



ICE LEAGUE TWO

OUR PRESEASON

S . C . K A T E

**Our Preseason
Ice League Book 2**

S.C. Kate

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Note from the Author:

Thank you so much for continuing the Ice League series with book 2!

What you read in these pages are settings from my real life tied in with my own rink romance daydreams.

I grew up in rinks around metro-Detroit, and for years, my life revolved around figure skating, watching my brothers' hockey games, eating dinners at concession stands, and reading romance novels on the bleachers.

For the longest time, I felt like I was sitting on all the hard work that I put into being a skater and a writer and was letting it all waste away. But through this series, I feel like I'm actually getting to combine those passions of mine and keep them alive.

So thank you again from the bottom of my heart for reading! You'll find a sneak preview of Ice League book 3 in the back (as well as clues throughout this book that hint at what book 3 is about.)

May we all write up our daydreams!

Love,

S.C. Kate

PS: I love hearing from readers! Follow along on my journey through tiktok ([@sc_kate](#)) and instagram ([@authorsc_kate](#)).

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1. TJ Vonnie

It was kind of a shocking realization that all the guys around me were starting to get married and have kids. I was one of the youngest in the group... and the only one still playing legit hockey... but still... There had been a change in a lot of the Ice League guys that I played beer hockey with all summer.

I sat back in my fancy white wooden chair and looked out around me. It really was a beautiful place to get married. I'd only ever passed through rinks in Michigan and had never made it to what they called "up north." They plotted a huge tent, dance floor, and a bunch of tables and chairs right at the base of a lake, and they had a gorgeous summer day. It was perfect for them. Grey had taken Jules outdoor skating up here during a tournament when they were kids, I guess.

It was a pretty small wedding. Neither of them had much family, but there were a ton of hockey guys milling around with their girlfriends or dates and pretty much a whole hockey team of little guys belonging to young families who were all probably on the team that Grey coached.

I peered a couple rows in front of me where I saw Max quietly burping a teeny baby boy in a onesie that had a graphic suit printed on it. Jesus. I shook my head. Max topped off his suit with a hat turned backwards. Only he would do that. Actually, I was surprised he wasn't wearing his hockey warm-ups. For as much of a goofball he was, he was taking the dad stuff seriously. Anyone could easily tell that he loved daddy duty. He had yet to relinquish the baby to his longtime girlfriend Paige, whose blonde head was next to his.

Grey was up front, waiting for the wedding procession to start. The only person standing next to him was Jules' little son. The kid looked pretty spiffy in a tux

with his hair gelled up. But Grey looked like The Absolute Man. He was my idol growing up. I was always watching Grey, Max, and Smitty as a kid. I think all of us younger players were watching them, wanting to be them.

A lot of guys around the rink thought I was Grey's younger brother because I looked so much like him. I was just a little more Italian looking and a couple inches shorter to my disappointment. I'd only made it to 6 foot even. We had the same dark hair and trimmed beard most of the time. I shaved for the event... Grey had not. I think it was because his fiancé, well, I guess wife starting today, loved it. He claimed she was mad at him every time he shaved.

I took another swig of my beer. I hoped that was allowed. This was my first wedding in a while. I looked around and realized no one else had brought their drinks to the white seats and nearly choked. Shit. I already fucked up. I doubted that Grey would notice, or care if he did, because he was so love struck by Jules. Watching them was kind of nauseating.

The music started then, and everyone got to their feet. I was a second slower. I really should've been paying more attention.

Jules came into sight then, and damn.

It was kind of weird- I always thought pregnant ladies looked slightly creepy before. But looking at Jules with Grey's future baby in there... It was perfect. She looked hot actually. She was only about six months prego, so no danger of the baby popping out of her or anything. It was kind of cute.

I felt the urge to reach out and touch her baby bump.

And- what the fuck? Like why?

I closed my eyes and gave a good head shake. I was probably just more drunk than I realized.

But when I opened my eyes, my judgment didn't change. She was like the hottest woman I'd ever seen. She looked like a fucking angel with her wispy, white dress and baby bump, and I was immediately struck with a kind of jealousy towards Grey.

I looked back to the front to see him, and his reaction was priceless. I mean, I'm a dude who doesn't give a shit about weddings. But it was pretty sweet that such a hardass like Greyson Scott was tearing up.

I was happy for them. At least some people could get it right. I kept trying with no luck. Paige tried to coach me through my last relationship, but she stopped helping because she thought the girl I was after was kind of a bitch. She kind of was. Oh well.

As soon as Jules made it to their altar, Grey lifted her veil, placed both of his large hands on either side of her belly and leaned down to kiss her forehead.

I rolled my eyes as the "aww's" I heard escaping from the mouths of practically every female in the audience, but I had to admit, it was nice. It was real. Their love. Everyone could tell by the way they looked at each other.

When the priest finally made it to the ring exchange, Canyon, Jule's son, grabbed the ring out of his tiny jacket pocket and handed it to Grey, which caused the guests to laugh and "aww" again.

After their dramatic kiss, Greyson threw his fist up in triumph and everyone cheered.

I usually didn't go to weddings. I typically just got the invite and threw it in the trash. I didn't like the pressure of having to bring a date and taking the chance that the date could get all weepy or drunk or weird. Like I said, I didn't have much luck when it came to women.

But Grey told me I had to come and didn't even give me a plus one.

But without a date I felt kind of awkward during the cocktail hour. I was drinking by myself at a high-top table trying to inconspicuously scope out any single women, but Jules didn't seem to have many single friends.

Max finally saved me.

He came by my table and held his baby out to me, practically shoving him in my arms. The pudgy guy had so much drool on him that his onesie was wet down to his belly button.

"Just in case you make it to the chel too," Max said with a wink and then shot a picture of us. By "chel" he meant "NHL." I was still playing a level down in the AHL. He was such a weirdo. Like I wouldn't know his baby for real? I was always around. Max fucking employed me every summer at the rink. But I guess goalies always were kind of weird fucks. I was so focused on not dropping his baby that I must've looked weird myself. But if I dropped this baby, he'd kill me. I'd literally be a dead man.

I stared down into the baby's big, happy eyes and was struck with responsibility. The baby just smiled at me and made a cute noise, showing its two teeny teeth. How could it smile at me? Did it not realize that I could literally accidentally drop it and hurt it bad?

"He likes you, bud! But, hey, you're kinda gripping him hard," Max grimaced. "Jesus. Give me back my baby." That caused me to relax and laugh a bit, I never thought I'd hear those words from him.

Just as soon as I handed the baby off, extremely carefully, I felt a heavy pat on the back.

I turned to see Grey and Jules in their wedding outfit glory making their rounds. I pulled both of them into a quick hug.

“Happy for you, kids,” I told them, but I couldn’t take my eyes off Jules’ stomach. Right then it moved. It really fucking moved. I felt my eyes practically pop out of my head at the surprise.

“Jesus, it’s really real.” I couldn’t keep the awe out of my voice. Jules’ glassy eyes danced with laughter at me in return and Grey placed a protective hand on the bump.

“Fuck yeah it is,” he said. “We’re gonna have more too. Right baby?” he said down to her.

Jules rolled her eyes, looking way up at his tall frame, but couldn’t keep the smile from sliding onto her face. She obviously loved what he said too.

She reached up and patted his neatly trimmed beard. “Mama’s gotta use the bathroom.”

“Need help?” Grey asked as he wagged his eyebrows, to which she rolled her eyes again.

Grey kept his eyes on her as she waddled away until she reached the tent where an extra bathroom had been set up.

“I think she’s going to be constantly pregnant for the next ten years,” Grey joked, but something in his eyes told me he wasn’t lying.

I think love made him lose his ever-loving mind. “Woah there, bud. That’s a lot of babies,” I said.

“You’ll know when you know. But damn. She wants me even more now, like all the time. Pregnancy hormones are amazing,” he smirked and raised his beer bottle to clink mine.

“I thought pregnant chicks just cried all the time?” I asked him curiously.

“Nope!” Max jumped in and looked at Grey. “Crying only comes after the birth, man. Mom and baby... and probably you too. Have fun with that.”

Grey shrugged his shoulders. "I can handle it." He turned back to me, "How are you doin, man?"

"Kinda sucks you didn't give me a plus one," I half-joked... The other half of me was annoyed.

"We didn't give you a plus one because Jules and I think you'd be great for someone here," Grey said pointedly.

I looked at him skeptically and couldn't help but think they were trying to pull one over on me.

"Okay, I'll bite," I resigned. "Who?"

"That, we aren't going to tell you, little bro. We didn't tell her either. If you find each other, great. If not, too bad, so sad," he laughed. "But we do actually think you two would be perfect for each other."

With that, he slapped me on the back again before disappearing into the crowd, leaving me to wonder if what he said had any truth to it.

2. Ellie Brampton

Today was finally The Day.

Saturday, July 25th. Christmas in July. The Day I'd been working on almost exclusively since January.

And things were going pretty damn well, right down to the silvery G&J stamped cocktail napkins to go along with the bride and groom's signature cocktails.

I tried to suppress a giddy smile as I watched people milling about and chatting happily with one another. I was hoping this success would bring me more elite clientele- the higher-paying, smaller-headcount, refined-taste type of bride and grooms. My bread and butter.

I regained my composure and smoothed my dress, mentally checking the ceremony and cocktail hour off my list.

Next was rounding up people to head into the tent for dinner and Grey's speech. I really loved how Grey and Jules skipped out on having bridesmaids and groomsmen. Less cooks in the kitchen for sure. It avoided the usual problems I dealt with on a weekly basis: missing groomsmen during photo time, and drunk bridesmaids crying about their own love lives during the reception. I'm not sure how many times in the past few years that I've had to ream people out with the phrase: *It is not your day!*

"We are moving the flock into the tent," I said clearly into my headset to my assistant and vendors. "I repeat, help me herd the flock and shove 'em in the tent please, Nikki."

Nikki, my best friend, roommate, and assistant, suddenly appeared- looking like a chique guest in a flowery dress with her raven-black hair pinned back in an up-do- and started to direct people. She always called herself a professional temp, but her affinity for weddings

and happy-go-lucky attitude made her perfect for working in the wedding industry.

Where I've always been an organized, cross-all-the-T's, dot-all-the-I's type of girl (and let's face it, some may call me uptight), Nikki brings the fun and has the whole free-spirited, artsy-fartsy vibe. She's also really the only friend I've made in Northern Michigan since I moved up here about five years ago looking to completely start over.

I guess I should amend that she's my only outside-of-work friend. My main source of income, especially during the week and during the slower wedding seasons, came from coaching figure skating, and I absolutely loved my girls. Heck, they even felt like my own daughters sometimes, but they didn't really count as friends considering they were all under the age of 10.

I quickly entered the tent and made my way over to the DJ to give directions for the speeches- or speech I should say. Again, Grey and Jules were really my style kind of people: they eliminated all traditional speeches and were only having Grey say grace and speak a few words before dinner.

"Uh, Ellie?" I heard Grey's deep voice sounding a bit pained from behind me, pulling me from the DJ.

I turned to see Grey kneeling down looking super confused at Jules' longer skirt, and Jules giving me a pleading look.

"Right," I nodded and internally slapped myself for not remembering that I was supposed to bustle Jules' dress before the reception started. "Here, I'll have you stand behind the sweetheart table so I can get out of sight and do it."

Grey took Jules' hand and whispered a thanks down to me while I quickly found all the little loops and buttons to pin up her train. It was a French bustle, and her seamstress did an excellent job, making very little

hassle for me. The last few years made me an expert at bustling dresses. Nervous maids-of-honor usually struggled, and wedding minutes were precious.

When I stood back up, Jules reached to touch my hand. “Ellie, everything is so beautiful. It’s better than I imagined. I hope you enjoy some dinner, drinks, and dancing. Make sure you have fun too! Have a glass of wine for me especially,” she said, touching her baby bump with her other hand.

“It’s definitely the most beautiful tent wedding I’ve worked on,” I admitted, feeling my face heat up at her compliments.

“Yes!” she said excitedly. “I honestly just wanted to throw it together as fast as possible, but this blew my expectations out of the water. So, glass of wine, for me, please.” Jules’ eyes crinkled in the corners as she laughed and looked at the lit-up tent around her. It really was fancy-pants around here. Tulle and twinkling lights laced the entire structure of the tent, and they all tied up to the center chandelier hanging over top of the currently clean and empty, black and white checkered dance floor. The tables surrounding the dance floor, now filling up with guests, were draped with white tablecloths and dotted with Chiavari chairs.

“You girls did amazing,” Grey confirmed. “But I hope all this wedding talk the last few months didn’t make our little nugget in there a girly girl.”

Jules rolled her eyes and looked up at him with a smile.

“What?” he asked defensively. “She’s gotta be ready for hockey season.”

“Or figure skating,” Jules added. “Or ballet, or soccer, or nothing at all; it’s up to her, Grey, remember?” she asked, patting him on the chest.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever Mommy says,” he teased, but then leaned down to seemingly whisper to

her belly.

Jules shot me an amused look and shook her head, but I could tell a smile was pulling at the corners of her lips.

Their love for each other was probably the most apparent between any bride and groom that I'd ever worked with. It seemed they were always touching each other and cracking jokes at the other's expense. Their attitudes about life were like two kids in a candy shop, and even though I'd written off my love life a while ago, I felt the ping of loneliness when working with them. I had to shove that aside though. My business was flourishing, and this was my busy season- no time to get distracted and start desperately swiping on dating apps. Also, Venti's was catering, and their vanilla sugar cupcakes could probably make me happier than any man ever could.

3. TJ

“And now!” the DJ’s voice boomed throughout the tent. “For the first time on the dance floor, give it up for... Mr. and Mrs. Scott!”

Greyson towered over Jules as he led her to the middle of the dance floor while a romantic oldies tune started to play throughout the tent.

I sipped on my jack and coke, skeptically scanning the tables around me for ‘Ms. Perfect for me,’ as Grey and Jules deemed her.

There were at least four girls I picked out right away that I figured were here alone... and then it was down to three after I saw a hulking defenseman from the Calgary team walk back to his table with two drinks. This place was filled with only hockey people apparently. I was kind of afraid I’d end up hitting on an ex-girlfriend of one of my hockey buds.

Towards the end of the first dance song, the DJ interrupted with the usual invite: “The happy newlyweds would love to invite all the couples present onto the dance floor for a good luck dance,” he announced.

I was tugged from behind then and whirled around to see Max shaking his head and shoving his drooly, happy baby at me once again with serious eyes.

“The wifey loves to dance, man. I’m trusting you,” he called over his shoulder as he started moving towards Paige, who was in a gaggle of people by the bar.

I looked down at the pudge ball that was forced on me and ever so carefully sat down.

“Just two single guys, am I right,” I said to the baby. He stared up at me and gave the goofiest gum-showing smile.

“Alright!” I laughed. “You feel me. Why they gotta do couple dances anyways? So awkward, right, buddy?”

I must’ve pinched him or something because all of a sudden, his face started to crack, and a scream-cry was released.

I tried to do the whole bounce your knee thing to calm him down, but the cries seemed to escalate with that.

“Buddy!” I whispered. “I thought we were friends now. Two single dudes, right!” I scanned for Max, but he was twirling Paige on the dance floor and busting some weird moves.

I heard an exasperated huff from behind me then.

“Give me the baby,” a stern girl’s voice snapped.

I turned in my seat and made eye contact with the most beautiful girl I think I’d ever seen. I actually felt like the wind was knocked out of me. If the clouds could figuratively part and angels could sing, this would be that moment, and not just because she was saving me with Mr. Drool monster.

The look on her beautifully delicate face wasn’t very pleasant though...

“What is wrong with you?” she asked, snapping her fingers in my face. “Did you not hear me?” Her eyebrow creased.

I felt my mouth drop open, was she talking to me that way?

“Hand over the baby. Are you stupid? You’re bouncing him way too hard,” she said in a harsh whisper.

I paused for a minute, trying to understand why she was being so mean to me.

“Well, I don’t know if I *should* hand him over,” I finally said after finding my ability to speak. “You’re being awfully mean.”

“The baby is almost as loud as the DJ right now,” she said tersely. “Max and Paige are enjoying their dance and they’re going to leave the dance floor if you don’t give me their baby! Once some people leave the dance floor, they all start to leave.”

Who was being loud now, I thought. She went from a whisper to practically yelling at me... But as annoying as she was, I was still totally captured by her. I wanted to tip her angular chin down to me and claim her beautiful pink lips with my mouth right there to stop any more harshness from coming out and being aimed at me. It would preserve her beauty honestly.

But she just shot me an annoyed look and reached for the butterball, taking matters into her own hands.

Immediately, the baby stopped screaming and started busying himself playing with a chunk of her curled auburn-colored hair that reached down to him. Since I was released, I slowly stood and realized I towered over her. Maybe her tone made her seem larger. But she probably wasn’t much taller than Jules, who was around 5 foot even.

“Damn,” I cursed to myself. I couldn’t be with a short girl. I took another sip of my jack and coke to ease the disappointment. Our future babes wouldn’t surpass me in height if I married short. I was trying hard for my swimmers, ya know? A man had to.

“Excuse me?” She regarded me with a suspicious look.

“You’re short,” I said with a shrug, trying hard to ignore how perfect and motherly she looked holding the baby.

“And?” she asked with an arched eyebrow directed at me. She had an annoying way of phrasing things- like she knew so much more than me. It made me feel like I was a dumb little kid again being reprimanded by my three know-it-all older sisters.

“Can’t have short babies,” I said matter-of-factly.

She snorted at this and rolled her eyes at me like I was some low specimen that she’d never get with anyway.

“What’s so bad about me?” I asked, suddenly feeling very defensive. I was already feeling a bit sad about sitting here alone while all the happy couples sashayed their way around; it really felt like they were rubbing it in my face on purpose.

She ignored me and looked at the baby lovingly while slowly swaying. This girl. She was the true definition of what Billy Joel was explaining in his song “She’s Always a Woman.” While she totally gave off the vibe that she couldn’t care less about you, she also had an addictive aura about her. She was just so gorgeous that I couldn’t make myself walk away.

Max’s baby chose that moment to ruin the trance she’d put me in.

Right at that second, almost in slow motion, butterball spit a line of liquid a foot high, like a volcano erupting, all over Ms. Sassy Thing.

White liquid coated her neck and chest and looked like it was seeping down the center of her shiny lavender dress between her (beautifully featured) boobs.

Immediately, uncontrollable laughter bubbled out of me- karma got her for being such a brat in my book.

“I told you that you rocked him too hard!” she screeched at me when the shock wore off.

“Oh my God,” I sighed at the ceiling, fighting a smile and willing myself not to laugh anymore before I looked back down at her again. “Sure, let’s play the blame game now.”

Paige swooped in then, interrupting us to steal her baby back.

“Ah! I am so sorry!” she apologized with worried eyes and a creased forehead as she rushed for her kid. Man, I liked the little guy a lot more now. He had my back.

After Paige tore away toward the bathrooms, I was left with the spit-up covered she-devil. I really wanted to walk away, but when I looked back down at her to say goodbye, I noticed the rims of her bottom eyelids were turning a little red... and there might've been a little glassiness coating those green eyes, which immediately made me feel bad for laughing at her.

“Hey, it's okay,” I tried to comfort her while searching the table for a napkin to hand over.

“No, it is not,” she said through gritted teeth. “Please continue to the dance floor, sir.”

I tried to give her the napkin in my hand, but what I really wanted to do was ease the tension I saw in her shoulders.

“Are you sure you don't need a bit of help?” I couldn't help but sneak a peek at her slime covered cleavage- it really wasn't my fault because she was about a foot shorter than me.

“Can you just mind your own business please. I'm kind of dealing with a lot right now, and this is my only nice work dress,” she said.

I was taken aback by that. “*Work* dress?” I questioned. I thought she was a guest.

She let out a sigh and nodded, not making eye contact as she tried to clean up.

It dawned on me then- why she was being so cruel to me- I really should have known!

“It's like... your week, isn't it?” I asked her. Like I said, I'm a man that was raised with three sisters. I wouldn't hold it against her if it was. I totally knew the signs and she was exhibiting some for sure: snipping at

me, almost crying, dealing with “a lot right now.” She was probably a very nice girl if it wasn’t this week.

She looked at me like I had three heads though. Damn, her eyes were just so large and green.

“Your uh... shark time?” I offered.

She stopped messing with her dress and her mouth fell slightly open. She still had a confused look on her face, so I tried again.

“Like ketchup packet time?” I squinted at her.

“WHAT?”

I actually physically jumped back a bit from her outburst and put my arms up, afraid she’d hit me.

“Did you just call a woman on her period a... a ketchup packet?” Her jaw jutted out in defiance at me, waiting for an answer.

“Uh... well... I...” I couldn’t really find words to answer her. She was scaring me even though she was a teeny tiny thing.

She shook her head at me and huffed again before turning on her heel and tearing off. I could make out her saying something about why she was single as she left me in her wake.

Well, maybe that was just the low before the high of the night, I reasoned. I tried to brush off the interaction... because I had Mrs. TJ to find.

4. Ellie

My dress was a literal tragedy. I blinked furiously against my burning eyes as I tried to save it in the hotel lobby's bathroom sink.

I left Nikki in charge of organizing the passing out of the cupcakes while I hustled back to the hotel to clean off this stain. The tent, which was part of the Traverse City Cherry Lane venue where my little wedding business operated out of, was only a short golf cart ride away.

I shook my head and tried a deep breathing exercise to ease away my frustration. In through my nose, make my stomach big, and out through my mouth, I directed myself. My business budget was pretty tight these days and it was causing me premature stress lines that no number of lotions or essential oils could fix. I hung on by a thread each of the past four summers according to my accountant father.

What also didn't help my financial situation was that my coaching hours were always hurt in the summers because of stupid hockey. It was tradition for the professional team from Detroit to host preseason training camps at Pine Ridge Ice Arena in Traverse City through August, which cut out figure skating time. Forget a rink ever sacrificing hockey ice, no way, the bias was completely unfair and, I'll say it- sexist. While more girls were joining hockey, and boys joining figure skating, which was amazing, there was still a dominance of boys on the ice for hockey, and girls on the ice for figure skating times, and what coincidentally always got axed from the rink schedule first? Figure skating.

I blew out a breath. Buying another couture dress to wear to my events would make a pretty big dent in my profits that I really couldn't afford to take this year. I'd have to try my best to make this stain come out.

And what was up with that a-hole guy? He must've been a hockey friend of Grey's. He oozed hockey dude with his pricey in-style suit. I'm sorry, but those pants were just too tight and too short for him. And those fancy loafers with no socks, who was he kidding? I internally rolled my eyes. What an arrogant hockey jock. I could hear Nikki in my head trying to convince me that it wasn't his fault, but ya know what? I *knew* it was.

I moved to hold my dress under the hand dryer. I'd have to make this work for the night.

While inspecting my crappy dry-cleaning job, I jumped at the sound of my phone loudly buzzing against the bathroom counter.

Now, okay... I'm a 23-year-old working woman. I knew not to take phone calls during events, but also, it was my own company. And my mom was calling.

"How's my girl doin'?" The comfort of her voice immediately soothed me.

"Well, my dress is toast," I complained.

"Nooo, the lavender little number?"

"Yupp," I shook my head at the injustice of it even though she couldn't see me.

"Well, you gotta get back to business like a woman on a mission. And you know what mission I'm talking about," she hinted.

I rolled my eyes. "This cannot be another call about me finding a date to cousin Jacob's wedding *next year*, mom. I'd rather plan the whole thing than be in it."

"Well," her voice went an octave higher. "That's just not the case! And you have so many options presented in front of you each weekend!" She urged. "You have to look up from your work and give someone a chance eventually!"

"Yeah, yeah," I muttered.

“Well honey, I just wanted to remind you. Now don’t you let a little dress situation stop you from having a great time. Go shake ya booty a little! I’m sure you’re allowed to after all the hard work you put into this one! Less than a year to pull this off and I bet it looks spectacular. Can you send your dad and I some pictures?”

“Sure, Mom. How’s Florida summer treating you guys?” My parents were former Michigan snowbirds-retired people who lived in northern Michigan for the summer and then escaped to Florida for the remainder of the seasons- who turned into full-time Floridians.

She tsked on the other end of the line. “Nope, I will not carry on. Ya know, I wouldn’t bug you about dating but I know you could find someone lovely and have so much fun, you just don’t let yourself. Your father says to find a sportsball watching buddy for him.” I couldn’t help but smile at that. He totally wasn’t even into sports, as one could tell from the term “sportsball.” The only sport he ever watched was figure skating, and it was very easy to tell that he only followed it in order to relate to me, which I appreciated very much.

We said our goodbyes and I hurried to get back to the wedding.

Outside, I quickly hiked myself up into the golf cart, placing my heels in the shotgun seat next to me- I hated driving with them on- and turned the key to flip the ignition.

Driving the golf cart at night was one of my favorite perks of working at this venue because it was breathtaking at night. The sidewalks were all lined with lights, you could see the sun slowly setting into the nighttime, and you could hear the lake’s waves breaking on the beach in the distance. The nice breeze also wasn’t bad to cool off my sweaty, anxious self.

After the short ride was up, I quickly, and loathingly, put my heels back on and smoothed my hair behind my ears. It was back to business.

Opening the tent flaps and looking in on the party made my heart flutter with happiness because the dance floor was totally a vibe. Canyon had changed into basketball shorts, had his shirt flapping open from being unbuttoned, and had his tie around his head. He was bouncing around on the dance floor with a couple other youngsters all with open coca-colas in their hands. They looked like mini versions of the guys who all held cracked beers.

I looked across the floor at Jules and waved, trying to catch her attention to ask if she needed anything, but I caught Grey instead. He shot me a quick thumbs up with a wide grin, so I hustled back to the tent's partitioned back room to make sure the late-night snacks were almost ready to come out to the guests.

As soon as I opened the back flap to the little room, I almost knocked a whole tray of pizza out of a teenage cater-waiter's hands.

"I am so sorry!" I gasped. The teenage boy muttered his own apology, avoiding eye-contact with me. I internally cringed seeing his cheeks turn red. It was my fault, and I almost wrecked my dress even more. It was just *not* my night tonight.

"Nice catch!" I called after him.

The sudden sound of clapping and laughing coming from the back of the tent probably made him want to hightail it out of the situation faster... I know it made me want to. Of course Nikki and Mario, the Venti Catering owner's son, would see the little mishap. Mario was a lanky Italian boy with the beautiful brown eyes, long eyelashes, and curly dark hair to prove it. He

attended Michigan State and only worked up here for his dad in the summers.

I rolled my eyes at their amused faces as I made my way toward them.

“Whatever,” I mumbled. “Miss me?”

“You know it, babe,” Nikki replied. “But everything is running smoothly, and we are almost to the finish line...” she drawled, giving Mario the side-eye.

“So...” Mario said, turning to me with a mischievous smile. “Time for...”

“Oh God, no,” I groaned.

“It’s tradition!” Nikki pushed.

“You two are always looking for trouble,” I warned, but that didn’t stop me from craning my neck and searching to see if any hotel higher-ups were around.

“Here, bella,” Mario’s eyes glinted as he passed me and Nikki empty shot glasses. “Time to finally cut loose, my girlies.”

It’s not like we didn’t work hard all day long, and it’s not like I could afford to not be on good terms with Mario. We did business together practically every weekend. Plus, I was safe because I was with Nikki. At least that’s what I told myself as I downed the vodka.

The lone shot on a pretty empty stomach thanks to the crazy day was enough to allow Nikki to drag me onto the dance floor for a couple songs.

Soon Grey and Jules rejoined the dancing, and I couldn’t leave without looking rude...

I was actually having a blast dancing around in the flashing lights to an old Shania Twain song, but when I turned to look back at Nikki and sing the chorus with her, I faced Hockey Douche from earlier. I immediately glared at him, just daring him to come even near me

dancing. He took the hint. The smile fell from his pretty-boy face and he cha-cha-ed away pretty smoothly.

In the back of my mind, I knew that my mother would have reprimanded me for being mean, but she didn't know what guys were like now.

It's not that I wasn't attracted to him. He had looks in spades- tall, dark, and handsome if I'd ever seen it. He also had a hockey butt which was nicely featured as he danced away- I mentally slapped myself for even thinking that. But I knew his type. He was just another athlete on the prowl for a one-time hook-up. And I was simply not that.

5. TJ

By 11pm I was getting pretty sick of the search. I kept dancing around each girl that I thought had potential and then trying to make eye contact with Grey or Jules to see if they would give the nod of approval.

But so far- the girl by the bar I spent about a half hour chatting up got a negative head shake from Jules. The girl I danced to "Up Town Funk" with got a mouthed "hell no" from Grey. And the last girl who I downed a Tequila shot with got a disapproving grimace from both of them.

Sweating, tired from dancing, and a little drunk, I made my way over to the newlyweds who were now sitting down at the sweetheart table relaxing.

"Okay guys, give it up, who do you think I should meet? I'm pleading with you guys here," I urged.

Jules just shook her head, and Grey didn't even look up; he just kept massaging his girl's feet.

"God, that feels so good, baby," Jules said in a breathy little voice.

"That's what she said," I retorted, then slapped a hand over my mouth. The moment it popped out I wished I could have taken it back, because I knew I sounded like a teenage boy saying it. But what's a guy to do with that sentence?

Grey glanced up and shot me an amused look.

"Should I go for it or you, babe?" Jules asked him.

"I'll do the honors, hon," Grey answered her. "Jules wants you to know that not being able to keep comments like that to yourself is what gets you in trouble and the reason why we did not set you up in an obvious way."

"Just in case you were mean," Jules added.

It really didn't seem like a fair answer to me. If the girl was perfect for me, then she would accept all of me, no? But because I was drunk, my rebuttal didn't come out that way.

"So, you two are stopping me from getting what you guys have just because of that?" I asked them.

I could tell they were giggling at my expense, and I didn't like it at all.

"Why is everyone being so mean to me tonight?" I let out a frustrated growl.

Jules took the bait. "Who was mean to you, Teej? They'll feel a mama bear's wrath."

"Just this girl," I answered lamely. If I was being honest with myself, I really couldn't get Spit-up Girl's face out of my head. Those beautifully high cheekbones, those glowing green eyes, that bangin bod... even though it was pretty tiny. And she looked like she could use some help. I was a sucker for always trying to help. I needed to stop trying to play Prince Charming with girls. That's why I always ended up dating psychos. And she obviously was one- she bit my head off for no reason.

"Well... if it was a girl, she might've been right. You didn't say anything patronizing, did you? You have a way of doing that TJ," Jules warned.

I spread my arms out wide in front of me trying to relay my innocence. "Are you serious?! That's defamation, Grey!"

They cracked up at that one. Sure, make fun of the drunk guy. Grey was no help anymore. He was team Jules all the way. Bro code, over.

The DJ stopped the music then, and I noticed most of the couples who had populated the dance floor were scattered around the tent looking pretty beat.

"Alright, everybody!" The DJ announced. "Please come grab a sparkler here by the stage and make your

way out to the sidewalk to prepare for the Scott family's walkout!"

I pulled my tie loose and shook my head at them as I walked away to get their stupid sparklers.

I did my job and was a good sparkler twirler. I was last in the twirler line and was responsible for opening the door of a fancy old car for Grey and Jules to get into. Only thing was- this whole twirler car thing was more for pictures, because they redid it a bunch, and I had to open the door for them about three freaking times.

When I finally shut the door on them for good, I got yelled at because I forgot Canyon was also loading up into that car. They didn't really clarify that to me, so it wasn't completely my fault.

Canyon came sprinting out of the tent with his spiked hair, tie around his head, dress shirt unbuttoned, and with gym shorts on instead of suit pants. Damn. The kid looked like he had a blast, and he was smart, I should've packed other pants. The crowd cheered as he made his way toward the car, and he ate it up, waving his hands for louder applause.

When I gallantly opened the door to let Canyon in, I heard Jules shout at me: "Straight across from you!"

I looked at her like she'd lost her mind... until I registered what she meant, and finally looked where she said...

Standing straight across from me was Spit-up Girl.

6. Ellie - SUNDAY MORNING

I left everything as is last night because Grey and Jules booked the entire venue for the whole weekend- which meant the girls would probably be enjoying the spa located in the hotel, the men were probably drinking on the golf course, and no one would be using the tent that I had to clean.

Looking in on the messy tent this morning made me regret not asking for at least a little bit of help last night though. The tear down would take a while and Nikki wouldn't be able to come assist for a couple hours because she was working one of her other temp jobs. It was fine though; I was never one to shy away from a little work.

I quickly walked behind the DJ stand and connected my phone to the aux cord to play some Taylor Swift songs. Music always helped me drown out my own thoughts; plus, as the epitome of female entrepreneurial success, Taylor Swift was an inspiration.

I immediately got to work stripping all the decorations and tablecloths off the tables. I would eventually have to haul them back to the hotel's massive laundry unit to wash them.

Working kept my mind busy; it's what was needed and healthy for me. When I dropped out of college five years ago, my parents thought I'd lost my mind, but I couldn't face what had happened there. I shuddered against the memory...*It's fine, I'm fine*, I reminded myself.

I'd made all the right decisions since then, and my hard work paid off: I built a safe and stable life. Each weekend of the summer gave me the new challenge to run a perfect wedding, and during the week, I felt like I was really making a difference at the rink.

I lost myself in my own little world while I cleaned and thought about the work week ahead of me. It had to have been around noon by the time I made it to the de-tulle-ing of the tent's ceiling. It really was a shame that my next wedding here didn't want the twinkly lights and tulle, or else I could've left it. I stood on the ladder trying to untie the knot I'd been overzealous making on Thursday night during the set up.

As I struggled with the tulle, I heard someone rip open one of the tent flaps causing me to let out a shriek and wobble a bit on the ladder.

"My God! It's just me!" a frustrated male voice yelled at me. "Some people have hangovers after weddings, you know."

I paused for a moment, registering just how rude that outburst was.

I slid my gaze over to see who the offensive voice belonged to, and of course it was Hockey Douche.

Gone was his suit and tie, and instead he wore a light blue polo and nice golf shorts that showed off his muscular body. He topped off his outfit with a hat turned backwards... I was always a sucker for the stupid backwards hat.

He looked at me with wide eyes and outstretched arms, as if questioning why I screamed.

I put a hand to my heart to slow my breathing.

He started walking closer with concerned eyes then, but I wished he would've just turned around and left, because I knew what territory I was edging on now. I couldn't stop my brain's one-track lane to panic land. Why had he come back here? Why of all people would he see me in this compromising position?

I knew what I had to do, and as I started to scramble down the wobbly ladder, he rushed forward to keep the base of it still.

I could feel the tears starting to come forward and my entire body was beginning to tremble. I tried like hell to coach myself off the ledge, but just as usual, I couldn't stop the shaking.

"Hey, hey," I heard from my peripheral vision. "Water?" he asked.

I honestly am not sure what I even answered because I was busy performing a tip from a recent podcast about panic attacks: I laid straight down on the floor, wrapped my arms around myself, closed my eyes, and started to count my breaths.

One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three-

"What the fuck are you doing?"

My eyes flashed open, and I tried to throw him a glare in my scared state.

"I'm having... a..." I tried to get words out, but my body was shaking like it was 20 degrees despite the beautiful summer day.

He gave me a curious look then and pulled up a foldable chair next to where I was laying down. I almost cried out because I just wanted to be left the hell alone. I tried to close my eyes again and tell myself that nothing was wrong.

"You got this. Get back up! You're a badass boss bitch!" he yelled down at me like he was some kind of football coach or something.

Which did not help the situation at all. I felt the tears erupt then.

"Stop yelling at me!" I screamed up at him.

"I'm just trying to help!" he yelled back with wide eyes.

He sat back in his seat then and looked like he started playing with his phone. At least that was better than the yelling. I needed zero pressure. Calm.

I closed my eyes again and tried to focus on stopping my mind from creating intrusive thoughts and my body from shaking. I needed to be zennnnn. I pictured the empty rink- my happy place- with clean, glistening ice waiting to be marked up by edges. Nothing was wrong, no one was touching me, all was completely fine.

I heard Hockey Boy clear his throat, pulling me from my focus.

“Wanna uh... try something?” he asked.

I pushed his voice away. Maybe if I ignored him, he'd leave. Why stay and watch someone have a panic attack?

But what happened next shocked me. He moved down to the ground next to me, and ever so slowly rolled right on top of me. I was hit with a wave of sunscreen, beer, and boy smell.

7. TJ

Panic immediately slid into those green eyes, but I quickly explained myself to her, "I'm giving you compression. Shhh."

I pressed a lot of my body weight onto her, but not all of it- I didn't want to completely squish her. I kept myself propped up a bit by placing my forearms on both sides of her head.

She looked at me like I was crazy, but I mean, this made sense- it was like a weighted blanket, right?

"Trust me, okay?" I asked her. "I'm trying to help you... Shit, I don't even know your name." Yeesh, I couldn't help but think that this was probably a bad position to be found in. Hopefully none of my buddies wandered in from the golf course.

She looked like a feral cat with her eyes darting everywhere except to meet mine, but seeing her this close up affirmed my judgment of her beauty last night. She had a nice summer tan goin which complemented her honey tinted auburn hair.

"Ellie Brampton," she finally said.

I cracked a smile. "Pretty."

"Oh, don't do that." She rolled her eyes at me.

"Do what?!" I asked defensively.

She didn't answer right away.

"I'm waiting," I pushed.

"Be all fake schmoozey and charming."

I squinted down at her. "Are you for real? Am I not genuine? I looked up this little maneuver just for you," I told her. "And I think you're feeling better now, seeing as you can make fun of me, huh?"

I felt her take a deep, full breath underneath me, and I knew it had worked, because a couple minutes ago those breaths were so shotty I thought she was going to pass out on me. She didn't make any move signaling she wanted me to get up just yet though.

"Why are you here?" she demanded in a sassy voice.

"No 'thank you'?! I asked with wide eyes. "My name's TJ by the way. And I lost my wallet here somewhere last night, so I figured I'd come back and look for it."

"*You're* Theodore?" she asked with an amused smile.

"Yeah, so what?" I instantly felt my shackles rising.

She cackled then. At least I helped her feel better. I moved to roll away from her now.

"I'm sorry, it's just, I found your wallet under a table and... never would have taken you for a Theodore."

"Well good thing my name is TJ," I retorted. The wallet was a hand-me-down from my father, the man I was named after, and it had Theodore printed on the outside in fancy handwriting. "That happen to you often?" I asked curiously, moving up to a sitting position. She was still laying straight as a board with her long, pretty hair fanned out around her.

"Why did you yell at me?" she asked, ignoring my question and looking up at the ceiling. Even her side profile was cute. She had an adorable, upturned nose, and I wondered if it was naturally like that or if she pushed it up too much as a kid while sniffing.

"I was trying to coach you out of it," I shrugged. "Didn't think I'd make you cry like a baby," I smirked.

I waited for her rebuff, but when one didn't come, I felt kinda bad for adding the baby comment. She

continued to stare up at the tent ceiling but gone was the lightness from a few seconds ago; in its place was the stoic business chick face she had plastered on all of wedding night. She had a knock-out smile and I wanted to see it again... I should just tell her my middle name, I thought.

“It only happens when I get scared... and my mind kind of spirals. I should have been paying more attention to my surroundings so I don’t let it happen again,” she grumbled more to herself than me.

“Let what happen again?”

“Alright,” she sat up slowly. “Time to get back to work here, Theodore,” she said, as though the last five minutes hadn’t even happened. She quickly got to her feet and started to move forward.

“No, no you don’t. You don’t get away with it that fast,” I warned, getting up and starting to follow after her.

She spun on her heel, and I almost ran smack into her. She placed her hand in the center of my chest and pushed back.

“Please leave,” she commanded without making eye-contact.

“Why?” I asked, looking down at her.

She didn’t make a sound then- just stared at my chest, seemingly fixated on monitoring my breathing. Even though I was prepared she was going to swat my hand away, I took the chance to lift her delicate chin. I wanted to see those beautiful green eyes again.

“Scaredy cat,” I challenged her.

Her eyes flashed and her lower jaw jutted out at me.

“No,” she snapped, but she still didn’t push me away.

I raised my eyebrows. “I like it when you get feisty.”

Her face cracked in disapproval, and she whirled away from me. “You are beyond irritating me, Theodore,” she called back.

“Fine, don’t tell me,” I said as I moved quickly to fall in step with her. For a short girl, she moved pretty damn fast. “But what can I help you with?”

I’ll admit it, I should have walked straight out because stop with the Prince Charming complex, dude—but she looked like the kind of girl who could stand on her own two feet. Unfortunately, she also looked like the kind of girl who shut everyone else out and was left lonely...

She was waiting for someone to take the challenge to barge into her life. She wasn’t going to make it easy, but I always loved a good challenge.

8. Ellie

After a long Sunday at the venue, I was finally driving back to my apartment to have a restful night. I needed to reset after the busy weekend. I was already planning on lighting some lavender candles, changing into my pjs, throwing some Mac & cheese in the microwave, and then pouring myself a glass of wine to enjoy while I caught up with my once-a-week guilty pleasure tv show. I craved cranking the AC and then snuggling up under my heated blanket. I was way more of a true Michigander than my parents ever were and was kind of done with summertime.

Nikki texted she wouldn't be home tonight because she was staying over at her boyfriend's house. We always let each other know our whereabouts; it was a good and needed system for women.

While I microwaved my dinner, I tried to stop thinking and shove the unusual day into the back of my brain. While I had to admit that it was nice of TJ to help me tear down, and that I might've initially judged him a bit harshly, I needed to wipe him from my brain. How embarrassing to have a panic attack in front of him. If I never saw him again, I could completely erase the fact that I ever showed weakness in front of the man. It didn't matter anyway. He'd be gone tomorrow probably, back to whatever corner of the world he was from. That was the beauty of living and working in a vacation spot: the fudgees- what we called out-of-towners because they always came and packed up the touristy fudge shops- would all disappear as soon as the temperature dipped.

I knew my mom would've wanted me to give him a chance, but I didn't need anyone; I was safer on my own. I figured the longer I stayed alone and stayed calm, the stronger and more centered I'd become... and really, it was stupid Theodore's fault for my panic attack today anyway. He was the catalyst because he scared me... I

needed to shove him away if he ever contacted me again.

As I poured my favorite wine, my doorbell rang.

I made it to the door just on time to see a delivery man walking away. Now, I know I'm a little weird, but I went back to my bedroom to grab my pepper spray just in case. It was after sunset, and you never knew who could be out there. Some spray could make a world of difference.

I safely grabbed up the package and immediately recognized the brand name on the box.

I quickly tore it open to reveal a stunning light green dress just like my now slightly ruined lavender one. I'd never seen this dress in green, and I loved it.

I pulled it out and held it up to me, causing a small piece of paper to flutter to the floor.

On the small, stylish index card was typed out: "Because I felt bad your old one was ruined, and this one will match your gorgeous eyes."

My mom was quite the lady. I couldn't believe she'd gone out of her way to make sure I had something perfect to wear to my next event without having to dip into my savings.

I dialed up her number but ended up getting her answering machine. I left a short message thanking her for the perfect gift.

9. TJ

I hadn't received a thank you yet... I mean, I knew there was a chance that would happen, but jeez, that was kinda cold, no? I was pretty thrifty, some would say cheap, so it really wasn't every day that I spent half a grand on a girl and used my "almost-pro" status to call in favors to get things done quickly.

It was Grey's fault really. After helping Ellie tear down for a couple hours yesterday, I finally rejoined him, Max, and Canyon on the golf course. I decided that I needed the help, so I confided in him about my feelings for little Miss Sassy Thing. He advised that I should go big or go home.

"Ellie really is a great girl," Grey said. "She's wifey material, not like the other girls you bring around. I doubt she'd throw a drink in your face like the last girl." His shoulders shook with laughter as he leaned down to place his ball on the tee. "It really started out that bad though? Me and Jules just thought you'd balance each other out."

"It was disastrous dude." I took a swig of my beer. I decided not to tell them about the whole panic attack-compression snafu that I think helped me gain ground with her. For some reason, saying that part of the story out loud would make me feel like I was betraying her. I threw Max a nod, "It's actually your baby's fault I started off on the wrong foot."

"Ah, shut it, don't put your ineptitude on Frankie, bud. He's a chick magnet, she never woulda come up to you if it wasn't for him," Max added.

I guess he had a point about that.

"Balance each other out?" I asked Grey to clarify.

"Well, yeah... Shit," he muttered. His golf ball went way off course and Canyon cackled next to me and marked it on the scorecard. Pretty sure the kid was

almost winning. Grey grinned at Canyon and turned to face me. "You're just... a lot and she's like a hyper-organizer."

I think he could tell I was confused by the look on my face because he explained further.

"Dude, you missed the warm-up of almost every game last season when you helped coach because you were always running late. She pulled together our whole wedding in half a year and made everything run smoothly," he said.

"A lot? You guys think I'm a lot?" I asked incredulously. I was still stuck on that part of his explanation. "And you guys aren't?"

That cracked them up for some reason and I sat there shaking my head.

"Yes, I was late a bunch, but that's because I was always arguing with my ex or trying to get Paige's help about said arguments with her. It's not my fault I attract the crazies," I defended myself.

Canyon visibly shuddered. "That girl was awful." He showed his true age by mispronouncing girl like "gurl." He was only nine, but he always acted like one of the guys, so I occasionally forgot how young he truly was.

Grey pointed down to his son. "True."

I couldn't argue with them there. I tried to be the perfect boyfriend for her, but as Paige said, it seemed like she wanted more of a "yes man" than an actual human being who had thoughts and feelings.

"Dude...ok, I'm channeling Paige," Max hummed to himself and closed his eyes. Goalies, man- always weird ones. I shot Grey a look as if to ask, seriously? But he just shrugged.

"It's like the great Whitney Houston once said," Max began, "Each time with you it's the same script, different cast. At some point ya gotta look at the common

denominator; you gotta look at yourself and ask what you're doing wrong."

I hung my head. "So, I'm the problem."

"Aren't we all?" Grey countered with a laugh. "What I suggest is making a romantic gesture. You have preseason camp in what- a week or two?" He squinted trying to remember the preseason dates. He had retired a bit ago but had played multiple seasons in the NHL.

"Yeah," I sighed. Trying to lock down a girlfriend while playing hockey was proving to be difficult. I was always cut off from exploring more because I always had to leave. But watching other guys have girls waiting for them after games or having someone call them to receive a pep talk after a tough loss, or even just having someone to check-in with when our planes landed made me feel like I was missing out. I wanted it so badly. I wanted mutual care, mutual respect... I wanted fricken cuddles, okay? But for some reason, I always messed it up or they freaked on me.

"Well, Ellie really loved those cupcakes at the wedding, she convinced Jules we needed to have them," Grey said thoughtfully.

"Those were good," Canyon confirmed with wide eyes. "I had like ten," he added.

Grey patted his head and whispered, "Sugar consumption that mom doesn't need to be reminded about."

I sat there shaking my head against the idea of the cupcakes though, because I came up with the perfect one.

"Y'all seem like the rookies. I know just what she'd want," I told them.

But I guess I'd been wrong...

Maybe she didn't know how to find me? I knew I should've put my phone number or name on the card, it just seemed romantic not to, and girls liked that romance shit. I figured she could find me on social media or through Jules- they seemed to have gotten close over the planning process.

Or maybe she was too shy to thank me? That had to be it.

Whatever it was, I guess I'd never know because I was checking out of the hotel and flying back out to Minnesota to spend my last week of summer with my family. The following week, I was scheduled to leave for preseason training camp in Vancouver.

August was really when our hockey seasons started because all the NHL teams hosted their camps where they'd invite minor league guys like me to come up and skate. I was hoping to catch some attention and be pulled up for at least a few games this year. I'd been playing in the minor league for years, and at 26 I was now one of the oldest guys on my team that had yet to see NHL playing time.

I guess this past season didn't really count because I injured my knee early on in the season and went home to Northfield to recoup. It ended up being kind of a nice mental break because Grey, Max, and Smitty gave me some good advice and solid ice time practicing with them. Spending time at the Ice League and working with some of the youth teams also reminded me of how much fun hockey could be and why I fell in love with the sport in the first place. Playing in stadiums was great and all, but there was nothing like walking around your home rink eating some concession stand food and feeling nostalgic while almost getting taken out by some eight-year-olds playing mini-stick tourneys in the lobby; it did wonders to humble a guy.

Right.

Hockey.

That was my focus.

Not girls.

So... It was probably for the best that it didn't work out with Ellie, I thought as I leaned against the hotel elevator's wall. What would Ellie want with a boyfriend a whole country away anyway? Who knew if she even had an up-to-date passport?

I pushed my hair back and closed my eyes against the mounting frustration... because the more I convinced myself not to think about her, the more I couldn't shake the thought of how I hadn't felt that excited about anyone in such a long time. And she really didn't seem like a psycho- despite the breakdown I saw. I think I actually handled her panic situation super well. Helping her made me feel like The Man. I always felt like I was a dude who had a lot to give, but no one to give it to. And she-

Nope.

Hockey, man.

The elevator dinged, finally releasing me, and I lazily walked to the lobby's concierge desk to start the checkout process and book a ride to the airport.

I pulled out my credit card, readying myself for the bill, when I saw a very short flurry of auburn hair disappearing through the doors and heading into the bright sun outside.

Without giving it a second thought, I immediately dropped my bags by the counter, threw a "sorry" back at the guy manning it, and broke into a run to catch her.

This had to be the universe telling me not to give up, right? I felt my heart pounding in my chest as I ran, trying to seize the opportunity in front of me.

Outside, she was already marching ahead at a breakneck speed with a taller, dark-haired girl beside her.

“Ellie!” I called out.

She halted and turned slowly.

I couldn’t help but break into a goofy grin. Because I kid you not- my heart fluttered. Her long hair was lightly blowing around her in the wind, and her white sundress billowed a little making her legs look impossibly long for such a short girl. Girls in sundresses killed me.

I kept smiling as I got closer, despite the fact that she most definitely was not. It seemed like she was trying to pull away and the dark-haired girl was lecturing her and holding her in place. Whoever that girl was, I was a fan of hers.

“Hi,” I told her brightly, shielding the sun from my eyes.

She grunted out a greeting and the taller girl seemed to push her a little.

“Hello, TJ. Checking out today?” She asked in a fake cheery voice.

“Uh, yeah,” I quickly tried to find in my brain how to ask if she got the present without sounding like an ass. “Did you find something to wear to your wedding this weekend?” I fished.

She looked at me skeptically. “Yes.”

I faltered. Well, this was awkward.

“So, you got it?” I asked her.

She blinked at me for what seemed like a full minute. “You?” She practically choked on the word.

I broke into a wider grin. “You like it? Did it fit? I asked Jules for help,” I quickly added. A man did not want to get size wrong. “I figured because Frankie ruined your other one.”

“You mean *you* ruined my other one?”

I blew out a breath and reminded myself of how beautiful she was when she laughed at me the other day

and how much I wanted to see her smile again.

“She loved it.” The dark-haired girl cut in and leaned forward to shake my hand. “I’m Nikki, nice to meet you.”

I distractedly shook her hand, keeping my eyes on Ellie.

“Okay, well. Goodbye,” Ellie said, still in shock apparently.

Who did she think gave her the dress if not me? Did she already have a guy and that’s why I was continually getting the cold shoulder from her? I couldn’t let another guy win, especially not when Grey said we’d balance each other out. We needed that. And, thinking there was another guy brought out the born competitor in me. I didn’t take losing well, not in hockey, or any area of life.

“My middle name is Jiffy,” I blurted out in a last-ditch effort. “You thought Theodore was funny- Theodore Jiffy Vonnie III is my full name. That’s why I go by TJ.”

That did it. Her stern face finally broke into a laugh at my expense, but it was worth it.

“You two gonna play nice?” Nikki asked- mainly looking at Ellie- I was always nice.

I looked down at Ellie with my eyebrows up in anticipation.

“Thank you,” Ellie finally said to me.

I had to work fast before she changed her mind and thought I was a fuckup again. “Can I take you to dinner?”

She skipped a beat then.

“Because I owe you for the dress or something?” she deadpanned.

I was taken back by how quickly she jumped on the defense. “No... because...”

“Because?” she questioned.

As uncomfortable as being put on the spot was, I knew this was the moment Grey was talking about- go big or go home. Get the girl or get my ass on a plane in a couple hours.

“Because I think you’re absolutely stunning and on top of that, you’re real enough to deal with me- *and* I don’t want to go home with the regret of not getting a shot with you,” I said. I did it, I laid it at her feet, and that’s all a man could do.

She twisted her mouth in thought for a moment, and I detected a small blush on her face.

“Well, it might not go well, and then you’ll have missed your flight for nothing... and you’ll probably blame me,” she said skeptically.

This girl was looking for every excuse in the book.

“And that’s my problem, not yours at all,” I assured her.

She looked at her watch, avoiding eye-contact again. “I get off at 5pm today.”

“Great. I can pick you up around six then? How long do you need to get pretty?” I winked.

Her jaw started to slide out and I quickly replayed what I said and put my hands up.

“I *just* said you were beautiful! My older sisters always took over the bathroom for forever before dates when I was growing up, okay? Forget it if a little dude had to take a shit.” I shook my head. “They ruled the house, and I was their bitch.”

Most of the tension visibly left her, and she pressed her lips together like she was trying to suppress a smile.

“What about your flight though?” she asked.

“I’d skip it for you, babe.”

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “You have to stop doing that,” she said dryly.

“Doing what?”

“Being so fake and putting this show on,” she urged.

She truly didn’t get that I was genuine in how much I liked her. But that was alright, I got my shot for 6pm tonight.

“I’ll pick you up then?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Sorry... Let’s just meet at The Landslide.”

10. Ellie

I sat in my car at The Landslide, a popular waterfront joint where people could dock their boats or drive up to and waited for him.

I figured I'd see him first rather than waiting out in the open and having him watch me. I always arrived everywhere early anyway; it was part of my uptight charm.

I looked in my car mirror one last time and smudged some lip gloss on while I fought off insecure thoughts- my eyes were too big, my nose was gross, I was starting to get forehead wrinkles, I had too many freckles... I could go on and on. It didn't matter if he liked me or not though, the world would move on, and tomorrow would be fine. I tried to remind myself that I couldn't take anything he said personal, because it's not like he really knew anything about me anyway. Besides, I was a badass boss bitch, which he'd called me when he bizarrely yelled at me the other day, and I needed to start acting like it.

I saw him then, walking onto The Landslide's plank sidewalk which bordered the beachfront and led into the restaurant.

I sighed. He was exactly the kind of guy I would have swooned for before. I couldn't deny that he was strikingly handsome. He was the type that looked like a professional athlete- dressed in khaki joggers and a Henley t-shirt that his built, broad shoulders filled out excellently. He walked with a command in his step that said he was important, and he looked like he could take on anyone and beat them with a single swing- an aspect any girl could appreciate.

But he was also the type that knew he could get any girl, with his long-ish hair that swooped off his neck and fell into his dark eyes a bit. He'd be someone easy

to get carried away with, and I was determined not to let that happen.

He stopped to chat with the teenage hostess for a minute and continued to look around for me. You could tell the teenager was lovestruck and watching his every movement.

It was now or never, I told myself as I swiftly exited the car.

He took off his sunglasses as I neared him, and he looked me up and down and mouthed the word, "Wow."

I shook my head at him, because, how cheesy, but I couldn't stop a blush from creeping into my face.

"Hey beautiful," he greeted and ushered me to follow the hostess to our seats.

"But you are a hockey fan though, no?" He looked at me across the table completely aghast at the possibility I wasn't.

"I mean, not really? I never paid too much attention to it," I told him, loving the reality check I was giving him. "I've always been too busy with my own life and my own sport to watch anyone else's. Plus, hockey guys are usually arrogant."

He looked like I knocked the breath out of him. "Damn it. I mean, short and no hockey, good thing you're pretty."

"You're gonna get yourself in trouble even on this date, Theodore," I warned.

He tried to suppress a smile. "I'm sorry, but you're really pretty, especially when you're mad, Ellie."

But I guess it's not that hard to believe... because I bet you had a 4.0 and were a..." he looked me up and down. "Dancer?"

"Rrrr wrong." I took a sip of my water. He got the fruity drink I suggested, but I never drank on a first date or with anyone I didn't know or trust.

"With all your organizing and wedding planning you were definitely one of those girls obsessed with gel pens and planners. You definitely had all A's," he smirked. "And I mean, you're little but you're built... tennis?"

"Pretty much all A's yes, and don't dis gel pens, sir," I said. "But nope. I think that guess is going in the colder direction. What about you though, why hockey?"

He paused and cocked his head to the side, like he hadn't been asked that question before. "Well, when you've got parents who met at the rink and three sisters who all played, that's kind of the natural progression. My dad coached all of them and used to build a rink in the backyard every year, and everyone would be out there, including my parents. I kind of went from walking to skating."

"So, it wasn't really your choice?" I asked skeptically.

"I mean... I think it was more of the way of life when I was a kid, but I could've stopped at any time. It's pretty addictive trying to make it though. Like you always feel so so close- I even felt that way at 15, but now that I'm *right* there knocking on the NHL's door, it'd be downright stupid to stop. And I always had this picture in my head..." he stopped himself from finishing and shook the wistful look off his face.

"What picture?" I asked, amused now.

His neck seemed to go a little red then and he smirked. "Like I'd have a wife and baby cheering for me and wearing my jersey in the stands. I just felt like if I

made it, that would come hand in hand. Realizing it doesn't work that way though."

If I could feel a physical crack in the cool facade I was trying to maintain, that would've done it. Because I knew that feeling- that reaching that single goal in your head would bring you all the happiness and make everything better. It was too bad life didn't work out that way.

"I get it," I said.

He didn't respond, just nodded with a small smile and drank a bit more fruity goodness. I was slightly jealous of the drink.

He seemed to be waiting for me to start a conversation then. It'd been nice that he carried it up til that point. I surprisingly felt the urge to fill the silence and keep it going.

"So, what team do you play for?" I asked.

He smiled pleasantly. He totally had been testing me to see if I even cared to start talking or was fine to sit in awkward silence.

"I'm glad you asked." He winked, to which I shook my head. "I play for Vancouver in the league right below the NHL. So, I could get called up to the Big Show at any time. Just have to make sure I'm on top of my game. I banged up my knee a bit last year, so my season got cut pretty short."

"I'm sorry," I supplied.

He shrugged it off, but you could tell it bugged him. "It wasn't all bad. I spent a lot of time working at my old rink. Saw a lot of Grey and Max. But preseason camp starts back up next week. I'm a bit nervous actually."

I patted his hand lying in the middle of the table between us, which seemed to surprise him. "Well, I bet if you have your whole showboat swag thing intact, it'll go great for you."

His eyebrows shot up. "I have a whole thing?"

"Oh please! You walk like there's paparazzi waiting for you. When you show even an iota of self-doubt, that's when I'm like okay, maybe he's a real person."

"Damn girl, you want me to be all afraid?" He leaned back in his chair and pushed a hand through his hair. "That could hurt my brand, babe."

"See, that!" I pointed out. "That cannot be real."

"But it is!" he pushed. "Why do you have such a problem with having some self-esteem?" He laughed.

Now, I know he was trying to make a joke... probably. But that also felt like a personal attack because 1) he'd seen my panic attack, and 2) my confidence hadn't been intact in a long time.

I grabbed my purse and stood up in a swift motion.

"Goodbye."

He seemed shocked by my sudden movements, but I forced myself to turn away from his stupidly cute face.

The date had lasted longer than I thought it would in the first place, but I knew it would end this way.

I stomped all the way to my car, also stomping out any tiny hope that grew about him.

I threw myself into my car's front seat and let out a frustrated growl.

Dating was stupid anyway. You willingly met up with a complete stranger and talked about yourself to see if you were compatible, when the person sitting across from you could be a Ted Bundy, taking notes.

And even if he wasn't a serial killer, did I really want to let this guy yank my chain and make me worry about our every interaction? No. I'd have to worry about

meeting up with him and spending time with him and always be hooked to my phone waiting for his responses, then stressfully agonizing over every word I texted back. Who would want that? Not me. The whole thing sounded dangerous and annoying.

I liked being in control of situations, and with dating, you inevitably gave up control and had to place trust in the other person. That was something I had no interest in doing.

I was fine on my own.

This little interaction proved it, didn't it?

I wasn't sure what I was thinking when I agreed to come.

I took a deep breath in and peeled out of the parking lot.

At least I could tell my mom I tried, I thought lamely.

11. TJ

I thought about going after her as I watched her tiny, cute butt march away.

I drained my drink and sat back, making sure she made it to her car.

I mean, I really wanted to grab her, throw her over my shoulder, and walk her back to the table to eat dinner with me. It'd be easy too; she was a tiny thing. She definitely gave off a stray cat vibe though... Don't force it and it'll come. I hoped at least.

It seemed she had limits, and I hadn't figured them out yet. It was a shame because if we had the time, I think we really could be great.

I thought back to what Grey said and realized he had a good point- we probably could balance each other out. She needed some of my easy-going self, and I needed some of her reality check.

I tried to replay my words to figure out where I'd gone wrong. Something about self-confidence was definitely a trigger for her. Yeesh, she was a complicated little thing. Cute as hell though.

I quickly got some cash out of my back pocket and threw it on the table.

At least I could say I gave it my best shot. I needed to get back to business now and catch the first flight out of this place.

12. TJ - Saturday, August 7 Preseason Camp in Vancouver

I sped to the corner to beat the defenseman and scoop the puck up without being checked.

I made it out by a sliver, but that didn't matter, only that I made it. If I was being honest, I think my bum knee from last season was making me skate faster because I didn't want to get hit. Guess it could work out well in a way.

I hightailed it up ice as fast as I could, ignoring my right winger who shouted at me to pass. I needed to show off my own skills right now- he wouldn't be offended- I think everyone felt that way at preseason camp. If it was a game, I'd be passin' it right over to him. He hung back a bit by the blue line to avoid going off-sides on me and I felt him starting to trail for the rebound in case I missed.

My decision to puck hog a bit proved beneficial, because I had a one-on-one now: just me and the goalie. This was my favorite part. I quickly stickhandled short, wide, faked a shot, and then sniped one right top-shelf, our goalie's weakness.

Boom. The goal light went off and I threw my arms wide- just to make sure the high-up guys making the calls knew it was me.

This season would be golden. It was mine for the taking. I was feeling powerful as all hell after hitting almost every shot this week. Now I was just waiting to hear where I'd be- either still on this affiliate team of mine in Vancouver, or... called up for my big break. I knew in the back of my mind that getting a shot to be called up this season seemed pretty unlikely. We all kind of knew it. The team we were affiliated with was stacked this year with old and new talent, and no one was really close to retirement. It would take someone getting hurt to get called up, and no hockey guy would wish injury on

another. I just had to keep grinding, and hopefully get my shot one way or another, even if that meant getting traded to a different organization.

The buzzer went off then signaling the end of practice, and my buddy Eric Jones, aka Jonesy, came over and gave me a glove punch.

“Nice work, bud. You definitely made a name for yourself this week,” he said.

I pulled off my helmet and pushed my sweaty, shaggy hair back. “Thanks, man. Hopefully I did enough.” I looked around the empty stadium and took in the low quiet hum of the cold rink. Pretty soon, these seats would be packed with cheering fans, and I couldn’t wait. I fed off the crowd’s excited energy.

“I feel ya.” He grabbed a water bottle off the boards and squirted it in his face before stepping off the ice. “We’ll know soon I guess,” he said with a sigh.

We walked in silence, beat from the long practice, through the dark hallway back to the locker room to rip off our equipment.

As soon as I got to my locker, I heard, “Vonnie!” barked at me.

I turned to see Coach Johns, my head coach, holding a clipboard and wearing some reading glasses which didn’t match his hockey warm-up outfit at all. He gave me a stern look and nodded toward his office.

I cut my eyes to Jonesy... this was it. I’d know my fate in the next couple minutes.

I felt excitement and unease swirling in my chest, and I tried to stop my hands from shaking as I quickly tore off the rest of my equipment so I could get my butt into his office. With this kind of career, there was always a chance of getting bad news and being traded down instead of up... I was definitely taking the longer route and having a harder go at this career than some people. I was never drafted at 18, and ever since then, it

felt like I'd been pigeon-holed with a reputation of being good, but not good enough... I just needed my shot to prove that I could hang in a game with the NHLers. I wanted it more than anything... but if I was traded down at 26, I wasn't sure if there was any coming back from that...

Jeez. I couldn't help but think that this was how Ellie must've felt when I scared her in the tent that morning after the wedding. Maybe I needed someone to compress me... The thought of her delicate chin and stunning green eyes brought a smile to my face, which I immediately wiped off. She didn't want me, she made that pretty clear. I asked Grey to ask Jules for her number when I got back to Vancouver, and I shot her a quick text, but I had yet to hear back. I shook my head to clear her from it. I needed to focus right now.

As soon as I was back in my team joggers and dry fit t-shirt, I walked across the locker room and knocked on Coach's door. I heard his signature gruff harrumph, signaling me to come in.

I made eye contact with Jonesy and the guys one last time before going in, trying to read their faces to see if anyone knew anything, but everyone else seemed to stop what they were doing and just stare blankly back at me, waiting.

Coach Johns didn't even look up when I entered his barely lit office. His back was hunched over as he leaned close to the iPhone laying on his desk, putting it mere inches from his glasses. He must've been trying to watch game tape. He was a confusing old man. I didn't understand how he could compliment my quick stick play when I backchecked all the way across the ice from him, but then not see how much time was left on the game clock or pretty much anything on his phone. I guess you didn't question his coaching genius- it had led him to

multiple AHL Championships. He'd been asked to come up to different NHL coaching staffs multiple times in his career, but he always turned them down, saying that Vancouver was his home. That was not the case for me. If I could get on an NHL roster, I'd fly outa here in a second. Not that I wasn't appreciative of this experience... it's just... the NHL was the dream.

"Sorry, son," Coach started talking as I sat down in the cushy office seat across his desk from him.

I wished he'd stop talking right then, because I'd rather hear anything than being traded down to a lower league. How could that happen after my amazing week? I felt my empty stomach churn angrily. I must've jinxed myself somehow.

"We'll miss ya for sure around here. But you've been traded," he said as he looked at me over the top of his glasses. He paused and I could hear blood pumping in my ears from the pressure coursing through my body. "Detroit needs ya, son."

The shock I felt over that statement practically gave me whiplash and I dropped my mouth open, but no words came. Did he mean *Detroit* Detroit?... As in not a minor team... but The team... The NHL team?

Coach's face slowly transformed into a big shit-eating grin and his whole body moved as he laughed.

"Sorry for scaring you, I love doing that," he said. "But I'm happy to be the one to tell ya that the Big League called kid, and you've got a shot."

I stood up, threw my fists down, and let out a loud "Woo!"

Immediately I heard clapping coming from the locker room. The guys must've understood what just happened for me.

"The Detroit Crewmen have one week left of their training camp up in Traverse City, so you can chat with their team manager to get you organized up there.

From what I understand they want to sign you to a 2-way deal. So, you could either end up on their minor team or, if you play your heart out like I know you can, you'll be in The Big Show." He handed me a small business card.

My head was spinning with the information he just told me, but one detail really stuck out...

"Did you just say Traverse City? As in Northern Michigan?" I couldn't help but laugh at my lucky ass.

He squinted back at me. "Something the matter with TC?"

I shook my head. "No, sir. Gettin the call and a shot with the girl."

He nodded at me like he understood and ushered me to leave. "Well get on up there. We'll miss you around here, kid."

I was up in a second, reaching over to shake his hand.

"Thank you, sir, thank you," I pumped his arm before bolting for the door. My mind raced with all I'd need to do before jumping on a plane back to Michigan.

"Make no mistake, Vonnie!" I heard Coach call out behind me. "I don't wanna see your jersey back in this league, so make it count!"

13. Ellie - August 7th

I was just putting the finishing touches- the bride and groom figurines- on the Lawson's vanilla cream tier cake in the kitchen when my phone rang.

I licked a finger and looked down to see the name Jules Scott appear.

"Hi!" I answered brightly, wondering if maybe she needed other services. A baby shower possibility lingered in my mind. I tried to convince her to have one after she confided in me that she never experienced one when she was pregnant with her little boy Canyon. She really needed some baby girl things this time around anyway. I'd never organized a baby shower before, but it was definitely something I was open to expanding into. It would be a bit more work to organize something in another state, but I was down to do it- especially for her.

"Hey!" she answered cheerily. "I have a major favor to ask if you're available?"

"Umm sure," I said as I motioned to the cater-waiters to start taking the cake out to guests.

"Can you pick up Grey from the TC airport tonight? I know it's a big ask, but he's flying in kind of late and you're the only one I know up there right now. I'm always afraid of relying on driving services. He had to leave last minute for a coaching gig up there," she explained.

I wondered when the Scotts had crossed the line from clients to friends, but I honestly didn't mind. It's not like I had many other friends besides Nikki.

"Sure, I think I can make that work. He might have to wait for me depending on the time though. I probably won't get out of the venue until midnight," I warned.

“Thank you so much,” she gushed. “I knew you’d be the right girl for the job. Can you call me when you get him?”

I thought that was an odd request, but I assured her I’d do it anyway.

I quickly hung up the phone and got to work organizing the Lawson party’s late night pizza bar.

After the twirler exit, I was so tired I felt like ripping my shoes off and collapsing right there on the sidewalk. I was kind of regretting telling Jules I’d pick up Grey at the airport because all I wanted was to strip off my dress and be in the comfort of sweatpants. I needed to be a good friend though, I told myself, and the airport was small and easy to navigate- nothing like the Detroit one.

“Can you take care of the lock-up here tonight?” I asked Nikki as soon as the last guests were loading onto the party buses back to their respective hotels.

“Sure, that tired girl?” she asked.

“Yes,” I laughed, “but not ditching out early because of that. Remember the Scott wedding? I told Jules Scott that I’d pick up her husband from the airport. He must be involved in that annoying hockey stuff going on at the rink.”

“Ahh,” she nodded. “They were the cutest couple we’ve organized for; don’t you think?” She looked dreamily up to the ceiling. “If only Dom would wanna have babies and get married like now,” she sighed.

“I’m sure you guys are close,” I encouraged. They’d been dating about a year, but that was practically a decade compared to her usual timeline for relationships. Dom seemed like a solid guy.

“Doubtful,” she sighed. “Well, you’re stuck as my roomie until he pops the question, so in that way I’m just fine and dandy waitin for it. What would I do without your tidiness? Dom and I are doomed. We’re both disasters,” she laughed.

“You’re not bad!” I told her, to which she shot me a ‘get-real’ look. I guess I did take initiative on the cleaning around our place.

She stood then and extended a hand to pull me up.

“Time to get goin, girlie. I love that new dress by the way,” she said, looking me up and down. “Hot, hot, hot in that color.”

I let out a chuckle at that. TJ did have good taste, I’d give him that. I felt self-conscious when I first put it on today, but I couldn’t necessarily wear my ruined one. I knew the only thing that held me back from loving it was my pride, but it’s not like he would see me wear it anyway, not with him being all the way in Canada.

“Thanks, Nikki,” I said. “I’ll see ya back at home base.”

It was pitch-black out by the time I reached the airport, and I hoped I hadn’t made him wait outside too long. *Not everyone is irrationally afraid of the dark*, I told myself as I drove up to the pick-up lanes that glowed under the lamplight.

I pulled over and searched around for Grey. I felt my chest tighten a bit at the prospect of not seeing him and having to get out and search. I put a hand to my chest to calm my breathing. I was doing a friend a favor;

I would not be a weirdo and freak out. It was Grey after all, he could handle himself out here.

I finally saw a figure with what looked like a hockey bag slumping toward me, but he was also holding something up in the air above his head.

As he walked closer, I realized it was an old school boom box... and holding it was the stupid, big, baby shaker himself: Theodore. Jiffy. Vonnie. With the biggest, brightest smile stretched across his dumb, lover-boy face.

I mean... What was a girl supposed to do with that? He was a gorgeous man, smiling at me like that. Was he out of his mind? I walked out on him mid-date and left him at a restaurant by himself. Why had he come back here?

I called up Jules as he made his way to my car window, wondering what the hell was going on. Because TJ was walking toward my car and Grey was nowhere to be found.

When I finally got her answering machine, her voice filled the line saying, "This is Jules Scott! Leave a message at the beep! But if this is Ellie then, yes! I tricked you and I'm sorry, but TJ needs to talk to you. I'll call you in the morning!"

He tapped on the window, waiting. I dropped my phone and shook my head at him. He looked so happy, but I would not smile. I repeated to myself- do not smile... because I'd been tricked. And what was with the boombox?

I rolled the window down slightly.

"Hi, Ellie. Thanks for coming to get me," he said with a flirty smile.

Now, I can't really point to anything specific for why I did what I did next, other than the fact that his smile just got to me...I wasn't sure if it was cockiness or just unnerving confidence he possessed, but it just

seemed like he thought his smiling at me would for sure mean I would fall over in love with him and do whatever he needed me to in a split-second. He needed someone to knock him down a few pegs, and I would gladly do it. I released from the break a bit to make my car lurch forward and he jumped away from the curb real quick with a shocked look on his face.

“I’m sorry, okay?! I’m sorry for what I said at The Landslide! Arguing is our thing though, okay? I even brought the boombox, see? We’re making up!”

“Boombox, TJ?” I squinted at him trying to read if he was for real. “Do you think we’re living in a movie? How stupid-” I cut myself off from finishing the sentence after seeing the look on his face... It completely fell into a disappointed pout, like he was a little kid and I’d just broken his favorite toy or something, which made me feel slightly bad for yelling at his optimistic self.

I faced forward and forced myself to calm down and think. He did say he was sorry, and he probably really didn’t know anyone else here. And it was just a ride to wherever he was going. If he was going to do something weird, he would’ve already done it, right? Besides, Jules sent me here. She wouldn’t send me to pick up some kind of serial killer.

When I turned to look at him, he was waiting patiently with a hopeful look on his face, and he extended his hand into my car window for a handshake. He was like a puppy- seemingly happy and looking for affection no matter what I said or did to push it away.

I reluctantly shook his hand and unlocked my car doors.

He struggled for a minute, or five, shoving his giant, smelly hockey bag into my car’s small trunk.

When he finally sat down in my passenger seat, his large frame looked completely out of place. He made my car look like a toy car. He tried to mess around with the controls on the side of the seat to lower it, but after what felt like a full minute, his head still grazed the top of the car, and his knees practically hit the dashboard in front of him.

I eased my car into drive and cleared my throat before asking what I'd been afraid to: "So where are you sleeping tonight? Where am I driving you?"

He shifted in my shotgun seat uncomfortably before answering. "Well, that's the thing..."

I snuck a glance at him. "What's the thing?"

"I don't really have a place to stay."

I gripped my steering wheel, trying to harness in the astronomical amount of frustration radiating off my body. "Are you kidding me with this? So you just invited yourself to my place? What if I say no?" I shouted at my windshield because I was too afraid to take my eyes fully off the road.

"Woah, woah, I was just gonna ask nicely, no need to bite my head off," he said in a much calmer tone than mine. I hated him for it.

"Don't placate me," I bit back.

"Please, Ellie? I've got no place to go," he begged.

"If you're sticking your bottom lip out right now, so help me God, I will kick your fake ass to the curb so hard," I warned. I thought through multiple situations in my head but couldn't come up with a different viable solution. I blamed what I said next on the fact that it was so late, and I was extremely tired from working all day. "You can come back to my place, but only if my roommate says it's okay. And you're sleeping on the couch," I added for good measure.

14. TJ

I didn't say it, but when I first saw her in the car wearing that light green dress, it made my day even better- and this was quite possibly already the best day of my life. The color really did match her eyes perfectly, and it was completely stunning on her. I felt elated that I could do something nice for her and she actually accepted it. She knew I bought it for her, and she still wore it. She had to have thought of me when she put it on, right? I'd buy a hundred more for her if she wanted me to.

After we discussed the sleeping arrangements, which, let's be real, I could get a hotel room if I really had to, she turned up her music so I couldn't talk anymore. That was alright, I was trying to take my time with her.

I wanted to slowly edge myself into her world. I took my trade to Detroit as a sign from the universe that we were meant to be together, now I just needed to put in the work to show her that. I needed to play the long game with her. I needed patience.

After about ten minutes of driving, we pulled up to a beachy light blue apartment structure that was a little bit past downtown. It probably only housed about four units. I smiled looking up at it because I could totally picture her picking this place out.

She sighed before opening her car door, and her voice dripped with disdain as she said, "Let's go, Hockey boy."

Again, totally ok, because she would've kicked me to the curb already if she truly wanted to, and I knew deep down that wasn't what she wanted. I felt a certain possibility when I looked at her, possibility for fun, for genuine friendship, for love; and she must've felt that with me too, even if she was trying to squash it down.

When we got to the door, she quickly opened it with one hand, and I noticed her other hand was gripping a small tube which had to have been pepper spray.

“Dangerous neighborhoods around these parts, eh?” I joked, because it most definitely was not.

Her bottom jaw angled to the side, clueing me in that what I said was out of line.

I threw my hands up in innocence. “Sorry, you do you.”

She crossed the threshold into her place, and I followed suit. I closed the door quickly behind me and studied the lock situation- which was decked out with three- and began doing them up for her. She was definitely into safety, and it was definitely not something I could make fun of her for, so I had to show her I’d take it seriously as well.

“Thank you,” she said quietly when I turned back around.

I nodded and looked around at her place, not at all surprised by how clean, organized, and beautiful it looked.

The all-white kitchenette to the left had a tiny two-person table pushed to the side, and the living room area to the right was decked out in white shiplap with a circular mirror hanging over top of it. It was neatly furnished with a small couch, a white treasure chest coffee table, and a tv stand.

I studied the couch and internally cringed. It was totally the kind of couch a five-foot-flat girl would buy: all for fashion and not considering taller people trying to sleep on it. About a foot of me would end up hanging off it. But that was alright, because this was an investment into my future... Into future possibilities with her.

“Nikki! ... We have... a surprise,” she called, looking at me with an arched eyebrow.

I walked to the couch and pushed away about five or six small throw pillows to make room for myself. I really never understood their concept. Like, they were pillows, but you weren't allowed to sit on them or sleep on them... but they took up room on your couch...? Whatever. Girls were weird about them.

I plopped down on her couch to rip off my shoes. She still stood in her high heels, staring down at me, and looking a bit envious of my shoe situation. What I wouldn't have given to take those high heels off for her... and maybe take some other things off-

Nope. Patience, I reminded myself.

"I'm not going to bite." I patted the couch next to me, to which she just shook her head.

"Don't get too comfy, she still has to okay this little arrangement," she warned. Her eyebrow creased in worry, and again, I wished I could comfort her. A massage would ease those worries away... a massage in bed would probably be just what she needed...

Nikki, the taller, dark-haired girl from the venue, came out from the hallway that must've led to the bedrooms.

She was dressed in flannel pants and a sweatshirt, clearly ready for bed. Her eyes glinted when she saw me, and a slow smile spread on her face as she looked at Ellie. That was a good sign. I was already in with the bestie.

"Wow, some company? This is an upgrade from Grey," she laughed and leaned against the living room wall.

Ellie rolled her eyes. "I'll fill you in tomorrow, but can he stay the night on the couch? I told him it was only okay if you said so."

It looked like Ellie gave an ever so slight head shake saying no, to which I did pout my bottom lip out at.

“Yeah, sure! I have no problem with it,” Nikki said. She pushed off the wall and walked into the kitchen, then started rummaging around in the fridge.

“Want some wine, girlie? Hockey dude?” Nikki asked.

“Yes!” I said, leaning back into the couch. “I can finally celebrate.”

Ellie looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “Celebrate staying on my couch?”

“Well now that you ask... I got offered a two-way deal with Detroit!”

Ellie’s face transformed into disbelief.

“OhmyGod!” Nikki yelled. “They have their whole preseason camp circus up here every August. You’re in that?”

“Yeah,” I chuckled. “Thank God someone here knows something about hockey.”

“Oh, Ellie knows!” Nikki called over. “She always gets so annoyed-”

Ellie loudly cleared her throat and cut Nikki a look, signaling her to shut up about the topic. Interesting... I’d have to figure out what that was all about later.

Nikki proceeded to rush over with the wine and three glasses and place them on the coffee table.

“You have to tell us everything. We have an inside man now, Ellie,” she said excitedly. “So much traffic around there and so many hot dudes walking in and out. Congrats by the way.”

“Thank you, Nikki,” I said genuinely, and looked at Ellie for some kind of acknowledgement. She, however, looked stupefied by Nikki sitting on the couch with me. I patted the space on the other side of me again.

“Um... I need to change,” she said slowly.

I bit my tongue, stopping myself from charmingly offering help.

I politely chatted the next couple of minutes away with Nikki, who was easy to talk to. But when Ellie emerged, my brain seemed to stop functioning. I felt like I had somehow stolen my way into secret girl territory, and I felt lucky to be here... because damn, Ellie in some loose PJ shorts that showed off a bit of booty and an old t-shirt that read Up North in big block letters was a sight to behold. She had Victoria's Secret Angels beat by far, and she wasn't even trying. It looked like she had also swiped off all the make-up she had been wearing earlier, making her look younger and prettier. I know some guys liked that whole contoured makeup look that a lot of girls did, and it was sexy, but I was always a sucker for the natural look. Then again, I think all guys got a thrill over seeing girls without makeup because then it felt like you were “in”- you weren't an outsider anymore.

I wondered if she knew the effect that she had on me. She proceeded to bend over and grab all her thick, long, auburn hair together to put in a messy bun, which exposed her beautifully delicate neck that I would kill a man to kiss. I could practically feel myself being drawn to her, like a magnet was pulling me to get up and hook my arm under one of her gorgeous legs and push myself into her, while holding her neck, and lightly kissing it all the way to her-

“Earth to TJ,” Nikki joked.

“Huh?” I snapped my neck to look away from my sassy temptress.

Nikki clapped her hands together and threw her head back. “I love it!”

I felt my neck heating up as I tried to shake the daydream out of my head. Ellie just looked back at Nikki like she was crazy and reached forward to pour her own glass.

I took a sip of my own wine and then almost spit it out when I felt my shirt being pulled up to expose my chest.

I reactively flexed my abs. Why work so hard if you weren't going to show them off sometimes?

"Hello, washboard! So, where's the tats?" Nikki asked. She then began exposing my arms, looking for any hidden ink. I didn't mind, let Ellie see, I figured.

"None," I told Nikki.

"Really? I thought all hockey boys were tatted up. Grey had this hot sleeve," she said dreamily. "You scared of needles?" she asked with her head cocked to the side. She was very animated as she talked.

"Nah, I'm just a Momma's boy. She'd cry if I got one, I think," I said with a chuckle.

Ellie snorted.

"You can't be mean about my Momma too, Ellie..." I looked at Nikki. "What's her middle name?"

She sat in thought. "Actually, I don't know."

I sighed. "I'm gonna guess Marie. You can't be mean about my Momma, Ellie Marie Brampton."

That broke her, and I saw a smile trying to appear. "Why Marie?"

"It's beautiful, you're beautiful. And...Because you're a 90's baby. Two of my sisters' middle names are Marie. No originality in the 90's."

"Jiffy is pretty original," she mused.

That perked me up, because hey- she remembered. "Nah, no originality. Family name."

"Alright gang, I say it's cards time. Euchre, TJ?" Nikki asked.

I cleared my throat. "Uh, no clue what that is?"

Ellie and Nikki both looked at me like I had a third head.

“This must be a Michigander thing. I learn fast, show me,” I told them.

The two of them went off each other, teaching me the rules. After I felt confident enough to give it a try, Nikki excused herself, saying she had a dog-walking gig in the morning, and that it was a two- or four-person game anyway. I wasn't clear on the rules enough to know if this was true or not, but either way, I was happy to get Ellie and her serious eyes to myself again.

We played in silence for a bit... until her eyes wandered up to mine.

“Congrats by the way,” she said with a small, tight-lipped smile. “That was part of your dream, right?”

“Yeah, part of it,” I said distractedly while I tried to organize my hand. “Thank you.”

She put down a card then, and I cringed because the game was over now. I was trying my hardest to keep it going in order to get more time with her, but she beat me swiftly despite my efforts. The competitor in me knew I needed to become an expert at this game. I'd have to do some research about it tomorrow.

I was lost in my thoughts, mentally reviewing the game, when Ellie shocked me.

She leaned toward me, lingered a second over top of the mess of cards between us in indecision, and then lightly kissed my cheek.

“Happy for you,” she said shyly.

I dumbly watched her unfold herself from the couch and shuffle back to her room.

At that moment, I knew my patience strategy was working with her. I also knew that I was right.

She was the one for me and I'd do anything to earn a real kiss from her...

I barely slept all night because of nerves over the first team meeting in the morning. Ellie's tiny couch that my legs hung off of did not help the situation either.

Around 4am I wished I could've fast-forwarded things with Ellie, because then I could've been in bed with her. Cuddling up close and being a big spoon sounded like heaven, but the thought of that just made me even more uncomfortable because then I had a hard-on as well.

By 6am I was ready to throw in the towel with trying to sleep and start moving. I padded into the kitchen to try to figure out if she had a coffee maker.

While I located the maker, I couldn't seem to find the actual coffee, and damn did I crave it. I could not function in the morning without it anymore.

I sleepily walked down the hallway and looked at the two doors. One had a tie-dye cloth and dream catcher on the door- not Ellie's vibe- and the other had a calendar on it with each passing day checked off, which was much more my uptight girl's speed.

I knocked but received no answer. I wondered when her usual wake up time was, and I chastised myself for not asking last night.

I weighed how mad she would be if I woke her up against how badly I needed coffee. But I didn't sleep and was desperate at that point, so coffee won out.

Only thing was, when I tried to open the door, my push was met with something on the other side.

That was weird...it wasn't locked because the handle gave way. I tried again and it only budged about an inch. I pushed my shoulder into it, opening it a little further. I looked through the crack then to see a couple disturbing things.

One- the girl had pushed a small dresser up against her door, and two- she was sleeping with a baseball bat on the floor next to her bed.

Now, that hit me with a painful ping to the chest and pissed me off at the same time. At what point did I come across as dangerous to her?

It was one step forward, three steps back with this girl.

15. Ellie

“What the fuck, Brampton?”

I was stirred from my sleep by that outburst and looked up at my door to see a very shirtless, very muscular TJ with a hurt expression on his face trying to wedge his way into my room.

“I’m not some bad guy. Was this all because I stayed here?” he asked as his dark eyes narrowed in on me.

I just pulled my blanket up higher, ignoring his question. I knew by this time that he wouldn’t hurt me, but I needed to do what would let me sleep with a peaceful mind. He wouldn’t understand. I could tell I made him feel badly by it, but I couldn’t help it.

I tried to box up the feelings that I was having as I watched his strong muscles working while he moved my dresser out of the way.

“Not gonna say anything, huh?” He carefully closed my door behind him and walked closer to my bed.

“Can we talk about this?” he demanded. He pushed a hand through his messy, pretty-boy hair and pointed at the bat with his other muscular arm.

His demand irked me. Why was he coming into my space and questioning me?

“Talk about what?” I snapped quietly. Nikki was probably still sleeping.

“About the panic attack. The stomping away. The freaking baseball bat, Ellie!” he said with wide eyes.

I had no response for him. This was who I was now. He had to know that. He liked me that much? Well, he could take it or leave it. This was why I stopped dating. Now he could see it and leave me too. I was the scaredy-cat with no self-confidence in my choices

anymore. I second guessed letting him use my couch about a million times last night.

He put a hand over his eyes and shook his head. I thought he was going to turn and storm out the door and that would be the end of this strange little connection...

Instead, he moved closer, and my bed creaked under his weight. I felt it divet down by my feet near where he was sitting.

"I'm not going to hurt you, you little psycho," he said, patting my leg.

I paused a beat.

"Well, how do I know that?" I spoke so quietly I wasn't sure if he even heard it.

He seemed to gain confidence when I responded, and he sat a little straighter.

"I guess you have to trust me, okay? You like me too, at least a little bit, don't you?"

I turned and buried my face in my pillow and let out a frustrated sound. Was he looking for me to admit that I was crushing on him? He was infuriating half the time, but did I find him attractive? I'd have to be blind to say no. Was I pushing him away just to see if he'd care enough to come back? ...Maybe.

"I can't," I said into my pillow.

"Can't what, Ellie?"

I turned and sat up to face him head-on. "Trust you, okay? I can't trust you."

He looked like I slapped him, but he kept fighting. "Well, what do you need? References or some shit?"

I felt too exposed to him. "I don't know, T.J. Maybe, okay?" I said desperately. I was at a loss myself when it came to this. The idea of being so openly

vulnerable with someone who was practically a stranger scared the shit out of me. I felt my breathing go choppy at the thought of that and I flung myself back down on my back and crossed my arms.

“Oh my God!” He looked to the ceiling, clearly frustrated. “This again?”

That was fine. I closed my eyes and folded my arms over my chest. He could leave. What did I care?

But what he did next surprised me more than Jules tricking me. Because instead of leaving, he moved toward me and slowly laid down on top of me.

His brown eyes softened and were laced with concern as he stared down into mine.

“See. Now I’m gonna be late to my new team’s meeting because I am here squishing you instead of making coffee. Do you trust me now?”

I chose not to answer.

We laid there in silence for a couple minutes. Listening to his heavy breathing was calming.

I kept my eyes closed, but I felt a tear roll down my cheek as my breathing started to settle into a normal rhythm. I wanted to shut my brain off and be blissfully ignorant once again. But I couldn’t.

He wiped the tear away with his rough hand and kissed my forehead, and that was too much for me. Because I knew how easy it could be to let him in. And deep down, I wanted this. I pushed the possibility of someone like him away for so long... but I secretly wanted to be one of those girls who was part of a nauseatingly cute couple who clearly cared deeply about each other and put each other first before anything or anyone else.

But I also knew how easy it would be for him to leave me.

And how hard it would be to hate him for it afterwards.

I couldn't put on some cool girl facade. The truth was- I was an anxious mess. And I was difficult. And I knew other girls weren't. If I wasn't careful, I'd fall for him just in time for him to go off and find someone normal and easy to love, and I'd be left in the dust, hurting all over again.

I could not afford to let my guard down just because he flashed his dimples at me. I was finally strong enough to stand on my own two feet. I didn't need to rebuild again.

16. TJ

Walking into the cold rink from the August heat, I couldn't get Ellie off my mind. The girl had major trust issues, that was for sure. She was a total psycho... But she was my little psycho. She let me comfort her today, and that was a huge leap. Maybe she'd be comfortable enough with me sometime soon to confide in me, but for now, I'd take what I could get.

I needed to get my head in the game though, or else I'd be thrown right back to the minors, and all my progress would vanish.

Make the team, get the girl, I repeated to myself, simple as that.

The lobby of the rink was decked out in red and white, Detroit's colors, and it donned fatheads of the captains on the wall above the closed concession stand. This small-town rink lived for this time of year when they hosted preseason camp for the Crewmen. I lived for it too, I reminded myself. I still couldn't believe my luck and hard work had landed me here.

"Vonnie?" An older man standing in the rink's office addressed me. He was suited up in a hockey sweatshirt with a name badge that read "Keith."

I'd been so busy checking the place out that I must've missed him as I walked in.

"Yes, sir." I reached out my hand for a firm shake.

"Team's gathering in the workout room upstairs, kid. Nice to meet you."

I nodded at him and hustled to get up there, taking two steps at a time.

The workout room spanned the entire length of the arena and was exposed by windows on both sides so that people could view down into the east and west rinks below. I knew this was built solely around the fact that the rink could pack eager fans up here and charge them to view our preseason exhibition scrimmages starting later this week.

The overly large current team would most likely be split into two groups and then we'd play each other throughout the week. By Friday, some people would be put back down into the minors, while others would make the final Detroit roster and start in the preseason games downstate.

I looked down into the west side rink which was filled with little tykes drowning in overly large hockey equipment too big for their tiny bodies and chasing after low-weight blue pucks. They were a shaky group. I chuckled watching them all fall down like dominoes.

The east rink was busy with "loner hours" - what we hockey players called figure skating sessions because they were always so devoid of any conversation or laughter. Those girls were cut-throat. I couldn't blame them though, I guess that's what happened when you played an individual sport.

While scanning the figure skaters, I did a double take seeing a delicate looking coach with auburn hair tied up in a bun helping a little girl about half her size. I shook my head. Couldn't be Ellie. I left her back at her place. But damn. I bit back a laugh. I was very clearly wifed up if I was already seeing her everywhere in every girl-

"TJ!"

My head snapped up to meet Coach Petersen's gaze before I could further study the east rink skaters.

I immediately walked toward his larger-than-life presence. He was the total opposite of Coach Johns, who had a Santa Claus belly and balding head. For a

guy in his early fifties, Coach Petersen had an impressive build. If it weren't for his telltale limp, one would think he could still play in the NHL. His stellar hockey career was kind of shrouded by an infamous hit he took in a game against South Carolina back in the nineties. The hit shattered his right leg and ended his playing career. But he'd always been known as a strategy player, and since becoming a coach he'd racked up three Stanley Cup Championship rings. I could only hope to be on one of his championship winning teams one day.

He was frowning when I walked up, and I wasn't sure if that was his normal face, or just the face he chose to regard me with.

"Good to see you, son," he said, stretching out his hand for a firm handshake.

"Excited to be here, Coach," I returned.

About ten guys had wandered in and began stretching out.

"We like to do workouts at the same time as team meetings. All of y'all are too ADHD to sit too long," he barked.

I cracked a smile at the truth of that. I already liked this team. From observing my friends, I knew a lot of guys at this level did have either diagnosed or undiagnosed ADHD. I always thought maybe having that specific brain wiring helped when it came to hockey IQ- which was half strategizing and half putting your body in the right place at the right time.

"For this week there's a red and white team. We have you on the red team, third line with Griff and Duke." Two guys near him raised a hand. "You're a center?" he asked, to which I nodded swiftly. "Play your cards right and you guys can get more ice time this week. Good?"

"Perfect," I said.

“Alright then, looking forward to seeing what you can do out there, Vinny.”

I paused at Vinny; he must've known that wasn't my name...

I went to speak, but Duke, whose shoulders were shaking with silent laughter, shook his head at me.

“Ready to play some Detroit hockey, Vinny?” the guy named Griff asked with a smile.

I shook my head affirmatively. I guess I'd be Vinny if that meant I could play in the Big Show.

I looked back at Griff then, trying to place where I'd seen him before. His short brown foe-hawk hair was spiked up in disarray and his eyes were so clear and light blue that it felt like he was seeing into your soul... I knew those eyes from somewhere...

He stretched out a hand to shake mine and cracked a grin. “I was a ref at the Ice League years ago. I wondered if you'd recognize me.”

I felt my mouth drop open and wanted to further question Griff, but Coach interrupted by choosing that moment to yell, “Round up, boys!” And I didn't dare interrupt or divert my attention away from him.

The team meeting went smoothly. I worked out hard but made sure not to pass up any old dogs and make enemies.

Griff, a team veteran for the past five years, seemed to take me under his wing and show me the ropes. It was nice having someone from the Ice League around; we had built-in common ground.

“We're one of the lucky teams. Our preseason camp is in an awesome spot. You familiar with TC?” Griff asked after we were dismissed from the meeting.

“Eh, I was here for the first time for a wedding a bit ago. Greyson Scott’s wedding if you know him?”

“No shit!” Griff looked at me with a bit of respect then. “He was a tough son of a bitch on the ice. I remember him from the League. Played a season with him a couple years back in DC too,” he said. “You’ve gotta know Smitty and Maxie boy then?”

I laughed at that. “Yupp. Max is my boss in the off-season.”

“Good man,” Griff nodded. “You gotta girl?”

Now, maybe it was because Ellie’s piercing green eyes slammed into my head. Or maybe it was because I was able to comfort her this morning combined with the fact that she didn’t kick me to the curb last night, but some confidence from within made me say yes.

“Awesome,” Griff responded. “My girl’s family has a place on the lake about fifteen from here. You guys wanna come by later for some boating and BBQ? I invited a couple of the guys and their gals as well.”

I mean, that invite meant I was in with them, right? It had to, and that’s why I couldn’t say no.

Now I just had to convince my little feisty friend not to say no.

17. Ellie

As soon as TJ left this morning, I hurriedly grabbed my coaching clothes while dialing up Jules' number.

I always wore my same jogger sweatpants and fur-lined, fleece jacket for coaching. I would only have about an hour of coaching time today- so two half hour private lessons.

I usually spent most of my day at the rink: I'd coach private lessons for a couple hours, stay on for noontime Learn to Skate where I spent an hour just teaching little groups of toddlers how to shuffle around the rink, and then I'd stay even later to be an ice monitor for Open Skate. Open skate time was always my favorite. I usually only had to monitor the regulars- two old geezer hockey players named Mikey and Jerry who skated around together reliving their glory days, and then Flora and Tom, a fragile looking, elderly ice dancing pair who skated slowly around the rink holding hands. During this time, I had fun keeping up a few of the skills I wasn't too afraid to still practice in my old age... I say old age because you're unfortunately basically over-the-hill at 18 in the figure skating world.

But this whole week, Learn to Skate and Open Skate were cancelled because of the stupid hockey camp... that apparently TJ was in...

As soon as Jules picked up, I grumbled, "You have some explaining to do."

My frustration was met with Jules' laughter on the other end of the line.

"I'm sorry! Grey and I just think you guys would really work!"

"Did I somehow ask to be set up?" I asked, not even bothering to keep the annoyance out of my voice.

“You’re totally right. I shouldn’t have meddled. I am sorry, Ellie. But you’re not even a little bit curious about him?” Jules asked.

I sighed. “Let’s hear it.”

“He truly is a great guy and he’s been struggling to find someone,” Jules started. “It’s like he’s got all this love to give a girl, but he keeps getting it thrown back in his face. I have a soft spot for him because of it. He just lacks a bit of finesse when it comes to charming, and you’ve got that in spades! When we met you and you seemed so organized and kind and were single too, we figured damn, these two belong together! Plus, you have the rink in common. Just like Grey and I.”

She had a couple good selling points there. Hearing that he’d gotten his love shoved back at him made me feel a little bad about being so mean to him. He was slowly proving to me that he wasn’t a bad guy. But the rink commonality thing? Nah. While I was happy he was able to chase his dream, he was part of the selfish hockey world that stole our ice.

“He doesn’t actually know I skate,” I pointed out.

“Ellie, why? You should have told him; you might see him at the rink today!”

I chewed the inside of my lip, debating what to say. Nikki almost blurted it out last night, but I did not need him knowing how annoyed I was that his team took over the only Open Skate hours where I could enjoy skating for myself... Actually, I didn’t even want him knowing that I skated at all. It felt too personal. Skating was mine. If I shared it with him, next thing I knew I’d be thinking of him on the ice, and I did not want him to taint some of my only peaceful time.

“He just comes on really strong with his playboy attitude,” Jules plowed on. “But it’s totally fake. He’s got a heart of gold and he really wants to be in a relationship. He’s ready for one; he doesn’t have commitment issues like a lot of the other hockey guys.

Grey is telling me to tell you that the two of you would be ying and yang,” she giggled.

“Alright, alright,” I told her. “I hear ya.”

“So you’ll give him a chance?” she asked excitedly.

“Maybe,” I told her.

“Babe! She says maybe!” I heard Jules call to Grey, and I had to stifle a laugh. The two of them truly were soulmates if I’d ever seen them.

“So how’re you feelin? Ready to pop?” I asked her, trying to change the subject away from Hockey Boy. “Think any more about a baby shower?”

“My goodness, you and Grey are both at me about that,” she said. “I’m still a maybe on it, Grey really wants me to have one. And... I’m feelin alright. I just keep waking up at night with painful Charlie horses in my legs and I feel bad because I end up waking Grey. He’s very helpful though,” she laughed. “His hands are much stronger than mine and he rubs them out way faster than I can.”

Hearing how he supported and helped her could make any girl swoon. I couldn’t help but think of how nice it would be to have someone always there to help you or even just keep you company as you pushed through whatever you struggled with... A concerned TJ laying on top of me flashed into my brain, but I tried to stomp it out before I got carried away.

“Hey, Ellie,” she added.

“Huh?” I asked as I grabbed my skating bag and exited my room.

“If you two are meant to be, I just don’t want you to lose time like I did with Grey. Like what are the chances he gets traded to the team that hosts their preseason right in your backyard? I think it’s a sign. So give him a chance?” she asked quietly. “I just really have this good feeling about you two.”

I sighed, thinking she was slightly crazy about the whole thing, but I didn't want to offend her. "How about I let you know how this week goes?"

She let out a happy noise then and we said our goodbyes.

I quickly scanned my kitchen cupboard for a protein bar- my breakfast to-go- and made my way to the rink.

As soon as I walked into Pine Ridge Ice Arena, Keith, the old rink manager, waved me down.

I quickened my pace to his little office across the lobby. He was an old man of few words, so I was surprised he was calling me over to talk.

"What's up?" I asked, slightly out of breath.

He was scanning his clipboard and rubbing his gray, bearded jaw ever so slightly.

"Well, we've got some open ice before a figure skating session if you want it?" he asked, still eyeing the clipboard.

I could feel adrenaline kicking in over the prospect of getting ice all to myself.

"When?"

"Wednesday and Thursday, first thing in the morning," he said with an affirmative nod in my direction. "Want it?"

"Thank you, Keith," I gushed and started walking away before he could take it back. "For real!" I called over my shoulder as I made my way toward the east rink.

“Remember this next time I need an extra instructor for a birthday party!” he yelled, to which I shot him a thumbs up.

No one ever wanted to help with birthday parties because you never knew what kind of talent, or lack thereof, that you’d be instructing. Sometimes you could find a diamond in the rough- a small, fearless kid who zoomed around the ice, loving it- and you could try to approach the parents and talk them into signing their kid up for lessons after the party. Other times, you could get taken out- like legitimately slide-tackled on accident- by a wobbly child on skates that were way too big for them.

I’d risk birthday party coaching for some private ice though, especially because it was hard to come by this week.

I pushed open the door leading to the east side rink and breathed in the cold air.

The rink’s main lights were still shut off, but the ice glowed under the small emergency light that was always on; it gave the ice an even more peaceful vibe. When I first moved up here, I experienced a lot of homesickness, but the rink helped cure it. All rinks automatically felt like home to me. The ice was where I belonged; it was my place. Maybe the cold air had something to do with it, but I was always able to think clearer here. At times when all else went wrong in life and I didn’t even recognize myself, I could always still skate. No one could take the long hours of hard work that I put into this sport away from me.

I walked alongside the boards until I reached a keypad locked door opposite the ice- the coach’s room- and then quickly inputted the code to let myself in.

The coach’s room wasn’t anything special, but it was cozy, with wooden benches and old pictures hung up in disarray around the 10-by-10-foot room.

I only came in here when I knew I wouldn’t have company. In order to avoid drama, I didn’t tend to

socialize much in the rink except with my students.

I tied up my skates- my right one first- one of my only superstitions, and then ripped open a new package of hand warmers that I brought with me today.

As a skater, I never felt the cold. I'd dress in layers and then shed them as I powered through practice, and by the end, I'd always end up in a tank top leotard and leggings. I did not have the same experience as a coach. I basically turned into a popsicle by the end of each full-out coaching day.

I shoved the hand warmers into my designated coaching mittens and pushed open the heavy door to reveal the now fully lit, smooth surface. My body hummed with excitement over the prospect of stepping out onto the ice, just like it had ever since I was a little kid.

I spotted my teeny, six-year-old student wearing a skating dress and tights with her hair smoothed into French braids pushing open the rink doors and waving excitedly at me.

"Hi Annie!" I said as I started moving toward the rink door. We were the first two out here today. I'm sure the older girls were busy gossiping in the locker rooms- they had a lot to talk about this week with the hockey guys all around and what not. I internally rolled my eyes but knew I shouldn't be too hard on them- I was like that once upon a time too.

I used one hand to push down the lever on the board's door and the other to pull it open.

"Ready for more axels?" I ushered Annie onto the ice in front of me. "I think you're gonna land one today, I can feel it!" Axels were always a difficult hurdle for young skaters, because at 1.5 rotations in the air, it was the bridge from learning single rotation jumps to moving onto doubles.

“Me too!” she smiled sweetly and stepped onto the ice.

“Our bet is still on, girlfriend. You land that axel, and one concession stand slushie for you,” I called after her. I always kept that bet with my girls, and it really seemed to work. It was something my mom always did for me with new jumps, and I was happy to carry on the tradition.

I skate-ran onto the ice and then smoothed into glides. I always entered this way.

I breathed in the cold air and settled into my edges while I made my way across the ice to where I usually coached. All of us coaches had our unofficial spots where we usually stood or sat on the boards. I always sat on the boards by the far blue line.

I hoisted myself up into a sitting position and observed the rink around me. The older girls started to pile onto the ice and begin skating warm-up laps, the bleachers were practically empty besides two or three mothers sitting on their own, and above the bleachers, the windows that peered into the off-ice workout room were filled with strong, grown men stretching out.

It was just another busy Monday with multiple worlds simultaneously working in this building.

After my private lessons were finished for the day- sadly no axels were landed- I left the rink and grabbed some Tim Horton’s iced coffee and a couple croissants for myself, Nikki, and yes, TJ too.

I was still mulling over giving TJ a chance as I opened my apartment door to reveal Nikki seemingly waiting for me in the kitchen.

She started in on me before I was even fully inside. “Why can’t you just have a fling and see where this goes? He’s clearly interested in you!”

I shrugged. I wasn’t comfortable discussing my issues and didn’t have any other reasons that would legitimately tally a negative for TJ.

“I like being alone,” I said simply.

She threw me a look that said, ‘seriously?’ and crossed her arms over her chest. “Okay, well how about the fact that you were looking all envious and shit at Jules and Grey during their whole weekend? How about the fact that in all the time that I’ve been your roommate, you haven’t once let anyone stay over, but then you let him. You obviously like him,” she pointed out.

“I was not envious! And he forced his way here!” I tried to argue, but she just shook her head.

“I think you’ll keep missing out if you don’t go for it one of these days. And this is a perfect opportunity! I say have fun while he’s here. Don’t worry about the long term. I know that’s what you’re doing, Ellie,” she looked back at me with worried eyes, and I wished I could shove her gaze away. “You’re pushing him away before he can do that to you. But you know what- just have fun with him! You’re in your twenties! Have a fling, damnit!” she said, throwing her arms wide.

I clamped my jaw shut. The more I thought about it, the more I knew she was right. What was wrong with a fling? He’d be leaving for Detroit in a week anyway, and then I could tell Jules I gave it a shot as well.

And, what I’d only admit to myself, was that maybe I could use the practice in trusting someone. Maybe I could use a friend, a guy friend specifically.

Plus, he’d already seen me at a low, so it’s not like I’d have to try to act perfect. Either way, I resolved I’d try to just go with it and not overthink things...

...I started to overthink things as soon as he came in the door.

Where I had always thought he was way too handsome for his own good, with a hat turned backwards and wearing his hockey warm-ups it just wasn't fair.

I reactively took a bite of the croissant I bought for him. I felt too insecure for him to know I got him something for some reason. And... I was mad that I was so damn attracted to him.

"What's that?" he asked when he finished locking the door.

I took a swig of my iced coffee and cleared my throat. "Croissant," I mumbled.

He pouted his stupid, cute lip out in response making him look like a man-child. "I'm hungry."

I let out a frustrated sound and started to head back to my room to abandon the fling plan. It would be too hard.

"Wait! Ellie, I need you," he said.

I paused and slowly turned to look back at him. He took that as permission to plow through with asking the favor.

"The guys invited me over to have a boat day and barbecue and I don't want to go alone. Please come?" He fake-cried, waiting for my answer.

I felt my face crack in disbelief. A boat day? Guys? Did he seriously think I'd throw on a bikini and prance out of here to some stranger's house? He clearly didn't know me at all if that were the case. While I felt sympathetic toward not wanting to go somewhere alone, he was totally playing me by saying that. He had

showboat confidence for days and I doubted he'd ever been nervous to go anywhere.

"Please! You have to come! I said you would and now I'll look like a liar," he continued.

I pushed a finger into his chest. "Well, that sounds like a personal problem now doesn't it, buddy?"

His eyebrows drew together as he looked down at my finger. He shook his head before pushing forward on me again. "Do you want the guys to hate me? Want them to haze me? Do you want me to not make friends, Ellie? Then I'd have to hang around you even more."

"Stop!" I yelled at him. I sighed and reminded myself of all the things Nikki yelled at me for earlier. "What do I even wear?"

He smiled smugly and it made me want to punch him in his infuriatingly handsome face. "I dunno. Whatever girls wear..." He snapped his fingers thinking. "Like a bikini and shorts!"

I felt my jaw unhinge at that as I looked up at him. "I am not wearing a bikini in front of a group of strangers, especially not a group of guys," I said. I turned back to my room and felt him starting to follow me.

"Don't be weird, Ellie," TJ said.

"Don't be mean, TJ," I snapped back and stopped walking, causing him to bump into me. I threw him up a glare for good measure.

"You're so cute when you're mad," he said sweetly.

I rolled my eyes and proceeded into my room.

He followed on my heels, and I had to push down my own vulnerability as I watched him study my personal space. My room was newly painted white on three walls with an exposed brick back wall that I loved. I walked over toward my bedside dresser and pushed a

frame down on its face. I didn't want him seeing an old picture of me with my parents; it felt too personal.

I walked to my walk-in closet door and threw it open to assess my clothing options. He went to my bed and laid back on it with his limbs all stretched out.

"Do you think I wouldn't protect you?" he said in a quieter voice from the bed.

I didn't answer, just bit my lower lip and contemplated the situation.

"Do you think I'd leave you there to fend for yourself or something?" he tried again. "It'll be fun. What's got you weirding out?"

I knew I was irrational because of my past, but I didn't feel like explaining that to him. I stepped into my closet to try on a couple different options. I didn't want to wear a skirt or sundress and risk looking like I was trying too hard. I ended up choosing cut-off jean shorts and a black tank top over a black tankini with rib cutouts underneath.

I threw my head down to grab my hair together and put it into a messy bun before walking out of the closet.

It seemed the first team meeting exhausted him because he was lightly snoring on my bed. He was way too comfortable encroaching in my space. I took the time to study his face for once. His eyes were shielded by the longest eyelashes, and his face was looking scruffier than after the wedding, like he hadn't shaved in a couple days. He had a small birthmark under his right eye, along with very faint freckles, like they'd faded through the years. I fought the temptation to smooth a thumb over them. He bounced from looking like a hockey douche to an innocent little boy; always innocent after I challenged him... and when sleeping apparently.

I sat down at my floor length mirror and got to work putting on some light spf makeup.

By the time I was putting on some mascara, with my mouth hanging open in concentration, I heard a small, "Don't mess up!" come from the bed.

He rolled off my creaky mattress and came to sit behind me on my white rug. His impossibly long, muscular legs were stretched out on both sides of me, and his body warmth radiated heat around me.

I wondered what the hell he was doing, until he started to massage my shoulders.

The urge to tell him to stop was squashed by how good it felt and my eyes fell closed, enjoying his touch.

"Breeeeeaathe," his husky voice whispered in my ear, giving me goosebumps.

There was no other explanation than he put me in a trance because I hadn't been touched for comfort like that in so long. I was speechless as he pulled the pony out of my hair, and I felt it fall against my back.

"I love your hair like this best, babe," he whispered in my ear, causing me to shiver. His breath trailed lower, until he lightly bit my neck, causing me to gasp. He smoothed a kiss over the same place that burned on my neck and then chuckled in my ear.

"Keep it down?" he asked.

I turned my head to face him...

But then his touch was gone, and he was standing up.

I blinked a couple times.

Looking up at him, I couldn't help but wonder...

I wondered why he had stopped...

What it would be like to kiss him...

And what it would be like to let down all borders with him.

18. TJ

She threw those wide green eyes open at me and her cheeks flushed pink. It took all of me to suppress a groan... because damn it all to hell if I didn't want to kiss her right then and there... If I didn't want to pick her up and push into her against the wall... if I didn't want to-

I cut myself off from thinking any further.

I knew she wanted me too. I knew it by how she didn't stop me. But I also knew I couldn't be the first one to make a move with her...

Patience, man, patience. I forced myself to swallow down my desires. I couldn't forget she was the same girl who barricaded her door this morning.

She scurried around her room grabbing things and throwing them in a tiny bag, seemingly avoiding eye-contact. When I thought she was all done, I started moving toward the door, but I could feel her shrinking back, hesitating.

"I'll protect you! You think I won't?" I questioned her with my hand on the doorknob. "Need me to lay on you again?" I started to push her back towards the bed. "Let's get this over with I guess," I chuckled.

"Stop it TJ, it's not funny," she said quietly, way less snarky than her usual self. She looked much smaller with her arms crossed in front of her, and I immediately missed her sassiness. I could tell there was a fierce independence and a scared uneasiness within her that battled at every interaction. I didn't like when her strong, boss-bitch self was shrouded by anxiety.

"Where's the feistiness?" I asked her. I took the opportunity to smooth her silky hair behind an ear. "I know this is out of your comfort zone, but how about you focus on keeping me in check. You love yelling at me, I know you do. Make sure I don't do anything stupid like shake a baby," I smirked.

She was definitely trying to stop a small smile at that.

“There it is!” I said, “We’re teammates, okay? Linemates, like in hockey. You know what those are?” I asked. “When you go up, I hang back to have your back. When I go up, you pass and I get to be the hero,” I winked. “We work together and pick up each other’s slack, okay?”

“Linemates?” she asked, looking at me like I was a dork.

I nodded and grabbed her hand to go, and this time she didn’t pull back.

We drove in silence most of the way. I was driving Ellie’s little car, and I was pretty shocked she let me. The anticipation of the boat day was probably eating away at her brain.

In one way, I felt bad about pushing her out of her comfort zone; but in another, I was damn happy she was letting me do it. She had to be placing her trust in me to some degree if she’d go to a place where I was the only person she would know.

I looked over at her sunlit profile. Her serious eyes studied the tree lined drive, and the sun caught her hair, making it glow. It was almost like her hair couldn’t decide if it was gold, rust, brown, or red, and all colors were battling it out. Her shoulders were smattered heavily with freckles- that if I were to be so lucky one day- I’d kiss all over.

When I finally slowed to turn onto a gravel road, we were met with a large sign that read: “Welcome to The D Hockey.”

“I guess we made it to the right place, eh?” I asked her.

She nodded but kept quiet. I pushed my luck then- but hey, it's not like she could jump out of the car by reaching over to grab her hand. I was surprised by how much smaller and daintier her hand was than mine. I gave it a squeeze and didn't chance looking at her and making it a big deal, and I was rewarded with her accepting the comfort.

When the house at the end of the drive finally came into sight, I think both of us were left speechless. It was the biggest, nicest, beach house I'd ever seen.

The house was three stories high and painted dark blue with white trimming and cultured stone added here and there in nice places. There was what looked like a guesthouse to the right that was built to look like a tree fort, and in between the two structures was a basketball and tennis court.

When I finally parked alongside about a dozen fancy cars, ranging from Range Rovers to shiny sportscars, me and Ellie turned and looked at each other.

"Well... this is..."

"Huge," Ellie said with wide eyes.

"Biggest house I've ever seen," I said, shaking my head. "The Vonnies aren't used to this kinda style."

She giggled then. "Me neither."

I loved the sound of her laughter and would do or say anything to hear it again.

"Maybe they'll have some boujee food. You like boujee food?" I asked her.

"I wouldn't mind some caviar in my Mac n cheese," Ellie said with her nose stuck up in the air to pretend.

"Caviar?" I made a face.

She grinned. "Yeah, I'm just kidding. I just couldn't think of anything else 'boujee,' so clearly it's not

my style.”

“Mac and cheese kinda girl, I like it,” I winked at her, to which she rolled her eyes at me yet again, but this time, she did it with a smile.

“Let’s make our entrance, Brampton.”

19. Ellie

As we walked up to the long porch that looked like it wrapped around the entire house, TJ grabbed my hand again... and I let him.

His hand was warm, much larger than mine, and calloused, probably from constantly wearing hockey gloves and lifting weights by the look of his body this morning. His toughness was attractive, and just the thought of him shirtless made my face hot.

Walking up to the house, I couldn't help but notice how nice it was to have someone to lean on in a social situation.

When I was working my events, I never cared that I was alone because my brain was occupied. I had a mission to accomplish and clients to please. But in other parts of life, I'd gotten very used to being alone, and the stark contrast I felt when I was with TJ highlighted that.

I had to admit that it was nice to hold hands. When I was young, I never imagined I wouldn't have a hand to hold at this point in life. I always imagined having a Someone who would support me and joke with me through every situation; Someone who would be there for me and help, no questions asked, and would never make me feel like I was asking for too much. I dreamt up a Someone who would crush spiders in my apartment, eat ice cream with me because I felt embarrassed indulging alone, and Irish goodbye out of parties alongside me because a party of just the two of us would be even better than some random packed place. I think the whole thing came down to the fact that I just wanted someone to choose me for once. As I got older, I pushed that kind of Someone into the category of a pipe dream—the kind that Disney sold to little girls. With age, I grew jaded. I figured all romantic love was a sham. It was a feeling you could only attain when you were naive and innocent enough to love blindly and take people at face

value, and from my life experiences, I was rendered incapable of doing both of those things... But TJ... He was unexpected. He was proving to be much different than the typical asshole I'd first pegged him to be.

It's not like I wanted to get my hopes up or anything, but standing with him on the porch, it felt an awful lot like we *were* a team... Linemates, as he so dorkishly called it.

"So boujee," he whispered to me with a smile as he rang the doorbell.

"So very much so," I whispered back. And I enjoyed having a secret with him. I enjoyed feeling like we could be two conspirators together amongst whoever was behind the door.

A second later, a young, very attractive couple threw the door open to expose an even more beautiful inside of the house if that were even possible. The decor was all 'at sea' themed, and the dark hardwood floor made it look like the inside of a ship.

"Hi!" The blonde girl greeted us brightly. She had a happy, ginger-haired baby girl probably around a year and a half old propped on her hip.

The tall muscular guy behind her who sported brown fauxhawk hair- the sides were cut short and the middle was all spiked up and messy- was holding her hip with one hand and extending his other out to TJ.

"Griff, hey," TJ said, with a firm handshake.

"How's it goin Vinny bud?" he said politely in what I detected was a slight Canadian accent; his "bud" was pronounced "baud." His serious eyes were the lightest blue I think I'd ever seen.

"This is Ellie," TJ pointed to me.

"Your baby's so cute, what's her name?" I asked, trying to make polite conversation, then chastised myself for not even saying hi. Why did I always feel so socially

awkward all the time? I felt my face heating up. This was why I didn't venture to random barbeques.

I felt TJ's hand rub my lower back, giving me some comfort, and was thankful for his presence.

"Indie Mae Griffiths," the guy called Griff said proudly. "And this is my wife, Savannah," he motioned to the petite blonde, still smiling. "And the six-year-old monster athlete out back who will probably beat you at all the lawn games is our son, Johnny."

"You can call me Sav. Welcome to the Detroit Crew, guys," she said warmly. "C'mon in, everyone's out back by the water."

She ushered us through the door and kept talking as we went. "I think food is pretty soon. My parents are getting it catered."

TJ threw me a secret look, as if to repeat, 'boujee,' and I tried to fight a smile.

Outside, a freshly cut lawn spanned the entire length of house and led down to a beach that entered Lake Michigan. Their beachfront was so long it was probably the size of three beach cottages' usual sizes put together. It was a perfect place for lawn games, and some of the guys were already busy playing Swedish lawn bowling, corn hole, and spikeball. The women were all gathered around a large picnic table with a couple other babies scattered on their laps.

All the couples seemed to be in their twenties or thirties, and they were all extremely attractive. I guess a requirement of being part of the Detroit crew was being runway worthy. The men were all jacked and fit, probably from the hard hockey schedules they endured, and their women were all practically Amazonians... Just looking, I could tell that, with exception to Sav, I was probably the shortest girl present.

It was almost like TJ could read my mind as I was measuring myself up and falling short of the other women, because he slowed our pace and whispered down to me, “You look beautiful by the way. I don’t think I said that earlier.”

When I looked up into his warm brown eyes, it was almost like he was imploring me to listen to his words. For some reason, when he said it, I felt it. I felt wanted, and that mattered more than any superficial beauty standard in my mind. He gave my hand another squeeze and then was pulling me forward to introduce me to the group.

As he greeted people, I couldn’t help but realize how we were such opposites in almost every way. Where I was all anxiety, he was calm; where I was the introvert, he was comfortable talking to any human in front of him.

“How long have you known these guys?” I asked to double-check he really did only have one meeting with them.

“Well, the hockey world is pretty small, so I’ve known a lot of their names and played against some through the years, but most of them I only met for real today. I recognized Griff earlier today because he refereed at the Ice League back home, but I never met him before today,” he said. “I remembered the blue eyes.”

I nodded; those light baby blues would be pretty memorable. But I was still shocked that he could be accepted into a group so easily while I’d only made a single friend up here in five years.

“And... Why do they keep calling you Vinny?” I inquired. I was pretty sure I hadn’t gotten his name wrong. I was the one who painstakingly wrote out all the name cards for the wedding, after all.

He laughed at that. “Well... Coach said it earlier today, and I didn’t want to correct him,” he shrugged. “He can call me whatever he wants, so long as I get to play.”

“Makes sense to me. Don’t piss off the big guy.”

“Exactly. I guess he does it a lot, and now I’m a bit confused on what to call a couple of the guys even though I know their actual names.”

A guy who was tatted up on his entire right side interrupted us then by yelling across the lawn: “Ellie! We need your man for Spikeball!”

TJ squinted down at me, as if asking permission. This was yet another innocent look of his. It was almost like he was a little kid and his friends were coming up to knock on the door to ask if he could play outside with them.

“Go for it,” I nudged him. “I’ll go sit with the girls. Maybe not shake a baby.”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss into my hair, shocking me yet again today. No one had ever publicly shown affection to me like that, and the move felt more intimate than making out. It felt beyond fling territory...

“Better not, heard they explode sometimes,” he grinned. “I’ll just play one game. It goes to 21.” Then he was gone, jogging over to a round net on the ground with three men surrounding it.

20. TJ

“Mine!” Campbell yelled, and I moved for the optimum place to take the next spike. The game was pretty fast paced. One person threw the ball into the bouncy net, and the next group had to hit it twice before throwing it back to the net to pass to the other team.

After a perfect set from Campbell, I hit the ball hard onto the net and Duke and Griff couldn't return it.

“Wooo!” Campbell let out a signature hockey guy yell and moved to smack me five. “Nice work, rookie.”

“Thanks, man,” I said, but my focus was not on the game. I craned my neck to try to catch a glimpse of Ellie while the other two were retrieving the ball. She looked like she had the ginger-haired baby on her lap, and she was genuinely smiling at the little thing.

Campbell stood next to me, trying to look at what I was seeing.

“Oh man! Your girl looks awfully comfy holding that baby,” he shoved me in the gut.

“She does,” I said quietly.

“Gonna need another diaper party here soon, boys!” Campbell yelled. A diaper party was the male version of a baby shower, except instead of a classy event with wrapped up gifts and cute, little desserts hosted in a nice dining hall, all the guys just brought boxes of diapers, and everyone would drink cheap beer all night in someone's garage. I usually would've cracked a joke back at this, but I wished everyone would just shut up about it. They didn't realize how much I wanted that kinda life, but how jumpy Ellie would probably be about the topic.

Woah, I needed to slow down.

We hadn't even gone on one successful date yet. Then again, did we even need official dates? Today

was going well...Maybe I could just swing this into us hangin' all the time and then it would just happen?

I know other guys would tell me to keep my options open and not get so hung up on one chick, especially going into this hockey season... but I had this nagging feeling that it had to be her. There was something addictive about her that pulled me in. I'd fallen into her orbit, and that's where I wanted to stay. I just hoped she wouldn't shove me out on my ass.

"Shit, Ellie looks like she could be Indie's mom with her hair," Griff said after coming back up to the net. "Is that Ellie's natural color? We think the ginger is from my side of the fam, but no real way to really confirm it."

"Uhh," I thought for a moment and drew a blank. That was something I hadn't thought to ask her. But it was also because my mind was so captured by seeing her so happy with Indie that I couldn't think of anything else past that. She was helping the baby stand on her little chunky legs on her lap while she held her tiny hands.

Yellow swished past my face then, and I dodged the spike ball from almost hitting me at the very last second.

"Dude!" They all laughed at me. I forced myself to chuckle back. I was distracted, completely, because at that moment I was thinking of how I could move from where I was in life to where Griff was: An old guard guy on the team, with a beautiful wife and kids in tow. At least I'd know where to go for advice in Detroit.

After Campbell and I won the game, I turned down the next round and tapped little Johnny in over the other hockey guys standing around watching.

"Wait, really?" he asked with wide eyes as he scrambled to his feet.

"Yeah, man, keep the streak up for me," I said while giving him a knuckle punch.

He'd been watching on the sidelines cheering the last couple points and you could tell he was itching to join in. I was impressed the kid was so well-mannered, other kids would've thrown a tantrum to play right at that second, but it seemed he just wanted to be accepted as one of the guys, even though he was about half the size.

I watched a minute of their first round before trying to inconspicuously slip away to join the ladies. I was looking forward to catching up with my girl... *My girl*. The phrase felt so right in my mind, and it brought a smile to my face. I could see her talking over there and I'd fight a man just to catch any word coming out of her mouth. I wanted to know what she was saying, what she was thinking...

I wandered up behind Ellie and put my hat on her as she was playing peek-a-boo with little Indie.

She pushed the hat further up so she could see and turned around to look at me with uncharacteristically loose posture, and she gave a real, authentic smile, with no eye-roll. It was like the tension had drained out of her, the mask had come off, the clouds had truly opened this time. I vowed right then to try to earn more of those smiles... even if I did have to steal babies and shove them in her arms to get them.

"So, give us the deets, how long have you guys been together?" Sav, who was sitting at the head of the ladies table, asked in a conspiratorial tone. Soon all the chatter died down and it felt like everyone was looking at us. It's almost like there's a beacon system in women-like relationship talk was coming out, so everyone shut it and listen up.

I saw pink rising into Ellie's cheeks and knew this one would be up to me. It's not like we were *together* together... even though I wanted us to be... and I definitely blurred the lines between fact and fantasy

when it came to the two of us when Griff asked if I had a girl earlier today. But that was something Ellie didn't need to know.

"Umm... since a wedding earlier this summer. Did you ladies know that Ellie's a wedding organizer?" I tried to turn the subject away from us. "So, any of you ladies with a new rock on your hand, she's your girl. She makes people stay on the dance floor as long as possible. Apparently if one couple leaves the dance floor it can throw the whole night into jeopardy," I said seriously.

Ellie looked at me with a smirk. That got the ladies really going into wedding talk though, and they all had questions for Ellie. Two things almost all women seemed to love- again, don't chew me out if I'm wrong because I'm strictly speaking according to my sisters - were #1- weddings, and #2- babies.

"Alright, y'all!" Griff announced, cutting through the women's chit chat and the other lawn games going on. "Quick boat trip before food. So, everyone grab whatever drinks you want and meet on the dock. Break!" he called out and clapped his hands together.

Everyone slowly dispersed then- Sav grabbed up Indie to suntan lotion her chunky limbs again, and others started to wander around to find their beach towels and drinks.

Two defensemen were rolling out a hefty looking cooler and handing out beers and seltzers on their way to the dock.

"Bathroom?" I asked Ellie, causing her to jump a bit.

I followed behind her as she walked into the house. I guess one good thing about a shorty girl was that I could see everything over top of her. When she approached the sliding door, I reached around her to open it for her, and as we entered the large, state-of-the-

art kitchen together, I could see those shoulders starting to tense up again.

“Hey.” I touched her lower back, and she jumped a couple inches away from me. “Easy,” I laughed. I tugged her arm to turn her around. “You don’t have to drink anything, no one will pressure you,” I assured her. That had to have been what was on her mind, unless... “You’re not afraid of water, are you?”

She threw me an ‘are-you-stupid?’ look and crossed her arms, but I just shrugged. If it was the drinking she was worried about, that was nothing that couldn’t be fixed. I knew how even harmless people could get pushy sometimes with a bit in their systems. It always turned into- ‘Why aren’t you drinking? What do you want? C’mon, we’ll have whatever you want, I’m sure of it...’ But I was a pro at trying to avoid those kinds of conversations. I knew from Grey’s experience that a lot of guys got trapped in the lower leagues because of the toll partying took on their bodies, and I was always determined not to let that happen to me. So, I always took partying in small doses, such a bad boy, I know.

I quickly moved around her and grabbed a seltzer from the fridge, looked around us to make sure the coast was clear, then dumped it down the drain. I filled the empty back up with tap water.

I turned and handed her the full can. “Good?” I asked.

Her mouth seemed to fall open a little, and she slowly took the drink from me.

“Thank you,” she uttered with her eyebrows up, seemingly surprised.

I took the opportunity to smooth a hand down her back and she ever so slightly leaned into me. “I told you I wouldn’t leave you hanging. Linemates.”

She chewed the inside of her lip and the softness in her won out. She gave me a small smile. I

was pretty sure I was starting to finally win her over and make her believe just how interested I was in her.

“What was that out there? You telling them I was a wedding planner? Trying to set me up for some goals?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow up at me.

“I do like to score, baby.”

She looked around to make sure we were alone before whispering up to me. “I get the sense they think we’re really dating, TJ.”

Shit. I felt my body pause.

I grabbed at the front of my hair, thinking of how to smooth it over. “Huh. Yeah, maybe... Is that so bad?” I cracked a smile at her, trying to play it off.

She looked back at me like I was crazy.

“I mean... So, I might’ve fudged some details,” I admitted. “I wanted you to come with me today. I figured it’d be fun spending some more time together.”

Her face was unreadable when I looked back down at her.

“Well, you could’ve just said that,” she finally said.

Knowing she wasn’t pissed, I cracked an easy smile. “Ah, but what would be the fun in that, babe?”

She rolled her eyes and pushed away, but I tried to hold her for a second longer against me

“Why do you always do that?”

She lightly patted my stomach and looked up at me. “Because ‘babe’ rolls off your tongue way too easily. It makes it seem like you’re really practiced in being a flirt who just goes around calling all girls ‘babe’ because you’ve forgotten the real name of the girl in front of you.”

“Really? I just like calling you babe,” I said honestly. “But I’ll stop if you want me too?”

Her mouth twisted and she paused.

“Should we actually hit the bathroom before the boat?” she asked, changing the subject.

So, did she want me to eliminate the “babe’s” or not? Maybe she just needed me to clarify that she was the only one I was calling “babe”? I guess I’d just have to gauge her reactions.

I ushered her in front. “Ladies first, as Momma V says.”

21. TJ

I had never loved a boat ride more in my life. We were all packed into the pontoon tightly, so it gave me the excuse to smoosh close to Ellie and put my arm around her, and she didn't push me away. Instead, she seemed to enjoy the closeness. I was super aware that the entire side of her, including her boob, was touching my side. My ridiculous excitement level over this made me feel like a lovesick teenage boy.

The other upside of the boat ride: there was no talking. The wind and music playing were too loud, so there was no chance I could stick my foot in my mouth. We needed more opportunities like this.

When we finally stopped by a sandbar toward the end of the lake, all the guys started to hop over the sides of the pontoon to throw around a football.

When I hesitated in my spot, Ellie pushed me. "You can't be the odd one out when you're also the new guy. I'm good here," she whispered. She sipped from her drink and gave me a wink.

I backed up like I'd been shot. "You've stolen my move, girl! There's power in that wink." I gave the ends of her hair a little tug, "You sure?"

She nodded with a small smile. That was the push I needed to bail overboard and join the guys.

As soon as I waded my way to a good spot, a missile was thrown at me that I had to jump to catch. There was no way I could drop it here in front of all the guys as the rookie.

When I resurfaced all the ladies were clapping for me, and Ellie even gave me a thumbs up as I launched the ball back to a defenseman that I didn't know yet.

Out in the water, I was able to watch Ellie without holding back or being deemed weird. I was mesmerized by the way she wove her hair into a long braid.

While she was moving around the boat and chatting with the other ladies, I couldn't help but notice how hot she looked in her sleek Tankini. The girl didn't need to wear anything skimpy to show she had a bangin' bod. She was small in stature, but muscular like an athlete, and I'd make it a point later to get what sports she played out of her. While I always thought I'd go after a taller girl, she made the others look lanky and uncoordinated to me now. I only had eyes for her.

Catching her laugh off-hand at a joke was a breath of fresh air. Here on the lake, she looked so much different than the small girl lying on the floor of the venue fighting choppy breathing.

After a couple minutes of throwing the football around, some of the girls decided it was time to join the action.

First in was Duke's girl, quickly followed by about three other girls.

I waded my way toward the pontoon, curious if Ellie would take the plunge.

When I made it there, I grabbed hold of the boat's ledge and hoisted myself up so I could lean half my body inside.

Ellie gave a little yelp of surprise. "TJ, you're dripping on me!"

"C'mon in," I urged. "Can't hold myself here forever, ya know."

She gave me a smirk. "Those muscles just for show?" she asked behind her dark aviator sunglasses.

“Oh, you think that?” I retorted. I pulled myself further up and jumped inside the boat. “That sounded like someone wants to get thrown in!”

She started running to the other side of the boat to get away from me, but I caught her quickly and wrapped my arms around her little waist.

She struggled against me, her body shuddering with giggles.

“Can I toss ya?” I whispered in her ear.

“You’re asking permission now?!” she hollered. “Now that I’m already wet?”

“Ooh, but I like when you’re wet, baby,” I whispered in her ear again. I could feel her slightly shiver against me and I spotted goosebumps on her arms. I loved having that effect on her. “But I mean, it’s not ketchup packet time, is it?”

Her jaw dropped open. “Did you just use that again?”

“Well, is it?” I knew from my sisters that this was a horrible mistake a man could make. I learned the hard way when I shoved one of them in a pool when I was a little kid. I got chewed out for it for about a month.

She huffed. “No, but-”

I didn’t let her finish. I felt a smile spread across my face as I stood up on the pontoon’s bench, fully carrying her now, with one arm under her back and one hooked under her knees.

Guys in the water were now watching us and chanting, “Do it! Do it!” While the girls were yelling at me to stop.

I was never one to let a crowd down, and the boys were a hundred percent louder.

“Here we go, Ellie!” I warned her, and then we were in the air.

The cold shock of the water felt amazing...

Not so amazing: Ellie kicking me in the balls by accident as she swam to the surface.

She emerged laughing and smoothing her hair back, but when she turned to look at me, she knew something was wrong.

“What?” her eyebrows drew together in concern.

“You kicked me in the balls!” I yelled at her, feeling betrayed somehow as the pain coursed through my entire body.

After all of a single second of concern, she threw her head back laughing, and swam towards me struggling to say sorry due to her laughing fit.

“Oh shoot,” I heard a little cackle from the boat. “She gotcha with a nut shot?!” Johnny said while peaking his little head over the side of the boat. He slowly shook his head at Ellie with an incredulous look on his little freckled face.

“She did, little man,” I said wryly as I swam back toward the boat.

Johnny’s spiky haired head disappeared then, and we heard a little voice begging his mom for another pop.

I hung on to the back of the pontoon for a minute, waiting for the pain to go away. When she reached me, she steadied herself by holding onto my shoulder.

She leaned closer and gave me the quickest kiss on my cheek.

After she pulled back, I could still feel her wet, delicate lips against my skin, and it took me a second to recoup.

“Sorry, Theodore.” She bit her lip trying to hold in more giggles. I just shook my head at her. I guess I deserved it for throwing her in the lake in the first place.

“Know what would make me feel bett-”

“Shh!” she warned and put a dainty finger up to my lips. “Don’t say anything bad to ruin the moment, Theodore Jiffy Vonnie.”

I blew out a sigh, I should’ve never told her my full name.

“C’mere,” I told her, and grabbed her leg and wrapped it around my waist so she was facing me head on. Water clung to her long eyelashes making her eyes look even more shiny than usual. She put her hands around my neck.

She paused for a beat, taking in her surroundings, and I followed her gaze. It was a beautiful summer night, but you could feel a bit of chill in the air signaling that summer was fast coming to an end. That didn’t take anything away from the beauty of the sun beginning to set though. It looked like the sky was being painted with all the colors in the rainbow- shades of red, pink, and orange around the yellow sun bled into the deepening shades of blue and purple near the moon. It amazed me how you could see the sun and moon at the same time here. Heads were bobbing up and down around the boat where the couples still in the water were talking in their own little worlds.

“Do you like it here? Up north?” Ellie asked me hesitantly.

“I do,” I replied. “It seems slower, simpler up here.”

Her face seemed to glow above the water. “It is. That’s the beauty of it. The seasons feel longer up north.”

“Are you from here?” I asked. I wasn’t sure why it hadn’t occurred to me to ask that earlier. How did one end up in a vacation spot full-time?

“Nah,” she looked wistfully at the sun setting. “I’m from Wixom, which is less than an hour from Detroit.”

My parents moved down to Florida though, after-”

She cut herself off and cleared her throat, looking suddenly surprised by giving me even the smallest bit of personal information. I wanted more though- I wanted to fully know her.

“Where are you from?” she asked. She reached toward my face and smoothed out one of my eyebrows for me.

“Am I pretty again?” I asked.

She just smirked back.

“I’m from Minnesota. I grew up at the Ice League- the same rink as Grey and Jules and all them,” I told her.

“You make the Ice League sound like a city,” she pointed out.

I shrugged. “Felt like that when we were kids. Our worlds revolved around it. A lot of memories there,” I told her. “But I still want to know...”

She looked at me in question.

I pinched her flat tummy and she immediately flinched away.

“I still wanna know what sports you were into, little lady,” I finished.

“How do you even know I played sports?” Her eyes narrowed in on mine.

I grabbed her legs then and hoisted her in the air a bit. “Oh, these babies played sports, I know it,” I grinned. “Soccer?” I asked.

She shook her head no. “Absolutely not. That’s way too much running for me.”

“Damn.”

“Guess you’ll never know, pretty boy,” she said as she placed her feet against the pontoon and kicked

off onto her back to float away from me.

The girl was a mystery... but I was addicted to trying to figure her out.

22. Ellie

After the nice boat cruise, we had dinner back at the house, and then some of the guys had the idea to start a bonfire. They had an easier day tomorrow because their schedule read that it would be focused on drills and skating rather than scrimmages, and they were starting off a bit later than usual so they could sleep in.

The only thing that jilted my night was when Sav asked when we would be settling into Detroit...

The group definitely thought TJ would make the final cut and that TJ and I were full-blown dating. Up until that point in the night, I was fine playing the part. I was honestly enjoying it. I was enjoying the attention and care he was giving me. When he handed me the can of water earlier in the day, my heart pretty much flopped around happily in my chest, telling me- finally! He could be The Someone. And after I called him out for his “babe” use, his eyes flickered with genuine hurt as he offered to stop calling me that. I instantly regretted it. I suddenly wanted that title and knew I’d probably miss it from his vocabulary if he stopped.

But after Sav asked, I couldn’t stop my brain from thinking... and pretty soon, I was missing him.

He was sitting next to me at the fire, our thighs were touching, and I was wearing his overly large sweatshirt that he gave me to keep from being cold, but I knew his warm presence in Northern Michigan, and in my life, was only temporary. This could only ever be a fling with us, but at some point through this day, I started to hope. Now I was feeling the sting of the reality check. He’d leave for Detroit at the close of preseason camp at the end of the week, and I’d be alone again.

So, I was sitting next to him... already missing him.

I didn't want to be that girl who complained, but about an hour into the fire, I started to shiver from the night's drop in temperature despite the fire in front of me and TJ's sweatshirt. TJ, noticing how cold I was, rubbed his large hands up and down my arms and told the group we were going to head out. The fact that he noticed and cared more about how I was feeling than what he wanted punched me with a bittersweetness...Because it was nice to be cared about for a change. This was what a Someone would do, but I had to remind myself that this wasn't for real and there wasn't any true potential with him leaving so soon.

The whole ride home, TJ seemed perfectly at ease, while I was the exact opposite, and when I pulled up to my house, my stupid, anxious brain was still working in overdrive.

As I went to my door, TJ trailed after me like an obedient golden retriever. I couldn't help but feel the difference between last night and tonight.

Because tonight, I didn't want him to leave.

When we entered, he quickly turned and started to lock up without me even asking him to do it. It's like he knew how important it was to me, and he was taking that into his own hands.

I was caught in indecision then, and I don't know why, but my defensive fight response started to kick in.

"Shouldn't you get a hotel, TJ?" I asked him in the hallway. "You should probably leave now." I said it, but I couldn't deny that a small part of me wanted more than anything for him to fight to stay.

He closed his eyes tight and shook his head like he was struggling just to stay standing. "So tired," he

mumbled with a small smile. He turned me around and started to guide me playfully toward my room.

Once he entered my room, he switched off the light, tore off his shirt to expose his ripped torso, and then plopped down on the left side of my queen size bed like he had absolutely no cares in the world.

I was envious he could shut his brain off and be so nonchalant, like laying in someone else's bed wasn't the huge deal that it was to me.

When he noticed I hadn't moved, he patted my bed next to him.

"Don't overthink, Ellie. Sleep," he mumbled.

I leaned against my doorway, knowing that I probably seemed like a weirdo, but my body wouldn't allow me to move forward. That was the thing about trauma though- you could try as hard as you wanted to go back and delete chapters of your life, but they won't disappear, not completely. Because your body already read them; your body remembers them.

"What's up?" he finally asked.

I felt anxiety course through my body over the fact that I didn't want to ruin it- to ruin what was between us. Because when I finally stopped fighting it today, I felt it, and I was sure he did too.

I walked over and sat on my side of the bed and waited for my eyes to adjust to the dark so I could see him more clearly.

His kind eyes stared back into mine as he stretched a hand toward me, waiting on me to talk.

It really wasn't a big deal if he stayed in my bed...right? I tried to reason with myself. He had shown kindness all day today. He didn't act like we just met. He acted like my boyfriend. Could it all be an act? Or was that something he was actually interested in pursuing with me? He-

“Ellie. I know your brain is like frying itself going in circles right now about ten million different things,” he mumbled; half his face was smushed into one of my pillows. “But please, stop. Don’t think of us as on opposite sides- we’re on the same team. I see that bat on the ground, and I think I’ve proved- I hope I’ve proved- that I’m no threat. So you swinging the bat or me, babe? You’re gonna want me to. Simple as that. You could leave that front door wide open with me sleeping here for all I care, because I’d never let anyone come near you. Whatever you’re afraid of, I can take care of it.”

His words all but melted my heart, and I wanted to climb into bed and curl into him. I imagined it would feel so nice, and so warm. But the other half of me couldn’t be convinced. The other half wanted to demand- for how long? You can take care of it for how long, TJ? Because I know you have to leave.

I needed to remind myself that nothing could be figured out tonight and that things would be clearer in the morning- they always were. At nighttime, everything always seemed daunting. Worries came at night. Tears came at night when no one else could see them. Feelings of being trapped, stuck, at the end-of-the-rope all intruded in with the darkness. I was no stranger to those feelings. But with morning sunshine, possibilities- ways out of the seemingly stuck places- always shone in.

So I grabbed my pj’s and went into my large closet to change.

By the time I walked back toward my bed, it looked like he was already peacefully asleep.

I carefully tried to pull some covers out from under him and climb into bed without waking him up. But after laying there for a minute, I felt him moving behind me.

“I’ll make you believe it. I know you don’t right now,” he muttered in the dark. “Linemates, Ellie.” And

then I heard him wrestling with the covers, and soon I felt his large, muscular presence against me, being the big spoon. His arm curled around my waist, and it felt so secure, and so loving, that it made me tear up.

Because after trying to deny it for so long... I knew that this feeling, this kind of security blanket, this kind of teammate... was all that I wanted.

I laid there realizing that at that moment, he had my back, and I had my front.

And I felt protected.

I had a Linemate.

And I didn't want to lose him... even though I knew that I probably would.

And I knew it was going to hurt when I did.

I was sleeping next to him.

But laying there in the dark, I was already missing him...

And wondering... if he'd miss me too.

23. Ellie

My alarm clock sounded loudly early on Tuesday morning, and I groaned in rebellion against it. I pulled the covers close to my chin, and I felt TJ move closer to me.

“Stay,” he mumbled behind me.

He grabbed my body and pulled me into him effortlessly, almost as if I was weightless, and my body instantly felt a shocking attraction, emitting from low, over how in command and comforting that action was.

I felt his rough scruff against my cheek. “This is nice,” he whispered groggily.

I snoozed my alarm for ten more minutes and cherished cuddling into him.

When my alarm went off again, I knew I couldn't delay the day anymore. TJ seemed to know this as well, and he rolled over to sleep in a bit more.

I dressed in my coaching clothes and grabbed my bag to head out.

As I quietly creaked the door open, I heard TJ, who was flopped on his stomach on the bed, whisper to me, “Have a good day, babe.”

His words felt like a hug, and I suddenly felt the temptation to walk over to him and kiss his sleeping face goodbye...

But that would be too much... that would be too... intimate.

I shook the urge out of my head. As nice as this morning was, I needed to get out of this Taylor-Swift-song-fantasy-life and move on with my reality. With my work...

So, I tried to lock thoughts of TJ out of my brain as I walked into the rink.

Tuesdays were always my favorite day because I ran a quick power skating tutorial before and after the morning practice session.

I only ever took on girls for private lessons until they reached the level where they wanted to compete, then I handed them off to the other coaches at the rink. I hated traveling, and competitions were not fun for me. They were both things that gave me major anxiety, and I learned to give in to what my body needed- a Zen way of life where I avoided panic attacks before they could happen. It was sometimes sad for me to see girls move on, but I knew it was good for them. And it didn't hurt as bad when I knew I'd still get to coach them a bit during these little power skate sessions.

Usually higher-up coaches would hate that another instructor was working with their girls, but Pine Ridge coaches knew I wouldn't poach any of their clients- because my whole competition scaredy-cat thing- so it was a pretty good system.

I tied up my skates in the coaches' room and then walked to the concession stand to buy myself some hot chocolate.

I greeted the boy manning the stand before he looked up to see me.

"G'morning, Tommy," I told him.

He sleepily looked up from his textbook that was opened in front of him. He was a pre-med college student who only worked here part time.

"The usual?" he asked while yawning.

"You know it," I replied. I needed some sugar to wake up, and some warmth for when I skated out onto

the ice today. Rinks were always about ten degrees colder in the mornings.

As soon as he handed over the hot chocolate, I shuffled over to the east rink to get moving.

My girls were already in full swing warm-up mode when I ran onto the ice holding my hot chocolate.

I skated over to the timekeeper's box to locate the aux cord and cue up some morning tunes.

As soon as I was happy with a new pop song that had a great tempo for stroking exercises, I skated into the center circle and motioned for the girls to gather.

I had a group of about seven girls today.

"Y'all ready?" I asked, looking at their fresh morning faces. "I've got some good ideas for today," I said, rubbing my gloves together in front of me. "Keeping time with some music to start. Follow me," I told them, and pushed off to start crossovers around the middle circle.

"Keep the beat, make sure you fully extend!" I called out.

After I got them to a good tempo, I glided out of rotation and watched.

"Nice, Kimmie! Keep pushing!" I said to my smallest skater who was concentrating hard. She was keeping up well, and I could tell she was probably the most talented in the group.

"I know you're getting tired but finish the song!" I coached. "Don't let those shoulders turn in!" I reminded them.

I was just about to call for them to cease the crossovers and use their speed to glide out in a strong checkout, which was the landing position for jumps,

when my music was suddenly cut-off and a whistle sounded loudly.

Most of my girls looked at me confusedly, but Kimmie kept right on moving. I liked her spirit.

I searched around to see who the whistle belonged to, and finally made eye contact with an older guy wearing a hockey warm-up outfit and hat pulled low.

I snapped my jaw shut and grinded my teeth, preparing my body for a showdown. We would not be kicked off our ice. I would stand my ground for my girls. This was clearly our time on the rink's schedule.

I motioned for my girls to wait for me and skated over to the man.

"Excuse me," I started, trying to sound as authoritative as I could. "But we're in the middle of a session here, do you need something?"

"Yeah," he drawled, looking out onto the ice. "What's goin on over here? What's all this?" he motioned to my girls.

"Power skating," I snapped. "Now could you please let us get on with it?" He must've been part of the summer hockey camps, because I didn't recognize him from around the rink.

He finally made eye-contact with me then. "Can you explain it to me?" He asked.

I cocked my head to the side, trying to figure out if he was actually serious.

"Why don't you just watch?" I responded and reached for my phone to begin the music again.

What a weird exchange, I thought, as I turned quickly and skated back to my girls.

They looked at me questioningly, but I shook my head. "Ignore him, just some hockey guy. We have work to accomplish," I reminded them. "Let's line up at the end, we'll practice a couple new moves in the field. I

know Jaimie has her Juvenile test coming up and she's going to pass with flying colors, right girls?"

They all gave their approval, and I could see Jaimie giving me a shy smile.

In figure skating, in order to get to the next level of competition, skaters needed to pass two tests. The first was a skating skill test called moves in the field, which consisted of edge work and power skating. The second test was for freestyle moves- meaning jumps and spins. I loved showing all the girls higher level moves even if they weren't ready to test said level yet. Helping them in these little sessions meant they'd have a built-in familiarity when they finally did have to work on them to pass the test.

I ran the rest of my session in peace, going around to correct girls to help them master the moves.

At the end of the quick 10-minute group lesson, the girls all dispersed to work on their own, and the other coaches started to file onto the ice.

I skated back over to the boards and stopped in front of the stranger who was still standing there watching.

I'll admit, I had a bit of a snarky edge to my voice when I asked, "Questions?"

He chuckled to himself and leaned over the team box where he stood. "Seems like you have something against hockey, Miss. You don't know who I am, eh?"

I didn't care who he was, I'd be irritated with anyone who interrupted my lesson. As for his other inquiry, what I wanted to say was that there was an unnecessary barrier between the two sports that wasn't helpful nor healthy for either. Instead of the sports working together to attract more kids, they were always

competing. And it always felt like hockey coaches looked at figure skating like a joke or a side show. They swooped in and took our ice time whenever they wanted to without giving it a second thought.

“What’s this all for?” he questioned.

I struggled to read him. I wasn’t sure if he was serious or just another hockey guy making fun of figure skating. I decided to humor him.

“What we did today was to work on stride,” I told him. “Pushing, lengthening... You see how small my girls are?”

He gave a firm nod.

“Well, I bet they can probably skate just as fast if not faster than your hockey players, and with less chopping and more graceful strides.”

He looked out onto the ice, rubbing his jaw, thinking. I was about to start skating away when he finally spoke again.

“What I’m thinkin, little lady,” he started, but I pursed my lips in disapproval at this name. I deserved the same amount of respect as any hockey coach. Calling me “little lady” was not necessarily a title that was up to my standards here in my workplace.

“Sorry,” he said gruffly.

I motioned for him to get on with it.

“Okay...” he drawled. “What if hockey players used this technique of yours? I’m just thinking... The quicker guys fit in a lot of strides, if they had even more power behind them...”

“They’d be much faster, exactly. That’s why we train stroking techniques,” I said matter-of-factly.

He whistled to himself then looked back at me with serious eyes. “I kind of have an idea if you’d be up for it...”

24. TJ

Coach's whistle pierced the rink yet again, and I internally groaned and dropped my head. I blinked hard against the sweat dripping into my eyes and leaned forward against my stick. I mean, for real? What now? He was proving to be the pickiest coach I'd ever skated for.

We all skated slowly back over toward the team box where Coach was standing on the bench watching us as he made us bag skate- which basically meant skating suicides up and down the ice til we felt like puking. Most coaches I'd had in the past laced up skates to be on the ice with us, but I had a feeling something to do with his leg probably stopped him from doing that.

"Slow. Sloppy," he called out to us. "I'm done with this shit, today. Y'all need someone else to yell at you because you obviously don't listen to me."

I cut my eyes to Duke and Griff to see their reaction. Was negative motivation his usual style or something? Their stoic faces looking back at him gave nothing away.

"I'm kicking ya'll off this ice. Get to the east side," he said.

We all hesitated.

Was he joking?

Everyone was so silent you could actually hear the air blowing around in the rink. Everyone seemed to look around at each other, wondering if he was serious.

"But sir..." One of the defensemen started but stopped when they noticed the pissed off look on Coach's face.

"Did you not hear me?" he yelled; the veins in his neck seemed to bulge, like they were protesting as well.

“Isn’t that...” Campbell began.

“Isn’t it what, Chicken noodle soup?” Coach asked.

I heard someone whisper it.

“What was that?” he motioned to his ear.

Griff cleared his throat. “Figure skating, sir?”

Coach crossed his arms over his chest and didn’t give anything away. “Get a move on. The Coach is waiting for you.”

We all shuffled off the ice in a line. I took up the rear and just followed as we walked through the skate-safe, rubber-floored tunnel that connected the two rinks. Whatever drill this was, I’d figure it out. I always did...

As soon as the ice came into sight, I heard guys ahead of me murmuring and looking back at me. Now, I’m not a self-conscious guy, but it was making me feel weird. I frowned, wondering what I’d done that would garner attention and what they could possibly be saying.

As soon as I pushed forward and stepped onto the ice, it felt like I’d been hit in the head with a puck.

Because I realized why they had been looking at me and whispering.

Standing there waiting for us... the so-called Coach... was Her.

I felt my body freeze up as I struggled to connect the dots as to what I was seeing in front of me.

There she was... *my girl*... gracefully gliding across the ice to stand in front of my teammates looking

so delicate, especially compared to our equipment clad selves.

She was saying something, but I couldn't comprehend it. I was still lost...

Her sport was figure skating? How had I not guessed that? Why hadn't she told me?

My mind snapped back to yesterday morning when I first peaked down into this rink and promptly blew off the fact that a coach had the same hair as her. Shit. If only I would've looked an extra minute, I wouldn't have been so caught off guard. I figured she worked her wedding business stuff all week. I had no clue she juggled two jobs.

She started demonstrating a mohawk, back cross-over, step-forward drill, but I honestly couldn't concentrate on the how-to of it because I was so mesmerized by her. She was so graceful, strong, and coordinated. She was probably a better skater than I was- I did not feel ashamed to admit that because I was used to it- my sisters were better players than I was in some ways as well. She-

"TJ!"

Fuck. It must've been obvious that I was staring at her. I looked over in the direction of my name being called.

"You don't stare at me like that!" Coach yelled from the boards, making the whole team start laughing.

I racked my brain for a decent comeback, but I was hopelessly struck dumb watching all my teammates laughing faces.

I dared to look back at Ellie. Her bottom jaw slid out ever so slightly.

Double fuck. That was her pissed face. She would not like that I'd been called out for this. I was reminded of her face when Frankie screamed at the

wedding. She did not like people messing up her mojo. My girl was a perfectionist.

“Vinny,” she called coolly, and came to a fancy figure skating stop in front of me- the kind where she crossed one foot in front of the other.

The team let out a synchronized, “Ooooh,” and I felt my face heat up even more despite the rink’s cool temperature.

“You’re first up,” she motioned in front of her.

I shifted my weight uncomfortably, and hesitated. “I think someone else should go,” I said, feeling more ashamed by the second realizing that I’d been called out for not paying attention.

My teammates started making whipping noises, as in, making fun of me because I was totally whipped by her. I couldn’t blame them. It was true.

She ignored the chorus around us and just arched an eyebrow at me, basically giving me a warning. Then she glided a couple feet away and pushed Campbell forward. I instantly felt jealous that she even touched him.

Fuck.

I needed to get my head in the game, Coach was still watching. I snuck one last look at Ellie and then decided to avoid looking directly at her for the rest of this little practice session so I could keep my head.

She had us running edge drills up and down the ice for what felt like an eternity.

At one point Campbell fell to his butt and slid backwards about ten full feet, making the rest of the team crack jokes at his expense.

I paid careful attention to my foot placement to make sure I wouldn't be the next to fall. I didn't need to embarrass myself in front of Ellie.

I think the entire team let out a sigh of relief when the zam doors finally started to open and the Zamboni began backing up onto the ice.

Coach blew his whistle three times, alerting us that we could leave the ice. I watched as he turned and hobbled out of the rink.

I waited for my teammates to file off the ice before lifting off my helmet and shaking my sweaty hair out. She put us through the ringer out here, and I already had the sore leg muscles to prove it. Figure skating exercises were no joke.

I hung back, waiting to see where Ellie would go.

When she finally started moving towards the zam doors, I followed after her.

To hell with patience.

I felt my heart beating wildly in my chest with each step closer to her. Because this was the moment. Our moment. I wanted to... I needed to... I needed to claim her. To officially call her mine. To wrap her up into my arms and kiss her smile. Kiss the hell out of her. Because I was so damn addicted to her.

As I neared her, I reached out and touched her shoulder. "Ell-"

She turned and jumped back, surprised that I was so close to her.

"TJ, you scared me," she said in a slightly panicked voice, all but stopping me dead in my tracks.

"Oh, no, no, no," I quickly said, backing up. I must've moved a bit too fast and aggressively toward her, forgetting that I looked like a hulking individual all suited up compared to her tiny self. I cleared my throat, "I just want..." I looked at her lips. "Can I..."

Those beautiful green eyes stared back at me in anticipation.

“Uh...” I chickened out, becoming all too aware that we were both in our workplace. I felt like I was shrinking on the spot, and now that my trance was broken, I was able to look around at my surroundings. I realized she must’ve been on her way to talk to my Coach- aka my Boss... Who could fire me or trade me or... banish me from Michigan... aka away from Ellie.

She bit her lip, and shyly looked around, then smiled brilliantly back at me. It was almost like sharing that smile was sharing a secret with me. Happiness on her made me weak in the knees.

“That was kinda fun, wasn’t it?” she asked as her eyes danced happily. “I’ll see you...”

“At home,” I swallowed. *Her home*, I yelled at myself. It was not *ours*. She was *not yours, dude*, I reminded myself. I shook my head. What the actual fuck was I thinking? I was like a neanderthal walking toward her. Seeing her working with my teammates must’ve thrown me for a loop, because I knew all of them were probably crushing on her now too. How could they not? Beautiful and could skate like that? I felt my face heating up. Fuck. I was embarrassed. How had this girl thrown me so far off my game?

Ellie turned on her heel, and I sat back like a chump, watching her walk away.

25. Ellie

While I didn't want TJ knowing I skated, I couldn't necessarily turn down the money from the coaching gig I was offered. Plus, it was damn funny seeing the shocked look on his face when he saw me skating toward his team. I was finding that not much threw him off, but that sure did.

Sharing the ice with TJ and the rest of his hockey boys wasn't as bad as I initially thought it'd be either. No one so much as dared to joke about figure skating after the guy named Campbell fell on his butt during one of my edge workouts. After that, they were all too afraid of being the next to screw up.

Overall, I think the session was a success. TJ's coach must've liked my work as well because I was asked to instruct another power skate for a lower tiered group of Detroit Crewmen prospects later in the day. So, my day at the rink surprisingly did last longer and was more lucrative than I originally thought it'd be.

TJ beat me home from the rink and was waiting for me on my couch with his arms crossed in front of him when I opened the door.

"So, Ms. Sassypants," he regarded me and rubbed a hand over his jaw to cover a smile.

"Yes?" I asked, amused by the nickname. If he would've called me that name before, I probably would've wanted to throat punch him, but after today I realized that nicknames were part of hockey culture. Roasting was basically endearment to them. Weirdos.

"So, you skate, huh?"

"Guess so," I told him. I walked to sit on my couch, taking the furthest spot from him, and ripped off my shoes to hold my frozen toes with a grimace.

He immediately slid my feet into his lap and began rubbing them out for me. I almost tugged away from him, but it honestly felt like heaven.

“You could be a professional at this if the whole hockey thing doesn’t work out,” I mumbled. I let my head fall back against the couch. “God, that feels so good,” I said, then immediately snapped my neck back up, realizing what I said.

TJ regarded me with a goofy smile, like he was a second away from cracking a joke that was eating him from the inside out.

“Don’t even!” I pointed at him.

“I know, I know,” he said laughing. He looked up to the ceiling and sighed. “Grey and Jules would be so proud of me right now.”

I swatted him on the shoulder and pursed my lips.

“So, why didn’t you tell me, Brampton?” he asked.

I shrugged, and closed my eyes, enjoying the foot rub. “I have a busy life.”

“So tell me how this works,” he urged.

“Wanna have dinner?” I asked, trying to avoid his nosy questions. I moved to get up, but his hands wandered further up my calf, keeping me in place.

“Oh, no, no, no, you’re not off the hook that fast,” he said. “I was so shocked, I thought I got dinged by a slap shot. Then in the locker room all the guys were asking me why I hadn’t told them you’d be coaching today. I looked like an absolute dummy. Griff thought it was the funniest thing that ever happened. Then Duke was saying how Detroit should make a trade- me for you.”

I snorted at that, and, as much as I didn’t want to, tore myself from his grip so I could stand and head

into my kitchen.

He was up in a second, blocking me with his hands on his hips.

I couldn't completely tamper down the little thrill I got from his continued interest in my life. But I pushed a finger into his chest. "Move."

"Why didn't you tell me?" He asked quietly.

I looked up into his eyes and they seemed to smolder over. He was looking at my lips, then his gaze moved dangerously further down...

We stood just inches from each other, and my body tingled from his heat and the building anticipation. My breathing seemed to all but stop as I waited for his next move...

But when nothing happened, I found myself needing to exit the situation. He was confusing the hell out of me. We played this tense game, dancing around how much we liked each other all day long and waiting for the other person to be vulnerable enough to do something about it.... But neither of us would break. Then we'd sleep in the same bed, end up cuddling all night, and start the process all over again.

I finally pushed past him.

He followed behind me into the kitchen like a puppy on my heels. "During the week you work the rink, on the weekends you organize people's Happily-Ever-Afters?" he asked.

"Pretty much." I reached into the freezer, then held up pre-made frozen dinners, asking him wordlessly if he wanted some. He gave a nod of approval.

I struggled to rip open the box, but he just lifted it from my grasp to effortlessly finish the job for me.

I shoved two of the meals into the microwave.

"Well, so what does it all entail? Are you gonna coach up the next Ice Princess Champion?" he asked,

lifting his arm up to push his messy hair back. I admired his strong arm muscles working as he-

Nope.

I shut my mouth firmly. I would not ogle him like some puck bunny.

I forced my dry mouth to swallow. "Ice Princess Champion, TJ? Is that what you're callin' yourself? Because I coached you today," I lifted an eyebrow at him, challenging him.

"Buddy," he rolled his eyes and popped his hip out.

"No, just no," I smirked at his lame attempt to imitate me.

"No?" he asked confusedly.

"I only coach kids until they hit about six or seven and start landing double jumps. I won't take kids to competitions," I clarified.

I felt hot under his gaze as he studied me.

"What?" I asked him defensively.

His eyebrows scrunched together. "Why?"

"You don't know the answer to that?" I said dryly. He'd seen my anxiety on full display.

"I guess I understand. But giving your work to someone else to finish doesn't sound like an Ellie Brampton thing to do."

I paused; he'd caught me on that. I did hate handing over my girls to the other coaches, but what alternative did I have? I couldn't push myself past my panic attacks. I'd need to lay on the ground before my skaters took the ice and that would probably freak them the hell out. I'd become the laughingstock of the entire figure skating community. I had no clue how I myself had competed up until my senior year of high school. I was a

stronger girl back then. Sometimes thinking about how far I'd fallen crushed me.

"Hey, don't be sad," TJ came closer to me and backed me against the kitchen counter. His brown eyes looked down into mine and he pushed my hair back behind my ear in a movement that seemed so gentle compared to the usual force and strength of his movements.

His voice seemed to drop deeper as he said, "I only want to make you happy."

He moved closer to me then, and I felt his presence surrounding me... his hand was suddenly holding the back of my head, and I felt his head dip closer to mine... I wanted this... I wanted him...

The microwave dinged, making me jump.

His eyes flew open, and we both paused, looking at each other for what felt like a whole minute. His body against mine felt like it was searing hot.

I swallowed and pushed past him to retrieve the food from the microwave, but my mind was going a mile a minute. Part of me wanted to march over, grab the front of his sweatshirt, pull him down to my level, and finally kiss him. The other part of me... wasn't brave enough.

I sensed him behind me as I took out my frustration on the food while stirring it up. Why wouldn't he just kiss me already? He must've known that I wanted him to? Why was this so awkward? Was this just another way I was messed up?

"Yeesh, I think you're done," he chuckled and touched my arm to make me stop mashing the food.

I could feel his hot breath on my neck, making me hold mine, as he uttered, "Thank you," while grabbing his meal from around me.

I watched him move toward the living room like nothing happened between us at all. He casually

grabbed the clicker, *my clicker*, like he owned the place, and then relaxed back onto the couch.

“Spend more time with me babe, you’ll be at competitions before ya know it. I’ll teach you my ways,” he said with a wink aimed in my direction before digging into his meal.

He was being frustratingly calm compared to the eagerness he possessed on our first date, and I wondered what exactly had sparked the change.

I wasn’t sure when things had changed on my end either, but they truly had. He moved from an annoyance, to a fun pretend Someone, to an actual possibility in just a couple short days.

And now, I just wanted him to kiss me.

26. TJ

I laid in bed the next morning cuddling with Ellie and watching the sunlight stream into the windows, highlighting her golden hair. I smoothed it out against the pillow, spying bits of red, gold, and blonde, and wondered which color was more dominant when she was a kid.

She shivered against me, and I tugged the weighted blanket further up on us. I noticed every time she tried to shift the blankets in the night, they barely budged. It was funny to me that she bought such a heavy blanket when there were definitely lighter ones out there that could still get the job done.

For a girl who was closed-off and snarky, she had a soft, needy side to her, even if it did only make an appearance when she slept. During the day, I felt like she still held me at an arm's length away, but through the night, she snuggled into me like a puzzle piece that fit perfectly, and I loved it. Ellie was all small and all smooth, and she made me feel needed; she made me feel like a protector.

I could tell she wanted to kiss me last night in the kitchen just as bad as I wanted to kiss her. But the timing and situation didn't feel right. I wanted her to initiate. I wanted her to have that power. I needed to know that she fully wanted it... so I'd drag my feet until she did... Communicating about it would probably be a better idea, but for some reason I always clammed up or stuck my foot in my mouth around her.

As a guy with sisters, I thought I'd be good at figuring out women. I thought I had a leg up because I was so used to talking to them. Turns out, I needed to learn how to keep some things unspoken. It's almost like my sisters desensitized me in some ways because I took it for granted that women always felt in control and like they could shove me around when I mouthed off. I

should clarify- growing up, we showed love through roasting at my house- the closer you were, the crazier the jokes could be... now I realized words had different weight with other relationships, and I still needed to figure out how to communicate correctly with Ellie. She eyed me skeptically, almost shifty- like every time I spoke, she was waiting for the other shoe to fall.

My sisters scared me- but in stupid ways- like as kids, they'd offer me ice cream and give me cold mashed potatoes in a cone. As we got older, they'd joke about making my best friends fall in love with them and then smashing their hearts like I knew they could.

With Ellie, it was the vulnerability of the situation that scared me. It was the thought of her not wanting or needing me here with her, or her not reciprocating how strongly I felt for her. Like what if I laid my heart at her feet and she triple axel toe-picked it to death? What if she never fully accepted or trusted me? I felt an urgency in trying to show her the advantages of being with me. I just needed to find a way to explain these things to her without sounding like an ass...

She stirred awake then, first stretching out all limbs, and then lazily rubbing her sleepy eyes.

"You're not a morning person, are ya, Brampton?" I asked.

"How long have you been up?" she mumbled. "Shit." She sat up fast and looked around alarmed. "What time is it?"

"Don't worry, it's only 7," I laughed. "I wouldn't turn off your alarm and not wake you. You just woke up earlier than usual." I rubbed her back to calm her.

She blew out a breath, laid back down on her side, and closed her eyes.

When I didn't move back toward her, she scooched her butt back ever so inconspicuously closer to me.

I laughed at that. "If you want to cuddle, all you have to do is ask, babe," I told her.

"Hmm," was all she responded.

I took that as a hint to give her what she wanted. I grabbed her little body and pulled her into me and she seemed to curl tighter. I draped my arm over her stomach, and she held it with her other hand.

"So nice," she mumbled.

I felt myself smile; I could stay here all day and be a happy man.

I ended up peacefully snoozing along with Ellie for another hour until her alarm finally sounded.

When she did get up, she zoomed around her room quickly getting ready, while I laid in bed texting Duke, who was my ride to practice. The team's day wouldn't officially start for a couple hours, but I was asking Duke to drop me off at the rink a bit earlier. I wanted to catch my girl in action...

A half hour later, I walked into the rink carrying my hockey bag and a tray of Tim Horton's coffee. Duke only had a slim timeframe to be able to get me to the rink before his massage appointment, so I left Ellie's place in a rush and ended up not having enough time to make my usual coffee there. Duke took pity on me and swung by Timmy's before dropping me off.

The rink's lobby was desolate besides the young kid manning the concession stand who looked like he was sleeping.

I loved starting the day at the rink. Back at the Ice League, Max would let me open up sometimes, so I'd be in charge of hitting the lights and completing the morning zams, but then I'd get the clean surface to myself. I wondered if Ellie had a similar situation worked out here.

As I neared the east rink, I could see through the lobby windows that only the emergency light was on, making it look almost like a spotlight. I also saw a girl gracefully skating, marking up the ice with deep edges as she moved around the rink. The thing that's unique about skating versus other sports is that each skater has their own stride that distinguishes them from anyone else. Watching this girl skate, I could tell it was Ellie. She had a way of lengthening each stride, and it seemed that all her motions were circular. She finished her large circle around the rink with smaller fancy footwork loops, and her arms were constantly, gracefully moving.

I was mesmerized by her as I pushed open the rink door. My body was immediately met with the familiar chill of the rink, and I scrunched up my shoulders as she pulled herself into a fast spin.

I watched in amazement as she pretty much bent herself in half and hung her head back as she spun. I had no clue how she could do that without barfing after.

I set the tray of coffee down on the bleacher stairs, and my body, acting on its own accord, started clapping for her.

I kind of surprised myself by how loud my clap was and how well the sound carried in such an empty rink.

She immediately stopped and scanned around looking for the clapping.

As soon as her eyes landed on me, she shook her head wryly and a small grin played on her face as she skated over to me by the rink door's opening.

“What was that called?” I asked her, motioning to the spin she just did.

“A layback. You’re here awfully early.”

“Yeah...about that. I was wondering if I could get some private lessons?” I wagged my eyebrows at her.

She put her hands on her hips and looked me up and down. “Well, you got your skates?”

“Really?” I pumped my fist in triumph. My plan had worked. That was totally an invite to join her little private ice session. “Oh! Before I forget, coffee!” I quickly grabbed up the tray and extended one of the coffees out to her.

She gave a shy smile and skated closer to retrieve one. “What did I ever do to deserve this?” she asked, taking a small sip.

I threw her a wink and then walked with a pep in my step as I made my way around the edge of the rink to the team box so I could lace up my skates there.

27. Ellie

With his hands tucked in his hoodie pocket, and his hood pulled up over his head, TJ jumped onto the ice from the team bench's opening and skated over to center ice where I was practicing spins.

"How do you do that?" he asked. "Spin so tightly, I mean?"

"For one, having a toe-pick helps."

He lifted his eyebrows at me. "Explain?"

"Well, you push hard onto your left outside edge, like this," I demonstrated in front of him. "And pressure it into a curve so you eventually hit your toe-pick. Then you just start spinning, see?"

"Hate to say this because you're an Ice Princess Coach Champion and all, but you make that sound and look way easier than it actually is, Brampton," he said.

"It's really not that hard. Here, follow me." I grabbed his hand and directed him to stand on the red line. "So start on the line and put your feet in a T. Then you're going to push into a half circle and spin at the end of that half circle, yeah?"

He pushed with no abandon...

...and made it around probably two rotations before his body spun out of control and he landed on his ass.

I giggled at the sight of his large frame sprawled out on the ground just from trying a simple scratch spin.

"Oh, you think this is funny?" he asked with wide eyes. He laid fully down on the ice and crossed his arms behind his head. "I did that on purpose. It's nice here."

"Down there on the ice?" I asked him dubiously. I mindlessly pushed into some twizzles around his head. "There was a girl who used to train with me back in my

competitive days, and when she'd fall, she'd mope around the ice crying. And not just regular crying, like scream-crying. It was definitely an attention thing. The next time she fell, she just laid there all splat on the ice crying. So this older gentleman coach, who is an Olympian coach by the way, goes and lays down next to her and starts scream-crying as well. She was so embarrassed she never did it again," I told him, laughing at the memory.

I thought he'd find the story funny, but his face held a grimace.

"Yeesh. Figure skating's rough. Sounds like there's a lot of tears shed?" he asked.

I stopped skating and lowered myself to the ice to lay down beside him and look up into the rink's wooden rafters. The arena's soft humming filled the air around us and it felt weird to be out here and not moving for once. He was right, it was nice. It felt peaceful, cold, and fresh.

"Yeah. There are definitely more losses than wins in this sport. Only one girl can get the gold. It's not like hockey where a whole team wins," I said. When he didn't reply I felt the need to explain further. "There's so much happiness after you guys win, like you all go hug each other. It's nice to see. When figure skaters go look at the result sheets after competitions, we're coached to show no emotion. No crying, no happiness. Look, accept, leave."

"It's so weird," TJ finally said, turning to study me.

"What is?"

"We skate side by side in the arena, but we're in two completely different worlds," he said. "It's like hockey and figure skating are on parallel tracks that never meet."

I reached to lay my hand on his. It felt like we were breaking some kind of invisible barrier.

“Hockey’s not all happy though,” he sighed. “I was pretty damn lucky.”

I looked over at his handsome profile. “How’s that?”

“My parents were girl parents first. I think they kind of softened a bit maybe,” he chuckled wryly. “That’s what my dad thinks anyway. Because I was never yelled at after bad games. I was told, like ‘eh, better work on this,’ or ‘how ‘bout we practice that together, bud.’ But some of my friends... yikes. They’d try to stall in the locker room to avoid the car ride home. Some buddies used to ask me for a ride so they wouldn’t have to face their dads. You’d hear yelling in the parking lot sometimes. Everyone would just turn a blind eye toward it. Doesn’t seem like that happens as much anymore though. The worst guy I saw when I was coaching at the Ice League was Canyon’s birth dad. He’s not in the picture anymore though.”

I’d gathered bits and pieces to know Jules’ first husband was kind of a dick.

“Your parents sound nice,” I offered, choosing to focus on the good.

“Yeah, they’re great.” His face lit up thinking of them. “And I think a lot of those buddies I played with are going to be great parents here someday soon.”

His body shivered against the ice then, and I laughed.

“Not so nice down here anymore, huh?”

He shook his head with a sheepish smile. “Let’s move it to the boards?”

He jumped up onto his skates and held a hand down to pull me up. We glided back toward the visitor’s team box together.

“Know what I’ve always wondered?” he asked as he came to a stop in front of the boards. “How is it competing against your friends in skating?”

I ignored his question and hoisted myself up to a sitting position on the boards. I didn’t want his pity when I explained there really wasn’t such a thing as friends where I grew up skating, only competitors. While I loved the actual sport, I hated the organization of it. I loved skating in the mornings on my own, throwing jumps and sticking the landings and feeling incredibly strong, like I was on top of the world and my body was working perfectly. And I could spend an entire practice session just spinning. But, up here, by myself, this was a different kind of skating. I was old. There was nothing at stake. Downstate where I grew up, practices were always tense because girls were always watching each other and trying to one-up one another. I didn’t want to describe that desperately hopeless feeling that settled to the bottom of your stomach when you’d fall on a double axel during a competition’s practice ice, and then another girl from your own rink would come up right behind you and land one in the exact same spot where you fell just to intimidate you.

Instead of answering his question, I posed one of my own: “Do you think hockey formed you?”

He finished taking a sip of his coffee and shrugged his large shoulders. “I guess so. It has its own culture and rules, I think it’s changed in recent years for the better. Before it was all Take it Like a Man,” he said in a mock-gruff tone. “But now I think my generation has kind of seen how pretending you don’t have weaknesses just puts you in a worse position in the long run,” he said thoughtfully. “And before it was a pretty vicious hitting game. Now it’s a lot more finesse- like we’re taking lessons from you and focusing on our skating instead of taking boxing classes. That’s growth, eh?”

“You guys did well yesterday. I was impressed.” His hand was between us again, and in another daring

move, I interlaced my fingers with his.

“Why thank you, Ms. Brampton.” He winked and gave my hand a squeeze. “And you become most like the top five people you hang out with, right? All my friends are from hockey. I don’t know one person outside of my fam that I stay in touch with who isn’t from hockey. I think it just happens because you’re all in it together—the struggles, the victories, you can relate. So, yeah, I think it has formed me.”

I liked hearing his thoughts aloud. It was refreshing to be around someone who didn’t hold back what they were thinking. I never got the feeling that TJ was saying things just to manipulate me into thinking a certain way.

“I think it’s healthy to play a team sport. I was always envious of girls who played hockey,” I admitted.

He gasped. “You? Hockey? I think you would’ve been too aggressive. It would’ve been dangerous for the other girls,” he teased and shot me a smile.

“Well, that’s just not true,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, you’re right. You can’t even move your weighted blanket on your own,” he quipped.

I gasped and pushed his arm. “Can to!”

He just shrugged and turned his gaze back to the rink’s wood ceiling with a smile etched on his face.

“What I mean is with figure skating, you’re nice with everyone around you to their faces, but you’re also not hoping for the best for them. You don’t want them to succeed because that wouldn’t be good for you. You put a lot of bad mojo in the air. I wondered if karma came back at me for that when—” I put my gloved hand up my mouth to stop myself from talking. He was too easy to talk to. It was dangerous. I had to be careful not to simply spill all my guts to him.

He looked at me curiously, but I just cleared my throat and redirected. “Basically you end up looking at

every girl as competition, even after you leave the rink. It took a long time for me to break free of that mindset, and I still don't have many friends. I'm always looking at what angle they're taking and what their true motivation is in talking to me. What are they trying to get from me? Ya know?"

He regarded me with a crease forming between his eyebrows. "I hear you," he finally said. "But...That sounds lonely. They should make figure skating like gymnastics and make it more team-based," he suggested.

"Very forward thinking of you TJ, but I doubt restructuring will happen. This year is the first year we can use lyrics in program music," I fake gasped for effect. "I grew up skating to straight classical music. These girls have no clue how lucky they are," I laughed.

"Yeesh, figure skating has to get with the times," he said.

I smirked back at him. "For real."

He looked down at our interlaced hands. "This is nice."

I nodded in agreement.

"I like when you have sweet girl hours," he said. "You have to mix some more of those in."

I opened my mouth in shock. I was never necessarily not sweet to him.

"I'm sweet," I sputtered.

He opened his eyes wide, but he was struggling to keep a straight face. "You've almost kicked me to the curb like every day this week!"

"Yeah, well..." I thought for a moment as I watched his profile. He was a pretty boy who cared way too much about his hair, but he was strikingly handsome. And he was kind. And he was sitting on the boards with me, holding my hand. And I'd be stupid not to affirm my

growing feelings for him and finally make a move at this point, right? I needed to be brave in at least one area of my life, and TJ made me feel capable.

That's what I told myself as I quickly put a gloved hand to his cheek to turn his head. He looked back at me in surprise, but I leaned forward and swiftly kissed his full lips.

When I pulled back, he looked at me with eyes that filled with desire and need.

"Game on, Brampton," he said huskily with a wicked smile. He dropped from the boards to stand on his skates and move in front of me. He nudged my legs apart to make room for his waist, and then he was kissing me again.

His tongue swept through my mouth as he deepened the kiss. "Yes," he said triumphantly against my lips, which sent a pleasant shudder through my entire body.

I looped my arms around his neck and felt myself arch into him, letting out a gasp as he trailed a scratch down my back.

I moved to kiss his neck then, and he released a groan.

"Fuck, babe-"

The rink's bright white lights suddenly flashed on.

I pulled back from him, and he let his head fall back.

"Our timing is impeccable," he said matter-of-factly.

I laughed, feeling completely light and happy.

He stared into my eyes. "I knew kissing you would be magic," he said in a gravelly voice, sending happy butterflies fluttering into my stomach.

I patted his chest and lightly pushed him backward so I could jump down onto my skates.

“You better get going,” I told him. “My girls will be out here soon.”

“They could’ve learned a thing or two from ya a couple seconds ago,” he said as he wagged his eyebrows and drifted away from me.

I shook my head and shooed him away as I started toward my coaching spot.

“And thanks for the coffee!” I called after him, grabbing it up from the boards and taking a sip to warm myself.

“Anytime, babe!” TJ yelled as he glided away. “Make some Ice Princess Champs!”

I watched him skate to the home team’s bench where he left his gear. He effortlessly jumped off the ice and disappeared into the team box.

I touched my lips, replaying the kiss, and feeling a giddy bubble of excitement growing in my chest. How did that feel so perfect?

As girls started to file onto the ice, I couldn’t help but think that over the past five years, I had strived to blend into the background, and in result, I became a side character on autopilot... the coach, the planner... not the skater, not the bride... But TJ made me feel important.

TJ made me feel like I was a main character for once.

28. TJ

Last night had been kind of a bummer because Ellie spent all night at the venue setting up for a rehearsal dinner. So, I sat on her couch by myself, hugging one of her useless throw pillows, feeling lonely. I wondered how the hell I'd be able to go back to being content all alone after this week. It was nice to have someone to come home to for a change.

Around dinnertime, I scoured her kitchen for some ingredients to throw together a meal that I could have ready for her when she returned, but I ended up eating some cereal by myself. It was clear from her cabinets and fridge that the girl didn't know how to cook. That was alright though, because maybe that was one corner of her life that I could help her with. I wasn't too shabby in the kitchen. I could whip up certain recipes with ease; Momma V taught me well. If things worked the way I wanted them too, I could teach her some authentic Italian cooking skills as well.

I ended up heading to bed early after dinner, and only woke again when I felt her slipping into bed around midnight.

"You're a hard worker," I mumbled in the dark. "You've got me beat, babe."

"Someone's gotta pay the bills," she joked as she slid under the covers.

I immediately pulled her into me, and she laughed.

"Um..." I felt her tense up a bit under my arms. "Would you wanna come with me to the rehearsal dinner tomorrow?" she asked hesitantly.

I kissed her head. "I'd be honored," I told her.

"Okay," she laughed nervously. "Sorry for waking you, sleep time."

“Mmhmm,” I said as I squeezed her tighter.

She was gone again when I woke up in the morning, but when I got back from the rink on Friday, the last day of training camp, my heart all but stopped when she opened her apartment door for me.

She stood there looking movie star level gorgeous in her rehearsal dinner work clothes. Wearing a shin length, off-the-shoulder black dress that flared a bit at the bottom with some baby doll heels, she looked like old Hollywood money. Her hair was pulled to one shoulder in a loose braid that ended past her boob, and she perfected the look with some red lipstick. It was hard to imagine a jealous bride wouldn't get mad at her for looking as beautiful as she did on their day.

“What?” she asked shyly.

“Damn babe.” I rushed in and planted a kiss on her.

She pulled back with a smile. “You've got a half hour to get ready, think you can do it?” she asked with hopeful eyes.

“Say no more.” I pointed to myself. “Athlete, babe,” I said before running off to the shower.

Even though I was dead tired, I pushed myself to meet the deadline. I wanted to be there to support her, and I wanted to see her in wedding action. Grey and Jules' big day didn't really count in my mind.

When we arrived at the Cherry Lane Hotel, I was shocked at seeing the venue all dressed up for someone else's day. Looking around, it was obvious how much work and dedication Ellie put into each event she produced to create a unique atmosphere.

Where Grey and Jule's rehearsal dinner was mostly outside and had a nature vibe with candles in mason jars and miniature birch trees as centerpieces, this one was fully indoors at the hotel, and pretty ritzy. The color scheme and music were completely different, and the decor made me feel like I was in the 1920's.

"It's Gatsby themed, can you tell?" Ellie asked with bright, excited eyes. "This was one of the most fun ones I've planned because they didn't give me any budget cap." She pointed to the corner of the room. "Look at that champagne tower. Nikki and I put the whole thing together, not one broken glass." She smiled proudly, looking around at the happy wedding party guests who were starting to seat themselves.

"I've gotta say, it's beautiful, Brampton, but not as beautiful as you," I winked at her.

I lifted her hand above her head and made her twirl into me. She let out a tinkling laugh.

"After everyone gets their plate, we can go back to the kitchen and help ourselves," she whispered up to me.

"Not worried about it. I'm enjoying myself, miss," I assured her and rubbed circles around her lower back.

"Even though I made you put a suit back on?" She arched an eyebrow at me.

"I don't mind. I love wearing suits. My junior hockey team used to compete to see who could look the freshest walking into the rink. I never won, but I think I rock it, yeah?" I smoothed my suit jacket.

She patted my chest and the corners of her mouth curved up. She looked like she was about to say something back, but noise erupted through her headset, and she put a finger up to me to let me know she'd be back in a minute.

During one of the rehearsal dinner speeches, I got the call I'd been waiting for.

I felt my phone buzz in my suit jacket pocket and quietly left the dining room. I wandered out to the sidewalk that I had practically chased Ellie down on the day I was supposed to leave for Minnesota after Grey's wedding.

"Vinny," Coach barked when I answered.

"Yes, sir?"

"Detroit. We fly out in the morning. I'll see you at the arena. Sunday, 8am sharp."

He disconnected the call before I could even thank him, and I was left standing there with my jaw practically on the floor.

I knew when I signed the two-way contract that I could potentially be on the team. But this confirmation was everything.

I was officially on the roster.

I had my shot in the NHL.

Ellie walked out then, wearing a hesitant look on her face, probably wondering why I exited the room so fast.

I ran toward her, scooped her little self up, and swung her around in a circle. When I set her back down on the ground, I dipped her and gave her a dramatic kiss. She smiled against my lips.

"What's got you so happy?" she asked, reaching up to my lips to wipe some of her lipstick off.

"I'm officially on the team. I made it. I'm a Detroit Crewman," I said, still shocked that those words were coming from my mouth.

Her face stretched into a bright smile, but it didn't make it up to her eyes.

“Happy for you,” she said, placing her hand on my cheek.

I turned my head to kiss her delicate, warm hand before pulling her up out of the dip.

I ushered her forward and started to walk us back into the dining room.

“Better here than Vancouver where I woulda been,” I told her. I looked down at her serious face. I could tell that brain of hers was going a mile a minute. “Detroit’s only four hours from here. You’ll come cheer me on, right?”

“Is that an invite, Hockey Boy?” she asked, slyly side-stepping the question.

I stopped and brought her hand to my lips for a kiss. “It is.”

She rolled her eyes at me. “Such a *you* move, Theodore.” But she couldn’t hide her smile from me.

“You know you like it. Don’t be a brat, Brampton,” I told her.

She gasped, “I am not a brat!”

“Yes. You are a brat, and I am the brat tamer,” I said with a cocky smile.

She gave me a sideways glance, suppressing a laugh.

“I’ll let it slide tonight,” she said, and then she shocked the life out of me by reaching to hold my hand again as we continued to walk back inside. I’d be lying if I didn’t say that made me feel about ten feet tall.

29. TJ

While hearing that I made the roster was the best news, it turned bittersweet because of my unfinished business here. I was staying on the trade-up side of my contract, but as I was making coffee and eggs on Saturday morning for the final time this week, the idea of leaving here for Detroit in an hour felt jarring.

I knew having to say goodbye to Ellie would be sad, but I never imagined it'd be this hard.

She lazily walked out of her room with her hair in a messy bun and those pj shorts on crooked as she sipped some coffee with sleepy eyes. Where I was the morning person, she was the night owl of the two of us.

I felt confident that I would continue to try to grow our relationship, but without me being here, I was afraid she would easily be able to convince herself that she didn't need or want me.

"Drive me?" I asked and petted her head.

"Mmm-hmm," she nodded solemnly, and turned to head back to her room to get ready.

On the way to the airport, I kept the conversation light and moving so she wouldn't be overthinking. But at the airport, when I unfolded myself out of her passenger seat and unloaded my bags out of her trunk, she didn't get out to join me.

When I walked back up to the front of the car, she looked extra small in her front seat gripping the wheel, staring straight ahead.

Seeing her sitting there made me want to get back in and tell her to drive off so we could escape together and start an adventure. But I knew that wasn't

possible. I couldn't forget that I had worked my entire life for the opportunity I was being given in Detroit.

I threw her shotgun door open and sat back in the car with her for another minute.

"You know I'm not going to just stop bugging you, Ellie." I reached over and touched her small, muscular thigh.

Her face didn't change, but I could see her tell. It was the same one I saw at the Scott wedding. The lower rims of her eyelids were turning red.

"I promise I won't. I'll be texting and calling so much you'll be sick of me. And we could always drive to see each other during our downtime. It's only four hours, babe."

She pressed her lips together, trying not to cry.

"I know you don't believe me right now, Ellie... but this isn't the final goodbye you think it is. I'm here to stay. And I don't lie. I hate lies."

"I'm gonna miss you," she admitted, finally looking me in the eye. Her words damn near killed me. I didn't want her to cry because of me. This was the opposite of how it was supposed to work.

"You'll be busy, and the time between seeing each other will fly by. You've got the wedding tonight, right? You're strong. Badass boss bitch! Say it, Ellie."

She rolled her glassy eyes. "I'm a badass boss bitch," she said, and it looked like her face couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry.

"Good. I'm gonna get settled down there and I'll be sending you some tickets, alright? The preseason opener is two weeks from today. Say you'll come, please," I urged.

She nodded at me. I'd have to take that as enough for now. I leaned closer to give her a quick kiss on the cheek before exiting her car.

I swiftly picked up my bags and headed into the small TC airport. I could see some guys already sitting down in one of the gateway's waiting areas.

This was something they all had to do- leave their relationships on hold during camps and away trips. It was nothing new for most of them, but I'd never felt so heavy about leaving before. I'd never had anything I was scared to lose while I was gone. I also knew that this would be a test for us. I was fully invested in pursuing her... but this couldn't be one-sided. I had to know that she'd at least show up for me to fight for her.

I guess I'd get the answer after sending her a ticket.

30. Ellie

“And I don’t lie. I hate lies,” he said.

Well, I had a few of those lined up in my life that I didn’t really want to explain to him.

I blasted some pop punk music as I drove the few miles back to my apartment, trying to get myself into a better mood. I smoothed the tears away from my eyes. I needed to stop. Why cry over something that was never even fully a something?

I knew why though... It was the potential that I was crying over. It was the fact that I let someone into my life for the first time in years, just to have them leave. It was sleeping peacefully next to him at night. It was questioning if everyone else had this every night, and I was the only one just now getting it. I didn’t want to be alone and closed off anymore, and that scared me...And I really didn’t want to walk into my empty apartment and miss his large, masculine, happy presence.

But if he knew just how much baggage I had, would he even stick around me anyway?

It was a fling. That’s all it was, I commanded myself. That’s all it ever could be anyway.

I needed to get my shit together. Nikki was already at the venue setting up, and it was Nina and Patrick Pivardi’s day today, not mine.

A small voice inside me said, *Nina gets to feel the way you felt with TJ every single day and night*, and that realization, and jealousy, hurt.

I shook my head to clear it of that thought.

“Badass boss bitch,” I repeated to myself aloud. It would be fine. I needed to keep moving forward, just like I always did.

31. TJ - One week later - Detroit

“So, TJ, what do you say, beers at the Blitz with me and the guys?”

I closed my locker and turned to face Griff, who was leaning against his own locker waiting for an answer. I had a lot to finish up at my apartment- it was basically an empty brick box with a bed and a tv on the ground and a basket full of clothes- but I also needed to make sure the guys liked me. What was really making me lean toward the beers though was that it would probably give me the opportunity to ask Griff his thoughts on my Ellie situation.

It'd been only a single week since I left up north, and Ellie had been awfully quiet. She was texting short and not really engaging in our phone conversations. I knew there was a chance of that happening, but I didn't want to lose her... not when we were so close to making it work.

“Sounds good, man,” I returned.

The Blitz was the usual hangout spot for the team. It was located downtown only about a block from the rink, and it was pretty much right next to the apartment complex that I, along with a lot of other players, lived in. It was rumored that the rink had tried to buy out The Blitz's owners for their property, but they stood firm. It was smart on their part, because now a lot of hockey fans grabbed drinks here either before or after games.

The Blitz was your typical hole-in-the-wall sports bar. It had low-lighting and signed Detroit sports flags and jerseys hung up all over in disarray, as well as plenty of flat screens for watching games. The bar was

basically a large square island, with seats on all four sides, and then tables and lounge areas surrounded it.

The petite girl bartender with black hair and a tat sleeve greeted all five of us who had come in the door, but then only had eyes for one of our defensemen named Brody... at least I thought that was his name- it could have easily been a change up like Vonnie to Vinny.

Brody was a tough guy to read, but he was very clean cut. It shocked me when I saw him stalk over and make out fiercely with the bartender overtop of the bar counter while grabbing the back of her hair.

“Well, that’s an intense hello,” I said.

Griff laughed beside me. “That’s his girl, Adrienne. Unofficial, but everyone knows she’s off-limits.”

“Got it,” I nodded. “So, where’s Sav?” I asked as we sat down on some empty barstools at a corner of the bar.

“She’s at the house opening it back up again. We stayed up north pretty much all summer, so now there’s kind of a lot to do. September always feels hectic. It’s hard to come back, that’s for sure.”

“Where do you guys live?” I inquired.

“Plymouth. It’s about a half hour outside of downtown. We’ll have to have you guys over.”

I nodded at that and ordered a beer.

“It must’ve been hard for you to come downstate with your girl living up there and all, eh?” Griff asked with his serious blue eyes on me.

“Yeah...” I blew out a sigh. “I kind of maybe exaggerated how serious we were. I mean, I want to be serious with her,” I pointed out, “but she scares pretty fuckin easily.”

“Ahh, I know the type,” he chuckled. “Patience is hard, but it worked when I won over Sav. Do you guys

have plans for her to come down here to visit at all or not yet?”

“I mean, I was about to send her some preseason opener tickets. She’s just been so quiet, I’m afraid she’ll just try to slowly shut me out of her life.”

Griff took a sip of his beer. “Well, hate to tell ya this, but if she’s the one, you can’t let that happen. Hockey players are superstitious, kid, I don’t have to tell you that. It’s a game of luck and mere inch misses or wins. A split-second can either make you a hero or make a whole city hate you. One inch to the left, a puck hits the crossbar and your team is done; one inch to the right, you clinch a playoff spot. Not to sound too ominous but try your hardest with her. If your love life goes to hell, you’ll be snakebitten. You know what that is?”

I swallowed, “I’ll play like shit?”

He nodded. “Happy wife, happy life. But the opposite of that...” he trailed off. “I almost got traded down to the minors again after Sav and I separated once. Couldn’t score for shit. Ended up spending a night in jail. I swear it’s a thing. It’s like the game won’t want you in it if you’re a jackass to the ones you love. My advice, work hard on your home life, and your hockey life will come easy.”

“Jail? What the-”

He shrugged it off with a laugh. “That’s a story for another time, bud.”

I closed my eyes hard for a second. I wouldn’t do well in jail. It’d probably make my mom cry too. I hated when she cried. “Now I’m a little nervous, man,” I admitted to him.

He shook his head and cracked a smile. “You’re already in too deep to let it go easy, bud. I saw the way you look at her. You’re sunk.”

“Why do we even talk to women? Risk being snakebitten?” I asked incredulously.

“Well, rookie, you think you could’ve stayed away from her? You think you’d be okay if some other dickhead had her?”

I felt my jaw tighten at the idea of seeing her with anyone else.

“Right there, bud. That’s your answer. Upside, when you have that home life security, you’ll be a ringer like me,” he laughed.

“Very funny, man,” I said dryly.

“Just playin. When she comes for the opener, she can sit with Sav and the rest of the girls,” he offered.

That’d be good. She just had to come. I was determined to show her a good time around Detroit because in the back of my mind, I was already trying to gauge how many weddings happened outside of the summer... and if she’d be interested in working from a small box of an apartment here in Detroit... with me.

32. Ellie

I'm not gonna lie, before TJ sent the game ticket, I was trying not to get my hopes up about him. There was a nagging fear in my brain that said he'd find some hot, tall, easy-to-love girl in Detroit as soon as he got there.

But the day I got the ticket, I couldn't tamper down the excitement any longer, and I proudly displayed it on my fridge door. I put it there to remind myself of how much I wanted to see him.

I was setting myself up for success just like my anti-anxiety podcast had told me to do. I was showing myself that my desire to see him was stronger than my fear of driving downstate and spending time in the Metro-Detroit area- the place I grew up and had avoided for the past five years.

I worked overtime every day this week to make sure the wedding scheduled for the weekend I'd be missing would go off smoothly with Nikki in charge, and then I marked my calendar with vacation days until the next Wednesday so I could spend a little extra time with TJ.

On Saturday morning- TJ's game day- I made myself some calming lavender tea, double checked that I had everything I needed packed in my bags, and then blasted some Taylor Swift as I pulled out of the driveway.

I tried to have a successful drive downstate. I really did. But here's the thing about anxiety- sometimes you fully know that you're working yourself up, but you still just can't seem to stop it. It's like a train plowing through with no breaks.

And because I knew what I was anxious about, I had turned into a mile count-downer with all my energy focused on that one stupid thing.

For some reason, driving over the stupid Zilwaukee bridge seemed about as possible as summiting Everest in my eyes.

I was anxious about driving over the bridge because I was afraid my anxiety would make me hyperventilate, and then I'd crash and hurt myself and others. And it's not like I could remove my hands from the wheel to do a five-finger breathing technique where I traced my fingers to count out my breaths to make sure I didn't hyperventilate. So, I was screwed.

I tried to envision how relieved I'd feel on the other side of it, and as I neared Saginaw, I pictured TJ's face as extra motivation. His handsome five-o'clock shadow with a hat turned backwards over his swoopy hair, his ripped muscles, his easy smile. The spooning cuddles I'd get at night. I was pushing myself so I could see him. I really wanted to spend time with him, I truly did... but would I risk everything? Would I risk passing out while trying to drive over this atrocious bridge?

My knuckles were starting to turn white from gripping the wheel so hard. And when the bridge finally came into sight, my leg pushing the gas pedal seemed to quake.

Not. Today.

I took a shaky breath and quickly pulled over, trying to ignore the horns that people were blaring at me.

I fumbled with my phone to stop the dumb podcast and dial up TJ. I'd have to let him know that I wanted it, and I tried, but I failed miserably.

This was just part of my baggage, and he had to know that.

"Babe! Hey! Almost here?" he answered happily.

I choked out a sob.

"What's wrong? What happened?" he demanded.

"I... c-c-can't... come," I tried to hold back my stupid crying and get actual words out.

"Ellie, why not?" he asked slowly in a concerned tone.

"Because this stupid, damn, fucking bridge, TJ!" I broke down and pushed my hands through my hair. "I can't. I'm gonna pass out. I wanted to, but I can't."

There was silence on the other end of the phone while I became a blubbering mess. I had driven three hours just to get defeated in the last quarter. I'd have to drive three more just to see my bed and it would be the stupidest way to end a day and a relationship. I tried to focus on stopping my body from shaking, and I wished more than anything that he was in the car driving instead of me.

"Where are you?" he asked with a resigned sigh.

"On the side of the road," I said in a shaky tone.

"Jesus, Ellie."

"I want to come, but I can't do it. I can't stop shaking," I pleaded with him to understand.

"No," he said sharply

I sniffled, "huh?"

"No, Ellie," he said crossly. "You're being selfish."

I took the phone away from my ear. This was TJ I was talking to, wasn't it?

"Wha-"

"You can't? Fuck can't. You just don't want to. You don't want to inconvenience yourself. Thought I'd give you an out? Well, I'm not."

I looked at the phone aghast.

"Are you mad at me?!" He yelled.

I still couldn't find words.

“I thought you were a boss bitch, but I guess you’re just a weak bitch. I don’t date weak bitches,” he continued. “I’m gonna go pick up someone’s baby tonight and shake it just because I feel like it, and who’s gonna stop me?”

I felt my eyebrows knitting together. Was he making fun of me? Did he really call me selfish because I was having a panic attack? Did he really just call me a *weak bitch*?

“Are you a selfish, weak bitch?!” he yelled.

“Stop it, TJ!” I desperately yelled back, but he hung up on me.

What the fuck was that?

What an absolute asshole.

He could not talk to me like that.

I sucked in a huge breath.

With a new anger, I pushed myself. I needed to cross that bridge. I needed to walk up to him and slap him across his stupid, stupid, handsome, stupid face.

He knew I had a problem with anxiety, and he just threw it in my face like that? Did he think I was making this up?

“Oh God... Oh God... Calm, calm, calm!” I felt myself yelling in my car at myself and trying to focus on the road in front of me instead of the drop off on both sides.

About a minute later I had safely crossed the bridge.

I let out a celebratory yell and turned my music higher.

Now I just had to find that boy and make him regret what he said to me...

I stormed into the huge arena seeing red, and not just because that was one of the team's colors. I was still fuming over what TJ had said to me. I replayed it over and over in my head the last hour of the drive, making me more and more angry. I couldn't think of anything else as I made a beeline straight to the box office and asked for the manager.

"I need to talk to a player!" I yelled at him angrily.

The old man in the booth looked back at me confusedly.

"I'm sorry, young woman. But I don't think I can make that happen for you today," he said.

"I. Need. To. Talk. To. TJ. Freaking. Vonnie," I forced out between clenched teeth, trying to ignore the cold sweat I was feeling from being in a huge crowd of strangers.

"Ellie?" I heard a familiar voice say behind me.

I whipped around to see Sav, looking taken aback. She was dressed stylishly with ripped skinny jeans, boot heels, and her husband's large jersey overtop. I probably looked like a crazed woman with my hair all a mess from my stressful drive.

"I need to talk to TJ. Right now," I told her, trying to relay my frustration.

She nodded swiftly, with a look of understanding and motioned for me to follow her.

"Everything okay?" she tested as she power-walked me to an elevator away from the crowd of fans making their way toward their seats.

"Not. At. All," I punctuated each word as I said it.

“I get it. These boys,” she sighed. “I swear they have the emotional intelligence of middle schoolers half the time.”

When the elevator stopped moving, it opened to an ugly concrete floor and cinder block walled hallway. I could hear the echo of some kind of ball being kicked around.

“They’re playing their warm-up game called suey over there,” she pointed down the hall. “Keep walking and you’ll run into the boys. Someone will find TJ for you,” she assured me. Come up to box suite 110 when you’re done to fill us girls in. We’ll help you out. We’ve all had that look.”

She reached forward and pulled me into a quick hug, surprising me. I missed a beat before reciprocating.

“Indie and Johnny are up there with the ladies right now, they’d love to see you too,” she said.

I nodded, turned on my heel, and marched my way toward where TJ would be.

33. TJ

“Mine!” I called out and ran to kick the ball back into the circle. I loved playing suey probably just as much as I loved playing hockey. I knew a couple kids on my junior team that said they only continued to play hockey because of suey. It was such a simple game, but so fun. All you did was stand in a circle and kick the ball up and not let it touch the floor, but we went to extreme lengths to keep it going. It also helped to kick our quick-twitch muscles into gear for the game.

I was focusing on my next kick when my shirt was grabbed from behind and I was pulled around.

“Noooo!” The group yelled as the ball fell to the ground.

“Yesssss!” I shouted triumphantly, because I was spun around to face My Girl.

But the next thing everyone heard: a splintering slap to my face.

“Jesus! Ow, Ellie! What the hell?!” I yelled at her, holding my stinging cheek and feeling betrayed.

“That!” she yelled with a finger pointed at my face. “Is for being mean to me!” She seethed. Her lower jaw was protruding- the tell-tale sign of her anger.

“You called me selfish!” She blew hair out of her face. “You called me weak! You called me a BITCH!” she yelled up at me with crazed eyes.

“Ooooooh!” I heard my teammates chorus together behind me.

But I couldn't help it.

I started laughing.

I picked up her petite body and spun her around.

“Are you *insane*?!” she yelled in my ear. But I couldn't care less. Because she was here. Whatever I

had to do was worth it.

“Put me down!” She struggled against me and started pounding my back with her tiny fists, which felt like a little nothing. I’d have to remember to teach her how to punch with some real power.

I set her back on her feet but couldn’t stop grinning like a fool.

She started to yell again, but I put a finger in front of her lips to shush her, like she’d done to me at the lake.

“Shhhh. Babe, I only said those things to motivate you! Coach mode! I know it didn’t work before, but I couldn’t squish you. I had to try to help you somehow!”

That lower jaw of hers was still out.

“And look around! You made it, babe! You made it past the bridge. You made it past all those crowds of people! You did it!”

She kept looking up at me with daggers in her eyes.

“Yeesh. I thought you wouldn’t be mad when I told you what I did. I didn’t mean any of that, honey,” I tried.

She still wasn’t budging. I looked around at my team still staring at us.

“You look so pretty!” I said, but really her hair was kind of crazy. I tried to smooth it down for her a bit, but she slapped my hand away.

“You better score a freaking goal out there for me!” she yelled.

And then she turned and marched away with her hair swinging and her cute butt moving fast.

There was an awkward silence that stretched amongst the group as I looked around at them.

The sound of clapping finally broke the silence.

“You heard her!” Coach yelled from the locker room doorway. “You better score a freaking goal, Vinny!”

The rest of the team started clapping and chirping, and I awkwardly stood there and ran my hand through my hair.

I guess if that’s what it took to put her in a good mood, that’s what I’d have to do.

34. Ellie

He pissed me off on purpose...

I felt tricked.

But also, it was kind of sweet in a twisted way. My body was finally starting to come down from its heightened state. I sagged against the elevator door and let out a relieved laugh.

However irritating his “coach mode” was, I had to admit that it did work. Standing up to him and wanting to check his ass ended up being the motivation I needed to fully face my fears.

And I did.

I was here. In a packed arena. In Detroit.

I just needed to hang on to my bravery until we could be together. For some reason, TJ’s presence gave my brain the peaceful oasis it craved. When I was with him, I never felt like I had to look over my shoulder, because I felt protected.

I tried to coach myself: Watch the game, watch my back, and then I could be with him.

When the elevator dinged, indicating I’d made it to the level that housed the box suites, I quickly exited and walked around to where the arrows on the walls directed 110 would be.

As I opened the door, the other women that I’d met at the team bbq shouted out their hellos to me, and I instantly felt welcomed.

It was funny, by hanging around TJ, I felt like I’d somehow been invited into a club, and it felt nice to be included for once.

Sav rushed over with Indie on her hip and gave me a hug.

“Girl! Tell us everything! I filled the ladies in on what I knew,” she said with a serious face.

“Hi!” Johnny, who was standing close to his mother like a built-in shadow, said with a bright smile. He looked extra adorable today with his spiky brown hair and jersey that read “Daddy” on the back.

“Hey! Nice to see you again,” I greeted him.

“Are you married to TJ Vonnie, number 25?” he asked me curiously.

I bit my lip and shook my head. Sav shot me an apologetic look, but I didn’t mind. This cutie was going to be a heartbreaker one day.

“I’m just a friend of his,” I told him and ruffled his hair, then Sav led the way toward the bar seats that overlooked the ice below.

As soon as we were seated, the interrogation began.

“So what did your boy do?”

The question came from a black-haired girl wearing a leather jacket and ripped black jeans.

“I’m Adrienne, I missed the shindig up north. Nice to meet you,” she said with a blank face and an outstretched hand to shake mine.

“Hi,” I greeted. About seven other ladies were now gathering around to hear what I had to say as well, so I plowed through it. “TJ just does this thing he calls ‘coach mode’ where he basically insults me to try to motivate me...and I didn’t realize that’s what he was doing,” I huffed. “Let’s just say he laid it on a little too thick.”

The women all started chatting around me then, agreeing and explaining what their guys had done in the past to piss them off.

“I fully dumped Griff once when we were dating,” Sav admitted.

“I once trashed Brody’s car,” Adrienne said, cutting through the rest of the women and making them crack up and want more details. She looked like the kind of girl who could mess up someone’s car. I couldn’t help but think that I was definitely a weak bitch compared to her.

“Ah! I almost forgot!” Sav yelled and ran toward her purse in the room.

When she reappeared, she was holding a jersey that read #25 on the back and had the name “Vonnie” stitched over top of it, and she was carrying it toward me.

I felt my face getting hot at the attention, but gladly accepted the jersey.

“TJ repeated to me like five times this morning- ‘Don’t forget to give her my jersey, pretty please Sav.’ It was actually so sweet,” she admitted.

As happy as I was to wear his jersey, I felt a ping of jealousy that all these women didn’t have to travel four hours to be able to wear one.

I also knew that most of these women were in a way different position than I was. They would be together all season. They had the rings, they had the security, some of them even had babies. I, on the other hand, had a couple of nice days of an attractive NHL rookie feeling protective of me.

This jersey and these women including me in their little fan club made me want things...

The announcer’s booming voice advertising raffle tickets cut off my thoughts then.

“It’s almost warm-up time, ladies!” One of the girls called as she brought out a pitcher of some kind of mixed drink.

I felt my stomach nervously flip and caught Sav’s eye.

She promptly leaned over to whisper to me. "Don't feel pressured at all. And TJ told me to tell you that this box suite has a shit load of security. There's even a security guard specifically for us when the game starts."

I nodded and chewed the inside of my lip. I accepted a drink from one of the women and participated in their cheer, but the whole time, I was questioning how TJ could possibly see through me so easily. How was he able to know what I needed and still provide it for me when he wasn't even with me?

35. TJ

I sat in my little cubby in the locker room feeling my legs shake.

This was the most nervous I'd felt in a long ass time.

I'd never been called up before, so this experience was brand new to me. I could hear the crowd every time someone opened the locker room door and I wished they'd keep it shut. I didn't need reminding that there was a lot of fuckin people out there who'd see me flop if I messed up.

Coach was talking at the front of the room, but I put my head down between my knees, sending up a quick prayer that I would do alright and that I wouldn't barf right here in front of everyone.

"Hey." I felt someone tap my skate with a stick.

I looked up to see Griff's clear eyes staring at me.

"I told Grey and them that I'd watch out for ya. How ya doin, bud?" he whispered.

I looked from him to Coach up front drawing all over the white board and shook my head.

"I threw up before my first game," he admitted. "A lot of guys do. But think- you've got your girl here. She's never seen you play, has she? Just play a good game for her."

He was right... and thinking back to drinks at The Landslide, Ellie admitted she'd never paid too much attention to hockey, so she probably wouldn't even know if I played like shit. But a voice in my head argued that wasn't necessarily true... *She told you to score, you loser.*

I tried to swallow, but my throat felt like sandpaper. She was up there with the ladies, she made

it all the way here for me, I needed to play for her. I closed my eyes and pictured her bright green ones.

I fished my phone out of my bag below me and sent out a quick text to Ellie: *Nervous as shit. Too bad you can't lay on me. Hope you're having fun.*

"Vinny!" Coach boomed. "Something more important than my plays?"

I cursed softly to myself. "Sorry Coach, I'm a... I'm..." I couldn't find the words to finish.

"Nervous as fuck! We all know! Get your head in the game, son!" he yelled, to which many guys chuckled.

I felt my phone buzz, but I didn't dare look at it.

Coach kept talking, but I don't think I heard a single thing he said.

He finally called for everyone to exit the locker room, and I watched as everyone tapped their stick against a small #33 that was written on an empty locker next to the door.

"Need a minute, son?" Coach asked in a kinder, but still gruff tone.

"Thanks," I said quietly. I took the opportunity to look at my phone, and I was glad that I did. There were two texts.

The first read: *Don't be a weak bitch, Vinny! I don't date weak bitches. Get out there and score some goals.*

The second one said: *You can do it. I believe in you.*

My girl, quoting my coach mode back to me. I laughed to myself.

I could do this. She believed in me like I believed in her... and she faced her demons coming here. It was my turn to fight now.

I quickly put my phone away and hustled to exit the locker room.

As soon as I pushed the door open, I was shocked by the deafening noise.

I punched my own helmet a couple times with my glove, willing myself to toughen up and not shit my pants. I shouldn't have stayed the extra second back, because now I'd be walking out alone.

"You got it, you got it, you got it," I repeated to myself with each step down the hall and closer to the ice.

I tried to block out all the fans hanging their heads down the side of the entrance, waving to me. I'd usually eat that up and love waving and playing it up for them, but today I was shaking.

I kept my vision and focus on the white surface in front of me, and my nerves eased as soon as I jumped onto the ice and powered onto the smooth surface. All was right in the world when I was skating.

It didn't hurt that the music was bumpin too. Whoever was in charge of that needed a raise.

I joined my teammates skating around our half of the ice for the warmup, feelin my edges, and loosening my muscles up, then went to the corner to start up the puck shooting drill to warm our goalie up.

"How ya feelin, bud?" Duke asked, reaching out for a fist bump.

"I'm uh, feelin it," I told him.

He threw his arms wide. "Embrace it buddy. They're cheerin for you," he said, addressing the home crowd.

When it was our turn to run the drill, he skated first with the puck, and I rounded up behind him. He dropped the puck back behind him on a fake shot, I scooped it up, shot, and sweeeet goal.

Alright, alright, I could do this. It's all muscle memory, I told myself as I skated back to the corner to wait for my next turn.

And, the music really was good. I loosened up and showed off some of my sick dance moves to some little girls wearin Crew jerseys in the corner, and their belly laughs made me feel even better.

After the fun warmup and getting all amped up, the first period became a bit of a letdown because I hadn't even touched the ice.

As I sat at the edge of the bench, I became more and more envious of the guys who were actually getting to play.

I mean, I felt happy to be in the big show even if I was just a bench warmer... but being so close to the game, and not being able to feel part of it felt like a sick joke. I'd never been a benchwarmer before, and I was finding I did not have a good attitude about it.

We were up 3 to 1 against Pittsburgh, which was awesome, but it kinda sucked at the same time because each time a line came back to celebrate a goal, I had to celebrate and swallow my bitter jealousy.

It wasn't until there were three minutes left in the period that I finally felt a tap on the back of my helmet.

I turned to see Coach, looking at me and pointing to the ice. He yelled something at me, but I wasn't even sure what because I clumsily hopped over the boards as soon as I could before he could change his mind about putting me in.

As soon as my skates hit the ice, I was chopping away to try to catch up with the play.

One of our defensemen passed the puck up to Duke, and he was skating full speed up ice toward

Pittsburgh's net.

I pushed my cold muscles as hard as I could to trail behind Duke for a possible rebound.

And thank God I did.

Duke's shot deflected off the goalie's pads, and I was almost right behind him to try again. Muscle memory took over as I stretched to reach the puck. I went down on a knee and slapped a one-timer toward their goalie.

The next thing I knew, the goal light was shining bright red.

I stood there in shock, remembering there was a huge-ass crowd watching me that was definitely making itself known.

A second later I was pounded into the boards in celebration by my guys on the ice.

"First shift out the gate, Vinnnnn-ayyy!" one of the guys yelled in my ear.

As we dispersed and started skating back toward our team box, the Detroit celebration song queued up and I saw my dance moves from earlier light up on the Jumbotron. I swear I could hear the laughter from the happy crowd, and that was all good with me. I was cheesin' hard because I did what I'd always wanted to: I made a statement in my first big game.

I grabbed my jersey and shook it, playing it up for the fans, and then pointed my stick directly at suite box 110 where I knew Ellie would be sitting.

I couldn't see her, but I hoped she knew that was for her.

36. Ellie

The girls in the box next to me were screaming and jumping up and down as Duke skated fast toward the net, and soon I was too... because TJ was behind him...

I held my breath as the puck bounced to him, and in a split-second he fired it.

And he scored.

He actually scored a goal... in his first game.

I knew how badly he'd wanted that, and I felt so proud for him I could cry.

The entire stadium was practically on their feet screaming as he skated back to the bench to tap gloves with the rest of the team- the usual celebration it seemed. The announcer's voice boomed over the crowd's cheering: "Deeeee-troit Gooooal, scored by number 25, Teeee-Jaaaayyy Vonnieeee!"

And then, like my heart could take anymore, TJ looked in the direction where we were sitting and pointed his stick at us and raised his other hand in victory.

"Did he just point at you?! Ellie, he pointed at you!" Sav yelled.

I couldn't help but laugh with tears in my eyes as the women around me slapped me high-fives, because I guess my version of coach mode worked on him too.

When the Jumbotron showed his goofy dance moves from the warm-up earlier, the girls in the suite lost it.

"He is a charmer!" Sav called out. "Detroit is going to love him."

TJ didn't score any more goals, but the rest of the game was just as exciting as his first shift out. I found myself laser-focused on the game, and even moving in my chair anxiously as if I could move for the players. Each time TJ stepped onto the ice, I was so nervous for him I felt like I couldn't breathe.

As I watched I was able to pick up on some of TJ's superstitions. He played center, and every time he skated towards the ref to take the face-off, he first checked his left skate, and then adjusted his helmet. Sav explained that slapping the puck back to his own guys was a win, and he was able to win almost every one of the face-offs.

TJ was back out on the ice for the last minute of the game, and Sav told me that was a great sign for him.

When the final buzzer sounded, the crowd erupted, because Detroit beat Pittsburgh 5 to 1, which was apparently a good indicator that the upcoming season would be a winning one.

As the guys filed off the ice, I sat back wondering where I should be headed to next because TJ hadn't given me any directions for after the game.

"Family room time!" one of the women called out, and I anxiously looked to Sav to find out if that was a thing for me too.

"It's connected to the locker room, so that's where they meet us without everyone getting swarmed by fans," Sav explained as she turned Indie to face me. "Can you carry her for me and hand her off to Griff? I have a bunch of stuff for Griff's charity to bring down and pass out. Me and Johnny can handle it, but not when I'm holding Lil Squish here."

"Sure. I'd never complain about holding a baby," I told her. "Especially not one as good as Miss Indie here." She squealed happily at me and immediately reached for my hair. It felt good to know Sav trusted me

so much. She immediately felt like a friend to me, and her warmth reminded me a lot of Jules.

As soon as I held her, Indie grabbed my face with her little starfish hands and gave a big gummy smile.

“Hi baby girl,” I cooed as I started to trail after Sav, Johnny, and the other women.

As soon as we left the room, I noticed a large man- probably around 6’5 with muscles triple the size of TJ’s- in a black security shirt standing outside the door.

“Hullo, Ellie. Hullo, Indie,” he greeted. I smiled back, feeling relieved that he was accompanying us.

Entering the Crewmen’s family room felt like I was walking into a secret club. It’s plain, black door gave way to a beautifully furnished room with Detroit Crewmen history and memorabilia plastered all over. Multiple leather couches and retired player’s locker cubbies lined the walls. In the middle of the room, two mini hockey nets were set up on the plush red carpet, and a couple of the younger kids were already running around with little plastic hockey sticks playing mini-sticks.

The families were all waiting for their men to shower and get changed back into their suits to make an entrance.

As Sav explained, some of the men would take longer than others depending on if they got pulled for a post-game interview.

As each guy entered, everyone in the room applauded and the guy’s family members ran toward them for hugs. While I recognized quite a few people from the lake barbeque, there were definitely more wives and children present now.

It seemed like the entire team was now in the room, but TJ was still missing. I would've tried to text him to figure out where he was, but I was still holding Indie, and I didn't want to take my hands off her.

She started fussing a bit then.

"Shhh, baby, I gotcha," I whispered to her and lightly swayed back and forth a bit.

"Damn, wish you'd say that to me sometimes, babe," I heard TJ's gravelly voice say from behind me.

I looked up at him and felt a little flutter in my chest, because post-game TJ: hotter than ever. His freshly showered hair was mostly pushed back, with the shorter strands falling into his face, and his tie was pulled loose like he didn't want to put it fully back on. He was casually tossing the game puck in his hand, which now had tape across it that read: 1st NHL goal.

"You did it!" I whisper-yelled at him.

He came close then and placed a large, comforting hand on my back and leaned forward to kiss my forehead.

"So all is forgiven?" He gave a hopeful smile.

I sighed. "I mean... I guess so."

"She guesses?! Indie, can you believe this?" He grabbed her little hand. "She guesses?"

Indie let out a happy screech at being talked to, making us both laugh.

"I heard her! Where's my baby girl?" Griff called as he entered the room still dressed in his gear and skates. He must've been one of the guys pulled for an interview.

When he walked up to us, Indie was practically jumping out of my arms to get to her daddy, and people around us let out some "aww's."

“Thanks for watchin her, Ellie,” Griff said, only looking at his daughter. His eyes crinkled in the corners from smiling and he let out some high-pitched baby talk that totally didn’t match his stature. As he walked away, he threw Indie up in the air and caught her little body, and the sound of her happy giggles trailed in their wake.

When I looked back at TJ, he was still paying attention to Griff and Indie, watching them with what looked like a wistful expression on his face, which all but cracked my heart open.

37. TJ

Seeing Ellie holding baby Indie when I walked into the family room threw me for a bit of a loop.

My dreams of scoring a goal in the NHL were complete, and then I walked into the room and boom: a lady and a baby... waitin' on me and wearin' jerseys.

Of course, the baby was Griff's, but still, Indie seriously looked like she could be Ellie's daughter. I couldn't shake the thought that the picture in front of me could be my future... Our future...

Ellie cleaned up a bit since I saw her before the game; not that she looked bad before, she just looked stressed as hell. She worked her hair into a nice French braid that fell over her shoulder, and she looked extra tiny and cute in my jersey that she wore over top of skinny jeans and some booties.

After relinquishing Indie, she was wringing her hands together like she didn't quite know what to do.

I put an arm around her and pulled her into me for a hug. Her head only went up to my mid chest even though she was a bit taller from the booties. Hanging around her, I realized I had misjudged dating short girls, because her smallness automatically made me feel even more like a protector.

"Number 25 looks good on you," I said, leaning down to kiss her smile. I'd never get tired of doing that.

"Thank you for the jersey." She smiled back at me. "You played great. Are you happy?"

"Yes, but tired," I answered truthfully. "I wouldn't mind just headin' back to my place and putting on a movie and havin' a little kickback, just the two of us. I don't know if the guys are going to let that happen though. Would you be alright with going out for a bit? The bar is right next to my apartment."

If she opposed going out, I really would be totally fine with skipping the celebration, something that if you would have told me a few months ago, I'd be shocked at. It was my first NHL goal after all. But I truly was just happy that she was able to witness it and be here to celebrate the feat with me. What I really loved in this moment was how close I felt to her.

"That'd be alright with me," she said quietly. "This is your turf now."

"What? No way. I've been here all of five minutes, Miss Michigan." Her face seemed to falter a bit when I said it, but she quickly recovered when I grabbed her hand to leave.

When Ellie and I walked into The Blitz, some of my teammates who were already at the bar started hooting and applauding for me.

I raised my hand, which was holding Ellie's, and did a little victory cha-cha-cha dance. When I looked back down at Ellie, her cheeks were flamed red, but it looked like she was enjoying herself.

We squeezed our way to the front of the bar, and I ordered a beer for myself. When I asked Ellie what she wanted, I couldn't hear a thing. I had to lean down to hear anything she was trying to say.

"I'll have one of those fun cocktail drinks that the other girls have," she said.

I raised my eyebrows at her. "You sure, babe?"

She nodded and pulled me back down by the collar of my shirt to hear her. "You're not leaving me, right? Linemates," she whispered. "Besides, we're celebrating."

I searched her eyes to gauge the seriousness of her statement. Those words felt like affirmation that she finally did trust me. It honestly made me feel like I scored a second goal today.

“We’re celebrating, huh?” I asked with a grin.

She nodded with a shy smile. My girl was here to have a good time, so that’s what we’d do. I would definitely keep it at a tame level despite the fact that the guys would probably try to push me over the edge. With Ellie drinking out at a bar with me for the first time, I knew I had some expectations to fill for her, and I didn’t want to ruin anything.

Ellie started the night leaning her head on my shoulder and engaging in conversation with all my teammates and their girls. But soon the girls retired over to a fire pit lounge area, and she surprised me by wanting to join them.

I made sure to stay in a position where I could keep my eyes on her, and every couple minutes we made eye contact. I lived for those quick seconds. When we looked at each other, everyone else faded away. My chest felt tight, like if I breathed too much or even moved, I’d ruin our connection, and I was desperate to keep it. I couldn’t believe my luck that this beautiful figure skater was here with me, and we had such a strong attraction to one another. I knew enough to know that this kind of deep connection was rare. Somehow, when I looked into her green eyes, I knew she was important to my life story. She was someone I was supposed to find. She was someone who was supposed to stay.

I downed my drink kind of quickly so that I’d have an excuse to go near her again. I lifted my empty glass to her, asking if she wanted a refill, and she nodded confirmation from where she sat across the room.

I maneuvered my way around to reach the bar and order another round for us, but instead of facing the guy bartender who'd helped us earlier, I was now facing that Adrienne chick who was apparently Brody's girl. Only thing was that I hadn't seen Brody in a while, and Adrienne's eyes were all puffy like she'd been crying.

"You okay?" I asked quietly.

She avoided eye-contact with me and made a hand motion as if to say hurry it up, buddy. I'd have to consult with Ellie later to ask if she knew anything about this situation.

It dawned on me then that I had someone to chat with about all the ins and outs of the night. I wasn't sure if it was because I was raised with a bunch of girls or not, but I always loved getting home and hearing all the gossip. Every time we ever went anywhere as a family, when we'd get home, we'd all go into one of the girl's rooms and recap about everyone who was there and everything that happened. At first my sisters kicked me out during these little get-togethers, but after a while they realized I'd have some small insights to add to the conversations as well- or they just got sick of me begging to hear what they were talking about. Like sorry I wanted to know things too, guys. Let's face it- boys do gossip, but girls are better at it... they're better at most things than us.

When I brought back the drinks, Ellie was looking extra small sitting in an armchair between Griff and Duke, who had now joined the girls in the lounge area.

"We knew you were trying to ditch us for your pretty lady," Duke said smugly. "So we beat ya here." The girls all laughed at that, but I just shrugged. I was finding that Duke loved an audience, but he was also the one who got roasted the most by the team.

"Well, when ya got a lady this pretty, why waste my time with your ugly mugs," I quipped back as I

handed Ellie her refill. There was no spot for me, so I sat on the arm of her plush chair.

Griff reached over to knuckle punch me. “Always go for the looks. Duke can’t handle that,” he joked. Griff and Duke were fast becoming the guys I was closest to on the team, and it was funny how opposite they were. Griff was a married man and team veteran, where Duke was a young buck who was still feeling the bachelor vibe. He was now with a different girl than the one he was with at the lake barbeque, which was only a couple weeks ago.

“Well, back to your question from before Teej so rudely interrupted, I’ve known old Griffy for forever,” Duke was telling Ellie.

“How?” She asked, looking curiously between the two of them.

Griff shook his head, but you could see a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Kid’s always runnin his mouth and tellin everyone.”

“Aren’t you proud to be associated with me, old man?” Duke countered with a smile.

Griff looked at Ellie and relented. “He’s my brother-in-law.”

“Nooo,” I challenged, looking to Savannah for confirmation, but she was already engrossed in a different conversation with a couple other women. I saw it then, the similarities between her and Duke- they both talked with their hands, that was for sure. They had different hair because it looked like Savannah lightened hers, but they both had similar facial structures and wide smiles that lit up their whole faces.

Griff shrugged and took another sip of his beer.

“If it wasn’t for me, Griff here would be a loner,” Duke said. “Sav’s my older sis. She used to take me to games a lot, and shithead here was a zebra.”

“No shit?” I asked Griff. “You met Sav because you were a ref?”

“Yupp,” he confirmed. “Refereed all young Duke’s games just to see her pretty face in the stands.”

“Yeah, sure, make it sound like you volunteered to ref,” Duke said sarcastically. “It definitely wasn’t because you were being punished and needed to learn to respect the game.”

Griff chuckled at that. “That was more Nicky’s fault,” he said before draining the rest of his drink.

Duke held his beer up to the ceiling for some reason, like he was cheers-ing an imaginary friend.

“He threw me in the box a shitload too just to catch her attention. It was a long ass season,” Duke complained.

We all cracked up at that because Duke was not the cleanest player, and he usually rightfully earned his penalty minutes. The guy loved the hits. You could tell he got an extra jump in his skate when he saw an opportunity to lay someone out.

A minute later, sparklers held by waitresses started coming our way.

I looked at Griff in dread, but he just shook his head and pointed at Duke, who was laughing it up.

“You only get your first goal in the Big Show once!” he argued. “Tabs on me, bud!”

I felt Ellie pat my leg and laugh at my expense as the waitresses passed around shot glasses and poured drinks for the whole team and their ladies.

Right as the waitress poured my drink, I heard a high-pitched, “I’m so sorry!” from across our little circle. I looked up to see Brody trying to clean up a drink that had apparently spilled in his lap. He suddenly stopped moving and turned to look back at the bar where

Adrienne was staring him down with a set jaw and arms crossed in front of her chest.

That was... a development. It was obvious that Adrienne had somehow set up that little spill to happen. It wasn't my business though. Seemed like Brody had some shit to figure out.

I turned my attention back to Ellie.

"Well, cheers," I said and tapped my shot glass to hers.

She looked at her glass hesitantly.

"You don't have to if you don't want to," I whispered. "I'll take it quick for ya?"

"Nah, I want to," she said decisively. "I haven't been to a bar in forever."

"Well, I'm glad I can show you a fun time, babe," I told her. "Cheers."

I watched as she threw the drink back, and I proceeded to do as well. Her face scrunched up in disapproval as the alcohol hit her. I chuckled as I handed her the cocktail I had ordered for her earlier to wash it down.

When chatting ensued again, Ellie comfortably laid her head against my arm, and I enjoyed feeling taken for once. I'd gotten so used to always jealously watching the couples, and now I was finally part of one. Today felt like a turning point in my life. Like I'd finally made it and now I just needed to build from here... with her.

At some point, one of the guys brought out a deck of cards, and we started playing a drinking game called waterfall. Basically you had to pick up a card and slide it under the can's pop top and avoid making it crack open. Each card number had an action to go along with it as well. I tried to keep up with explaining the game to Ellie, but the group did a good job of making it self-explanatory.

When I drew a six from the deck, the group yelled, “Dicks!” meaning all the guys had to take a drink.

When Ellie was up, she grabbed a nine and the group called out, “Nine, bust a rhyme!”

She looked at me questioningly.

“Just choose a word and everyone after you has to say something that rhymes with it. The person who can’t rhyme has to drink,” I whispered.

She raised her eyebrows and then addressed the group. “Beer!”

“Dear,” I said.

“Spear,” Savannah contributed.

“Meer,” Duke called out confidently.

“Meer?!” Everyone yelled at him simultaneously. He held his arms up and tried to argue his point, but the group wouldn’t let it pass.

“Like a meer campaign, to make someone look bad, ya know?” He pushed.

Savannah slapped a hand to her forehead. “That’s a smear campaign, doofus!”

“Oh, shoot,” Duke stood up and drank, giving the group what they wanted.

After a while, I could tell Ellie was starting to yawn and sway a bit in her seat.

“Wanna peace out of here? We can pretend we’re going to get another drink,” I suggested.

She looked at her glass and then proceeded to chug the rest.

“Damn, girl,” I rubbed her back and chuckled.

She placed her empty cup on the table in front of her, then tapped my shoulder and said, “Lead the way.”

38. Ellie

We Irish good-byed...

I couldn't get over it. My tipsy head questioned if I'd somehow slipped it out to him that Irish-goodbye-ing was a thing I wanted to do with someone.

It was such a little thing, and probably so dumb, but... I couldn't get over how nice it felt for him to choose to go home and hang with me rather than drinking the night away in celebration with his teammates.

He took my hand as we squished through the crowd to exit the bar. I was pretty thankful that people didn't really know him yet the way they knew his friends. It seemed Griff and Sav were staples in Detroit because so many people called out hellos to them and wanted pictures with them.

I noticed other girls looking at TJ throughout the night. I knew right off the bat that would be the case- he oozed professional athlete by the look of his body and the way he carried himself. I realized now that it wasn't cockiness, it was more so the combination of finesse and strength.

I didn't blame the other girls for checking him out, but I did feel lucky he was choosing to hold my hand... *even if it was just for now*, a little anxious voice in my head added.

Exiting the bar felt a lot like walking into the rink because the September night's temperature had dropped way below how warm it was earlier in the day. I was grateful I still had his large jersey on, which kept me a little warmer as I stumbled to follow after him.

Even though we were walking back in the dark, I relished in how safe I felt holding his hand. All night I

hadn't felt the need to look over my shoulder because he was here with me, watching over me, caring about me.

The only thing wrong with this picture was that my head was starting to feel like it was spinning. When I was sitting in the bar, I hadn't noticed how much the alcohol was affecting me. Now that I was walking, I realized how messed up I was.

I stumbled a bit for a second and TJ reached out to me. "Ya alright, babe?" he asked, his voice laced with concern.

"Oh yeah-" I almost fell completely over as I tripped up a curb trying to follow him. TJ grabbed my arm and stopped me from falling splat on my face.

"We should sit. Or eat. Or go dancing!" I suggested. Maybe moving would make it so I wouldn't notice. I never noticed the shot affecting me at weddings... but that was probably because I'd never had more than one.

"Oh, babe..." he laughed and easily scooped me up, one arm hooking under my knees, and the other cradling my back.

"I know that girls walking back from bars are indestructible- my sister Stella ran smack into a stop sign and cut open her head once and didn't even feel it. Needed stitches and everything. But we need to protect your legs. You're like a swan on the ice, baby girl," he said. I enjoyed feeling his deep voice rumble in his chest as he talked.

"A swan, TJ?" For some reason, that was the funniest thing I'd heard in a long time, and I started cackling.

"Careful, careful," he warned.

I took a deep breath, trying to gather myself and focus my vision, but it was a bit of a struggle. "Oh jeez." I put a hand to my forehead. "I'm sorry...I shouldn't have drank as much as I did."

“Don’t be sorry, babe. I’m used to chauffeuring drunk girls back to their places,” he said.

I felt my face starting to fall with disappointment. So he did this a lot? Was that what he was saying?

“My sisters, Sassypants,” he looked down at me with a chuckle. “They took advantage of my driving abilities as soon as I turned sixteen,” he said. “I’m glad you feel safe with me,” he added in a quieter voice, cutting his eyes quickly to mine as he walked.

I leaned my head against his muscular chest and studied his strong jaw line covered in just the right amount of scruff making him look impossibly tough. How was this my life right now? Did I just have a fun night out at a bar without having a panic attack? Did I really have a handsome man carrying me right now? Did I even realize just how attracted I was to him? I needed to... I needed to tell him... I needed to kiss him... I just wished we could get home faster...

He finally stopped in front of a row of tall, brick townhouse looking apartments.

TJ climbed the stairs effortlessly.

“Can you reach into my pocket and grab the card?” he asked me.

“You can put me down now,” I told him, patting his chest.

His mouth curved into a smile. “I don’t wanna,” he said softly, causing a warm happiness to wash over me.

I quickly fished for his wallet and pulled it out to hold it against the front door’s scanner.

I pulled the door handle down as he pushed the door forward with his hip to open it up and reveal a plain hallway that went to the back of the building. There were only two doors on this floor and an elevator that probably led to other floors.

“That’s Duke’s place,” he motioned to the door on the right side of the hallway while he walked us to his, which was directly across from it.

As soon as he let us in and closed his apartment door behind him, he set me down.

Excited that we were finally alone, I immediately reached up and looped my arms around his neck, pulling him towards me to kiss him full on the lips.

I felt his hands smooth down my body and then squeeze my butt, pulling me into him. And suddenly he was lifting me again. I automatically wrapped my legs around him, needing to be closer.

He groaned and deepened the kiss, and I felt a happy euphoria erupting inside of me. He pushed me up against the wall, using it to hold me up, as he started paying attention to my neck.

I let out a gasp, shocked by how good he was making me feel.

I ran my hands through his hair, and pulled his head back with one hand, with the other, I scratched a fingernail down his neck, sucking and kissing in its trail. I felt his body tremble, making me feel incredibly elated that I could affect him that way.

“Fuck,” he growled.

He whirled me around and moved further into his dark apartment and then dumped me onto his bed, which felt way lower than it should’ve been.

I looked around, gathering my bearings, and realized he didn’t have a bedframe and instead, the bed was laying on the ground.

A giggle erupted and I quickly covered my mouth.

He smiled as he towered over me. “Oh yeah, make fun of the loser boy for not having a nice bed like yours,” he said sarcastically.

“Did I just ruin the moment?” I covered my eyes.

“Well, it doesn’t help a guy when you start laughing at him mid-make-out,” he clarified.

He moved to kneel on his bed.

“Sorry, I forgot, this is supposed to be sweet girl hours,” I told him, trying to keep a straight face.

“Don’t worry, babe,” he said seriously, staring into my eyes while he ripped off his shirt. “I’ll get a ‘please’ out of you.”

He nudged my legs apart to make room for himself, and then leaned forward over me. He pushed my shirt up to expose my stomach. I watched him, barely breathing... waiting... wanting him to touch me.

He kept unnerving eye-contact with me as he traced his tongue up my stomach, making me squirm, and then my shirt was gone too.

My breath hitched and I nervously stopped his hand. He paused, searching my eyes, waiting for more direction from me.

I lightly pushed him to roll around and change positions. Staring down at him, I felt in control. I hadn’t known I’d be able to feel this way with a guy... I felt sexy.

“Damn, Ellie,” he said huskily, and the way he looked at me, the gleaming awe in his eyes as his gaze trailed all over my body, made my usual self-consciousness disappear. I felt confident.

I leaned forward to move his hands above his head, but while I did it, my boob moved directly in front of his mouth, and his tongue drew circles around it. My hips bucked forward from the jolt inside my body, and when I looked back down at him, gone was his playful look from a minute ago, instead, his eyes looked like they were smoldering over.

I leaned forward to make out with him again, and this time, he bit my lip and pulled back lightly.

I pushed deeper into the kiss, and he somehow got his hands loose and was exploring my body, sending a light hum of pleasure coursing through me.

I thought the kisses were making me feel otherworldly... until I realized that feeling was actually the room spinning... and that was definitely not a good thing.

I quickly broke away from him and leaned over the side of his bed... feeling like I was going to...

Barf.

I felt my throat burn and tears sting my eyes at the embarrassment of the mess I just made in front of me.

"Ellie, did you just throw up?" TJ asked like a dummy.

I tried to swallow the ball of hurt in my throat and keep my voice even. "No," I heard myself wimper out the lie.

TJ moved quickly to the floor beside me and held my hair back to look into my eyes.

"Babe, are you crying? No, don't cry!" He laughed. "It's all okay!"

"Stop laughing at me!" I half-warned, half-begged.

"It's not a big deal," he said.

"I just wanted to be sexy for you," I mumbled, then immediately groaned, realizing what I'd just meant to be a thought had popped out of my mouth. Stupid alcohol.

My admission made him practically roll over laughing on the ground, which made me feel one hundred times worse.

“It’s funny to you that I’m not sexy?” I practically shouted at him, feeling my face burn even more red if that were possible. I wished I could’ve disappeared on the spot.

He finally quieted down and put his arm over his head.

“You are so incredibly sexy, babe. It is crazy to me that you are even questioning it because I find you insanely beautiful and attractive. But you have to know this wasn’t going any further tonight anyway.” He reached over and began rubbing my back.

I lurched again. This time he quickly got up and ran for a trash can to place in front of me.

He continued to brush my hair with his fingers and rub my back as my body angrily purged my stupid drinking sins.

After a minute without barfing finally passed, I worked up the courage to speak again.

“Can you not laugh at me?” I asked quietly.

He kissed my bare shoulder and lingered there for a moment. “I am sorry, I apologize. I just-” I could feel him starting to smile against my skin. I turned to look him square in the face.

“You can’t do it,” I complained. “You can’t stop laughing at me even when I’m being serious!”

“No, babe,” he protested with wide eyes. “I just like to find the humor in situations!”

“You don’t find this gross and absolutely appalling?”

“Babe, I’m a hockey player,” he said. “Here, smell my hands.” He held his hand out to me and I took a whiff and immediately shrunk back. Was it always like that? How had I not noticed it before?

“I can’t get the hockey glove smell out of my hands no matter how hard I try,” he explained. “I’ve seen

teammates barf from hangovers, bag skates, you name it. I've seen teammates shat their pants on the bench—that's always funny. Hell, a little kid peed on the ice and my skate a little while back at the Ice League and I lied and told the other kids I spilled Mountain Dew to cover for him. I'm seriously not squeamish. So I am telling you not to be embarrassed by this. I'm feeling it right now too, if I took like a couple more shots, I'd prolly barf too. Want me to?" he jokingly offered- I think jokingly at least.

I gave him the side-eye, but his explanation did calm me down. His reaction to me getting sick did match his whole calm vibe. Besides me coaching his hockey team, what actually shook this guy?

"You feel better?" he asked.

I sighed. I did. I think all the evil alcohol had left my system and now I was just left with a pounding headache.

"Good," he quickly stood up, careful not to step in the barf, and started rummaging around in his lone dresser. He handed me some of his clothes and pointed me in the direction of the bathroom to shower and change.

"I should clean this up first," I protested.

"Nah, I got it. Shower, babe. I'm serious," he said casually and shooed me toward the bathroom.

I felt bad leaving the mess for him to clean, but I craved showering the griminess of getting sick away. It also helped that his shower was a masterpiece with three different shower heads all working to heat you up, and the hot water felt amazing on my skin.

When I finally left the shower and looked back at my reflection in the mirror, I internally lectured myself over how much I drank.

Deep down I knew why I did though... It was the night's perfect storm of emotions fueled by my anxiety. I

felt that if I drank, it would loosen me up, and I could actually afford to lose focus for once because I was with TJ. I trusted him...

But I also didn't want to disappoint him.

I had sensed a shift between us since the last time we were together. The steaming hot gazes he was giving me all night at the bar practically set my body on fire. There was a need there, coming from both sides. I wanted to feel closer to him... but I did not feel ready for it. So, sitting at The Blitz, my brain was already on staying at his place with him in his bed and wondering if that would give him ideas... Ideas that I would want to take part in, but that I knew would make me feel uneasy and panicked. I was embarrassed to admit that I'd never crossed that line with anyone before. That was the problem with running away from your life at eighteen and shutting the whole world out- you ended up feeling like you fell behind. And I know how all people have different timelines, etc, etc, I've heard that all before. But...looking back at TJ, I wished I was ready. And I wished it wasn't such a big hurdle in my mind.

And I had to face it that he was a hockey player. A hot one too. I wasn't stupid. There was a reason why they had the hook-up reputations they did. Growing up in the rink, I'd always see countless girls waiting in the arena's lobby after hockey games hoping to catch the hockey guys' attention. I imagined there'd be thousands waiting in line for TJ now that he'd made his debut tonight. And if I wasn't "sexy" enough for him, would he just forget about me? Would I lose him before we even started? Would we succumb to an "almost"? I had a feeling that an "almost" with him would hurt just as much as the real deal with someone else. Because the truth was- I liked him, and I didn't want tonight to be the little slide to the end of us and to me being alone again. Not when I'd come this far.

I felt hopelessly desperate in my desire to be with him. So, I figured the alcohol would give me the

confidence I needed.

I knew now that alcohol was *not* the way to accomplish that... and what had TJ said? I must've known tonight wouldn't go much further? What had he meant by that? He didn't want to be with me in that way? He didn't see that with me?

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I needed to shut my anxiety off for the night. I could do this, I could be normal, I told myself. I could communicate with him. I needed to just do it...

I picked up his clothes from the floor and began changing into them. It felt intimate; it felt like a girlfriend thing to do. I cherished the way they smelled like him. While the clothes were soft and comfy, they were way too big for me. The basketball shorts he gave me barely clung to my hips and threatened to fall down if I moved too fast, and they were almost Capri pants on me. The shirt went past my butt. But I made note of the brand because I wondered if they made girls' clothes just as soft.

I entered his bedroom ready to demand what he had meant when he said tonight wouldn't be going further, but his reaction to me when I emerged was not what I expected.

He full on cracked up at the sight of me. His whole body shook with laughter as he fell to his side on the bed.

"Stop it," I demanded, practically stomping my foot like a five-year-old.

"I'm sorry, you're just so tiny!" he wheezed between laughs. "You're just so tough and sassy, but pocket-sized," he smiled. "God knew what he was doing when he made you. You'd be way too powerful if you were bigger."

I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling defensive. "You always laugh at me, TJ."

“I always laugh when I’m with you. It’s part of why I like you so much,” he argued. He patted his bed next to him, but I didn’t budge.

“You prolly just want to hook up,” I blurted out.

The easy smile slid off his face as he studied me.

“No,” he said softly. “That’s not all I care about. That’s only one part of relationships, Ellie,” he said.

Relief coursed through me, but looking at TJ, he looked... sad?

His eyebrows pinched together. “Kinda hurts that you’d think of me like that,” he said quietly.

Now a war was waged inside of me, because his proclamation made me even more attracted to him, and I suddenly felt the urge to reassure him.

“I mean, hooking up with you would be amazing,” he said with his lopsided smile back again.

39. TJ

She still stood at the foot of my bed, looking stuck and unsure.

“So why did you say tonight wouldn’t be going further?” she asked, looking much smaller than her usual self. I wasn’t sure if it was because of her lack of confidence in this conversation or my clothes, but I needed to fix it.

“Oh, I want to, babe,” I told her. “C’mere,” I patted the bed beside me. At some point in our timeline, she somehow started to question her sexiness, and that was my fault. I wanted to reassure her that me not pushing her should not be confused with me not having interest or attraction to her.

Seemingly more satisfied than when she first stepped out of the bathroom ready to fight, she wordlessly flipped the light switch and tiptoed around my bed to lay down next to me. But she didn’t snuggle into me like usual. She lay flat on her back a few inches away, making it feel like there was a barrier between us again.

“Explain, please,” she said, looking up at the ceiling.

“You got a lil shwasted tonight, babe. And that’s totally fine,” I told her. “I want you to have a good time with me. Like I said, I’m glad you trust me, and I don’t want to break that trust. I don’t want you to do anything you’ll regret while you are shwasty with me. When we’re finally together, I want it to be intentional and one thousand percent committed.” I rubbed her tense shoulders and tried again to comfort her. “I’m not goin’ anywhere, and I hope you don’t plan on leaving anytime soon either, so why rush things?”

I reached to hold her hand, which lay between us, and was happy when she didn’t pull back. I’d take

what I could get.

I listened to the rhythm of her breathing in the dark for a couple minutes. When she didn't respond after a while, I asked, "You sleeping?"

She sighed. "No."

"Wanna talk more? I'm still wired," I admitted.

She rolled on her side to face me. "Were you nervous today?"

"Yeah," I admitted. "I was a bit nervous for both of us."

"You're going to have to explain that one as well, sir."

"Well, I pretty much made you come to the game. So I was kinda nervous for you, like if anything went wrong I was afraid you'd blame me. But I selfishly really wanted you to come see me," I shrugged in the dark. "But that was a good distraction. When you made it here and were all fired up and fine, I thought too much about what was in front of me. Stepping onto that ice in front of all those fans... It was pretty intimidating at first."

"It's refreshing seeing you a little off your game," she said.

I looked over at her. "We're all human, Ellie."

She took in a deep breath. "I'm embarrassed I've cried in front of you," she admitted. I rubbed her calves and shook my head no against her. "When was the last time you cried?" she asked.

"Easy," I felt myself smile. "When my oldest sister Gianna named me godfather to my twin niece and nephew."

"I must see a picture now," she smiled.

I reluctantly let go of her hand to rummage around the side of my bed for where I'd placed my phone

to charge. I quickly flipped through a bunch of pictures to find last May and then showed her the screen.

“Twins run in my family,” I told her proudly. I couldn’t help but look at her tiny stomach and wonder...

“Woah, buddy, nah-ah,” Ellie said with a wag of her finger. “Eyes up here.”

“What?” I asked with a laugh, putting my hands up in innocence.

“You’re looking here!” she accused and pointed to her stomach’s general area.

“Well, I’m just thinking like...shit. You’re short as hell. Your stomach is like two inches,” I said with my eyebrows up. “That’s gonna be interesting.”

Her jaw dropped.

“What? I’m manifesting, baby.” I felt a goofy smile spread on my face. I put my phone back on the ground and laid on my back. She finally inched closer to me. She rested her head on my chest, smushed her body against mine, and looped an arm around my stomach. I breathed a sigh of relief. All felt right when she did that.

“Well, stop it,” she said softly. “That’s like way too much.”

“I think it’s the perfect amount,” I countered and pushed a kiss into her hair.

After a beat of silence, she changed the subject.

“When was the last time you threw up?” she asked.

“Oh man,” I laughed. “From drinking? Probably Grey’s bachelor party. We didn’t do anything crazy, just played some pick-up games at the Ice League for hours one Saturday and drank while doing it. It wasn’t my finest moment. I was already upset about my knee, so I indulged a bit too much. The guys roasted me for weeks

because I was the only one who overdid it and lost my shit.”

She seemed satisfied with my answers, and I thought we were both drifting to sleep, until she sleepily murmured, “Why me?”

I smoothed her hair, loving how peaceful she felt against my chest.

“Why not you, Ellie? For one, you’re drop dead gorgeous. I mean, when I first saw you at Grey and Jules’ wedding, I was like ho-lll-yy hot mama.” She suppressed a giggle at that. “And then on top of that, you’re kind, strong, independent, and a boss-bitch. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

What I left out was how her red-rimmed eyes pulled me into her. Seeing her tear up at the Scott’s wedding did something to me, just as it did when I left her for Detroit. I’d do anything to fix whatever this girl needed fixing. I was a goner. I was sunk by her. But I don’t think she knew it, and that made her even more attractive in my eyes. She wouldn’t take advantage of the fact that I was wrapped around her pinky like other girls would.

“I have a lot of baggage, TJ,” she admitted in the dark.

I debated what to say next, because I knew whatever I said she would hang on to and try to decipher for forever. My girl was an overthinker, and I knew I had to be careful with my words.

“Why do I even have these muscles if not to help you lift some of it, babe,” I joked. After a beat of silence, I internally cringed realizing that probably wasn’t the right thing to say.

She silently stroked her nails against my chest and stomach, which felt like heaven. But it was almost like I had a sixth sense when it came to her, and I could tell when she was still feeling uneasy.

I tried again. "I know you think you have a lot of baggage, but I don't see that at all. We all have things that make us feel heavy; we all have our own shit. If you could help me with mine, wouldn't you?"

I felt her nod against me.

"That's how I feel about you, Ellie," I said. "Besides, I kinda hate the word baggage. We should retire it. Life gets hard for everyone at one time or another. It's just called being a human."

"Retire it?" I could feel her smile against my chest. "I like that."

"Good." I softly stroked her back until we fell asleep.

40. Ellie

I woke up to the sound of a muffled voice talking. It was quiet, like the voice was coming from the other end of a phone call. At first, I thought it was just part of my dream, but then I heard it again...

"Is someone there with you?" a woman's voice questioned.

I shot up from where I laid on his chest and fixed a death glare on TJ who had the phone up to his ear.

"Uhh, sorry, Mom," he said hesitantly while keeping his eyes locked on mine, trying to communicate with me through them.

I felt my body sag with relief and put a hand to my head to stop the blood rush from sitting up so suddenly. For a second, I thought... No, I didn't even want to go there... it was only his mom... wait, his mom?

I shook my head urgently at him. I did *not* want his family to know about me. It was way way too soon in my book.

"Yes!" he said brightly.

I punched his arm, and then immediately shook my fist out because I hurt my thumb.

He grabbed my hand back and kissed my thumb, but I tried to pull away from him.

"Don't," I mouthed to him, gesturing to his phone.

"There's a girl here that I like, but she doesn't like me all that much right now apparently," he said into the phone, smiling despite the angry look I was shooting at him.

"I don't know why she doesn't, Mom," he continued. "She's very sassy."

I rolled my eyes and watched him as he talked. This train was pulling away from the station and I felt like I was barely hanging on.

“She’s a bit of a brat, but that’s alright because I’m a brat tamer,” he repeated to her, which earned him another shove. His smile never wavered though. He loved toying with me. He was like a little kid whose cuteness saved him... because if he didn’t look so cute when getting on my nerves, I’d probably be completely over him at this point.

I could tell he started to talk with his dad on the phone after that, because it dissolved into hockey talk that I couldn’t follow very well.

I located the remote for his tv sitting in the corner of his room on the ground and turned on an episode of Friends on mute.

When I heard him say his goodbyes, I pushed myself to a sitting position and moved to put my hair up in a messy bun. Only problem- I pulled it a little too far and snapped it.

“Damn it,” I cursed.

He looked up at me in question.

“My ponytail snapped.” I showed him the now useless rubber string. “It was at the perfect tightness too.”

“Perfect tightness?” he asked, intrigued.

“It’s always too tight at the beginning and gives me a headache, then it slowly loosens and becomes perfect. I’ve kept this same one for months. Now I have to start all over.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Sounds like a Champagne problem as T-Swift says,” he quipped.

I looked at him in shock for the second time this morning.

“You think I didn’t pay attention to what you played in the rink, Ms. Sassy Thing?” he smirked and rolled onto his stomach, grabbing the pillow and puffing it up between his strong forearms.

“Good one. But you just don’t understand. RIP perfect ponytail,” I sighed. “I should probably find my own phone.” I pushed up from the bed and went to my clothes from last night, which were crumbled in a ball in the corner of the room.

When I pulled out my phone, I wished I could’ve put it back... because there were a million missed texts from Nikki...

Apparently, the mother-in-law of the bride went off on Nikki about me not being around until Thursday, and she went to the venue and complained about my lack of professionalism. It was just my luck that the one vacation I took all summer would get rained on by a Karen who wouldn’t even need me until Thursday night anyway.

I wanted to rewind to five minutes ago before I had ever looked at my phone. Because what I really wanted was to stay in bed cuddling with TJ.

I sat back on the edge of his bed and lazily scratched his back.

“I’ve gotta go back up north.”

He seemed to freeze.

“Because...?” he asked.

I sighed. “Because a client is putting up a big stink about me not being there right now, and I can’t afford to lose Cherry Lane as a venue.”

He put his arms around my waist and pulled me back into bed with him, making me giggle.

“No,” he grumbled. “I need more Ellie time,” he said into my hair.

I patted his cheek. “Wish I could stay longer.”

“We have more pre-season games this coming weekend, but the weekend after that we have the kick-off to our regular season, will you come?” he asked, giving me a hopeful look.

“I’ll try to,” I told him earnestly.

He hugged me tighter then.

“I wish you could stay,” he said, clearly still groggy with sleep. “I’d pay you whatever you make if you could skip this wedding and just stay here.”

I stiffened in his arms then... because did he realize what he just said...?

“TJ...” I warned, “that was kind of disrespectful.”

His eyebrows pinched together. “I was just kidding, I just want you to stay, babe.”

“Well, I created this life for myself, and I won’t just give it up because you flash your dimples at me,” I said, kind of irritated that I even had to explain myself.

“I’m not asking you to give it up-”

“Yeah, you pretty much just did,” I said, and pushed away from him.

He rubbed his eyes. “I’m not even awake yet. Why don’t we get some breakfast first and talk?”

“Talk about what, TJ? You’re not convincing me to stay if that’s what you think. I need to leave, it’s my job.”

“Jesus, you’re being super defensive. I just want to-”

“What?” I felt like I’d been slapped. “I’m entitled to feel defensive over my job that I worked very hard for. Forget it.” I quickly grabbed up my clothes from the floor and went to the bathroom to change. “I don’t need this right now,” I muttered.

It’s not like I wanted to leave, I clearly wanted to stay with him. But for him to act like my job didn’t matter

was pretty frickin rude.

I quickly changed back into my own clothes, not even bothering to look in the mirror. Today would just be a driving day anyway.

I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing before I opened the door. I didn't want to leave on bad terms with TJ, no matter how much his comment bugged me. He probably didn't mean it, he was probably just sleepy, I reasoned.

He was sitting up on the edge of his bed, still in his boxer briefs when I entered his room again.

"Can you take me to my car?" I asked quietly.

"Thought you didn't need this right now," he muttered, not meeting my eyes.

"C'mon," I nudged him. "Can you just take me to my car?"

"So you do need me?" he asked, his eyes were blank and gave nothing away.

His question irked me, and I sat there blinking at him, wondering how his tone could shift so fast.

"TJ...I-"

"No, I think you can do it all by yourself, Ellie. You clearly don't need me."

I whirled on my heel then and marched to the door feeling a manic laugh rise in my throat. I knew the other shoe would fall. I knew he'd just end up hurting me. I needed to leave before it got worse.

But I made it to his door and came to an abrupt stop.

I thought about walking by myself through the city all the way to the dark parking garage where I left my car... and it felt like the room was closing in on me.

My mind spiraled into all the what if's. I closed my eyes against the mounting fear and balled my fists so

hard I felt myself shake.

Yes, they were intrusive thoughts, but there was an underlying worry stemming from a real memory... from five years ago... that I couldn't shake. The worry whispered that it could happen.

It happened all the time.

It happened to girls like me.

It happened to me.

The tears came to my eyes then, and I struggled to keep my voice even as I called back, "Can you please take me to my car?"

My plea was met with silence. He didn't even care to respond.

And that was too much for me.

"Take me to my fucking car!" I screamed in a shrill voice laced with so much desperation, that I absolutely hated it. I hated how weak I sounded.

My vision of the door was blurred with tears. I hated that I was ruined. I hated that I couldn't do this by myself.

And I hated more than anything that in this moment of anger, I still needed him.

I backed up against his wall and slid down it, covering my face and collapsing into my tears, angry at him, and angry at myself.

A second later, TJ's arms were around me.

"I'm sorry, babe. I'm sorry," he kept repeating.

But the damage was done, and I was gasping for full breaths as I panicked.

When my breathing finally settled down to a normal pace and I stopped shaking, TJ got up and went

to his fridge.

He came back with a Gatorade, and a guilty look on his face.

“I’m sorry, Ellie. You should drink something to pep you up a bit,” he said, handing me the Gatorade. “I didn’t mean...” his voice faded away and he shook his head.

I accepted the drink and wiped my eyes. I’d broken down way too many times in front of him now. It almost felt like I needed to leave him and the memories of embarrassing myself in a locked-up place in my brain to never visit again. It would be easy to do... if it weren’t for the good memories with him that were competing, and winning, against the bad. I didn’t want to erase the handholding, the inside jokes, the kisses, the security blanket that was TJ.

When I finally felt steady, I started to pick myself up, and TJ reached a hand down to help me up.

As soon as I was standing, he pulled me into his arms.

“I am sorry,” he whispered into my hair, and I knew it was true. I was sensitive about the life I built for myself, and he was sleepy and touched a nerve. It was bound to happen with two people who had only known each other for a few weeks. We still had so much to learn about each other. And I wanted to continue to get to know him... and maybe one day, he’d fully know me.

“I say stupid things sometimes. Ask Jules, she definitely thinks so,” he said. “I am working on it.”

“It’s alright,” I said, “I’m sorry for...” I looked away. How did one say they were sorry for something that would surely happen again?

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” he looked at me with serious eyes, and I believed him when he said it. He smoothed some hair that had fallen behind my

ear and kissed my forehead. I closed my eyes and embraced feeling loved by him.

After finally leaving his apartment, we walked wordlessly down the five blocks to the arena's parking garage holding hands, almost understanding that the physical touch, but silence, was needed for now.

Dread gripped me as soon as my car came into sight because each step toward my car was a step further from TJ, and it pained me to leave him so soon. I just wondered if I was the only one feeling this way. I was too self-conscious to tell him my thoughts though, just in case they weren't reciprocated to this magnitude on his end.

It was scary how fast I'd fallen for him. And this morning made me realize just how fast I could lose him as well.

There was an awkwardness that stretched between us when we stood near my car.

TJ was the one to break it.

"So, there's one more thing I was going to tell you. There's this banquet in two weeks," he pushed a hand through his messy hair, which I was starting to realize was a nervous tick of his. "It's before the home games against Tampa to kick off the regular season games. Would you be my date?" He asked sheepishly. His chocolate brown puppy dog eyes implored me. And I knew I could never say no to him. "We could have fun getting all dressed up and having a night on the town with the team."

"That sounds fun."

He sagged with relief against my car and gave a small smile. "I'll miss you, Ellie. Wish we had a bit more time, but I'm happy for the time we did have," he said.

He scrubbed a hand over his face. "That's what I should've said this morning. God, I'm so dumb."

I pulled at his arm, realizing he was beating himself up for what had happened.

"It's okay," I told him earnestly.

He leaned down and gave me a kiss on the cheek, but in a daring move, I put a hand to the back of his head and moved him to my lips.

When we moved apart, his good-natured, lopsided smile came back to his face.

"I'll see you in two weeks," I told him. "Might call you in an hour when I'm going over that bridge to distract myself."

"I'll be waiting for that call, Miss Brampton," he said, flashing his dimples at me.

41. TJ

I walked back to my apartment alone feeling like I'd been checked by a Mack truck into the boards. I couldn't help but think that something definitely happened to Ellie in the past that caused her to panic the way she did. It wasn't nothing. It couldn't be brushed off. She was practically paralyzed at the prospect of leaving alone. And I felt horrible that I'd pushed her to that point, even though I one hundred percent did not mean too. I slipped and wasn't careful with my words. I pulled at the front of my hair replaying the conversation. My sisters would've killed me if I said that to them, so I don't know why I said it.

I felt a new urgency to unfold the mystery that was Ellie Brampton. I needed to figure her out before I lost her... Because how could I ever know what to say and do if I didn't know what exactly triggered her panic attacks?

I tried to think back to when she had that first panic attack in front of me when I walked in on her as she tore down the Scott's wedding decorations. She said she wasn't aware of something...? I racked my brain for more lost details but came up short.

I wished she could've stayed here with me longer because we made such huge strides last night. I was planning on asking her to be my girlfriend this week. But timing was never right for us, and that was mostly my fault. It was difficult for normal people to find someone to love, then add in the fact that my job would be taking me to different places every weekend and I could end up getting traded at the drop of a hat to who knows where...

I swore to myself to give it my absolute all here in Detroit, because at least we could see each other in four hours here.

My thoughts were cut short when I reached my apartment and realized the door handle gave way, meaning it was already unlocked...

I moved to open it, but leaning close, I could tell by the bubbly voices behind the door who had “broken into” my apartment.

I swung my door open to find two bottle blondes dressed to the nines with mischievous eyes sitting on my couch.

“Hey, baby brother. Show us the town,” my sister Stella said.

42. Ellie

My meeting with the Monster-in-Law, which was the name Nikki and I deemed the coming weekend bride's Mother-in-law, was scheduled for 9am sharp this morning.

She had wanted to meet yesterday as soon as I arrived from downstate, but I nixed that idea. There was nothing that important that needed to be dealt with as soon as I arrived- especially considering the fact that the wedding was still almost a week away- about a year in the eyes of a wedding planner.

But this morning I was ready and raring to go. I stopped at the venue's coffee shop extra early to caffeinate before taking this family head on.

And it was a good thing I did.

Because they were probably the pickiest and snobbiest wedding party I had ever dealt with.

"What was your name? Eleanor?" Monster-in-law asked. She was a large woman with practically a bowl cut and bright pink lipstick that wiggled beyond the lines of her actual lips.

"I don't care, Suzie!" the bride, a flitty girl named Angela, yelled into her phone. "Your hair better be brown come this weekend. I told you all I would be the only blonde in the pictures and when you accepted the bridal party invite you also accepted my demands!" she hollered and actually stomped her foot like a two-year-old have a tantrum. I fought like hell against the temptation to roll my eyes... TJ would be proud of my valiant effort. I felt bad for Suzie, whoever she was.

"Uh, no, just Ellie," I finally responded to Monster-in-law.

She pursed her lips at me. "Well, now that you're back, here is a list of things I have noticed that are not

up to our expectations.”

She handed me a checklist written out on a napkin, and I squinted to read her handwriting.

It seemed most of the demands had nothing at all to do with my company, and more so to do with the actual hotel. How lovely.

“Well, Ma’am, I don’t control the number of towels you all receive, nor do I control the hotel restaurant. I am only in charge of the events on Friday night and Saturday- the rehearsal dinner and the actual wedding,” I pointed out and tried to maintain a relatively unfazed facial expression.

“Well, then who do I deal with?” she asked in an exasperated tone.

Now, I felt bad throwing Andre, who was the concierge at the venue, under the bus. But someone had to deal with the Monster-in-law’s wrath.

“That would be Andre behind the concierge desk in the lobby,” I told her.

“Well, I expect you to have everything perfect for the rehearsal dinner. How the hell am I supposed to have confidence in someone who isn’t even around until the day before?” she asked with her hands up.

“I don’t know, Ma’am.” I held my mouth in a firm line. I did not need to be chastised by this woman who hadn’t even seen any of my work yet.

“Can you get me some Evian water? I am positively dyin’ here,” Angela interrupted us to ask.

I gritted my teeth and handed over a hotel complimentary water bottle that was behind my desk.

She gave me a fake “cutesy” smile when I handed it to her but didn’t utter so much as a thank you.

“We have to see an Andre person in concierge apparently.” Monster-in-law’s words, aimed at Angela, dripped in disdain.

She threw me a dissatisfied look over her shoulder as she left. “We’ll be back,” she barked.

I held my fake smile on my face until they finally hobbled out of my office.

As soon as the coast was clear, I covered my face with my hands and let out a frustrated sound.

“That bad, huh?” Nikki asked as she walked in.

“Monster-in-law and bridezilla from hell,” I deadpanned. I was not looking forward to this weekend.

I usually enjoyed my job and felt satisfied when I put together a masterpiece come wedding day. I could tell this kind of client would be at me the whole night about the stupidest, most minute details and rob me of any satisfaction.

I rubbed my hands over my face and left them on top of my head.

“This is going to be frustrating,” I told Nikki.

“Ya think?” she countered sarcastically.

I searched for my phone then, feeling the need to vent to TJ.

I started typing out my description of the interaction I’d just had, and then paused looking at my phone. I touched the goofy smile on my face. It’d been so long that I felt the need to touch base with anyone or share any part of my day... and it made me feel special that I had someone who cared about what I had to say.

43. TJ

Good luck tonight! Score some goals! Wish I didn't have a wedding tonight, but I'll be watching the game when I can sneak it in!

I reread the text while I was doing some warm-up exercises, and it got me feelin' the butterflies in my stomach, and no, I didn't feel like a girl saying that- guys got butterflies too.

I hoped she could catch some of the game, but I also hoped that the bridezilla and monster-in-law she was dealing with this week wouldn't catch her.

I started getting amped up in my own little world, listening to my Rocky music playlist and replaying some plays in my head as I did high-knees under the bleachers, when I heard my name called.

I ripped out my headphones and turned to see the rink's broadcast reporter named Dominique with a small crew behind her staring at me.

"Can I pull you for some pre-game questions?" she asked eagerly, to which I nodded dumbly.

I guess I really was making a statement here, I thought happily.

She pulled Duke from the other direction and shuffled us to stand in front of a painted solid red wall.

"Hey Detroit fans! We're back with Pregame Games with the Crewmen! Today we're playing what's in your pockets with TJ Vonnie and Duke Callahan!" Dominique said into her microphone as she looked straight at the camera.

It was a good thing my sisters always shoved cameras in my face growing up because they eliminated any fear I could have potentially had of screen time... and I'm not gonna lie- they totally built my confidence a bit by always sayin' how cute I was. The only thing that

faltered my confidence was the mention of the game, because I didn't have anything cool in my pockets.

Dominique turned to us then with a beaming smile.

"TJ and Duke, what do you guys have in your pockets?"

I shoved my hands into my workout shorts and came up with my car keys and wallet... pretty boring.

I looked at Duke and realized he was either prepared or more of a weirdo than I thought.

"Well, Dominique, I've got my lucky rabbit's foot, my lucky legos, and some energy boosters." Duke showed off his lucky charms with a cocky smile.

"By energy boosters, you mean starbursts?" Dominique asked.

"Yes, ma'am, eat two yellow ones before every game."

"And TJ," she said, turning to face me, "you have a wallet and keys... and what is on your wrist I see?" Dominique asked with a tiny smile etched onto her face. Her head cocked to the side like she knew exactly what it was. Damn, cold-blooded. She was gonna embarrass me like this? I felt my face heating up.

"Uh... well, my uh..." I cleared my throat and she nodded at me to go on. I hung my head in resignation. I'd have to just admit it.

"Well, Dominique, my girlfriend doesn't like when her ponytails are too tight so I'm stretching this one out. I'm trying to make it perfect for her." I curled my arm into a flex to look more manly as I showed it off. "It's a style, I think, yeah?" I asked her.

She threw her head back and laughed. I guess that was exactly the kinda answer she was looking for.

She talked at the camera then, previewing the game with some random facts and stats about us and

Dallas, who we were playing.

When she wrapped up, she thanked both of us with a bright smile and then stormed off to grab other players.

“Dude, you’re stretching out her ponytail? Whipped!” Duke teased, looking totally amused.

“Whatever,” I shook off his comment, but I couldn’t shake the smile that came to my face whenever I thought about Ellie.

44. Ellie

When dinner ended and the dance floor began, I felt my body sag with relief. I was almost in the clear with Bridezilla and Monster-in-Law.

I scanned the room, making sure everything was going according to plan when a proud young dad rocking his baby in the crook of his arm caught my eye. Now *that* was how you held a baby. I felt a laugh bubble up in my throat thinking about TJ holding Frankie and making him spit up all over me. What a beginning... The beginning of what, I still wasn't sure, but I wasn't ready to see whatever we had between us end.

I couldn't tell if it was because these clients were so horrible that I didn't enjoy this wedding as much, or if it had more to do with the fact that I was focusing more on my personal life these days.

Before TJ, I would be wholly consumed by the wedding in front of me and my brain would be analyzing each detail of every single precious wedding minute... but now, I just wanted it to be over so I could talk to TJ.

It dawned on me that for the first time in my adult life, my personal time mattered more to me than my billable hours. It was kind of a nice change.

The last text I received before I left the venue was from TJ: *I wish I could give you a massage after your night, babe. I bet you're zooming around making everything perfect. Headed onto the ice so I won't be able to talk for a while.*

Reading his text made me feel a burst of happiness in my chest that I wished I could hang on to forever. Because how was this guy real? He was the one playing a physical game and he wanted to give me a massage?

Even though I knew it was impossible, I wished more than anything at that moment that he could be

waiting for me in my apartment when I arrived home...

...But that wish changed the second I got there.

He hadn't responded to the quick text that I'd sent saying that I'd gotten home safely, so I checked again to make sure that the game had ended- which it had. The final score was 3-2. TJ ended up getting a goal and an assist, helping the Crewman to snag the win over New York. So, call me crazy, but I went on Instagram to see if he was active.

When I opened the app, I wanted to throw my phone away from me... because it felt like a cold hand seized my heart.

I looked at my phone again for confirmation and focusing on it hurt worse.

Because there was TJ with his lopsided smile and swoopy hair... in between two sexy, blonde girls in low-cut Detroit t-shirts with boobs for days.

Puck bunnies.

I knew they'd make their appearance soon enough. I loathed them growing up. They were groupie girls who always ran around hockey players to catch one. When I was young, I half envied them and how they had a life while I wasted away all my hours training. The other half of me wanted to scream at them to get out of *my* place. The rink was where I belonged, not them. I think all of us figure skaters felt that way.

There was a very obvious difference between young and old puck bunnies though... With age, these girls hoped to make the hockey guys cheat on their significant others just to brag that they bagged a player.

Wait... girlfriend... I was *not* his girlfriend. TJ had never asked me to be his girlfriend. We had never talked about being exclusive.

So why did this feel like betrayal?

I blocked my face with my pillow and let out a muffled scream.

I knew he was too good to be true. Teammates. Linemates. Whatever. It really all was a bullshit-Disney-type pipe dream. No guy was as nice as he was... it just wasn't possible. I called it back in the summer, but still allowed myself to be duped.

Where I first thought he had zero emotional intelligence, I'd grown to think he actually had a fairly deep IQ in that area. Now I knew it was all just for show. He just didn't want to be alone for the preseason hockey events.

I stalked over to my bathroom, trying not to make any noise. I did not want to talk this through with Nikki. For some reason, the photo of TJ flanked by the bunnies made me feel ashamed. Like I'd been stupid enough to be played a fool by him.

Because I thought he cared about me.

I thought he chose me.

I quickly turned on the shower and got in.

I needed to clean this day away and let myself cry it out of my system.

I would not call him. I would not beg. I would not compete against those kinds of girls- the kind who were so effortlessly beautiful and knew how to hold their liquor and be sexy...

I knew it was only a matter of time. I *had* told myself. I pegged him right from the start: He was a typical hockey douche. He was just better than most at disguising it.

But that didn't stop my heart from hurting. And the shower could only mask the tears, not end them.

I admitted to myself what I was too afraid of before: That he felt like the last shot for me. The last shot

at a relationship. The last shot to have a Someone just for me.

And deep down, I knew I didn't want to go back to life before; especially not now that I knew how special having a Someone could be. Not now that I knew that kind of Irish-goodbye love did exist.

But how could I possibly start over with someone new? I had to face it that I didn't start this with him in the first place. He did. And there was no other guy with the patience and willpower to plow into my life like TJ had.

There was no other TJ.

I laid down in my bed, missing his large presence hugging me from behind. I closed my eyes against the disappointment. Because I could still feel him... like he was right here with me, and that broke my heart.

45. TJ

After the tough close game last night, my sisters pretty much ambushed me as soon as I walked out of the locker room. I had no clue how they figured out how to bypass security and the family room where they were supposed to be, but the two of them could probably break into a bank if they wanted to. They were a force of nature when they wanted to figure something out. Growing up with them had been scary at times.

“A ponytail, Teej?!” Stella questioned in a high-pitched, accusing voice and pushed me hard against the cinderblock wall.

“A girlfriend?! That you didn’t feel the need to enlighten us on?!” Victoria glowered at me by her side. “We had to find out on the jumbotron during the second period with the whole world like some chumps?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” I said, looking down at them bullying me. “You guys never directly asked,” I defended myself.

“So that’s who you’ve been texting non-stop then?” Victoria interrogated further, pointing her finger up at me accusingly.

“What’s her name?!” Stella asked. “You have to tell us everything now!”

“No ‘Great goal, bro! Good hustle, man! You did amazing, my wonderful brother!’” I asked with an incredulous laugh.

“Well, yeah, that’s standard.” Victoria rolled her eyes. “You played solid. You just need to work on your back-checking so your plus-minus doesn’t get any worse.”

That was true. These girls probably had higher hockey IQ’s than I did from playing themselves and then

reliving it through watching all my games. As annoying as they were sometimes, they were damn supportive.

“Okay, let’s hit the town and you can tell us everything!” Stella pushed. She looked around then. “And how bout you bring some of these hotties with us.” She wagged her eyebrows as Duke walked by.

I caught him winking at her, and I gave him an aggressive negative head shake. Absolutely not. That was a giant no in every bro code there ever was, but of course, Stella scampered after him.

The last thing I felt like doing tonight was going out. What sounded good to me was taking a long shower and then calling Ellie and asking her about the wedding she worked tonight. But I knew I couldn’t get out of taking them around. I was just the baby brother after all, and they’d guilt trip the shit out of me if I was a boring host. Force of nature for sure, these girls.

Once I got to the bar, my phone died, so I couldn’t even tell Ellie I’d have to skip out on our late-night phone call...

My whole night was kind of thrown off after that. The whole time I sat at The Blitz, I kept asking people if they had a phone charger and wishing for time to fast-forward. I thought about running back to my place but was torn about leaving my sisters in the bar, so I just sat there hopelessly in a grumpy mood.

As soon as we got back to my apartment, I quickly charged up my phone and sent a text to her explaining what happened, but I still hadn’t heard a word from her, which made me feel uneasy.

We'd been texting on and off all week, only ever going about an hour without texting back- yes, I kept track of that- it was hard to not notice that kind of thing in my book, especially when it made me so damn happy that we were actually communicating. So, now that it was nighttime once again and I'd gone an entire day without hearing from her, I was left feeling... off...

Almost as off as I felt when I stumbled upon something about her earlier today.

I finally called her up and left another message pleading with her to call me back, and that's all I could do for now.

I sat down on my couch and poured myself some cereal for dinner. I probably should have been eating a steak and salad like the trainers advised, but I loved chocolatey kids' cereals with cold milk at nighttime, it was my guilty pleasure. And what the trainers didn't know couldn't hurt them.

I reasoned that I needed a bit of comfort today after the ground pretty much fell through on me- figuratively of course. I shoved spoonfuls in my mouth while I continued to leaf through Wixom High School's 2015 yearbook...

It just so happened that Stella and Victoria had a friend that graduated from Wixom in 2015, the same year Ellie supposedly had.

My sisters left early this morning to visit this friend, who attended the University of Michigan, and apparently the girl said there was no one named Ellie Brampton from Wixom. She even had her yearbook to prove it...

My sisters dropped off said yearbook at my doorstep a couple hours ago.

Flipping through the glossy pages just about broke my heart.

Because there was a girl who looked exactly like Ellie, except with blonde hair. She stared back with those same green eyes, but they were far more playful than I'd ever seen them; there was no hesitation in them.

And her name was Chelsea Hamilton.

I reread the name about a thousand times, each time feeling like I was taking a stab to the heart.

I flipped to the index to find her name and locate all the other pictures of her, and they honestly hurt to look at.

Because that girl, the younger version of the woman I was falling in love with, did not look like someone who was constantly battling fear and anxiety.

Chelsea was pictured a bazillion times through the colorful pages, and each time she looked happy and carefree. She cheesed hard with her arms around a couple other girls for a powderpuff football game... she was decked out in the school colors, donning a funny face during spirit week... she stood on the sidelines of the Homecoming parade, wearing a press pass and holding a camera with a bright smile on her face... It looked like she participated in everything, which seemed completely out of character for the girl I now knew.

I turned to the figure skating team's page and saw a picture of her on the podium with a gold medal around her neck... so competition hadn't always scared her...

Chelsea was listed as the secretary of the National Honor Society and the Yearbook Design Editor. She had the makings of a professional organizer, that was for sure.

Looking at her in these pages with the blonde hair and bubbly smile confused the hell out of me. Because what happened that made her want to ditch her name and this seemingly bright past?

I found in a Q and A section with seniors that she planned on attending and skating for Michigan State... but she never mentioned anything about college to me. You'd think someone who made it onto a school's team like that would brag about it... Ellie never came off as a bragger, but still... not even a casual flex about it seemed strange.

Was this what she was talking about when she said she had "baggage" the other night? It wasn't that I was mad at her for not telling me more about her past; she had basically warned me, hadn't she? But I couldn't help but feel a bit hurt that she didn't feel the need to confide in me that she changed her name.

I'd been whispering "Ellie," to her, but did she really want "Chelsea"?

My phone rang then, interrupting my thoughts.

I looked over and saw the name Ellie pop up. *Well, that's a lie*, I couldn't help but think.

I hesitated before hitting the answer. I thought about bringing up what I found to her because it felt odd to know this information and not come clean about it.

What would she say if I answered, "*Hello, Chelsea*"?

But this felt like an in-person conversation. This felt like something to be brought up when I could reassure her.

"Hi, babe," I answered.

She was silent on the other end, and I racked my brain to think of anything dumb I could have possibly said to her. There had to be a reason for the random whole day freeze out, right?

I cleared my voice, wondering if maybe she hadn't heard me. "Babe?" I asked.

I heard her blow out a sigh on the other end of the line.

“Eii-”

Her words came out in a rush then. “Why would you make me fall for you, and why would you say all those things to me about being here to stay if you were just going to go out with some puck bunnies as soon as I left?”

She said it all so quickly and accusingly that my brain had to take a beat to process everything she had fit into that single sentence.

“Puck bunnies?” I asked, almost laughing because she could not be serious. I definitely had not been with any other girls.

“Yes, TJ. Did you think I wouldn’t look at social media or something?” she asked tersely.

I paused, thinking of anything I posted...

And then I started laughing.

I fell over on my couch and grabbed my stomach because it was hurting from the ab workout the laughing was causing. And she was going off on the other end of the phone saying I should “Stop laughing right this very minute!”

I probably should have been mad at her for jumping to such conclusions, but it was damn funny... because she just called my sisters “puck bunnies”- something they would definitely be pissed about if they ever found out.

Knowing she was clearly angry at me had weighed me down all day, now I felt a relieved lightness.

“Are you done laughing your ass off now?” she asked when I finally caught my breath. I wiped away the tears in the corners of my eyes that the laughing caused.

“Wanna let me know why the hell are you laughing at me, TJ?!” Her voice had an angry edge to it.

“Jeez Sweetheart, you’d think I’d be the one with the quick temper in this relationship because of my hot-

headed Italian blood and all... but I think it might be you,” I said. “Those girls you called puck bunnies are my twin sisters.”

Silence filled the line, and I wish I could've seen her surely shocked face. I could picture that little mouth of hers falling open and those green eyes searching for clarification.

“Bet you feel a little upset about not talking to me all day, huh?” I asked her. “I got the Ellie silent treatment for no reason at all. I mean... I think you owe me for makin me sweat all day, babe.”

“But they're blonde!” she argued.

“Yeah, bottle blondes!” I told her.

I heard a tiny, uncomfortable laugh pop out.

“There it is!” I said. “You had me scared there for a minute,” I admitted. “But what's this I hear about you falling for me? You're falling for me, Ellie? TJ and Ellie sittin in a tree,” I sang out.

I heard her “pshh” and could practically see her eyes rolling.

I leaned forward to close the book in front of me, that would have to wait another day, and I listened to her recount the bitchy bride's wedding day as I walked to my bed.

We'd started talking on the phone every night until one of us drifted to sleep, and it actually annoyed me that my sisters stayed over last night and we missed out on it.

Her voice was the kind of comfort I'd always wanted. The only thing that could beat it would be having her here to cuddle with as she chatted away.

I was a very touchy-feeling kind of guy, and it was a nice surprise to me that her love language was touch as well.

I felt like we were so close to having a solid foundation to build our relationship. I just needed to be allowed to cross her final barriers that were higher than frickin skyscrapers.

I started thinking that maybe I could help her out... Maybe I could ease her into telling me about her past. Maybe if I was able to show her that I already knew everything and that I fully accepted her no matter what, then we could really start building.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how my “stupid, stupid, stupid plan,” according to my sisters upon later consultation, came into works.

46. Ellie

The drive downstate for the banquet was not as hard as the first time I had driven down.

I knew what to expect this time and I kept TJ all dressed up in a fancy tux in mind as motivation.

I was running a bit late because of last minute issues that Nikki needed help with for this weekend's wedding. I was slightly pulled in both directions because this was one of my last weddings of my busy season, but I also wanted to spend time with TJ. While more brides had started to schedule fall weddings, they always planned them before the end of September because true fall up north was way too cold. The two months following were empty. I had only had one winter wedding on my schedule, which was planned for the day after Christmas.

I ended up getting all ready for the banquet at my apartment before leaving because I would be meeting TJ at his place and then quickly leaving to make it on time.

I decided to wear my hair half up with a French braid leading to the ponytail, and I added a bit of extra makeup to look "dewy," as Nikki called it. Having events every weekend helped me perfect a couple signature looks that were easy to replicate each time I needed to.

I threw on the light green dress TJ had gifted me with some heels, hoping it would be the right level of dressiness.

My brain fired at a thousand miles an hour the entire drive, which made it go by much faster. My thoughts bounced from advertising tactics to TJ's hair care products... The boy must've known what to do because of his sisters because no boy had that nice of hair. I bet he'd never admit what he used though. And his sisters... that was a whole other topic that I was scared

to even touch. I needed to remind him to never ever bring up the fact that I thought they were puck bunnies. Talk about starting off on the wrong foot with his family...

His family... Would I ever even meet his family?

That thought crossed my mind a couple miles from the bridge... and I decided that would be a perfect time to cut my thoughts off and call TJ to distract my anxious self.

He answered on the first ring and his voice was like a security blanket.

"Hi babe," he said.

"Are you busy?" I cringed, hoping I didn't interrupt anything important.

"I'm at team workouts but I snuck my phone in because I knew you'd be driving. Knew I might have to whip out coach mode on your ass," he whispered. I could practically hear his smile as he talked.

That answer pulled at my heartstrings, because it felt like he really knew me.

"Can you be funny for a couple minutes?" I asked.

"Oh, she wants it on command now!" he retorted.

I laughed at that, but he really did know how to be funny on command, something that was incredibly endearing about him. He could switch to a lighter mood in a split second in order to win a laugh from someone.

"Oh shit," he said.

"What?" I asked, alarmed.

"All good, Griff is distracting Coach for me. I think he saw my phone. Or I mighta been a bit too loud there."

"Am I going to get you in trouble?" I asked nervously. I didn't want to be the cause of any

punishment that would come down on him for having a phone during workouts.

“Nah.” I could hear him breathing louder now. “I am tryin to keep up with this workout though, so long as you don’t mind a mouth-breather.”

“I’m on the bridge now,” I told him. I tried to relax my muscles and focus on the car in front of me.

“I was thinking of updating my celly dance for the regular season games, what do you think?”

“Like after you score a goal?” I asked distractedly.

“Yeah. I could ask the box ladies if they could play me some T-Pain, or maybe some Pitbull. I’d lay my flirty face on thick for them. I know you’d probably suggest some country song, but that’s not really my style, babe. Sorry,” he rambled.

“No country?” I asked him.

“Def not. I’m a city boy,” he countered.

“But you like up north!” I pointed out.

“True, true. But I think that’s because I like a specific someone up there.”

“I’m over it now!” I told him, feeling sweaty, but relieved. I blasted the AC in my car.

“Nice,” he whispered. “You feelin okay?”

“Yes, I’m feeling good,” I said firmly, surprising even myself with that answer.

“Great to hear. Is it alright if I get goin? I’ll be waitin’ for you at my place. I can’t wait to have ya back here again.”

“Yupp! Have a good workout,” I said. “And, TJ... thank you.”

“Anything for my girl,” he answered before hanging up.

I turned my music louder and tried to enjoy the drive.

I smiled at the fact that I was road tripping again. Something I used to love but thought I'd never do ever again. It was an amazing feeling. Because the world closes in on you when you're too scared to leave your tiny little town, and I felt empowered now. Like I could really do it, I could really drive off and go wherever I wanted... with a little bit of TJ's help that is.

47. TJ

“She’s almost here. Thanks for uh, helping out,” I said to Griff as I spotted him on the bench press.

“No prob, bud. She gets nervous driving you said?” he asked, looking at me with his serious eyes.

I grimaced, not sure of how much Ellie would be alright with me telling him.

“Well, yeah, but I think it’s more because she has pretty bad anxiety and then, what it seems like to me at least, is that she gets fixated on one specific thing, like driving over a bridge, and she can’t handle it all then. She definitely is a bit quirky about some things, and I’m not quite sure why... Yet,” I added. “But can you keep this between us?” I asked.

He drew a breath in before pushing the bar back up and I waited patiently for a response.

When he put the bar back down, his blue eyes focused back on me. “Well, anxiety is not the same thing as grief,” he looked away to make sure no one could overhear us. “But with Sav, I got her a dog, and it really took her mind off things. Like she focused more on the puppy than what was going on with her.”

Now that was something to think about. I wasn’t sure if we were ready for a pet together... but gifting her a pup, that wouldn’t be bad, would it?

“Like a therapy dog?” I asked.

His eyes widened. “Oooh, don’t call it that. That got me in a shitload of trouble. She was in such denial about everything. I don’t know, maybe Ellie’s not stubborn like that. But the puppy ended up in my bed and I was in the doghouse. My advice, just treat it like a gift, but yeah, functioned as a kind of therapy for Sav.”

“Interesting,” I said. That would definitely be something to think about. I did love puppies and hadn’t

had one since our childhood beagle passed away.

I pictured Ellie driving with a cute golden retriever kinda dog sitting shotgun. Or would she want one of those tiny dogs? Damn... maybe I should just buy it because then I could pick it out. It's not like I wasn't making money now... And maybe if I kept the dog she'd want to visit even more.

"Sav's an overthinker too," Griff said with a grin. "It used to drive me crazy, but the thing is, when a girl tries to think of every single risk and reason not to be with you, but then is still there with ya, it really shows she loves you," he said. "Overthinkers just need to be wifed up, bud," he smirked. "Saves time."

That stopped me in my tracks. I'd never thought about it that way, but he really did have a good point about that. She pushed me away as hard as she could, but... she was still coming to see me, wasn't she?

I spent the rest of the workout daydreaming about different dogs and different names, which was probably me getting in over my head... but Griff did it and it worked out for him pretty nicely, right?

When we were finally dismissed from workouts, I ran back to my place to get showered and ready for Ellie's arrival... and I guess the banquet too, not that I cared too much about it. I was more into trying to impress my girl.

I watched out my window as she parked in the back of my apartment complex, and I ran down the stairs to greet her, feeling like a kid on a Christmas morning.

I ran down the stairwell and cranked open the back door swiftly, making her jump slightly. She was still next to her car, grabbing her bag.

I let a slow smile spread on my face then, because she looked absolutely stunning. I made a big

show of looking her up and down and called, “Dayyumm, girl!”

She bit her lip, and I could tell those cheeks were turning pink.

I took a few strides to walk over to her, took the bag from her hand, and wrapped my other arm around her little waist. I hoisted her up and spun around.

She laughed, put her delicate hand on my face and kissed me lightly.

“Nice to see you too, Hockey Boy.”

“Missed you, Skater Girl.”

I set her back on the ground and placed a hand at the small of her back, guiding her toward my place.

“How was the rest of the drive?”

She beamed up at me. “Great.”

“Glad to hear it, babe. Ready for this banquet?” I asked.

She smoothed the light green dress I’d given her. “This boujee enough?” she asked, throwing her body into a show-off pose.

I leaned back to check her out. “So very boujee, so very sexy.”

After dropping her bag off in my apartment, I locked up and we turned to head straight back to the arena where the banquet was being held.

I reached for her hand as we walked the couple blocks down the sidewalk to the rink. I could see a couple other fancy couples’ heads bobbing up and down as they walked toward the rink as well.

“I missed this,” I told her earnestly.

“Holding my hand, Theodore? Oh, boy,” she looked up at me in mock seriousness. “TJ and Ellie sittin in a tree,” she sang at me teasingly, copying what I had said to her only a couple days ago.

I rolled my eyes and stuck my jaw out imitating her, and she shook her head at me, laughing.

“No, I mean, I missed your touch,” I told her, and lifted her hand to kiss it.

The way she looked at me then, I knew tonight was the night.

We would break down those final barriers.

And I would ask her to be my girlfriend- officially that is.

48. Ellie

As soon as we entered the arena, it felt completely different than it did during game day. Gone were the crowds in jerseys and rock music blasting, and in their place were couples in gala attire- the men wearing suits and the ladies all in fancy dresses, with elegant music playing in the background.

Sav, Griff, and Duke walked in ahead of us and TJ, holding my hand, quickened his pace to catch up to them.

“Oh shit,” he stopped abruptly, looking down at my feet before back up to my face. “Forgot you were in heels,” he said with a cringe.

“Nah, I can run in these babies. I wear them all weekend, every weekend,” I countered.

“Damn, my girl, an athlete! Yeah!” he joked and continued forward.

“Hey!” Sav called out to us when we neared, and quickly grabbed me into a hug. “You ready for your first gala, girly?” she asked with a bubbly smile.

“I guess so,” I laughed and looked at TJ for confirmation. He smiled and shrugged, then quickly grabbed two champagne flutes from a waiter bringing them around. He gallantly handed one to me and I took it to hold.

“Wanna head down to the ice, buds? I think they’re auctioning off some cool stuff,” Griff said.

I was confused by his “ice” comment until it came into sight.

For the event, the ice was covered with some kind of felt covering, and there were tables scattered around the entire rink with nice white tablecloths, refined place settings, and vases with white and red roses as centerpieces.

“Whoever organized this did a nice job,” I whispered to TJ as we walked down the concrete steps of the arena and toward the ice.

“Not as nice as you could’ve done,” he said, and then shimmed up behind me and grabbed my butt.

I let out a gasp and attempted to shoot him a warning look, but I couldn’t tamper down the giggle trying to erupt.

“No one saw, swear,” he said, leaning down and giving me a quick kiss. “I just can’t wait to get you back to my place in that dress, babe,” he said gruffly, making me feel hot.

I bit my lip and changed the subject before my body combusted, “Let’s find our table, yeah?”

“Uh, now?” TJ’s face faltered.

I gave him a confused look. “Why not now?”

“I don’t know, we could walk around and mingle for a bit? Or we could find a secret place of our own,” he winked.

I rolled my eyes at his ideas. “This is your workplace, Theodore. I think you need to take a cotillion class next time it’s offered up at Cherry Lane.”

“What?! Absolutely not. I am a refined gentleman... of sorts,” he added.

“Of sorts,” I snorted. “I’ll give that to ya.”

“Let’s talk first,” he urged and motioned his head to the side.

“But we should find our spots, they won’t want us wandering when it’s time to sit. I always hate that,” I countered and started to pull him toward the table listings which were etched in a huge piece of glass. Who knew hockey organizations could be this fancy?

I quickly spotted TJ’s name, because it was one of the longest names, listed as Theodore Jiffy Vonnie III.

But what I saw under his name left me gulping for air.

In the space that should have read “Ellie Brampton” was instead “Chelsea Hamilton.”

No. That couldn't be right. My anxiety was playing tricks on me. I closed my eyes tight and looked again.

But the offensive name was still clearly written there.

I felt TJ come up behind me and rub my back, but I whirled on him.

“Why?” I asked desperately.

He looked back at me seemingly shocked that I wasn't... happy?

“Babe, I know! It's all out in the open now, and I don't care that you changed your name. I really don't. That's not a big deal at all, a lot of people do that for... a bunch of reasons I suppose. But it doesn't even matter... What's that whole thing Shakespeare said, ‘A rose by any other name, yada yada?’ I love you! Even if your name was Poo!” he said with a smile and tried to reach to brush my hair behind my ear as he'd done countless times now, but I dodged his hand.

I couldn't take it.

I couldn't take it even though he just declared his love for me in public.

Because now my name would be out in the open.

For the first time in five years.

Now...

I was a mess of emotions and couldn't think clearly.

Anger, hurt, love, sadness, and fear all mixed together to create an internal mess, causing me to

hyperventilate and make me feel like I was going to pass out.

I started shaking, looking for an exit, and my vision blurred. I felt pain at the back of my throat from trying to hold back my emotions.

“Hey, hey, hey,” TJ anchored me, and he stepped closer to pull my head into his chest. “Don’t... don’t cry, babe. I don’t know why you’re crying? Everything’s okay! I was trying to show you that it doesn’t matter.”

I let him hold me because I felt like there was no fight left in me.

My body froze in the irony of him trying to comfort me when he ripped away a whole lot of comfort by writing that name.

“But it does, TJ,” I said before the crying really kicked in.

“What does? What do you mean?” he asked with wide eyes, clearly not getting it.

“It does matter, TJ.”

I felt a hand reach out and touch my shoulder, causing me to jump.

I turned to see Sav’s concerned face, which felt like the dagger to my heart was being twisted further in. Because I needed to leave all of this behind me. I needed to leave everything behind me again. I could not come back to Detroit again.

I pushed away from TJ, not even daring to look at his face, and I ran.

49. TJ

She must've gotten over her fear of leaving alone.

Or that was just how much she didn't want to see me.

As soon as she started running, I chased after her, but was stopped by Coach himself and some old timers looking to chat. I couldn't necessarily leave them hanging and not expect to have negative repercussions.

I tried to focus on what they were saying but ended up scanning the stairs around the rink for her green dress.

By the time they said their goodbyes and went on to Griff and Duke, she was long gone.

I ran upstairs to the rink's rotunda lobby area and ran the entire rink in a frenzy in my fricken suit and dress shoes, but it seemed she must've left the premises.

Next I tried her phone. I called about a dozen times, but only received her answering machine.

"Dude," Duke caught up to me. "You're gonna wanna be down there for dinner. If you skip out it'll definitely be noticeable." He must've seen my panicked face, because the next thing out of his mouth was, "You alright? You're really white, man."

"Ellie... She..." I grappled for words, but I didn't know how to explain what happened without telling the entire story. Because what did I say? I went and wrote her real name on the seating chart, and she ran away? That would call even more attention to both of us- her in the way that she was using a fake name, and me in the way that I made a huge dumbass mistake with the girl I loved.

And lost.

“Dude. I feel bad for whatever must’ve happened between the two of you. But I think she’d understand that you wouldn’t want to lose your job tonight. They’ll be super pissed if you don’t hurry.”

“I need to... I need to think!” I shouted and scrubbed my hands over my face. How did I fix this?

Duke must’ve decided he’d had enough with trying to convince me and started shoving me hard back toward the entrance of the banquet.

“Take a deep breath, put on a fake smile. You’ll be out of here after dinner and can go fix things. She probably just needs some alone time to cool off,” Duke said behind a fake smile.

He was right. I couldn’t risk getting fired. Ellie would understand, wouldn’t she?

I forced a dry swallow. I had to let it go for now to save face...

Duke pushed me lightly in the direction of the ice and continued to do so with his hand on back until we went all the way to our table. Then he all but shoved me in my chair.

“Nice, rookie at our table!” Campbell called out. “Where’s-”

I looked up and noticed Duke shooting Campbell with a “shut up” look. He was definitely about to ask where Ellie went. Hell, I would have too if I were him.

I shook my head and pulled at the front of my hair. I grabbed for my phone, but Duke swiped it from me.

“TJ, chill, don’t say anything right now that you’d regret,” he warned.

“I need to...” I felt so much pressure boiling inside myself that I wanted to flip the fricken table in front of me. “I need to know if she’s alright at least,” I said without looking up at him.

“Sav,” he said. “Text Ellie and make sure she’s all good, please.”

“Will do,” I heard her quietly say to him, but more so to me.

How did she run off by herself when she couldn’t even make it past my door without having a panic attack? Seeing her real name made her that upset? I figured I would show her that I knew about it, which I didn’t think was a big deal, and then we’d be A-ok and better than ever.

Guess I was wrong as fuck.

Duke pushed a drink toward me.

I looked at the amber liquid in front of me and an empathetic looking Griff and Sav.

How did I manage to fuck up again?

I blew out a sigh and downed the whiskey in one gulp.

I downed about five or more of them too.

I lost count at some point.

Because the more I thought about it, the more I realized how stupid I was for doing what I did to Ellie.

Sav told me as much too.

“So, you ambushed her? Do you see how that was probably not the smart thing to do?” she asked with a pained look on her face.

“Duh,” I said, not making eye-contact. “I realize that. But the way she framed it... I wanted to let her know like I don’t care! I’d shout it from the rooftops.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, TJ.”

“Well, shit, I see that now!” I yelled at her.

“Ay bud, watch it,” Griff told me sternly, clearly the protector of his wife.

“Sorry,” I muttered. That look on Ellie’s face when she turned on me was stuck in my head. She looked at me like I was a traitor, and it all but cracked my heart wide open. “I’m just pissed at myself.”

Sav got up and gave me a hug. “I’m sure she’ll talk to you soon. She just needs some space.”

I accepted her hug. She had a motherly aura about her that anyone could detect. She was definitely the “mom” of the D crew here.

After the banquet, I walked back to my place sullenly and completely wasted with Duke by my side.

About halfway through dinner, Ellie had apparently texted Sav that she was driving back up north, so there was nothing I could even do to fix things... the only thing I could do was dull the pain with the open bar.

“I’m fine. You don’t have to babysit me,” I told him as I unlocked my door. He seemed to be hesitating by his door to make sure I entered my own place.

“We’ve all been there, man,” he sighed.

My eyebrows shot up at that. “You? You’ve lost the girl of your dreams?” I kind of hoped he’d say yes because I felt completely alone in my heartache.

“Shoot, Ellie’s the girl of your dreams, huh?” he asked with a grin. “Drunk words are sober thoughts, I guess.”

I nodded and closed my eyes with my hand against my already raging headache. “I told her I loved her,” I explained slowly.

“Damn.”

“Yeah. And then she left.”

“She left because she was in shock,” he reasoned. “You really messed up, dude. But if y’all are meant to be together, I’m sure she’s hurting too and will come back to talk it through with you.”

“You’ve been through this?” I asked Duke.

“I... uh...” Duke smirked sadly. “Something like that.” And then he slipped into his apartment.

50. Ellie

I don't even remember making it to the rink's entrance because my head was exploding with frantic thoughts.

I found myself standing by the entrance, rubbing my cold arms, trying to build the courage to walk out to my car alone.

"Girl, you alright?"

I turned to find Adrienne and Brody. Adrienne, dressed in a long, plain black, single-shoulder dress that showed off her half-sleeve tattoo, looked stunning. But looking back at me, her face transformed from skeptical to concerned in a second, and I hated that people were seeing me cry.

She moved toward me then and held my shoulders. "What do you need?" She asked directly.

I sputtered for a second before uttering, "My car."

She looked toward Brody and his jaw set, giving nothing away.

"I'm going with her," Adrienne said.

Brody cut his eyes to me. "Drive her back," he commanded coldly.

"Maybe add a 'please', Brody," Adrienne threw back, clearly annoyed with him.

He faltered, but as Adrienne pushed through the door in front of me, I heard a small, "Please."

We walked in silence to the apartments where TJ and a lot of the other guys lived. Her step held no hesitation at any turn, showing she clearly knew the way well. I was grateful she didn't pry into why I needed to leave. It was almost like the two of us had a silent agreement not to question the other, because she and

Brody were clearly in some kind of serious discussion when my presence interrupted them.

Her dress trailed a bit on the concrete as she walked, and I had to run a bit to keep up with her breakneck pace, but I wasn't complaining. The sooner this embarrassing ordeal was over with, the better.

We both entered my car quickly, and she was all business as she started pointing directions back to the rink.

When we pulled up to the entrance, she hesitated before exiting.

"I'm not a girl's girl," she said uncomfortably. "But if you need anything, you can call me."

I bit my lip, holding back even more crying and nodded at her.

She rattled off her number quickly, and then I watched her until she made it back into the rink.

The ride back was not smooth, to say the least.

I transitioned from thinking about TJ and the way he looked at me with such devotion and concern, to thinking about the consequences of his stupid actions.

I quickly looked at my reflection in the rearview mirror and could already tell my eyelids were all red and puffy from the amount of crying I'd already done, and I still had about an hour left to drive.

Of course, my phone rang then, and I looked down to see the name Jules Scott appear.

Suck it up, you're a boss. You have a business to worry about, I disciplined myself and cleaned off my face with my hand before answering.

"Hello," I tried to keep my voice even, but my tone was off, and she could probably tell.

“Hi!” She paused. “You okay?”

I held my mouth with one hand, trying to swallow back the sob that was trying to break free.

“Ellie?” Her voice was laced in concern.

I swallowed. “Yeah, I’m here,” I said weakly. “I just...” I tried to start talking but my voice cracked and I couldn’t stop the tears.

“Oh Ellie... I’m so sorry. Did something happen with TJ? Do you want to talk about it or should I change the subject? I’m here for you either way,” she said quickly.

I sniffled and cleared my throat. “Different subject, please. I’m sorry, this is so unprofessional.” I let out a pathetic laugh at just how low I’d sunk.

“Oh my goodness, do not apologize,” she said firmly. “Life is hard. Grey and I were not smooth sailing, so I get it. And we passed over all that professionalism stuff when you had to help me pee at my wedding,” she laughed. “Okay, I’ll shift gears... so Grey and I compromised a bit-” I heard someone mumbling in the background.

“Ohmygoodness,” she said exasperated. “Sorry, that was Grey correcting me. We *collaborated*, not compromised,” she laughed, “and we decided to throw a baby celebration, not a shower. I don’t really feel well enough for too much social time right now.”

“Everything okay?” I questioned, internally slapping myself for crying over my problems and not even considering what she was going through.

“Oh yes, just so tired, and the doctor ordered bed rest until my due date... which isn’t bad because it’s only about four weeks away.”

“Oh, jeez. Hopefully Grey and Canyon are keeping you company,” I said.

“Grey’s not letting me do a single thing these days. It’ll be a hard reality to face when I’m in charge of laundry again,” she snickered.

I laughed at that even though I was still feeling incredibly low. I was thankful for her phone call and for pulling me out of my own mess even for a couple minutes.

“Well, I am very happy to organize whatever you’re thinking. You and baby girl deserve it. What do you think the timeline would look like?” I asked.

“That’s the tricky part,” she chuckled wryly. “We kind of wanted to wait out the flu season, and everyone we know is involved in hockey in one way or another anyway, so we figured we might just wait until after the season’s over... Maybe May? What do you think?”

“I think that would be amazing. I would love to block off a weekend for you. It would be out in Minnesota I’m guessing?” I asked.

“Yes! We’re actually thinking of maybe hosting it at the Ice League if that would be possible.”

The Ice League. Where TJ had grown up. Of course. That was just the first thing that reminded me of what I was driving away from, and it felt like a stab to the heart.

“I’ll start calling and looking into it for you,” I affirmed.

“Great! Thank you so much!” she said. “And Ellie, I think you guys will be alright. Hearing about TJ’s love life all last year, it’s obvious that he means well, he just pushes too hard sometimes.”

I felt my eyes sting at that.

51. TJ

It'd been five days since I last saw Ellie.

And instead of seeing her, I got five full days of her ignoring me.

I called her so many times that there was no more space on her phone. Now when I called it just made a weird beeping noise and said her voicemail was full.

I scrolled to her name to text her again. Seeing all the blue bubbles struck me with embarrassment and shame. Was I crazy? Wasn't this what crazy people did? I'd sent so many unanswered text messages that it was like I was having a conversation with myself at this point. But I knew that if I stopped trying, it'd be over, wouldn't it? And I couldn't let it be over.

But what was I supposed to do? Drive back up to Traverse City to face her? Sure, if it were summer, I'd do it in a heartbeat. But we were right at the beginning of the season.

And this was my dream.

She was too...

But she was making me decide?

Stop, TJ, I ordered myself. I knew she wasn't. I knew I was making up reasons and twisting up fake scenarios in my head, but she left me without anything to grasp. There was nothing to analyze, nothing to think over. So, I just sat stewing in what she would have called "intrusive thoughts."

My head was definitely not on the game just a couple hours in front of me when I walked off the plane and onto the tarmac in South Carolina behind Campbell...

...And I majorly regretted that in the middle of the first period.

I couldn't seem to keep my stick on the puck. I missed almost every pass, and the anger over my personal life and now professional life too just got to me, that's all I could say about what ended up happening.

Because I wasn't a dirty player. That was never me. Duke was usually the one racking up the penalty minutes for our team, not me.

And on top of that, my mother would probably be disappointed in me. I hoped she wasn't watching the game, but I knew she was. She never missed one.

I saw a guy on South Carolina go for the suicide pass, which meant he was turned around, blindly accepting the pass and not paying attention to his surroundings. And I was there...and I was pissed.

So, I went for it. I set up the check and executed it clean, but I really should've just played the puck.

The guy went flying like I brick-walled him, and he laid there sprawled on the ice for a solid couple of seconds before getting up, making me regret the move even more. We all finally got to the NHL, and none of us wanted to throw a stupid check and ruin that for one another. But it was like an angry monster possessed my body for a minute and did what it wanted to do. Now that it left me, I was left almost gawking at him as he skated slowly to the bench.

I heard the whistle pierce my ears then, and the ref was skating over to me...

"A two-and-ten? What the fuck, Vinny!" Coach hollered at me as soon as my ass hit the bench seat in the locker room during the intermission between first and

second period. I put my head between my knees, not wanting to look anyone in the face. Especially not Duke, who had to sit two minutes for my stupid move.

“And you, Brody! What the hell was that whiff at the puck? Are you a professional or a fucking mini-mite out there?” Coach yelled.

He continued his tirade, reaming out about five other guys before throwing his clipboard against the wall with a loud clatter and then walking out with a beat red face.

We all sat in awkward silence, some sipping water, others stretching out, waiting the Zamboni minutes out until we had to go back on the ice.

I didn't need to stretch out. I'd be sitting at least half the next period, maybe longer if Coach was still pissed at me after that.

“Let's go boys,” someone called with much less enthusiasm than usual, and everyone started to get up.

I was pulling up the rear and noticed Griff waiting for me.

We walked back out toward the ice silently, until Griff opened his mouth.

“Where's Ellie?” he asked. “Sav said she invited her to a girls' watch party, but she never showed.”

I swallowed. I was being tested today.

“I don't wanna talk about it,” I said gravely.

“Ahh... Snakebitten,” he aimed at me.

I shoved him away from me. “Shut the fuck up, man.” Was he mad that I didn't make it better with her? It's not like it was my fault she wasn't answering my phone calls. I was trying. She was the one cutting me off.

“Ay, just tryin to help, bud,” he said, with an arched eyebrow.

It rained popcorn as I sat in the sin bin.

I tried to ignore it; this wasn't my home crowd, and I probably deserved it after what I did to that other rookie... and at least it wasn't beer.

But I should have taken the popcorn as a hint that this South Carolina trip would not end well for me.

I got the communication from Coach that I would be stepping out of the box and moving into my regular shift, which I thanked the Lord for. Sometimes guys get lucky when they left the box and were able to get a breakaway out of it.

I should've known that wouldn't be my luck today.

As soon as I stepped onto the ice, I got the pass, but it was a little further up than I would have liked.

I went skating as hard as I could towards it, thinking I'd have a bit more time on my hands than I actually did.

It didn't help that Charkoff, who was known as South Carolina's enforcer, had been put on the ice for the sole purpose of trying to impose repercussions on me for what I did to their rookie.

As soon as my stick touched the puck, I was rocked.

My whole world was turned upside down.

And then I was laying on the ice staring up into the arena's rafters, noticing how much higher up they were than Pine Ridge's when black bled into my vision from all angles.

"Ughhh," I moaned. My whole body hurt, and my ears were ringing.

I laid there not moving, and momentarily lost where I was in the world.

Griff's face filled my vision.

Fuck. Did I just black out?

I was freezing. Why was I freezing?

The memory of the hit came back to me in a rush then and my hearing returned to normal. Like a nightmare, the crowd was chanting Charkoff's name, and they were replaying the check on the jumbotron with the word Yard Sale overtop of it. I watched in tantalizing slo-mo how my helmet, gloves, and stick went sprawling away from me as my body was airborne and then flat on the ice.

I looked at my hands, just then realizing I didn't have gloves on. I touched my head, not really believing what had happened, but felt my hair. I saw my helmet then, about five feet from me as well.

Fuck.

I'd never felt like this after a check before.

"Can ya get up, bud?" Griff asked with a concerned face. After I let out another groan in response, he heaved a sigh and said, "If ya don't get up, they're gonna have the medics come onto the ice, and that always makes it look worse than it is. Plus, you definitely won't have a chance of comin' back on the ice anytime soon if that happens."

I scrambled to my feet then. I did not want to go out on some kinda stretcher at an away game when it really didn't call for it and end up being labeled a dramatic pussy.

But getting up that fast did me no favors, and I immediately felt myself tipping to the side.

"Ayyy," I heard Duke say. He supported my right side, and I couldn't even argue about it because my head hurt to think.

I noticed him leading me toward the door back to the locker rooms instead of the team box, and I tried to argue, but he cut me off.

“Nope. Just go, Teej. This also happens to the best of us. South Carolina is just not your place. It’s not Coach’s either,” he said with a chuckle. “New Jersey is not mine. You’ll see when we get there.”

How could he be joking about something like this?

“Duke... oh fuuuuck,” The hallway we were moving toward was starting to spin.

I thought of Ellie’s question about the last time I’d thrown up...

Because I’d have to update my answer now.

52. Ellie

I sat at work on Saturday morning totally slumped. This week we'd had a Thursday rehearsal dinner and Friday night wedding, so today was pretty boring and bleak. I looked from my computer to my phone for the hundredth time, fighting the temptation to call TJ.

I wasn't able to watch his game in real time on Thursday night because of the rehearsal, and I was happy for that now.

Had I been watching, it probably would've broken down the barrier I'd built between him and I, because I definitely would have lit up his phone trying to find out if he was alright.

But watching the recap highlights of his game weren't as bad when I already knew that he was pretty much fine thanks to a statement his team put out early this morning saying he sustained a concussion from the hit during the game and that he wouldn't be playing in the rest of the weekend's road games.

Watching the hit, it looked like his body was slammed from the side and then flung up in the air about five feet by a guy who was about twice his size. He landed flat on the ice with a thud and lay there for a beat or two until Griff skated over to check on him.

Seeing him skated off the ice with Duke supporting him haunted me. The look on his face was totally unfocused, like he had no clue what was even going on, and it was scary to see my charming, quick-witted guy so unsure of himself.

Nope, don't go there, Ellie, I reprimanded myself. He was not "my" guy, and he never truly had been. It's not like he ever even asked me to be his girlfriend. We played relationship for a couple of weeks, that was it.

We were just an “almost.”

So why did it hurt so bad?

Why did it feel like we just had a full-on breakup?

And just because he wasn't my boyfriend didn't stop me from worrying about him.

And it didn't stop me from thinking that if the stupid banquet hadn't happened, and if he would've minded his own freaking business, I would've been there taking care of him right now.

Instead, we were both alone.

After logging a couple more hours at the hotel, but not really getting anything done, I packed up my stuff and decided to call it a day.

I drove the way home preoccupied with thoughts of TJ and the look on his face when I turned to him after seeing my name.

He really thought I would be happy? Why would I be happy? He completely exposed me, making it easy for anyone to track me down. Why wouldn't he have talked to me first?

It was a vicious cycle of questions that swirled in my head for the past week that I knew I needed to move on from.

I quickly let myself into my apartment, only thinking about how comfortable I needed to be right then. Wearing tights and a skirt all day could be way too much sometimes and I dreamed of my sweatpants, comfy t-shirt, and slippers. I had misplaced hope this morning when I got dressed and did my hair, thinking it would help me feel better. It turned out to be just another lame attempt that did not work.

It wasn't until I entered my walk-in closet and quickly started ripping off my dressier clothes that I heard it.

I listened for it again and was right.

There was a creaking noise, like someone had just walked into my kitchen.

It couldn't be...

My thoughts were cut off by more footsteps.

This was the exact situation I feared. I winced and covered my mouth to stop myself from crying.

Why?

Why the hell did TJ tell the whole freaking world where Chelsea Hamilton was?

I tried to slow my breathing and not allow intrusive thoughts to run amuck in my brain.

It was probably just Nikki, I reasoned. But I mentally went through Nikki's schedule and knew she wasn't supposed to be home until 7pm.

I finished pulling my shirt on and leaned to the door to listen closer.

I hadn't misheard. There was definitely someone with a heavy step walking around. I closed my eyes and thought through potential solutions.

I could crawl through my window, but it would probably be loud...

I could arm myself with the baseball bat, but would he be able to just strip it from me and use it against me?

I was transported back five years and saw his face flash in my mind and almost cried out.

I wiped a tear from my eye.

Not again. Not this time. I was older, I was stronger. I swore I would never let this happen again.

The perfect idea formed in my mind then.

I tip-toed out of my walk-in closet and grabbed the small, circular keychain from my bedside table and crept to the entrance of my room.

I stood by the door and covered my mouth with my freehand to keep myself quiet.

There was one chance to make it count.

I listened for the footsteps that were coming down the hallway toward my room, and I geared myself up.

When the intruder was at my door, I slammed it open, sprayed the pepper spray directly into their eyes like I'd been told to do and yelled out while I kicked him hard right in the balls.

53. Ellie

It was only when the intruder was on the ground that I realized the huge mistake that I just made.

“Ow, Ellie! Son of a bitch!” he cried, holding his eyes and balls. He doubled over and leaned against my doorframe. “Nikki gave me the key! I was going to surprise you!” He dropped something he was holding to the floor, and my heart beat faster when I saw it was a tiny box from Venti’s... My mind ran through a million potential scenarios for why he could possibly be in my apartment.

“Oh my God, did you get cut because of one bad game?!” I asked frantically, feeling horrible for him at the prospect of losing his position he worked so hard for.

“No!” he shouted aghast at the idea, and I felt myself breathe a sigh of relief for him.

He slowly started to get up to a standing position, and I just watched, almost in a trance as he sniffled and continued to cover his face from me. I spotted a black band on his wrist... a ponytail...

“Is that a ponytail on your wrist?” I questioned. What I didn’t ask aloud, but wanted to demand, was who gave it to him. My heart plummeted through the floor as I panicked that he’d come here to tell me he’d moved on.

“Yeah,” was all he said.

I felt my eyes bug out. “Who-”

“I was making it perfect for you, ok?” he said, sounding pained and still not showing his face.

I put my hand over my heart and felt a laugh bubble up in my chest. I slapped a hand over my mouth to stop it. He did not look ready to laugh at this little misunderstanding yet. I just couldn’t get over how relieved and warm that admission made me feel.

“You remembered?” I asked.

He was very still then.

“I remember everything you say, Ellie.”

I crept closer to him and tried to move a hand away from his eyes to assess the damage.

“Are you crying?” I asked, completely shocked at the sight of his wet face.

“No!” he shouted again and moved away from me. “Maybe! Fuck. This hurts, ok? And you kicked me in the balls *again*, Ellie!”

I let him snivel for a minute and waited to see how this exchange would go. I hoped he'd forget everything that happened at the banquet, and we could just move on. But when he opened his mouth, it was clear he had other plans.

“You have some explaining to do,” he said.

I tried to walk out the door, willing myself not to cry, but his athletic reflexes kicked in and he grabbed hold of my arm. In a swift motion he put his phone in front of my face, and a screenshot of my old self stared back at me.

I felt like I'd been cornered. And when that happened, my fight defense kicked in hard.

“So, you stalked me too? Is that it?!” I snapped at him and pulled my arm away from his grasp.

“Stalked you?” he asked with hurt registering in his face... but I saw the wheels turning as he processed through what I had said.

“Too? Did you just say ‘too’?” he demanded.

I ignored him and started moving around him to walk down the hallway and find my keys.

“Chelsea!” he boomed.

It felt like a cold bucket of water had been dumped on me and tears stung the back of my eyes,

threatening to come forward. It felt otherworldly to hear my real name come from his lips.

“I had a stalker, okay? Is that what you wanted to hear?” I hated how desperate my voice sounded.

He raked a hand through his hair and looked to the ceiling.

“When?” he choked out, not making eye contact.

He walked down the hallway to meet me in the kitchen.

“My freshman year of college,” I said. I slowly sat down at my kitchenette table.

He shut his eyes like what I was saying pained him, but I knew we were too far gone now. I couldn't stop until it was out in the open and there were no more hidden truths between us. He wanted to know, and now he couldn't get out of it. He stayed standing, not daring to look at me.

“I had a stalker at the end of high school who would text me things like, ‘I see you, you wore a new outfit today! You look nice’... and I thought it was innocent and just funny, honestly.” I shook my head in disgust of how someone had taken advantage of my youthful naïveté. “I thought someone was just being nice to me. With skating, I never had a regular childhood. I was always so focused and shy. I never talked to guys, so when I got those messages, I thought, wow, someone's actually paying attention to me. But then it changed. The messages got aggressive... and I had no clue who it was or where they were.”

“Did you go to the cops? I mean, did you report it?”

“I'm not stupid, TJ,” I bit back, then quickly regretted it. I had to remind myself that he was hearing this for the first time. It was a sensitive subject for me, and I'd already lived through it and had gone back over it a million times. He was gripping my kitchen counter so

hard his knuckles were white, and I forced myself to swallow before I could power through the rest of the memory.

“By the time I left for college, I figured, whatever. I hadn’t heard from him in a while, and I thought- I moved. No one would follow me to college, right? So, it was Welcome Weekend at school and I was all in for making memories and having new experiences. Like I said, I never really went out or spent much time with friends because of skating and how hard I was on myself to have perfect grades, and to just be... perfect. It was exhausting. I felt like, well, that hard work didn’t really get me anywhere, did it? So I needed to work in a new direction in college. I needed to prioritize having fun and being social with new people. I needed a new goal- not something as impossible as figure skating. I needed something simple... A simple boy.” I shrugged, realizing how lame that sounded.

When I looked up, I could see him silently shaking his head, his eyes glued to the floor, and I wondered what was going through his head.

“So, I went out with a couple girlfriends thinking it would be a great time.” I felt a sick laugh come out of me at that. “For the longest time I blamed myself because I chose to go out, I chose to drink, I chose...to not be more careful.” My voice broke at that, and I could see through my teary vision that TJ was still shaking his head no. “Because that night, he did find the guts to come up to me...and I didn’t even know it was him until he told me.”

TJ winced, like he was bracing himself, but I wasn’t going into the gory details with him. Not tonight.

“One of the girls I was with found me in time and thank God for that.”

“In time... Shit, babe,” he said, pulling at the front of his hair.

I wiped a tear away as I felt myself flashback to that moment of desperation. Him forcefully trying to kiss me... Trying to fight him off, almost getting away, him grabbing hold of me again and slamming me back to the floor. Almost blacking out but screaming my own name and location to anyone who could hear me.

I closed my eyes against the horrible memory and tried to shake my own appearance from that night out my head. I remember looking in the mirror and being shocked at what I saw; being shocked that something like that had actually happened to me.

“I am a scaredy-cat, TJ. After that I had panic attacks. I had so much anxiety I quit school. I thought everyone was out to get me. I second guessed every single decision I made and had zero confidence. I pressed charges, but his team argued that I stupidly *did* engage with him by texting him back, and it was a first-time offense, and he was stopped before... things got worse... he only got a slap on the wrist.”

“Fucking hell.” TJ rubbed his jaw and shook his head.

“I filed a restraining order, but I had to get off the grid. I needed to ensure he couldn’t find me. I had to change my life to be able to move on. So, I changed my name, moved out here, and started building. Keeping my head down and grinding worked for me before, so that’s what I tried. I thought it would work, but I’m still stuck. Because every time I start to get confident, and I stop looking around every turn I take, and I start living, I remember why I can’t do that. That’s when the panic slams into me.” Tears started to blur my vision. “Yes, I’m strong, yes, I’m capable. But I couldn’t overpower him, and that’s a harsh reality to face, TJ.”

54. TJ

As she recounted her story, I grinded my teeth so hard they could've cracked. If I could pummel the guy I would. There was a special place in hell for men who made others feel weak.

I knew something must've happened for her to change everything so drastically, but hearing her explain aloud hurt like a motherfucker... because when I was blissfully ignorant, I could think the reason wasn't a bad one... now I knew it was the thing of nightmares.

I walked into her, and she accepted it. I hugged her head against my chest and brushed her hair down her back, feeling absolutely gutted.

I had to stop my mind from running away with what she said and picturing that horrible night. Thinking of my beautiful girl in such a vulnerable position made my vision swim. A hopeless feeling that I couldn't do anything to help settled into my stomach.

I vowed to myself right then to make sure she'd never feel weak with me and that she'd never even slightly put herself down over the whole thing like she was doing as she retold the story to me.

She pulled away and looked up at me then.

"Are you crying?" she asked for a second time today, wiping at her own tears.

"It hurts, okay?" I said, and I wasn't sure if I was fully talking about my pepper-sprayed eyeballs or hearing the story.

I held her for a second longer, embracing her warmth, before speaking.

"You said you couldn't overpower him," I said slowly.

She pulled back from me with a confused look.

“Well, babe... You took me down,” I told her. “A professional athlete who works out for a living.”

Shock registered on her face. “I did?”

“You did. You fuckin did, babe.” I gave a small smile. “And my eyes still burn really bad. But I want you to know that I’m here for you and I’d help protect you from any crazy freak out there. Even though you are perfectly capable of taking care of business on your own, I’d throw down for you in a second. No one touches you.”

She sniffled against my shirt, and I heard a tiny, “No.”

“No?” I asked for clarification, feeling the hurtful recoil of the word.

“No, because you belong in Detroit,” she said, pushing me away.

“How many weddings do you have left this year, Ellie? One? None? I’m trying to be sensitive and not stick my foot in my mouth, but come live in Detroit with me for the season, then come back up here, and I’ll come with you. There are a million rinks in Michigan you can coach out of- hell, I’ll even take more lessons from you. I think you really helped my stride.”

She paused and looked at me like I was crazy, so I plowed on.

“I know you’re going to need to make an organized list of all the reasons why it would be a good or bad idea, but I don’t want you to. Don’t overthink it. Do you want to come back downstate with me today?”

“I... I don’t know. I want to but that seems way too fast, TJ.”

“Too fast according to who? Who cares what anyone else thinks if that’s what we want to do. There’s no rules in life, Ellie.”

She was still hesitating.

“You can play with Indie all the time...Until you want one of your own...” I couldn’t help but look down at her stomach.

“Eyes! Eyes up here!” she said, and I just chuckled. She bit her bottom lip and looked beyond me then, thinking, and I could see a small smile fighting at the corner of her lips.

“You’re crazy,” she finally said.

“Nah, nothing wrong with a bit of manifesting into the world.”

She patted my chest and was quiet.

“What’s goin on in that pretty head?” I asked.

“I thought we were done,” she confessed.

“Nah, I think you’re stuck with me. We need each other, babe,” I explained to her. “Besides the fact that I probably shouldn’t drive myself back home because I’m prolly even more concussed thanks to you,” I said, to which she rolled her eyes. “I love you, Chellie, my little brat.”

Her glassy eyes danced, and her smile lit up her whole face. “I am not saying you are a brat tamer if that’s what you are looking for, you big dummy.”

“It would help if you did though,” I winked.

“I think I’ll keep ya around, baby shakes and all,” she said with a wry smile.

When she looked back up at me, I smoothed a tear away from under her eye.

“You and me, babe.”

I hugged her, treasuring how comforting it was, and enjoying the lavender scent of her hair.

She pulled back from me suddenly, and I internally rebelled, thinking she’d found another problem, but then she asked, “Did you bring me a cupcake?” and my body shook with happy laughter against her.

I guess Grey had been right all along.

Epilogue- TJ

The days between Christmas and New Year's Eve are supposed to be lazy.

I'm a firm believer that those days are for pajamas and movie marathons.

Not bag skates run by your girlfriend.

I skated to the boards and grabbed a water bottle to squirt some into my helmet. We still had a couple minutes of practice left, but my whole body was aching, and Ellie was yelling at us to get moving again.

Her whole strategy aimed to make us lighter on our feet, but in order to do that, I think she tried to wear us down first.

I caught her eye from across the ice then, and gave her the old up-down look, and I think I detected a small blush creeping into her face. She hated when I made her all hot and bothered at work, but I loved it. She was just so damn graceful and gorgeous, even when she was in drill sergeant mode out here on the ice.

After Coach got wind that she'd moved down here to Detroit with me, he requested a meeting with her. Next thing I knew, she was hired on as a power skate coach for the Detroit Crewman, so she really didn't skip a beat in moving at all.

She also started coaching figure skating in the afternoons at a local rink, and she even registered some of her girls in a basic skills competition in the coming month. I knew she was nervous about it, but I also detected a bit of excitement. Her whole goal with coaching skating was to try and help shift the rink culture in a positive way, and after some convincing, I think I showed her she couldn't do that without helping girls compete. I also told her we'd be switching spots and I'd be in the stands supporting her for a change, and I think she liked that.

We all gathered around Ellie, who made the red Crewmen Coach hockey sweats look way better than anyone else in the organization, to hear her explain the last drill. Sometimes it was kind of funny to me how we all towered over her but then she could beat our butts in any of her drills. She definitely humbled us when it came to our skills out here.

The last drill of the day sounded simple enough- just crossovers in a circle- but she always made us go faster or slower depending on her mood and how cruel she wanted to be. Sometimes she played Taylor Swift music and made us do crossovers to the beat of the music, which was oddly relaxing, but the trick was that she also had us passing the puck while doing this, so we always had to be alert.

After the group got moving, we completed a couple quick passes within the circle, but then Coach's whistle interrupted us, signaling that practice was over.

I glided out of the circle and waited on the ice while the rest of the team exited the stadium. I squatted down like a frog, trying to stretch my tense muscles a bit, and I shook my helmet off onto the ice in front of me.

When I looked back up, it was finally just the two of us on the empty sheet of ice.

"Oww, oww," I cat-called to her. "Straight-up fire on ice, babe!"

She shook her head wryly and began skating to pick up the cones she placed on the ice for drills. I scrambled to my feet to help her out.

This was our weekly routine: We'd clean up together, throw everything into storage, and then chill on the ice for a couple minutes until we were kicked off by the zam.

I always tried to carry as much as possible so we didn't have to take more than one trip to the storage closet where we kept all the practice gear.

“You did good today,” she said, while struggling to lift her bucket of pucks and stacked cones over the edge of the boards.

“Thanks, babe,” I grunted out, also struggling.

After we hauled the stuff through the dark hallway, I stood back and gave her a little booty squeeze, making her giggle. I couldn’t help it. After an hour of not being able to touch her and pretending not to be her boyfriend, I had to touch the booty.

“You did good today too, Coach,” I said as I hugged her from behind. I rested my chin on her little shoulder and she reached up to ruffle my hair.

“Wanna get back out there for a bit?” she asked, turning in my arms to face me. “I haven’t heard the zam yet, so I think we’ll have a bit more time than usual,” she said excitedly.

“Mhmm,” I responded. I didn’t want to let on that there was a reason we were getting a bit of extra time today. Some cash may have changed hands so that I could rig this little half hour together.

I leaned down to kiss her, but all of a sudden, her presence was gone, and I was kissing air.

Feeling like she’d betrayed me, I opened my eyes to see her making a break for the ice with a mischievous smile dancing on her face.

“What?!” I yelled as I ran down the hallway toward her and picked her up before her skates could touch the ice, then turned so I’d technically step on the ice before her. “Nice try, but not today, babe,” I whispered into her ear. We were always competing with each other. We couldn’t even walk up to our apartment nicely together; her feisty side always came out and she’d turned it into a foot race... *Our* apartment. Damn. I loved the sound of that.

I felt her little body shake with laughter against my equipment.

When I finally set her back down on her skates, I grabbed her hand to twirl her into me.

“So... I’m happy we have a couple minutes here,” I said, still holding her tight. I’d been meaning to bring this up to her for a few weeks now, but it never seemed to be the right time. I finally picked today to lay it on her because then I knew I could soften the blow with a present if she was mad at me about the whole thing. “I have two things I need to tell you. One I’m afraid to tell you. The other, I can’t wait. With both, I don’t know if I overstepped, but I hope you’re not mad.”

Her eyebrows scrunched together in concern, and she touched my cheek with her gloved hand. “Well, that was confusing. Either way, I’m staying and we’ll talk it out. Linemates, right?” she said with a wink.

I lifted her chin and quickly kissed her smile. “You got it, babe,” I said, looking into her eyes. I held her hand and began leading her to our usual hangout spot. We always sat down at the end of the ice behind the net and looked out into the empty rink. Sometimes I was still shocked that I was allowed to be here. I mean, I was just a rink rat kid from a small town in Minnesota, and now I was playing here in this stadium. It felt like I was waiting for Craig, the old rink manager from the Ice League, to come down the steps and start yelling at me for being here or something. I don’t know if I’d ever get used to playing in this size of a stadium for this large of an audience on a weekly basis.

I took a deep breath, knowing that I needed to just get this out in the open already. She patted my leg, and her hand looked extra tiny on top of my hockey pants.

I looked into her green eyes then and blurted it out.

“I hired a PI,” I said.

She took her hand back and seemed to shrink away from me. “I told you everything, TJ,” she said

defensively. "I thought I explained why I changed my name, that doesn't mean there's-"

"Not for you, ya crazy girl," I cut her off and shot her my what-the-heck face. "That was sus though, babe!" I pointed out.

"What?!" she cackled. "I'm trying to say I have nothing to hide! I'm an open book!"

I scrubbed a hand over my face before getting on with it.

"No, I did not hire a PI to snoop on my girlfriend who I love and trust very much," I looked over at her red-tipped nose. I always found her even cuter when she was out here in the cold rink. "I hired one because you deserve peace. You deserve to know where that fucker is at all times- if you want, that is. It kept me up at night, babe- knowing that you still felt insecure at times. And it really fucking bugged me that he got away with it. I just couldn't..." I grinded my teeth. "I couldn't accept it. So, I hired this guy. Griff recommended him, so it was all tight and stuff. Turns out that motherfucker is rotting in jail. He didn't stop after you, Ellie. He tried again. And that time, when he got to court, there was a long list of other bad shit on his record. The judge threw the book at him. So, you don't have to be worried about that specific fear anymore. I just thought you should know. Again, I hope you're not mad that I looked into it."

She stared blankly in front of her, and I was slightly afraid to touch her. I didn't want to force affection on her if she wasn't feeling too hot towards me after that. I knew I probably overstepped... but I couldn't help it. The whole thing just ate at me. I hated that she was still worried, and I hated that the asshole was still out there somewhere walking free.

I watched her profile as her bottom lip quivered and the rim of her eyelids started to turn red. She drew in a shaky breath and quickly smoothed a tear away. "I feel

horrible that it happened to someone else,” she said quietly.

“No, no, no, babe. Don’t go there,” I pulled her against me and smoothed her hair. “You did everything right. You reported it, pressed charges, did the whole thing. You deserve peace of mind, babe. That’s the only reason why I looked into it.”

“Thank you, TJ... for...”

“No problem, babe.” I kissed her hair.

We sat there in silence for a moment, enjoying cuddling together in the cold, peaceful rink.

She cleared her throat then. “Let’s think of something happy. You ready for the Winter Classic?” she asked, her voice still a little shaky. We’d come a long way through the season so far. During the preseason we had a lot of missteps from miscommunications and jumping to conclusions. But now, she was getting better at directly telling me what she needed, and I knew to honor her request when she wanted something like dropping a subject.

The Winter Classic was the traditional New Year’s Day NHL game. Each year a different state hosted it, and teams had to be invited to play. The special thing about the Winter Classic was that it was one of the only official games that was played on an outdoor rink.

“I’m excited for it,” she patted my leg again. “Sav texted me that she got all the tickets for us girls.”

I shot her a serious look and ran a hand through my shaggy hair. “Can’t believe I’m playing in it.”

“I can,” she said confidently. “You guys will win too.”

“I might throw up.”

“Nah. You got it. I’ll go coach mode on your ass, baby,” she said with a smile.

“Might need that, Ms. Sassypants,” I chuckled. “I’ve always watched that game and been so jealous because I love outdoor skating. Campbell’s in for a surprise though, he’s never pond skated before.”

“Never?”

“No ma’am, he’s a Cali boy,” I told her. “Kid’s in for a surprise. He won’t know what hit him when it starts snowing out there and his toes freeze.”

“That is the worst,” she laughed. “One time, I took my skates off after pond skating and thought there was a rock in my shoe... turns out that was part of my toe I couldn’t feel.”

“Oh babe. Your toes do freeze easily,” I said knowingly. Everyday when she got back to the apartment after a long day of coaching, she shyly asked for one of my famous foot rubs. I loved the feeling of helping her. I loved feeling needed.

“Wanna get going?” she asked, grabbing my hand to leave.

“Well,” I hesitated and tried to make eye contact with Duke in the stands. He was stealthily making his way down the steps holding a large cardboard box. “There is one more thing... It was supposed to be a Christmas surprise, but I was a little late. I’m not a super organizer like you, so I can’t always get things in a timely fashion, but better late than never, right?”

She looked at me curiously. “I loved your Christmas present. I’ve been wearing this everyday, Teej.” She put a hand to her necklace. That was true, and I loved seeing it on her. I gave her a heart-shaped diamond necklace, thinking it was perfect. But afterwards, Duke and Griff roasted me over it, saying that girls never liked heart-shaped jewelry because it was tacky and that she was just pretending she loved it. I had a feeling they were just egging me on to see my reaction... but it worked. They successfully pushed me in

a different direction. They didn't have to push much though, because I really wanted to do this...

"I just think you'll love this even more," I threw a quick - hopefully inconspicuous- nod to Duke, who was now standing in the team box. He quietly opened the board's door and let him onto the ice...

Right then, a tiny golden retriever puppy ran onto the smooth surface, sprinting and sliding in every direction, looking like the absolute happiest puppy in the world with all the open space in front of him.

Ellie gasped and covered her mouth.

She slowly turned to look at me with wide eyes. "Is that...Wait, are you joking? Because if this is just a joke then I'm going to be extremely mad at you." She waited for my answer with a set jaw, ready to pounce.

"Hey, hey hey," I put my arms out in innocence. "That's our baby!" I laughed. "You like him? Spartacus!" I yelled back at him, but he just ran in the opposite direction of my voice... We had a lot of training ahead of us. I popped up to my skates to chase after him.

And chasing after puppies on the ice - wouldn't be the worst power skating exercise... because it was quite a workout.

When I got close to him, he happily stutter-stepped me and ran away again, thinking that we were playing a game together.

When I finally was able to scoop him up, I glided back to Ellie holding him, and gently placed him in her arms.

He immediately snuggled into her furry jacket, and Ellie released a happy sound... At least I thought it was happy, it was a mixture of a gasp-cry-aww. Her green eyes went glassy and tears pooled up and spilled over as she read the note I attached to the baby dog.

"Babe, don't cry!" I told her, and rubbed her tears away with my thumbs, hoping they were happy tears.

“I’m... I’m so happy, TJ.”

And that all but burst my heart open.

I leaned in to kiss her. “Anything for my girl.”

Epilogue - Ellie

I felt like I was in a Hallmark movie as I strolled through the downtown Northfield streets while holding hands with TJ and walking our little golden retriever puppy named Smudgee. I caught our reflection in one of the shop windows and smiled to myself at TJ's big, protective figure holding hands with me.

Nikki told us we were nauseating to be around now, but I couldn't help it. I could confidently say that I loved TJ- to myself at least.

TJ jumped the gun with the L word at the banquet, and then again through a written card that was attached to Smudgee (well, at that time TJ was calling him Sparticus or something ridiculous like that, but the pup and I agreed that Smudgee was much more fitting). And while I knew I loved TJ as far back as the preseason, I wasn't brave enough to say it aloud to him, and I think he knew to be patient with me, so he kindly never addressed it.

Around March, I found myself almost bursting with wanting to say it to him, but I felt awkward bringing it up after months of him putting himself out there for me. The end of every phone call had become awkward, like both of us were acknowledging the space where the "I Love You's" should have been with a stilted silence, but then quickly saying bye and hanging up.

I planned out the timing of dropping the L word then. I figured I'd waited long enough that I could wait a few more weeks for the perfect moment: After TJ and his team won their Conference Championship game.

But... They lost in a closely fought battle against St. Louis, which ended their playoff berth, signaled the kick-off to TJ's postseason, and the start to us moving back up north for the summer.

I was kind of bummed at the loss because I was getting really into the games, especially because I felt I had a hand in their success as an official power skating coach here in Detroit for the Crewmen.

I also had officially become part of the wives and girlfriends club. There wasn't a home game that went by where I wasn't cheering and holding Indie or Johnny on my lap. I loved the little Griffith's family like my own, and they'd really brought TJ and I under their wings in Detroit. Every Wednesday, we had a standing dinner invite to their house, and I had even picked up a bit of wedding off-season work with Sav and Griff's charity.

While I was sad for the season's routine to come to an end, I knew my busy time with weddings was about to pick back up. And it didn't hurt that I was already in a group chat with the "Crew Ladies" that had been blowing up the past week over plans to make jean jackets with our guys' last names on them for next season. I also already had scheduled lunch dates with a couple of the girls, including Adrienne, in August for when preseason camp started up again in Traverse City.

I felt lucky to have so much confidence that I would be a part of next season. Because after making it through preseason together, TJ had become my rock, and thanks to him, I'd never felt more secure in my life.

But now we were back in Northfield, Minnesota, TJ's hometown, to prepare for Jules' baby celebration.

TJ and I had flown in a week early so I could make sure all the vendors were ready and raring to go. TJ showing me around town in the down time also wasn't so bad; it gave me an extra little glimpse into the man I loved- especially when we stopped by his parents' house and I officially met his gorgeous, and very intimidating, sisters.

But today, there was business to be attended to, well... kinda.

We were walking through downtown to meet up with Greyson because he wanted to show us a surprise he had in store for Jules.

We spied him outside of a low-lit, cozy-looking Starbucks, and he immediately walked up to us and stretched to give us both a big hug.

“Long time, no see! Way to blow it in the ploffs, lil bro,” Grey said jokingly to TJ. The hockey boys always seemed to shorten “playoffs” to “ploffs.” They had their own lingo and accent that was unique to them and I was slowly picking it up. Their accent wasn’t all the way Canadian, but about halfway there. Even TJ who’d grown up in Minnesota sounded Canadian sometimes.

“Yeah, well, we’ll be out for vengeance come September,” TJ said with a shake of his head. “How’d your team do, Coach?”

A cocky smile slid onto Grey’s face. “Won states. Canyon sniped a buzzer-beater for the win.”

TJ let out a low whistle, “Nice, man. I miss the League and all the lil guys.”

“Stop by practice this week,” he offered. “I’m sure they’d love to mess around on the ice with you a bit. Probably make fun of you for missing that shot in the first period against St. Louis,” Grey teased. “Let’s get movin’ though. I’ve gotta get home. Missin’ my pack.”

I held TJ’s hand and we quickened our pace to keep up with him, until he abruptly stopped and pulled a door open.

I looked up at the name of the shop and was a bit surprised to see Mike’s Tattoos written across the top.

I turned to Grey, who had a big smile on his face.

“Have to add my baby girl’s name,” he said with the quiet confidence he always exuded. Just those

words could make any girl's baby box scream.

Grey's long strides carried him into the shop where he slapped five and bro-hugged the bearded guy waiting for him, who I assumed was Mike, and then immediately ripped off his shirt... and damn. Totally in love with TJ, but that man was built. Dad bod did not exist in his vocabulary apparently.

"Um... we have our dog," I said cautiously from the doorway.

"No problem, Sweetheart," the guy who I guessed was Mike said. "Love puppers. Bring him in."

As Grey sat himself down in the tattoo parlor's reclining chair, I could see that on his chest over his heart were already scrolled the names "Julianna," and then "Canyon" underneath it.

"Alright, Mike, we're adding 'Gracie' under Canyon. G-R-A-C-I-E," he spelled out. He looked a bit self-conscious for a second, like he wanted to tell us something, but was shying up.

Pride won out though, and he beamed at us as he said, "She's named after me."

"Way to go man," TJ said happily. "She's a lucky little girl."

I felt the urge to give him a hug, but Mike's needle was already firing up.

"That's a beautiful name, Grey," I told him, and he nodded his thanks.

"Hey," TJ turned to me suddenly. "You wanna get tats?" he whispered as his mischievous eyes flashed.

I rolled my eyes. "Your mom would hate me if I let that happen," I told him, thinking he was just testing me to see what I'd say anyway.

"No, I'm serious," he pushed. "You and Nikki said so before- all the hockey guys are tatted up. And I finally

feel like there's something I want. Plus, this is just me continuing to push you out of your comfort zones, babe."

I tried to look into his eyes and gauge how serious he was, but his excitement made me laugh. He was like a little kid when he wanted me to go along with one of his plans.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but... okay," I relented with a laugh. "A tiny one."

"Let's look around and see what they've got, yeah?" he asked.

The parlor's walls were decked out with pictures of people and the art Mike drew on their bodies, and TJ and I began to scour the walls, looking at different potential designs.

My eyes stopped when I came across a picture of someone we knew...

Looking back at me was a younger Sav, probably around 20 or 21. She wore her hair in a messy bun and proudly showed off a newly tattooed "#33" in black skinny ink on her hip.

The curious thing about the picture was that... Griff was not #33...nor was he the guy in the picture with her.

The guy with her looked a lot like him with spiky brown hair, but he was a bit thinner and had brown eyes. He looked so much like him he could've been his brother. The guy was proudly flexing his muscles and showing off the inside of his arm, which read "Savannah."

"Hey, TJ..." I called him over and pointed to the picture.

"Huh... that's interesting," he said as he came up behind me. "I wonder what the story is there." He studied the picture with a crease forming between his eyebrows.

Grey spotted us from the chair and squinted at what we were looking at. He must've known the walls pretty well considering how extensive his tatt work was: he had a full, detailed sleeve beyond the names on his chest.

"Ah," Grey said slowly, and rubbed his jaw. "That's Nick Johns."

"I feel like I know him from somewhere," TJ said, snapping his fingers.

Grey opened his mouth like he was going to say something, but then decided differently and began talking softly with Mike.

"Pst," TJ whispered down to me. He tilted my chin up with his hand and kissed me quickly. I loved when he stole kisses like that. He made me feel cherished.

When he pulled back, I bit my lip and smiled up at him. "What was that for?" I

"I figured out a good design," he said as he wagged his eyebrows at me.

I rolled my eyes. He was probably playing at some kind of inappropriate boy joke.

But he surprised me when he reached down to pull a folded piece of paper from his pocket, making me question when he could've possibly written it down.

I looked down at his crumpled piece of paper and felt my heart in my throat.

No... was this his way of...?

"Those are our initials," I said dumbly.

"Yeah, and I wanna put yours on my ring finger." He paused and looked at me nervously. "What do you think?"

"I think," I reached my arms around his neck to pull him closer to me, "that I love you, Theodore."

“Hell yeah, Chellie,” he said in a husky voice and claimed me with a kiss while I giggled happily against his lips.

Afterword

Book 1 is titled Our Overtime because time is a main component in the story; the narrative jumps back and forth from past to present to represent that idea. An Overtime in hockey is what happens after the game ends and there isn't a clear winner. So in the relationship, it's what happens when Grey and Jules get their second chance.

Book 2 is titled Our Preseason, because a preseason in hockey is the training period before the season starts. It's the prep work that lays the foundation going into the season. In relationships, it's that stressful situationship time period where you're always questioning what the other person is thinking. That's why TJ and Ellie's story focuses on them meeting and finally getting together and ends when they've fully established the start of their relationship.

Book 3 is called Our Teammate (turn the page for a sneak peek!) and you can decide why it's titled that for now!

**I will say that I think Griff and Nick are now my favorite characters!*

Til next time,

S.C. Kate

Read a sneak peek of the third installment of the Ice League Series!

Our Teammate: Ice League Book 3

FIRST PERIOD – Thirteen years ago

Ch. 1 Griff

Wednesday night game at the Ice League

I jumped into the glass behind the net that I just scored on- my celly tradition- and turned to throw my arms wide as my teammates all pounded into me for a celebratory hug.

Dunny, our largest D man was skating fast toward us to join the hug, and I internally cringed as he came nearer. The poor guy didn't know his own strength; he'd been known to give a guy a concussion after celebrating his goal because he launched his 6'5 frame into the huddle too happily and too hard. He even gave me a nosebleed once when hugging me after I gave him an assist to his lone goal of the season.

"Time to break it up, boys!" I called before Dunny could reach us. My teammates all laughed knowingly.

Dunny cracked a smile and just tapped my helmet as we all skated back to the bench to knuckle punch gloves.

I launched myself up over the boards and felt my fellow teammates make some space for me on the bench.

“Ayyy, budday!” I felt a tap on my shoulder and turned to see my best bud, Nick Johns. He was supposed to be a couple guys down from me and about to get on the ice. He must’ve inconspicuously messed up the bench order to be on my line next shift.

His eyes flickered toward Coach, who totally did a double take seeing him next to me, but then his attention was torn back to the ice where one of our wingers got leveled. His feet flew up in the air and you could hear the thud from his body being dropped to the ice all the way from the bench where we were sitting. That got Coach riled up for sure. The veins in his neck bulged out as he yelled at our defensemen to stop giving suicide passes.

“Help me out?” Nick grinned.

I shook my head, biting back a laugh. “Old, cocky Nicky Johns wants my help? He can’t do it all by himself?” I turned my gaze back to the game. I loved watching, strategizing, trying to find weaknesses while I waited for my next shift out there.

“Yeah, yeah,” he countered, leaning over the boards in front of him. He lowered his voice, “I’ve been stuck on a line with Simpson and Reggie all game, and no matter how hard I try, I can’t get anything to work with them. Every time I set something up, they just take and puck hog. I want some smooth, pass, pass, pass, shoot, score.”

“Pass, shoot, score, you say?” Coach growled behind us.

Shit. Nick was always getting us in trouble with his loud mouth.

Nick cut his dark, mischievous eyes toward me and raised an eyebrow, as if questioning me as well.

“Yes, sir,” I barked, just as the ref blew the whistle.

“Let’s see it. 17, 33, 2!” Coach boomed, alerting us to jump the boards and take the next face-off.

I was number 17, Nick was 33. Those had been our numbers for as far back as I could remember. By luck, Nick and I had signed up for the same mini-mite team when we were 5 years old in our poor, run-down, hockey town in Canada, and we’d stuck together ever since. A bond formed between him and I just as much as one had formed between me and hockey. We were brothers. And this was our game.

And we always played better together, which was why I wasn’t too annoyed he jumped the line and got Coach’s attention. We had the opportunity, now we just couldn’t blow it.

I leaned down to take the face-off, ignoring the asshole in front of me chirping. He’d been doing that all period, trying to throw me off my game and mess up my timing.

But it seemed he was only messing himself up.

The second the puck dropped, I snapped it back to my left D-man named Stoney, and the poor sap in front of me groaned and let a curse out.

We were off then. I moved up ice and felt- or just knew- that Nick was moving faster and further into the offensive zone than I was. Stoney snapped the puck to me, and in a second, I passed the puck up to Nick to give him a breakaway.

I hustled up ice after him, trying to beat the Detroit defensemen and be able to help with a rebound if the goalie stopped Nick’s attempt.

But my hustle wasn’t needed.

Nick dangled around the lone defensemen in front of him, and then it was just him and the goalie.

He held onto the puck til the last minute, drawing the goalie all the way to the right, then shot top left to score.

The goal lamp lit up and the ref's whistle pierced through all sound in the rink.

I kept skating though, to pound into Nick for a hug... but the reason changed as I got closer.

After Nick scored, he threw his arms up in celebration, but he was also yelling something at the Detroit guys, our opponents, and pointing to the scoreboard, which now read 2-0.

I shook my head. Nick was always looking for trouble. Egging on the Detroit guy who just got burned was not the smart move at this point in the game. I watched almost in slow motion as the Detroit guy held his stick with both hands and cross-checked Nick in the back of the neck.

It didn't matter that Nick probably deserved it. He was my brother, my teammate, and I'd throw down for him any day. I was already moving at a lightning speed and didn't bother slowing down.

Nick was already getting up to take him on, but I was there faster.

I felt my first crash into his helmet, and then it was on.

There was a flurry of red and white jerseys clashing, and it was all motions and fury.

I felt my neck snap back after taking a punch square to the face, but that just made me punch back faster and harder.

I gave it my all until the ref overpowered me and pulled me too far from the Detroit kid.

Nick continued to run his mouth as we were both ushered toward the penalty box.

The refs all convened for a moment in front of the timekeeper's station.

I sat my ass down and took off my helmet to shake out my sweaty hair. No way were we going to be able to play the rest of the game. We'd be watching the last 5 minutes from the sin bin. I wasn't sure what was going through Coach's head at this point- because we did do what we said we would- we scored smoothly. But we were also probably about to be short-handed for the rest of the game... And Nick and I probably could've gotten at least one more point up on the board. Coach had to know that, and that's why I was afraid to look across the ice at him.

I at least hoped we avoided a game suspension. I couldn't handle not being able to suit up this weekend. I'd be pretty pissed at Nick if that were the case. He needed to learn to keep his mouth in check. I was all for backing up my bud in a fight, but only necessary fights. He kinda brought this one on himself for taunting the other team.

I tried to read the refs' body motions as they talked, and knew it was coming before the minutes even showed up on the time clock: We were both in for the last five minutes of the game.

I knew it would happen, but it didn't make me less upset. Seeing the game happen in front of me and not be able to play was the worst... This was what I was good at. It was who I was. The Griffiths didn't really have anything to be proud of, but we always had hockey.

"You're not too mad at me, are ya, bud?" Nick said beside me.

I felt my jaw clamp shut. I was.

"We get a nice rest now after our hard work," he tried. We were shoved tightly in here and I felt him shift next to me to lean back against the glass behind him.

"I mean, Goodie Howe hat trick, my boy!" He shook my shoulder. "Goal, assist, and fight," he pushed.

He got me with that one, and I couldn't help but crack a small smile... that I immediately wiped off my face when I caught Coach giving me an intense stare down instead of watching the play down the ice.

I pushed my sweaty hair up. "Nick, do you ever take anything seriously? You're not pissed we're kicked out? Coach is gonna give us a fuckin earful," I whispered.

"Nah, life's too short, we're only seventeen," his signature, easy-going smile slid onto his face. Him and I had been told for years we looked like brothers, besides his dark eyes and my blue ones. It was the dark messy hair and hockey build that we had in common. I could see brothers I guess, but definitely not twins. When it came to our faces, he was pretty-boy, where I was more harsh looking... *just like my father*, I couldn't help but think disgustedly. Nick could probably dress up and hide the trash we came from. That wasn't true for me. I'd probably stink of it my whole life.

"Look at it this way," Nick broke through my thoughts. "I got to take on the world with my buddy on the battlefield today. And we won. We fuckin won!" He cackled.

"You sound surprised," I challenged.

"I mean, they make pretty tough motherfuckers in Detroit. But you're toe-to-toe with 'em. You'll be in the Big Show one day, bud. My best friend. Benny Griffiths, big time NHLer."

I felt a bit self-conscious at that, but my chest swelled all the same time.

"You too, bud. Us together or nothing. Team." I put my fist out for him to punch, and he gave a genuine smile, like I just made his day.

When the final buzzer sounded, I threw my helmet back on before exiting the box to join my team's

lineup to shake hands with the Detroit boys.

I could practically feel Coach's gaze on our backs as we fell in step with everyone else.

This was not going to be a fun locker room chat.

Whatever. It was better than the earful I'd get from my dad back home if he was watching. I made a mental note not to answer my phone the rest of the day in case he somehow streamed the game.

It was eerily quiet in the locker room as we all undressed, especially considering we won the game.

I looked around and noticed no one would make eye contact with the two of us. It was like we had the fuckin' plague or somethin'. That was a bad sign. Coach was probably mouthing off about us on the bench to everyone too.

"Hell of a rumble, eh boys? Two-zip! Way to keep the win," Nick yelled beside me. His "boys" always sounded like "bois." I couldn't help but notice his accent sounding stronger. He always sounded more Canadian when he was nervous. It was his tell. A nervous Nick was also not good... not that anyone else would notice... but that rarely ever happened.

He earned a couple chuckles around the room from his comment, but everyone shut their mouths when Coach stormed in.

Coach looked slowly around the silent room until his eyes landed on the two of us.

I put my head down to avoid his gaze.

"No respect for the rules of the game," he spit. He didn't even have to say our names. Everyone knew who he was talking to. "You're Refereeing the rest of the season or you're Off. My. Fucking. Team." He pointed his finger at us as he yelled, like he was using it to punch

those words into us. He was so pissed he was practically seething as he said, “Now I have to play fucking damage control with the scouts for your asses. Y’all want to piss away your talent. I’m determined not to fucking let you. Go talk to Craig. Now.” He spit on the rubber ground as he walked back to his office.

I sat there stunned until I heard the blinds on his office door clash loudly as he slammed it closed.

Scouts?

Damage control?

Did he say we were talented?

All our teammates were staring at us.

I was not good under pressure.

This was all Nick’s area... and he knew it.

I cut my eyes to his; he gave a playful smile and shrug, like nothing was a big deal. I wish I had his attitude for about the millionth time in my life. Nothing fazed him. I felt anxiety course through me as I finished drying my blades on my towel rag before placing them in my bag.

Nick jumped up faster than I did. I shakily stood and followed after him.

At least I wasn’t alone.

Walking out of the locker room and into the hallway carrying out bags over our shoulders, we stopped by the front office where Craig sat.

His gray-haired head was watching a little tv in his office. The Texas Titans were playing, and a legendary kid named Greyson Scott a couple years older

than us made that minor team. According to buzz around the rink it seemed like he might be called up soon for a shot in the NHL. We were all cheering for him. That's what the hockey community was all about. We wanted to see one of our own make it. Even if we were all jealous as hell of him.

"So, got into a bit of trouble, have we, eh?" Craig mumbled without even looking up.

Nick pushed his sweaty hair up. "Yeah, man—"

"Yes, sir," he corrected, finally looking up at us with his tired, kind eyes. "Here's the deal, I'm short on refs for mini-mites and for squirts—"

"Squirts!" Nick yelled, and I internally agreed with him. The squirt league was made up of 10-year-olds, and by that time they at least knew the rules of the game. Mini-mites were usually kindergarteners who had no clue what was going on... and saying kindergarteners was kind of a loose age standard because most hockey guys had their little tykes on the ice at 3-years-old and just hoped no one questioned them.

Craig gave us a smirk. "I have half a mind to give you the mini-mites... but I don't want to do that to those parents. There's a squirt game this Friday at 5. Be here early and I'll get you guys uniforms."

"Thanks, man," Nick said.

Craig arched an eyebrow at him. "Sir," he corrected again.

I nodded my thanks and pushed Nick to follow me and leave Craig alone.

"Let's get home," I whispered.

Nick cut me a look. "Dude, we need food first."

I blew out a breath. That was true. Our living situation was proving to be a bit more difficult than what we'd first imagined.

When we first arrived in Minnesota, Nick and I were assigned to live with the same billet family. Only problem was- our experience was opposite of how most went. Where Stoney got to live with a fun family who had baby hockey players in the making that he could play with all the time and loving stand-in parents who came to all our games and supported him, Nick and I got shafted to the middle of nowhere with an older couple who probably only signed on to host players in order to receive free labor around the house.

I probably would've handled the crappy situation all season, but Nick couldn't deal. He was pretty much a slob in every area of life except when it came to his food and eating utensils. When it came to those- he inspected each fork to make sure there was nothing on it and washed his hands about three times before eating anything. I always thought he had a bit of OCD tendencies when it came to his nutrition habits, but whatever, let a guy do what he's gotta do. But... When he found cat hair in his cereal bowl one morning, he almost puked and then couldn't eat a damn thing set in front of him in that house anymore and the old lady was pretty cruel to him about it.

My issue was that the old man would yell at me after games when he thought I didn't give it my all. Like nah, no thanks, old man. I suffered through enough of that back home in Canada. Here at the Ice League, I was finally settling into the game and having fun for a change without the fear of making mistakes that would turn into a ride home from the rink with my screaming, drunk father.

We came up with our exit plan the first week of the season, and so far, we hadn't been caught. We already had money coming in each month for billeting, so we told the team manager to redirect it to my mother, who we'd be staying with at an apartment here in Northfield.

It worked out great. We had the apartment paid for, and if anyone wanted to track down my mom to confirm this little situation... I'd tell 'em good luck, because I hadn't been able to reach her since I was about seven years old.

Our apartment was small, but it worked. Our biggest struggle was food. Neither of us had ever cooked a thing in our seventeen years of life, so we were trying our best with what little money we had.

We ate most dinners at the concession stand here at the Ice League or at Benny's, the little diner in the lobby, when we felt like splurging. I was the one in charge of the money because Nick had very little impulse control and he trusted me to not let us go homeless.

Maybe the refereeing wouldn't be such a bad thing... We could really use some extra cash.

"Pizza again?" Nick asked with a grimace.

"Nah, let's get Benny's tonight."

"Really?" Nick asked with a shocked face. "Yes," he pumped his fist in the air. "Gimme some lumberjack breakfast for dinner."

I shook my head at him. The littlest things could make him the happiest guy on the planet.

"You think Paige will be workin' the tables?" he asked, practically drooling at the thought of her.

"Dude, she's like five years older than us. Why would she even look at you?" I shoved him.

"What can I say? She's a beaut," he said with a dreamy look on his face. He was out of his mind. Poor Paige. She humored him every time he hit on her. He was lucky she was so nice and laughed at his antics instead of getting pissed off. I just hoped Max, her long-time boyfriend who was away at college, wouldn't hear about Nicky's little crush and come back to deck him one day.

Ch. 2 Savannah

Friday night - Duke's game at the Ice League

"Go, go, go!" I yelled quietly to myself and felt my own body move along with the play in my seat as my little brother, Duke, stickhandled down the ice on a breakaway.

He was almost to the net when a kid on the other team hooked him, taking out his right skate, and taking away his opportunity to score.

Duke's little body slid toward the goalie as the ref blew the whistle.

I stood up, covering my mouth and craning my neck to see if he was alright.

I didn't have to wonder for long though.

Duke was up in a second and charging after the kid who tripped him.

No, no, no, I mouthed to myself.

I groaned and dropped my head into my hands as he pounced on the other kid and the refs went berserk blowing their whistles.

At least his team was playing on the NHL sized-rink of the Ice League arena. The NHL rink's bleachers spanned out all around and could seat about 3,500 people. I loved it because I could sit peacefully by myself while the other kiddie's parents all gathered together behind the home box. On the Olympic side, which was mostly used for figure skating ice time, there was only watching space on one side of the rink, and I'd surely have to make small talk with the mothers on the team.

I liked to watch by myself and just focus on the game.

And... I hated when the other parents rolled their eyes at Duke's temper. They nicknamed him "little ball of hate," which I couldn't stand hearing.

He got a lot of penalties, ok? The kid was physical, so what? He also scored more than anyone else, so I didn't know why they cared so much.

And we were working on his game temperament together. It was a work in progress.

But I couldn't blame him for being mad and losing it today. He was in the right this time.

Through my hands, I saw Duke land a couple punches in on the kid who tripped him before the refs could pull the two little kids apart from each other.

Now Duke was hanging his head as one of the refs pulled him by his jersey toward the penalty box.

"No penalty shot?!" I jumped up and yelled at the ref dragging Duke.

I couldn't contain my outrage. Because it really wasn't fair. Duke was playing great, and he wouldn't have fought if the kid hadn't tripped him. Duke had been playing the puck all game, while these kids were slashing and throwing cheap shots the whole time. It was actually quite surprising that Duke hadn't thrown down earlier. He totally deserved a penalty shot seeing as it was just him and the goalie until the stupid brat on the other team intervened- against the rules- I might add.

He made eye contact with me then- the ref, not Duke.

He was probably around my age, and his serious, light blue eyes gazed back at me while a little smile played on his face.

I let out a frustrated sound and crossed my arms over my chest, daring him to break eye contact first. I arched an eyebrow at him, challenging him, but felt my cheeks heating up- my body's efforts to revolt against my brain. I truly hated attention and just wanted to sit the hell down, but he was wrong, and I needed to let him know as much. For Duke, I could stand my ground.

Ref boy shook his head at me with a grin as he ushered Duke into the penalty box.

Did he think this was funny?

Just because I wasn't an adult or parent didn't mean he shouldn't take me seriously. Would he smile like that if a dad on the team yelled at him?

I was totally done with assholes who doubted my hockey knowledge. Duke was the only one who took me seriously when it came to sports. Whenever I gave him advice, he actually listened to me and used it to improve his game. We watched a bunch of old and new games together, played NHL on our Xbox, and read players' tribune pieces together for fun. The ice was how we bonded as siblings. Sure, he was ten and I was sixteen, but Duke was my best friend.

Even though I was a figure skater, I probably knew more about hockey than half the guys who went to my high school- which was saying something for a public school in a small hockey town like Northfield, Minnesota.

Duke and I probably spent way more time in the rink than anyone else as well. Our parents were workaholic doctors who sometimes spent days on end at the hospital- which was why I usually took Duke to his games, like today. It was a fine arrangement for us, Duke and I figured things out just fine. We lived in the subdivision just down the street from the rink, so we walked here almost every day for either practice or games. I did get my license a month ago on my sixteenth birthday, but I didn't feel safe enough to drive us, especially not in the wintertime with all the ice and snow.... And a small left and right issue hindered my confidence behind the wheel. Duke never complained, but I think he wanted me to start driving.

We had it down to a science- besides the driving part- I practiced on the ice right after school, so Duke would do his homework while I skated, and then the days he had practice, we'd swap- he'd skate with his

team while I did my homework. Dinner was usually concession stand food unless I felt like making something when we returned home, which was usually once a week when I was feeling creative.

I blew out a sigh... Well, Duke was going to be pretty bummed after this game. Maybe I'd take him to get 7-11 slushies to cheer him up.

I looked up to the game clock and noticed they hadn't even put his penalty on the board, signaling that he'd be sitting the rest of the third period.

Asshole refs.

I tried to watch the rest of the game in peace, but I felt like both refs kept looking in my direction.

At first, I thought maybe they were just trying to see if the net in front of me was on right...

But nope...

As the play came to my end of the ice, I noticed blue eyes looking directly at me...

After the game's final buzzer sounded, I waited in the arena for a bit so I wouldn't run into the other parents. I didn't mind waiting. I loved sitting in this arena alone, feeling like it was just me and the ice. It was my happy place. It was calming. I wished I could've skated on ice like this- all to myself- instead of with the group of girls I always had to share with.

When Craig, our rink manager, started to roll onto the ice on the Zamboni, he lifted an arm to wave hello to me, and I saluted him back- that's how most of the arena regulars greeted him.

I took that as a sign to push out of my seat and head to the lobby.

The lobby of the Ice League was always hectic, but I found peace in the crazy. No one was looking at me when there were kids tackling each other on the ground while playing mini-sticks. I quickly found a corner to myself and played on my phone while I waited for Duke to emerge from the elevator. The NHL side of the Ice League locker rooms were all located on the lower floor of the rink, and while the older kids could walk up the stairs with their bags, the younger boys couldn't handle that kind of weight yet.

I watched as it felt like the entire team had come and gone, but Duke was still a no-show. I started to worry when his coaches emerged from the elevator and there was still no sign of him.

I bit my lip in indecision for a minute, then moved to start my search for him.

I didn't make it far though- the elevator dinged open as soon as I reached it, revealing a sad looking Duke hanging his head.

My heart squeezed at seeing him so upset and I opened my arms to give him a hug.

He quickly looked around first making sure none of his teammates were around to see him accepting a hug from his big sister, then sniffled and walked into me slightly.

"Hey, it's okay, just one rough game. And you were doing amazing before that little scrap," I said as I patted his back. "Let's go, bud."

He sucked in a deep breath, looking like he was willing himself not to cry, and wordlessly handed me his sticks. We always took turns holding his hockey bag and sticks while we walked. It was our little compromise since I refused to drive and instead made us walk all the way home.

We usually talked about the game as we trudged down the rink's long ramp and through the slushy snow, but today he seemingly wanted to avoid that topic.

"Have any homework to do this weekend?" I asked him, trying to get his mind on something else.

"Not much. Just some math. Luke's gonna get in a crap ton of trouble on Monday," Duke filled me in. "Ms. Henry caught him cheating on his math test and said she was gonna call his mom after the weekend."

"Well, that's nice of her to give him a nice weekend at least."

He blew out a breath. "Yeah... because Luke's mom's gonna kill him. She might not let him come to practice next week."

"I don't blame her," I ruffled his hair. "School comes first, remember? And cheating's a slippery slope."

"Well, Coach says if you're not cheating, you're not trying..." He gave me a sly smile, like he was testing me.

I gasped. "That's bad!"

He cackled at that. "I knew you'd say that."

"Cheaters never win and winners never..." I trailed off when I noticed an old, beat up, brown truck starting to drive toward us. We were still crossing the rink's parking lot that stretched all the way to the main road; it was so large the city usually used for drive-in movies during the summers. I instinctively pushed Duke behind me and paused, waiting for them to drive past us... but they didn't.

Instead, they slowed to a stop next to us.

I felt my heart beating hard against my chest as Duke clutched onto my jacket and tried to move to my side. I knew he hated being treated like a kid. He was practically up to my shoulder in height, and it went to his head, but he was only ten.

“Everything’s fine,” I whispered to him, trying to sound firm. “It’s probably just a parent from the rink.”

He set his face in a tough grimace and kept his eyes on the car.

The brown truck’s passenger side window rolled down then, revealing the last people I thought it’d be.

Staring back at us were the refs from Duke’s game.

“Hullo!” the boy sitting shogun greeted us with a bright smile.

“Um...” I was caught in indecision then. These were perfectly good strangers...

I decided to ignore him and start walking with my head down and dragging Duke with me.

Their car inched along beside us.

I felt the blood pumping in my ears. Was this how human trafficking happened? I knew kidnappings did happen at arenas... but did that include hockey arenas or was that more concerts and larger things? I made a mental note to check on that when we got home.

Shit. If we got home.

Why were they following us?

“Hi?” he repeated. “Where ya goin?”

I looked over at him and studied his face. He looked happy. When he smiled, it seemed like his whole face lit up, and I became very aware of what I looked like in that moment in my long winter coat, sweatpants, and sorel winter boots. I instinctively put my hand to my hair and forgot I was wearing a beanie.

Wait, why did I care what I looked like when I might be getting kidnapped?

By hot kidnappers...

But still...

I shook my head of that thought and cleared my throat. "That's a little forward of you to ask, seeing as I am a girl with a kid and you are two guys following us in your truck," I deadpanned. "Do you not see how you could be viewed as threatening in this situation." I swallowed but my throat felt like sandpaper from yelling in the cold. "You're scaring me."

"Oh, shit." Awareness seemed to dawn on his face and his eyes became large, worried saucers. "We look bad, eh? Sorry about that." His Canadian accent was clearer with that response. His sorry came out as surry and his about became a-boot. "I totally didn't think about that. Griff," he turned and hit the guy driving, "stop the car, bud. You heard the girl, we're scaring her."

I heard them arguing in the truck then, and I pushed Duke forward to start walking faster again. He kept a menacing look on his face and licked his lips.

"We could take them if we had to, I know it," Duke whispered to me. "You just have to go for their weak spots. Hit em with a nut shot."

"I guess that's one way to look at it. Wanna switch?" I held out the sticks to him.

"You sure?" he asked with worry etched on his little face. I could tell his back was starting to hunch forward more as he grew tired.

"Yes, for sure." I grabbed the handles and eased it on my shoulder.

We made it a few more yards before hearing more commotion behind us. I looked over my shoulder to see the two teenage refs- wearing nothing but hoodies, hockey warm-up pants, and sliders with socks peeking out- slushing through the snow towards us.

"They can't run very fast in those," Duke whispered. "Good sign." He stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth- his thinking face- before speaking again.

“We could hit them with my sticks too. Use em as baseball bats.”

I felt a laugh bubble up in my chest, because the refs looked completely innocent to me now, but I didn't want to hurt Duke's feelings. He had good instincts.

Yeah, no... I wasn't thinking about hurting them at this point... I was more shocked that two very good-looking guys my age were walking toward us.

“We come in peace!” the boy who talked with me from the shotgun seat yelled.

I pushed my beanie up and eyed them. Now that they stood in front of me, they looked like brothers- they both had dark hair, wide shoulders, and athletic stances. The only difference was that one boy had brown eyes and the other had glowing blue ones.

“Where ya headed?” Brown eyes asked.

I twisted my mouth, still sizing them up and trying to decide if I should tell the truth or not.

“7-11,” I finally said.

Duke looked at me in shock and mouthed ‘what are you doing?’

“It's okay. I think,” I whispered to him. “We can't let them follow us home anyway.”

He nodded and turned his gaze back on the two of them.

“I'm Nick Johns,” brown eyes pointed to himself. “This here is Benny Griffiths, future hockey star. He goes by Griff though.”

Duke's temper got the best of him.

“You threw me in the box, you dumbass zebras!”

I shot him a stern look for swearing, and for calling refs zebras.

Nick laughed in front of us and stuck his hands in his sweatpants' pockets. "Yeah, little dude, I'm sorry about that. I would've done the same thing you did, but we're kinda on short leashes currently."

"He really would've," the guy called Griff confirmed, crossing his arms in front of him. "That's why we are stuck reffing. It's punishment because this dumbass won't stop fighting in our league."

"Want some company on your walk?" Nick asked. He grimaced looking down at his wet feet. "Or ride with us in Griff's truck?"

A warm car ride did sound amazing. Duke's bag was starting to cut into my shoulder... and it's not like it wasn't 20 degrees and snowing... and we did have about five or six more blocks before we made it to our house, let alone 7-11 which was even further.

I looked at Duke and he shrugged, seemingly put at ease knowing they were hockey fighters as well.

"Uh... sure," I said, sounding anything but sure.

Nick threw me a thumbs up and scampered back to the truck.

Griff moved toward me and grabbed Duke's bag from my shoulder and effortlessly hoisted it up onto his.

When we made it to his truck, I took a deep breath, wondering if I was being completely stupid for allowing Duke and myself to get in. I mean, I was in charge of Duke. I was more worried for him than for myself... and my parents would absolutely kill me if we ended up dead somewhere.

I grabbed Duke's arm before he opened the back door.

"I need some insurances first," I told Nick through the shotgun window.

"Insurances? Are you a 60-year-old accountant?" He cracked a smile at me.

“Shut up,” Griff said, shoving Nick. “She’s smart, unlike you, doofus.”

“Alright, how about we give you our phones to hold?” Nick asked.

“No,” I rubbed my hands up together to heat them up. “That’s not enough.”

“How about we tell you a secret?” Nick’s eyes glinted at me.

Duke looked aghast over that idea. “No way! Then you’d want to kill us! You really think we haven’t heard that trick before?” he asked.

“How about you hold one of each of our skates,” Griff cut in, leaning forward to make eye contact with me. “Those are the most important things to us.”

I felt myself nod.

As I opened the back truck door, Griff hopped out and went to his trunk.

Climbing into the truck was a bit of a task- there wasn’t an extra step that hung down and it was pretty high-up. Duke tried to get in first and I had to push his butt up a little. I was next, and ended up having to grab onto Duke’s hand and hold the side of the truck to hoist myself up to get in.

As soon as I sat down on the lumpy seat, I was hit with the overwhelming smell of pine trees mixed with cologne and a bit of hockey bag stink... But the stink could’ve been coming from the skates Griff handed me with a small smile. I held them at an arm’s length away, hoping the smell wouldn’t transfer onto me.

“So, what are we getting’ at 7-11?” Nick asked.

I was amazed how fast we’d become a “we.”

“Slushies, duh,” Duke grinned.

Nick reached his fist back to knuckle punch Duke, but the whole time, his eyes were on me, making my face feel incredibly hot.