back, pulling my pillow over my face. "It's true."

"Maybe it's good," Poppy says. "He could use some sunshine in his life."

"Are you kidding?" Raya hisses. "It's not good. There is only one way this ends—with an unemployed and heartbroken Eloise."

"Gee, thanks, Raya," I say from under the pillow, holding up an aimless thumbs up.

"Do you . . . like him?" Poppy asks. "Like . . . *like* him like him?"

I can hear what she's not saying. *Why* would I like someone as awful as Grayson Hawke? Haven't I learned *not* to date the jerk?

I toss the pillow aside, rip the covers off and get out of the bed. "He's grumpy and rude and he grunts instead of using actual words—what's not to like?" I walk into the kitchen and grab a bottle of Dr Pepper from the refrigerator. When I crack it open, judgy Raya frowns.

"You're drinking that?" she asks. "Now?"

I let out an exasperated and melodramatic sigh. "Yes, Raya! Yes! I'm drinking a Dr Pepper in the morning! Yesterday I ate leftover chicken nuggets for breakfast. Is there anything else I'm doing that you want to openly criticize?"

She snaps her jaw shut, and I see Poppy's impressed face out of the corner of my eye.

I plop down on the bed. "There's more to the story," I say. "With Gray."

Poppy sits down in the chair at my little two-seater table against the bright yellow wall. "So, tell us."

I take another drink, then cap the bottle. "I actually met Gray before that day at the house."

My sisters' confused expressions match.

“We met on New Year’s Eve. In a bar,” I say. “And we kissed.”

They respond exactly how I’d expect them to respond, with a chorus of *Why didn’t you tell us? And You kissed a random guy in a bar? And Why did you take the job?*

I hold up a hand in an attempt to silence them, but somehow, they get louder. I open my soda and take another drink. Then they start arguing with each other, Raya saying this is the dumbest thing I could ever do while Poppy is saying that maybe they should hear me out.

Poppy pretended to date a stranger in a coffee shop, after all. And look how that turned out. When Dallas went along with it, their love story began—and even Raya has to admit, that harebrained idea wasn’t all bad.

After a few minutes of this, they both run out of things to say and look at me.

“Oh, is it my turn now?” I ask sarcastically. Because I’m the youngest, I’m used to people telling me what to do, but I don’t like it. Not anymore. Nobody else’s opinion really matters here—it’s my life.

But even as I have that thought, I know it’s only partially true. It *is* my life, but I care a whole lot about what these two think of it. Of me.

“You should know better than to try and keep things from us,” Poppy says after I finally start telling the New Year’s story.

“Yeah, I’m surprised *The Rumor Mill* hasn’t written about it yet. Maybe they don’t go as far as Chicago.”

Poppy smirks her agreement. “Right? Stupid site commented on my relationship with Dallas at every turn.”

“At least they don’t make you out to be a spinster in a Jane Austen novel.” Raya pretends this doesn’t bother her, but I know it does. It has to.

I think she had her heart broken one too many times, and it’s left her cranky and bitter.

It’s understandable, but sad. Deep down, she is a good, good person who is fiercely protective of her people. She deserves to be happy, but I’m not even sure she’ll let herself. Sometimes, it’s like she runs away from anything that makes her feel anything.

I’m the flip side of that coin. I seem to be made up of one hundred percent feelings.

I finish the whole New Year’s Eve saga, doing my best not to sound as pathetic as that night made me feel. When I’m done, they both stare at me with slightly pitying expressions.

“See?” I say, exasperated. “This is exactly the opposite of what I wanted and the exact reason I kept this whole thing to myself in the first place.”

“Meredith was always a bad influence on you,” Raya says, looking for someone to blame. “She’s lucky she doesn’t live here anymore, or I’d find her and give her a piece of my mind.”

I roll my eyes at her. “Raya, *I’m* the one who sat down next to him. *I’m* the one who wanted to make Jay jealous. *I’m* the one who took the job with the Comets.” I groan. “And I really don’t want a piece of your mind.”

“Okay, so I understand the New Year’s thing,” Poppy says. “But how did you end up kissing him last night? And more importantly . . . how was it?”

Raya purses her lips, doing nothing to hide her disapproval.

I open my soda and take another drink, trying—hard—not to replay the kiss in my head like I’d already done a thousand times while trying to fall asleep. What am I going to say, that Gray and I seem to have some sort of magnetic pull toward each other?

Ridiculous.

I don’t have any idea what’s going on in his mind, and the kiss surprised me. Wait. That’s a ginormous understatement. The kiss shocked me. Stunned me.

Made me weak-kneed.

And I really, really liked it.

“I can’t explain it,” I finally tell them. “It just sort of happened.”

“Probably all the emotion of the night,” Raya says, as if there’s a reasonable explanation for that kiss. Something that will explain it away.

“Actually,” Poppy says.

My eyes flick to hers.

“Dallas thinks he might have a thing for you.”

My heart leaps. *He does???*

I force myself to play it cool, shaking my head. “No, I think Raya’s right. Definitely the emotion of the night. I mean, he’s alone here. He doesn’t have anyone.”

“What about the phantom girlfriend?” Raya asks, pointedly.

Sometimes Raya’s moral compass needs to be rerouted. She’s got this high and mighty, self-righteous thing going on, and frankly, I don’t like it.

“He said there isn’t one,” I say. “So, maybe I overheard him talking to a sister or something?” And then, I feign nonchalance and ask, “But, incidentally, why would Dallas say that?”

Poppy shrugs. “Guess he was acting weird when Jimmy was flirting with you.”

“Weird, how?” *Ohmygosh*. I’m a middle school girl who’s just gotten wind that her crush might skip over the NO and the MAYBE and circle YES on the paper asking him to be her boyfriend.

And I remember the look on Gray’s face when Jimmy and I walked over. I remember the way he pushed Dallas aside and walked out of the restaurant. And I remember the way he looked at me in the hallway.

Don’t go out with Jimmy.

“Eloise.” Poppy narrows her eyes. “Do you have feelings for Gray?”

“What?” I scoff. “No. I’m just—curious.”

She stares at me. Raya stares at me. I’m caught in their crosshairs, and there is no escape.

“Don’t look at me like that,” I say. “I’m just curious.”

“Eloise, curiosity is bad enough,” Raya reprimands. “Don’t make it worse.”

“But also, are you seeing something in him that the rest of us aren’t?” Poppy’s forehead pulls. “I mean, he’s good-looking, sure, but even Dad thinks he’s rude. And Dad loves everyone.”

I think about Gray. Poppy’s right. He’s rude. But there’s something else there, something misunderstood.

He took pity on me in the bar when I asked him to kiss me. He was kind to me when I crashed his car. He was even okay when he found me asleep on his bed—and thoughtful when he covered me with a blanket and slept on the couch.

“You’re doing it again,” Raya says.

“Doing what?” I hear the defensiveness in my own voice.

“Trying to save the lost puppy,” Poppy says, resigned. “This is what you do.”

“Like the time you brought home the baby raccoon and cried for three weeks because Mom and Dad wouldn’t let you keep it,” Raya says.

“This is not that,” I say. “But I am still mad about Kevin.”

“Kevin?”

“The racoon,” I say, like they should remember. “He was sweet.”

“He was hairless, Eloise,” Raya says. “He probably had rabies.”

I cap my soda and walk the five steps from the kitchen to the living room. “Look, I don’t have feelings. It’s just attraction. I’m attracted to him.”

“That’s not like you,” Poppy says. “And you know it.”

I do know it. Anytime I’ve dated anyone, I’ve believed in the potential for something serious. Something that might last forever. I’m not a person who guards my heart, I’m a person who offers it freely, willingly, pathetically. I’ve been searching for my person for as long as I can remember.

“We just don’t want to see you get hurt,” Raya says.

I hear what she’s saying. Gray isn’t a relationship kind of guy. He doesn’t date during the season, and I’m not going to be a fling.

“Fine. I get it. I’ll make sure that was the last time,” I say.

And I’ll relish every sweet memory of that kiss.

“I’ll tell him today that it was a giant mistake,” I say. “And that I agree with him that it can’t happen again. Because I need this job.”

“And also because he’s cranky,” Raya says.

Poppy and I look at each other, and don’t look away fast enough to hide what we’re thinking from our oldest sister.

“What was that?” she asks.

“Nothing,” Poppy says.

“Except it’s a little like the pot meeting the kettle and all that,” I add. “You calling Gray cranky.”

Raya rolls her eyes. “You two need to grow up.” She looks at her phone, and abruptly stands. “I have to go. I have a job interview today.”

I frown. “Wait, what?”

A new job? That’s unlike her. I look at Poppy, and she shrugs.

Raya picks up her purse and waves. “I’ll call you later, I promise. And please, El, use your head. Not your heart.” And with that, she walks out.

I look at Poppy. “Raya has been at the same job for ten years. And she hates change.”

She nods her agreement, and then turns to me. “Are you okay?”

“Of course,” I say.

“Because your heart is always on your sleeve, El,” Poppy says. “And if you like him—”

“I don’t,” I cut in. “Just caught up in the moment. From now on he’ll only get the professional version of me.” Whoever that is.

Poppy gives me a firm nod, but I can tell by the look on her face she’s being cautious with her optimism. “I have to get to the restaurant.”

“I have to get to the city.”

And I have to address what happened with Gray.

Like a grown-up.

Chapter Eighteen

Eloise

Just. Breathe.

In the elevator ride up to Gray's apartment, I force my racing mind to slow down. I will my heart to stop beating like it's keeping time with an advancing Roman legion.

Neither the forcing nor the willing are successful.

I have no idea what I'm stepping into. Is he going to pretend it didn't happen? Is he going to be angry with me? Is he going to ask me to resign?

Maybe he'll tell me he's thought of nothing else since last night and desperately wants to start a relationship with me after all?

I'm scheduled to be here at 9 a.m. so we can go to his photoshoot together, but maybe I should've texted to remind him.

Or maybe I should've faked my own death. Will they put you in witness protection if you're in danger of dying from utter humiliation?

When the elevator slows, I feel heat rush to my already flushed face. I'm going to exit this little metal box looking like a sweaty tomato.

I've had that kiss on mental repeat ever since my sisters left my apartment, my promise to them notwithstanding. It wasn't just the kiss itself—it was the *way* he kissed me.

Like he meant it. Like he wanted it. Like he wanted *me*.

It made me want to be everything to him.

I try to shake the thoughts away. My sisters are right. This is what I do. I try to save everything and everyone, treat broken people like stray animals in

need of a home.

And I'm usually the one who ends up hurt.

The doors separate, and I hesitantly step into the apartment and look around. At least he hasn't gotten rid of the simple, homey touches I've added. That's a good thing, right?

I start toward the kitchen when something stops me. A coat and purse on the end of the sofa.

I gasp and freeze and the words *I'm the other woman* race through my mind.

I freeze and panic at the same time, muscles tense but unable to move. I try to turn back to the elevator when I hear movement in the kitchen followed by a small voice that says, "Hello?"

I'm still frozen when a little girl with long, sandy-colored hair appears. She's wearing black leggings under a pink polka-dot dress and a jean jacket, and she has a trail of bracelets up her arm.

I stare at her like she's a unicorn or an Oompa-Loompa, unable to register her presence here.

"Um . . . hello," I say after a long, confused moment.

Am I in the right place?

The little girl walks back into the kitchen, then sits at the counter focused on an open iPad.

I look behind me. I look back at her.

She's still there.

"I'm sorry, but are—"

"I'm Scarlett," she says without looking up.

This is Scarlett?

"Like the color. Only with two T's."

I feel my fingers tighten around the strap of my purse. "Like the color?"

"Yep. It's my favorite," she says. "It's the color of passion and energy and confidence."

I have to smile. She's a whole little person. "Ah, that's a pretty impressive name, Scarlett."

Her eyes jump up to mine. "My mom named me that."

And the shoe drops. He doesn't have a girlfriend. He has a *wife*.

But, no. Coach Turnrose specifically said Gray isn't married.

"I'm Eloise." There's a pause as I gently sit down on the stool next to her. "So, *you're* Scarlett," I say with a playful lilt.

She glances up at me, smiling, and I note the familiarity of her bright blue eyes. “You’ve heard of me?”

“I have,” I say.

“Huh. Dad usually keeps me a secret.” She returns to her iPad.

I’ll say.

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Almost eleven,” she says.

“And Gray is—?”

“Duh. My dad.”

Gray is twenty-nine, which means—she must see me doing the math because I catch her watching me out of the corner of my eye.

“They had me when they were still in high school.” She widens her eyes and shoots me a knowing look. “I was a mistake.”

“Whoa. You’re not a mistake,” I say instinctively.

She sets the iPad down. “I was. A total accident.”

“Not every accident is a mistake,” I say. “Who in the world told you that?”

She picks her iPad back up. “My grandmother. She doesn’t like me very much, I don’t think.”

My heart breaks a little. What on earth would possess someone, a grandmother no less, to call a child a mistake? I know practically nothing about Gray’s personal life, but I have to believe he’d be horrified if he knew she thought these things.

I’m trying to wrap my head around the scene in front of me when I overhear voices coming from the back of the apartment.

My guess is Gray and Scarlett’s mom are discussing this little girl, and all I can think to do is distract her.

But she surprises me by asking, “I bet you’re wondering why we’re here and not back in Philadelphia.”

“Uh, well, maybe I am. A little.” It’s strange and fun to carry on a conversation like this with an almost eleven-year old. “I mean, it’s your dad’s apartment,” I say. “Maybe *you’re* wondering why *I’m* here.”

She gives me a once-over. “He doesn’t have girlfriends, so you must work for him,” she shrugs, turning back to the screen.

“He—uh, doesn’t? Have . . . girlfriends? At all?” I stumble, knowing full well that I was hoping this was the case. “Ever?”

She shrugs again. “I’ve never met one.”

I wonder if the real reason he doesn't date during the season is because he's holding out for Scarlett's mom. And while it's a relief to know he's not involved with a supermodel named Scarlett, there's no way I'm getting in the middle of a family. That's even worse than accidentally being someone's mistress.

"So, which are you?" she asks.

"Which am I, what?"

"Girlfriend or employee?"

"Oh!" I say, flushed again. "No. You were right. I work for him."

She nods. "Thought so."

The voices in the back room get a little louder.

"Do you want something to eat?" I stand and walk around to the other side of the counter, opening the cupboard where I stashed a box of Lucky Charms, which is mine in case of emergencies. When I bought it, I was thinking more of a PMS emergency, but *surprise child* also fits.

I open a different cupboard in hopes of finding a bowl. Unlike the groceries, I didn't put the dishes away.

"I know what you're doing," she says.

"Looking for a bowl," I say.

"You're trying to distract me." She closes the cover on her iPad and points. "Just like they're trying to have a conversation without me hearing."

I stop moving and watch her. She's smart. Really smart. Definitely feels older than almost eleven.

"My dad doesn't have girlfriends, but my mom *definitely* has boyfriends," she says.

I take a step toward her.

"A little while ago, she met Ted."

"Ted?"

"Ted," Scarlett repeats. "He works in a bank or somewhere super boring like that, but Mom thinks Ted's *great*." She rolls her eyes. "She thinks he's great because he doesn't play hockey."

I finally locate the bowls. I pull two of them out and set them on the counter.

I see the look of *adults don't eat that kind of stuff* on her face and I cut it off.

"Lucky Charms are *not* just for kids," I shake the box at her. "This is my favorite snack. Fight me."

She screws up her face, and I hope she's deciding to like me. She seems to consider it, and then reaches out a palm.

"I think Ted's . . . *fine*, I guess," she says, as I drop a handful of dry cereal into her hand. "But he's not like my dad."

I grab the milk from the fridge. "And you want your mom and dad to be together."

"Oh my gosh, no!" She laughs. "They're only friends." She pauses. "But . . ."

I push the bowl of cereal toward her and get two spoons out of the drawer. "But what?"

"Now my mom's getting married," she says. "And Ted wants to take her to some island somewhere." She sticks the spoon in the cereal. "Without me."

"Oh." I take a bite, not knowing exactly what to say.

"She doesn't know I know," Scarlett says. "But I heard them talking. It was Ted's idea to bring me here, and Mom's trying to make it sound like Dad wanted me to come because he misses me, but he didn't even know about it."

Scarlett's mom has no idea how smart her kid is.

"Well, I do think your dad misses you," I say.

"Did he tell you that?" she asks, slurping a bite of cereal.

I shake my head. "I'm his assistant. He doesn't really talk to me about stuff like that." *Or anything.* "But I know he misses Philadelphia, and I'm positive you're the reason why."

I originally thought it was just the team that he missed. But the trade took him away from her, too.

She seems to accept this and quietly goes on eating.

"Ted talks to me like I'm a baby," she says, rolling her eyes. "My dad never does that. Plus, Dad is way more fun."

"Fun?" I choke the question through a mouthful of cereal before I can stop it.

"Yeah," she says. "At his old place, I had a room and he let me paint it myself."

"What color did you pick?"

"Purple," she says.

"Solid choice."

"It used to be my favorite. Dad says I'll have a room in this apartment too, but I think I want it to be turquoise. Or green." She looks at me. "Do you like green?"

“Green is great,” I say, after swallowing a bite. “But hmm . . . I might go turquoise.”

She nods, shovels a heaping spoonful into her mouth, chews it up and swallows. “Do you think he’ll let me stay?”

I smile at her. Despite what I told my sisters, I do like Gray. But I think I already love Scarlett.

“Gosh, I hope so,” I say. “I have so much to show you.”

“Like what?”

I pull out my phone and do a quick search. “Did you know that in March, they dye the entire river green for St. Patrick’s Day?”

“Whoa, for real?” She looks at the pictures.

“For real,” I say. “And there’s a big parade and tons of food—beef and roasted red potatoes and Irish soda bread. You’ll love it!”

“Wow. I hope I get to stay.” She hands my phone back to me. “I’ve never seen a green river.”

I spare her the history of that tradition and click my phone off, doing my best not to listen in on the conversation happening down the hall. “I really hope so too.”

Chapter Nineteen

Gray

Celeste has a way of blindsiding me. From the day she told me she was pregnant, to the day she told me I had a daughter, to this morning, when she called me from the lobby of my building.

Blindsided.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” I’d asked.

“We wanted to surprise you,” she’d said.

“We?”

A bit of a pause, then “Yeah, Scarlett’s here too.”

I shake my head. “You only surprise me when you want to make sure I don’t say no to whatever you’re about to ask.” Celeste knows I can’t say no when Scarlett’s involved.

“We’re coming up.”

When the elevator opens, Scarlett practically jumps into my arms, throws her arms around my neck, and squeezes.

“What’s up, Scout?” I bear hug her until she groans.

“I missed you, Dad!”

I pull away and frown. “Dad? Since when do you call me ‘Dad’?”

“I’m a little old to call you ‘Daddy.’ I’m practically a teenager.”

“I think I’d like you to stay about six or seven. Can you manage that for me?”

She makes a face and I make one back. Then I look over to find Celeste

staring at me, and a wave of panic rushes through me. Something is wrong.

“Why don’t you hang out here for a minute while I talk to your dad, okay?” Celeste asks.

I set Scarlett down, and she looks around. “Where’s your TV?”

“In my room,” I say. “I’ll get another one.”

“That’s why we brought your iPad, hon,” Celeste says.

Scarlett, who is a little like a forty-year-old woman trapped in the body of a ten-year-old, waves us off. “I’m fine. I know when I’m not supposed to hear things. Go talk like grown-ups.”

We walk down the hall, and Celeste closes the door of my room behind us.

“What’s going on?” I ask impatiently. “Is something wrong? Did she have a doctor’s appointment you forgot to tell me about or . . . ?”

She shakes her head. “No, Gray, nothing like that.”

I hold up my hands as if to say *Well? I’m waiting.*

Celeste walks over to the wall of windows and looks out over the city. “Are you settling in?”

“It’s fine,” I say. “Can we skip to the part where you just tell me what’s going on?”

She turns a pained face at me. Maybe this is . . . something hard to tell me? What could it be?

“Scarlett told me about the game last night.”

“Celeste,” I say. “Why are you here?”

“Ted asked me to marry him.”

A long pause.

She faces me, and only now do I see the ring on her finger. “And I said yes.”

“Great,” I say, honestly. I’m relieved it wasn’t something medical. “Congratulations. But, that doesn’t really explain what you’re doing in Chicago.”

“Actually, it does,” she says with a heavy sigh. “He wants to elope.”

I watch her, knowing there’s more.

“And have a honeymoon all at the same time.”

My stomach drops as the picture comes into focus. “And he doesn’t want to take Scarlett.”

“I mean, would you want a ten-year-old on your honeymoon, Gray?”

“She’s almost eleven.” I fold my arms. “Does she know?” I ask, not

liking the idea of this marriage or this trip making my kid feel like she's in the way.

"She knows bits and pieces," Celeste says. "But you know how she is."

"Smart," I say.

"So smart." Celeste's eyes get wide, as if to ask *How did that happen?* "I had to think of a way to make it clear to her that she's not a pest."

"Is this what it's going to be like with him?" I ask, a bit brisk. "Does he know that the girl sitting in the other room probably eavesdropping on us is the most important thing in the world to you? And that you guys are a package deal?"

"It's not that," she says. "He loves Scarlett. I mean, everyone loves Scarlett. He just thought—and I agree—that it might be nice for us to have some time away. Just the two of us. And maybe it would help her get used to the idea of you living here instead of ten minutes away."

I frown, trying not to let on that I hate—absolutely *hate*—not being ten minutes away.

"Okay, but what does she think about this?" Because that's all I care about. Celeste and Ted can ride off into the sunset on a white horse and I don't give a rip, unless it affects Scarlett.

"I think she's happy to see you," Celeste says. "But I don't know about the rest of it. She's not saying much." She sighs. "Look, Gray. I know it's selfish, but I never got to do anything like this. I was a mom before I was nineteen. And I know you were a dad, but Scarlett lived with me. And you were . . . gone."

I start to protest, but she cuts me off.

"No, it's fine, I understood what I was getting into. I never wanted to be the reason you didn't go make all these big dreams come true. You were made for something great, and I just . . ." she trails off. "I just couldn't follow. Not then."

I look away. As if I could forget. Does Celeste remember that I asked her to marry me? That I was willing to step up and do the right thing? Never mind that she'd already moved on to a new guy when she found out she was pregnant. That it was obvious we didn't love each other. That we'd only be getting married to raise our daughter, and while I was willing to do that, she wasn't.

She said she wanted the fairytale.

I guess Ted is Prince Charming.

We agreed that we'd stay friends, no matter what, for Scarlett's sake, but I won't pretend this move away from my kid hasn't been the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

"I never got to be young, or carefree, or go on fun vacations, or any of that, and you know how much I love Scarlett. I'd do anything for her, and me getting married isn't going to change that. But if you're okay keeping her for a week, I'd like to go."

I sigh. I know she's given up a lot to raise our daughter. I was drafted right out of high school, and Celeste told me she would never hold me back from "greatness".

Somehow, miraculously, we've been able to raise our daughter and keep our agreement to be friends. We're both committed to Scarlett and to making our arrangement work. Celeste moved to Philly a week after I did, and if Ted wasn't already in the mix, she probably would've moved to Chicago, too.

But he *is* in the mix. And I can't ask her to uproot their lives. Which means less time with Scarlett. We're still sorting out the details, but for now, I'll take what I can get.

"I'll never turn down more time with her," I say, still mulling this over in my mind.

There's just one problem. I'm in the thick of the season in a city where I don't know anyone. How am I going to take care of a kid when I'm on the road?

"But?"

I look at her. "But I have a trip this week."

"Can you take her?" Celeste asks. "She'd probably love it. Or find someone to stay with her or—" Then her expression changes, as if she's just now realizing all the reasons this won't work. "Or wait. Maybe that's a terrible idea. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have bothered you with this. You're in season, and I don't know what I was thinking, and—"

"No," I cut in. "We can figure it out." Celeste doesn't talk to her mother anymore, so I'm all she has. I don't ask why Ted has to elope *right now* because honestly, it doesn't matter. Scarlett is here for at least a week, and that's not a bad thing.

"What about school?" I ask because Christmas break is over. Is her school really going to let her just miss a week?

"I have all of her assignments," Celeste says. "And some of her classes can be done online, but you'll have to make sure she actually pays attention."

She's convinced that her teacher has nothing to teach her." Her smile is soft.
"She's like her dad that way."

"Yeah, sorry about that."

She smirks. "No, you're not."

I chuckle. "You're right. I'm not. I love that about her."

"I know managing the schedule won't be easy," she says, "with everything you have going on."

"I'll handle it," I say.

She narrows her eyes at me. "You're sure?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Thank you, Gray! You really are the best." She starts toward the door.

"I'll go tell her."

"Celeste?" I say, stopping her.

She turns, eyebrows raised as if to respond.

"Congratulations."

Chapter Twenty

Eloise

I'm rinsing out our bowls when I hear Gray's bedroom door open. My heart races, and I'm not sure if it's because I'm about to meet the mother of his very wonderful daughter or because he and I had a moment last night.

A very, very nice moment.

That can never happen again.

He walks into the kitchen, followed by a petite brunette, and when he catches my eye, I can see surprise there. He didn't know I was here.

Did he forget we have a photoshoot today? I already reached out to the photographer to let her know we'd be late, but this does have to happen today. Not only for the fan mail, but because the team needs photos for the banner and other promo materials. And he already failed to show up to the first one that had been scheduled, though he didn't mention that when we were discussing it. Apparently, publicity shots aren't high on his list of priorities.

"Hey," he says.

I smile, trying not to give away all the thoughts racing through my mind.

"You met Scarlett," he says.

I nod and glance at the woman standing beside him. She takes a step toward me and holds out her hand. "I'm Celeste."

"That's my mom," Scarlett says without looking up.

"I'm Eloise," I say, shaking her hand. "Gray's assistant."

Celeste's eyebrows shoot up. "Whoa, fancy. You have your own assistant?"

I'm pretty sure I hear him grunt something like *it wasn't my idea*, but he moves over to Scarlett's side of the counter and sits down next to her.

"What are you playing?" he asks.

"*Animal Crossing*," she says.

"Is it fun?"

"Not as much fun as *Just Dance*." Then, she grins. Her teeth are slightly crooked, and when Gray looks at her, it melts my heart, and I have to look away.

"Oh, you want a rematch?" Gray raises a brow.

"I'll smoke you again," Scarlett says.

"I'll take that challenge," Gray says. "But I get to pick the song this time."

My eyes trail down to Celeste's left hand where her giant engagement ring catches the light.

"Do you want to skip school for a week and hang out with me?" Gray asks.

"She's not skipping school," Celeste says.

Gray and Scarlett exchange a look that seems to be something like a secret language.

"I'll do my work, Mom," Scarlett says, exasperated. "It's so easy." Then to Gray, "And I'll stay, but only if you move the TV out here."

Gray picks her up and tosses her over his shoulder. She squeals as he walks her down the hall and stops in front of the room across from the bathroom. "Your room," he says.

"It's empty!"

He sets her down. "Blank slate, kid. We'll do whatever you want in here."

She looks up at him. "TV?"

"Uh, no," Gray says. "You know the rules."

I start to see a picture of what it was like for him in Philly. This little girl clearly gets a piece of Gray that nobody else in the world gets.

I feel privileged to witness it.

"Scarlett, let's go get your suitcase," Celeste says.

"All right." Then, she reaches over and squeezes Gray's hand. "This will be fun."

He smiles down at her, a look on his face that can only be described as

pure love, and I have to turn away again.

“We’ll be right back,” Celeste says. And then, over her shoulder, she adds, “She’s got you wrapped around her little finger.”

He gives her a half-hearted *what can I say* shrug, and they walk to the elevator, which opens right away. Wouldn’t do that for me, I bet, the traitor.

And then, it’s just the two of us. Standing here, in his kitchen, trying to ignore the parade of elephants in the room.

He opens the refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of water. “We’re going to be late for the photoshoot.”

“No problem. I already called to let them know.”

He nods. “And Scarlett will have to come with us.”

“I was hoping she would,” I say. “It’ll be fun.”

A pause.

“So,” I fill the space.

He takes a drink.

“You have a daughter.”

He swallows and looks at me.

“Google didn’t tell me that.” In Google’s defense, I probably didn’t enter the right search terms to uncover this information.

“I’m surprised,” he says. “Google has a big mouth.”

“Right, but you have a kid.” I say this like it’s going to shock him. “And she’s . . . *great*.”

His mouth turns up ever so slightly, as if he can’t contain a smile at the compliment to his daughter. “She’s the best.”

“She gets to go to your games and stuff, right?” I ask, because I’m still trying to figure out how this wasn’t the most important headline when searching Gray’s name.

“Yeah,” he says. “But I don’t want her in the public eye. That’s non-negotiable. I mean, I chose this life, but Scarlett didn’t.”

“I’m sure she understands,” I say, thinking about her grandmother’s comment.

Then he frowns. “Why the look?”

I try—fail—to shake my thoughts away. “Nothing, I just—”

The subtle quirk of his eyebrow is all the encouragement I need to continue.

“When I came in, we just, sort of started talking. Like, you know, adults having a conversation.”

He chuckles without a smile. “Yeah, that tracks.”

I continue. “We were talking, and she said something—” This is none of my business. I’m overstepping. Just because Gray and I have kissed twice and I get his groceries, that doesn’t give me the right to insert myself into his family.

But he surprises me when he asks. “She said what?”

“Something about being a mistake.” I wince as I say this.

His face falls. “She said that?”

I nod. “I’m sorry, I don’t know the whole story, and . . .”

“Why would she say that?” He looks genuinely hurt.

I pick my words carefully. “She said . . . her grandmother called her that. She didn’t think you knew she’d heard it . . . but she did.”

He sighs and shakes his head.

I don’t say anything, and this time, Gray fills the space.

“Celeste’s mother. She didn’t love the idea of her daughter getting pregnant by some hockey player. I mean, we were still in high school.” He looks away. “And my dad, he—” He shakes his head again. “Let’s just say the timing wasn’t great.”

I’ve done the math. For a normal teenager, having a baby would rock the boat. For one about to be drafted to play pro hockey? That’s a whole different level.

Still, this is a child we’re talking about here. And it’s obvious Gray doesn’t regret her.

All at once I see how complicated his life really is.

“I know it’s not my business,” I say, apologetically, “but I thought you should know.”

He looks at me and nods, but doesn’t say anything else.

I go still, leaning slightly against the counter, seeing a bit of the ice chipping away. “Celeste seems really nice.”

“She’s great,” he says. “And under the circumstances, she’s done amazing with Scarlett. We were young. Made a stupid mistake, but we got a great kid out of the deal.” He looks away.

I go quiet.

“Uh, look, Eloise—”

I hold up my hand. “Stop right there. If you’re going to talk about what happened last night, you don’t have to.” I have no idea if that’s what he was going to say but I set my dial to “ramble” and launch in anyway.

“We don’t have to make a thing of it,” I say. “So? It happened. It was a thing for a minute. And it was . . . *great*, but it’s behind us. Done-zo. We can still be friends. Lots of friends have shared a moment, and it doesn’t have to mess everything up. Right?”

I’m on a roll, but unfortunately, I feel like I’m rolling down a hill and off a cliff.

“But we’re not friends, Eloise,” he says. “We can’t be. You work for me. And I’m in season, and I don’t—I like to keep everything as uncomplicated as possible. It can’t happen again.”

“Oh, yeah! Totally! Pssh, I know,” I say, flustered, caught, feigning nonchalance. I have no idea what to do with my hands so I place them on my hips at weird angles.

I’m thinking, *You kissed me!* But what I say instead is, “I was *totally* coming here to tell you that same thing. This job is really important to me.”

“Great, so we’re on the same page,” he says.

“On the same line of the same paragraph.”

“Good.” A definitive nod.

“Good.”

“Only . . .” I make a face.

“Now what?”

I scrunch up my face a bit more. A question is worming its way out of my mouth despite my best attempts to wrangle it. “You pretended not to remember New Year’s Eve,” I blurt. “Why?”

His eyes dip to my lips, then back again. “I . . . I don’t know. I just did.”

That’s surprisingly accurate.

“Like I said, I like to keep things uncomplicated.”

“Telling me the truth would complicate things?” I frown.

“No.” He sighs. “Conversations like this complicate things. I don’t date because I need to stay focused. That means not having to navigate things like feelings. I’m sorry if that doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it does,” I say, even though it totally doesn’t. My DNA is one hundred percent feelings.

Gray is the exact opposite.

I need to start approaching this whole situation like he is. Pragmatic. Common-sensical. After seeing him with Scarlett, after seeing his considerate and mature relationship with Celeste, and after realizing that his kindness isn’t something I imagined, I need to follow suit. Be a grown-up.

However, I'm having a lot of feelings about all of it.

What the heck do I do with those?

"Okay, I'm going to get ready," he says. "Can you—?" He abruptly stops talking.

"Can I what?"

He scrubs a hand down his face. "I need to figure out what I'm going to do with Scarlett when I'm out of town."

"Oh," I say, not getting it, then brightening. "Oh! Yes! You're asking for my help. Like, as an assistant!"

He shoots me a look. "Don't act so excited."

"I'm at your service." I do a little curtsy and grin at him, trying to keep things from being weird between us, as if curtsying somehow isn't weird. "I can take her. I'd love it."

"You're not actually a babysitter."

"Trust me, Gray, hanging out with Scarlett will hardly feel like work," I say. "She's so cool. And I can get started on her room, if you're okay with it."

He frowns. "Her room? What do you mean?"

"Like, decorate it!" I say. "I'm good at making spaces homey." I half crouch and wave my hand like a model on a game show displaying a set of matching jet skis. "In case you haven't noticed."

"Are you sure?" he asks.

"It's *kind* of my job."

"It's *kind* of not," he says back.

It's banter. We're bantering.

It's the gateway to dating.

Shut UP Eloise.

"But I do love a project." And I've been wanting to help, to *really* help since they hired me. It's the first time Gray's acknowledged that my being here might be a good thing.

He holds my gaze for a three-count, and then releases me from its grip. "Okay. Done."

Done.

But I secretly pray he's not totally done with me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Eloise

We arrive at the photo shoot about an hour later. I try to busy myself in the car ride because watching Gray with his daughter is making my ovaries ache.

He parks the car in front of a nondescript brick building with a simple *Kim Murphy Studios* logo etched on the glass door.

I glance over at him. “This will be painless.”

Without cracking a smile, he says, “You’re a liar.”

I grin at him—I can’t help it—and we get out and walk toward the front door. Gray pulls it open and lets Scarlett and me pass. I purposely inhale a deep breath of his scent as I pass by. This is, of course, an epic mistake because the second I do, I’m imagining fistfuls of his sweatshirt, his hands tangled in my hair, our lips moving perfectly in synch in the most delicious—

“Eloise?”

“Huh?” I look at Gray, afraid I’m going to overheat, then realize there’s a receptionist staring at me.

“Are you okay?” he asks, a quizzical look on his face.

“Yep,” I say, and then, to the woman behind the desk. “We’re here to see Kim. Grayson Hawke.”

“Oh, I know who you are.” The woman gives him a flirty once-over, and I feel instantly protective. I want to shout, “He doesn’t date during the season!” but manage to keep my mouth shut.

She stands up to reveal her miles-long legs and smiles at him. He looks at

Scarlett, and I catch his concern. Gray doesn't want anyone making a big deal over him. It's odd enough we had to bring his daughter to a publicity shoot, and the last thing she needs is to see this drooling woman mentally undressing her father.

At least when I do it, I'm better at hiding it.

I step in front of him and smile at the woman. "Are you the one I spoke to on the phone?"

"Yes, I'm Misty."

Of course, you are. I widen my smile in an attempt to fend off my ugly, jealous side. "Gray really doesn't, you know, want anyone making a big deal over him." I lean in, like I'm telling her a secret. "He has a—uh, young fan with him, and really wants to make the experience fun for her. So maybe keep things more G-rated. Is that okay?" If he wants to keep Scarlett out of the public eye, this feels like the best way to go.

It doesn't count as lying. Scarlett is both young and a fan.

"Oh! Of course!" Misty says. "Don't worry, I know just what to do." And then she rushes off.

I turn and find Gray watching me, and I can't be sure, but I think there's gratitude behind his stormy eyes. Whatever it is, it makes my body tingle, and I divert my attention by looking around. The building is old, with tall ceilings, brick walls, and refinished hardwood floors. It's not unlike Gray's apartment that way, only it's much, much smaller and much more cluttered.

A blond woman with black horn-rimmed glasses and baggy clothes rushes out into the lobby. "Good morning!"

I take a step forward, ready to help Gray navigate what's bound to be an uncomfortable experience. "Good morning."

"My husband and I are huge Comets fans." She smiles over at Gray. "And Eloise made sure to let me know this isn't your idea of fun, so we're going to get you in here and make it as quick and painless as possible."

He grunts an indistinct reply.

"Gray does have practice today, so quick is good," I say. "And you have his uniform? I sent that over yesterday."

"Yes!" Kim looks at Gray. "If you want to step into the back, Misty can show you where to change."

I bet she can.

Jealous Eloise has a sarcastic streak.

"She tells me you've got a fan with you." She smiles at Scarlett. "Do you

want to help me get set up?”

“Sure!” Scarlett takes a step forward, and as she does, Gray glances at me.

“I’ve got her,” I say quietly.

He looks again at her, then at me, and his shoulders settle. He nods and walks through the doorway into the back where I’m sure ol’ Misty is waiting to help him get undressed. I’m internally rolling my eyes as I force myself to focus on Scarlett.

“I’m not sure what you have planned,” I say as Kim leads us into her studio space. Thankfully Misty is *not* in the dressing room, and there are two guys hanging around, most likely wanting autographs from Gray. “But I do want to make sure he’s comfortable.”

“Absolutely. We’ve done several other players already. I thought we’d capitalize on his intensity,” she says.

“So, no smiling or ‘say cheese’, right?”

“I know better than to try and pull that,” she says, laughing. “Finn Holbrook—he’s a smiler. Jericho? Smiler. I think I even got one out of Dallas Burke. But there’s no chance of that with Grayson Hawke, and frankly, I prefer it that way. He’s more intimidating and attractive with that serious furrowed brow.”

Amen, sister.

“Now, our first model.” She looks at Scarlett. “What is your name?”

“Scarlett.”

Kim looks impressed. “Nice name. Will you be my test subject?” She holds up the camera and shakes it at her.

“Really?!” Scarlett jumps into action, and I wander over to a nearby seating area and sit down, watching as Kim takes test shots of Scarlett, who strikes a pose like a pro. I lean back on the small loveseat when I catch movement in my peripheral vision.

It’s Gray in the dressing room, and he’s halfway through changing his clothes. My gaze lingers on the contours of his well-defined chest and the tingling is back in my body. I should look away or get up or go splash cold water on my face, but I can’t move. It’s not the first time I’ve seen him shirtless, but I think he gets more attractive every time.

It’s a theory I’m willing to test.

For science.

He shifts, turning to the side to grab the jersey off the hanger, and when

he does, he catches me watching him in the mirror.

I'm fully staring at his naked chest, and he knows it.

His gaze holds me hostage, and despite his warning only an hour ago, I'm thinking about his hands, his eyes, his lips—

“Do you want something to drink?” Misty steps in front of me, severing my view and knocking me right back to reality, which is where I need to be.

I pull at my collar like a man wearing a suit in a sauna. I push myself up to my feet. “No, thanks. I'm good.”

She smiles, and if she noticed me staring, she doesn't let on.

Gray doesn't let on either. When he walks out of the dressing room, he's dressed in his hockey gear and looking just as good fully clothed as he did bare-chested. How does he do that?

Oh, right. It's his face.

But the attraction turns into something else entirely when he reaches for Scarlett, hoisting her up into his arms like she's still young enough to be held and weighs absolutely nothing.

She goes along with it, wrapping her arms around his neck as he holds her completely upside down and backwards. She's giggling all her adorable little girl giggles, and everything in Gray's demeanor shifts. His love for her is so obvious, it cracks me open and tears me up inside. All at once, I understand his pain of being away from her. His attitude when he first got here makes perfect sense.

Kim snaps a few photos of the two of them together, and I see them pop up on a nearby monitor. One of the guys from earlier is watching the images as they light up the screen, and I take a few steps closer.

In the midst of their joking around, Kim managed to catch a tender moment between them. I can see the joy on Scarlett's face and the pure love on Gray's. It's magic.

I'm praying Kim doesn't think this is odd—that it's somehow too familiar for a pro and his “adoring fan.”

She doesn't seem to, as she points at a lighting stand and looks over at one of the guys, who nods and gives a thumbs-up. She then turns back to the posing duo.

“All right, Miss Scarlett,” Kim says. “You were brilliant.”

Scarlett, upside down again, says, “I'll have my people call your people.”

The whole room laughs at the precocious audacity, and I do too. She's a stitch.

“Fair enough! But I think Mr. Hawke is ready for his close up.”

He sets Scarlett down, and she runs over to where I’m standing.

“Eloise, grab my iPad and pick out some good music,” Kim says.
“Something that will help Gray get in the mood.”

My eyes dart to his without permission, and I quickly look away.

In the mood?! Kim’s innocent turn of phrase makes me think not-innocent thoughts.

It would probably be inappropriate to queue “Let’s Get it On,” right?

I need to get out of my head. I need to change the entire atmosphere in this studio. And I need to put a little distance between me and Gray.

So, I do what any sane person would do and turn on “MMMBop 2.0.”
The second the song starts to play, Scarlett jumps up and starts to dance.

“Come on, Eloise!” she says. “Dance with me!”

I shimmy my way over to her, and while the light from the flash pops, Scarlett takes my hands, bouncing around in a circle all the way until the chorus. And when I spin back around, my smile fades because Gray is watching us.

And he doesn’t look happy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Gray

The second the shoot is over, I head to the dressing room, changing back into my hoodie and joggers.

I'm frustrated.

I specifically told Eloise this couldn't happen.

And then I saw her watching me in the changing room.

And *then* she turned on that ridiculous song and started dancing around with Scarlett. Seeing that—it did something to me.

After what I've been through, happiness feels like an ache.

If the world lost power, all it would need is Eloise. She's like a bright light all on her own.

There are fleeting moments, flashes really, when I think that's exactly what's been missing. But I can't have room for bright lights in my life. I can't.

When I finish changing, I meet them in the lobby. "I've got to get to practice."

"Right," Eloise says, taking my uniform from me. "I'll make sure this gets back."

I nod. I won't lie, in some ways, it's nice to have someone taking care of things for me.

"I was thinking maybe Scarlett and I could go shopping for her room while you're at practice," Eloise says. "You know, if you trust us to decorate it."

She seems to know exactly how to jump in and help, but I need to be careful how much I let myself rely on her. Still, this is important. It's for Scarlett.

"Sure," I say. "But no black walls, okay?"

Scarlett tosses me a look followed by an eye roll that feels a little too teenager-y.

"Duh," she says with a grin. "I want turquoise."

Eloise smiles. "Bold choice. And the *right* choice, I might add. It's my favorite color."

"Okay, well," I reach into my pocket and grab my wallet. I pull out a credit card and start to hand it to Eloise, whose eyes light up. I pull it back, and she looks at me. "Don't go crazy, okay?"

She snatches it out of my hand, makes a huge *oh my gosh* face at Scarlett, which makes her giggle.

I go to practice and they Uber back to the apartment, before Eloise will navigate her way around the city with my daughter, buying everything they need to turn that empty guest room into Scarlett's room.

And I know that should have zero effect on me, but watching them head off together, it doesn't feel like I'm watching my employee babysitting. It feels like I'm watching a relationship forming.

And I'm pretty sure that is going to come back to bite me.

Because that's what happens.

That night, I look over the literal piles of things Eloise bought. Before she leaves for the day, she tells me not to open anything and that she'll be back tomorrow to help Scarlett set things up.

I watch as Scarlett throws her arms around Eloise's waist before she goes, and it's obvious: my daughter is falling in love with this woman.

And if I'm not careful, she won't be the only one.

The next day, I go to practice while Eloise and Scarlett work on the room. I know she got permission from the building manager to paint the walls, but I'm afraid to ask for details. After I work through my pre-game ritual, I get a text with a photo. A selfie of both of them grinning at the camera in front of a very turquoise wall. Eloise has a dot of paint on her right cheek and Scarlett has the whole front of her shirt painted turquoise.

I stifle a laugh.

I'm still staring at the photo when my phone starts buzzing with a call from Eloise. She's my assistant, and she has every reason to call me, but for

some reason, it throws me for a second. I'm getting ready for the game, and I like to keep this part of the day distraction free.

Burke frowns at me, and I turn away, quietly answering the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, Dad! It's Scarlett." As if I wouldn't have known. "Did you get our picture?"

"Yeah," I say, trying to keep my voice low. "It looks great so far." I don't talk to Scarlett the same way I talk to other people. She has access to my softer side, and that's not something I share with anyone else. Especially my new teammates. "Hey, I'm right in the middle of something, can I call you in a little while?"

"Yeah," Scarlett says. "I just wanted to know if I get to come to the game tonight."

I squeeze the bridge of my nose with my free hand. I had forgotten. "I'm not sure yet." I leave off the "sweetheart" I'd normally tack onto the end of that sentence because I can feel Jericho and Kemp eavesdropping.

I'm not ashamed of or embarrassed by Scarlett, not by a long shot. If I had my way, I'd parade her around on my shoulders after every game. But bringing her to a game means introducing her to a bunch of new people. It means accepting this trade. It's one step closer to making Chicago my home. And the Comets my team.

"Eloise said she'd take me," Scarlett says. "But I need a new jersey because I only have a Philly one, and it's too small."

"Well, you should stop growing then."

I can practically hear her eyes roll.

"What are you going to do with the old one?" I ask.

"Duh," she says. "I'm going to sell it on eBay and make a fat load of cash."

I stifle another laugh. "I'm both impressed and offended by that."

"How else am I going to get my own phone?"

I shake my head. I swear she's aged a whole year since I moved to Chicago only weeks ago.

"So, can you get us tickets?" she asks.

"Can you put Eloise on?" I ask.

Her voice is a little distant when she says, "He wants to talk to you."

I'm half-dressed so I don't go into the hallway, but I do move away from the audience of nosy teammates changing nearby.

“Hey.” Eloise’s voice instantly stills the nervous buzzing inside of me, and I start to wonder if *she* should be part of my pre-game ritual.

“Hey.”

“Sorry, she insisted on calling,” she says.

“It’s fine.” I push my hand through my hair and turn a circle. I’m standing near the coach’s office, but the door’s closed, and I think this is about as private a place as I’m going to get in a locker room full of hockey players. “I don’t ever want her to feel like she can’t call me.”

“I didn’t know she was going to ask about the game,” Eloise says, her voice low. “I wasn’t sure how you felt about that.”

“Do you think it would be okay to bring her?” I ask. “I mean, are you comfortable bringing her?”

“Of course,” she says. “Can I give her the VIP treatment?”

“Like sit in a box?”

“No way,” she says. “Like Chicago style hot dogs and giant Cokes.”

“*That’s* the VIP treatment?” I ask.

“What can I say? I’m a simple girl.”

If I close my eyes, I’ll be able to pull up an image of Eloise, smiling. I don’t close my eyes for fear that I’ll never want to open them again.

“I’m fine with that,” I say. “But keep a low profile. I don’t know this place like I know Philly, and the last thing I need is for my kid to get splashed around the headlines.”

“Got it.”

“And she wants a jersey. I’ll get her one in the team store.” When I’m going to do that, I have no idea.

“No, I’ll get it,” she says. “You don’t have to worry about it. We’ll go get one beforehand.”

Growing up, my dad was almost always at the games, but it felt less like support and more like criticism having him behind the glass.

This doesn’t feel like that. In fact, it feels exactly the opposite of that.

Up to this point, Scarlett hasn’t been a regular at my games. When she was younger, Celeste and I kept Scarlett to ourselves. My dad had made it clear that news, *any* news, could damage my career. He wasn’t worried about what my life might do to Scarlett, of course. Only that this news might “ruin my reputation” or “be too much of a distraction.”

Whatever.

Telling him Celeste was pregnant was one of the worst days of my life. I

knew before I said a word how the conversation would go, and I was right. My father held nothing back. Told me I was an idiot for losing my focus. Told me women were a liability. Told me I was destroying everything he'd worked so hard for.

Everything *he'd* worked so hard for.

And then he told me to walk away. To tell Celeste I didn't want anything to do with her or the baby.

That was a lightbulb moment for me.

That was the moment I started playing angry. I didn't have the words to silence him, so I let it out on the ice.

And when fights broke out during my games, I was usually the one to blame, because I had to find an outlet for the way he made me feel.

Funnily, my dad never disciplined me for fighting. Only for being weak.

Eloise must sense something because she says, "Don't worry about her while you're out there. Just focus on your game, and I'll focus on Scarlett."

Again, the nervous buzz inside me goes quiet.

"Okay," I say on a sigh. "But if there are any fights . . ." I don't even know what I'm trying to say.

"I'll make her look away," she says. "Or who knows? She might pound the glass with both fists and yell for you to kill the guy," she says laughing. Then, more serious, "I've got her. Just be careful, okay?"

Those words carry more weight than they should. No one's told me to be careful since I was a kid. I'm more accustomed to "be aggressive" and "get tougher."

"Gray?" Eloise says my name, and it's like waving away a cloud of smoke.

"Sorry. Yeah. I should go."

"Okay, we'll see you after the game," she says. "Good luck!"

I end the call and turn to find a few of the guys side-eyeing me. "What?"

"You have a kid," Jericho says. "You didn't tell us that."

"You didn't ask," I say, walking back to my locker.

"Grayson," Jericho uses a very proper, British-mocking tone. "Great assist in the second period, old chap, and watch for the breakout from the corner, and oh, by the by, do you have a child?" He's standing in the center of the room, completely naked after his shower.

He really doesn't have any modesty, this guy.

I wave him off. "It's not a big deal."

“Right,” Jericho says. “Having a kid is no big deal.” He rolls his eyes and grabs a towel, thankfully. Instead of covering up, though, he throws it around his neck. “I have kids, man. They change everything.”

That’s an understatement.

My dad told me once before a game that being around Scarlett made me soft.

I got into two fights that night.

Eventually, I learned how to mostly ignore his “instruction” because I didn’t want to parent her the way he parented me.

I glance over at Jericho. “Do they change the way you play?”

“Nah, man” he says. “My kids know when I’m working, I’m a machine.” He flexes his biceps and lets out a grunt like a caveman.

“And when he’s home, he’s a teddy bear,” Kemp says.

“A *whipped* teddy bear.” Finn chucks an elbow pad at him.

“Do you spend as much time naked at home as you do here?” Burke asks, laughing.

“How do you think I got them kids, bro?” Jericho responds, wagging his eyebrows and his hips. And then, he walks over to me, and because I’m sitting and he’s standing, we’re not exactly seeing “eye-to-eye.”

“She watched you play in Philly, right?”

I raise a brow. “If you’re going to talk to me, you’re going to need to put some clothes on. Or at least cover it up.”

I grab a washcloth and toss it to him. “There, that should about do it.”

A chorus of *ooh*’s and *awww*’s come from the guys.

“Oh, naw, man, Hawke’s got jokes now, right?” He grabs the towel from around his neck and wraps it around his waist and sits. “She come to your games?”

“Yes,” I say. “But she was younger then, and she didn’t really get it.”

“What’s her name?”

“Scarlett.”

“Cool name. How old?”

“Do you really want to know?”

“Know the man, know the player,” he says.

I frown and shake my head.

Burke stands up and leans his stick against the locker. “He’s not wrong. If we know you off the ice, we can get a better idea of who you are *on* the ice.”

I shake my head. “Whatever.”

“What?” Krush asks. “You don’t think your life affects your game?”

“No.” I shrug. “They’re completely separate.”

Jericho laughs.

“What’s so funny?” I ask, because I’m being serious.

“You *think* you can keep them separate. That’s cute.” He pats me on the shoulder.

“I don’t believe in distractions,” I tell them.

“Now I get it,” Jericho says.

“Get what?”

“Why you’re all *leave me alone* and hermit and stuff.” He stands up, chuckling to himself. “You don’t realize that having the right person cheering for you—on the ice *and* off the ice—is not a distraction. It’s *motivation*. It makes you play better, man, not worse.”

“You’ve already proven you’re the best.” Burke levels my gaze. “Now, you just get to remind them. And have fun.”

“You get to show off.” Finn raises his eyebrows like he’s just thought of the most fun thing ever.

But hockey hasn’t been about *fun*, not in a long time. So I have one good game because of a heart painted on my stick. That’s not how this whole thing works.

Right?

“And when you tank a game,” Jericho says, “Because we all do—it’s nice to have someone there who doesn’t rub it in your face.”

I think about the mistakes I’ve already made since getting to Chicago. Eloise challenges my behavior, but she doesn’t rub any of it in my face. It’s confusing.

“And for what it’s worth, we’d love to meet Scarlett,” Burke says, pulling his deodorant from his locker.

I go still.

Then, I decide to try talking.

“She’s ten, almost eleven.”

Jericho’s eyebrows shoot up the way most people’s do when they do the math and figure out I was barely eighteen when she was born. “Bring her by, we’ll sign a jersey for her.”

“She’ll sell it on eBay,” I warn.

Jericho glances at me. “Let me guess, she wants a phone?”

I actually crack a smile at him.

“How’d you know?”

He shakes his head, laughing to himself and strolls off toward the shower, starting to sing the lyrics to “What a Girl Wants” off-key, leaving me sitting there with Burke.

“It’s okay to let other people in sometimes,” he says. “I mean, we need you—that’s why I fought so hard to get you here.”

That hits me. I think I’m finally starting to understand, and it feels good to be wanted.

Although, needing someone who can put a puck in the back of a goal is a bit different than feeling like you need someone to breathe. I don’t point this out.

I don’t do anything halfway, and I know if I even considered letting anyone but Scarlett in, it would consume me.

And then, as if he read my mind, he adds, “And I don’t just mean on the ice. I need Poppy too. She calms me down. Big time. She makes me laugh. Like, legitimately makes me laugh. She’s nuts.” I see him drift off in a memory or an image for a moment, then he says, “She reminds me that there’s more to this life than hockey.”

“Glad that works for you,” I say. “Wouldn’t work for me.”

But even as I say the words, I think about the way it felt to have Eloise in the stands. The opposite of the way I expected it to feel. *Calming*.

And I played better for it.

Best I’ve played since I got here.

“I respect that,” Burke says.

Good.

Because that’s the way it is.

I can’t get distracted. I can’t even give Scarlett all the attention I want—I can’t imagine having to manage romantic feelings.

Maybe someday, later, when all of this is in the rearview mirror, things will be different.

But for now, this is the way it needs to be.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Eloise

Sitting in the stands at a Comets game next to Gray's little girl is enough to make me dream of something I rarely admit out loud.

A family.

I want a family of my own.

I'm not saying I need a man to make me happy or to determine my self-worth because I absolutely don't. I don't have big professional dreams like my sisters. I don't need to own things, or run things, or even work all the time in a place with other people.

Sometimes, even though I don't talk about it with my sisters or my friends, I think about a simple life. A family. Kids. A dog. The whole deal.

And that suits me. That suits me right down to the ground.

I grew up with parents whose love for each other was slightly left of nauseating, and the older I've gotten, the more I realize I want that, too. I'm starting to figure out where my talents lie, and one of those talents is being good at taking care of other people.

Little people.

Handsome people.

And, if they just happen to be named Scarlett and Gray, that would be totally fine.

It's silly to fantasize. The timing is totally wrong. The situation is way off-limits.

But I can't help it.

If I let myself, I can imagine a scenario where I'm not watching Scarlett as a favor to my boss, where I'm hanging out with her because she's partly mine.

And with that, I sound like one of the stalkers people hear about on true crime podcasts.

Just because I can admit I want to get married and have a family of my own, that doesn't mean I need to fantasize about doing it with him.

But it also doesn't mean I don't.

True to my word, I spoil Scarlett with the Eloise VIP treatment, and when she tells me I put too much stuff on her hot dog, I happily take it off her hands and get her a plain one. We're both wearing *Hawke* jerseys, number eighteen, and when I cheer at the wrong time, Scarlett is quick to correct me. She teaches me the rules of hockey as we sit in the stands, and I fall a little more in love with her by the minute.

At one point, a fight breaks out on the ice, and even though I try to get her to look away, Scarlett is too invested. She stands on her chair and yells, "Are you gonna take that!? Rip his head off!!"

I wonder if Gray is aware just how much she knows about this sport.

After the Comets win, I take Scarlett back to the hallway outside the locker room, and we wait off to the side. I'm thankful Poppy isn't here because I know she'd be asking me questions, and even if I hadn't sign a contract to keep my mouth shut, it's not my business to tell anyone Gray has a daughter.

When Jericho saunters out of the locker room, his wife, Monica is there waiting, and even though these two have been married for a while, they go at it like newlyweds long enough that I step in front of Scarlett to obstruct her view.

Dallas is next, followed by Kemp and Jimmy, who latches on to my gaze and smiles. I smile back, politely, which he must mistake for encouragement or flirtation or worse, an invitation. He walks over, completely oblivious to the little girl standing beside me.

"Hey Eloise," he says. "You're wearing the wrong number."

I glance down at my jersey and laugh. "Gotta support the boss."

"Right," he says. "Are you coming out with us?" He takes a step closer. "Or maybe just with me? There's this great bar around the corner—"

"Uh, no," I say, feeling a little caught. I don't want to use Scarlett as an excuse, especially since I don't know what Gray has told them about his

daughter, but also, I don't want to leave if there's even a shred of hope that I might be able to spend any time with the two of them.

"It's late," he says. "The game's over. Come have a drink with me." He pauses. "You're not still working, are you?"

"Uh—" I start to respond, aware that Scarlett is watching me. "I'm not actually sure."

"She's off the clock." I turn and see Gray standing behind me. His eyes are darker than usual, but they're every bit as intense as he bypasses me and looks at Scarlett.

"Dad!" She throws her arms around him, and he picks her up and hugs her, and I want Jimmy to make a quick exit so I can see how I fit into this moment. *If* I fit into this moment.

"Hey, Scooter!"

"Ugh, your nicknames," she acts annoyed, but she's smiling. "Just call me Scarlett!"

"You got it, Tootie." She playfully slugs him, and he sets her down.

"Hey," he says to me, "thanks for hanging out with her tonight," Gray says, like I'm a babysitter who's reached the end of her shift.

"Of course," I say, stuffing down my disappointment. "We had fun."

"Did you see Krush get nailed on the jaw at the end of the second quarter?" Scarlett's eyes are wide. "That hit was dirty, Dad. Good thing Krush let him have it."

Gray looks at me.

I hold up my hands in surrender. "Hey, I tried to distract her," I say. "But she liked the fighting." I wince. "A lot."

He glances back at Scarlett, and then, he smiles. Like, a genuine smile, and it's like seeing Halley's Comet. For a brief moment, the rest of the world goes quiet—and there are just the three of us.

But it's just me fantasizing again, and Gray makes that clear when he looks at Jimmy. "Have fun tonight." His eyes meet mine for a flicker of a moment, and then he takes Scarlett's hand and walks away.

Leaving me standing in the hallway, wishing I had a reason to go with him.

"So, ready to go?" Jimmy moves closer.

Wasn't Gray the one who told me *not* to date him?

"Uh, sure," I say, partly because I don't know how to get out of this situation, but mostly because I'm trying to process the conflicting feelings

inside of me.

We walk out of the arena and into the parking lot, and I see Gray close the passenger side door of his rental car—the one I wrecked is still in the shop until Thursday.

As he walks around to the driver's side of the car, he looks at me, then at Jimmy, and then he gets in his car and starts the engine.

“Eloise?”

I turn and find Jimmy, holding the door of his small black sports car open for me to get in, and all at once I realize I don't want to go. I want to go home, put on my pajamas, and eat a whole pan of brownies.

“You know what, Jimmy?” I say. “I'm really tired, and I've got a big day in the city tomorrow. Can I get a rain check?”

His expression holds. “Yeah, maybe we can catch up after we get back from St. Louis.”

“Yeah, maybe,” I say, nodding. “I'm sorry.”

His eyes narrow as he closes the car door and takes a step toward me. He reaches over and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear, letting his hand linger at the back of my neck. “I hope you're not holding out for Hawke.”

“Of course not.” I feel my muscles tense.

“Good.” He smiles. “He made it pretty clear you guys weren't a thing, but I just wanted to be sure.”

“Uh, yeah,” I say, my body flooded with disappointment. “I work for him. Totally not a thing.” But hearing that Gray said so still stings, even though I know it shouldn't.

“He's an idiot.” Jimmy smiles. “If you worked for me, I'm pretty sure I couldn't keep things professional.” His thumb traces across my cheek, and I inch myself away.

I'm sure his smile charms most of the women he encounters. Heck, there was a time he would've charmed me. After all, Jimmy is a good-looking, professional athlete. But there's no part of me that wants to “see where it goes” or to hope that I can change someone who is so clearly interested in me for one very specific reason. I'd be proud of that growth if it weren't for the fact that the real reason I'm not interested in Jimmy has less to do with him or me and more to do with the man who just drove away.

I step away from him. “Look, Jimmy, you're a great guy, but—”

He drops his hand. “You *are* holding out for Hawke.”

I shake my head. “No. I'm not. But I am focusing on work right now. I'm

just getting my bearings here, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize that."

"I get that," he says. "But you know what they say about all work and no play . . ." He lifts his eyebrows as if to punctuate his point.

"Yeah, I do," I say. "But for now, this is the way it needs to be."

"Okay," he says. "But if you change your mind, I hope I'm the first person you call."

"Good luck in St. Louis." I make my way to my car, which is parked in the next lot over, and drive solo back to Loveland. I have a full day tomorrow planned for Gray and Scarlett, and after tonight, it should be a lot easier to remember I'm *just* the tour guide for the day.

Not the love interest.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Gray

I can't sleep.

That night, long after Scarlett goes to sleep, I'm lying in bed when my phone lights up.

A text from Eloise.

Unfortunate timing. I've been trying *not* to think about her.

I practically forced her to leave with Gump, like knowing she was out with him would be enough to cure me of whatever it is I'm dealing with.

It wasn't.

Instead, the jealous streak I felt that night at the restaurant roared back to life.

ELOISE

Hey, I didn't get a chance to talk to you about this, but I thought I'd take you guys on a tour of the city tomorrow if you're up for it?

I know you have the day off, but I have a list of things Scarlett might like.

No pressure if not!

I stare at the text. It's only 11 p.m. Is she home already?

I tap a response.

GRAY

thumbs up emoji

ELOISE

K. Good.

I'll come to your place, maybe at 9?

What I want to say is “Are you still out with Gump?” because it’s making me nuts knowing they left together. Especially since I don’t really know what kind of guy he is and because I think I know exactly what he wants from her.

But it’s *none of my business*.

I tap out another response.

GRAY

thumbs up emoji

I suck at this.

I watch as the three dots on the left side of my screen start moving, then stop. I find myself wishing she was here, telling me one of her incessantly long stories. Her rambling is the opposite of annoying. It’s comforting. And somehow, endearing.

I set the phone down and throw my head back on the pillow.

Then I sit up and grab the phone again.

I shake my head, go to set it down, and then I just decide to type out something.

Before I can overthink it.

GRAY

Home from your date already?

I hit send. And I sit and stare.

ELOISE

...

I watch the dots disappear, and I wish I could take it back.

What am I doing?

But then, my phone buzzes in my hand, startling me.

ELOISE

I didn’t go.

I sit up a little straighter.

She didn’t go.

GRAY

You didn't?

ELOISE

Nope.

GRAY

Why not?

ELOISE

I really wanted brownies.

I laugh out loud, then suppress it. Even though Scarlett's on the other side of the apartment I don't want her to hear me.

This feels like a secret conversation. Weird.

ELOISE

And pajamas.

And a hair tie.

Do you know how annoying it is to wear your hair down all day?

I feel the corner of my mouth tug upward, and I adjust the pillow behind me, sitting more at attention. She texts the way she talks.

For her sake, I need to try not to text the way I talk.

GRAY

Uh, no. I don't.

ELOISE

Well, it's annoying.

There comes a point in the day when you just HAVE to get it off your neck.

At the mention of it, I picture her neck, remembering how it felt to let my hand linger there, her skin soft beneath my fingers.

ELOISE

But also, it didn't feel right to go out with Jimmy.

I stare at the words.

GRAY

Why not?

ELOISE

...

“Come on—” I say out loud, willing her to keep going.

I shouldn't be asking this. I shouldn't even be having this conversation. But telling myself over and over again that she's off limits only works if I believe it.

And right now, I don't believe it.

ELOISE

I told him I'm focusing on work.

I don't want to mess anything up on that front.

Right. Work. That makes more sense since this isn't new information.

GRAY

Smart

I don't know what else to say. I'm glad she's not dating Jimmy, but her reasons why she can't date him are the same reasons she can't date me.

Why am I even thinking that? It's not like it's a choice.

ELOISE

Besides, it might've been weird for me to date one of your teammates.

GRAY

Why?

ELOISE

I'd hate to do anything that might make my job awkward.

Like kissing your boss?

I contemplate typing it out and hitting send, but instead, I just text:

GRAY

Your personal life isn't my business.

Which is the opposite of how I feel.

She texts back:

ELOISE

thumbs up emoji

I stare at the lit-up screen as it fades and tap it with my thumb to keep it awake. I don't want the conversation to be over, but what else is there to say? Even if I did decide to date someone during the season, it couldn't be Eloise.

For a million reasons.

I don't want to jeopardize her job. Or my focus. But really, I don't want to risk hurting her. I have a long history of short relationships, and I knew the moment I met her that Eloise is the kind of woman you keep.

She needs to focus on work, and so do I. End of story.

So, I plug my phone in and turn it over on the nightstand, preparing myself to spend an entire day on her Chicago tour tomorrow without letting myself imagine it's a whole lot more than just business.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gray

I wake up five minutes before my alarm goes off, as usual.

I'm up before the sun, and I workout while Scarlett sleeps. By the time I'm done with my shower, I find her sitting on my bed watching television.

"Hey, Scooter."

She makes a face at me. She secretly loves all of the nicknames I give her, I know it.

"Do we get to see Eloise today?" she asks.

"I think so, yeah," I say. "She's going to take us on a tour of Chicago."

"Cool!" She grins. "I like her."

"Yeah," I say, pulling a hoodie on over my T-shirt. "She's great."

Really great. I like being around her. I'm not sure what to do with that.

"You like her too," Scarlett says without looking at me.

I frown. "Yeah. I just said she's great."

She tosses me a knowing look. "But you *like* her."

I laugh. "Uh, she's my assistant."

"But you think she's pretty, right?"

I almost blurt out a *heck, yeah*. But I stop myself from saying anything. It must've been too long of a pause.

"Dad?"

"She's my assistant."

She rolls her eyes.

I give in. “Yeah, of course she’s pretty,” I say. “But lots of women are pretty.”

She squints at me. “Lots of women don’t make you smile.”

I stop moving and meet her eyes. “I think you’re seeing something that’s not there.”

“I think you’re *not* seeing something that *is* there.” Scarlett shrugs and goes back to watching her show as if she hasn’t just said something profound.

I sit on the side of the bed, realizing she might get attached. If she does, it could hurt her to realize that I have no plans to date my assistant, no matter how pretty she is. And while Scarlett has always been an old soul, she is still a kid, and I don’t want anything in my life to hurt her.

“Listen, I know you like Eloise—”

“She’s so awesome,” Scarlett says wistfully.

I smirk. “You just met her.”

She shrugs. “It’s how I feel.”

It’s so easy for her to say how she feels. She must get that from her mom. “Okay, feelings aside, you need to understand that Eloise works for me. She gets the groceries and sets up appointments and runs errands. We aren’t a couple.”

She holds up a pointer finger without taking her eyes off the TV. “Yet.”

“No, kid,” I say. “We can’t be a couple because of her job.”

Her eyes dart to mine. “That’s dumb.”

On that point, we agree.

I shrug. “That’s the way it is.”

“Why can’t she do those things for you *and* be your wife?” she asks, showing her naiveté for maybe the first time since she got here.

“Whoa, now. My what?”

She shrugs. “She could take care of you. Like a wife.”

I shouldn’t be surprised that in just a few days, Eloise has completely won Scarlett over. That’s what she does. She told me that day on her porch that people like her, and I understand it now. It’s like her superpower.

I sit on the bed. “Scarlett. I think it’s awesome that you want someone to take care of me. I do. But . . . I’m fine. My life is good. I’ve got you, I’ve got the team . . . and that’s all I need.”

I’m starting to think that is a huge lie.

“Eloise is nice, but she’s just my assistant, okay? End of story.” Am I saying this for her benefit or because I need the reminder?

She shrugs. Since I'm pretty sure that's as close to acceptance as I'm going to get, I mess up her hair and walk back into the bathroom. When I finish getting ready, I leave Scarlett in my room and walk barefoot to the kitchen, where I find Eloise standing with her back to me. She's on the phone.

"Okay, Beth, thank you," she says. "Right, it is good news—" Her eyes meet mine, but she quickly looks away. "I'll do my best to convince him."

I grab a bottle of water from the fridge as Eloise hangs up the phone. "What was that about?"

Eloise winces. "Well, *I* think it's sort of amazing, but . . . you? Eh. Could go either way."

I uncap the bottle and take a drink, knowing she'll continue if I wait in silence long enough.

"First, I have something for you." She walks over to the living room and picks up a large package, wrapped in brown paper.

I frown, setting the water bottle down. "A present?"

Her cheeks turn pink, and she looks away. "I told you I love to give gifts."

She also told me she had a knack for knowing exactly what to get a person, which means, whatever's in here, she thinks it's perfect for me. Which means she was thinking about me. Which means—

She hands it to me across the counter. I hold it awkwardly, and she smirks.

"You gonna open it or just stand there holding it?"

"Uh—" I set it down on the counter. "Sorry, people don't usually give me gifts."

Her forehead pulls, and I can see her reading more into that than I want her to. "Ever?"

I evade the question. "I mean, how often do you get a grown man a present?" I say, turning the package over.

"It depends on the relationship, I guess," she says. "And the man. I mean, if the man is sweet to people, he'll probably get gifts all the time. But if he's *not*—"

My eyes shoot to hers, interrupting her thought.

She grins, and I see she's messing with me. I'm not used to her kind of teasing.

"Shut up," I say.

She double points at me. “Gotcha.”

I look back at the package. “So, what, I just . . . open it?”

Her eyes widen. “Are you serious?”

“I mean, you’re just going to, what, stand there and watch me open it?”

“Oh my *gosh*, you’re being really high maintenance about this. Just open it.” She laughs. “Here, I’ll rip the first piece of tape off to get you started.” She reaches over and flicks her finger under a piece of the tape, creating a gap in the brown paper.

I give her one last look, then pull the rest of it off to reveal the back of what I think is a picture frame. As I flip it over, Eloise pulls the paper out from underneath, balling it up and tossing it aside.

The frame is large, about the size of a poster, and when I get it turned over, I come face to face with an image of me and Scarlett. I’m holding her up, her forehead pressed into mine.

It’s from the photoshoot the other day, a genuine moment between me and Scarlett. I don’t know how Kim caught this—weren’t we just goofing around?

This looks like something that should be hung in a museum. Or on a billboard somewhere.

But it’s not the technicality of the photo that causes a lump in my throat. It’s our eyes. The pure love in my eyes as I look at my daughter. And the pure love in hers as she looks back.

I stare at the frozen image for a long time, unsure how to properly thank Eloise for doing this. Unsure how to act in the face of this emotion.

“Do you like it?” she asks, cheerfully.

I look at her, right into her eyes, unable to say anything that would come close to the effect this picture is having on me.

She fake gasps. “You *do* like it.”

I choke back a laugh, praying she doesn’t catch that I’m fighting my eyes from spilling tears.

I don’t cry. Ever.

She puts her hand to her forehead, like a fainting damsel. “*AND* an almost-laugh? Be still my beating heart.”

“You were right,” I say, bringing my gaze back to hers. “You are good at giving gifts.”

At that, her face brightens and she nods. “I told you.”

I look back at the framed photo. I shake my head slightly, at a loss for

words. All I can think to say is, “Thank you.”

She steps around the counter to where I’m standing and looks at the image in my hands. “I saw it pop up on the screen when Kim took it, and I knew it would be the perfect start to your photo collection.”

I lay the frame down on the counter. “My what?”

She faces me. “Gray, this place will never feel like home when it’s full of someone else’s things. Or things that someone else bought, no matter *how* good their taste is.” She smiles. “Originally, I thought you could hang this in Scarlett’s room, but I think it’d be better in the living room. I’m working on more so you can be reminded of all the good things in your life every time you walk in the door.”

This whole exchange tugs at a loose thread inside me. If she keeps messing with it, I’m going to completely unravel.

It’s like I’ve been withholding parts of myself and those are the only parts Eloise is interested in seeing.

I pick up my bottle of water and take another drink, a distraction to get something in my hands so I don’t fill them with her. “So, what’s the part I’m not going to like?”

She grimaces and avoids my question. She walks to my fridge, opens the door, and pulls a bottle of Dr Pepper from somewhere in the back.

“Did you hide a bunch of those in there?”

“Just a couple,” she sing-songs at me while cracking it open and taking a drink. “I don’t want to clog your space with my stuff, but some things—” she waggles the bottle at me “—are a necessity.”

“Stop stalling,” I say.

She caps the bottle, draws in a deep breath, then brings her eyes to mine.

At the point of contact, I swear the air sparks, and all I can think of is everything I promised myself I *wouldn’t* think of today.

“I accidentally got you an endorsement deal,” she says, then immediately shrugs her shoulders with a grimace.

“Accidentally?”

“I mean, kind of. Maybe. Okay, yes. But only if you want it.” Her cheeks turn pink.

“I don’t want it,” I say.

She makes a face. “Could you just hear what it is though? Because I think it’s sort of great.”

I cross my arms over my chest and lean back on the counter, but my only

reply is a slightly raised eyebrow.

“Okay. So. Story time.” She’s over-gesturing, which reads as “nervous,” and I wonder what Eloise has really gotten me into.

“I asked Kim to send me the proofs from your photo shoot, and when I picked this one to enlarge and frame, I meant to send it to a friend in Loveland who owns a custom frame shop, but—” She scrunches her face. “I accidentally sent it to my entire address book.”

I cock my head to the side and study her.

“Yeah. I know. Huge mistake. *But*. My friend from high school, Cybil? She’s in advertising, and when she saw it, she called me, like immediately. I haven’t talked to her in three years, but I guess she’s doing really well, she has a little cockapoo now, his name is Harry, and—”

“Eloise,” I say.

She startles a little, then inhales. “She said the photo gave her an idea for a big brand they’re working with, something about smoothing out rough edges or a man’s softer side or something? I don’t know, but by the time she called me, she had already pitched it to her boss, who loved it, of course, because it’s *you*,” she points at me, “and it’s Scarlett, and I guess it would be, like, a huge deal for her career to get you and—”

“No,” I say.

She’s undeterred. “It could be great!” she says. “And a lot of fun for Scarlett.”

I shake my head. “There are a million reasons why this is a bad idea.”

“I know. I know you want to keep her out of the limelight. Plus, I knew you’d say that,” she says, “so I told her you’d think about it.”

“I thought about it, and my answer is no.”

“Well, I think we should do it.” Scarlett is standing at the edge of the kitchen like a tiny cat burglar. “It’ll be fun.”

“How long have you been standing there?” I ask.

She shrugs and walks over to the bar stools on the opposite side of the counter. Then, she grins at Eloise, who grins right back.

“Morning, sunshine,” Eloise says.

“Good morning,” Scarlett says. “My dad thinks you’re pretty.”

Eloise’s eyes go wide, which is exactly, I’m sure, what mine do. “*Scarlett.*”

Scarlett’s innocent expression feels like an act. If I had to bet, I’d say she knows exactly what she’s doing. “What? You do.”

I look at Eloise, ready with a whole explanation. “We were talking, and she asked me—”

Eloise holds up her hand. “It’s fine. I get it. She also asked me if I think you’re handsome.”

I look at my daughter, who is sitting smugly at the counter, eyes pinballing between Eloise and me.

“She said she does,” Scarlett says with a grin.

I shoot her a look. “Okay. We might need to have a talk about appropriate conversation.”

“Mom always says when you think something good about someone, you should say it out loud,” Scarlett says.

“I like that rule,” Eloise says. “I think . . . you’re a very smart girl.”

“See? That makes me happy,” Scarlett says. “And Eloise, I think you’re amazing and fun and nice and pretty.”

“Aw, thanks, Red.”

“Red?” I feel my forehead pull.

“Nickname.” Eloise says this like I wouldn’t understand.

“You gave her a nickname?” I ask. Does she know that’s kind of my thing?

“Yeah,” Eloise says. “It’s shorter than saying her name, but it means the same thing.”

Huh. It’s a good one. Why didn’t I think of it myself?

Scarlett turns to me. “Now you, Dad.”

“Now me what?”

“Say something nice about Eloise.”

Oh geez. What is happening? I half-laugh, looking at Eloise, a million compliments running through my mind, a good seventy-five percent of them borderline inappropriate.

“Come on, Dad,” Scarlett says. “You think she’s beautiful or smart or fun—it’s easy to say nice things about someone.”

Eloise squints at me, amusement all over her face. “Yeah, come on, *Dad*. Let’s hear it.”

I’m trapped. By an almost eleven-year old. And by the woman I’m struggling to remember is my assistant.

I try not to squirm. “I think you’re . . .” But I shake my head. “This is dumb, we aren’t doing this.” I try to change the subject. “And we aren’t doing an ad campaign either.”

Eloise hasn't budged. "Well, I'm highly offended you couldn't think of one nice thing to say about me."

"Can you think of one nice thing to say about me?" I ask, straightening.

She pretends to be searching the air, eyes moving back and forth like she's reading an invisible book. "Hmm, I could say you're welcoming and friendly, like a big, squishy marshmallow, but—" she looks at me, playfulness on her face. It's adorable.

She's insulting me, and I think she's adorable.

But then she says, "Wait, none of those things are true. So, no, now that you mention it, I can't. But I'm *much* more likable than you." She grins.

I'm bad at this sort of conversation, so I shake my head and say, "Cute."

Eloise lifts two victorious fists in the air. "Scarlett, did you hear that? He said I'm cute! Woo hoo!"

Scarlett giggles.

I grunt.

And then my daughter looks at me. "So, can we do this photo thingie?"

"Sorry, Scout. It's a no."

"But, Daddy!" Scarlett's tone borders on whiny. "Look at how good this picture is!" She points at the oversized photo covering the counter.

Eloise holds back a laugh at my daughter's harmless attempt to manipulate me.

"Sorry, Scarlett, this isn't up for debate," I say, moving the frame into the living room, where I lean it against the couch. "It's not a good idea."

She ignores me and looks at Eloise. "Does it pay?"

Eloise looks at me, then back at Scarlett. "It does pay."

"A lot?" Scarlett reaches for a box of Lucky Charms that I definitely didn't put on the grocery list.

"Yep." Eloise pulls out a bowl and slides it across the counter. In just a couple of days, these two have come up with their own silent language.

"Enough for a phone?" Scarlett looks at me as Eloise grabs the milk from the refrigerator.

And all at once, something inside me sparks. This entire scene, both of them in my kitchen, joking around and discussing things that normal parents and kids would discuss. Seeing my daughter respond to Eloise with this kind of ease—I want this.

Dallas's words are back in my mind, waging a war with the words I grew up believing.

It's okay to need someone.

Won't that make me weak? Vulnerable? Soft? And if it does, is that really a bad thing? Will it really affect my game? I stopped playing for the love of it when I was fourteen and determined to make the junior hockey team by the time I turned fifteen.

Hockey has been a soulless job ever since.

"Dad?"

I look up and find them both watching me. "Sorry. Let's talk about it later, okay?"

Eloise takes the hint, changing the subject, sharing today's itinerary with my daughter with the kind of excitement I never seem to be able to muster, and five words keep playing over and over at the back of my mind.

It's okay to need someone.

When we head out, the words come right along with me, making it impossible to keep this day in the mental box where it needs to live.

This feels like some kind of date.

This feels like some kind of family.

This feels exactly like what I shouldn't want.

But exactly what I do.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Eloise

I want him to love it here.

As we head out into the city, I'm more determined than ever to make this place irresistible. I know this is my job, but if I'm honest, my motives aren't *entirely* professional.

I've gotten attached. To this job. To the team. To Scarlett. To Gray. *Especially* to Gray. Which doesn't make sense because he's not even pleasant to be around.

We spend the morning at Shedd Aquarium, which is one of my all-time favorite places to visit. It's not too crowded, so we can move about the shimmering underwater wonders with ease. After the dolphin show—which was as entertaining as I remember—we drive down Michigan Avenue and park in a garage near Millennium Park. It's a short walk to lead them to one of my go-to places in the city—Garrett's Popcorn.

"Every time I gave a city tour, I always made sure to walk by this place because it smells like caramel and heaven had a baby," I tell them. "We *have* to get some. I recommend eating it Chicago style."

Scarlett looks up at me. "Chicago style?"

I lean down. "It's where you mix the cheese popcorn *and* the caramel popcorn in the same bag. It's *soo* good."

I recite my spiel from memory—*Did you know that a building in the River North district has its own zip code?* and *The Wrigley Building's design was based off of the cathedral in Seville, Spain!* and *The Monadnock*

building, the tallest masonry brick structure ever constructed, actually sits on a concrete raft foundation, right on Chicago's marshy soil!—as we walk around the city. Scarlett matches my enthusiasm for the history, and giggles at the personal stories I add to draw them in.

But Gray hardly seems to pay attention at all. In fact, Gray seems bothered, and I start to worry that I'm the one bothering him.

A little after noon, we make our way to a local restaurant, more like a diner, that's tucked away in the Southport Corridor of the city. We walk inside and put our name in, then step off to the side and sit down, waiting to be seated.

I see a group of teenage boys recognize Gray, and it's obvious they want to come take a photo with him. They're talking in hushed whispers, pointing, pushing one another closer, but they, like most people, are probably too scared to make the final move. I don't blame them, what with the scowl on Gray's face right now.

What is bugging him?

I smile at the boys, and one of them stands. It's clear by the look on his face—and by the others smacking him to go on—that he's mustering every ounce of courage he can find to walk over here. I glance at Gray, who is oblivious to this, wishing there was time to explain what's about to happen and beg him to be nice.

“Uh, excuse me, uh, Mr. Hawke?” the kid says as he reaches us. Only now do I notice he's wearing a Comets' beanie. “Could we get a picture with you?”

It's not audible, but I can practically hear Gray growl. He clears his throat and glances at Scarlett, and the kid takes a step back.

“Oh gosh. Sorry,” the kid says. “I'm so sorry, I just realized you're out with your family. I'm just a huge fan, and—”

“Hey, it's totally fine!” I say, jumping up, trying not to dwell on the fact that this kid lumped me in as part of Gray's family. “I can take it for you!”

Gray shoots me a look and I flash him a hard smile, hoping it communicates *Be nice to your fans!*

Scarlett scoots away as the kid steps next to Gray, holding up a “number one” with his index finger.

After I snap a few shots, none of which Gray smiles for, the kid takes his phone back. “Thanks so much. My dad is going to freak out.”

“This will be great for your social media,” I say after the kid leaves. “That

kid will go crazy if he sees you shared the photo.”

Gray sits back down. “I don’t have social media.”

“Yes, you do,” I say. “I started an Instagram account for you. You already have 800 thousand followers, which is kind of nuts.”

“Why did you do that?” he snaps.

I try to diffuse. “Oh, Beverly said it’s part of the job.”

“Take it down,” he says briskly.

I can’t read him. I mean, I *can*—he’s being a total jerk—but I can’t figure out why.

I change my position, crossing one leg over the other. “It’s great for your image. Helps you build super fans. Lets them see a little bit of your real life.”

“I don’t want them to see my real life,” he says, loud enough for the people standing around us to glance our way. “It’s none of their business.”

I look at the other people, smile, and then lean back to Gray. “Hey. Trust me. I promise I’m being very strategic about what I post.” I pull my phone out, preparing to show him the account.

“Like you were strategic about sending out the photos to your entire email list?” he says.

I freeze. My face must register my hurt, because my cheeks feel like they’re on fire, and Gray starts to say something, then looks away. I click my phone off and slide it into my bag.

I speak in measured tones. “Um, yeah. Okay. I’m just . . . I’m just going to run to the bathroom. Since we’re just waiting.” I stand.

“Eloise, I—”

I leave him mid-sentence. I don’t stick around to hear what he’s going to say.

I don’t know why Gray is the way he is, and normally I can roll with it, but sometimes, even I need a second to regroup.

I start walking through the diner, eyes focused on the back wall where the word “Restrooms” is painted above a doorway, when I hear someone say my name.

I stop and see him sitting at a table with two other men, hand raised at me.

Jay.

A city with 2.697 million people, and I pick the one place where he is.

Come *on*.

He stands, and I instantly feel small. How does he do that? How does he

make me feel like I did something wrong simply by saying my name?

“Jay.” I glance toward the front of the restaurant where Gray is looking at Scarlett’s iPad. I take a few steps away from Jay’s table, near an empty space at the bar, backed into the only dead space I can find in this diner. But my conflicting feelings for my new boss and my conflicting feelings for my old boss both have me wanting to disappear.

I’m over Jay. But I’m still angry with myself for believing him. For being *such* a cliché.

And I don’t like being angry with myself.

“Hey, El, looking good, looking good. Oh! I heard you were working for a hockey player.” Jay raises a brow, looking over at Gray and Scarlett. “You all getting along well?”

“Yeah. It’s been great,” I say, hoping a waiter with a full platter would accidentally trip and dump a plate of spaghetti down the front of his shirt.

“You almost look . . . like a couple,” he says, his words are like wiping your hands with a greasy towel. “The kid’s a nice touch. But hey, I guess you do what you have to to move up in this world, right?”

I glare. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just that, you know, your plan is working.” His smile seems to suggest he’s in on a joke I’m not telling.

I’m incredulous. “My *plan*?”

“New Year’s Eve?” He leans closer. “Well played, Eloise.”

I stiffen. “I don’t have a plan,” I say. “I needed a job, and he needed an assistant.”

“Is *that* what he calls you?” Jay presses his lips together, and for a second, I wonder what it might feel like to punch someone.

With a chair.

I’ve never done it before, actually punched someone. Would it hurt my hand? And if so, would the pain be worth it?

“That’s what I am.” I straighten my shoulders, trying to mentally make myself bigger, a tactic I learned from Rebecca in *Ted Lasso*.

“Yeah, right, for me too,” he says smugly. “But, not really. Let’s be real here, nobody is hiring you,” his eyes drop momentarily then come back up, “for your brain.”

My mind spins for a witty comeback, but I’m too shaken to find one. I want to hurl some clever insult at him, but instead, I respond with a silent, stunned stare.

Then, a moment of clarity.

This is the way Jay talked to me when I worked for him.

This is the way he treated me.

He straightens. “Hey, do you think you could get me an introduction? Your new boss is kind of a big deal.”

“No.” I start to walk away, and Jay grabs my arm. “Aw, don’t be like that, Eloise,” he says. “Come on, for old times.”

“Let go of me,” I say in the strongest tone I can muster.

He lifts his hand in mock surrender, like I’m the one in the wrong. “I just assumed you were hooking up with the hockey player. But hey, if you’re not, I have some time in my calendar . . .”

Tears sting my eyes. Not because of what he’s saying now, but because this is how he treated me, and I believed the things he said.

I take a second to push these feelings away. I’m *fine*. I’m always fine.

“Eloise?”

I spin around and find Gray standing there.

Jay steps past me and extends a hand to Gray. “Grayson Hawke, in the flesh.” He grins, and I curl my hand into a fist at my side.

Gray looks at Jay’s hand, looks right back at him, and doesn’t move.

“Oh, okay, not a handshake guy, I get it, I get it,” Jay croons, like they’re old friends.

Gray slowly turns to me. I can feel my face flushed with anger and humiliation, my fists balled up at my sides.

My eyes sting, so I screw them shut for a beat and remind myself that everything is fine.

I’m fine.

I wish I could run out of this restaurant, all the way back to Loveland. I wish none of this was happening, especially in front of Gray.

He gives me a look, and I instantly know he’s asking *are you okay?*

My eyebrows furrow and my bottom lip trembles, but I manage a breath and a nod.

I take a step back. “Where’s Scarlett?”

“Sitting at our table,” Gray says, then lower, just to me, “but we can go.”

I nod and start to leave, but then, I stop. It’s like I’m outside my body, because I start to say things I normally never would.

I turn and face Jay. “I just want to thank you.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “Thank me? Well, it’s about time! For all the

good times we had together?” His face is so smug, it twists my stomach into a knot.

I let out a half-laugh. “No. I want to thank you for being such a creep.”

His smile twitches.

“It makes it so much easier to forget everything you ever said to me.” I can’t believe I thought being with him made me more grown up.

He holds his arms out to the sides, and smacks his lips against his teeth. “I’m doing just fine, Eloise,” he says.

“But you’re a bad person.” Clearly, I don’t have a lot of practice insulting people.

Jay makes a pouty face, like he’s twelve years old. “Aw. Am I? Am I a bad person?” He hits Gray on the arm, like they’re drinking buddies, and says, “Can you get a load of this?”

I feel Gray tense up next to me, and I hold up a hand to stop him.

To Jay, I point a finger and say, “I can’t believe I ever let myself care what you said or thought.” I shake my head and turn to leave. “I deserve so much better.”

Jay scrunches his face. “You’re just another pretty face, Eloise. You didn’t even go to college.” And then, he says—to Gray, I assume— “Hot girls aren’t exactly special, am I right?”

I don’t hear or see anything else.

Just white noise cranked up to ten in my head and burning red behind my eyes.

I pull back a fist, whirl around, and swing as hard as I can right at his smug face. I make contact square between his left cheek and his nose, and I can feel something give, either in my hand or his head. I hit him so hard it spins him around and he slams chest first into the counter, spilling drinks and plates everywhere.

My sight and mind clear, briefly, but it’s long enough to think, *Wow. That does hurt your hand.*

And yes, it was worth it.

Jay stumbles to his feet, aimlessly grabbing for something to hold him up, knocking more things off the counter. Blood pours from his nose, and I can see his cheek already discolored.

He immediately covers his nose with his hands. “Seriously, Eloise!?”

“I’m sorry,” I say, cheeks flushing again. I glance over at Gray, who looks . . . impressed?

“Don’t apologize,” he says quietly. I see the hint of a smile on his face. It flushes me with a different kind of confident heat.

A waitress rushes toward us. “*What* is going on back here?”

“I’m so sorry,” I say to her.

The waitress looks over at Jay. “Huh. *You*.” Then to me, “Honey, it’s about time.”

I frown, confused.

“I see him in here with a different woman every week,” she says. “I’m sorry if you were one of them.”

I go still.

“But . . .” She gives Gray a once-over. “Looks like you got an upgrade. Good for you.”

“We’re not—” I shake away my reply and realize that my hand really hurts. I glance at Gray. “Can we get out of here?”

He shrugs. “Whatever you say, champ.”

“This is assault, Eloise!” Jay says, holding a napkin to his face with blood on his shirt. “Assault! I’ll press charges!”

“No, you won’t,” I hear the waitress say, as another waitress comes alongside her. “I didn’t see who did it, did you, Eva?”

The other waitress shrugs. “Hm. My memory’s a bit fuzzy. Couldn’t tell ya.”

I don’t know who these women are, but I love them. The sisterhood is strong when it comes to creeps like Jay.

“Hurry up and finish your meal, *sir*,” she says to Jay. “There are people waiting for your table.”

I smile to myself as Scarlett runs over to us. “That was *crazy*. Are you okay?”

“My hand hurts,” I say.

“I bet! You hit him so hard, and then he did this, and *this*. . .!” she spins around and flops around and punches the air.

“Oh no, honey, no,” I say. “I did *not* handle that well. It was a very bad example. You should never punch people, even if they deserve it.”

She frowns as I push the door open and step out onto the street. “Dad gets in fights all the time.”

I look at Gray, who shrugs. “She’s got a point.”

I turn to Scarlett, ready to tell her what a completely poor choice I made, when Gray kneels in front of her. “Sometimes grown-ups lose their temper.

Somebody says something that pushes their buttons, and they know they *shouldn't* react, but they do.”

Scarlett narrows her eyes. “And that’s what happens with you?”

“Only on the ice,” he says.

“But it’s not okay,” I say. “It was a very bad choice.”

“But . . . he was a bad guy, right?” Scarlett says.

“I still shouldn’t have punched him.” I push a hand through my hair, and wince because it’s my punching hand.

I have a punching hand now.

I should go. I should leave them. I’ve made a giant mess of things, and if Gray never wants me around his kid again, I would understand. First the photo, and now this?

I’m just *trying* to get myself fired, aren’t I.

But then Scarlett reaches for my hand. “You need some ice for that.”

The same tears that have stayed hidden threaten to fall. I sniff and look away. I’ve got a lot of practice at pushing these kinds of feelings way down deep, but even I notice it’s getting more difficult.

Still, I’m not going to dwell there. *I’m fine.*

“And you don’t have to worry,” she says. “I know all about fighting. I have a temper too. My coach says I get it from my dad.”

Gray is still kneeling in front of her. “Your coach?”

Scarlett’s eyes go wide.

Gray leans back on his feet. “What coach?”

“My . . . hockey coach?” She says this like it’s a question, on a wince.

“Your *what?*” He stands.

“I won’t fight, Dad,” she says. “I promise.”

“You’re playing hockey?” He looks genuinely stunned by this, and while I’m grateful that the attention seems to have shifted, I still feel terrible for losing my temper in front of Scarlett.

“I’m the best one on the team,” she says. “And the only girl.”

“Why didn’t I know about this?”

She shrugs. “Mom didn’t think you’d let me play.”

“Uh, she’s right.” He pulls out his phone and clicks it to life.

“Wait.” I put my non-punching hand on his. “Take a minute. She’s on her honeymoon.”

“I’m good, Dad,” Scarlett says. “Take me to a rink right now, and I’ll show you.”

He pauses for a few long seconds, looks between us, then clicks off his phone. “We need to talk about this.”

“You will. But first,” I say. “Let’s actually go get some lunch. I know just the place.”

He pauses, then nods. “Fine.”

We start toward the parking garage, Scarlett skipping a few feet in front of us. I keep my voice low and say, “I’m *really* sorry I did that in front of her.”

He looks at me. “That tool had it coming.”

Then, in a lighter tone than he’s been sporting all day, he adds, “Heck of a right cross, slugger.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Gray

Loveland is the kind of town I want Scarlett to grow up in. Even though her car is still parked near my apartment, I insist Eloise ride with us, mostly because—and I don't say this out loud—I don't think she should be alone after that. I want to make sure she's okay.

She navigates us out of the city and back on the road to her small hometown, and just like the two other times I've been here, I'm taken by how peaceful it is. It feels different even pulling onto her street.

Maybe this is why Dallas chose to buy a house here.

Maybe I should buy a house here.

The thought comes out of nowhere, and it makes zero sense. A house? I don't need that much room. I don't need a commute, and Scarlett doesn't live with me full-time anyway.

Though when she *is* here, it'd be nice to have her in a place like this instead of in the city. The air is—lighter—somehow. And even though Eloise did a good job with her tour, I won't lie; I'm more interested in her hometown.

The ride out here is quick enough, but with a silent Eloise sitting in the passenger seat, slowly massaging her right hand, it feels hours long. I'm not used to her being quiet, and it signals that something is bothering her.

Understandable after what happened.

"Here, park right here." Eloise points to a spot in front of a little restaurant right on the main strip of her town's downtown. By the looks of it,

I suppose some people would call this place “charming.” I park the car and turn off the engine.

“This is my sister’s restaurant.” Eloise glances at the small building with a sign over the door that says “Poppy’s Kitchen.”

We go inside and a waitress with a name tag that says “Selena” leads us to a booth in the back. At the sight of her, Eloise brightens, and it’s obvious she’s genuinely interested in the waitress’s story—something about a random goose attacking the mayor in the crosswalk.

Even though she’s smiling and engaged and talkative, I can see behind her eyes she’s still reeling.

I want to help, but I don’t know how.

“Is Poppy in the kitchen?” Eloise asks as we sit.

Selena smiles, handing over our menus. “She is.”

“Could you tell her that I’m here?”

“Of course,” Selena says, then rushes off.

“You need to get some ice on that hand,” I tell her, nodding toward her swollen knuckles.

Eloise pulls her hand into her lap, like she’s ashamed, and I want to tell her not to worry about it. Scarlett is old enough to know better than to throw hands. At least, I thought she was.

Knowing that she’s playing hockey has me questioning everything right now.

A part of me is insanely proud, knowing that my kid doesn’t take crap from anyone. Just like I was proud of Eloise for clocking that guy.

Probably horrible dad advice, but that same proud part of me doesn’t care.

Seconds later, Poppy appears beside the table, visibly confused.

This looks a little less than professional, doesn’t it? Me and Eloise and Scarlett. We look like we’re on some sort of family outing.

But she recovers quickly, looking at Scarlett. “Oh my goodness! You must be Scarlett!”

Eloise glances at me, apologetic.

Poppy must’ve caught that look, because she says, “She didn’t let anything slip. Dallas mentioned your daughter was in town.” Then to Scarlett, “I feel really lucky I get to meet you before you head back.”

“Scarlett, this is my sister, Poppy,” Eloise says.

“Hi! Eloise said you make really good pancakes,” Scarlett says.

“The best.” Poppy smiles. “Do you want to come make some with me?”

“In the kitchen?” She beams.

“Yep.”

“*Like a real chef?*”

Poppy laughs. “Yep!”

“Can I, Dad?” Scarlett asks.

I hesitate. I need to address this hockey thing. I need to address the Scarlett fighting thing. And I need to make sure Eloise is okay.

“You can come back there too, if you want,” Poppy says.

“No, it’s fine,” I say. “If you’re sure she won’t be in the way.”

Poppy shakes her head as Scarlett scoots out of the booth. “She’ll be great. I know what Eloise is going to order, but do you know what you want?”

I glance down at the menu, but then remember one of the prepared meals that showed up in my refrigerator. “Maybe that chicken and pasta thing you made last week?”

She grins. “That’s a new recipe. You like it?”

“It’s good, yeah.”

“Great, we’ll be back in a bit.”

“Can you have the waitress bring us a bag of ice too?” I ask.

Poppy frowns, and Eloise’s gaze falls to the table.

“Sure . . .” Poppy draws the word out, confused, then disappears into the kitchen with Scarlett.

I stare at Eloise. I want to ask her if she’s okay, but everything about today blurs the line between professional and private. Worse, she seems to be avoiding my eyes. And even worse, I need to apologize for being a jerk for most of the day today.

Selena shows up with a bag of ice. She hands it over, and I thank her, then wait until I have Eloise’s attention. I turn my hand up on the table and motion for her to give me hers.

She pauses, holding eye contact, then finally pulls her swollen hand out from under the table and sets it in my open palm.

I wrap the baggie in a napkin and gently set it on top of her knuckles, holding the ice and her hand between both of mine.

She winces a little.

“Does it hurt?” I ask.

She closes her eyes and a tear slips out, but she wipes it away before it

has a chance to slide down her cheek. “I just feel so stupid.”

“Why?”

Her eyes flick open, and she shakes her head and draws in a breath like she’s just reminded herself crying is for babies. Then, in a measured tone, she says, “You could fire me over what I did. Heck, you could fire me over eighteen things I’ve done. And I wouldn’t blame you one bit.”

I frown. “Why would I do that?”

“I punched someone. In front of your daughter.”

I shrug. “Like she said, I get into fights all the time.”

“It’s different, and you know it.” A pause. “And sending your photos to everyone when I know you don’t like Scarlett out there like that—” she presses her palms into her eyes. “I just keep messing up.”

That comment I made. I don’t know why I said it. I didn’t mean it. It just came out.

“I’m sorry I snapped at you about that,” I say, honestly.

“No, you were right to be upset.”

“I’m not upset. I’m just . . .” this is a revelation to me as I say it, “rude when I’m processing things.”

She looks up at me, and I’m struck by how beautiful and soft her skin is. This entire day has been me trying—failing—to process things.

“It’s not a big deal. I promise,” I tell her.

“It is,” she says. “It’s classic Eloise.”

“Classic Eloise is punching guys in the face? Should I be worried?” I don’t often crack jokes, but it feels like the right option.

She offers a pained smile. “Maybe. Better stay on my good side.”

I heard what that guy said to her, and it’s obvious he got under her skin. Does she really believe those things? That she’s just a pretty face?

“I’m not going to fire you,” I tell her. “I just want to make sure you’re okay.”

She looks down at our hands. “I didn’t know who you were on New Year’s Eve. I want to make sure you know that. This wasn’t some play to try and—” she looks away. “I’m not a gold digger.”

“I never thought that once.” I frown.

“Jay made it sound like I orchestrated that whole thing so I could get a job and . . .” Her voice trails off, and she sighs. “But that’s not why—” She looks away.

“It’s fine.” I shift the ice on her hand. “Are you . . . uh . . . still hung up on

him?”

“Oh my gosh, no.” She laughs and sniffs at the same time. “I feel so dumb for falling for his crap in the first place. Raya always says I wear my heart on my sleeve. That I believe everyone is good, no matter what. I really need to stop doing that.”

My instinct is to stay quiet, but my instincts are wrong a lot. So, I decide to say what I’m really thinking instead.

“You could,” I say. “But it would make you a little less you.”

She stills.

“You believe in people,” I say. “That’s a good thing. It makes you who you are.”

“What makes you say that?”

“Because you believe in me,” I say. “I mean, you actually believe that I could be more than a hockey player.” I bring my eyes to hers. “I’ve always been just a hockey player. But you? You make me want to find out if there’s more to me than just that.”

Her shoulders drop so slightly I almost miss it. “Really?”

“Poppy said you’d want a Dr Pepper.” Selena is back. She sets the drink down in front of Eloise, but neither of us acknowledges her, our eyes still locked like a missile on a target. I feel the waitress pause and look between us, then walk off, and I swear the heat between me and Eloise is melting this ice.

Finally, she clears her throat and pulls her hand back into her lap. “Thank you. I, uh, I think it’s better now.”

I nod, setting the bag of ice off to the side, wishing I knew how to tell her that giving that guy any more real estate in her mind is pointless.

“I am really sorry I let Jay get the better of me.” She straightens, almost like she needs to communicate that she’s moving past this. “I promise it won’t happen again.”

“Stop beating yourself up over it, because if you hadn’t punched him, I would’ve,” I say. “And he would’ve required a lot more medical attention than just a bag of ice.”

She smirks. “So, I basically saved him.”

“Pretty much.”

Her eyes meet mine. “You really would’ve punched him?”

“I really would’ve,” I say honestly. She laughs, and it feels good. “I didn’t hear everything he said, but I heard enough.”

“Enough to know he was my boss,” she says.

“Enough to know you were right—he is a bad person.”

“He really is,” she says. “Which is why I think it’ll be easier to forget the way he made me feel about myself.” Her face falls. “At least I hope so.”

My stomach twists. I’d love to take a crack at punching that jerk’s face for what he did to Eloise. She beats herself up for it, but he was the boss, and he obviously abused that position. Between the two of them, he was the one in the wrong.

“And also why I’m going to do the very best job as your assistant.” She wipes the damp space underneath her eyes. “I can prove to Jay and everyone else that I’m good at this. A total professional.”

Right. A professional. Which is what I want . . . right?

Her phone buzzes. “Oh, it’s Beth.” Her eyes jump to mine. “We need to decide about the endorsement.”

“We?”

“Sorry. You,” she says. “You need to decide.”

I assume this will go a long way in helping rebuild her self-esteem, make her see that she really *is* good at this job, with or without her tool of an ex-boyfriend. “Do you get a commission?”

“Oh, that doesn’t matter, I—”

“Do you?” I cut in.

She sighs. “I mean, yeah. It’s whatever. They included that in there. Technically, they found you and the picture because of me. I think Beth sweetened the deal so I’d work extra hard to get you on board, but really, it’s fine, it’s—”

“I’ll do it.”

She stares.

“What?” I repeat. “I’ll do it.”

“Gray . . .”

“Send over all the details to my manager,” he says. “Have you been in touch with Malcolm yet?”

“I think Beth reached out, but I haven’t, no.”

“I’ll send you his information.”

She looks suspicious.

“Take the win, Eloise,” I say. “You deserve it.”

Poppy and Scarlett reappear with our meals, Scarlett’s plate a tower of heart-shaped pancakes, ending the conversation.

It's fine by me because the whole exchange has me feeling more unsettled than ever. Eloise is resigned to keeping things professional, but everything about today has me feeling exactly the opposite.

And all I want is to have her hand back in mine again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Eloise

My hand and my heart ache, but for entirely different reasons. I'm sitting off to the side of the Loveland Ice House, watching Gray and Scarlett skate around the ice. I don't know much about hockey except the little bits Scarlett taught me at the game the other night, but I think Gray is running drills with her, and it's drawing the attention of some of the locals.

Scarlett still has homework, and I know they need to get home soon, but I won't pretend I don't love this. It's making it more and more difficult to do what I promised—keep this whole relationship professional.

I'm embarrassed that Jay's taunts got the best of me, but the truth is, he spoke some of my greatest fears out loud.

A few of the boys skate over to Gray, and I sit up straight, worried he's going to bark at them to leave him alone. He glances at me, pauses, then motions for the boys to hand over their sticks, which he signs. He doesn't smile, but I'm calling it a win. I slyly photograph the whole encounter, because Beverly *did* say social media was part of my job.

Whether Gray likes it or not.

But then, to my shock, Gray starts playing with them.

He's not only playing with them, he's helping them, giving them pointers, showing them different ways to hold the stick, ways to balance, skate backward, improve their game. And, whether he wants to see it or not, even I can tell that Scarlett is the best of the bunch apart from Gray.

She's fast. Like, *really* fast. And she has an amazingly accurate shot.

I watch, marveling at the way Gray moves on the ice, with the same precision as always, but *none* of the aggression.

I take some video—more excellent content—then scroll through my photos, stopping on a selfie Scarlett made us take at the aquarium.

I think about the teenager mistaking me as part of Gray's "family."

I think about the way Gray took care of my hand before destroying his lunch.

I think of how he said I make him want to try and be something more than just a hockey player.

I try to answer a few of Gray's emails, including the one from Beth, accepting the endorsement request for, what I now realize, a very popular brand of fabric softener. Thankfully, Malcolm Crane signed off on the endorsement, and while he made sure to let me know his contract with Gray entitles him to a cut of the commission, he commended me for finding the opportunity for Gray *and* especially for convincing him to do it.

I don't bother explaining that the whole thing was a huge mistake and respond instead with a simple "Glad to help."

My phone buzzes with a new text in my Hart sisters' chat.

POPPY

If you guys are still in town tonight, swing by Dallas's.

I'm making chicken and dumplings.

ELOISE

We're at the rink, but I'll ask Gray when he's done.

RAYA

This doesn't sound like business.

POPPY

It didn't look like business either.

RAYA

You saw them?

POPPY

They ate lunch at the restaurant. They looked very cute together.

;))

ELOISE

No.

We are not "together."

I'm just showing him all the things to love about living here.

POPPY

But he lives in the city.

ELOISE

The city got a little hectic. We needed a time out.

POPPY

Well, come for dinner. It'll be a good break.

RAYA

I'm going to feel like a fifth wheel

ELOISE

I can see if Finn is free? ;)

RAYA

Funny, El. But I don't feel like babysitting tonight.

ELOISE

Such a stick in the mud!

POPPY

Hey! How did your job interview go?

RAYA

I'll tell you about it tonight.

ELOISE

Mysterious. I can't wait to hear.

“Eloise! Did you see that? I just scored on Dad! Woohoo!!!” Scarlett is taking a victory lap around the rink, holding her stick in the air over her head.

“I'm not a goalie, Scarface!” Gray calls out after her.

She shouts back in a sing-songy voice, “I-don't-care-I-scored-on-you-woohoo!!!” while shaking her hips skating backward around the rink.

They make their way back to the seats where they left their shoes, and I stand to meet them, still feeling emotionally wobbly. “Do you guys need to get back right away, or do you want to see more of my hometown?” I glance at Scarlett. “How much schoolwork do you have?”

She waves me off like schoolwork is an afterthought, and Gray glances up. “She's caught up. Got most of it done and turned in last night.”

“School is easy,” Scarlett says. “And not as much fun as hockey.”

Gray looks resigned. “You *are* pretty good, Scout.”

She pulls one of her skates off and flips it on the ground. “Told ya.”

He looks at me, slightly exasperated, and I smile. I love seeing this side of him.

I wish everyone could.

They finish changing their shoes, and as we leave, Gray signs a few more hockey sticks, a notepad, and a fast food napkin, then poses for a couple of photos with fans.

Once we're outside, I scroll through the images.

"You're smiling," he says, stepping out onto the sidewalk.

"I know! You were almost charming back there," I say.

He gives me a wry look. "Almost?"

I grin over at him. "Like forty-eight percent charming."

"You're going to put all of that on the internet, aren't you?" he asks, dryly.

"The thought did cross my mind."

He grunts a reply, and I smile at him.

"What's up with all the hearts?" Scarlett asks as we walk back to the car.

"Those are for Valentine's Day," I say, looking at the painted hearts affixed to the old fashioned lamp posts all the way down Cupid Lane. "It's a Loveland tradition. You can buy a heart for someone and leave them a message. There's also a Valentine's Day festival. Last year, Dallas got some of the guys to learn a dance so he could serenade Poppy. It was adorable."

"He danced?" Gray asks. "Is there a video of that?"

"Oh yeah," I say, remembering. "Not just him. Jericho and Krush and some of the other guys too. I got it all."

"Burke. *Dancing*." He scoffs.

"Love makes you do crazy things." I glance at him.

He looks over at me. I hold his gaze three seconds too long, then force myself to look away. "Hey, do you guys want to have dinner? Poppy invited us over to Dallas's house. She's making chicken and dumplings."

"We just ate lunch," Gray says. "Are you already hungry?"

"Well, not *just*, it's been a couple of hours. But we can hang out and you can relax for a while before dinner," I say. "You *do* relax, right?"

He tosses me a look that seems to say "very funny" as Scarlett says, "Yes! Let's do it!" and I assume that Gray doesn't actually relax. He's one of the most driven people I've ever met. He probably needs a long vacation and a deep tissue massage.

Deep. Tissue. Massage.

Hoo, boy.

“Let’s do it,” he says, giving in to Scarlett.

We get back to the car, and I navigate to Dallas’s house out on the edge of town.

“Why does he live here and not in the city?” Gray asks as we pull into the circle drive.

I look over at him. “He’s never told you?”

He shrugs. “Never came up.”

“Making conversation is a good way to find out things like this,” I tease.

“Shut up,” he mutters, but I can hear he doesn’t mean it.

I love that we’ve moved into the insult phase of whatever this relationship is.

“Plus, you can forge a bond with your teammates.” I open the door. “In fact, it’s a good way to bond with pretty much anyone you want to know better.”

He gets out, then moves his seat so Scarlett can crawl out of the back. “I think she means her,” she says, plopping her feet onto the ground.

“I absolutely do not,” I say even though I absolutely do. I’ve been working for Gray for weeks now, and I’m pretty sure he’s never asked a single personal question about me.

“Just generally speaking. Asking people questions about themselves is a good way to show you’re interested in something other than . . .”

“Hockey?” Scarlett says.

I tap my nose and grin, aware that Gray is not a fan of my teasing. “Bingo, baby.”

“Eloise,” Scarlett says. “Why do *you* live here when you love the city so much?”

“Well, look at that, that’s a great question,” I continue to tease, leading her toward the front door. “It’s less expensive, for one thing. But also, because of things like this. I can’t imagine not being where my family is.”

Gray tenses, and Scarlett looks away.

“Oh. Oh no, oh Scarlett, I’m sorry,” I say, cringing at the thoughtless comment. “I didn’t mean—” Way to stick my foot in my mouth. Scarlett is dealing with her dad moving to a new city, and this is what I say?

“It’s okay,” Scarlett says, taking Gray’s hand. “Dad promised to fly me out here anytime I want to come.”

With his hand in hers, she hits him with it. He looks down, and taps her

with her own hand right back.

I smile. I can't help it. For having a dad who doesn't seem to care a bit about how his stand-offishness makes other people feel, his little girl is grace beyond her years.

"And I'll fly out there too, Red," Gray says. "Whenever I can."

He stole my nickname for her. Something about that makes me feel proud.

The front door opens before we can knock, and Dallas is standing there in joggers, a Comets' hoodie and bare feet, his hair still damp.

"Hey guys," he says, smiling. "Glad you could make it."

"Thanks for inviting us," I say.

Dallas looks at Scarlett, his smile holding. "You must be Scarlett." He sticks a hand out in her direction.

"Dallas Burke." She sizes him up with a raised brow. "You're one of the top scorers in the league."

He purses his lips, and puts his hand to his chin, Sherlock-style. "The *top* scorer, I think."

She narrows her eyes. "Until Dad catches you."

Dallas looks at Gray. "Wow, you brainwashed your own kid?"

Scarlett sticks her hand in Burke's. "We should take a selfie later. The kids on my team won't believe I met you if I don't bring back proof."

"Your team?" he asks. "Wait. She doesn't . . ."

"Yeah. She plays hockey," Gray practically growls.

"Get out," Dallas says. "Are you any good?"

Scarlett looks up at Gray. "Am I, Dad?"

Gray draws in a slow, deep breath and lets it out on a huff. "Unfortunately, yes."

Scarlett's face beams even though he already told her once that she was good. I know from experience how one of Gray's compliments feels, though, and I don't blame her for making him repeat himself.

"Is Poppy in the kitchen? I want to see if she'll let me help," Scarlett says, shrugging off her coat.

"Yep, just through there." Dallas points off to the side in the direction of his kitchen, and Scarlett runs off.

"She must look like her mom," Dallas says to Gray. "She's way too cute."

"Maybe, but she favors *him* on the ice." I nod toward Gray and take off

my coat, then motion for Gray to hand his over. “She was skating circles around the boys out there today.”

Gray shoots me a look. “I don’t want her playing.”

“But she *is* playing.” I hang our coats on the hooks by the door. “And she’s good.”

He grunts.

“I put in an Amazon order for a *Grayson Hawke to English Dictionary*, but it hasn’t arrived yet. When it does, I’ll be able to interpret those grunts in no time.”

He glances sideways at me and shakes his head.

I look at Dallas. “Is Sylvia here?”

While I didn’t tell Gray, I *do* know why Dallas moved to Loveland instead of the city. His grandma lives with him, and she had to have surgery. I don’t think she was supposed to stick around after she recuperated, but this place and its people must’ve grown on her, because she’s still living here, and my entire family is happy that she is.

“No, actually,” Dallas says. “She had a date.”

My eyes widen. “A *date*?”

“Some guy named Walt,” he says. “She met him playing pickleball.”

I laugh out loud. “Of *course* Sylvia plays pickleball.”

“Surgery gave her a new lease on life,” he says. “They went to dinner at 3 p.m.” He chuckles, then motions for Gray to follow him into the living room, where, I’m sure, there is some game on the TV.

Before he walks away, Gray looks back at me. “You good?”

I nod with a warm smile. “All good.”

It gives me a glimpse into the kind of person he is when he’s not being *Grayson Hawke*, and I like it.

A lot.

I watch as he and Dallas disappear, then turn around to find Raya walking in the door.

She takes one look at me and says, “I talked to Amber today.”

“Hello to you too.” I scowl and walk into the kitchen where I find Poppy standing at the counter, stirring something and Scarlett sitting across from her, licking a spoon.

As predicted, Raya follows me. “You *punched* Jay, Eloise?”

Scarlett looks up. “It was *awe . . . some*.” She holds out the word “awesome,” wagging her eyebrows like it was, in fact, the coolest thing she’d

ever seen.

“You punched him? In front of *her*?” Raya shakes her head.

“Wait,” Poppy stops stirring. “You *punched* Jay?”

I sheepishly hold up my bruised hand.

“Yes,” I say. “And I feel sixty percent terrible about it.”

Raya looks at Scarlett. “You must be Gray’s daughter.”

“I am.” Scarlett smiles. “Who are you?”

“Eloise’s sister,” she says sternly. “Raya.”

“That’s a cool name,” Scarlett says. “Eloise and Poppy and Raya. I like it!”

“Hey, Scarlett—” I cut in. “Why don’t we go in the den and find something cool to watch on TV?”

“But I’m licking spoons.”

“You’ll spoil your dinner,” I say, shooing her into the den, aware that my sisters exchange a glance at the irony. “Shut it, you two, I can feel your judgment.”

After I set Scarlett up with the TV remote, I walk back into the kitchen and Poppy and Raya stop talking. Clearly, they were talking about me and didn’t want me to hear. I plop down on a stool and slide a meat and cheese tray closer.

The only play here is to put my sister in the hot seat, otherwise, I’m going to get a lecture about violence in front of children, violence on the job, and probably a repeat of the lecture they’ve already given me about falling for your boss. So, I redirect with an opening volley.

“You going to tell us about that interview, Raya?”

“Oh, yeah,” Poppy says. “That’s right! Where was it and what was it for?”

Raya pulls a water bottle from the refrigerator and closes the door. “It was for an HR position.”

“Is that what you do?” I ask. “Like now for a job? I never actually knew.”

“I thought it was something with numbers,” Poppy says. “Or maybe spreadsheets?”

Raya looks perturbed. “How do you not know what I do for a living?”

Poppy: “I never understood when you told me.”

Me: “I never listen to you when you talk.”

Poppy and I both giggle.

“Oh, you two are hilarious.” Raya uncaps the bottle and takes a drink like

she's a dainty woman who isn't really thirsty. That bottle is a prop, meant to occupy her hands. And it makes me wonder what she's not saying. "I manage people. At a big investment firm."

I wince. "Yikes, really?"

Her eyes widen. "I'm very good at what I do." Her tone is defensive.

"But you're so not personable," I say, softening the half-truth with a grin and a pump of my eyebrows.

"Funny," Raya says.

My grin widens. "Thank you."

"So, what, you don't like it anymore?" Poppy asks.

Raya shrugs. "This job opened up, and it sounded like a nice change."

I frown. "I didn't know you wanted a change."

She shrugs. "I've been doing the same thing for years."

"And you want a different result," Poppy says.

My frown deepens.

Poppy must note my confusion. "You know, the saying about the definition of madness."

I shake my head. "I don't know that saying."

"The definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result," Raya says.

"Who said that?" I ask.

"Albert Einstein," they both say.

"I've heard of him—lead singer for The Beatles?" I pop a green olive in my mouth and my sisters roll their eyes. I grin.

"So, what's the result you want to change?" Poppy asks.

Raya shrugs half-heartedly. "I don't know. This is . . . new . . . for me. Not knowing. Uncharted territory. I just think it's time to mix things up."

"Ah. Because your life is boring." I say dryly even though I'm secretly thrilled by this news. My sister needs a little shake-up in her life. I just never thought she'd do anything about it.

"Ha, ha," she says, annoyed.

"Ray," I say, straightening. "Is this because you don't want to be single anymore?"

Her forehead pulls. "What? No."

"Yes!" Poppy's eyes widen. "Because working in that same old boring office with the same boring people isn't going to find you a soulmate!"

"Who's finding a soulmate?" Dallas walks into the room at that precise

moment, followed by Gray, who looks a little less miserable than usual.

“Raya,” I say, eating another olive. “She’s quitting her job and going on the prowl.”

“Oh, did you take the job?” Dallas grabs a slice of summer sausage and a piece of cheddar and pops both into his mouth.

“Wait, how do you know about her interview?” Poppy asks.

Dallas’s eyes dart from Poppy to Raya. “Oh, crap.”

“It’s okay.” Raya holds up a hand. “Dallas is the one who sent me the link.”

Poppy and I exchange confused glances. Why is Raya being so cryptic about this?

“It’s for the team,” Raya says.

“What?” If jaws dropping were a literal thing, mine would be beneath me on the floor. “You’re going to work for the Comets?”

Raya shrugs. “I’m looking over the offer now.”

“Oh my gosh, take it,” I say. “We can eat lunch together every day.” I shoot a look at Gray. “Until my boss fires me, anyway.”

His stoic expression holds. I glare at him like he’s my nemesis. I point at him. “One of these days, I’m *going* to make you laugh.”

So far, I think only Scarlett has been able to coax one out of him. Even on the ice, even when he scores . . . no real, full face smiles. Only that same intensely focused expression that seems to define him.

I turn back to Raya. “Ooh. Then you could marry Finn. Have beautiful hockey babies.”

“Oh, good grief,” Raya says.

Raya can pretend she doesn’t like Finn’s advances, but the man is gorgeous. And he’s fun, which is exactly what my sister needs, whether she can see it or not.

“Finn is too young for me,” Raya says, as if that’s a valid excuse. “This is a strategic career move.” Because, of course it is. Because my sister is the definition of a professional. The opposite of me in every way. Raya is calculated and measured, which is why she’s a success, and I’m still over here trying to find my footing, punching guys, and crashing cars.

There’s always been a sort of divide between my oldest sister and me. Not a divide . . . just a difference of perspective.

Maybe it’s because we want different things or because I don’t have the courage to admit out loud what I know to be true—that Raya doesn’t respect

my choices. Because she sees my choices as impulsive and emotional.

“Well, I think you should take the job,” Poppy says, pulling my attention.

“I don’t know. It’s just so different than what I . . .” Raya continues talking, and I zone out.

Gray moves over to the side of the counter where I’m sitting, and I’m thankful for the diversion. Sometimes I get stuck in the rut of comparison when it comes to my two older, more successful sisters, and I’d much rather focus on something else.

Although, focusing on him is probably just as unproductive.

“Gosh, you almost look . . . relaxed,” I say, facing him. “It suits you.”

“Where’s—?”

“She’s in the den,” I say quietly. “Watching something age appropriate, I promise.”

“You sure?”

“Positive. She’s at home here.”

The comment seems to land funny, and Gray looks away. “Uh, should I check on her?” His gaze drifts past me into the silence of the house.

“I think she’s fine, but you can if you want to,” I say. “Hey, are you hungry yet?”

His eyes return to mine. “Yeah. I am. I wasn’t until I came in here and smelled whatever it is your sister is—”

At that moment, we both notice that the chatter in the background has died down. We simultaneously slow turn to find Dallas and my sisters are staring at us.

They all straighten their shoulders in unison, like they were given choreography.

“Well, well, well,” Poppy says. “What have we here?”

And I know I’m going to have a lot of questions to answer later tonight.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Gray

Eloise's sister is an amazing cook.

That's what I'm thinking when Poppy serves me a third helping of chicken and dumplings.

That—and that it's nice here.

They're not friends, exactly, but I think they could be. And Scarlett loves all of them. They all treat her like she's already part of the family.

If I let them, they'd probably treat me that way, too.

The thing that continues to amaze me most is the way Eloise seems genuinely interested in people. Not just *her* people, either, but everyone. The guy sweeping the floor at the ice rink. A random woman walking her dog on the street. The waitress. The doorman.

Scarlett.

Me.

She gets people in a way I never have.

I don't feel uneasy sitting here, at this table. I don't even feel uneasy answering questions about myself. And boy, there are questions.

Where did I grow up? Did I always want to play hockey? Where do I see myself in five years? That last one was Eloise's, and I fumbled through an answer because really, I have no idea. If this trade has taught me anything, it's that nothing is certain.

Not even my time playing this game.

The chatter around the table is familiar and laid back. Eloise and her

sisters are all very different, but it's obvious they're family. And it's obvious they're close.

Eloise tells them all about the fabric softener endorsement in the most adorable, self-deprecating way. After hearing it, I realize that this is a huge deal. She could've taken complete credit for the idea, too—but she doesn't.

Instead, she gets everyone laughing by recounting her mistake.

Mistakes were never something to joke about in my house growing up. They were things to work on and beat out so they never happen again.

After we eat, I get up to clear the table, and Eloise's oldest sister—the cranky one—stands to help.

When I walk a stack of dishes into the kitchen, she follows me, and I realize this isn't simply about her helping with dishes. She has something to say.

She sets her stack of plates in the sink, then looks at me, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'm not sure if you've figured this out about Eloise yet, but she's a little like a golden retriever."

I frown. "Okay."

"You can mistreat her over and over again, but she stays loyal and kind. Her heart is so big it gets her into trouble."

"I haven't mistreated her."

She flicks a hand in the air. "I meant 'you' figuratively."

"I think you've got the wrong—"

"I know about New Year's Eve," she says. "And about the other kiss in the parking lot."

I look away.

"You should know, Eloise isn't someone you can mess with. When it comes to relationships, she's all in. *Always.*"

My eyes flick back to hers. "Okay—"

"And you don't strike me as the kind of person who's looking to settle down." She raises a knowing brow.

"Eloise works for me," I say. "That's all."

"Do you make out with all of your employees?"

I sigh. "It wasn't like that."

Her glare is intense. "Then enlighten me."

I have to admit, while I don't appreciate the implication, I appreciate the directness. Raya is the protective big sister, and while she's putting me on the hot seat, all I can think is that Eloise is lucky to have someone who loves her

enough to look out for her like this.

I sigh. “It was a kiss. It was stupid, and we both agreed it can't happen again.”

“Then why do you look at her like you want it to?”

At that, I have to look away, because Raya picked up on the exact thing I've been trying to keep to myself.

She leans in. “Gray. This is her older sister talking. One who will protect her until the sun burns away this earth. *Don't* hurt her,” Raya says, with a warning tone. “She's been hurt enough.”

The thought of that ticks me off. How anyone, like that creep of an ex of hers, could hurt her, I can't understand. It would be like kicking a puppy.

And Raya is standing here, thinking I'm the kind of guy who would do that. Who *could* do that.

She's right about one thing, I don't treat people well.

Eloise's whole world is people. If I'm honest, other than Scarlett, people haven't really been my priority. By design. People—relationships—require time and energy and emotion that I don't have.

“Look. I appreciate you being direct. But you've got the wrong idea,” I say, leveling her gaze. “I'm not looking to get into a relationship with Eloise, or anyone else. I don't date during the season. Period. That hasn't changed just because we kissed a couple of times. She and I aren't even really friends.”

Do I really believe any of that?

Raya draws in a breath. “Good. Just make sure she knows it.”

“She does.”

She gives me a firm nod as Eloise walks in the kitchen with an armload of serving dishes.

And I walk out, hoping she didn't hear a word I just said.

After dinner, Scarlett falls asleep in the backseat as we drive back to the city.

I spend the whole ride missing Eloise's chatter. She's quiet again, and I hate it. Maybe Raya warned her off, too.

I could try to start a conversation.

Because I'm great at that.

I could tell her she was right about me needing to relax, or thank her for sharing her hometown with me and Scarlett, or including us in her family meal again, or about a million other things.

I could even take her advice and ask her questions about herself. Or tell her something real about me.

But I don't do any of those things. It's hard for me, and every time I come close to talking, I stop. I feel stupid, somehow, or, I don't know, vulnerable?

It's easier to just stay silent.

Once we get back to my place, I feel like I'm performing surgery to extract Scarlett out of the car without waking her. In retrospect, I should've just woken her, made her walk upstairs and trusted she'd fall asleep again, but it's hard to admit she's too old to be carried now.

I get her settled in her bright turquoise, half-decorated room, sliding her under a soft comforter with fluffy pink flowers on it. I quickly glance around the room, feeling like Eloise already captured Scarlett's personality, and they've only just begun working on the space.

How does she do that?

I close the door and walk out to the living room, where I find Eloise sitting, still wearing her coat, but looking like she wants to say something.

I take off my coat and hang it up, then sit down in an armchair next to her.

She stares at her hands, folded in her lap. Why isn't she talking?

The silence is killing me. "How's the hand?" I ask.

She gives her head a little shake. "Oh, fine."

A pause. A frown.

"I just wanted to tell you again how sorry I am," she says quietly.

"For what?"

A heavy sigh. "So many things." Her eyes rise to mine. "I probably seem like such a mess."

I lean back in the chair and kick my shoes off. "To who?"

"You, dummy." She laughs softly, then abruptly clams up. "Sorry. I didn't mean to call you 'dummy.' Ugh, I think I'm nervous."

Man, I want to kiss her.

Raya's warning rushes back, blaring like a siren.

"I just wish—" she pushes both of her hands through her hair, then scrubs them down her face, obviously bothered.

I don't know what to say to help. I really want to—but I can't figure out

the right words.

I look at her lips and try to remember a single reason why kissing her right now would be a bad idea.

One, she's my employee. Such a bad look. Two, it's complicated. Every relationship is.

Three . . . me. I'm aware enough to realize that I'm an anvil that would keep her from soaring.

She deserves the best of everything, and I am not that. Not by a longshot.

"Forget it. It's dumb." She stands.

"Sit back down," I say, a little bossier than I mean to.

"Oh. Okay." She sits, hands folded on her lap.

I take a breath. "Can I try saying that again? I think I can do better."

She gets a quizzical smile on her face. "Sure."

I clear my throat. "You were in the middle of a thought," I stare at her. "So, finish it. Please."

She presses her lips together, a slightly shell-shocked expression on her face. "A 'please.' That's progress, Mr. Hawke."

Good. She's kidding around again.

"I'm a slow learner."

She looks down, gathers herself, then says, "I just wish you didn't hear any of that stuff with Jay. My ex. His name is Jay."

"So, it's not Mr. Turtleneck?"

A laugh escapes like a tiny sliver of sunshine through a crack in a cave wall.

"No," she says.

"You told me his name," I say.

She frowns. "I did?"

"On New Year's Eve."

She goes still, and if she's wondered how well I paid attention that night, I guess she has her answer.

Her eyes meet mine. "I hate that he made me feel . . . small."

I nod and my pulse kicks up. "I hate that he did that too."

"I know you can't understand it," she says. "You've got people telling you how great you are all the time."

I actually don't. My whole life, from the loudest and most influential voices in my life, it's been the complete opposite.

She goes on. "In case you haven't figured it out, I'm kind of a disaster."

“Do you remember the meeting with Coach the day you were hired?”

“Yeah, why?”

I raise a brow, waiting until the realization washes over her face.

“Oh, that’s right . . .” She leans back in the chair. “You sort of got in trouble, didn’t you? That’s how you got stuck with me.” She widens her eyes. “But people still say you’re the best. They ask for your autograph and want you to pose for pictures.”

“Doesn’t mean I don’t know what it’s like to feel small.”

She meets my eyes, and I worry she can see straight through me. Unlike most people, she takes the time to look.

It gets uncomfortable, which is what usually happens when things get too personal, and I push a hand through my hair and stand. “I should, uh, get some sleep.”

“Sit back down,” she says.

I pause, holding in a smile at the way she’s thrown my words back at me.

She pats the cushion next to her, and I sit, hands folded in my lap.

“Elaborate.”

I raise a surprised brow.

“You said you know what it’s like to feel small,” she says. “How so?”

I shrug.

“You don’t get to do that. Use words, Gray.” Her voice shakes slightly. “Please.”

The death grip I’ve held for so long on my private, inner thoughts and emotions loosens a little.

“Okay. I’ve played hockey since I was three,” I tell her. “And let’s just say I’ve had my share of horrible coaches.”

She watches me so intently I have to look away. It’s like she knows I’m not being completely honest simply by looking at me. Because Eloise knows people.

Even ones who don’t want to be known.

Only, that’s not exactly true, is it? Maybe she cast a spell on me, because I find myself *wanting* her to know things about me.

Which is stupid. I feel stupid. And open.

It’s foreign.

And yet, I still hear myself say, “And then there’s my dad.”

Her gaze holds steady, but she doesn’t respond.

I pick up one of the dumb throw pillows and squeeze it, because I need

something in my hands.

I tread into waters I've dammed up for decades. "He, uh, he figured out I was good, and decided good had to be great, and then he decided great had to be the best. There was no pleasing him. Ever."

"And your mom?"

"Dad cheated," I say, my tone steady. "She didn't stick around."

"And that's why you hate cheaters," she says, as if she's just realized something crucial.

"A lot of people hate cheaters," I tell her.

"True," she says. "But I always wondered what possessed you to agree to that kiss, and now it makes sense."

"I didn't really need a reason to kiss you, Eloise." I look at her. "But yeah, I do hate cheaters. And I don't have a good relationship with my dad."

Her eyes are still glued to mine.

"You don't need all the details but—"

"Yes. I do."

I glance at her.

"I mean, if you're willing to share them."

"I'm not," I say. "He was hard on me, end of story."

"But it's not the end of the story, is it?" She pulls her feet up underneath her, like she's settling in for a long conversation. I don't do long conversations. Or short conversations. I don't do conversations at all.

"I said Jay made me feel small, and you brought up your dad," she says.

"Yep."

"He made you feel small."

"Yep."

She nods. "He made you think you had to be the best, no matter what."

I look away. She's only repeating what I've told her, but I still feel like I'm standing naked in the middle of the ice.

"And *that's* why you push everyone away."

I don't confirm this "revelation" she's just had, but I'm not surprised she's right. "He would say 'People make you lose focus.'"

"And if you lose focus, you won't be the best," she says. "If you start to want something or someone else—"

"You'll be weak," I finish her sentence. "He always saw Scarlett as a liability. Said because of her, I risked my entire future. When he found out Celeste was pregnant, he told me to get out while I could."

She goes still.

“Look, hockey is not just what I do, it’s who I am,” I say, shaking off the past. “And if I’m not the best at it, then who am I? If I’m not the best, then —” I shrug.

“Then you think you aren’t worth loving.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

She’s so right it’s infuriating.

“You’re wrong,” I lie. “He was hard on me, that’s all. But it worked. I’m here, aren’t I? I’m the best, aren’t I?”

“You sure are.” She nods. “You’re at the top.”

“That’s right.”

“All by yourself.”

“I’ve got Scarlett.”

“And you’re so great with her,” she says. “Like, *really* great. It’s honestly shocking how great you are with her.” She goes quiet for a moment. “But don’t you want more than that?”

“More than Scarlett?”

“No, not exactly, but more, I don’t know, more a part of the team? To have friends? To fall in love? I mean, don’t you want more?”

I draw in a breath. “Be a little selfish to want more, don’t you think?”

Eloise presses her lips together, and her sister’s warning fades into the background. She meets my eyes. “You’re never going to feel like you fit anywhere if you don’t let other people in.”

“My life isn’t about letting people in, Eloise,” I say, a little more firmly than I intend to. “You wouldn’t understand.”

She narrows her gaze. “Try me.”

I shake my head. “Feelings and emotions make you weak. Focus makes champions.” If it sounds like I’m reciting, it’s because I am. I’ve heard that stupid phrase for over half my life.

“And you can’t be focused if you care about people? Or if you admit you need other people?”

When my father barked those words at me, they had a very specific meaning, but hearing her question them stirs up underlying doubt that I usually stuff away.

She watches me, as if waiting for me to explain, but I can’t. I don’t have a response—not one that she’ll understand—and it instantly sets my nerves on

edge.

“Is that what you’re saying?”

I don’t like to be analyzed. Or prodded.

“Gray, answer the question. I think it’s impor—”

“Are you really the best person to be giving advice on this topic?” I snap. “How well has caring about people worked out for you?” My words, like my tone, are cold. Expected. And I regret them instantly.

She freezes, her mouth still open, mid-sentence. She closes her mouth, then nods a few times, smoothing her hands over her lap in broad strokes.

“Right.” She stands, a fake smile on her face. “Your suit is hanging up in the closet, ready to go, and I packed all the toiletries and everything. You shouldn’t have a hard time finding it all.”

Why? Why do I do this? It’s like I know what to do, and I still do the wrong thing.

Everything inside of me is screaming at me to stop her. To apologize for being an idiot. Again. To tell her that this is what I do when things get confusing or emotional or deep—I push people away.

But I don’t say any of those things.

Instead, I watch her zip her coat and pull on a stocking cap.

And I just sit there, listening as she starts to ramble.

“I forwarded you all the details for the fabric softener photoshoot. We’ll have to coordinate a few things because of Scarlett, but it’s still a few weeks or so away. And I didn’t post anything on your social media today even though I really wanted to because I think it’s a great idea, and I think a lot of your fans only see you as one thing, and you’re just a lot more than . . .” Her voice trails off, and she looks around like she’s lost something in the ether.

She straightens.

“I should get going because I have to be back here super early for Scarlett. I probably should’ve driven myself to Loveland earlier, I just wasn’t thinking.”

She pauses, waiting for me to say something, but I don’t, because I already feel stupid. Saying more would only make it worse, so I just stand there.

“You don’t have anything to say?” she asks, pointedly.

I open my mouth, hoping the right words will come out, but I just shrug, feeling helpless and annoyed that I can’t figure this out.

She nods once. “Awesome.”

She walks over to the elevator and pushes the button.

The elevator opens and she steps inside, but before the doors close, she blocks one with her arm and says, “Look, I don’t know if you’ll believe me or not, but I hope you hear me when I say that you’re more than just a hockey player. That’s what you do, but that’s not who you are.”

She watches me so intently, it’s unnerving.

“And yeah, caring about people hasn’t always worked out for me, but I wouldn’t change that about myself.” She steels her jaw. “I think it’s my best trait.”

Before I can respond, she pulls her arm back, and the doors close, leaving me standing there in the wake of words that hit a little harder than they should.

I lean my head against the cold steel of the elevator doors and think:
What. Am. I. Doing.

Chapter Thirty

Eloise

I *think it's my best trait.*

I believe those words. I *do* care about people. I don't care if it hurts, I wouldn't trade it for anything.

Unfortunately, my willingness to care has also been a huge source of heartache. Maybe Gray is onto something, keeping everyone on the outside.

But even as the thought filters in, I reject it.

I could never live my life that way. People are everything to me.

Which is why, when a text comes in from Raya asking me to meet for coffee before work, I respond immediately.

ELOISE

Is everything okay?

RAYA

Yes, just wanted to have a quick chat before we start our days.

That can't be good. Raya doesn't have "quick chats." Especially not with me. The truth is, my oldest sister and I are very, *very* different. Raya doesn't really get me. She doesn't understand anyone who doesn't keep dates in a planner or want to conquer the world.

I most definitely don't want to conquer the world.

And I don't have a planner.

The older I get, the more I think, all I really want is a simple life.

Why am I embarrassed to admit that?

I shake the thoughts aside and drive into the city. I park in the garage near Gray's building and walk around the block to the coffee shop where I told Raya to meet me. When I walk inside, I see her sitting at a table in the back.

I make my way through the crowded space, thankful that she got here early and ordered me a chai.

I have no idea why she asked me here, so I just say, "Morning, sunshine. What's the meeting for?" I sit and then add, "Couldn't this just have been an email?" I try to joke with her, but oftentimes it goes over like a large rock dropped in a vat of pudding.

"Funny," Raya says. "I just wanted to talk about a few things, to see how you're doing."

"Uh-oh. Am I in trouble?"

She purses her lips.

Wait.

"Raya, am I in trouble? Did I do something—"

She cuts me off with, "I talked to Amber Johanssen yesterday."

My stomach sinks. "Jay's girlfriend Amber?" Why is she bringing her up?

My cheeks are on fire. The words *I was the other woman* race through my head. A stark reminder that my so-called "best trait" is sometimes also my worst.

"They broke up," Raya says.

I do a double take. "Whoa. For real?"

"After she heard what you did," she says.

I straighten. Maybe I should feel badly that I came between Amber and Jay again, but I don't. She deserves better too.

"She said it was a wake-up call," Raya says. "I didn't realize he was so ___"

I pull my hands into my lap. I don't want to think about Jay or the things he said to me. And I especially don't want to think about the fact that I believed him. It was like he saw my insecurities and he figured out how to weaponize them.

I was never anything more than a game to him.

The embarrassing thing is that I was so desperate for his attention that I went along with it. Ignored the red flags and warning bells and let myself get swept up in a fantasy.

I glance at my sister and see a pitying look on her face. "I took care of

Jay, remember?”

Raya softens, like she can see through my brave face straight to the girl hiding in the back corner, wishing someone would love her. The girl who keeps putting herself out there, who keeps getting her heart broken, over and over again . . .

Every new relationship holds the promise of possibility. And every time that promise breaks, I have to check this brave face in the mirror.

Raya must see it faltering because she reaches across the table and takes my hand. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrink under her gaze, knowing this admission will make me seem weak. Especially to my always smart, always put-together sister.

“El?” Her eyes plead.

“Because I wanted to believe him,” I blurt, then look away. “I wanted to believe that I was—” I stop, not wanting to go to wherever reliving this is about to take me.

I expect my sister to judge that, but she doesn’t. She smiles sadly and squeezes my hand.

“He had this way about him, this—” I search for the word— “this *charm*. But he also had a way of making people feel small,” I say. “And it was easy to make me feel small because I wasn’t very secure in that job. I was so intent on proving myself, and I think he saw that as a weakness.”

Raya shakes her head, like she understands, even though there’s no way anyone would ever view Raya as weak.

“People like Jay do that to make themselves feel important,” she says. “It’s *his* problem, El, not yours. He put you down to keep you from realizing that you deserve so much better.”

I nod because I *know* this, but also, there’s something blocking me from really *knowing* it. It still feels like I’m the one who did something wrong.

She takes a drink of her latte, then clears her throat. “The truth is that in these sorts of relationships, it’s often hard to realize power dynamics are in play. Jay was your boss, and you were conditioned to want to please him.”

“But I’m fine now,” I tell her. “I don’t want anyone to make me into a victim.”

“Eloise, nobody *wants* to be a victim. But that doesn’t mean you aren’t one.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But if I am, I just want to forget about all of it and move on.”

“I understand,” she says. “I really do. It’s hard not to feel like you played a part in this.”

“I did play a part,” I say. “I messed up.”

“But he was the *boss*,” Raya says. “He should be held accountable by more than just your fist.”

“I’m fine, really.” I don’t want to dwell on the fact that Jay abused his authority. I don’t even want to think about it.

“I knew Jay was a jerk, but—” she pulls her hands back into her lap and shakes her head. “I want to kill that guy.” She looks at me.

“Get in line.”

There’s a lull. I had no idea what she wanted to talk to me about when she invited me here, but this was not even in the top ten. I don’t think Raya has ever apologized to me for anything, probably because I’m usually the one in the wrong. And even though she hasn’t come right out and said the word, I think that’s what she’s doing here.

She sighs. “I was so hard on you for starting things up with him in the first place. I thought you were just being typical, optimistic Eloise. I had no idea.”

I shrug. “How could you? I was still processing it all myself.” And maybe I still am. Or I should be. It’s not in my nature to dwell. I’m a *pick-myself-up-by-the-bootstraps* kind of person. An *always-look-on-the-bright-side* kind of person.

Not a person who lets something like getting dumped ruin her. In fact, I don’t know that I’ve ever grieved a breakup.

And only now do I realize that there is a part of me, a part I buried way down deep, that might need to.

Raya studies me from across the table. “Promise me you’re okay? Like, truly?”

I paste on my best fake smile. “I’m totally fine.”

Raya frowns. “Are you sure?”

“Of course,” I say. “I’m just glad to hear that Amber is seeing Jay for who he really is.”

“And you?”

“I bounced back.” But when my gaze meets hers, I see her chewing on something she maybe doesn’t want to say. “What?”

“Did you bounce back or did you bounce right into another doomed relationship?”

I turn my cup around in my hand wishing it was a Dr Pepper. “What do you mean? I’ve been single since we broke up.”

“Grayson. Hawke.” She says this as if his name is enough to make her point.

“I don’t follow,” I say. “Gray is nothing like Jay. And we aren’t a thing.”

“Maybe not,” she says. “But one of your best and worst qualities is that you only see the good in a person. Obviously, there’s an attraction there, and even though he told me he doesn’t see you as anything but his assistant, I just want to make sure you’re being careful. He’s got that adorable daughter, and you’ve always wanted a family and—” She looks at me, and stops talking.

“You were talking to Gray about me?” I admit, my brain snagged when Raya got to the part about Gray saying he only sees me as his assistant. It’s the truth, and I know this.

So why does it feel like a kick in the teeth? Or a betrayal? Or both at the same time?

Raya goes quiet.

“What did you say about me?” The question feels vulnerable the second it’s out.

She winces. “I’m sorry, El, you know how protective I get.”

“There’s a fine line between protective and nosy,” I say. “You crossed it.” I lean in closer. “Haven’t I been humiliated enough?”

She sighs. “I’m sorry, Eloise. You’re right. It’s none of my business. *Was* none of my business. At the very least, I suppose this whole Amber and Jay fiasco is a good reminder of why you should never date your boss.” Raya says this sort of off-the-cuff, like I’d already been thinking about it, which I totally hadn’t.

She’s obviously given this a lot of thought.

Her eyes jump to mine. “Gray could get in trouble, and you could lose your job.”

I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants. “I know.”

“Eloise.” She’s using the maternal big sister tone that lets me know she means business. She was being so kind, so understanding, but in typical Raya fashion, she just can’t leave things be.

“Stop it. I already told you, there’s nothing going on with Gray and me,” I say. “Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I’m sorry, Eloise, I just—”

“You just don’t trust me to make good decisions,” I say. “And why would

you? My track record is littered with mistakes.”

She doesn't argue that point. “I really am sorry for butting in, El.” She looks away, and I can see she's being honest.

“I know you think you're looking out for me, but at some point, I have to start looking out for myself. I'm going to make mistakes. But you have to let me. Because honestly, tiptoeing through life is never going to work for me.”

Her forehead pulls, and she straightens. “You're implying that's what I do.”

I scoff. “I'm not implying it. I'm saying it out loud. You're so afraid of a wrong move, you're frozen. In a holding pattern. Completely immobile.”

She holds up a hand, as if to silence me.

“Maybe I put myself out there too much,” I say. “But you don't put yourself out there at all.” I reach across the table and cover her hand with mine. “You and Gray have that in common.”

She frowns. “I doubt I have anything in common with Grayson Hawke.”

“No, you actually do,” I tell her. “He keeps everyone on the outside too, only in his case, I think he's worried about losing his focus or not being the best. And in your case, you just don't want to get your heart broken again.”

“That's not true,” Raya says. “I also don't want to lose my focus. Work is important to me.”

“Well, there you go,” I say. “That's such a lonely way to live.”

She seems unaffected by this, like any concern for her well-being fails to penetrate her outer layer. “Promise me you won't let history repeat itself.” Her raised eyebrows punctuate her sentence in a predictable, maternal way.

I respond with an annoyed look. Did she hear a word I just said? “I need to get going.”

How well has caring about people worked out for you?

After this whole conversation, this warning about falling for bosses and losing jobs and litigation, the last words Gray said to me still ring through my mind.

I'm such a fool for thinking it could work.

Chapter Thirty-One

Eloise

I rush back to Gray's building and take the elevator up to his apartment, trying to figure out how I'm supposed to feel about—and what I'm supposed to take away from—my conversation with Raya.

I nervously bounce as the numbers light up above the door in the elevator.

Raya's warning reminded me that a relationship with Gray could cost me my job, but it could potentially cost him so much more. I would never, ever want to cause trouble for him, and even if I *technically* report to Coach Turnrose, I work for Gray.

But that's not even half of what has me on edge.

The memory of the way I left here last night is too fresh to ignore.

I thought, for a fraction of a second, that he might actually open up to me. Or maybe that *was* his version of opening up. Maybe he's never going to share *feelings* about his father. Speaking only in matter-of-facts, resolved to move on.

Never mind that those feelings obviously still affect him. Or that sharing them with someone might be good for him.

The whole conversation and the way he ended it proved that I need to stop prodding. Stop digging. Stop trying to save him.

That's not my job.

These feelings are misplaced. Misguided. And potentially damaging, so I need to do what I said I would do and be professional.

I can continue to stock his fridge, respond to his emails, send out signed

photos in response to his fan mail, set up the occasional interview, and even accidentally snag him endorsement deals.

Look what happened with Jay. I lost my job over a stupid relationship.

And I may not have big career goals like Raya or my own restaurant like Poppy, but I *do* need this job.

I like this job.

I can do this. I can *so* do this.

But as the elevator bounces to a stop, my confidence wobbles.

Can I do this?

The elevator opens, and I walk into Gray's apartment where I find Scarlett sitting at the counter, eating Lucky Charms.

At the sight of me, she races over, throws her arms around me and grins. "You're back!"

"Course I am," I say, hugging her back. "We're hanging out tonight."

"Can we eat ice cream for dinner?" she asks.

"No," Gray bellows from somewhere in the apartment.

"Maybe *after* dinner," I whisper.

"Lame," she shouts down the hall. She runs back over to the counter where her iPad is propped up next to the cereal bowl.

Gray walks in wearing the suit I picked up from the dry cleaners, looking like he just stepped off the pages of GQ, and that little pep talk I gave myself in the elevator goes right out the window.

Keep it professional.

"Hey," he says.

"Hi," I say.

I won't read into his expression, but it looks like he wants to say something else. He doesn't, of course, because he's Gray, and then it's as if he suddenly remembers he's holding two ties.

He holds them up. A red one and a blue one. "I don't . . . I'm not . . . Which one?" He looks pained.

I feel a smile creep across my face, completely forgetting my elevator promise. In this moment of utter helplessness, he's adorable.

He gives the ties an impatient shake, as if to prompt me to choose.

"Uh, right," I stammer. "You can wear the red one, but the blue one brings out your eyes."

He stares.

"Don't wear the red one." I keep my face neutral to make sure I'm not

flirting.

He gives me a firm nod and walks away. I will my pulse to stop racing.

“Eloise?” Gray calls from the other room.

I glance at Scarlett, whose brows are raised, so I know I’m not delusional in thinking it’s strange for him to call for me.

“I hope you’re not in trouble,” she whispers.

I wave her off, but as I start down the hall, I find myself hoping for the same thing. What if I crossed a line last night? What if sharing even a hint of his feelings made him too uncomfortable, and he doesn’t want me working for him anymore? Or he finally realized that all my mistakes warrant letting me go?

I stop at the door of Gray’s bedroom, where a small rolling suitcase and another bag are parked. The smell of his aftershave lingers in the air, and I draw in a slow, inconspicuous breath, hoping he can’t tell I’m inhaling his scent.

“Yes?”

He’s standing in front of a full length mirror, fixing his tie, and I pray he’s not going to ask me to perfect the knot. Not only because I don’t know how to tie a tie but also because I don’t think I can be that close to him right now.

He catches my eyes in the reflection. “I just wanted to make sure you knew that you can sleep in here tonight.”

“Oh, the couch is fine,” I say.

“The bedding is clean,” he says, ignoring me. “And the TV’s in here.” He glances at me over his shoulder. “Sleep in here.”

I mock salute, and when he raises a brow, I realize that was a misguided response.

“I’m not . . .” he stops. He shakes his head once, looking frustrated with himself. He takes a breath and says, softer, “I’m not trying to tell you what to do,” he says.

I crack a smile. “You actually *are*.”

He draws in a breath. “You’re doing me a huge favor. This is really important to me. I don’t want you sleeping on the couch.”

“Okay,” I say, even though I have no intention of falling asleep in his bed again. There’s no way I’d get any sleep knowing he sleeps in here, in the same sheets, bare-chested, bare-everyth—

“And . . . hey.”

I look at him.

“I’m sorry.”

Now it’s my eyebrows that are raised.

He moves toward the dresser. “There were a couple of times yesterday when I was . . .” He seems to be searching for the right word.

“Rude?”

He takes a breath and holds it. Then, after letting it out, he starts, “I didn’t mean to be—”

“Cranky?”

He shoots me a look, and I snap my mouth shut.

“Look, I don’t like talking about—”

“Your feelings?”

“*Eloise*,” he says, and I can hear exasperation in his voice. “Let me say this.”

“Sorry.” What am I doing? He’s actually trying to talk to me, and I’m filling in the blanks like this is a Mad Lib.

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “I don’t like to talk about my feelings. Or my dad.” He looks at me. “And the things you said about me being more than a hockey player—”

“Was it out of line?” I ask. “Because I have a bad habit of sticking my nose in other people’s business.”

“That’s true. You do.” He shakes his head. “But no, it wasn’t. It was nice of you to say it, even if I’m not sure it’s true.”

“It is true,” I say quietly, kind of to myself.

“I snapped at you,” he says. “I snapped at you in the restaurant before I knew you had a mean right hook, and I snapped at you last night because—”

I force myself not to fill in the blanks, but inside, I’m practically begging him to go on.

“I just did.” He walks over to his suitcase.

I turn my body toward him as he passes. “Why?”

He sighs. “I’m trying really hard to keep you from being . . . a distraction. And the more you prod me about my *feelings*, the harder that is.”

I nod, and also my stomach is doing somersaults because he said I’m a distraction.

“I don’t mean to be a distraction,” I say.

“I know.”

“Assistants shouldn’t distract.” I mirror his stance, stuffing my hands in

my pockets because I'm not sure where else to put them. "Though I really do think that sometimes distractions can be good."

He looks at me, eyebrows raised.

"I don't mean me, I just—" I'm fumbling here. "I just mean, you deserve a break every once in a while. From work. From training. From the pressure."

"I don't take breaks."

I narrow my gaze. "I'm aware."

He quirks a brow.

It's a face off.

"I'm just saying if you did, it wouldn't necessarily be a bad thing."

"It would," he says.

I frown. "Why?"

"There are standards I need to live up to." He says this robotically, like he learned this particular mantra through rote repetition.

I nod, even though this all sounds ridiculous to me. "But you're not a machine. I mean, you need down time."

"I don't."

"Everyone does." Then, after a slight pause and a revelation, I blurt out, "This is not part of my job. Why am I arguing this?" I don't need to get involved here.

"I'm not sure." He looks confused.

"Neither am I!" I say, exasperated.

"Look, this is just how it is for me," he says, signaling the end of the conversation. "And all I wanted to say is that I'm sorry for the, you know—"

"For the general rudeness."

His jaw twitches. "Yeah."

"And I'm sorry for being nosy," I say. "And pushing you to talk about stuff. I should make your life easier, not more difficult."

"You do," he says.

"Do what? Make it more difficult?"

"This conversation? Yes. Way more difficult. In general?" he pauses, and softly says, "You make things way easier."

Okay. I like that. He can say more things like that.

I don't feel like I can walk away, so I just stand there, avoiding his eyes for as long as I can until finally, I glance up at him. He's watching me, and my heart starts racing.

He draws in a breath, like he's reeling everything back in. "All I wanted

to say is that I don't mean to be a jerk."

I nod, but in a rare turn of events, I can't seem to speak.

"And I apologize." He takes a step toward me.

"For being a jerk," I say, repeating.

"Yes."

"Okay."

"We're good?"

"Of course," I say.

I listen for warning bells, but I hear only silence.

Silence except for the blaring reminder that Gray is my boss. Still, I can't help but think he is nothing like Jay. Jay would've never apologized to me or anyone else.

He grabs the suitcase and starts out of the room.

"Oh," I say, stopping him. "Are you okay with me taking Scarlett back to Loveland? If she wants to go, I mean."

"Not sure," he says. "Are you going to crash my car again?"

What?!

"No! I'll make sure that everything is totally safe! Maybe we can take an Uber. Or I can see if Gerard is free. I'll watch her every second and I'll . . ." I look at him and see a twinge of a smile.

He's messing with me.

I narrow my eyes. "Shut. Up."

Totally deadpan, he points both pointer fingers at me and says, "Gotcha."

Yes, yes he does.

"I was thinking I'd show her where I grew up. Maybe take her back to the rink. Watch the game with my dad."

"Sounds fun," he says. "I trust you with her, so whatever you think."

The words hang there long after he walks away. I try not to assign more weight to them than they deserve, but it's hard. Because he trusts me with his most prized possession.

I suppose that's how this relationship is supposed to be.

A professional athlete needs someone he can trust, after all.

Someone like an assistant.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Gray

Distance is my friend. We're driving to St. Louis for tonight's game, and I'm glad it's only one night in a hotel away from Scarlett, but I could stand to take a few more away from Eloise.

She packed a bag for me the night before, and by the time I walk out of my apartment, I'm up to my neck in visual reminders of her.

The way she folded my socks. The way she bought reusable travel bottles and filled them with my shampoo and body wash. The way she stuck a sticky note inside my wallet that said: *You've got nothing to prove.*

What made her choose those particular words? And why am I having a hard time ignoring them?

Eloise challenges everything I think. About the game, about my perspective of it, about my life . . . and the holes in it.

I can't bring myself to believe that the thing that's really been missing in my game—in my life—is rest. And relationships. Friendships. Love.

I scoff at the thought of it. Nobody is talking about love here.

I get through the warm-ups, and Burke must sense that something is off, because as we head back to the locker room, he falls into step beside me.

"You good?"

"I'm good." Or I will be as soon as I get my head screwed back on. See? This is all a big, fat distraction.

We walk into the locker room, and as the guys start their pre-game rituals,

I go straight for my phone. I pull it out and find a photo from Eloise. It's a selfie of her and Scarlett, who is holding a giant bowl of ice cream and grinning.

Eloise looks like a beautiful psychopath.

I love it.

They're both wearing Comets' jerseys, and underneath the photo are the words:

ELOISE

Good luck! We're cheering for you!

I think back to the little nuggets of wisdom Eloise has been dropping. She said that hockey isn't who I am, it's just what I do. She said that distractions might actually *help* me. She said maybe I need (deserve?) to rest.

It's all in direct opposition to the way I've lived my entire life.

How do I reconcile that?

GRAY

Are you eating ice cream for dinner?

ELOISE

I promise, I made her eat real food first.

We had burgers on the grill.

And what the heck are you doing texting me?! You have a game!

GRAY

Burgers in February?

And I'll be OK, we're getting ready to start

ELOISE

We like to live dangerously.

Also, my dad made them. He's cheering for you too!

A photo comes in of her dad, wearing a Comets jersey (Burke's number —33, I'll forgive him for that later) and he's holding up a 'Number One' finger. I'm ashamed to think of the way I acted the first time I met Mick Hart. He's posing for a photo to cheer me on, and for the first time I wonder if Eloise was onto something when she said letting people in is the only way to make this feel like home.

I stare at the picture . . . and my mood shifts.

I can feel my attitude change.

I can visualize what's about to happen.

I'm ready for the game.

GRAY

I'll call when the game is over.

ELOISE

Good luck with the hockey!

crazy face emoji

hockey stick emoji

I click my phone off when Burke glances over at me. "What is that expression on your face? Are you . . . smiling?"

"No." I stuff the phone in my duffel and turn away from him.

"I thought you'd be a better liar." Burke walks away, chuckling to himself, and I know I'm not fooling him.

I sit down on the bench and turn my attention to Coach Turnrose, who starts in on the game plan we've been practicing for the past couple days.

I feel loose. Relaxed. Excited to get out there.

Knowing Eloise and Scarlett are watching is the exact thing I need.

And we absolutely destroy the other team.

It's like I can see where other players are going to be before they get there. Four steals, three assists, three goals.

We win 6-5.

When it's all over, and I'm sitting at the table in front of the reporters, they point out this change. One even says, "It almost seemed like you were having fun out there."

And while I know the answer, there's no way I'm saying it. Instead, I say, "Guess I just needed some time to adjust to a new team."

"You're usually pretty intent on scoring, but tonight, you passed up a shot to send it to Burke for the game-winning goal," one of the reporters says. "It was unexpected. Have the Comets turned you into a different kind of player?"

"Burke was open," I say. "He had a better shot."

I get up from the table, as if to signal that I'm done because I am. I'm riding the high from the game, but these questions still feel stupid, and I don't feel like answering any more. I hear Coach start talking as I push the door open and head out into the hallway. I pull my phone out, and I'm about to call Eloise when I hear someone behind me say my name.

I freeze.

I recognize the voice.

At the sound of it, I'm a kid, skating until my ankles swell and shooting until my hands bleed.

I turn around, and there, at the end of the hallway, is my father.

He's dressed in jeans and a Comets hoodie, and while he's aged in the few years since I've seen or spoken to him, he's still got the same grizzled look he always had.

The one I always interpreted as "mean."

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"You kiddin'? Came to watch the game." He starts walking toward me. "Wasn't your best."

It's all too familiar.

"We won."

"You could've had that goal at the end, and instead you passed it off like you were a toddler in a game of hot potato. How is that going to help your stats? Assists don't count."

Stay calm. Just breathe. You've heard all of this before.

"Burke was open."

"Did you forget how to score?" He's keeping his tone light, but the words still bite.

"I'm not the only guy out there," I say.

He stops in front of me and gives me a once-over. "Ah, geez, you've gone soft again. What's her name?"

I clench my hands at my sides. I'm not a scrawny kid anymore. I don't have to listen to this. So why am I not walking away?

"Your fire is gone," he says, and I know that by "fire" he means "anger." I didn't play angry tonight. I had a calm head, and he doesn't understand it.

"I have to go." I turn to leave, but he grabs my arm.

"Hey, hey, don't be like that." His tone shifts. "Let's go get a beer and catch up."

Catch up? I think. Like what, we're old friends? We're just shooting the breeze, we're swapping family stories?

"I have an early bus."

My phone buzzes in my hand, and the screen lights up with a photo of Eloise, a selfie she took when she entered her contact info into my phone. I flip it over to keep him from seeing it, but not in time.

He doesn't comment on it, but I see the disappointment on his face.

Instead, he says, “Let’s go get a drink. Come on. No hockey talk.”

I’m about to tell him we have nothing to talk about, but before I can, the door to the press room opens, and Burke walks out. At the sight of him, my dad puffs himself up.

“Mr. Dallas Burke,” he says, extending a hand.

I glower. I need to get out of here and call Eloise to check on Scarlett.

I need to get away from him.

Dallas glances at me, but when I don’t introduce him, my dad, with his hand still out, says, “Buddy Hawke. Gray’s dad.”

Burke’s eyes light up the way a person does when they’re excited to meet someone new. I want to explain that there is no reason to waste his good manners on my dad, but before I can, good ol’ Buddy is showering Dallas with all kinds of praise about his game. His speed and agility. His impressive puck handling. He even compliments Dallas on the game-winning goal.

His compliments aren’t meant for building Dallas up—they’re meant for tearing me down.

Everything is a competition. Everything is a measuring stick.

“Well, it’s a team effort,” Dallas says. “Gray’s pass was a dime. Your son was the missing piece.”

“Eh, yeah, not bad, but he was a little soft out there tonight,” my dad says, smiling. “It was a great win, but he could’ve been tougher, right, Gray?”

He slaps a hand on my arm and squeezes.

“Hey, some of the guys are going out for a quick bite,” Dallas says. “You should come.”

My father’s face brightens. “Yeah? I’d love to.”

“I’m not going,” I say.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Dallas says. “You served up the puck the entire game, have someone else serve you for the rest of the night.”

“I’m going to get some sleep,” I say. “Gotta stay focused.”

“Focus makes champions,” my dad says with a nod.

At that, something inside me snaps. I look at Dallas. “On second thought, Burke, I’ll go.”

Dallas nods, then looks at my dad. “Great, so we’ll see you both—”

“No,” I cut in. “It’ll just be me.”

Dallas’s smile fades, his eyes darting to my dad and back to me. “Great. We’ll wait for you outside.”

I nod, and Burke walks away, leaving me standing there with my dad. I lean in and forcefully say, “What the heck do you want?”

“Can’t a guy check in on his son?” he chuckles.

“We both know you never come around without a reason.”

“Noticed your game’s been off,” he says. “That’s all. Thought you might need a reset. Or a reminder.”

“A reset? A reminder?” I bristle. “I’m fine.”

“You’re distracted.” He sticks his hands on his hips and studies me. “You’ve forgotten what makes you great.”

“No, actually, I think I’m just figuring that out.” I shake my head. “What makes me great is completely different than what you told me it is.” Only as the words leave my mouth do I realize this could be true.

“Your little girlfriend tell you that?” He says it like the words have a sour taste.

“Yeah, maybe in a way, she did,” I say.

“We’ve been down this road before,” he says, referring to Celeste.

“I’m not talking to you anymore,” I say. “Your whole philosophy—it’s all wrong.”

“Got you here, didn’t it?” He straightens.

“Maybe,” I say. “But I’m not living this way anymore. And I’m not playing your way anymore.”

He smirks. “Yeah. We’ll see how far *that* goes.”

“You’ll see from a distance. Because this—” I motion to the back hallway of the arena— “is off limits to you. No more family access or VIP passes.”

“This is how you thank me,” he says through clenched teeth.

“No, Dad, this is how I thank you.” I push past him, walking down the hallway and back to the locker room.

He calls my name, but I don’t turn around.

It’s time to unlearn a few things.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Eloise

I love bacon.

Friday morning, after the game, I wake up to the sizzling, greasy, delicious smell.

I open my eyes, and it takes me a minute to remember where I am. Not in my apartment. Not in Gray's apartment. I'm in my childhood bedroom.

After the game, Scarlett and I were both tired, and frankly, I didn't think sleeping in Gray's room was a smart idea, so we stayed the night here. And now, I can hear my dad banging around in the kitchen, probably intent on impressing Scarlett with his signature breakfast. Pancakes, eggs, and bacon.

I pick up my phone and check for messages, but there are none. Gray didn't call last night after the game. He said he'd call, but he probably got busy.

Maybe he went out celebrating.

Maybe he took to heart what I said about distractions being good and he engaged in a few "extracurricular activities."

I groan at the thought.

Not my problem. Assistant—not girlfriend.

I drag myself out of bed, brush my teeth, and head downstairs to find my parents in the kitchen with Scarlett, who is kneeling on a stool cracking eggs into a bowl.

"Eloise!" Scarlett grins. "Good morning, sleepyhead."

I laugh at the reminder that she is unlike any other almost eleven-year-old

I've ever met. "Good morning, Chef."

"Your dad taught me to sign my name!" Scarlett drops an entire egg into the bowl as she says this, and my mom fishes it out without missing a beat.

Scarlett lifts her hand and begins to sign. She gets tripped up on the "E" and my dad jumps in to help her, and by the time she finishes, she's got both of my parents holding up their hands and shaking to sign applause.

"She's a natural," I say as my dad signs.

"How do you spell your name?" Scarlett asks.

I round the corner and step into the kitchen, and that's when I discover Gray and Dallas are sitting at the table, cups of coffee in front of them.

And I'm not wearing a bra.

I round my spine and cross my arms over my chest. "Oh!" I gasp the word, like I've just seen a bear in the bathroom. "I didn't know you guys were here." I spot a zip up hoodie of my father's hanging on the hooks by the back door, and I shrug it on, zipping it all the way up to my neck.

Poppy emerges from the living room. "Smooth." She's trying not to laugh at me, but she's failing. "They got in early, and Dallas couldn't wait another second to see me." She gives me a once over. "You look terrible."

I shoot her a look. I know I look terrible. That's what happens when you don't sleep because you're trying to figure out how to stop having a crush on your hot boss because a relationship with him could cost you your job and get him in legal trouble. Possibly. I'm not sure about that last one, but the whole conversation with Raya has me a little freaked out.

Because—and this is what actually kept me up—I *really* like Gray. I know. I tried not to, but I do. His apology did me in.

"Eloise?" Scarlett says as my mom signs. "Your name."

My dad taps her on the arm and shows her my name sign. The sign for "sunshine" incorporating the first letter of my name. When Scarlett sees he isn't fingerspelling it, she frowns.

"Why does it look different than mine?" she asks, Mom signing.

"Because when I was very young, my dad gave me my name sign," I tell her, signing with a smile at my dad. "So, my name is spelled E-L-O-I-S-E—" I fingerspell this for her— "but around here, I'm just—" I show her my name sign again.

"What's it mean?"

I smile, but my dad taps her again, signing while I say, "It's the sign for 'sunshine.'" I feel my cheeks flush as he continues. "Because Eloise always

has a way of making the world a little bit brighter.”

Apparently, I have no self-control because the second he says it, my eyes dart to Gray’s, and when I find him watching me, I have to look away.

“Can I have a name sign?” Scarlett asks while I interpret for my dad.

“Yes, after my dad gets to know you better,” I say.

“Can’t I pick it?” she asks. “Like what’s the sign for supreme queen?”

Everyone laughs, and I shake my head. “No, a name sign has to be given by someone in the deaf community. So, stick around, and I’m sure this guy will come up with something.” I give my dad a quick side hug.

Scarlett looks over at the table, where, yep, Gray is still watching us intently. Why is he doing that? It’s unnerving. And far from professional.

I might be projecting. Or hoping. Or fantasizing.

“What about my dad?” she asks. “Does he have a name sign?”

I sign this, and my father puts his hand in front of his face and moves his fingers, eyebrows pulled downward in a scowl. I laugh and smack my dad across the arm, which feels rude because not everyone in the room understands.

“Sorry,” I say.

“What’s that mean?” Scarlett asks brightly.

“It means grumpy or cranky,” I say, signing. And then, to Gray, “Sorry about that.”

He shrugs it off. “I earned it.” He picks up his mug and takes a drink, and I notice a tight line of worry across his forehead.

And I linger there for a beat because now I’m worried something is wrong.

My parents and Scarlett serve up a big breakfast, and we all sit around the table. It feels normal, having Gray and his daughter here with us. There’s quiet banter and catching up. My dad wants a full recap of last night’s game, and Dallas is happy to oblige with Poppy interpreting.

Halfway through the meal, there’s a lull, and Gray lifts a hand, as if he has something to say.

“Could I say something quick?” he asks, nodding at me, as if to silently ask me to interpret for him.

I sign the question to my dad, and when he sets his silverware down, we all follow suit, except for Scarlett, who shovels a big bite of pancake into her mouth.

“The last time I was here for a meal, I was—” His eyes flick over to mine,

but I learned my lesson about filling in the blanks for him, so I stay quiet, responding only by lifting my eyebrows to encourage him to continue.

“I was going through a hard time, adjusting to a new team and a new city —” he looks at Scarlett— “trying to figure out how to be a long distance dad.”

At that, Scarlett stops chewing and looks up.

I’m signing these words and trying not to have an emotional reaction to them, but it’s not working. There’s so much I still don’t know about Gray, but I know him well enough to understand how hard this is for him. Not just apologizing, which is what I assume he’s doing, but sharing anything about himself.

“I didn’t make a great first impression,” he says. “I was . . .” and then, he signs the word for “cranky,” as demonstrated by my dad. A soft laugh weaves its way around the table, and Gray looks at me. “What’s the sign for ‘I’m sorry?’”

I show him, and he looks at my dad and very slowly, very humbly, winds his fist palm in a circle over his heart.

I go still, thankful Raya isn’t here to analyze my expression because I am sure it’s the exact opposite of professional.

Water under the bridge, Dad signs, and when I don’t say it out loud, my mom does, giving me a quiet nod.

Gray picks up his fork, gaze falling to his plate. “Thank you.”

After breakfast, Dallas and Gray head back into the city for practice, and Scarlett and I spend the day baking cookies with my mom. Scarlett’s leaving tomorrow, and while Gray hasn’t said anything, I have a feeling it’s going to be hard not to have her around anymore. Halfway through our third batch of oatmeal cookies, I get a text from him.

GRAY

Do you have time to help me with some reservations?

I wanted to do something to celebrate Scarlett’s last night here.
Maybe dinner or something?

ELOISE

Like a Daddy/Daughter date?

GRAY

Or just dinner.

ELOISE

If you take her on a date, it'll help teach her how she deserves to be treated.

GRAY

Is this a thing people do?

ELOISE

My dad did.

GRAY

She's not even eleven.

I don't want her dating until she's 30.

ELOISE

Ha

It's never too early.

It'll be good for her self-esteem.

I think back on the times I got a turn "going out" with my dad. He was always clear that his girls deserved to be treated with respect and kindness, no matter what. Maybe it was a little old fashioned, and I'm all for equality, but it made me feel special to be doted on. To be taken care of. To have the door opened for me and my opinions heard.

I glance back at the screen and see Gray hasn't replied. The whole idea is probably freaking him out.

ELOISE

Wear something nice. Open doors for her. Listen when she talks. You know, be a gentleman.

GRAY

That's it?

ELOISE

And tell her all the things you love about her.

And that she looks pretty.

And ask her questions.

GRAY

You're overcomplicating this.

ELOISE

Probably. But I'll handle the details.

Do you care what kind of food?

GRAY

No.

ELOISE

And you don't mind driving back here?

GRAY

No.

ELOISE

Great. Pick her up at my parents' house at 7.

GRAY

I guess it's a date.

I stare at the words. They're not meant for me, but they still make my stomach somersault.

I click over to my Favorites list and press Poppy's name. After two rings, my sister picks up. "You're calling me? Is everything okay?"

"I've got a big favor to ask."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Gray

After practice, I follow Eloise's instructions and drive back to her parents' house in Loveland.

When I came out of the practice facility, my SUV, newly fixed, was in my spot. She never said anything about it, but she obviously took care of it, which is, I've learned, how she does things.

Quietly and without any interest in recognition.

Going to their house this morning was Dallas's idea, but I was glad I got the chance to apologize for my bad behavior. The events of the last few days definitely have me rethinking things that I was so certain of before.

Seeing Scarlett with Eloise and her parents. Running into my dad. Replaying Eloise's comments about my entire, solitary approach to life over and over on repeat.

Letting people in could be better, not worse. Is it possible that I really am more than just a hockey player?

All of it is on my mind, and it's a lot.

I pull into the driveway and turn off the car. I glance over at the flowers sitting in the seat next to me. Eloise said to treat this like a date with my daughter, and girls like flowers.

At least I think they do. Scarlett might've responded better to ice cream and some hockey pads.

I pick them up, walk to the door and ring the bell. Eloise pulls it open. Will her beauty ever not take my breath away? "Hey."

She smiles. “Aw! You got her flowers.”

“You said to treat it like a date.”

“Oh?” She looks surprised. “You’re a flower guy, huh?”

“You’re not a flower girl?”

She shrugs. “I think my dream man will bring me a bouquet of Dr Pepper. Or, you know, a can of it.” She laughs and tugs me inside. “I took her shopping,” she says quietly. “So be sure to compliment her dress.”

“You still have my credit card, don’t you?”

She winces. “I mean . . . I’ll give it back. Soon. Ish.”

“Did you guys have fun?”

A grin breaks out across her face. “So much fun. You wouldn’t think there’s good shopping here because it’s a small town, but there really is. A friend of mine from high school opened a boutique, and she has kids’ sizes. The *cutest* dresses.” A pause. “The elementary school has a fancy little celebration, and we found the cutest dress that flares when she twirls and—” She stops. “Sorry. I’m rambling again.” And then, as if someone flipped her “on” switch to “off,” she goes silent.

“I don’t mind,” I say.

She holds up a hand. “Nope. Rambling is unprofessional. I’ll go get Scarlett.” She rushes up the stairs, leaving me standing in the entryway holding a bouquet of flowers and immediately missing Eloise and her unprofessional rambling.

Eloise’s parents appear in the entry, and they both smile at me.

“You’re in for a real treat,” her mom says, signing.

And then, her dad circles an open hand around his face, and her mom says, “Beautiful.”

They’re both beaming with what I can only describe as “pride.” Like grandparents would.

Before I can unpack that thought, Eloise appears a few minutes later at the top of the stairs, her face lit in that trademark smile. She clears her throat, and in a booming voice, she proclaims and signs, “Ladies and gentlemen, media and international press agents . . .”

I hear Scarlett giggle from somewhere in the hallway.

“Mr. Grayson Hawke, please allow me to introduce your date for the evening, Miss Scarlett Hawke.”

When my daughter steps around the corner and starts down the stairs, my face breaks out into a smile of its own.

She walks slowly down three stairs, hits a pose, blows a few kisses to imaginary photographers as Eloise's parents wave their hands in silent applause. Scarlett grins, then drops the pretense and runs the rest of the way, throwing her arms around me like it's been days and not hours since she's seen me.

She buries her face in my stomach, and as I pull away, I realize she's crying.

"Whoa! Hey, hey, hey . . . Scarlett, what's—"

I kneel in front of her, my eyes drifting up the stairs to a now concerned-looking Eloise. She gives me a confused shrug and starts down the stairs.

"What's wrong?" I ask, forcing Scarlett to look at me.

A big sniff. A trembling lower lip. "I don't want to leave tomorrow."

Eloise's shoulders drop, and she starts to walk past, presumably to give us privacy, but as she passes by, Scarlett grabs her hand. Eloise freezes, her eyes wide, and she looks at me. Her parents have slipped out of the entryway, and now it's just the three of us.

I try to give her a look to convey that it's fine if she stays.

"Everything's going to be different," Scarlett says. "You're all the way here, I have to move in with Mom and Ted, and when am I ever going to see you again?" She directs that last question to Eloise, who sits on the bottom step and smiles.

"Oh, Red. You are *definitely* going to see me again," she says.

Scarlett brightens a bit at her new favorite nickname, but then starts crying again, her shoulders shaking.

I'm out of my depth here. I know what I'm thinking, and I know what I *want* to say—that I hate this separation too. That I hate the thought of Ted slipping into the role of Scarlett's dad. That I won't get to come home and find her there waiting for me—but I don't know how to explain any of it.

Talking is hard.

Before I get a chance to get over myself and say something, Scarlett blurts out, "Can't I just stay with you?"

Ugh. My chest aches. I wish she could just *snap*, make the decision, and be done with it.

"Mom is going to be all gooey over Ted anyway. She doesn't need me hanging around."

"Hey, that's not true," I tell her. "You know your mom getting married changes nothing about how she feels about you."

Scarlett's face is red and wet with tears. "She wants to pretend she's young again because I ruined that for her."

"No, she doesn't, kid," I say.

Scarlett glares up at me. "I heard her, Dad. She was on the phone with her friend Tammy. She said—" She raises her voice, as if to imitate Celeste, "I know it's selfish, but I never got to do this when I was young. I had a baby to take care of."

Eloise's face falls, and I look away.

"Scarlett, she didn't mean—" but what do I say? It was almost exactly what Celeste had said to me when she dropped Scarlett off to go get married. I understood where she was coming from, but it hadn't occurred to me at the time that Scarlett might've heard this or that she'd take the entire situation differently.

I look at Eloise, who is much better with people than I am, and hope my eyes are pleading with her to intervene.

"Scarlett," she says quietly. "Do you remember what I said about accidents? That all accidents aren't mistakes?"

Scarlett nods.

"I meant that. And it's the truth. You believe me, right?"

A pause. Then another nod.

"Your mom was really young when you were born, and she didn't have a big, fancy wedding, and she didn't have everything figured out, and babies are a blessing, but they need to eat and sleep and poop—" Scarlett giggles through her tears at that "—and need lots of love and attention. Just because you showed up early doesn't mean she regrets having you."

I would not be able to handle this moment if it were not for Eloise right now.

"But what if she does?" Scarlett still looks worried.

"She doesn't," I say. "I know that for a fact."

"She told you that?" Her eyes are so wide, and it kills me to think she's been feeling all of this for so long without saying anything.

"Are you kidding? We both look at you and think, 'how did we get so lucky that *she* is our kid?'"

Scarlett sniffs, then deadpans, "You *are* pretty lucky."

Eloise and I share a glance, both enamored with this precious almost eleven-year old.

"We are," I say.

“I don’t want to be in the way,” she says.

This kid. This kid is breaking my heart.

“*You could never be in the way.*” I squeeze her hand. “For me or your mom.”

“I don’t feel in the way *here*,” she says. “Because when I’m not with you, I get to be with Eloise.”

I can see how that would make living with me a lot more appealing.

“Will you ask about me staying with you?” Scarlett asks.

“Won’t you miss your friends?” I ask, knowing there is no way Celeste is going to go for this. “Your team?”

Scarlett shrugs. “All the boys on my team are gross.”

“That doesn’t get any better. Even at my age, boys are still gross.” Eloise scrunches up her face in mock disgust.

I shoot a look. “Hey.”

Eloise playfully rolls her eyes. “Well. . . I guess not *all* boys. Some shower, like your dad.”

Scarlett giggles again, wiping her tears.

If it were up to me, I’d take Scarlett full time without any hesitation, but I don’t exactly have the most stable environment to be a single dad. What about when I’m on the road? Or at practice? Or games?

“I won’t miss them,” she says. “I miss you more.”

“I miss you too,” I tell her.

“Then let me stay,” she pleads.

“It’s not just my decision,” I tell her.

“But will you talk to Mom?”

“Sure,” I say. “I know she won’t give you up, but we will work something out.”

“And Eloise can watch me when you’re on the road or you have a game,” Scarlett says.

“That’s not really part of her job.” I stand.

“But she doesn’t mind, do you, Eloise?” Scarlett drops my hand and turns toward Eloise.

“I love hanging out with you,” Eloise tells her. “I think you’re the coolest kid I know.”

“See?” Scarlett’s wide eyes are trained on me now.

“But—” Eloise takes Scarlett’s hand and stands. “These are grown-up decisions, and I don’t really have a say. So, for tonight, why don’t you guys

head on over to Poppy's and have the best Daddy/Daughter date ever?"

Scarlett's face falls. "You're coming too, right?"

Eloise looks like she just swallowed a goose. "No, this is your night. Your *last* night, and I'm not intruding on that. You guys need some quality time."

"But I want you there," Scarlett says.

Eloise glances at me, clearly now the one at a loss.

"Go put on a nice dress." Scarlett steps away from Eloise.

"That was really bossy," Eloise says, her tone light but serious.

"You're right." Scarlett sighs, and I love the banter they've developed in just a few short days. "I'm sorry for being bossy. But you can't go in that."

Eloise gives herself a once-over. She's wearing black joggers and a cropped blue hoodie, and frankly, she looks about as beautiful as I've ever seen her look. She's not the type of person who needs a lot of help to make herself attractive.

She glances up at me, and I realize I'm staring. Normal people would smile or speak, but I just keep staring.

"What do you think?" she asks.

"About your outfit?" I shrug. "A little casual."

"Was that a joke?" Eloise cracks a smile. "Did you just make a joke?"

"It's a one-time thing," I say, and then, echoing my bossy daughter, I say, "You really can't go in that."

She rolls her eyes. "Are you okay if I crash your Daddy/Daughter date?"

"He's fine with it." Scarlett gives Eloise a little push. "But hurry up! We're going to be late."

"Fine, I'm going!" She rushes up the stairs, and once she's out of sight, Scarlett looks up at me.

"You can thank me later." She grins.

"Thank you for what?"

"For setting you and Eloise up," she says.

"Oh, Scarlett, no," I tell her. "I thought we talked about this."

"You talked," she says. "But I can tell you like her." A pause. "And I *know* she likes you."

"How do you know?" Geez, I sound like a middle school kid who just found out the girl he likes said something about him.

"I just do," she says simply. "And I don't want you to be alone, after I leave." Next, she opens her bouquet of flowers and hands half of it to me.

“What’s this?”

“Flowers for Eloise.”

I’m trying to think of a reply when Eloise appears at the top of the stairs in a black dress that hugs her body in all the right places. She pulled her hair out of the bun that was on the top of her head, and it now hangs long and loose past her shoulders.

“That was quick,” Scarlett says.

“I’m pretty low maintenance.” Eloise starts down the stairs. “Luckily, my mom hasn’t given away all the clothes I left behind when I moved out.”

“Wait!” Scarlett practically shouts this.

Eloise freezes.

“You said to walk slowly.” Scarlett holds her hands, motioning for Eloise to *slow down*. “Make an entrance.”

“Okay, fine, but just this once.”

Eloise makes a point of sighing as she trudges back up the stairs. Once she’s at the top, she turns, shoots Scarlett a look of fake annoyance and starts walking slowly toward us.

Somewhere around the fourth step from the top, Eloise meets my eyes, and I freeze. Why is my heart racing? I know I need to stay focused, but I’m starting to think *not* telling Eloise how I feel is more of a distraction than putting it all out there.

My fingers twitch, and I tighten my grip on the flowers to keep myself from pulling Eloise in my arms and making sure there’s no doubt what I’m thinking in this moment.

She reaches the bottom of the stairs, her cheeks flushed, and a trace of embarrassment on her face. Scarlett elbows me, nodding at the half bouquet. “Oh, right.” I look at Eloise. “Uh, these are for you from Scarlett.”

She takes them and smiles. “Well, thank you, Scarlett.” She makes a face at her, and Scarlett gives one right back.

“Okay, I’m starving,” Scarlett says. “Let’s go eat!”

Eloise laughs, and an adorable shyness washes over her. She follows Scarlett out the door, leaving me standing in the entryway for a beat, and it’s nowhere near enough time to calm myself down.

Tonight is going to feel like a real date, and I’m not even going to fight it.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Eloise

I'm on a date that feels like a date but isn't a date.

Just one day after the stark reminder that *Gray is my boss* and all that entails, I'm sitting at a romantic, candlelit dinner, all dressed up, and trying really hard not to think about how real this feels.

Not that we would bring Scarlett on a real date, but oddly, I don't think I would mind. She's won me over completely, although I'm pretty sure she's trying to matchmake me with her dad.

Poppy's restaurant has a much more romantic atmosphere in the evening. Her staff changes out the linens in the late afternoon. They dim the lights. She has a playlist of songs with the word "love" in the title.

And because she agreed to help me make this special for Gray and Scarlett, we're getting the VIP treatment, including a visit from the chef.

I don't miss her quizzical expression when she sees that Gray isn't alone with his daughter, but I do a quick shake of my head, as if to say "I'll tell you later," and force a smile.

"I'm going to order a pizza." Scarlett looks at my sister. "Can I help make it?"

Poppy's eyebrows shoot up. "In that dress? Are you sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure," Scarlett quips.

"Well, then come on back!" Poppy grins, ushering her off, leaving me alone at the table under Gray's watchful gaze. His presence is hard to ignore, but darn if I don't try.

I avoid looking at him. Because what if he turned into a mind reader overnight and he discovers that I *like* the idea of this being a date. There are still moments when I don't want to be professional and keep him at an arm's length.

"You're a good sport," he says. "Thanks for indulging her."

I unfold my napkin and lay it over my lap, mostly because I need something to do with my hands, and shoveling another piece of bread in my mouth feels like not the right choice at the moment. "She's the best."

"You know what she's doing though, right?"

I laugh. "Oh yeah. She's setting us up."

He widens his eyes and shakes his head, incredulous, and says, "Yeah, what's that about?"

"Right?" My laugh sounds nervous, even to me. "She's a funny little matchmaker, isn't she?"

"She told me she doesn't want me to be alone." He takes a drink of his water. "After she goes back home."

"Ouch."

"I don't know how to explain to her that right now, there's only room in my life for hockey."

I nod, wondering if Scarlett is the only one who needs to understand this.

"Even though—" He goes quiet.

"Even though?" Our eyes meet, and I force myself not to look away.

"Nothing," he says, waving a hand. "It's nothing." He glances down at the menu. "I should figure out what I'm eating."

I watch him, and as much as I want him to keep talking, I'm learning that pushing him isn't going to work.

We share a few more surface exchanges, and I force myself to focus through the rest of dinner. When it's time to leave, I tell Gray that he should get Scarlett home, and that I can just walk back to my place. I'll get my car tomorrow because frankly, the whole night has just been too much for me.

"You're sure?" he asks. "I can run you back to your parents' house."

I shake my head. "Nah, it's okay. I'm tired. Spend time with Scarlett. I'll get my car in the morning."

"Will you be at the game tomorrow night?"

I scrunch my nose. "I think I'm going to take the night off, unless you need me."

He shakes his head. "No, take the night. You deserve it."

“Okay, but I’m just a text away, so let me know if anything comes up or they play the wrong introduction song or anything.” I turn my attention to Scarlett, who is standing beside him. “You’ll be back for the photo shoot, you sassy little model.”

She smiles, but her eyes are sad.

I kneel in front of her. “I’ll see you soon, okay?”

She throws her arms around me and squeezes. “I’ll miss you.”

I hug her for a long moment, then pull back and find she’s crying again. They say insta-love isn’t a thing, but “they” have never met Scarlett.

Gray’s move and her mom’s new marriage are taking a toll on her, and she’s been holding it in this whole time. “I’m always here if you need to talk, okay?”

She sniffs, and then says loudly, “I’d text you, but I don’t have a phone.”

I press my lips together to stifle a smile as Gray makes a production of rolling his eyes.

“Well played,” I whisper so only she can hear me.

Scarlett leans closer. “Watch out for my dad, okay?”

“I promise I will.”

I stand back up, and I give her shoulders one final squeeze. They turn to go, and I note the knot lodged in the center of my throat.

I’m completely smitten. Gray really has something special in this little girl.

Before he pushes the door open, Gray glances over his shoulder, holding me hostage with a simple look. There’s so much left unsaid between us, and I get the sense I’m not the only one holding back.

Finally, he walks out, leaving me standing just inside the restaurant, an inexplicable loneliness washing over me.

“You’ve got it bad.” Poppy is standing next to me, and at the sound of her voice, I turn to her and burst into tears. It takes me off guard because these aren’t joyful or sentimental tears. They are tears of pure sadness. And for the first time, maybe ever, I’m not *fine*.

Poppy pulls me into a hug and ushers me back into the kitchen. I’m only partially aware of her motioning to her staff, and I assume she’s telling them to finish up for the evening because she has to mop her little sister up off the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I say, trying—failing—to get a hold of myself. “I just feel so sad for her. She doesn’t want to go back, he’s amazing with her, really, like a

different person, and . . . blech, I'm such a mess."

She leads me to the back of the kitchen where there's a small table with two chairs. She plops me down in one of the seats, then walks over to the refrigerator and pulls out the ice cream.

"Is it cookies and cream?" The question is shaky, and it comes out louder than I mean for it to.

"Of course," she says.

"Extra Oreos?"

She holds up a small Ziploc baggie of crushed Double Stuf Oreos, and I swipe my cheeks dry.

This is dumb. Why am I even crying? It's not like I'm never going to see Scarlett again.

But even as the thought enters my head, I know this reaction is about a whole lot more than just Scarlett. This is years of unshed tears, years of giving and helping and caring and never asking for anything back. This is the reservoir of gathered wants and desires and hurt and disappointment all crashing to the surface like a tsunami, and I have absolutely no control.

Poppy dishes up the ice cream, then sprinkles both bowls with Oreo pieces and walks back over to the table.

She sets my bowl in front of me, and even though it's so good, it only takes one bite for me to realize it's not going to make me feel better.

I drop my spoon into the bowl and the tears push back, and I don't even try to hold them in. I'm fully sobbing now, helpless to stop.

"Eloise." I hear the concern in Poppy's voice, and honestly, she's right to be worried. I'm worried. This isn't like me. I've lost the ability to locate my bootstraps, and I have no idea how to get a hold of myself. My lip is quivering, and my body is shaking under the weight of these tears.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on?" she asks.

I shake my head and shrug and sob, and when I glance over at her, I see concern on her face. She pulls out her phone. "I'm texting Raya, and we're going to have a Hart to Hart to Hart."

I nod through my tears, picking up the bowl of ice cream while Poppy tucks her phone into the pocket of her chef's coat.

"Come on. Let's go." She motions for me to stand.

I and my bowl of ice cream follow her out to the alley where her car is parked. My coat is still inside, but I don't even care. We get in and she drives us to her sweet little house, and at the sight of it, knowing that space is safe

and comforting, the sobbing intensifies.

“Whoa, what just happened?” Poppy asks.

“Your house—” I cry out. “It’s so—*Niiii—ce.*”

“Okay, let’s get inside before you wake up my neighbors. Mrs. Howell goes to bed at seven-thirty.”

As she’s unlocking the front door, I take a bite of the ice cream, but because I’m still sobbing, it doesn’t exactly go down the way it’s supposed to. I cough, sending ice cream spluttering out of my mouth and onto the porch.

Poppy frowns over at me.

“I knooooow,” I wail.

Raya pulls up as Poppy pushes the door open, takes the bowl away from me, then shoves me inside.

“You need comfy clothes,” she says, as Raya walks in.

“What is going on?” Raya asks.

“Don’t be *meee—aann* to me,” I wail, and my sisters exchange a look. Poppy is digging around in a laundry basket of folded clothes. I reach for the bowl of ice cream, but she blocks me, then proceeds to strip me down to my underwear and, with Raya’s help, dresses me in baggy sweats and a giant hoodie right there in the entryway.

“Better?” she asks.

I nod, still sniffing.

They lead me into the living room and over to the couch. Raya sits in the armchair across from me, like a schoolmarm, a tight expression on her face as she waits for me to explain whatever the heck is going on with me.

But I can’t.

Because I don’t know.

“Eloise,” Poppy says in a gentle tone once we’re all seated. “Calm down. Take a breath.”

I struggle, but manage to shakily do both.

“Did something happen?”

I shake my head.

“Did you get fired?” Raya asks.

I shoot her a *gee thanks* look, and she holds up two surrendering hands.

“Is this about Gray?” Poppy asks. “Or Scarlett? Are you upset that Scarlett is leaving?”

I close my eyes and let out another sob. I’m sure my sisters are both

staring at me, wide-eyed and confused, but I don't know how to make them understand my breakdown.

"I don't think I've ever seen you cry," Poppy says.

And at that, the sobbing becomes harder to control. "Because I hate crying," I howl.

"Okay, but you need to cry sometimes," Raya says.

"Oh, okay. You don't cry," I choke out.

"Not in front of people." Raya holds a finger up as if she's just made a point. "You don't cry at all."

This makes me cry harder. I honestly don't know how many more tears I can produce here.

"Is this what twenty-nine years of not letting yourself feel the bad things does to a person?" Poppy frowns, and I respond with a helpless shrug.

Raya pulls her legs up underneath her and studies me. "Is this about yesterday?"

"What happened yesterday?" Poppy asks.

Raya gives her the abbreviated version of her conversation with Amber, and her conversation with me, and hearing it again makes everything worse. I reach for the tissue box on the little table next to the couch, and when Poppy hands it over, I pull out eight tissues in a wadded clump.

It's what I need right now.

"So this is about Jay?" Poppy asks.

"No." I shake my head. "Yes." I cover my face with my hands. "*Maybe.*" I bury my face in my eight Kleenexes. "I don't knooooow!"

"Okay," Raya says. "Just breathe."

I exhale a shaky breath, but it doesn't calm me down. "It's not just Jay," I say, my voice shaky. "It's everything."

"Everything?" Raya asks.

"*Everything,*" I repeat, just hoping that they'll understand it all from one word. I bury my face in Poppy's throw pillow because I don't know what else to say.

How do I explain that it's literally everything? Every broken relationship in my entire adult life. It's putting myself out there over and over and over again, only to have it not work out. It's falling for the wrong guy, letting myself get played, falling for the wrong guy again, falling in absolute love with a child who is not mine and knowing that all I really want is to be someone's person, and I've never been farther from that dream. It's the fact

that I'm twenty-nine and no closer to having the life I always thought I would have than I was when I was nineteen. It's *all of this*. And yeah, it's Gray. It's the fact that even though I really do love my job, I would absolutely give it up tomorrow if it meant I got to be with Gray, and that would only start this cycle over again.

What am I supposed to do with that? What does that say about me if I'm willing to throw away my career for a man? And can what I do even be called a career? The fact is, I really love my job, and it just absolutely sucks that it's standing in the way of something else I think I could love even more.

My sisters do their best to pull all of this out of me, and God bless them for being patient because it takes the entire night for me to explain it.

"Eloise, you've never processed any of this," Poppy says, hours later, as she brings out a batch of brownies she just whipped up like they were as easy as a frozen pizza. "You can't do that. Emotions like these don't exactly like being contained. Your body held onto them, and now it's trying to get them all out."

"I don't like these feelings," I say. "I like to be happy. I like to have fun. I don't want to be sad."

"Nobody *wants* to be sad," Raya says. "But life isn't always going to be happy and fun."

"And you have a habit of pretending that the bad things never really happened." Poppy wraps her arm around me, and I fall onto her shoulder.

"Like with Jay," Raya says.

"I feel like punching him was closure enough on that chapter."

"It was . . . something," Raya says. "But honestly, how much did you really process that relationship or any other failed relationship?"

"You let yourself feel lousy," Poppy says. "But only to a point."

"And then—" Raya motions my name sign. "The sunshine is back."

"I don't want to be a downer," I say.

Poppy reaches over and squeezes my hand. "Okay, but you don't have to pretend everything is great all the time either. Your heart is so big, Eloise. And so tender."

"And you just keep giving pieces of it away." Raya's face is earnest, not judgmental.

I feel like I'm going to start crying again. I whimper, "So, what do I do?"

"I think you have to let it all out," Poppy says.

"*All of it?*" I think all the way back to Trevor Mackey, the first guy who

broke my heart. So many failed attempts since then. Is she saying I need to have feelings about *all* of them?

“Let yourself feel sad,” Poppy says.

I shake my head. “I don’t want to do that.”

“I don’t think you have a choice.” Poppy squeezes my shoulder. “You have to feel the pain in order to heal.”

I know she’s right.

“Maybe you should talk about it?” Raya asks.

I look at her through my tear-filled eyes. “You don’t talk about your feelings.”

“I do,” she says. “To my therapist.”

I frown. “You have a therapist?”

“You have a therapist?” Poppy parrots.

“Everyone should be in therapy,” she says. “But since we don’t have a therapist on call right now, maybe talking to us tonight will help.”

So far, it has. Even though my emotions are a raw nerve, I feel somehow . . . unburdened of at least some of this weight.

So, I try to articulate, but my voice hitches. “I feel like I’ve been giving away small pieces of my heart for years, and I—” fresh tears spill— “I haven’t found a single person who’s taken care of it.”

I try to breathe through the wave of emotions. “Every time I’ve been in a relationship, I always thought there was the possibility of it lasting forever. I had hope. Every time.” I grab a new pile of Kleenex. “But that’s not how most people approach dating these days.”

“That’s true,” Raya says. “It’s awful out there.”

We both look at her because as far as we know, Raya is not dating.

She holds up both hands. “My co-workers tell me their horror stories. It’s enough to make me contemplate joining a convent.”

I sigh. “I thought my life would look so different by now, I guess.”

I try to blow my nose, but it’s completely stuffed now, another reason I hate crying. “I thought I’d find . . . I don’t know . . .” I trail off. “Someone who looks at me the way Dad looks at Mom, maybe.”

I think about the love that’s been modeled for us. Our parents are each other’s best friends. True partners in every sense of the word.

I sniff. “And I guess I thought if I kept trying, eventually I’d have to find it. I mean, the odds are better when you put yourself out there, right?”

“Unfortunately, when you put yourself out there, you open yourself up to

a *lot* more heartache.” When Raya says this, I know she’s speaking from experience. Unlike me, Raya does not wear her heart on her sleeve. She’s cautious and measured. So, heartbreak stings a little differently for her, I think. And all at once, I realize that I’ve been pressuring her to date the same way she pressures me to grow up or be professional.

I’m not going to do that anymore. Because this is hard. Feelings are hard.

“I want what Mom and Dad have.” I look at Poppy. “What you and Dallas have. I know it’s naive, but even getting knocked down all these times doesn’t make me want to give up on it.”

Poppy rubs my arm in a comforting, slow motion. “Then don’t give up on it.”

I’m taking tissues now purely to keep my hands occupied and amassing quite the damp pile. “But what if it never happens?”

Raya shifts, turning herself toward Poppy and me. “What if you don’t give up on it, but put it on pause so you can make yourself more of a priority?”

“How?”

“Find the things that make you happy, apart from what anyone else thinks, and focus on those things,” Raya says.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” I admit.

“Well, what makes you happy?” Poppy asks.

I sit with that question. What *does* make me happy?

A clear thought drops into my mind.

“I really like my job.”

My sisters exchange a look.

“And it’s not because of Gray,” I insist, cutting off their assumptions.

“Are you sure?” Raya asks.

I look at her. “Yes. I’m sure. I think I might actually be good at taking care of people. I . . . I really like it.”

“Well, of course you like it,” Poppy says. “You’re great at it.”

I sit up. “I like what I do. I like feeling like I’m helping.” I think about this for a long moment and start to settle down. “But I think maybe you’re right, Raya.”

Poppy practically spits out her drink. “Uh, mark the date. I think you just said Raya was right.”

I smile through wet eyes. “Make myself a priority. At least . . . at least for now. I should stop caring so much if everyone likes me.” I shrug. “Stop

pleasing everyone else and just find what I love.”

But what if I discover I love a guy I can't have?

“I don't mean you stop being you, El,” Raya says, frowning at Poppy. “Just maybe, when it comes to Gray, be a bit more guarded. Focus on other things.”

I sit up.

Maybe that's it.

All of these emotions, these connections, these ties—they're all connected to him.

“That makes sense. I don't have to stop being *me*, just stop being *me* around *him*.” I smirk. “I'll channel you, Raya. You're good at keeping people at an arm's length. I'll be Professional Eloise with Gray all the time.”

“I think you've been trying that with him ever since you got this job,” Poppy says. “The real Eloise always comes through.”

She has a point. How many times have I resigned myself to focusing on the work aspect of my job and not the romantic feelings that unfortunately accompany it?

But this time will be different.

It has to be.

Because I don't ever want to feel this way again.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Gray

Goodbyes suck.

Saying goodbye to Scarlett—again—is heartbreaking, but at least I have a game tonight to take my mind off of it.

Celeste and Ted are tan and glowing, and I'm honestly happy she found someone, but it's another reminder of what I'll never have if I keep living my life the way I always do.

That thought makes me think of Eloise, and while I know I shouldn't, I really want to call her. I have no idea what I'd say, and I don't have any reason to call her, but I know she'd have a way of taking the sting out of this whole situation.

I promised Scarlett I'd talk to her mother to try and arrange for more time with me, and I will, but it's going to require a lot of careful consideration. We're co-parenting, and I'm the one who moved.

Which means it's unfair of me to ask them to change everything.

A part of me doesn't care. Seeing Scarlett only a few times a year isn't going to work for either one of us.

I don't hear from Eloise at all on Saturday or on Sunday. It's weird.

It's hard to admit it, but I miss her. Of course, she deserves time off, especially after all the extra time she put in with Scarlett, but I wish she was around. I wish she was in the stands cheering with Poppy. I wish she was waiting in the hallway after the game. I wish she was pulling pranks with the DJ, who is still playing "SexyBack" every time I skate out onto the ice and

every time I score.

Which is a lot lately.

When she does return on Monday, it's like she's disappeared and been replaced. In her place is some robotic, AI version that looks like Eloise, but doesn't act like her at all.

The only time I see a trace of the woman I thought I knew is when Scarlett calls on Thursday to check in and tell me she misses us. Scarlett gets the happy version of Eloise, but that version disappears as soon as she clicks off the phone.

Eloise makes a quick exit promptly at five, and I'm left to watch basketball highlights as I fall asleep—alone.

The next couple of weeks bring more of the same.

Fun, personable, talkative Eloise has been exchanged for a nine-to-five Eloise.

She seems intent on being the best assistant anyone has ever seen, and she proves that she's good at it. She packs for my away games, responds to emails, manages fan mail, coordinates the photo shoot for the fabric softener endorsement with Celeste, which happens to coincide with the St. Patrick's Day festivities she told Scarlett about when she first arrived. Probably not a coincidence. Because while she's robotic with me, she's her old self with Scarlett.

Her real self.

What is happening?

She works on my social media accounts, cons me into recording five different podcasts, which I only agree to because she's the one who asks me to do it, and when I get a thank you card from Celeste and Ted, I realize she also sent them a wedding gift on my behalf.

Eloise anticipates everything I need, and she does it without hesitation or expectation of thanks.

And she's not just helping me. Because Eloise knows so many people, she starts making connections for some of the other guys on the team. She sweet talks the owner of Bianchi into a last minute private room for Junior to propose to Kari. She and Poppy handle all the details of Monica's baby shower like she's a seasoned event planner. The fabric softener endorsement leads to a protein bar endorsement for Burke, which is actually a pretty huge deal.

And she does it all without a trace of her old self.

There are no more rambling stories. No more teasing. No hint that she's thinking about me the same way I'm trying not to think about her. She doesn't sit in the stands at the games anymore—she stays out of sight.

And the little red heart on the end of my hockey stick has faded away.

It's been weeks of this polite, reserved, professional version, and I hate it.

We spend more time together than ever, but we couldn't be further apart.

When anything personal comes up, she shuts down. Gone are the stories of her family, gone are her thoughts on any subject, and gone are the connections I thought we'd made.

I want to ask her what changed—did I do something to upset her? Is there a reason she's so stand-offish?

But I don't.

I *should* be grateful. This is exactly what I said I wanted. No distractions. Eloise has cleared everything away to make sure I can focus solely on hockey.

And it's starting to affect my game. I'm starting to slip, and I can't even pretend I don't know why.

I stare into my locker after practice, knowing she's in this arena somewhere, probably avoiding me.

It shouldn't matter. It's what I said I wanted. It's what I need.

And it sucks.

“Know the man, know the player,” Jericho says, sitting on the opposite end of the bench.

I shake my head.

“What's going on?” he asks. “Is it your kid? You missing her?”

Yes. I'm missing her.

And my conversations with Celeste about spending more time with her haven't gone well. She's fighting me on every front. I want to talk to Eloise about it because her perspective is always better than mine.

But I'm not telling Jericho about any of that.

“I'm fine.” I chuck my jersey into the locker, and when I look up, I see that some of the other guys have stopped moving and are now actively involved in a conversation I don't want to have.

“You're obviously not fine,” Burke says. “You had an open goal at the end, and you shot it into the post.”

“Sometimes I miss,” I growl.

“You don't miss,” Burke says.

I sigh. “Will you get off my case? I’m fine. I just need to get focused.”

“It’s a woman,” Jericho says.

Krush, Junior, and Finn nod at each other, like this makes perfect sense.

“What are you even talking about?” I say, miserable that I’m the subject of their attention. “I need to shower.”

I stand, and Finn Holbrook steps forward. “You need to woo her.”

I frown. “I don’t even know what that means.”

He slowly nods. “Woo.”

“There’s no woman.”

“This—” Finn waves a hand in my general direction— “has heartache written all over it.”

I’m annoyed. “Will you get out of my face?”

“In Alberta, they call me Romeo,” Finn says, wagging his eyebrows.

“Oh, whatever,” Jericho jokes. “In the States, they just call you slow.”

A roll of *ohhh*’s from the guys. I roll my eyes, but I see there’s no getting away from them. They’re all intent on figuring out what’s wrong with me.

“So, who is she?” Finn asks.

“There is no woman,” I repeat.

“Drop the act,” Krush says. “There’s always a woman.”

“And woman trouble is the only explanation for the way you’ve been playing,” Jericho says.

“Like garbage,” Finn says.

He’s not wrong.

I sit back down on the bench, wishing I’d gotten out of here sooner.

“Hey, Gray.”

I turn and find Eddie, one of the trainers, standing in the locker room.

“Your, uh, assistant is in the hallway,” he says, jabbing a thumb at the door. “Says she has something to talk to you about?”

My pulse quickens at the mention of Eloise, and I stand.

“She can come back,” Jericho says, eyeing me.

“No,” I say. “I’ll go out there.”

“Let her back!” Finn shouts.

“Let me just go see what she wants,” I say, matching his tone.

Eddie looks like a base runner caught in a pickle between second and third.

“We’re all decent,” Jericho says. “Send her back.”

I don’t reply fast enough, and Eddie takes off. I glance over at Jericho,

whose knowing smile tells me that he's definitely figured out the source of my "trouble in paradise."

Seconds later, Eddie ushers Eloise in, and her cheeks immediately turn pink. It's either the fact that she's standing in the men's locker room or that she's now being stared at by eight professional hockey players.

I stand. "Hey."

Her eyes dart around the group, then land on me, and I really wish I still had a shirt on because I feel naked every time I'm in the same room with her. Like if she wanted to, she could see straight through me.

All the things I don't want people to see, she sees.

"Uh, I'm sorry to bother you," she says, not really looking at me.

"It's fine," I say.

"There's a reporter out here who wants to meet you." She draws in a breath. "He wants to do a profile on you for *Sports Illustrated*. It's kind of a big deal."

"How'd you score that, El?" Burke asks.

"Oh, I actually met his wife last year on a tour," she says. "They were on vacation, and she told me about her husband's job, and—never mind." She just stops talking mid-story.

This is how she acts now.

Also, this public relations stuff isn't in her job description, and I'm not sure she even realizes it. Her take on being my assistant is to do anything and everything she can for my benefit.

Nobody in my life has ever been this devoted to me.

"Okay," I say.

"You'll meet him?"

I nod.

She looks surprised. "Great."

"Great."

There's an awkward pause, and then, Eloise puts on a fake smile and walks out.

As soon as she's gone, the guys erupt into a chorus of "It's her!" and "You've got it bad!" and "Go for it, bro!"

Dallas gets my attention and says, "What the heck was that?"

"What?" I turn away.

"I've never seen Eloise so—" Burke cuts himself off, like he can't find the word.

“Silent?” I ask.

“Yeah. It’s weird. What’s going on with her?”

“I don’t know. That’s how she is now,” I say, pulling off my socks and tossing them on the ground.

“She wasn’t like this yesterday,” Burke says.

“I meant this is how she is *around me*.”

“What did you do to her?” Krush asks, frowning.

“Nothing!” I say. “It wasn’t like that.”

“But you wanted it to be,” Jericho says, like he’s solving a mystery.

“I knew you liked her,” Burke says.

I don’t say anything, and I don’t look at them.

They all crowd around me, staring.

Jericho slowly crouches down until his face is like three inches from the side of mine. He starts to say, “Bro—” and I cut him off.

I can’t stand it anymore. “Fine. Yes. I like her, okay?”

They all cheer, not because I like her, I’m sure. Just because they were right.

I groan. “This is exactly why I don’t date during the season.”

“The only reason you’re miserable right now is because you’re too chicken to tell her how you feel,” Jericho says.

“He’s right,” Burke says. “Eloise is good for you. Maybe even *too* good for you.”

I shoot him a look.

“Just kidding. But Gray, you’re better when she’s around—on and off the ice.”

“She’s your lucky charm, bro,” Jericho says.

I think about how her mid-game texts have changed the way I play. About how her simple pep talks have shifted my thinking. About all the little things and big things she does to make me better.

My lucky charm.

And now I’m thinking about the stupid cereal that’s always magically restocked in my pantry. Even that seems to be a sign.

“You gotta tell her,” Krush says.

“You owe it to yourself,” Finn adds.

I shake my head. “No way. She’s my assistant. Forget it.”

At that, they all start making chicken noises, strutting around the locker room like a bunch of hens, flapping their arms and pumping their necks.

“I know what you gotta do!” Finn jumps up on the bench.

“If you start singing, I’m throwing you on the roof,” I say.

“Something *big!*” Finn points at me enthusiastically, and I groan.

“I don’t even know what that could be.” I shake my head.

“Like that dance Burke did for Poppy.” Jericho is gyrating and grinning, and I don’t like either.

“I saw the video,” I say. “And you all looked ridiculous.”

“The things you do for love, man,” Jericho says, arms outstretched, still gyrating. Thank God he has pants on.

“Nobody is talking about love,” I say, growing more trapped by the second.

They all pause for a second, then, as if on cue, they bust out laughing.

“That’s exactly what we’re talking about,” Jericho says.

“You are in love with Eloise,” Krush adds.

I let out an audible groan. “This can’t be happening.”

“Oh, it’s happening, bro,” Krush says.

“We’re going to figure out something so good she’s not going to be able to resist.” Jericho keeps dancing around the locker room, and Krush and Finn dance in line behind him.

“Or you could just be honest and tell her how you feel,” Burke says.

“With a song?” Kemp throws a towel at him.

“Maybe grand gestures aren’t his style,” Burke throws the towel back.

“They aren’t,” I say loudly, but no one is listening.

“Then just have a conversation,” he says. “There’s no replacement for honesty.”

“Talking about feelings isn’t really my style either,” I say.

“Then just kiss her,” Krush says.

I don’t bother telling them that didn’t work either.

“Look,” I tell them, “Even if I was in love with Eloise—which I’m not—it doesn’t matter. She works for me.”

“Technically, she reports to Turnrose,” Burke says.

“She’s made it clear she won’t get involved with her boss,” I say.

Finn stops the makeshift conga line mid-step. “Wait, wait, wait!! I’ve got an idea.”

“I don’t like that look on your face,” I say.

“Simple question. Do you want her or not?” he asks.

They all look at me, wearing matching expectant expressions, waiting for

me to respond.

Do I want her or not? The question hangs there in the air, making it weighty and thick.

This is it. The moment of truth.

There's no going back if I actually admit this out loud.

"Yeah," I say finally. "I want her."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Eloise

Being professional all the time is exhausting. After my cathartic “cleansing,” (that’s what I’m calling it), I committed, really committed this time, to being super professional around Gray and focusing on myself.

This is how I learned that I hate exercise, but I love to bake.

It’s how I learned that crocheting isn’t as hard as I thought it would be, and that keeping Gray at an arm’s length is ten times harder.

I returned to work with a double dose of resolve.

Crying *suuuuucks*, and if I can avoid it, I’m going to.

The first order of business was to put my feelings for Gray in an airtight safe and bury them way, way down deep.

Because that’s worked so well for me in the past, my brain told me.

I told it to leave me alone.

“Old Eloise” would’ve jumped off a cliff if he’d asked me to, and that is not who I want to be.

“New Eloise” is laser focused on work. Work, work, work.

Which is why I tried to get out of going to the charity gala tonight. Because while it is technically “work,” getting all dressed up and spending the evening next to an all-dressed-up Gray threatens to undo all of my progress.

With the introduction of Eloise 2.0, Gray has pulled back too, and it’s nearly killed me. He probably thinks I don’t care about him as anything other

than my boss, which is, of course, what he needs to think, even if it's not even remotely true.

If anything, my new approach to our working relationship has only made my feelings *more* intense. Because now I don't know what he's thinking. About anything. I can't even guess, and it's not for lack of trying.

Honestly, I obsess over it a lot more than I want to admit.

Professionally, I'm crushing it. I've not only been taking care of Gray, but some of the other guys have started to ask me for help making connections in and around the city. It's validating, to be sought out like that, and Coach Turnrose called me in his office this past week to commend me on a job well done.

"I admit, I worried we were setting you up to fail," he says. "But you've really worked a miracle with Hawke. Because of you, we've got a real shot this year."

The praise is nice. It's legitimate and without any ulterior motives, and I accept it even though I'm sure he's giving me too much credit. Gray is the one out there playing hockey. All I'm doing is taking care of the day to day.

But if the coach thinks it helps, then I'll take the compliment.

I really *am* good at this.

The gala tonight is a huge fundraiser for the foundation the Comets created to build relationships in and around the city, support underprivileged youth, and raise money for causes that mean something to the fans. And something to Mark Rosen.

It's an amazing event with really fancy silent auction prizes and dinner right out on the ice, but as I head out to the car that Dallas sent for Poppy, I'm filled with dread.

I open the car door and slide into the back seat where I find Poppy sitting, looking gorgeous. One look at me, and she frowns.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks.

"I was thinking of faking a heart attack," I say. "Or a broken bone. Do you think I could run out into traffic and get hit by a car? Or get deported to France within the next hour? Then I wouldn't have to go to this thing."

"What is your problem? You love to dress up!" she laughs. "It's going to be fun."

I groan. "Ever since I successfully shelved my feelings for Gray, being around him is the opposite of fun."

"Oh, are you worried he's going to be too hot for you to resist tonight?"

I stare out the window in lieu of responding. Because yes. I am absolutely scared of that.

“The truth is, *you* will probably be too hot for *him* to resist.” Poppy links her arm through mine and squeezes. After a long pause, she says, “This is really hard for you, huh?”

I shrug. “I’m trying so hard to be professional, but I feel more confused than ever.” I glance at her. “I just don’t feel like myself anymore.”

“Maybe because who you are is a person who puts herself out there, who wears her heart on her sleeve, who loves people big.” She frowns. “Bigly? Is bigly a word?”

“No,” I say. “I’m pretty sure ‘bigly’ is not a word.”

She waves me off. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Maybe,” I say. “But I don’t want to keep getting hurt. I’ve been letting myself feel sadness in small increments every day to, you know, build up a tolerance. Like microdosing.”

“You’re microdosing sadness?”

“Yep.”

Poppy frowns. “How in the world are you doing that?”

Another shrug. “I watch the news.”

“Ah,” she says. “Well, that’ll do it.”

“I take in a few minutes of awfulness every day, and I let myself feel however it makes me feel. Last night, the news led with a story about a police dog named Rocko that heroically saved two police officers in a drug raid, and I bawled for two hours straight.”

Poppy frowns. “Isn’t that a happy story?”

I swallow a fresh dose of raw emotion. “Rocko didn’t make it.” The pain I feel over that discovery is still so fresh I almost start crying even now.

“Wow,” Poppy says. “That sounds horrible.”

“It is.”

“And this is working for you?”

“Nope. I hate it.”

Once the floodgates opened the day before Scarlett left, it took me a full week to function without having to rush off and cry in the bathroom. I avoided everyone the entire week, and that set me on the path for Eloise 2.0.

It’s working.

My job is everything now.

Except when I’m on the phone with Scarlett, who I can’t bring myself to

keep at an arm's length. She calls me sometimes, and we chat about her hockey games and how much she wants to move here to spend more time with Gray.

She tells me about Ted's house and how she isn't allowed to paint her bedroom because "bright walls will affect resale value." And while I know her physical needs are all being met and she is very much loved, there are things she needs that she doesn't have. A space all her own, for instance, and more time with her dad.

I groan out loud, and Poppy shoots me a look.

"Sorry," I say. "I'm just not up for this."

We arrive at the gala, and as we step out of the car and onto the red carpet leading into the arena, a handful of photographers appear. They're most likely hired by the team to capture the event, but it instantly makes me feel a little foolish. I'm a nobody. Here for work, and the only reason I'm dressed up is so I don't stand out and also because my sweatpants were dirty.

Dallas emerges from the crowd and takes Poppy's arm.

"Are you okay?" Poppy asks me before he whisks her off.

I swallow the lump at the back of my throat. "Of course. Go be beautiful." I force myself to smile, and they turn to walk down the carpet, looking like they should be standing on the top of a wedding cake. Their entrance is met by the flash of cameras lined up along the walkway.

I could jump back in the car and find a side door somewhere, but as I turn toward it, the car drives off, leaving me feeling like I'm living one of those dreams where you're starring in a musical and you never learned the choreography.

But then, as if the Red Sea has parted in front of me, Gray appears at the end of the walkway. He's wearing a charcoal suit, a white button down and a blue tie, and I guess he made himself a hair appointment, because he definitely got a trim.

And he is . . . beautiful.

The cameras are trained on him as he starts walking toward me, and I wonder if anyone told him walking *out* of the building onto the red carpet is not how you make an entrance.

When he reaches me, he doesn't smile. He simply says, "Hey."

For a flicker of a moment, I forget that I'm Eloise 2.0, and I smile. "Hey."

"You look—" He clears his throat. "Beautiful."

The word hangs there between us.

The corner of his mouth lifts in the faintest hint of a smile. “You can’t really be surprised.”

“I’m surprised you’re paying me a compliment.” I hold eye contact, but he makes no attempt to look away.

“I don’t say half the things I think when I’m around you,” he says.

There’s a low hum like an electrical current pulsing through my entire body as I try not to read too much into that. It’s probably not a good sign that I really want to ask him what kinds of things he’s been keeping to himself.

“Shall we?” He offers me his arm, and I slip mine around it and fall into step beside him.

It’s impossible not to let my imagination run wild.

It won’t hurt to take a moment to pretend. Just sixty short seconds of believing this isn’t a work event and Gray isn’t off limits.

Ninety seconds, tops.

As we reach the end of the red carpet, he pulls the door open, and I walk through. Inside, I tuck my phone into my sparkly black clutch and smile.

“I think tonight should be pretty straightforward,” I say. “I memorized the names of all the big donors, but even if you don’t know them, I don’t think anyone will mind introducing themselves. You’ll just win a few bonus points with Rosen if you look like you did your homework.”

“You don’t have to work tonight,” he says.

I frown. “That’s why I’m here.”

“Maybe it shouldn’t be,” he says.

I hold his gaze, then finally say, “I don’t follow.”

“Eloise—”

But he doesn’t get to finish because an older woman wearing a navy blue sequined gown walks right up to him and grabs his arm. “Well, sir, *you* are the best thing that happened to the Comets this year, Grayson Hawke.” She pats his arm in a forceful staccato as she says this.

Gray looks like a baby who’s just been handed to a politician for a photo op.

His eyes hang on mine, which is strange because he and I have barely been cordial to each other the past few weeks.

The older woman pulls him away, leaving me standing there, alone.

I notice Gray keeps looking in my direction, as if trying to escape. The way he looks at me ignites my imagination and has me searching for someone—anyone—to distract me. I turn and walk into the arena, where the

ice has been covered and several tables have been set up for dinner. They're beautifully decorated, with white linens and red roses, and there's a stage on one side, where I assume Mark Rosen and the foundation president and a bunch of other very important people will speak tonight.

A waiter walks by with a tray of champagne, and I take a glass just so I have something to do with my hands. I go to take a tiny sip, when another waiter swipes the glass away from me.

I'm so stunned, I can't speak, but then, in one fluid movement, he hands me a different glass. "We're told this is more to your liking."

I glance down at the champagne flute, three quarters of the way filled with a brown liquid, and the waiter rushes off like some sort of busy butler in an episode of *Downton Abbey*.

I sniff . . . and realize it's Dr Pepper. I can't help it, I smile. I glance up and find Gray watching me over the head of the older woman he still hasn't managed to escape from.

She's a chatty one.

I lift the glass as if to say "Thank you," and he nods at me, but doesn't look away.

I hold his gaze as he presses a hand on the woman's arm, says something to her, then starts walking in my direction. He hasn't broken eye contact, and I'm completely frozen.

I've seen this intense expression before.

The night he kissed me in the parking lot.

Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm, oh geez, here he comes, stay calm . . .

I draw in a breath, bracing myself for whatever is about to happen, certain that my resolve is no match for his. And then, when he's a few yards away, Mark Rosen stops him.

I feel my shoulders drop in disappointment as Gray turns his attention to the owner of the Comets.

I use the moment to gather myself and turn away, drawing in three slow, deep breaths, then take a long drink of the fancified soda.

"You okay?"

I glance up and see Raya, wearing a beautiful red dress and looking like she just stepped off a runway. My nerves settle at the sight of a friendly-ish face. "You look fantastic! What are you doing here?" I look around the room, my eyes wide. "Did you finally say yes to a date with Finn?"

She laughs. "No, I'm here because I am officially taking the job with the

Chicago Comets.”

“For real?”

She smiles. “I haven’t started yet, but yes. I’m going to be replacing Beverly.”

“Where’s Beverly going?”

“Spain, she said. And Greece and France.” Raya shrugs. “She wanted to retire.”

“Well, congratulations, Ray. I’m happy for you. The team is lucky to have someone like you to resource their humans.” I glance back and see that Gray is still talking to Rosen.

Her smile slowly fades. “Are you okay? You looked like you were going to be sick a minute ago.”

“I’m good,” I say. I don’t want to try and explain that being a robotic version of myself has taken its toll. Or that none of my ideas on how to manage my life have turned out to be the right ones. Or that I really, really want to know if Gray was coming over here for a specific reason.

She narrows her eyes but doesn’t press. “Do you know where you’re sitting yet?”

I shake my head. “But I’m not the new head of HR, so probably not anywhere near you.”

“Probably near Gray.”

“Or at the equivalent of the kiddie table,” I say. “They probably have that, right? A place for assistants? Maybe it’s outside in the lounge.”

“Eloise, assistants make up half of this room.” Raya looks at my glass. “What are you drinking?”

“Dr Pepper,” I say.

Her forehead scrunches in confusion.

“Gray had them give me this,” I say. “I don’t drink champagne.”

She squints at me, but before she can say anything else, handsome Finn Holbrook is at her side.

“I heard a rumor,” he says, that charming, flirty grin brightening his face.

Raya’s tight expression holds as she barely acknowledges him. Is she seriously not affected by this man’s attention?

“You took a job with *my* team,” he says.

She presses her lips together. “I took a job with the Chicago Comets, yes.”

“It’s because you want to be closer to me, right? I’m finally wearing you

down?” He moves closer to her, but keeps an appropriate distance. It’s like he’s mastered the fine art of flirtation, and honestly, if Raya would just give him a chance, she might see that he is exactly what she needs.

She muses. “I’m in HR.”

His face falls. “Well, shoot. That’s going to put a damper on things.”

“I’ll say.”

Yes, he’s a little younger and *much* less mature, but he knows how to have fun. He’d loosen her up, and she desperately needs that.

Plus, her cheeks are definitely reddening at his nearness, and that has to mean something, right?

With Raya occupied, I glance back at where Gray was standing and see he’s now in a circle with Rosen, Jericho, and two other stuffy-looking men. Because this is a work function and he’s working.

Which is what I need to be doing too.

I feel my phone buzz in my clutch. I pull it out and see I’ve got a new email. I really don’t need to be checking my email at this hour, but for some inexplicable reason, I open my inbox and find what looks like an automated email from the HR department of the Chicago Comets Professional Hockey Team.

I skim read it, wondering if there’s paperwork I need to sign for some reason, but my eyes snag on the word “terminated.”

My stomach drops, and I go back to the top and read more carefully.

Dear Ms. Hart,

This letter is to inform you that effective immediately, your position as assistant to Grayson Hawke will be terminated as your services in this capacity are no longer required.

“Eloise? Are you okay?”

There’s more in the email, but I can’t see it.

My eyes cloud over with fresh tears because apparently, I’m a crier now. Is this what Gray meant when he said maybe I shouldn’t be working tonight?

“What’s wrong?”

I look up at Raya. I can’t speak so I just hand her my phone.

“What’s this?” She takes my phone, her eyes scanning the screen. “This is a mistake. This isn’t how things are done. Did you have a meeting to discuss this?”

I shake my head. I want to run away.

I don’t get it. I thought I did everything right. I thought I could protect

myself from feeling like this again.

“Then this has to be a mistake. There’s no reason for this.” She searches the crowd. “Come on, let’s go ask Gray.”

“No,” I say, shaking and exhausted and clearly not able to cut it in the professional world. “No. I’m done. Just . . . done.”

“Eloise . . .” Raya starts.

I shake my head. I take my phone, and then, without looking back, I leave—my heart breaking more with every single step.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Gray

“Do you want to explain what on God’s green earth you were thinking?” I turn toward the angry voice and find Raya and Poppy glaring at me. At least they waited until Rosen was out of earshot, but I have no idea what they’re upset about.

“What I was thinking about what?” I ask, dumbly.

“Firing Eloise?” Poppy says, getting in my face. “I thought you were happy with the job she was doing. I thought you liked her? What the heck, Gray?!”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“She got a termination letter,” Raya says. “From HR.”

Oh no. That’s not how this was supposed to go.

There’s a hollow feeling in my chest as I begin to search the room. “Where is she?”

“She left,” Poppy says. “You didn’t think she’d stick around after that, did you?”

“She wasn’t supposed to get any letter,” I say. “Not yet.”

“Not yet?!” Raya’s voice is incredulous.

They both huff their disbelief, and Poppy says, “So, it’s true. You’re firing her?”

I push a hand through my hair. “This is really bad.”

“Ya think?” Raya shakes her head and folds her arms at me like a disappointed parent.

Burke walks up, and at the sight of me, he frowns. “What’s wrong? What happened?”

But I don’t get a chance to respond.

“Look, I get that things are complicated, and you’re not good with, you know, humans, but that doesn’t mean you can just fire her without so much as a conversation. Do you know how horrible that looks?” Raya glares at me.

“How horrible it *is*,” Poppy adds. “I mean, you didn’t even give her a reason. Who does that?”

“That’s not what this is,” I say, trying to figure out how she got that email. “This isn’t how this was supposed to go.”

Someone gets up on the stage and announces it’s time for everyone to find their seats, but Poppy and Raya clearly have no intention of sitting. They motion for me to walk out into the lobby, and once we’re there, they go back to glaring at me. Burke stands off to the side, a conflicted middleman.

“Explain yourself,” Raya says.

“It’s not what it looks like,” I say.

“So, you’re not firing her?” Poppy asks.

“Yes. Well, no. Well . . . kind of, but not exactly.” I groan. This is what I get for letting the guys talk me into a stupid grand gesture. I should’ve just taken Burke’s advice and told her how I feel.

“Look, Eloise has been really . . . professional the last few weeks,” I say.

They exchange a glance.

“It’s been weird,” I say. “And I hate it. And it made me realize that yeah, I’ve got feelings for her.” I sigh.

“Shocker,” Raya says dryly.

“And I let the guys talk me into—” I can’t even believe I’m about to admit this out loud.

“Into what?” Raya’s eyes go wide. “Firing her so you can date her? Shouldn’t she have been a part of that conversation?”

“No, it’s not like that,” I say. “It was supposed to be a . . . grand gesture.”

There’s a moment of silence, and the only thing I want to do is exit the building.

I draw in a breath and let out a long exhale.

“*This* was your idea of a grand gesture?” Poppy asks. “Do you *know* what a grand gesture is?”

“Finn explained it,” I say.

“Finn?” Raya huffs out a laugh. “You took romance advice from *Finn*?”

“He made some valid points,” I say. “Besides—” I turn to Poppy—
“Burke did that whole dance for you.”

“Yeah, but it didn’t cost me my job!” Poppy says. “Why didn’t you come to us if you wanted to do something for our sister?”

“Well, it wasn’t supposed to go like this. Beverly must’ve sent the termination email too early. She’s been really distracted lately.”

“She’s retiring,” Raya says.

“Explain how this was supposed to go,” Poppy says, looking visibly confused. “Because I don’t understand how any of this was supposed to win over Eloise.”

“The plan was solid,” Burke says, finally coming to my defense. “It just got messed up.”

I explain everything to them, and once I’m finished, they don’t look impressed at all. They’re right, why did I ever listen to Finn? Why didn’t I come straight to them? They know Eloise better than anyone.

I groan. “Okay, so what do I do now?”

“What you should’ve done in the first place,” Raya says. “Tell her the truth.”

“And tell her she’s pretty,” Poppy adds.

I frown.

She shrugs. “We’re strong, capable women, but we still like to be told we’re pretty.”

“What about the big, you know, dramatic moment?” I ask. “Doesn’t she deserve that?”

“Of course, she does,” Raya says. “But if that’s not your style—”

“Then it won’t feel genuine anyway.” Poppy puts a hand on my arm, finally softening.

“I don’t even know what my style is.” I say on a sigh. “I’ve never done this before.”

Both of Eloise’s sisters look surprised.

“So when you said you don’t date,” Poppy says, “You actually meant it?”

I shrug an affirmative reply.

After Celeste, I more or less stopped dating. My dad made a convincing argument that it was better this way. Proof that distractions are dangerous.

Sure, there were occasional attractions over the years, but nothing I’d ever put in the same orbit as the way I feel about Eloise.

And then, it hits me. “Wait. I have an idea. I know what to do.”

“Do you want to run it by us?” Poppy asks.

“No,” I say. “I’ve got this.”

I start for the door, and Burke calls after me— “What about the gala?”

I loosen my tie. “This is way more important.”

Eloise

I get an Uber and sob the entire way back to Loveland.

My poor driver isn’t sure what to do with me, but thankfully, he has a box of tissues, which he hands back to me without a word.

He might’ve seen this a time or two.

Once he drops me off, I stumble up the stairs to my little apartment, where I throw myself onto my bed and cry for a solid forty-five minutes.

This is especially annoying because I already watched ten minutes of the news this morning.

My phone buzzes and vibrates so much that I turn it off and chuck it across the room, which I realize could possibly backfire and lead to *visitors*, but I have to. I need some peace and quiet.

I’ve tried putting myself out there and it’s led to nothing but heartache. So, I pulled back, and that’s only led to heartache too.

I just want a guarantee that heartache doesn’t have to factor into the equation of my life, is that too much to ask?

I peel myself out of the sparkly black dress and leave it in a heap on the floor while I pull on the biggest, baggiest, most comfortable sweatshirt and sweatpants I own.

Only I realize the sweatshirt is Gray’s, so I have to toss it off and locate another one.

I take my hair down, shake it out, then put it in a loose bun on the top of my head. Next, I wash my face, then head straight to the freezer for ice cream therapy.

Once again, I’m jobless. Hopeless. And heartbroken.

I have no idea how to recover from this.

I’ve just covered my cookie dough ice cream with chocolate and caramel syrup when I hear footsteps in the stairway. I freeze. Of course, my sisters left the gala early to check on me. I would do the same for them.

Still, I'm not in the mood for company or a Hart to Hart to Hart. I can't process any of this right now, and I definitely don't want to think about all the ways I messed this up.

The knock at the door is forceful. Probably Raya. I could pretend not to be here, but that would only worry them more, so I draw in a breath, pad my way across my small apartment, and open the door.

But it's not my sisters standing there.

It's not anyone. It's a mattress.

I blink.

"Uh, hello?" I say.

At that, the mattress shifts, and Gray appears behind it.

I frown, step back and lift my chin, ready for a fight. "What are you doing here?"

"Can I come in?"

"No. You fired me."

"I can explain that," he says.

"I don't want to hear it."

He looks at me, side eyes the mattress, and then back at me.

"That's a mattress." I say.

"Yeah."

"Why are you here with a mattress?"

"You said yours has a spring that sticks out," he says simply.

That takes me off guard. "You remember that?"

He closes his eyes and takes a breath. "I remember everything you say."

At that, I soften, but only a little. Because even though this is incredibly sweet, and really, really strange, I'm mad at him.

"Did you already get a new one?" he asks.

"Uh, no. I didn't."

"Great." A pause. A shake of the mattress. "Now you don't have to."

I'm so confused by this odd turn of events, I can't think of a single thing to say.

"Should I take this thing back, or . . . ?" he asks.

I move out of the doorway. I'm still upset, but I remember that Gray is one of those people who says or does really nice things but in a rude way. A walking contradiction.

He lugs the mattress inside, and I close the door, watching as he leans it against the wall.

“I, uh, wasn’t sure what size to get,” he says. “But you said your apartment was small, so I guessed a full?”

I nod. “You guessed right.”

“Can I? Do you mind if—” He motions toward the bedroom, which is in full view of the front door.

“Uh, sure?” I’m still trying to figure out what is happening.

I pick up my ice cream and start eating it because there’s no way I’m letting it go to waste. I assume he’s going to explain why he fired me when he’s finished with this huge production of removing my old mattress and setting up the new one.

I’m mid-bite when he asks over his shoulder, “Do you have fresh sheets?”

I put my spoon down. I walk to the linen closet and pull out my only other set of sheets, then walk them back. “I can make my own bed.”

He grabs them out of my hand. “No. Go eat your ice cream.”

I frown. “Do you want to tell me what you’re doing here?”

He turns away from me and starts making the bed. I look down and see my bra in full view, still lying on the floor next to my black dress. Not so subtly, I reach my foot out while he has his back turned, snag the bra with my toes, and try to fling it under the dresser.

I miss completely, and it sails high and lands on the side table lamp.

He looks over, sees the bra, and just looks at me with a hint of a smile.

Without a word, I walk over to the lamp, grab the bra, put it in my hamper, and walk out of the room.

I go back into the kitchen and eat more ice cream. I would offer him some, but I’m mad at him.

Really mad.

More than that, I’m hurt. I don’t usually let myself feel either of those things, but I can’t pretend anymore.

Once my bed is made, he turns around and looks at me. “Do you want to try it out?”

My eyes go wide.

“I didn’t mean—” He looks away, visibly flustered. “I mean—” He pushes his hand through his hair and shakes his head. “I just meant, do you want to see if it’s okay?”

“Is there a spring sticking out of it?” I ask dryly.

“No.”

“Then I’m sure it’s great.”

He nods, sticks his hands on his hips and looks at me.

I look back.

What is he waiting for?

“What are you waiting for?”

“Nothing, just . . .”

He stands there for seconds that feel like hours, then finally says, “Okay, I’ll see you later.” He grabs the old mattress, which is now propped against the wall, opens the door and walks out.

I close the door.

What the heck?

Seconds later, there’s a light tap on the door.

I pull it open and find Gray standing there, my old mattress now at the bottom of the stairs, like he just tossed it down there.

“That’s not really why I’m here,” he says.

“You don’t say.” I lean against the door jamb and watch him.

He’s now holding a six-pack of Dr Pepper. He shoves it in my hands.

I look at it, a little confused.

“Bouquet of Dr Pepper,” he says, simply.

I go still.

“My . . . uh, grand gesture plan sort of backfired.”

I frown. If I’m honest, I’m slightly shocked Gray even knows what a “grand gesture” is, although I suppose I could argue that he doesn’t if the gesture was to fire me.

“Explain,” I say.

“Can I come in?”

I sigh, then move out of the way—again—and he walks into the apartment. Only now do I realize how small it feels with him standing in my living room. I set the Dr Pepper on the counter and face him.

“So, this is your place,” he says, as if he wasn’t just here seconds ago.

“This is it.”

“Smells like bread,” he says.

I point to the floor. “Bakery.”

He nods.

“Gray, I assume you’re here about my termination email,” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “It’s not what you think.”

“I think you fired me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

I frown. “I got a termination letter.”

“Beverly wasn’t supposed to send that,” he says.

“Well, *she did*.” I walk into the living room and sit on the couch, pulling a throw pillow into my lap and wondering how everything got so screwed up.

He turns toward me but doesn’t sit. “I want to date you.”

Wait. What?

I try to shake some sense into my brain.

“You . . . what?”

“I couldn’t do that with you working directly for me.”

The words try to seep in, but something—fear, probably—keeps them out. “So, what, you had to fire me in order to do that?”

“No.” He takes a step closer. “I mean, yes, but no.”

“I don’t understand, Gray, can you just—.”

“I didn’t *fire* you. I promoted you.”

I frown.

“I mean, *I* didn’t promote you. Coach did.” He sits. “Burke and I went into his office this past week and explained all the ways you’ve been helping not just me, but all of us, and we convinced him to make you an assistant for the whole team.”

“How will that even work?”

“Well, it’s more of a PR type job,” he says. “Fan interaction, social media, and getting the guys opportunities like you’ve been doing for the last several weeks. Not just for me . . . but for everyone. Company-wide.”

I shake my head. “There’s no position for that.”

“They created it for you.”

I stop.

They created it for me.

For *me*.

“They *created* a position?” I ask what I’m thinking out loud. “For me?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t have a PR degree,” I say.

He shrugs. “They don’t care because you’re good at this.”

A beat. And then, “So . . . I’m not fired?”

“No.” He sighs. “There must’ve been a mix up because yes, they have to technically terminate the contract you had as my assistant and officially bring you on in this new role, but we were all supposed to meet and talk about this Monday. And I was going to tell you about it tonight. At the gala.”

I hug the pillow closer and suddenly wish I wasn't wearing my ugliest clothes.

"I, uh—" he draws in a breath, like he's not sure what to say next, but I don't let him off the hook. This mistake put me through hell tonight, so if he has to squirm a little, I'm here for it. "I also let Turnrose know that I want to date you. Officially. There's paperwork we have to sign with HR, and certain rules about . . . uh . . . physicality in the workplace . . ."

My skin tingles at that.

". . . but he said there's no reason two consenting adults can't have a relationship, even if we both work for the team."

I go still. Seeing him like this—raw and vulnerable—is a rare thing, and I want to take it all in.

"What about your no dating during the season rule?"

"Yeah, I've been thinking about that, too."

He moves a little closer and takes off his suit coat. His tie is undone and hanging around his neck, and there's pain behind his eyes when he looks at me. "Ever since they hired you, I've been questioning everything I thought about who I am and how to play this game. You made me realize that I don't have to play angry. I don't have to keep everyone out of my life. That maybe having people *in* my life will make me better, not worse."

"I don't know if you should take advice from me," I tell him. "I let *everyone* in. I don't have boundaries. When I love someone, it's with my whole heart. And that hasn't exactly gone well for me."

"Because you haven't given it to someone who will treat it like it's—" He pauses, and then, he looks at me and signs the word "precious."

My heart stops, I'm sure of it. I'm going to need an ambulance. "How did you—?"

"Internet," he responds to my unasked question. "Because I knew that this was what I wanted to tell you." He shifts, and even though my apartment is tiny, he looks really, really good on my old couch.

"I know you've been burned just by being yourself, but I miss you. The real you, not this weird robotic version you've been for the last few weeks."

I wince.

"Who was that anyway?"

"Eloise 2.0," I say. "You didn't like her?"

"No," he says. "I like the version of you that always stuck her foot in her mouth and told long, rambling stories. The one who knows how to pick out

the perfect gift for everyone and has never met a stranger.” He reaches for my hand.

“You do?”

He brings my hand to his lips and presses a soft kiss to the back of my knuckles. “I don’t talk. I know. I don’t always have the right words, or even know how to put them in the right order.”

He looks down.

“But you helped me see that I’m more than just a hockey player. And that hockey can be fun. I had forgotten that. You helped me see that I need to let people in more. And man—” He shakes his head— “the way you loved Scarlett right from the start . . .” He trails off like the sentence will finish itself.

Somewhere during his speech, he took the throw pillow away from me, took my face in his hands and robbed me of every last line of defense I stupidly thought might protect me from these feelings.

“I don’t want you to be my assistant anymore,” he says quietly. “I want you to be my girlfriend. And you’ll have a new job with a new title and you’re going to be crazy good at it.”

He brings his lips to mine, but our eyes are still open. He’s got that same hungry, intense look he had at the gala, but there’s a smile playing at the corner of his mouth.

“What will my new title be?” I ask, and then softly kiss him back.

“I think ‘Princess Eloise’ was discussed,” he says, kissing me again. “And Lady Hart was another possibility.”

I smile through the kiss. “What about ‘Your Honor’?”

He shakes his head. “Too stuffy.”

“I can’t believe you remember all of this,” I say.

“When it comes to you, I don’t want to miss a thing.”

I study his face, eyes snagging on that scar, one of the first things I noticed about him. I reach up and touch it. “What happened here?”

“Stick to the face,” he says.

“I feel like there’s a story there,” I say.

His gaze dips to my lips. “Can I tell it to you later?”

I decide, at this moment, to dive in headfirst.

“Talking really is overrated.” I pull him close, and when our lips meet, all of my fears fade away, and I practically melt into a puddle right here on my couch. It’s a mix of relief and elation and a revelation that all these feelings

I've been fighting, I don't have to fight anymore. And this person I've been trying to be?

I don't have to be her anymore either.

If I get hurt, I get hurt. Because this—the fact that it feels so different and real and honest—is worth the risk.

Gray's lips are strong and full, and I have to think that I'm reaping the benefit of his no-dating rule because he's so intentional and careful. But there's a quiet desperation there too, like he's been holding back for so long and only now gets to finally—finally—give in.

There's something to be said about delaying gratification.

He pulls me closer, our bodies tangled together, and I'm hopelessly aware of all the places where we're touching. We fall back on the couch, and I laugh, looking up into his stormy eyes and thinking that whatever story they tell, I want to be the first person to hear it.

He places a trail of kisses across my neck and chin, then his lips are back on mine, the perfect balance of strong and sweet.

I wrap my arms around him and pull my head into his chest, tight. He wraps his arms around me, and then suddenly pulls away. "Oh wait. I have to tell you one more thing."

I look up at him.

He smiles—a real one—and I'm pretty sure it's the best thing I've ever seen. He tucks my hair behind my ear. "I think you're pretty."

"Oh?" I grin.

"And your sisters are terrifying."

Another kiss. Another smile. Another somersault in my stomach. And then, I pull back and ask, "Do you want to explain where you got the mattress?"

"You're not the only one with connections," he says.

"As grand gestures go—" I pull him closer, grinning— "it was kind of perfect."

His eyes dip to my lips, and then he meets my gaze. "Yeah?"

I nod. "It's the best gift anyone has ever given me."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Eloise

A week later, I'm standing in baggage claim at O'Hare, waiting for Gray and Scarlett.

Even though she insisted she could fly by herself, Gray flew to Philly to meet her, and they flew back together. He also wanted to talk to Celeste about the arrangements, which I know have been weighing on him.

The past week has been a whirlwind. I went to Beverly's office on Monday to find Raya standing there in a black power suit with an outline of my new job description and a waiver I had to sign in order to officially "enter into a relationship" with Gray.

Guess we jumped the gun there.

Whoops.

I dotted my name with a heart, which made her roll her eyes, but secretly, I think even she's happy to have the old Eloise back. And I'm happy to be back. I guess I knew myself all along, it just took a little time for me to accept that who I am is enough. That everyone won't like me. That everyone won't have good intentions.

But it turns out, loving people is one of my best traits, so I'm going to do it well.

We're heading into St. Patrick's Day weekend, and oddly, it's my favorite holiday in the city. Yes, I love Christmas in the city, and Valentine's Day in Loveland, and of course, I'm always excited to eat every bit of Thanksgiving Dinner . . . but St. Patrick's Day in Chicago tops them all.

And thanks to my genius planning, I've scheduled the fabric softener photoshoot with Scarlett to coincide with the holiday weekend, which means we have a very full docket of events.

Not only is there the river dyeing and the parade, followed by corned beef and cabbage dinner at an authentic Irish Pub, but the Comets have a big celebration of their own. Irish dancers, bagpipes, and every fan gets a green plaid Comets hat to match the special edition Comets jerseys that will be auctioned off after the game.

I won't brag, but I was the one with the connection for the bagpipes. I guess I *am* good at my job.

I'm not even Irish.

I love these traditions like I'm a leprechaun, and I can't wait to share them with Scarlett and Gray.

When they appear in the baggage claim area, I jump up and race over to Scarlett, who rewards me with a giant hug.

"I knew my dad loved you!" She squeezes me so hard, I almost snap in half, and when Gray appears by her side, he doesn't even look embarrassed by what she said.

"You told her," I say.

"That I loved you?" He smirks. He pulls me close and kisses me.

"He totally does," Scarlett says as Gray takes a step back. "I can tell."

I feel my cheeks heat when Gray doesn't deny it. Scarlett takes one of my hands and one of Gray's, and we walk over and grab her hot pink suitcase off the carousel, and once we're back in the car, she puts her headphones in, and Gray reaches across the seat and takes my hand.

We drive toward the city, but Gray drives right past the exit to his apartment. "Did you mean to miss your exit?"

"Yes," he says.

When he doesn't say anything else, I lean toward him. "Where are we going?"

His smile is so faint I almost miss it. "You'll see."

Scarlett leans forward between our seats. "Is it a surprise?"

"Yes," he says.

She looks at me, and I look at her, and we both frown. "We don't like surprises."

"I do," Scarlett says. "I hope it's a puppy."

"Oooh, me too!" I say. "Okay, I like surprises now."

“It’s not a puppy.” Gray keeps his gaze on the road ahead.

“Darn,” I say.

“A pony?” Scarlett asks.

“It’s not alive,” he says.

He takes the exit toward Loveland, and I frown. “Dinner at Poppy’s?”

“Hey, here’s a thought. Maybe you guys should just wait and see.” He pretends to be annoyed, but I’ve gotten better at reading his looks, and it’s clear to me that he’s enjoying this exchange.

“I’m not good at waiting,” I say.

He shakes his head. “I’m aware.”

Before we reach the downtown area of my hometown, Gray makes a turn on Shaw Road, a country road where the houses are separated by acres and the nights are so dark you can actually see the Milky Way.

As we drive, it starts to snow—big, heavy flakes, like snowballs falling from the sky.

“Whoa!” Scarlett says. “I’ve never seen snow this big.”

Gray makes a turn, and drives us down a long stretch of driveway, and I have to wonder who he knows all the way out here in Loveland. Through the trees, a big, beautiful farmhouse comes into view, and I frown because I happen to know this house was on the market two weeks ago.

And the for sale sign is gone.

“Gray,” I say slowly. “What are we doing here?”

He slows the SUV and parks in the driveway, and for a moment, we just sit there, watching the snow fall, covering the grass and trees in a blanket of white.

“Who lives here?” Scarlett asks.

A pause. And then he says, “We do.”

I catch my breath.

He turns to Scarlett. “Your mom and I mapped out a schedule to make sure you get to be here on school holidays and two months of the summer. And I’m going to come your way when I get breaks, too.”

“Seriously?” She reaches up and hugs his neck. “Do I get my own room?”

“Look at the size of the house, girl,” I say, “I think you get four of your own rooms.”

She giggles, and then her eyes grow wide. “Can I paint one of them?”

“This again,” Gray groans and rolls his eyes, but again, it’s obvious to me

he is loving everything about this. “Yes, if you want turquoise walls, you can have turquoise walls.” He opens the door, so Scarlett and I open our doors, and we all start toward the house.

“I don’t like turquoise anymore.” She smiles at me. “I’m thinking black.”

Gray picks her up, tosses her over his shoulder, and she lets out a loud, happy shriek. Thankfully, there’s nobody around to hear it. He hands me the house key, and when I open the door, Scarlett rushes straight up the stairs in search of her bedroom.

“Can I have the one with the bathroom in it?” she calls out.

He closes the door and flips on the light in the entryway. “What do you think?”

“I think it’s amazing,” I say. “But are you sure you want to live in Loveland?”

“I thought about it a lot,” he says. “You were right about the city. It’s pretty special.”

“Or this one with the huge closet?” Scarlett shouts from what sounds like the other end of the upstairs hallway.

I laugh. “You haven’t seen Chicago at its best yet. Just wait till tomorrow. The whole river—”

“Will be green,” he says. “I know.”

“It’s cool!”

He smiles. “It’s fitting it’s St. Patrick’s Day.”

I frown. “It is?”

“Yeah,” he says. “I feel pretty lucky to have found you.”

Lucky. Huh. Me too.

He smiles, and looks off toward the staircase. “When I saw Scarlett here, in Loveland, that’s when everything started to feel more like home,” he says. “I want her to have a big yard and easy access to the rink and—”

“A puppy?” I interrupt. “Because there is the *cutest* little beagle at the shelter right now. I’ve been calling her Miss Beagleton III, but obviously Scarlett could call her whatever she wants. Butterscotch or Maggie or—”

He interrupts this time, with a kiss, which starts out light and fun, but quickly evolves into something much more intense. I pull back when I hear Scarlett’s footsteps upstairs.

“Let’s not traumatize your daughter,” I say.

He kisses my forehead, and says, “She’d probably start cheering. I think she’s more in love with you than I am.” And then, he steps back. “If that’s

possible.”

“Wait.” My eyes widen. “What did you just say?”

“You’re it for me, Eloise.” He wraps his arms around my waist, his eyes searching mine. “I’m bad with, you know—”

“Words?” I smile.

“Yeah, those.” He levels my gaze. “But I realized a while ago that I love you. I just do.”

He shrugs, as if he’s resigned himself to it. “You’re the only person in the world I actually want to talk to.”

I laugh.

“I’m not kidding.”

“I know,” I say, still laughing. “It’s part of why—” I pause— “I love you too.”

“You do?”

“Duh,” I say, teasing. “I tried not to, but it didn’t work.”

“Good,” he says. “Stop trying not to.”

“Dad, can we have a movie room?” Scarlett calls from upstairs.

“You might want to look in the basement, Scout,” he calls back.

She lands with a thump at the bottom of the stairs, having jumped from the fifth step. “No. WAY.” She lets out a cheer, and I hear her footsteps running around as she explores her new home.

Home.

That’s what this is.

Or, more to the point, what I plan to make it.

Because really, more than anything, that’s all I ever wanted.

THE END

A Love Letter

From the Author

Dear Reader,

A few years ago, I realized that I am my own ideal reader, so I started writing the books I really wanted to read. Ones that weren't too heavy, that were playful and fun. Low angst romance where you can count on the happy ending. My goal is to put a little sunshine into the world, so maybe that's why Eloise was so fun to write.

Revisiting Loveland and my beloved Hart sisters has been PURE JOY. I knew when I wrote *My Phony Valentine* that I was going to be writing stories for Poppy's sisters, but I had no guarantee I'd enjoy it. Sometimes, when time passes, other creative projects steal my focus, but the second I started this book, I was hooked. Totally excited to discover Eloise's love story.

It's been a while since I wrote a grumpy, brooding hero, and I have to say, I'm pretty smitten with Grayson Hawke, and I really hope you enjoyed this story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

As always, I am SO grateful to you for reading my books. It's not lost on me how many choices you have when it comes to the books you choose, and to think that you picked up one of mine? The best feeling in the world.

For every single reader who reads this book, shares it with a friend, requests it at a local library, reviews it online, talks about it to anyone, anywhere. . . THANK YOU. **You** are why I get to keep doing this.

I'm so, so grateful.

Please don't hesitate to catch up with me via email: courtney@courtneywalshwrites.com I love to chat with my readers & make new friends!

Courtney

Acknowledgments

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Sophia—I’m so glad you’re my kid and my co-worker. I think you’re kind of amazing.

Ethan—You’ll never read this, but I love you anyway. I think you’re pretty inspiring.

Sam—You’ll also never read this, but I’m SO glad I get to be your mom. Thanks for making me laugh. I think you’re such a good soul.

Mom—Thanks for being excited about my books. And for still buying a paperback copy. And for listening to me vent. It’s awfully nice to still have a safe space to do that.

Becky Wade & Katie Ganshert—How’d I get so lucky to have two best friends like you? For the brainstorming, the cheerleading, the listening, the chatting...for reminding me I’m not alone, thank you.

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Sarah Smith—Your copyediting skills were invaluable. Thank you for helping me with this one!

About the Author



Courtney Walsh is the Carol award-winning author of twenty novels and two novellas. Her debut novel, *A Sweethaven Summer*, was a *New York Times* and *USA Today* e-book best-seller and a Carol Award finalist in the debut author category. In addition, she has written two craft books and several full-length musicals. Courtney lives with her husband and three children in Illinois, where she co-owns a performing arts studio and youth theatre with her business partner and best friend—her husband.

Visit her online at www.courtneywalshwrites.com



MY PHONY VALENTINE

♥ A
HOLIDAYS
WITH HART
ROMANCE ♥

New York Times bestselling author
COURTNEY WALSH

Chapter One

Poppy

I don't know why I did what I did.

I mean, I *know* why I did it—I just can't believe I *did* it.

It was a knee-jerk reaction. A rash decision. An instinctive reflex, not unlike that decision you face when you're waist-deep in the cold water of the swimming pool, and you have to tense up and plunge yourself under the water.

Or when you're twelve and you're in the circle and the bottle you've just spun lands on that boy you've been doodling about in your notebook for a month.

I just. . .went for it.

And now I'm arm in arm with a complete stranger.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Twelve and a Half Minutes Earlier

Some voices just have that knack of making the muscles in your neck cramp when you hear them. Like dragging a rake across a chalkboard.

I don't have to turn around to know who's behind me in the line at the coffee shop. What are the odds?

"*Poppy Hart*, is that you?"

Actually, considering how small of a town Loveland is, the odds are pretty good that if I leave the house I'm going to see someone I know.

But why does that someone have to be Margot Richards?

I do a slow turn and force myself to be nice. “Sure is, *Margot*.” Even her name in my mouth tastes like week-old milk.

“It sure is!” she repeats back, as if she didn’t hear me at all. “Poppy Hart. You look—” she gives me a familiar once-over, as if searching her Rudeness Rolodex for the perfect insult—“healthy.”

Margot Richards, everyone.

I shake my head slightly. “Uh. . .Thanks?”

She continues, unabashed. “Amazing your little restaurant is still running after everything that happened with that *boyfriend* of yours,” she says, emphasizing boyfriend as if it’s bolded in a *National Enquirer* headline. “Wait. Was it. . .boyfriend? Business partner?” She waves a hand in the air. “I never was sure of the relationship.” She smiles one of those *I’m being friendly but really insulting you* kind of smiles. “But then, apparently neither was he,” adding a “right?” with a head tilt.

People don’t really speak like this in real life, do they? As if their rear ends were planted squarely at the top of their neck and talking out of the hole that’s there?

“It doesn’t really matter,” I say, desperately wanting to run down to the river and jump in, or, at the very least, push Margot in.

Her laugh is humorless. “Doesn’t it?”

“I just meant—”

“Oh, I know what you meant, Poppy.” Another dismissive wave. “I was sorry for you though. Such a pity to waste so much time on someone who turned out to be such a disappointment.”

I turn away, but then double-take. “Are you talking about him or me?”

She just smiles back.

I glance at the line. It’s moving as fast as a sloth on Benadryl.

“And *The Mill*,” Margot says. “Ugh. That article?” She places a hand over where a normal person’s heart would be, as if there wasn’t just a gaping black soul-sucking cavity there. “I really felt for you.”

“Yeah. That was. . .” I stiffen. “That was some post.” I shift my weight to stop from kicking her. “I doubt anyone really visits that site anyway.”

I know absolutely everyone in town visits that site anyway.

It’s the website that Loveland locals had been getting their daily dose of town chin-wagging from ever since the *Gossip Girl* wannabe site popped up online.

I thought someone like me was exempt from rumors. And I was, until Avi blew up my life.

“Oh, Poppy.” Margot lays it on thick with a sardonic laugh. “Everyone reads *The Mill*. You know that.”

I just stare at her, and she nods over my shoulder toward the line, which has moved three millimeters. I turn, take a step forward, and face the front, but Margot isn’t done humiliating me.

It’s her favorite pastime.

“It is *so funny* seeing you here. I haven’t seen you around town for so long.”

“I work down the block,” I say.

She ignores me. “You know, I just ran into your mom at the store the other day. She mentioned she’s worried she’s never going to have grandkids at the rate you and your sisters are going. I guess some people bloom late.” I turn to her just in time to see another pointed look from my feet to my face. “And some people never bloom at all.”

Most people outgrow their bullying once they graduate high school, but it turns out that’s not true for boxed-wine sociopaths like Margot.

Some people are mean no matter how old they are.

Oh, look. She’s still talking.

“Though, with everything that happened. . .I can see why you’d want to avoid the male species at all costs,” Margot says. “There is absolutely nothing wrong with being single, Poppy.”

My stomach twists. I don’t know why Margot chooses to be the way she is or why she seems to focus her energy on humiliating me, but I do know that I’m tired of it. Tired of *The Mill*. Tired of the town looking at me with a strange mix of pity and judgment.

Still, a smart person would turn around and ignore her. A smart, *mature* person would let Margot be her typical unhappy self and pity *her* for it.

Today, I am not a smart person.

Today, I’m waist-deep in the pool, and I tense up my muscles.

Today. . .I just go for it.

I turn to let loose a barrage of pent-up vitriol, when at that precise moment, my shoulder bumps into the man in front of me. A tall, solid man.

A man who I decide in an instant would make an excellent visual aid.

I turn to face her full on. “Actually, I haven’t gotten around to telling my mom yet, but I am, uh, dating someone.”

Margot's face looks like the *eyes wide emoji*, but quickly disintegrates into disbelief. "Oh, you are?"

—*the water's not THAT cold, just take a breath, plunge deep, it'll be fine*

—
"Yep."

I turn and I grab onto the arm of the man I just bumped into. "So, sorry, Sugar Bear."

Now We're Caught Up

He's talking on his phone, and when he realizes I'm talking to him, he gives me a confused look.

My eyes go wide at him.

Telepathy, don't fail me now.

I look at Margot. "So sorry, he's on an important call." I turn my attention back to Margot. "It's new, so I haven't even told my sisters yet."

"*HE* is your boyfriend?"

I squeeze the man's arm, hoping he'll take pity on a perfect, albeit crazy, stranger. Also hoping he doesn't look like Gomez Addams or worse, Uncle Fester. "Yep."

I am not a smart person.

At that, the man turns around, giving me the first real look at his face. His beautiful, chiseled face. He's got dark hair and blue eyes, a traffic-stopping combination. And while I typically don't like facial hair, his neatly trimmed beard is working for me.

Definitely not a member of the Addams family. He'd be better suited as an honorary Hemsworth. A dark-haired Hemsworth.

Wait. . .*is* he a Hemsworth? There are a lot of them, you know.

Margot's eyes widen, and I delight in her surprise, even though part of me is aware I could be heading for even worse humiliation.

"Dallas *Burke*." Margot says the name on an exhale.

Dallas Burke? Why is that name familiar?

The man—Dallas Burke—straightens.

The heartless cow—Margot Richards—muses. She flicks her eyes to mine. "*Dallas Burke* is your boyfriend? Sure, Poppy."

I look up at him. And I do mean *up*, because he's a good foot taller than me, and I want to hide. To crawl under a rock and stay there, sealed deep in

the dirt. I could live out the rest of my days in darkness, the worms and I.

“Poppy, next time you fake a boyfriend, pick someone a little more in your league.”

Margot twists a curl around her finger and eyes Dallas like he’s a giant cupcake and she hasn’t had carbs in ten years. She leans around me. “So sorry to bother you, Mr. Burke.”

I’m about to go find a building to jump off of when a thick, muscular arm lands on my shoulder, anchoring me into place. “Hey, sweetheart, did you want a scone with your coffee today, or are we just doing drinks?”

I look back at him, jaw fully slack.

Is this. . .are we doing this? Oh, my Dear Lord, we’re doing this.

He smiles at me and I feel it in my knees. They actually go weak for a moment, and I’m thankful for that beefy arm that seems to be holding me steady. He gives my shoulder a soft squeeze, probably meant to remind me that a question has been asked and I’m expected to answer. For the life of me, I can’t remember what that question was.

“Pops?” Dallas says.

“Huh?”

“Are you hungry?”

“What can I get for you?” The barista behind the counter smiles at Dallas.

He smiles back. The power goes out on three city blocks. “I’m going to have three of those egg bite things, two blueberry muffins, and a black coffee, and my girlfriend will have . . . ?” He looks at me, smiling, and all I can think is, *Wow, his teeth are so white.*

“Poppy?”

“Right! That’s me!” I finally find my voice, slapping the counter like a sailor asking for another. I point at the barista, trying to speak, but forget how to for some reason. I glance at Margot, who stares at us both in disbelief. She’s clearly as confused as I am.

I realize I’m still pointing, so I thrust my finger again at the poor barista, a bystander to this mental breakdown, hoping the movement will dislodge the twenty-car pileup in the speech center of my brain. “I’ll have a peppermint mocha.”

“Anything to eat, babe?” Dallas asks. Then, he looks at Margot. “I’m always trying to get this one to eat. She knows I love her curves.”

I’m almost certain my eyeballs just bugged out of my head and are now rolling around on the floor. He flashes that ultra-white smile at me.

“Ha. . .ha ha. . .you know I love you. . .loving my curves. . .!”

I’m an idiot. A blathering, nonsensical idiot.

“I’ll just take the drink, uh, sweetheart.” My mouth goes dry. “Thanks.”

He takes my hand and squeezes it, sending a pulse of electricity straight to my gut. “You’re sure?”

“Yep.” The word comes out like air from a squeaky toy that’s been stepped on.

The barista gives Dallas the total and he pays, stuffing a twenty into the tip jar.

A beautiful man named Dallas Burke just bought me coffee.

I’m still trying to place him. *Where do I know him from?*

Margot’s snotty voice from behind reminds me that yes, there really are terrible people in the real world, and not just on Twitter. “*You* are dating the *star* of the Chicago Comets.” There’s an insulting amount of disbelief in her voice, but I can’t even be offended because I’m equally shocked by this turn of events.

It clicks. The Chicago Comets.

Dallas Burke is a hockey player.

I think he’d been in the news recently, but I can’t for the life of me remember why. At this moment I can’t even remember my own name. I don’t follow sports, especially not hockey. I don’t even know the rules of the game.

Dallas slides his credit card into his wallet and tucks it in his back pocket. I wish I was that wallet right now.

“Is this for *real*?” she chirps.

“Oh, it’s for real. . .” His arm is back around my shoulder, pulling me closer into him. He smells like a forest and I want to get lost in the woods. He studies Margot. “I’m so sorry, what was your name again?”

It’s an honest question, but the look on Margot’s face tells me it felt like a burn.

Good. I shouldn’t relish that fact, but I do. Just a little. Or a lot.

“Margot Richards.”

“Good to meet you, Margot, but we should go. Busy day.”

Margot’s eyes narrow. Dallas flashes a smile. I’m a statue afraid if I move I’ll wake up from this pine-scented fantasy.

Margot turns her attention back to me. “So, we’ll see you both at the Festival of Hearts then?”

Dallas answers for me. “We’ll be there.”

She looks incredulous. “I find it hard to believe a big hockey star like yourself wants to spend the week of Valentine’s Day at some festival in our little town,” Margot says.

Dallas puts both his hands on my shoulders and says, “I want to spend Valentine’s Day making my girlfriend happy.” I look up at him, and he looks down at me, and I swear there is a moment. He tilts his head, almost imperceptibly, as if considering it for real.

A moment.

The moment’s gone, quick as a rumor, and he says, “So, I’ll do whatever she wants to make that happen.” His hands slide all the way down to mine, so slowly it sets off a chain reaction inside my body.

And then he’s standing next to me holding my hand.

I let out three quick, sharp, high-pitched sounds that can only be described as a “titter.”

Margot eyes me, suspicion on her face, then finally turns on her heel and walks away.

I guess she didn’t want coffee after all.

Dallas is still holding my hand when the barista slides our drinks across the counter. We each pick up our cups with our free hands, and then he leans toward me. “Is she gone?”

I peek back just in time to see Margot’s blond head disappear out the door. I let out a heavy sigh. “Yes, thank God.” A pause. “You really didn’t have to do that.”

“No big deal.” He waves me off like he didn’t just save me from utter humiliation. “Besides, it’s been a long time since someone called me ‘Sugar Bear.’”

I groan.

“You know that’s not an acceptable nickname for a grown man, right?”

“But ‘Pops’ is perfectly fine for a grown woman?” I smile at him, some of the embarrassment starting to wane. “Sorry. I panicked. I froze. I owe you big time. How can I return the favor?” I glance down and realize he’s still holding my hand. When I do, he slowly lets it go.

Darn my eyeballs for zeroing in.

“No need,” he says. “I was happy to help.” He grabs the bag of food he ordered.

I stare at him, mostly because I still can’t believe he’s real. Or that anyone looks this good in person.

I always wondered how I'd act if I ever met a celebrity. Now I know. Mouth agape. Stuttering for words. Making a fool of myself. And I'm not even really a fan.

I stand awkwardly, clinging to my mocha like it's the only thing keeping me upright.

Dallas looks around the coffee shop. I'm thankful there aren't many people here today and curious what he's doing in town, but it's none of my business.

"I should probably go."

What? Why did I say that? I don't want to go!

I want to stand and stare. And I do, until, "Oh, shoot."

"What?" He seems legitimately interested.

"The Festival of Hearts. You said you'd go, but you obviously aren't going to do that, so don't worry, I'll make up something."

He looks at me and I just keep right on talking.

"I'll tell everyone you let me down easy, or it didn't work out, or whatever. I won't make you sound like a jerk or anything." I try to smile. I wonder if it's as weak as it feels.

"Why don't you tell them *you* let *me* down easy?" He smiles. I hear an angel getting its wings, I swear it.

"Ha. That's funny." I'm staring again. In an effort to stop, I say the only thing that comes to my mind.

"Poppy."

His expression turns quizzical.

"My name, it's my name, it's what people call me, it's. . ." I shake my head to stop talking, and stick out my hand for him to shake. "Poppy Hart."

I'm wholly unprepared for the zinger that shoots through me when he takes my hand in his.

Is this lust? Am I going to have to repent? How many deadly sins am I committing?

"It's good to meet you, Poppy Hart," he says.

"Good to meet you, *Dallas Burke*." I'm certain my smile pales in comparison to his. Margot was right to be gobsmailed by the whole idea that I even have a boyfriend, especially after the embarrassment of my last relationship. But Dallas Burke? Ludicrous.

I can't believe I'm standing here talking to one of the most successful professional athletes of our generation.

And he's not running away.

"You have no idea who I am, do you?" He grins.

"Sure I do." I smile back. "You're the star of the Chicago Comets."

"Do you know what sport that is?"

"Um. . .ice dancing?"

He laughs. I find myself wanting to make him do that more.

"Thanks again for the save," I say.

He nods at me. And as much as I wish he'd ask me to stay and drink coffee with him *for as long as we both shall live*, I know this surreal interaction is all I'm going to get.

I smile again, wave, and turn to go, bumping into a rack of granola bars as I do.

I slowly turn back to look, and yep, he's totally standing there, still watching me.

Solid.

Not exactly the impression I was hoping for, but hey, at least I'd made myself hard to forget.

For once.

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