



Falling for

GRAVITY

An *ICE TIGERS* Hockey Novella
Isabella Cassazza



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AN ICE TIGERS HOCKEY NOVELLA

ISABELLA CASSAZZA

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Editing: [My Brother's Editor](#)

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CHAPTER 1

Wioletta

“WHAT DO YOU HAVE THERE?” JULIAN MOLDS HIS BODY TO mine from behind and peeks his head over my shoulder.

“The most important gift you ever gave me.” I turn in his arms, throw one arm around his neck, and give him a quick kiss on the mouth. “Remember?” I lean back in his embrace and wave the small slip of paper in front of his face.

He catches the ticket with one hand and stares at it for a second. “The best investment I ever made. Thank you for taking a chance on me.” He looks me deep in the eyes. “I love you.” Then he bends down to kiss me.

Even after five years, my heart beats faster every time his lips meet mine. Excitement runs through my veins the moment we connect. At the same time, it feels like coming home. We were meant for each other from the very first minute we met.

I break the contact for a split second. “Love you more.” Then I lift up on my toes, pull his head down with both arms, and kiss him again like there’s no tomorrow. Which there isn’t for us. At least not in Boston.

“Debatable.” He breaks free and pants against my mouth. Just when he’s about to join our lips again, a knock echoes through the empty room.

“Uh... sorry guys,” Lily says once I turn my head in her direction. “We’re done with the boxes. And Emilia and Matt are here with the food. So... just join us whenever you’re ready.”

“We’re coming,” I say, but she’s already abandoned her spot in the doorway.

“I wish I was. Deep inside you...” Julian whispers in my ear.

Goose bumps appear where his hot breath meets my skin. But now is not the time for more. I giggle. “Later. Come on. It’s time to say goodbye.” I take his giant hand in mine and lead him into the living area where our friends are waiting for us.

“Here they are.” Matt walks over to greet us. “You’ve figured it out. Let others do the work and have a good time yourself.”

“I’ll miss you and your humor.” I hug him and walk over to greet his wife.

“I can’t believe this is your last day here. It was bad enough to see Julian in the Ice Tigers’ jersey for the last time. But... can I say I really don’t like my job right now? Whenever I see you, I want to apologize,” Emilia says while we’re still half-hugging each other.

I squeeze her arm. “Don’t. We’re good. Truly, we are. I’ve said it before. The trade was a shock in the beginning, but you made it very clear that it was a necessary business decision and nothing personal. We both understand.”

“I couldn’t have said it better.” Julian places his arm around my back and greets his team owner too. “Besides, we’ve already found the perfect house and we can always visit, right?”

“Anytime. You’ll always be a part of the Ice Tigers family. I’m still sorry. How is the baby doing? How are you feeling?” She points to my growing belly.

“He or she is doing well. We can’t wait to meet our little miracle. And I’m feeling fantastic. Julian is a little overprotective and wouldn’t let me lift anything heavier than a teacup. But we still managed to pack up everything.” I wink.

“Are you still sure about not wanting to find out the gender before the birth?” Tyler walks over and hands me a paper plate and a napkin.

“Yes,” Julian and I say at the same time. All we want is a healthy baby. Whether it’s a boy or a girl isn’t important.

The others laugh.

“I had such a fantastic idea to reveal the gender at the baby shower.” Lily pouts.

“You can always use the idea for your first child then.” I join my best friend at the other end of the room.

“Who’s hungry?” Danny walks through the door with several pizza boxes before Lily and I can talk more baby stuff. “It’s just like in college. No furniture and pizza. Though this one is a lot better than the cheap stuff that was all I could afford back then.” He grins.

“You realize you and Emilia are the only ones in this room that have firsthand college experience?” Matt accepts a box from Danny and sits down on the floor. Emilia, Julian, and I follow his example.

“See, that’s even better. Wioletta and Smithy will learn something new on their last day in Boston.” Danny hands a pizza box to each of us.

“Will you be okay?” Lily asks and places one hand underneath Tyler’s arm.

“Let me.” Danny sets his box on the floor before he helps his roommate.

“Do you need a cushion, old man?” Julian laughs as Tyler lowers his giant frame slowly to the floor with the help of both Lily and Danny. “We can open the boxes and get one for you?”

“Very funny. I can manage.” Tyler’s face is a mask of pain for a split second, but his features relax once he’s in a sitting position.

“Good thing you have a physical therapist living with you.” Julian chuckles. “No kidding, man. That hit yesterday looked nasty.”

“I’m not getting any younger.” Tyler sighs.

“None of us are,” Matt chimes in.

“So, let’s enjoy our food while we still can.” Emilia laughs. So do the others.

“Enjoy your last meal in Boston,” Matt adds.

We dig into our food and a comfortable silence fills the room. I wish I could imprint every little detail of this moment in my brain forever. I don’t mind change. It can be exciting. But... I’m also intimidated.

I’ll live alone in a new city while Julian will join his new team on long road trips. I’ll make new friends eventually. But nothing will ever come close to the Ice Tigers family.

Who knows when we'll see the Boston group the next time and if it'll ever be this perfect again? Wonderful food and our favorite people around us. It's heaven on earth.

"What do you have there?" Lily asks when only crumbs remain in the boxes.

I place my paper plate on the floor and only then realize that I carried the plane ticket with me into the living room.

"This is the reason we're here today." I grab the small slip of paper again and smooth out the edges.

"I don't understand." Lily frowns.

"Julian bought me this plane ticket shortly after we met. Have we ever told you the story?" I look from left to right. Our friends shake their heads.

"You're telling it," I say to Julian.

My husband shrugs. "It's actually your fault." He turns to Tyler.

"My fault?" His eyebrows shoot up so high they nearly meet his hairline.

"Kind of." Julian chuckles.

I smile and lean against him. "Destiny might have had something to do with it too." I give him a quick kiss on his bearded cheek while a slow smile spreads over my face. Thinking of our meet-cute always makes me happy.

"Let's hear it then." Tyler pulls Lily closer to his side and leans against her.

A quick glance at my watch confirms that we have half an hour left until the movers will arrive to collect our stuff. I snuggle my head against Julian's shoulder and close my eyes.

He clears his throat. “Well....”

CHAPTER 2

Julian

FOUR YEARS EARLIER

Prague, Czech Republic

A harsh knock on my door, followed by a loud voice calling my name, interrupts my dreamless sleep.

“Hey, Smithy! We’re going out to explore the city. Are you coming?” One of my teammates, I think it’s Nussy, yells a second time before I have time to force my heavy eyelids open.

“Nah, I’m good,” I holler back as loud as my hoarse voice allows. Jet lag is a bitch. I have no idea how the others cope so easily with the time difference. My body has a hard time adjusting to switching day with nighttime.

While my teammates are active in their free time, I use every minute I’m not practicing or working out to compensate for the lack of sleep during the nights. Coach Benning already let me know that I didn’t live up to his expectations in the first game of the season. How could I when my body was in sleep mode instead of beast mode?

We arrived five days ago in Finland, played the first game of the season in Helsinki, and lost. I should watch film and prepare mentally for the second game here in Prague. Instead, I want to bury my head underneath a blanket and hide from the bright sunlight.

I curse whoever thought it was a good idea to fly overseas for just a few games right at the beginning of the long hockey season. Some players love the experience and enjoy the trip. I'm not one of them.

My muscles feel sore from spending too much time on planes over the last few days and the lack of sleep during the nights. Even the obligatory morning skate today couldn't relax my legs. I should have joined my teammates to explore the city. At least a walk would have helped to get rid of the stiffness in my body.

I wish I could roll over and fall asleep again, but my bladder chooses that moment to remind me I have more basic needs other than sleep and food.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I'm wide awake. Fucking great since my teammates already left.

I don't want to spend all day inside, so I throw my coat over one arm and grab my room key. In the hallway I hear a commotion going on inside what I think is one of my linemate's rooms.

I haven't spoken much to Tyler yet. We understand each other on the ice without words. But he doesn't talk a lot in the locker room. I know little about him other than he's a highly talented center. This might be an excellent opportunity to get to know him better and bond.

"Tyler." I knock on his door.

“Yeah.” He opens it after a few seconds.

“I wasn’t quite awake when the others left. But... I could use some fresh air. Do you want to join me?”

He shakes his head. “I’m going to watch some film. See you at team dinner.” The door falls shut in front of my face again.

Cool. See you later then, I say in my head.

Tyler’s super dedicated and unstoppable on the ice. But other than that, I have no idea what kind of person he is. The guy doesn’t like to socialize. That much is clear.

I leave the hotel with no clue where to go or what to explore. I guess I could always Google the famous sites in Prague. But I’m in the mood to just roam around without aim. Tomorrow, I need to build up what I like to call my laser-focused mindset during the day to be ready for the game. Today, I’d like to relax.

The sun is shining and even though it’s already fall, I carry my coat instead of putting it on. A shirt, jeans, and sneakers are enough clothes to warm me on this beautiful day.

Rather than following the signs to the city center, I head in the opposite direction. On my way to wherever I’ll end up, I pass ornate buildings and several churches. After that, I come across what must be one of the old city gates. Prague is a beautiful city. I should count myself lucky to explore it.

The longer I walk, the fewer people I encounter. So far nobody has noticed me. It’s nice for a change to not have to wear a baseball cap and keep my head down. From what we’ve been told in preparation for this game, hockey is popular in the Czech Republic. But they have their own league. And while the Czech hockey fans are excited to watch

us play, they don't necessarily follow the NHL. Still, we were told to expect a loud and electric atmosphere in the arena tomorrow.

An hour later, my legs are loosened up and for the first time in two days, I feel like myself again. So does my stomach. A loud growl hits my ears. Team dinner is only a few hours away. But I don't want to wait that long. I'm a big guy and could eat constantly during the day.

I pause. I spotted a few nice-looking restaurants on my way here. Should I turn back around or explore the neighborhood a little more? There doesn't seem to be a lot of tourists in this part of the city. I learned from previous travels that's where you can usually find better and cheaper food than in the crowded areas. Instead of heading back in the direction of the team hotel, I walk on.

After two more corners, I stumble upon what looks like a beer garden, hidden behind huge trees on a backstreet. The smell of roasted meat wafts in my direction. My stomach rumbles again. I spot an empty table in the corner and snatch the seat before anyone else can.

My butt is barely in contact with the chair when a young waitress heads over to greet me.

"Ahoj!"

"Uh... do you speak English?" Shit, it didn't cross my mind that there could be a language barrier.

A warm smile spreads over her beautiful face. "Yes, I speak English. Hello, again. What can I get you?" she asks me with a cheerful voice.

Thank God she understands me. I blink. "Just water, please." A quick look at the tables near mine confirms that

most people here drink beer, but with the upcoming game, it's better to skip the alcohol. When I turn my head again, the waitress has already vanished through an archway to what must be the restaurant.

I lean back in my chair and close my eyes. A light breeze rustles the golden leaves on the ground. I congratulate myself on having found such a peaceful place in the middle of a buzzing city.

"Here you go." Only a minute later, the girl places my water in front of me.

"Here is the menu. I'm afraid it's only in Czech, but I can translate and explain the dishes if you want me to?" She places a leather-bound booklet on the table.

"Yeah, that would be great." I meet her eyes for the first time. Damn, the girl's pretty. She has full hazel eyes with sweeping lashes that sparkle whenever she smiles. And her honey-blond hair is pulled into a loose ponytail. I want to trail my fingers through the shiny mass. Would it feel as silky as it looks?

"Would you like to order a main dish or just an appetizer?"

My stomach chooses that moment to rumble so loud it must sound like I haven't eaten in days.

"A main dish it is, right?" She laughs.

Heat creeps up my neck. "Yes, please."

She winks. "Don't worry. Our portions are big."

I can't take my eyes off her stunning face while she speaks. What the hell is happening here? I swallow. "What's your specialty?"

Her nose crinkles a little. God, she's cute. "Do you like meat?"

"Of course I do." This is my time to wink.

She laughs again. "This restaurant is well known for its *Uzene*. That's smoked beef with vegetables. It's tasty, and the portion is... how do you say that? Gigantic?"

I join in with her laughter. "Yeah. Gigantic, sounds great. I'll take it."

"Perfect." Her genuine smile lights up her eyes again before she turns to leave my table.

"What's your name?"

She pauses mid-motion. "I'm Wioletta."

"Thanks for your help, Wioletta." My stomach rumbles again. She winks and another wide smile spreads over her face before she vanishes inside the building. My heart flutters in my chest. Interesting. It's been a while since I was drawn to a girl instantly.

While I wait for my food to arrive, I watch Wioletta balance plates overflowing with food and trays with huge beer glasses. She's carrying more than her small frame should be able to handle. And yet Wioletta moves with such an elegance and grace that my eyes follow her whenever she appears in the archway.

The autumn sun plays with her blonde hair and especially with the one curl that has escaped out of her ponytail. My fingers itch to put that curl back behind her ear. What is wrong with me? It must be the lack of sleep... or Wioletta.

I wish I'd met her in a bar in Boston. I don't know what it is about her. But the flutters in my stomach tell me that this

girl would be worth abandoning my bachelor lifestyle. If only she didn't live an ocean away from me.

I stretch out my legs underneath the table. If my teammates could see me right now. They'd have the time of their lives chirping me for... lusting, no that's not the right word. For following a girl's every step as if I were a lovesick fool.

I could always say I am admiring the way she conducts herself. Wioletta knows how to do her job. Her wide smile and kind way is the reason for the relaxed and easygoing atmosphere in the beer garden. Whether it's the old man in the corner across from me, or the young family at the table right in the middle, each customer's eyes light up whenever Wioletta approaches their table. She treats them all with the same kindness and empathy. I like that. I like that a lot.

"Here you go. Enjoy your meal." I'm startled when she places a giant plate with meat and vegetables in front of me. Before I can blink, Wioletta is gone again.

My mouth waters when the smell of the smoked dish invades my nose. I dig into my food. This is heaven on earth. Not only does the girl know how to wait tables. She also knows how to make a man happy.

"Would you like more water?" She appears out of nowhere again.

I need a moment to swallow my last bite before I can answer and use the time to admire her high cheekbones. This girl has it all. A beautiful face. A stunning figure. And a warm aura. How could I not be attracted to her? "Yes, please. You're very attentive."

She shrugs. "I'm just doing my job. Do you like the dish?"

"I love it. This has to be my new favorite food."

“You can always come back for more.” She winks.

Is she flirting with me? Could it be that she’s as drawn to me as I am to her? Or does she talk to every guest like she does to me? Damn. I wish I could understand Czech right now.

Before I can tell her that my only option to visit the restaurant again will be tomorrow, she’s halfway inside the building. Only to return a minute later with a new glass of water for me.

While I devour the rest of my food, my eyes follow her every movement again. I’ve never been drawn to a woman before as I’m drawn to Wioletta. Nothing can come out of this encounter but... a little flirting never hurt no one. And who knows? Maybe I’ll get lucky and she’ll spend the night with me.

I’ll have to bring my A game to win her over. Wioletta doesn’t look like a puck bunny but has the door next girl vibe about her. It’s a good thing I like challenges. Especially when the reward comes in the form of soft curves and full lips against my heated skin.

I shift from right to left in my seat and adjust my erection underneath the table. *Stop daydreaming, Smithy.*

“Can I get you anything else?” Wioletta asks the moment I swallow the last piece of meat.

“Another water please and... do you have dessert?”

“Of course we do. Would you like to wait a little or do you want to order right away?”

“How much longer will your shift be?” Time to find out if I stand a chance.

She hesitates a second but then answers. “I’ll be off in an hour.”

“Then I’d like to order right away.” I have sixty minutes to think of how to convince her to spend more time with me.

She places a finger underneath her chin. “Okay. Let me think. We have—”

“Why don’t you surprise me?” I look deep into her eyes.

She blinks twice. “Is there anything you are allergic to or you don’t like at all?”

I shake my head. “As long as it’s sweet. I’m a goner.”

She throws her head back and laughs loud and free. My chest expands to twice its size for making her so happy.

“Here you go.” Fifteen minutes later, a plate with what looks like thin pancakes topped with whipped cream and berry jam arrives in front of me.

“Enjoy.”

And boy, I do. Fatty meat and whipped cream is not exactly what the team nutritionist has in mind when it comes to my diet, but he’ll never know about this particular indulgence. Heaven can’t be sweeter than this dish and the girl who chose it for me.

While my taste buds register explosion after explosion of buttery dough and fresh fruit, my mind reels over how I can spend more time with Wioletta.

I close my eyes to fully appreciate the last bite of my dessert. It’s not often that I’m fully sated, but my favorite waitress in the world wasn’t kidding. The portions in this restaurant are gigantic.

“Can I get you anything else?” As if she senses my thoughts, her voice fills my ears.

I slowly open my eyes and take in her sweet smile again. “Just the check, please. I’d like to pay with my credit card.”

She nods and is back in no time with the little pay thingy.

“What’s considered an appropriate tip in the Czech Republic?” I ask before she can type in the amount.

She pauses. “Uh... that’s for the customer to decide.”

“What if the guest is extremely pleased with the way the waitress treated him?”

She shrugs. “It would be a little higher.”

“Double the highest tip you have ever received.” I inch a little closer to where she stands and pretend to look at the screen.

“That’s too much.” She stands her ground and narrows her eyes.

“You deserve it.” I hold her gaze and hope my eyes communicate that I’m dead serious about it.

She frowns and crinkles her nose. Then she types something into the device. I couldn’t care less about the number. I’d rather watch her for the rest of the day.

“Sign here, please.” She hands me the receipt and a pen.

I’m sure I never signed something as slow as I’m signing this mini piece of paper right now. I also might have added two more loops to my signature. But then I’m done.

Now or never. I roll my shoulders back and sit up straight. “Wioletta. I know it sounds crazy. But... I’d really like to spend more time with you. Would you show me some of

Prague?” I put on what I hope is my puppy dog eyes look and bend my neck to look right into her beautiful eyes.

“I don’t even know your name.” She bites her lip.

If I could face-palm myself right now I would. I’m so stupid. “I’m Julian. Nice to meet you.” I stand up and stretch out my hand for her to take. Now Wioletta is the one who has to bend her neck to find my gaze.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Julian. But...”

“You don’t have time.” My shoulders slump.

“No. Yes. I mean. I do have time.” A blush spreads over her cheeks.

“Then please take pity on a poor American tourist who has no idea where to go. Be my tour guide for today.” I hold her gaze while I wait for an answer. *Please, say yes.*

“I’m not even from Prague.” She bites her lip again.

“No? Where are you from then?” I won’t give up that easily.

“I’m from Poland.”

“But you have been living here a while?”

Wioletta nods. Her eyes are still glued to mine. She just needs a little more convincing.

“What do you need me to do to say yes? Fall on my knees? I’d do it.” I place a hand over my heart.

She shakes her head with an amused expression on her face. If I have to make a fool of myself to persuade her I’m worth a shot, I’d do it for the rest of the day.

It takes her no more than ten seconds to answer. But seconds feel like hours while I wait for her decision. “I need

five minutes to change.”

“I’ll just wait here.” If I wouldn’t look like a complete moron, I’d pull a full-on goal celebration right in this beer garden. Instead, I plop back in my seat and release my breath. Our time together is not over. It might just have begun.

Five minutes later, we’re on our way to what is Wioletta’s favorite spot in Prague. I don’t care where we’re going as long as she’s beside me. In fact, I don’t pay attention to my surroundings at all.

“Watch out.” She warns me a split second before I crash right into a light post.

I blush. “Thank you.”

“Are you all right?” Wioletta places her hand on my arm.

“More than all right.” I stare into her eyes and study the yellow specks around her irises.

“Hey, are you still with me?” She waves a hand in front of my face.

“Wouldn’t want to be anywhere else.” I give her a sheepish smile.

She shakes her head. “Be careful or you’ll end up with a concussion.”

“As long as you’re my nurse, I won’t mind.” *And concussions don’t scare me anymore.* I’ve had my fair share of them. But now is not the time to tell her what I do for a living. This girl has no idea that I’m a pro athlete. She made time for me because she wants to get to know the real me. Not the famous hockey player.

Wioletta blinks twice, then walks on to wherever we’re headed.

“How come you live in Prague?” I rush after her.

“I came here to work.” She turns to the right and we enter a park with giant trees and circles of flowers in the middle.

“This your favorite place?”

She nods and chews on her lip. “I know it isn’t fancy. There are a ton of spots that are more... impressive in this city. But I like nature and the trees remind me of Poland.” She stares down at her flats for a moment. Wioletta’s tall for a woman and reaches my chin even without heels.

“It’s beautiful. I love to be outside too. Did you come to live here alone?”

Wioletta sits down on a wooden bench and motions for me to take the place next to her. “Yeah. My family lives in Poland. The unemployment rate is high there and young people don’t find work easily.”

I sit down so close to her our knees are about to touch any second. She doesn’t seem to mind and remains where she is. “Did you always want to be a waitress?”

She sighs. “No. I...” This time her smile is sad.

“If you don’t want to talk about it—”

“I was young and foolish. A model agent in Poland discovered me. She told my mom there would be more jobs in Prague and that I should come to live with her. In the beginning, it worked out well and I earned some money. But then she retired, and her son took over...” Her face hardens.

“Did he do anything to you?” I clench my fist.

Wioletta chews on her lip. “He wanted to. But I wouldn’t let him. And then there were no jobs for me anymore.” She

shrugs. “Like I said. I was young and foolish. My mom still thinks I earn the money I send her from modeling jobs.”

“I don’t think you’re young and foolish. I think you’re strong and beautiful.” I place my hand over hers and squeeze it. Her skin is silky soft underneath my calloused fingers and my heart beats faster from the contact. I have it bad for this girl.

“Thank you for saying that.”

“I mean it. You’re stunning, Wioletta. I’m sure you could get other modeling jobs. Have you applied to other agencies?”

She shrugs. “There are many beautiful girls in Prague.”

“But you’re special.” At least you are to me. “I know it’s sounds crazy but... I really like you.”

“You don’t even know me,” she says matter-of-factly.

“Then tell me something I should know about you.” My hand still covers hers, and I trail my thumb in a slow circle over her skin.

“I don’t know. I’m not that interesting.” She follows my little circles but doesn’t pull her hand away. Wioletta isn’t making this easy for me. Maybe I’m crazy. But I like it.

I rub my chin with my other hand. “What’s one thing from your childhood you miss?”

Her face lights up. “My pony.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Your pony. Like... an actual horse?”

She nods and her smile reaches her eyes this time. “I named him Beauty. You know like in the book *Black Beauty*? He was overweight and lazy. But he was perfect for me.”

I squeeze her hand again. “So, you like horses?”

“I love them. It’s crazy I never had any lessons and Beauty preferred to eat rather than carry me around, but... a girl can dream, right?” Her eyes shine and her face glows. In this moment I want to buy her every single fucking horse on Earth. Or one every day to make her happy. If she were mine, I’d make sure to make her eyes glow with happiness every morning.

“Do you like horses?”

They scare the living shit out of me. “Uh... I’ve never been horseback riding. But I’d try it with you.” *Maybe I can watch while you ride.*

We sit in silence while my hand remains on hers. Now and then I draw a little circle on the back of her fingers. Time stands still and runs way too fast at the same time. The wind plays with the loose strands of Wioletta’s hair. I wish it was me twirling that golden blonde curl.

I wish we had all the time in the world to get to know each other. But my time in Europe is limited so I better make sure to find out as much about her as possible. “What—”

“Let me ask something. We’ve talked enough about me.” Wioletta lowers her eyes.

“You can ask me anything you want.” I lean back against the bench. It’s only fair she gets to ask some questions too.

“Have you come to Prague alone?” Her gaze finds mine again.

“No, I’m here with some... friends.” I’m not ready to tell her I’m a hockey player. It’s important that she wants to be with me because I’m... me. And not because I earn a shitload of money playing the sport I love. I see some of my teammates more often than my folks, so it isn’t even a lie. Speaking of

which. My gaze falls to my watch. *Shit*. I thought we had at least an hour left. Time is my enemy today. If I don't want to miss team dinner, I need to hurry back to the hotel.

“Wioletta.” I take her other hand in mine. “I really would like to get to know you better. But I have to meet my friends now.”

“I see.” She disentangles her fingers from mine. Damn. That's not what I want.

“If I didn't have an important... appointment with them. I'd stay the entire evening and night here with you.”

“I'm not that kind of girl. I—”

“No. No, that's not what I meant, I mean... I... you're stunning. But I don't expect you to jump right into bed with me.”

She chuckles. “You're cute.”

I laugh out loud. If she knew that I slam opponents into boards for a living, she wouldn't call me cute.

“Are you working tomorrow?”

She nods. But her eyes remain on her hands.

“When?”

“My shift begins at four,” she says without looking up.

“Can we meet here at noon?” That would give me enough time to come here after morning skate.

She bites her lip. “I would like that. But—”

“No buts. Yes or no?”

She chews so hard on her lower lip I'm afraid she'll draw blood any second. “Okay.” She finally meets my eyes again.

I could kiss her. But it's too soon. "You're making me very happy." I'm a hundred percent sure now that she wants to meet me. Julian. Not the pro athlete. She deserves to know why our time is limited. "So, here's the thing. I'm in Prague with my hockey team. We have team dinner tonight and a game tomorrow night. That's why I have to leave now." I take her hands in mine. "We have a training session in the morning, but I can meet you here around noon. I won't have a lot of time. But every little second I have, I want to spend with you."

"You're a hockey player." Both her eyebrows shoot up.

"I am. Is there something wrong with that?"

She squeezes my hands. "Yes. No. I mean... good for you. I saw the billboards. Tomorrow there's a big game in the arena here, right?"

"Are you a hockey fan?"

She shakes her head. "My brothers go to games all the time. But I don't watch sports."

I smile. "Let's talk about your brothers, tomorrow. I really need to hurry now. See you at noon." I bend down and give her a quick kiss on the cheek before she can change her mind.

Wioletta isn't a fangirl. And she wanted to see me again before she knew what I do for a living. To say I walk back to the hotel on clouds would be the understatement of the century.

As much as I dreaded this trip before it began, now I wish it would never end.

CHAPTER 3

Wioletta

A GLANCE AT MY WATCH CONFIRMS IT'S TEN PAST TWELVE. I'M so stupid. Of course he wouldn't show up. Why would he? Julian's a star. What would such a guy want with the poor girl from Poland who struggles to pay her rent?

I plop down on my favorite bench and hug my knees to my chest. It was all just a beautiful dream. How foolish of me to think a man like Julian took a fancy to me. I Googled him last night and used way more of my data limit than I should have. He makes millions. Women throw themselves at his feet. What would he want with foolish Wioletta from Poland?

Julian's a famous hockey player. Whereas I'm... I don't know what I am anymore. My family relies on me sending money back home. My brothers work as well. But they depend on whatever construction work they can get. And in between jobs they have to live off what they made on the last one.

I work as a waitress because I don't have a choice. And because I believed my first agent's lies about how after a few model gigs, I would never have to work again.

I wish things were different. But—

Julian kneels down in front of me and takes my hands in his. “I’m so sorry.”

My breathing speeds up when he squeezes and fondles them with his long fingers. I’ve always had a thing for man hands. And his are close to what I consider perfection. Strong. Calloused. And yet capable of the softest touch.

I shiver when I recall the way his thumb rubbed little circles on my skin yesterday. If only I could experience his caress one more time, I’d be the happiest woman on earth.

“I fell asleep after the morning skate. And…” He takes a minute to catch his breath. Then he abandons his spot on the ground and sits down on the seat next to me. But instead of keeping his distance, his giant arms hug me close. “I’m so sorry.”

“You’re here now.” I lean my head against his shoulder and give in to the urge to caress his beard with one finger. The hair is surprisingly soft underneath my touch.

“I made you sad,” he murmurs against my forehead.

“Only a little.” I force the corners of my mouth up. *And you’ll only make me happy for as long as you are here. Afterward, I’ll be sad again.* It’s better I get used to the feeling.

“How was your day?” He lifts my chin up with one finger and looks deep in my eyes while he waits for my answer.

I resist the urge to wipe away the wetness from my cheeks. “I slept until eight. Then I went grocery shopping. Now I’m here.” I wink.

He laughs. And the tiny lines in the corner of his eyes show themselves for the first time today. “Sounds super exciting.”

“What about you?” I wish I had a photographic memory and would never forget his joyful expression.

“My teammates think I’m on drugs since I bounced around during the morning skate. You should have seen their faces when I told them my drug is called Wioletta.”

“You told them about me?” I lift my head up straight.

He sighs. “We spend so much time together as a group. They smell if something of importance has changed your mood even before you realize it.”

“You think I’m important?”

Julian nods. “Please tell me I wasn’t the only one that felt this crazy connection between us right away?”

I bite my lip. “No, I felt it too. But—”

“We have only a limited time to get to know each other.” He sighs. “I’m afraid it’s even less than I thought yesterday. My coach wants to go over some drills and plays with me before the game. And I need a nap before we head to the arena. I can only stay half an hour.” He trails one finger over my cheek. “Let’s not waste a single second. What’s your favorite color?”

I chuckle when I really want to cry. Half an hour. That’s all we’ve got. “Red.”

“So you’re a passionate girl.”

I shrug. “I only like red. What’s your favorite color?” I want to hear his deep voice again.

His eyes light up. “Blue. The dark blue I’ll wear tonight.”

Blue like his eyes. I might have to change my favorite color to this exact shade of midnight blue. “Are you excited

for the game?”

He nods twice while his eyes sparkle with enthusiasm. “It was my dream to be a hockey player since I was a little boy. I wish you could see me play tonight. I tried to get some tickets for you, but... I’m afraid the game is completely sold out.” He sits up straight and takes my hands back in his. “Will you meet me after the game? You would have to come to my hotel room. I can’t sneak out at night—”

I look at where his thumb caresses my fingers. “I’m not sure this is a good idea. You’ll leave tomorrow—”

“Please think about it. I know it sounds crazy, but... I want to spend more time with you. I don’t expect anything to happen. We can just talk.”

I bite my lip again. It’s an annoying habit, but one that calms me. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure.” His shoulders slump. How can this giant of a man look so freaking cute? Does he know it and use it against me? What woman in her right mind can say no to such an overload of manly forlornness?

“Where exactly is your hotel?” I ask before I can think about the words.

“It’s close to the city center. But don’t worry about how to get there. We could book a taxi for you right now. Or I could give you money for one if you don’t want to use public transportation at night. Or—”

I pull one hand out of his and place a finger over his mouth. “I can manage. You gave me a more than generous tip yesterday. Remember?”

Julian shakes his head. “You should buy something nice with that money for yourself. Not spend it on a taxi ride.” His

gaze leaves me for a second to look at his watch. His shoulders drop even more. “I need to head back. But... I really want to see you again. Will you give me your number?”

I hesitate. Nothing can come out of... whatever is developing between us. There simply isn't enough time. But deep down I know I'm not ready to say goodbye to him for good. So we exchange numbers.

Then he bends over and gives me a quick kiss on my forehead. Without another word, he turns around and heads in the opposite direction.

I drop my head. My heart already hurts in my chest. How will it feel the last moment we're together knowing I'll never see him again? I curse my bad luck. Of course I would meet the perfect man only to realize that we can't be together. I push myself up from the bench and take a hesitant step forward. My phone rings.

Unknown Caller appears on the screen. I accept the call.

“Why are you still standing next to the bench?” Julian's voice sounds even darker through the phone.

“Why are you already calling me?”

“I had to make sure you gave me the correct number.”

“Well, now you know. How do you know I'm still standing here?”

“Look over to your right.”

My head flies around to where he's leaning against a tree with a big grin on his face. He waves his hand.

“Didn't you just say you needed to hurry?” I can't help it. I smile and wave back.

His expression becomes serious again. “I have to race back to the hotel now.” Even though there’s quite some distance between us, the blood flows faster through my veins from his intense gaze that never leaves my face.

I swallow. “Won’t that tire you out?”

“You’re worth it. Besides, I have a ton of stamina.”

I swear he winks in my direction. “Go now.” I chuckle.

“I look forward to seeing you tonight.” His voice is deeper than ever before.

“I still haven’t said yes.” Gotta give it to the man. He’s persistent. And surely doesn’t lack self-confidence.

“Then I need to do some more convincing.” He runs over to where I stand and crushes his mouth on mine in an unyielding kiss. I lose myself. In him. In his passionate embrace. So much that I forget we’re in the middle of a public park. This man could be my undoing. Or my salvation. Or both at the same time.

“Go back to your hotel.” I pant when he finally lifts his head again.

“Only if you promise me I’ll see you tonight.” His eyes shine with longing. How could I resist them?

I smile. “I’ll be there. Text me the address and the time. I need to work now. And so do you.” I turn around and head outside the park.

He’s right. There was an instant connection between us. A kind of pull that I never felt with anyone before.

I’ve always been the good girl. My older brothers scared away any man for as long as I can remember. Julian could

stand his ground against them. Not that he'll ever have to. His life is in the States. Mine is here. Or in Poland.

But we have tonight. And if one night has to be enough. I better make sure to create a memory that'll last me a lifetime.



I TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND KNOCK ON THE DOOR. EMPLOYEES and other guests stared at me while I walked through the hotel lobby. I don't even want to know what they were thinking about me. Girls with shoes worn as many times as mine don't belong in fancy five-star hotels.

The door flies open. "You're here." Julian pulls me inside and hugs me close.

"Congratulations. I looked the game score up online. You won, didn't you?" I pull back in his embrace.

He leans his forehead against mine. "We did. But I don't want to talk hockey right now. I'm so glad you came." He puts his arm around my shoulder and leads me into a room that is bigger than my entire apartment. God, what would he think of me if he saw my rundown furniture and the limited space?

"I'm sorry. I didn't have time to tidy up. I'm usually not messy." He drops his arm from around me, grabs a pair of boxer briefs from the floor, and throws them in the direction of his suitcase where they land with a plop.

I laugh and relax a little. "Don't worry. I grew up with three brothers. I know how boys are. And believe me when I say, I've seen worse."

I'm rewarded with his signature grin that spreads over his entire face. "I already like your brothers."

“Let’s not talk about them. Tell me something about yourself.”

“I don’t want to talk.” I walk over to where he’s standing and put my arms around his neck. “We only have one night. Let’s not waste a single second.” I repeat his words from earlier today.

His Adam’s apple bobs up and down. Then he swallows. “Are you sure?”

I nod. I want him. And the memory of this night.

He puts one arm underneath my knees and lifts me up against his chest. With two long strides, we reach the king-size bed where he lowers me to the mattress as if I’m his most prized possession. For a moment he towers over me, then he sinks down beside me.

His mouth meets mine in a lingering kiss. It’s only sweet in the beginning. Then turns scorching hot. The night only has so many hours after all. And we both know it.

“I don’t want to rush,” he murmurs against my neck while one hand sneaks under my blouse. “At the same time, I can’t wait to be inside you,” he says in between ardent kisses.

“We have all night,” I pant when his rough hand shoves my bra away and cups my breast. My entire body tenses. I’m overwhelmed. By his touch. By his intense gaze. And by his gentleness when he frees us both from our clothes.

“Look at me, Wioletta.” His head towers above mine again.

My eyelids flutter open. And I lose myself in his blue eyes while he explores my body. Calloused fingers draw circles around my nipples. Then the lines expand until there isn’t a place between my neck and my belly button Julian hasn’t

kissed and caressed. A quiver surges through my veins when he moves up my torso with a trail of kisses again. And my entire body is filled with want.

“You’re so beautiful. I wish you could see yourself through my eyes,” he whispers when he reaches my ear. Tears prickle behind my eyes, but I refuse to let them out. This is a happy moment.

“I want to touch you too.” I thread my hands through his blond hair. He’s taking care of me. But I want to make him feel as special as he makes me.

“Not yet.” While his hands play with my breasts again, his tongue invades my mouth until my skin tingles all the way from my head to my toes. I’m floating on a high that’s called Julian Smith.

“Open up for me.” He rolls in between my knees and pushes them apart. Then he descends on my body. I shiver when his erection slides over my inner thigh. His weight isn’t on me yet. Instead he leans on one elbow while the other hand is free to roam my outer thigh.

“You’re so fucking beautiful.” He caresses my thigh and my knee while he speaks with a hoarse voice.

“I’m—” Before I can finish my sentence, his body crushes mine into the mattress. Then he rolls his hips against me in frantic motions. I whimper and lift my hips to meet his. At this point, I’m ready to come from the friction his body inflicts on mine alone.

Each time I lift my hips a little higher. Each time I rub myself harder against him. Until we both exhale heavy breaths.

“You’re driving me crazy.” He presses his lips together. “I want to prepare you. I want to kiss every inch of your body. But... I need to be inside you.” His eyes are pleading with me to say yes.

“Do...” I swallow. “Do you have a condom?”

The tip of his penis grazes my entrance when he bends over to the left and retrieves a foil package out of the pocket of his pants. My eyes follow his every move. He’s packing. But I don’t need more preparation. I only need him.

Julian settles between my legs and lowers his nose against mine for a second. Then he lifts his head and holds my gaze while he presses his erection against my core. “Am I hurting you?” He releases a shaky breath and inches deeper.

“No.” I don’t recognize my own voice. I don’t know who I am anymore. All that matters is the thick penis in between my thighs as it ever so slowly slides inside me.

I whimper when he hits home. The way he stretches me from my entrance to deep inside my middle is overwhelming. Delicious. Too much. And yet not enough.

Every muscle inside Julian’s body is as tight as it can get when he pulls out and drives back in again. I close my legs over his thick thighs when he places his hands underneath my butt and let go of what little control I had. He’s in charge. He can do whatever he wants to me. I don’t care as long as the tension inside me finds an outlet.

His erection leaves and enters over and over again. I throw my head back when his pubic hair caresses my clit over and over again. Now he’s the one driving me crazy.

He angles my hips up higher and drives home even deeper while his hips roll relentlessly against mine. I pant against his

shoulder. He's trying to be gentle. But I need more.

"Let go." I pull him down until his mouth is on my lips and drive my tongue deep in his mouth. He growls. Then his hips bang against mine in unleashed passion.

My eyes want to roll back in my head and yet I can't take them off of him, the way his jaw goes slack and his neck muscles tense until they look as if they're about to erupt.

I'm delirious. From sexual tension. From crazy emotions. And from the heat between us as we race each other to the ultimate fulfillment.

Then I fall. Until nothing else matters other than his pounding heart against mine and the soft postorgasmic tingle on my skin.

Much later, I open my eyes. Someone towers over me. Not just someone. Julian.

"Good morning." He smiles down at me.

"Are you watching me sleep?" I ask with a voice hoarse from sleep and our lovemaking. Twice he took me to heaven and back again. Twice more I let him do whatever he wanted to do with me. And I wish we had the time to do it a hundred times more.

"I don't want to miss a split second with you." Little wrinkles appear in the corners of his eyes.

"I was right. You're cute." I close my eyes again and snuggle closer.

"My teammates wouldn't agree with you." His chest expands when he laughs and takes my head with it.

"Mmh," I murmur against his skin.

“Go to sleep again. I’m not going anywhere.” He puts one arm around me and places his chin on my head. I would give everything to freeze time.

There’s nowhere I’d rather be than in his arms. But I can’t sleep anymore. While the clock ticks mercilessly, my brain revolves around how I can see him again. What and if are torturous words when they’re repeated over and over again in different scenarios. Especially since there’s one we’re this is the last time I’ll ever see him.

Julian trails one finger over my arm. If only I could stop time.

“What are you thinking about?” I ask into the silence.

“What makes you think I’m thinking?” He bends down and kisses my hair.

“You’re frowning. Why aren’t you relaxing? Don’t you like holding me?”

He sighs. “I enjoy holding you too much.”

“I don’t understand.” My voice is still hoarse from sleep. And from our lovemaking.

“I don’t want to leave without you. I’m...” He clears his throat. “I’m in love with you.”

I close my eyes for a second. When I open them again, his face is right above mine. “I’m in love with you too,” I whisper.

“Thank God,” he says against my mouth. Then he molds his lips to mine. Not in the frantic way from earlier, but in a way that tells me how much I mean to him. And I do my best to tell him the same without using actual words.

“Would... would you visit me?” he asks after a few moments.

I sit up straight. “You want me to visit you in the States?”

“The moment I saw you, I knew deep down that you were my future. I know it sounds crazy. But—”

“Yes.” Tears overflow and blur my vision. I blink them away as fast as I can.

“Are you sure?” His voice cracks.

“I’m not saying I’ll stay forever. But I could visit for a while?” I throw my arms around him and bury my head against his broad shoulders.

“And then you could visit again.” He whispers in my ear and gives me a peck on my cheek when I lift my head. “And again.” His lips find my mouth in a deep kiss. One that promises me heaven on earth. Now. And in what hopefully will be our future.

“Maybe.” I pull away and giggle when he tickles my stomach.

“Let’s buy a ticket for you.” He jumps out of bed, grabs his laptop, and browses the internet for the next available flight. “I want to know when I’ll have you back in my arms again. Every minute I’ll have to spend without you will be pure torture.”

Am I crazy for following my heart? Maybe.

But what kind of crazy would I be if I didn’t take a chance on this gentle giant of a man?

CHAPTER 4

Julian

“AND YOU JUST PACKED YOUR STUFF AND WENT ON THAT flight?” Lily asks after I finish my story.

Wioletta lifts her head from my shoulder. “I didn’t own many things back then in the first place. Besides, I had nothing to lose. The restaurant owner was nice, and it was a good place to work. But it wasn’t what I wanted to do for the rest of my life.” She then turns to me. “I guess it was like Julian said. Deep down I knew the moment I saw him he was my future.”

“That’s so romantic,” Emilia says and wipes away a tear.

“How come no one told this story at your wedding?” Danny asks.

“Well, we didn’t want to worry my mom and told her a slightly different version of our meet-cute. One in which we spend more time together in Prague before I flew to Boston for the first time.” Wioletta winks.

“I guess it was a good thing I wasn’t much of a talker back then.” Tyler chuckles.

“You’re right. But I’m glad you found yourself a pretty lady and opened up.” I grin.

“Me too, buddy. Me too.” He bends down and kisses Lily.

“Now we just have to find a girlfriend for you, Danny.” I turn to the only single person in the room.

He frowns. “I’m good.”

“And once you arrived in the States, your modeling career also took off, didn’t it?” Lily asks before I can respond to Danny.

“Julian made me go to different castings, and I found my niche.” Wioletta gives me a quick kiss.

“And he bought you Fortuna.” She winks.

“I would have bought her more horses, but she wouldn’t let me,” I add.

“To love then,” Matt says and lifts an imaginary glass.

“To love and the crazy things it makes us do,” I say.

Just then a horn blows outside. History is repeating itself. Our time has run out. But this time we’ll face the new challenge ahead of us together, right from the beginning.

“Time to go,” I say. “Come here, Matty.” I push up in a standing position and pull Wioletta to her feet before I turn to my linemate. “I’ll miss your incomplete passes.”

“You moron. I’ll miss you too. Thank you for always having my back.” He slaps me on the shoulder.

“Smithy, I’ll miss you.” Emilia is the next one to hug me close. “And, I swear this is the last time, but I have to say it again. I’m so sorry. I wish there had been another way. I—”

“I understand. I’m sad to leave the Ice Tigers. But... I like a good challenge and I can’t wait to get to know the boys in New Jersey. Who knows? I might be able to teach the young guns over there a thing or two.”

“You certainly will. I’ll miss you.” Emilia hugs me one last time and follows her husband outside.

“Lily. How can I ever thank you? You turned Tyler into a human being after all.”

She chuckles. “He just needed a little push in the right direction. I’ll miss you and Wioletta.” Then she turns to my wife.

“I’ll miss you too, Lily. Please take care of Fortuna for me.”

“I promise. And once you can ride again, we’ll find the perfect place for her in New Jersey.”

While they talk horse stuff, I say goodbye to Danny. “I’ll miss your magic hands. What will I do when the muscles in my thighs refuse to cooperate again?”

He laughs. “You book an appointment. It isn’t that long of a drive, is it?” He gives me a quick hug. Then there’s only one person left.

“I still can’t believe that soon I’ll be your enemy on the ice.” Tyler steps in front of me.

“But only on the ice.” I blink away a tear.

He nods. “Absolutely. Friends?”

“Friends.” I hug Tyler. We might not have had the best start. But deep down, I know I’ll never connect with anyone on the ice as I did with him. We didn’t use words when we played hockey. I always knew where he would wait for me to

pass without even looking up. And he would know where to find me at any second of the game. You'll only find such a linemate once in a lifetime. If ever. While I'm sad that our time is over, I'll forever cherish the memories. And I'll never forget my hockey family here.

I understand that Emilia needs to plan the Ice Tigers' future. I loathe thinking about it. But deep down I know I only have a few years left to play at top level. But there's one last challenge ahead of me in New Jersey. And I'll give my new team all that's left inside me hockey-wise.

"Thank you for everything." I slap him on the shoulder. He winces. Poor guy truly took a nasty hit last night. But he'll be fine. It wasn't the first one and it certainly won't be the last one.

"See you soon." He waves goodbye and joins Lily and Danny outside.

"Are you ready for a new adventure, Mrs. Smith?" I place one hand on Wioletta's bump and hold the other out for her to take.

"Always." She places her small hand in mine.

"I'm so glad I found you. Thank you for taking a chance on me." I pull her closer.

"Thank you for sharing your life with me. And with our little one." She puts her other hand over mine. The baby chooses that moment to kick.

"He or she is excited too." I chuckle.

"I love you." Her eyes tell me how much more than words ever could.

"Love you more." I tap her nose with my index finger.

“Debatable.” She giggles.

I take in her beautiful smile. The day I met her, I fell for it.
And for her.

Yesterday I fell for her. Today I fell for her. And I will
keep falling for her.

Over and over again.

No matter the place. No matter the time zone.

Gravity will pull me right toward her.

The End

Can't get enough of the Ice Tigers' world?

[Click here for Tyler's story \(Ice Tigers 1\) and read more about
Wioletta's love for horses](#)

[Click here for Matt's story \(Ice Tigers 2\) and attend Wioletta
and Julian's wedding](#)

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Isabella Cassazza lives in Europe. She has been an avid reader from an early age, and when she's not writing, she usually has a book in her hands. Other than that, she enjoys a good hockey game, equestrian sport and chocolate—lots of chocolate.

For more books and updates:

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you so much for taking the time to read Wioletta and Julian's story. I hope you enjoyed reading about their meet cute.

Thank you to everyone who helped me to get the word out about my books. You'll never know how much I appreciate your help.

Thank you Ellie and Rosa from My Brother's Editor. I couldn't have done it without you.

Thank you to my family. Your support means the world to me.