



Twins FOR MY
PUCKING
Fake Fiancé

LEXI LANDON

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Lexi Landon

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Chapter One

ELSA

I t's not my proudest moment.
At twenty-four, I'm moving back home to stay at my parents' until I figure out my next steps.

After I graduated two years ago with a theater degree, I genuinely thought I'd kill it out in the real world, but chasing my dream of being a successful actress has proven to be next to impossible.

My mother is letting me have the basement all to myself. As a teen, I would have been thrilled and looking forward to it, but as a supposed adult, I feel humiliated and low.

My older brother is the real golden child of the family. Parker is a local sports newscaster, with ambitions of reaching national notoriety in the next year.

I'm currently sitting on the floor of my parents' basement, surrounded by boxes and plastic bins. A few are what I've brought with me, including some of my theater posters from

college productions, but most are unopened memories from when I was younger.

At the moment, I'm looking through one from high school and seeing all my old awards and straight A report cards makes me feel cheated.

How could I have worked so hard just to end up like this?

“Elsa!” I hear mom call from upstairs. “The sandwiches are ready!”

Between giving into my self-pity and obeying my stomach, I choose my hunger and walk upstairs. Careful not to trip over anything, I follow the scent of pastrami and mustard on rye.

To my surprise, Parker is there, and with a friend.

He's a tall muscular man with dark hair and piercing blue eyes who looks to be in his late thirties, a few years older than my brother.

He's so ruggedly handsome that it catches me off guard, but I quickly regain my composure.

“Hi, Parker,” I say, greeting my brother with a hug.

I arrived home a few days before and he had come home to have dinner with me, mom, and dad. It was nice to catch up and I was glad that he didn't rub it in my face once that my career hadn't taken off yet.

I had mainly kept quiet and just listened, wishing I could be gloating about becoming an actress instead of quietly hiding

the fact that I'd been working retail to support myself since college.

I look pointedly at the hot stranger in our house. "So, who's your friend?"

Both men look at each other and start to laugh. Confused, I look at mom and see she has no idea what's going on either.

"Hi, I'm Harvey Baker," the stranger says, offering me a hand to shake.

His hand is calloused and rough, and my hand gets lost in it.

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. Am I supposed to know who you are?" I ask, still trying to clear the confusion.

"Harvey plays center for the Boston Arctic Wolves, Elsa," Parker says from the sidelines. "It's a hockey team. I told you about him the other night. He's been my closest friend for the last five years or so."

"Oh," I say, not sure how to continue in the conversation. The truth is that once Parker had started talking about sports at dinner a few nights ago, I had tuned him out.

Harvey laughs at my reaction, and I'm pretty sure it's at my expense.

"I assume you don't follow hockey," he says with a cocky grin, and I force myself not to roll my eyes.

"You assume correctly," I end up saying, but what I *really* want to say is something like, "there's a whole world out there

that has absolutely nothing to do with hockey. Get over yourself.’

Only then do I realize I’m still holding his hand. I quickly let it go as if he had given me an electric shock.

Mom approaches us, places a hand on my shoulder, and says, “Come take a seat, Elsa. You’re still stressed from your recent trip back home from Los Angeles.”

I do as she says and sit on the couch between Parker and Harvey, while mom goes to sit across from us in her usual chair.

The boys start to talk loudly with me in the middle as if I’m not even there, and I regret my seating choice immediately.

“How do you think the next game will go?” Parker asks Harvey, then takes a gulp from his glass of water.

“You tell me. You’re the sports expert,” Harvey retorts, loud and laid back. “I just play!”

I stand up and order Harvey to scoot over the very next instant. “You speak way too loud for my comfort. Does hockey affect your hearing?”

Both Harvey and Parker look at me as if I just sprouted wings. Then they exchange glances and start to laugh again as if sharing some inside joke.

“I hear just fine, lady,” Harvey says, tapping the couch by his side for me to sit. “Now please, relax. I promise I am a friendly guy.”

I end up choosing dad's chair to sit in instead and am now sitting closer to mom. I cross my arms and pout, gritting my teeth hard enough to cut diamonds.

Now mom looks over at me, displeased and disappointed. Her 'you will never find a man acting like this, Elsa' expression says it all, and I just shake my head in protest.

"Harvey was telling us about the championship he's playing, weren't you, Harvey?" Mom continues the conversation, trying to act indifferent, but it's clear as day that she's hanging onto his every word.

"Oh yes!" Harvey takes a sip of water and speaks with enthusiasm. "It's the conference finals for the Stanley Cup. If we get through these, then we'll end up being one of the teams playing later for the Stanley Cup! It'll be happening soon after my sister's wedding."

"Oh! Your sister is getting married? Send her my best wishes!" Mom says, taking over the conversation like none other. She tries to elbow me in the ribs but has no reach to actually do it.

Then she says in a loud whisper that can be heard by everyone, "Doesn't that sound amazing, Elsa?"

I glare at my mom, appalled that she is trying to force me into this conversation, but not really surprised. If meddling in my life were an Olympic sport, my mom would win the gold every time.

“He does need company for it, actually,” Parker says, catching me off guard.

In confusion, I turn to stare at Parker, and I see Harvey nodding his head in agreement.

What the actual F is going on here?

“But I think it would be better if we talk more about this somewhere else...” Harvey points his thumb towards the front door.

I look at everyone present in the room, one by one, trying to understand what’s going on.

Mom is ecstatic.

Harvey and Parker are staring at me with an expectant look on their face, as if I hold the key to some treasure box.

Again, I’m deeply confused and narrow my eyes at them, waiting for an explanation, but none is forthcoming.

I take a deep breath, then close my eyes before turning to look at Harvey. “You’re inviting me to go somewhere with you right now?” I ask him in pure disbelief.

“Parker would come with us, too!” he says. “Look, I know you have questions, but I promise we’ll explain everything.”

“Um...” I don’t know Harvey at all and so far, I don’t like him, but I trust my brother enough to hear them both out.

Plus, I *am* curious.

As if I need any more incentive, mom adds, “It’s not like you have anything else to do, honey...”

“What about opening and going through the three dozen boxes in the basement?” I try to joke.

“I’ll start going through them for you, and you can finish them later!” She taps my hand as a form of encouragement. “Now go. You’re losing daylight!”

Like two peas in a pod, Harvey and Parker begin to laugh in unison again and stand, ready to leave.

Harvey walks over to me and offers his hand to help me up.

I lower my gaze and get up on my own, and he gives me an exaggerated frown as he pretends to be hurt.

Yeah, I’m sure you aren’t used to being turned down, Mr. hockey pretty boy.

I bid my goodbyes to mom, and I head outside with Parker and Harvey, wondering what I’m walking into.

It’s a very bright day and I squint my eyes against the sun. As my eyes adjust, I drop my jaw at what I see next.

There’s a yellow high-end sports car that must have cost at least half a million parked in the driveway.

“I guess professional hockey pays well, huh?” I say, impressed.

“You have no idea,” Harvey grins, strutting over to the driver’s seat.

I open the door to the back seat and settle into the plush leather seats with care and awe. I’ve never been inside a car

this expensive, and I worry that I'm going to scratch it or something.

And then I remember that Parker and his stranger best friend are taking me somewhere and I have no idea what's going on. Scratching the rich stranger's leather seats should be the least of my concerns.

Parker takes the passenger seat, and Harvey starts the car. It doesn't take long for him to start reciting Harvey's stats as if reading from one of those trading sports cards.

"Harvey is the richest hockey player ever, Elsa," he continues, all excited. "How much is your fortune estimated, dude?"

"Five billion," Harvey says it with relaxed ease, then raises a finger in the air. "But it's not all from hockey! I have a construction company and a boating one. We make high-end yachts and sailing boats."

I nod and the truth is I'm impressed, but I'm also incredibly annoyed by the boastful way Harvey talks about himself.

I decide to stay quiet the rest of the way until he parks at a diner, and we all climb out and head inside. Parker and Harvey are excited about jalapeño poppers and beer, but I am tired of staying silent.

"Okay, what exactly am I doing here?" I throw the question out into the air with exasperation, the curiosity killing me.

"It's simple," Harvey says as the host seats us.

At this time of day, past the lunch rush, there are only two or three other latecomers inside, so we have the place pretty much to ourselves.

“As your brother said, I need company for my sister’s wedding. But... It’s a special kind of company.”

Parker puts in the order with the waiter without even consulting me.

Sitting across from me, Harvey looks like he’s struggling with how to phrase what he wants to say next. He just keeps moving his hands around wildly while deep in thought.

It’s pretty funny watching him.

He finally says, “My grandmother is ninety-eight years old, and she’s been making it overly clear to me and everyone that she wants to see all her grandchildren married. That’s her last request and she’s being very dramatic about it.”

“And Harvey is the last single lady,” Parker points at him, and Harvey elbows him in the ribs.

“As I was saying... My grandmother has gone so far as to threaten to cut me out of my share of the inheritance if I don’t settle down soon. I don’t care about the money, but I’m slated to get a super rare 1954 Mercedes-Benz 300SL, and there’s no way I’m risking giving that baby up.”

I just stare at him in disbelief.

He continues, “My grandma will be in town for my sister’s wedding in a few weeks, and I would like to introduce her to my fiancé and put her at ease,” he says.

Parker interrupts him once again, “But there’s just one problem. He doesn’t have a fiancé.”

“I was getting there,” Harvey growls.

“You are taking forever dude!” Parker moves his hands around impatiently.

“Wait a second...” I hold up one of my hands as I struggle to wrap my head around what is going on.

“Are you saying you want me to play your fiancé at your sister’s wedding?”

“You’re smart!” Harvey slaps the table.

I scratch my head, frowning so hard I’ll certainly get wrinkles ten years earlier.

“Are you crazy? This is *never* going to work! I don’t even know you!” I cry out, flustered.

“Come on, Elsa. You went to college for theater, right?” Parker says. “This should be a walk in the park for you!”

I growl, “This is ridiculous, Parker! What you are asking me to do is insane!”

“It won’t be that hard. I’ll walk you through what you’ll have to do,” Harvey says, as calm as if he’s asking me for a glass of water.

I cross my arms. Already feeling fed up, I look at them both, my eyes almost closed shut from all the emotions I’m feeling.

I want to shake both of them. They are clearly in cahoots and are not telling me the whole story.

“Why should I even consider doing this crazy thing for you instead of just walking out of here right now? What exactly is in it for me?”

Parker puts a hand on his chest in a gesture of exaggerated offense. All the while, Harvey smiles, hands folded over the table and looks at me, his blue eyes sparkling.

“Would a hundred grand convince you?” he asks, a smug smirk on his lips.

I lean back so hard in my chair I have to catch myself before falling backward.

My eyes are wide, equally shocked and appalled by the offer.

“What?” I manage to whisper, and for a second that’s all I can say.

I blink a few times and finally ask him, “But why me? You’re a freaking billionaire. You could just hire a professional actress.”

Harvey shrugs. “You’re my best friend’s sister, and in my mind, that makes you more trustworthy than anyone else I can possibly hire. Plus, Parker told me how you are an aspiring actress, so isn’t this the perfect role for you?”

I fall silent, eyes fluttering everywhere.

I try to make sense of this mind-boggling situation and wrap my arms around myself as if creating a protective shell.

“Think about it, Elsa,” Parker says. “You could pay off your student loans, buy a brand-new car, then move to Hollywood

and continue to pursue your acting dream. What do you say?"

I look at Parker with suspicion and place my hands on my hips. He appears to be trying to convince me even more so than Harvey, and I'm going to find out why.

"Why are you so interested in me doing this, Parker?" I hiss, my eyes boring into his.

Parker startles in place, but Harvey steps in and answers, "I'm paying him too, okay. Ten grand to help me convince you. Plus, he has to vouch for me. So... Is it working?"

I snort in anger and turn a fiery glare to Parker.

"You're pimping out your sister?" I stand up, feeling indignant and offended.

"Think about him more like your agent, Elsa," Harvey says, grabbing my arm to gently bring me back to a seated position.

Once I'm seated, he continues, "This is an acting gig. We're not having sex. Hell, I'm not even touching you beyond what's socially acceptable. What do you say?"

Food and drinks arrive, and I immediately shove a popper in my mouth so I don't have to answer.

I huff, swallowing the food almost whole. "I'm going to need some time to think all this over."

"How much time?" Parker asks, his shoulders tensing up and hands splaying out at his sides.

Wow, you really are used to being told yes all the time, aren't you?

I turn to glare at my brother. Then I turn back to Harvey.

“You shouldn’t pay my brother anything. That actually makes things worse in my opinion!”

“Noted.” Harvey launches Parker a sideways glance, making my brother facepalm and groan.

“Well, let’s ignore your brother, then.”

At that, Parker lightly punches Harvey’s shoulder. Without missing a beat, Harvey continues, “It’s just me coming to you and asking for a favor. I feel like it’s a good idea because your brother is my best friend and because of your acting skills. It’s a win-win for us both. What do you say?”

I stare at him, still feeling unsure and full of doubt.

But the truth is I don’t really have anything to lose, and it sounds like I have a ton to gain. I can’t even begin to imagine how much one hundred thousand dollars would change my life.

It would give me a huge head start and I wouldn’t have to live in my parents’ basement.

“Give me three days,” I finally say, nodding and biting my bottom lip. “I need some time to think this through.”

Looking satisfied and acting like I already said yes, Harvey raises his glass in celebration.

Chapter Two

HARVEY

I wish I hadn't forgotten to get Elsa's phone number the other day, because then I could call her now and ask if she's coming or not.

I could just ask Parker, but I'm supposed to be working directly with Elsa now, as she prefers, so I just wait and hope she shows up.

She's late by an hour now, and I'm here, sitting at a sidewalk table outside a coffee shop. I'm waiting impatiently for her to appear, but so far, she's nowhere to be found.

I order my third coffee, this one a mocha cappuccino, and while I wait, I stand to look around the corner and check if she's coming.

I return to my table, and the waitress brings my beverage and politely asks, "Waiting for a friend?"

I look at the girl in front of me. She's a redhead with beautiful green eyes and an incredible figure, but she's not my

priority right now.

“Yeah...” I say, taking a sip from my cup, unsweetened to better taste the beans and cocoa powder. “She’s running late. I might get going soon.”

“Did you call her?” the redhead continues, her eyes looking concerned.

“No, I don’t have her number!” I say, feeling like an idiot. “We scheduled this encounter through her brother.”

“Oh, so it’s a blind date?” the girl giggles, looking excited about the whole situation.

“No, we met each other before. This is more of a fake dating planning party.”

She raises an eyebrow, clearly confused by my words, but in the end, she smiles and hands me a slip of paper.

“If you ever decide to do some real dating, let me know, okay?” Then she winks and leaves my side.

I glance down at the paper. It’s her name, Tessa, and her phone number. I save it in my pocket and decide to leave, but only after finishing my coffee.

Because there’s always time for coffee.

A few minutes later, I’m so distracted thinking about what I am going to do without Elsa that I don’t see her standing right in front of me.

“Harvey?” she calls to me, and I don’t answer. “*Harvey?!?*”

Startled, I almost spill the last drops of my coffee when I realize she is finally here.

“What took you so long?!” I complain, and she frowns at my irritated tone.

“I just didn’t know what to wear,” she says sweetly as she sits in front of me.

I stare at what she’s wearing. It’s a pair of black leggings with a dark brown sweater that matches her knee-high boots and a denim jacket.

It really brings out her brown eyes.

“And it took you one hour to decide on that?” I soften my tone, but I can tell she still doesn’t like it.

“Thanks for the compliment. And well, there was traffic too,” Elsa shrugs, getting defensive and tossing her long blonde hair over her shoulder.

I sigh. “Alright, well it’s all good. And you do look great, but I’m sure you get told that all the time. Anyway, if you are here, does that mean what I think it means?”

“I just thought it would be nicer to let you down in person instead of standing you up.” She says it deadpan and I’m about to lose my temper when she grins and lets out a giggle.

“Fine, I’ll do it, but on one condition.” She looks at me with a smile, but her eyes are dead serious.

My eyes are about to pop out of my head with her quick mood change, but I just snort and say, “You had me there for a

second. Okay, what's this condition of yours?"

"You said your sister's wedding is in a few weeks, right?"

I nod, trying to figure out where the hell she's going with this.

"Well, my condition is that we meet a few times before then to get to know each other and make this believable. I'm not walking in as your fake fiancé without being prepared."

I frown. This sounds like a lot more work than I was planning on.

She taps her fingers on the table, and I can feel her eyes boring into mine.

My mind starts racing with what my options are, but I don't have many. I told my family and granny that I had started dating someone about three years ago. That's when granny had dropped the ball that she'd write me out of the will if I didn't start taking my life seriously.

Since she lives in California and doesn't travel much, I have been able to avoid her. But once my sister got engaged a year ago, my granny upped the ante on me and my plans.

So coincidentally I got engaged three months ago to my supposed girlfriend of three years. And even though granny rarely travels, the only things she *does* travel for are her grandkids' weddings.

So now I have no choice but to make this work with Elsa.

"Earth to Harvey?"

I look up at her and sigh, accepting her terms. “Fine. You really want to earn this money, huh? We’ll do it your way then. You are the expert anyway in acting, right?”

She just grins playfully. “That I am.”

She leans back, looking more relaxed now. She continues, “So, tell me what I should expect, *honey*.”

I snort. I guess she really has been thinking this over for the past three days.

“Don’t you wanna order something, first?” I ask.

“Oh, good idea!”

I signal Tessa to come over. She seems less enthusiastic to approach the table now that I have company, but she still puts on a smile as she comes with her paper and pen.

Elsa orders an iced mocha with tons of whipped cream. Meanwhile, I bring my hands under my chin and stare at her, mentally trying to prepare myself to act like I’m engaged to this woman in front of my entire family.

I mean, she’s definitely my type. Blonde, tan, chocolate brown eyes, slender, witty... Should be easy, right?

“So, you don’t know anything about hockey?” I ask.

“I know it’s played on ice,” she shrugs.

I wince. “Actually, there are different types of hockey, and not all of them are played on ice. In fact, growing up I got into street hockey and loved it. That was my intro into hockey and led me to ice hockey through joining a youth hockey league.”

I stop talking and frown. I don't usually talk about myself this much on a *real* date, let alone a fake one.

I clear my throat and continue, "But that doesn't matter. Let's just—"

She stops me. "It *does* matter. I need to know things about you, Harvey. So how did you go from a youth hockey league to being in the NHL?"

She leans down and starts searching around in her purse then pulls out a notepad and a pen.

I just stare at her incredulously. "Look, I didn't know I was going to be interviewed—"

"What did you expect?" She interrupts again and I grit my teeth. "You thought I'd just show up at your side as your fiancé and it would be that easy? I can't believe I'm the only one taking this seriously. I mean, it's *your* family! I don't *know* you and to make this believable—"

This time I interrupt her with my hands raised in surrender.

"Fine, fine."

I start to talk to her about my journey into the NHL. And once I start, I can't stop.

I tell her about how scouts noticed me from high school games and how I got drafted into a junior league. Then I caught the attention of NHL scouts after leading my team to victory in several tournaments and championships.

“My life has revolved around hockey since as early as I can remember. It was like dominoes. Once I was introduced to it as a kid, that was the one tap and then everything came crashing down and led me to where I am now.”

I look at her with a stupid grin on my face. She is taking notes and nodding, looking at me with interest.

I clear my throat. “Anyway, like I said. It doesn’t really matter. We met each other after a game, okay?”

“Oh!” Now she seems taken aback. “So, I’m supposed to be a fan?”

“You could say that.” I nod.

Elsa looks antsy and anxious. She is frowning and rubbing her temples with closed eyes.

I worry that she’ll get cold feet about it all and give up, but hopefully, the money will keep her here.

“Is your family all hockey freaks?” She looks at me with wide eyes and I laugh at her facial expression. She looks very cute while doing it.

“I don’t know about freaks, but yes, they like hockey. It’s mostly because of me though. Why?”

“If they’re fans, I can’t have met you at a game. They will see right through me.”

She continues, waving her index in front of me. “We met in a coffee shop like this one.”

“No,” I say and shake my head firmly. “That’s the story they already know, and that’s the one we’re sticking with.”

“But I don’t know the first thing about hockey!” She groans and places her hands on her head. “Why did you have to come up with a fake fiancé anyway?”

“According to my family, everything is solved by settling down,” I say, not enjoying being reminded of their influence in all this. “I’ve had to, so they’d stay off my back, but it’s mainly because of my grandmother.”

“Yeah, yeah, I remember. Your precious vintage car.”

She places a hand under her chin as she considers my words. “So, you value your freedom too much to compromise, then? You’d rather lie and say you are a taken man to appease your family, but in reality, you’re a player?”

“What... No!” I raise a finger, speaking in a tone of warning. “It’s just hard to get to know someone with my crazy schedule.”

She stares at me as if I’m full of shit and I compose myself and continue. “Let’s just stick with the story that you are a hockey fan, okay? It’s not a big deal. They’ll barely let you talk anyway.”

Now she looks at me with mistrust, her shoulders tense and her eyes staring at me between narrowed lids.

God, the wedding is in just a few weeks, and I really need her...

“Fine,” she finally mutters. She folds her hands over the table and looks down at them, considering how to continue. “Let’s talk about the basics. How long have we known each other?”

“Um...” I try to remember exactly when I started lying to my family, and it shows on my face. “A little over three years?”

“You’ve supposedly had a girlfriend for three years and she’s never even met your family?” she asks, incredulous.

“Eh...” I wave her off. Yes, my story has a lot of plot holes, but everyone has been swallowing it so far.

“My work is seasonal, and her work is seasonal, so we’re never free at the same time.”

“Okay, and what exactly is the work that I do?”

“Education,” I don’t bat an eyelash. “You’re a high school teacher who does volunteer work for kids in low-wage families during summers.”

She raises her eyebrows and bites her lips, looking thoughtful and pleased with what I said.

Her drink finally arrives, and Tessa apologizes for the delay, but all that matters to Elsa is taking a big gulp, her mood quickly brightening with each sip.

“Well, at least my job is good.” She nods and puts her drink down. “Yeah, I can fake working in education. I like kids. And I can say I took some well-deserved time off to finally meet everyone at your sister’s wedding.”

“Good,” I smile, feeling relief that something is going right.

“What else do you want to talk about?” I ask.

“Well, how long we’ve been engaged, for starters.” She perks up even more after another sip of coffee.

“Oh, that’s recent. Just three months ago,” I say.

“Okay,” Elsa nods, writing in her little notebook.

She sips her coffee, and I try to sip what’s left of mine, but it’s now cold. Elsa looks up at the sky, and my eyes follow her gaze.

It’s overcast and ugly, but the breeze it brings feels nice. It’s late April and still a little chilly in Boston, but I’m used to the cold, so it doesn’t bother me.

“So, your family has never even seen a picture of this girlfriend and now fiancé of yours?” she asks with disbelief and confusion.

“Kinda...” I reply. “Every time I date a blond girl, I tell them it’s her. But don’t worry, this will be the first time I’m introducing *her* to my grandma.”

She almost spits in her coffee. “How is that even possible?” she asks, skeptical. “They don’t notice they’re different women?”

“Nope,” I say, with my own share of determination. “I usually only bring someone if they insist and if it’s a party where I know they will be drinking heavily. Then I come late

and even then, if they ever say she looks different, I blame it on plastic surgery.”

“Oh my God,” she says, covering her mouth with her hand and shaking her head in a mixture of shock and amusement. “If they are that easily fooled, then that makes my job that much easier. Alrighty then. And where did we get engaged?”

I am starting to get overwhelmed by all these questions.

I don’t know what I was expecting. Maybe I thought that she would just sit down in front of me and do as I say.

But no, of course it couldn’t be that easy.

“On my boat?” I say, making it up on the spot.

“Okay, so you have a boat,” Elsa says, still writing. “What kind of boat?”

I sigh, growing bored of this charade already.

“It’s a sailboat,” I say, feeling more and more defeated in this little game, but I just need to suck it up because I have to make this work.

“It’s named Queen of the Marina.”

“Huh, original,” she scoffs with sarcasm. “It’s only marginally better than what my father named his.”

With a fist supporting the weight of my head, I smile and say, “Okay, I’ll bite. What did he name his?”

“Roadrunner.”

We both laugh in unison, recognizing a true genius when we see one.

“Your father seems like a cool guy,” I say, slamming my fist against the table. “Wish I’d met him the other day.”

But she doesn’t seem very interested in introducing me to her father. Instead, she just shakes her head and I hear her mutter, “That would be a complete disaster...”

I sigh, heavily and audibly, ready to put the final nail in this coffin.

“Anything else you wanna go over before our next *date*?” I say, splaying a hand towards her.

“Nothing I can think of now,” Elsa says, shrugging.

“Okay, I’ll pick you up at your house next Monday at 7 pm. Wanna grab dinner and go over more details?”

“Fine,” she says with a small smile and nod. “It’s a date.”

“Where do I find you if I have any questions or need to talk to you?” she asks, standing up and stretching.

“Preferably you don’t call me,” I snicker. “But here’s my cell.”

I give her my number, and she calls it, so I have hers too. I tell her I’m picking up the bill and she doesn’t complain.

If one thing is certain, she made me realize I’ve made myself into a clown with this whole situation, and it’s going to take an even bigger lie to get out of it.

Chapter Three

ELSA

I didn't call Harvey as he requested, but ever since I agreed to be his fake fiancé, I've bitten down on my fingernails hard enough to need acrylics to cover them.

I've spent the better part of the week leading up to our *date* trying to educate myself on ice hockey. If I'm supposed to be his biggest fan, I figured I should know a thing or two.

The best thing that came out of that bit of research was catching up on sleep.

A few days ago, mom came in and found me asleep and saw my ice hockey research on my laptop. When she asked me about it, I fessed up and told her I agreed to play Harvey's fake fiancé and spun it as a way for me to help Parker's best friend and practice acting while I was here.

She had skipped right over the word *fake* and has been acting as if I am really engaged to the guy ever since.

This past week has taken forever to go by, but now that all I have left is a few minutes before he arrives, they go by like seconds.

“Oh, I’m so happy for you, Elsa!” Mom says hugging me. “So happy you found a nice man!”

“He’s *not* my man, mom!” I complain in protest. “I told you. He is just Parker’s friend who needs a favor!”

I didn’t tell her about the money.

But once again, it’s like she didn’t even hear me because now she is acting as if I’m going on a date with my soon-to-be husband.

“Yeah, Judith. Listen to the girl!” my father says, coming from the kitchen with a glass of water and some leftover lasagna. “She is too skinny to attract a millionaire.”

“*Billionaire*, John. He’s a billionaire!” Mom corrects him.

“Even worse.” At this point, I am ruby-red, and dad is loving every minute of it. “The richer the man, the pickier he is!”

“Mom! Do something!” I complain, looking from her to dad in exasperation.

I know that dad doesn’t want his sweet little angel to get fooled by men or become a single mother, but undermining my confidence isn’t helping.

“John, stop it.” Mom slaps the bald spot on the back of his head with gusto. “The girl has enough problems as it is!”

What a mess this has turned out to be. I came home hoping to clear my head and figure out my next steps for my life, and now I'm caught up in a lie.

At least I can work on my acting and get one hundred grand in the process.

My mind goes back to my life after college. I had such a fun time in college getting my theater degree, and I even graduated at the top of my class. But after college, real life hit me. And hit me hard.

After auditioning countless times for various roles, one can only handle rejection so many times. And I was tired of working in retail just to pay my share of rent between three roommates.

I grit my teeth and nod my head. For one hundred grand, I will do whatever it takes. And I will do it well.

I'm drinking a glass of water and almost spill it on myself when I hear a loud honk from our driveway.

I quickly hug my mom and wave goodbye to my dad as I grab my purse and head on out.

Before I shut the door, I can't help but see my mom's disappointed face that she didn't get to see Harvey and hear my dad muttering something under his breath about bad manners.

Good. There's no reason for either of them to grow too attached to him anyway.

I walk towards the driveway and even though I expect to see it, I'm still dazzled by the yellow sports car.

The windows are rolled up and tinted. I open the passenger side door and peer in to see Harvey scrolling through his phone. He doesn't even look up.

"Um, hello?"

He glances briefly and nods, then looks back at his phone.

I keep from rolling my eyes and remind myself of the one hundred thousand dollars. I sit down, shut the door, and strap myself in.

He looks over and mumbles, "Sorry, one second," as he keeps scrolling on his phone.

I'm glad the windows are tinted because if my parents were to look out the window and see him ignoring me while on his phone, I would never hear the end of it.

After another minute, he puts his phone down and turns to me. "Are you hungry?"

I nod as he pulls out of the driveway.

"Is everything alright?" I ask.

He looks confused for a moment, then nods. "Oh yeah. That was just about a charity game I'm playing soon."

I raise my eyebrows and think maybe there is more to him than meets the eye.

"So, are you excited to be sitting in this beauty again?" He asks with a smirk.

Okay, maybe not.

I clear my throat and ask, “So what kind of car is this anyway?”

His eyes light up. “This baby is a Rolls-Royce Phantom. It’s my current favorite.”

I laugh. “Don’t tell me you have a three-story car garage filled with cars or something?”

He just laughs back and says, “Not yet! But it’s good to have goals.”

“Where are you taking me?” I ask. “It’s Monday, so wherever we go, we’ll probably have the place to ourselves.”

He nods. “We are going to Charles River’s Esplanade.”

“Oh nice!” I smile. “I like it out there. It’s so beautiful and peaceful. Don’t tell me you planned a picnic for us *babe*?”

He snorts. “It’s a sports bar, actually. I hope you don’t mind.”

I just shake my head and rub my forehead, knowing I don’t really have much of a choice. I mentally tell myself to choose where we go next time.

Harvey turns up the volume and as I listen to classic rock music, I lean my head back and look out the window as we drive.

It doesn’t take long before we reach Charles River’s Esplanade, and I can’t help but feel calm and tranquil as it

comes into view. The river looks almost magical reflecting the muted purple, pink, and dark blue colors of the setting sun.

When he pulls into a parking garage, reality hits again, and I check my purse to make sure I brought my pen and notebook.

After he parks, I step out and we start walking out together. He surprises me by reaching out a hand. When I look at him with confusion, he just shrugs, his blue eyes sparkling mischievously.

“Might as well start practicing now.”

When his fingers interlace with mine, I shiver as I feel the rough callouses on his hand. It reminds me of when I shook hands with him when I met him for the first time.

He looks down. “Are you cold?”

I’m glad it’s getting dark and hope he can’t see the reddening of my cheeks. I shake my head. “No, I’m fine.”

He nods, “Yes girl, you are.”

I just snort and shake my head as we walk down the street and over a few blocks until we reach the bar.

Right before we go in, he leans down and says, “This is one of my favorite places. I’ve been coming here since I was old enough to drink.”

The place is filled with merry patrons, fueled by beer, greasy food, and the loud sportscasting on the TVs. At this hour, a soccer match is happening.

A very bored host waits for the next clients at the door, and after stifling a yawn, he says, "Please come with me."

"Busy day today?" I ask the host.

"Ugh, same as always," he says, completely lacking the will to pull a chair out as we reach the table. He just points to it. "The menus are on the table. What are you two going to drink?"

"Just a coke. I'm driving," Harvey says, opening the folded menu.

"Make mine cherry!" I say.

"Alright, I'll let your waiter know..." And he goes out and about, dragging his feet and barely moving his arms while walking.

"Somebody needs a Zoloft," Harvey says, watching as he goes.

I hide my smile behind my hand. "I'm guessing someone is a failed thespian too."

Harvey looks at me and rolls his eyes. "From what Parker said, you graduated top of your class. Doesn't sound like a failure to me."

I wave my hand aside. "Well, we aren't here to talk about me. Not the real me anyway. I'm here to get to know you better to make sure this whole fake fiancé scenario doesn't fail."

Now Harvey is waving his hand around nonchalantly. “I told you before, you don’t need to worry. I told them you were shy anyway so it’s not like they are expecting anything crazy from you, and they will all be distracted with the wedding anyway.”

I nod.

Shy schoolteacher. Should be easy enough, right?

The waiter arrives with our drinks.

“Here you are!” He sounds bubbly and smiles widely. He is much livelier than the host.

He looks at Harvey and says, “I’d ask what you’d like to order, but I already know. Buffalo chicken wings, sliders, and mozzarella sticks?”

Harvey laughs and reaches out a hand to give the waiter a handshake. “You know it, man. Elsa, what would you like?”

I smile and ask for some chicken tacos.

“Chicken tacos it is!” I catch it when the waiter stares at me then raises an eyebrow at Harvey.

“I’ll be back soon!”

As he walks away, Harvey leans back with a sigh, arms behind his head and his eyes on the game.

I take out my notebook and read over my questions.

“So, what hobbies do you have?”

His eyes tear away from the screen and meet mine. He glances down at my notebook and pen but doesn’t say anything.

He thinks for a second then responds, “I’m a big outdoorsy guy. I like camping, hiking, skiing, and rock climbing. I also enjoy the occasional round of golf and video games.”

I nod and continue, “What are your favorite and least favorite foods?”

He just stares at me with a frown.

“This is boring.” He leans over and closes my notebook.

“Why don’t we just talk?”

His fingers move over to my arm. “Are you always this uptight? I am pretty good at tickling and I’m not afraid to use it to make you loosen up.”

At this I smile and hold my hands up in surrender. “I believe you! I’m just trying to be prepared.”

He grins widely. “Ah, so you are ticklish then? Good to know.”

I scoot further back and drink my cherry coke. I look around the dimly lit pub, hearing the chatter of the patrons around us and the sportscaster talking on TV, and sigh.

He’s right. This is boring.

I’m slurping the rest of my drink when Harvey looks over at me with a raised eyebrow.

I swallow. “Oh, sorry. Was I interrupting the game?”

He sighs then turns his back to the game to look at me.

After a moment, he says, “So, why are you back here instead of in California chasing your acting dream? You’re beautiful,

smart and from what I can see, you take things seriously.”

He nods to the closed notebook on the table.

Before I can answer, our enthusiastic waiter is back with our food and refills.

I dig into a taco hungrily. As I chew, I feel Harvey’s eyes on me. He’s chewing on a mozzarella stick.

He shrugs, “It’s ok. You can talk with your mouth full. I don’t care.”

I hold back a snort, so food doesn’t go up my nose.

After I finish a taco, I lean back and say, “Well, I haven’t really told anyone about it, but since we aren’t going to know each other for long, I might as well tell you.”

Looking genuinely interested now, he leans forward, his eyes still on mine and says, “I’d be honored.”

I roll my eyes and he raises his hands as he laughs.

“No, seriously. I really want to hear what you are going to say.”

I make him wait as I finish my other taco.

Then I say, “I’ve been able to do anything I set my mind to before. Everything I did was to get to the point where I graduated with an acting degree and became a successful actress. Everything from getting good grades to excelling in drama classes and even taking theater classes outside of school growing up. I had tunnel vision my whole life.”

He chuckles and I pause.

“What is it?” I ask.

He shoves a slider in his mouth while he thinks.

I grin and say pointedly, “It’s okay. You can talk with your mouth full.”

He swallows then chuckles again. “When you were talking, I was just thinking that I understood. It’s the same with me and being a professional ice hockey player.”

I nod. “Well, I was an excited eager beaver when I graduated with honors. I even have an award for outstanding acting. I was ready to take on the world and finally become what I always wanted.”

Harvey grabs another slider, all while keeping his eyes on me.

I freeze. I haven’t talked to anyone about this. I am too ashamed.

As if he can read my mind, Harvey makes a goofy face and says, “Like you said, we won’t be in each other’s lives long. Your secret is safe with me. I promise.”

With that, I pour everything out as if a dam just broke. As I speak, I feel a sense of relief and much lighter.

I tell him how every time I had gone to audition for an acting role after graduation, something happened that had never happened to me before.

I had frozen and forgotten all my well-rehearsed lines. It wasn’t just a random case of stage fright because it happened

every time. My anxiety had gotten so bad that I began having panic attacks too.

When it happened the last time, I didn't know what else to do. I couldn't take it anymore and had to come home for a while for a reset.

His eyes wide and his food untouched, Harvey's hands cover mine and he says, "Oh my God. That is terrifying. I'm so sorry that has been happening to you. Have you asked for any help?"

I just shake my head. "I've never told anyone else."

He leans forward, his hands still covering mine. "You don't have to do everything on your own, Elsa. You can get help with this. Then be back to winning those acting awards, okay?"

I smile, my eyes tearing up.

It was nice opening up to him. I didn't want to give up on my dream, but I don't know what else to do to get out of this slump I'm in. Maybe it would help to talk to a professional therapist about this.

I continue, "And don't worry about me being able to do this for you. Improv is the one thing this doesn't apply to. I got a few improv gigs, but those don't pay as well. Acting, which requires scripted lines, is my dream, and auditioning for those is what brought all this on."

He waves a hand as if to wipe my words away. "Nah, I'm not worried at all."

Then he leans back, thoughtful. “How about this? I’ll check into some options for you. Our team has access to sports psychologists and therapists to help with stress and anxiety. I’ll reach out and get some recommendations for therapists specializing in your field.”

I am left speechless by his offer and all I can do is give a grateful nod.

I move my hands away, grab my purse and stand. “Thank you for listening, Harvey. I’m going to go to the restroom. I’ll be right back.”

The way he looks at me, the concern clear in his eyes, moves me unexpectedly.

I didn’t know how much I needed to let all that out until now. I hadn’t even really let myself face it. And now, for the first time in the last two years, I feel a glimmer of hope that things might end up being okay.

As I push open the bathroom door, I grab a tissue and wipe my eyes then blow my nose. I try and fix my mascara then use the restroom. After I wash my hands and take a few deep breaths, I feel more composed, and I feel lighter and more grounded.

I will figure this out.

I head out and walk through the maze of people and tables as I head back to Harvey. I see him standing up and looking at the game on the TV and talking to another tall muscular guy. Their backs are to me.

As I walk slowly up to them, I hear the other guy say to Harvey, “Seems like you’ve got a type, man.”

That doesn’t bother me, but what Harvey says next does.

“I’ve got her wrapped around my finger, just like the others.”

The other guy laughs and slaps him on the back before saying goodbye. I realize I’m just standing at the table, feeling like a deflated balloon, when Harvey turns around.

“Oh! You’re back already. Want dessert?”

I just stare at him, my eyes narrowing.

“Just like the others, huh?”

He doesn’t even have the decency to look ashamed.

He just shrugs and says, “He’s on my team. It doesn’t mean anything.”

I start to back up stiffly and he reaches out a hand.

“Where are you going?”

I grit my teeth.

“I’ll find my way back home. And don’t worry. Even though I don’t want to, I’ll live up to my end of the bargain and do this, but there’s no need for us to meet again until the wedding. I’ve already got you all figured out anyway.”

And I turn and walk out of the bar.

Chapter Four

HARVEY

*I don't think I did anything wrong.
Then why do I feel like shit?*

The ice rink is buzzing with energy as our team gathers for our morning practice. The crisp, cold air fills my lungs as I step onto the ice, fully dressed in my team's practice jersey and gear.

The echoes of skate blades scraping against the ice filled the arena. We all begin with a warm-up lap, circling the rink to get ready for the intense training ahead.

As I glide along, my thoughts keep turning back to Elsa's hurt and angry face that night over a week ago.

The head coach, Coach Dawson, blows his whistle and calls us to gather at center ice.

"Alright, everyone," Coach Dawson says, his tone nonsense. "Today, we're working on our offensive zone entries

and maintaining puck possession. It's crucial for the upcoming game."

I nod, but my gaze wanders to the stands where a few fans have gathered to watch the practice.

We start with a series of drills. I try to focus, but my mind keeps thinking about how I'm going to convince my family I'm engaged to a girl who can't stand me. We haven't talked since that night and—

"Damn it!" During a passing drill, a stray puck slips past me.

"Harvey!" Coach Dawson calls out sternly. "What the hell's going on with you? You better get your head back at practice with the rest of us!"

I'm glad my face is covered so no one can see how red I am. "Sorry, Coach," I say loudly, and double down on my focus.

Just focus on the damn practice and text her later and apologize.

Luckily, I manage to get my shit together for the rest of practice, but I need to make things right with Elsa, and soon.

The wedding is this weekend.

After practice, I shower and change. Before heading over to our team meeting, I grab my phone from my locker. I have a ton of notifications, messages, and missed calls.

But none from Elsa.

I sigh and I start to type:

Are we still on? Are you good?

I frown then change my mind and erase it.

Instead, I type:

I'm sorry about what happened at the bar.

Do you forgive me?

I hit send.

Feeling a little anxious, I'm more than happy to lock my phone away in my locker and head over to the team meeting for a distraction. I'm just hoping she will have responded by the time I check my phone again.

I try to focus on the meeting. Coach goes over strategies, game plans, and player assignments for the next game.

We also review previous game video footage to analyze our performance and that of their upcoming opponents.

But in the back of my head, I am worried Elsa not only hates me now, but that she won't want to go with me to my sister's wedding. My grandma is ecstatic and keeps going on about how she can't wait to meet my fiancé finally. I can't show up alone to my sister's wedding.

Elsa gave her word though, and she doesn't seem the type to break it. That is my only hope.

When I get back to my locker after the meeting, I feel like a high school kid waiting to see if their crush texted them back.

My heart drops. Nothing from Elsa.

Distracted, I barely acknowledge the slaps on my back from my teammates as I head out. It's hard to ignore the slap on the

back of my head though.

I turn to see Tchekov, my teammate and the left winger on our team, and he's looking at me with concerned eyes.

“What's up, dude? You're not yourself. You seem distracted and you haven't made fun of anyone once today.”

I snort and say, “Just got a lot of my mind, man.”

He says, “Are you worried about the upcoming conference finals?”

I laugh and shake my head, “No way. We got this in the bag.”

Tchekov continues, “Ah, so it must be woman problems, huh?”

I look at him sharply and he just laughs, “I'm right huh! Well, this one must be something special then.”

His phone rings and before answering it, he puts a hand on my shoulder and says, “Good luck, dude. I hope it all works out.”

I nod, turning to go with my duffle bag over my shoulder.

Yeah man, me too.

Chapter Five

ELSA

I'm still furious.

It's my fault. I shouldn't have opened up to a guy like that, one who is self-centered, arrogant, and shallow.

I mean, he's hiring me to be his fake fiancé. If that doesn't tell me about his character, I don't know what else will.

The one good thing that came out of that situation is that I finally spoke about what's been going on.

I've been in denial for so long but saying it out loud has made me realize that unless I do something about my panic attacks and stage fright, nothing will change. It won't magically go away.

I still feel aimless and not sure exactly what to do next, but I do have some hope that with the right help, I can still chase my acting dream.

I've been thinking about seeing Becca and Monica, two of my friends from high school that still live around here. I think

it may help me feel better to catch up with them and get out, but I'm putting it off since I'm not exactly proud of my life right now.

My stomach growls as the comforting smell of mom's lasagna drifts down. I take my earbuds out and pause my hip hop playlist. It usually helps me feel better, but it's not working today.

As I do, I see a text from Harvey.

I'm sorry about what happened at the bar.

Do you forgive me?

I just roll my eyes and head upstairs for dinner, leaving my phone behind.

When I walk in the kitchen, mom is pulling out the lasagna from the oven. She looks up at me with surprise.

"I was just about to call you up for dinner! Have you been feeling better? You've got me worried, dear."

I smile and nod, "I'm just tired, mom."

She nods then asks, "Have you been looking for a job, honey?"

I hold back a groan and say, "I'll go get dad," and then head towards the garage, which is his usual hideout. He's always working on something in there.

As I dodge both my parents' questions around how the job hunt is going, I think about how the one hundred grand from playing Harvey's fake fiancé will be life changing for me.

I wouldn't have to worry about finding a job right way. I could also use part of that money to start getting the help I need to deal with my panic attacks.

When mom brings up going away with Harvey this weekend at his sister's wedding, I surprise them both by saying I'll do the dishes.

"Go tinker with the car, dad. And mom, take a break and go catch up on reading for your book club."

Dad doesn't say anything. He just hands me his plate with raised eyebrows before heading back into the garage.

Mom smiles, beaming as I take the plates to the sink.

Before she heads out, she gives me a huge hug and says, "Why, thank you, sweetheart! And I have to say, I am so happy that you'll be spending so much time with Harvey this weekend. I can't wait to hear all about it."

I focus on rinsing the plates then putting them in the dishwater, cover the leftover lasagna in foil and put it in the fridge, and then I head downstairs.

I check my phone and see a text from Parker.

Hey, I won't bug you too much about it, I know you are still mad at me, but I wanted to say good luck this weekend with Harvey ok? Be careful!

I laugh and shake my head.

I am! But, don't worry. I'll be fine. I'll let you know how it goes.

I lay down and before long, I fall asleep.

Chapter Six

HARVEY

I get up early to go on a run.
The first thing I do is look at my phone, but still nothing from Elsa.

I groan.

Is she bailing on me?

I brush my teeth, drink a ton of water, then throw on a t shirt and shorts and go for a quick jog.

There's a slight chill, but it's not uncomfortably cold. I enjoy it and feel myself waking up right way. I like it when I can wake up with the sunrise.

Once I'm back home, I check my phone. Still nothing from Elsa, but I do see a missed call from Parker.

I call him back, "What's up man?"

He answers, "Hey, I know you are busy, so I'll make this short. I know you are going with Elsa this weekend. Take good

care of her, okay?”

I feel a flicker of hope.

Does this mean she told Parker she's still going?

“Of course, dude. You have my word. Has she said anything to you by any chance?”

Parker just laughs. “Nah, not really. I think she's still kinda mad at me for being in on this with you. I did hear from her last night though, and she did tell me she'd let me know how it went.”

A surge of relief washes through me, and I nod my head with an idiot grin on my face.

“Yeah man, I'll let you know how it goes too! Thank you for helping me figure this all out. I owe you one.”

Parker laughs and says, “Just send me over the ten grand like you promised man. Then we'll be even.”

I frown. “But I promised Elsa I wouldn't.”

Parker continues, “Yeah, kinda. But you promised me you would before you told her you wouldn't, so I think that trumps.” I sigh. If she finds out, that's all I need. Another reason for her to be pissed at me.

“How about this, dude. After it's done, I'll pay her, and I'll pay you. That work for you?”

I can hear the excitement in his voice. “Yeah, man. Sounds good. Appreciate it!”

I tell him goodbye and then go take a shower.

During practice today, my focus is razor sharp as I move through the drills and I crack a ton of jokes, feeling lighthearted.

As the day goes on, I still haven't heard from Elsa, and I consider calling her, but decide to wait a bit longer.

When I head to the car to go grab some dinner, I take out my phone to start my playlist. When I do, I see a text from Elsa.

Finally!

It's short and simple, but I don't care. I'll take it.

When are you going to pick me up on Friday?

Chapter Seven

ELSA

C*an I take you to dinner Thursday night?*

I know that's tomorrow, so short notice, but I hope you can make it.

His response to my curt text catches me off guard but what surprises me even more are the butterflies that start to come alive in my stomach.

What is wrong with you?

He's an arrogant asshole, remember?

I sigh and try to figure out how to reply. I don't want to seem too eager after all.

"Elsa, dinner!" mom yells. I startle in place and almost drop my phone. Laughing at myself, I decide to leave my phone downstairs and then come back to it after dinner.

No reason not to make him wait, right?

As I head upstairs, I turn back to look at my makeshift basement home. It's still full of boxes and bins, but I've pushed them all to one side of the room, so they are out of the way.

It's dimly lit by the soft, warm glow of a few strategically placed lamps in corners and along the walls.

I don't have a bed exactly, but the well-worn sofa in the middle of the area opens into one.

I shake my head and remind myself it's just temporary as I walk upstairs.

Mom is talking nonstop throughout dinner about Harvey. I mainly just listen. Dad eats as quickly as possible then excuses himself to go work on the car in the garage.

"Elsa, are you listening?"

I smile absentmindedly. "I'm sorry mom. I'm just tired. I think I'm going to head downstairs and start packing for the wedding this weekend and—"

Before I can say anything else, mom nods enthusiastically and basically shoos me away from the table.

"Do whatever you need to, dear! I'm just so happy to see you spending time with such a wonderful man. Who knows, maybe the next wedding you go to will be your own!"

My eyes grow wide, and I just get up from the table, put my dirty dishes in the dishwasher, and head downstairs with a glass of water.

I open the sofa into a bed and curl up with my pillow, blanket, and phone. With a triumphant smile on my face, I text Harvey back.

As long as I get to pick the place this time.

The next twenty-four hours go by in a blur. I'm annoyed to find myself nervous about seeing Harvey again and having dinner with him.

He said he would be here at six, which is only fifteen minutes away. The way mom keeps looking outside the window is making my nerves even more shot.

"I'm just going to wait outside, mom. I'll see you when I get back."

She starts to protest, but I grab my purse and open the door.

"Love you mom, bye." I give her a side hug before closing the door and sitting on the swing on the front porch. I know mom is disappointed that she won't get to talk to Harvey, but it's better this way.

He pulls into the driveway a few moments later and I rush up to meet the car in case mom had ideas of coming outside to send us off.

I open the passenger door and he gives me a brief wave as I sit down.

When I see him dressed in a well-fitted charcoal gray suit jacket, dark jeans, and light blue button-down dress shirt, I want to melt. I almost forget I'm supposed to be mad at him.

It doesn't help that his blue shirt makes his blue eyes pop and that the first few buttons are undone, making me want to undo the rest.

What the hell is wrong with me?

I move my hands nervously down my black cocktail dress and try to catch my breath.

“Are you still mad at me?”

His voice is sincere but has a touch of humor in it, and I can't help but smile back.

“Mad about what?” I ask, playing dumb.

He snorts. “Oh, I see. You are going to make me apologize again, huh?” He leans back and turns to face me, his eyes peering intently into mine.

He continues, “I am sorry for what I said at the bar the other night. It was tasteless and disrespectful, and I wasn't thinking when I said it. I hurt your feelings and I don't want to ever do that again. Do you forgive me, *sweetheart?*”

Even though he says the last word jokingly, it still sends shivers down my spine.

But I act nonchalant as I say, “I suppose so.”

He smiles as he pulls out of the driveway. Classic rock is playing again in the background, but it's on a low volume.

As we drive out of the neighborhood, he says, “I have to admit. You had me worried for a while. I thought maybe you were ditching me.”

I lean back and laugh. “I’m not going to lie. It did cross my mind, but a promise is a promise. I wouldn’t leave you hanging, *babe*.”

He looks over for a moment and we both laugh, and in that moment, I find myself wishing I was going on a real date with him.

Before I know it, he is pulling into La Cucina Elegante, which is a fine dining Italian restaurant I’ve always wanted to try.

Excited, I hop out of the car as soon as he parks. He has to jog to catch up to me.

“Someone’s hungry,” he jokes as he opens the door to let me in.

The dim lighting that greets us feels romantic and all the tables are covered in white tablecloths with a flickering candle in the center.

My stomach growls as I breathe in the scents of Italian herbs, garlic, simmering tomato sauces, and fresh-baked bread.

With a smile, the hostess welcomes us, “Buona sera, please follow me.”

We follow her to a private table for two in the back corner. As we sit, the hostess gives us a pair of menus.

“If you have any questions, please let Mateo know,” she says and nods to our waiter.

Mateo smiles and asks us what we’d like to drink.

Harvey quickly says, "I'll just take sparkling water. What would you like, Elsa?"

I glance down at the wine menu and then make my decision.

I boldly say, "I'd like a glass of Prosecco, please."

He nods with a smile. "Absolutely. I will be back soon with your drinks. Please let me know if you have any questions about the menu."

As the waiter walks away, I notice Harvey's eyes are dancing as he says, "Well I can guess what your favorite type of food is."

I laugh and shrug, "You got me. I mean, you can't go wrong with cheese and pasta and bread, right?"

I grab the dinner menu and begin looking through it.

I notice Harvey hasn't even glanced at his. I look at him and joke, "Let me guess. You are ordering pizza?"

When his eyes widen, I know I'm right and I can't help but giggle.

"Wow, I'm that easy to read, huh? I have a feeling you'll do just fine as my bride-to-be."

I stop giggling and a shiver runs through me as he says that. I pretend to get lost in the menu, and when the waiter comes back with our drinks, I jump.

My face red, I graciously take the offered glass of wine.

"Are you ready to order? Do you have any questions?"

Harvey is looking relaxed, his menu still unopened. He looks pointedly at me. “What would you like, *dear?*”

I ignore him and look to the waiter and say, “The truffle-infused fettuccine alfredo with black truffle shavings, please.”

He nods while writing it down, then turns to Harvey, who simply replies, “A sausage and pepperoni pizza please.”

To his credit, the waiter doesn’t bat an eye and simply replies, “Will do, sir.”

As we are left alone again, Harvey pulls out a piece of paper from inside his suit jacket.

He slides it over to me and says, “I know how prepared you like to be, so I listed out my family and their names for you.”

I read over the list showing the names, including his parents, sister, aunts, and uncles.

I give him an appreciative smile, “This is helpful, thank you.”

As he leans over to show me their pictures on his phone, I breathe in the musky male scent of him and pretend that I don’t enjoy it.

Dinner was delicious. I even stole a piece of his pizza, which was the best slice of pizza I’ve ever had.

I’m sitting content after dinner when Harvey reaches into his pocket and brings out a ring.

Before he can say anything, I immediately cry out, “Oh my God, no.”

A couple sitting near us look over with raised eyebrows.

Harvey hitches his own eyebrows up in confusion. “But there has to be an engagement ring. Can you at least try it on, so we know if it fits?”

I sigh then grab it from him and slowly slide it on my finger.

“It’s a snug fit. I get that we need this, but just bring it when you pick me up tomorrow. There’s no way I’m going home with that. If my mom saw it, she’d freak out even more than she already is. And I don’t want to risk losing it.”

He nods with a knowing smile, putting the ring in his pocket. “Your mom loves me, huh? Moms always do.”

I snort. “Why do I get the feeling you don’t make it to the ‘meet the parents’ phase a lot?”

His grin falls and he just stares at me and says, “No dessert for you.”

I laugh and say, “I’m way too full anyway.”

When he drops me off that night, he is a gentleman. He walks me to the door. The porch light is on, and I can just imagine mom’s eyes on us. I turn to look at him and for a moment, I don’t know what to say.

“I guess I’ll see you tomorrow then,” he says softly. “As my future bride.” He grins.

I laugh, “You forgot the word *fake!*”

His gaze lingers on mine a moment longer and then he slowly walks back to his car and drives away.

I unlock the door and go inside, heading straight for my basement bedroom with the realization that I didn't hate dinner with him.

But I still don't like him.

That much.

Chapter Eight

HARVEY

I'm relieved Elsa doesn't hate me anymore. I never thought I'd feel this way, but I'm actually getting excited to show her off to my family. I think we can pull this off.

I'm not going to lie; I had a fun time last night with her. She's pretty comfortable to be around and the time flew by. I love the way her brown eyes light up when she laughs.

And that was the best damn pizza I've ever had in my life.

I enjoyed opening up to her about my family and sharing their photos and little stories with her. And the way she listened and asked questions made me feel like she cared. It was refreshing.

The truth is I wanted to kiss her last night. She looked so sexy in that little black dress. Hell, I wanted to do more than that, but the fact that it was her parents' house kept me in check.

I guess it's not a bad thing if I am attracted to my fake fiancé right?

It will help sell it.

I check my phone and see a torrent of texts from Parker.

It's as if he can hear my thoughts or something.

Bro you better take care of my sister.

Don't make me regret this!

I laugh to myself. Parker always freaks out about stuff.

Chill, dude. I'll make sure she's comfortable and watch out for her.

I can already see him texting me back.

You better. If anything happens to her, I'll never forgive you.

I just sigh and text him again.

I appreciate your help. I owe you one man.

His last text makes me laugh.

You owe me ten grand!

I place my phone on the edge of the outdoor hot tub and close my eyes, enjoying the bubbling hot water and steam. I need to relax a bit before encountering my entire family. I love them, but I know it will be exhausting.

My thoughts turn to what would happen if Elsa were here now.

Damn it, I should have taken a cold shower instead.

I step out on to the wooden deck and towel off, then head inside to take that shower.

Afterwards, I throw on a navy sweater, dark jeans, and brown loafers.

After I change, I think of texting Elsa and asking what she's wearing but decide against it.

The last thing I want to do is offend her right before we have to reveal our fake relationship to my family.

I step outside for the tenth time today to admire my new toy. It's a Ford F-150 Raptor with metallic silver paint and sleek black trimmings. It definitely has a commanding presence.

I fold the rear seats up and place my duffle bag there. I just plan on staying for the weekend so don't need much.

I lock up, turn on the alarm, and make sure the gates are locked.

Almost giddy, I get behind the wheel and press the start button. As it growls to life under me, I know I made the right choice.

As I head over to pick up Elsa, I notice three things.

I'm excited to see her.

I know how to get there without the GPS this time.

I haven't thought about hockey once.

Chapter Nine

ELSA

I go sit by my luggage, near the door.

It's just a single suitcase, as I don't want to call much attention to myself, and Harvey's expensive sports car probably doesn't have a lot of space in the trunk anyway.

Supporting my elbows over my knees, I can tell I'm getting nervous. I bury my face in my hands and secretly pray for him not to come, but still leave me the money.

'Oh, hi, Elsa! I've found a real fiancé, but here's the money for your hassle!' he would say in a perfect world.

I feel a little bit more prepared after last night and seeing his family photos and learning their names. The way he talked about them made me smile and helped me get over some of my anger towards him. He really cares about them, but I think it's odd he could lie to them like this so easily. He seems like a lot of fun, but not very trustworthy.

It's not like it matters anyway. Just get there, pull this off, and get your one hundred grand.

I feel my heartbeat quicken when I remember him pulling out that ring last night. I knew it was fake, but I still got chills. It doesn't hurt that he's so tall, muscular, and sexy. I definitely won't have to pretend that I'm attracted to him.

I'm halfway to the kitchen for a cup of water when a potent car horn makes me jump.

“Elsa! It's Harvey!” mom says, frantic.

I ignore her jumpy appeals to me and instead go in search of my water.

I hear mom opening the front door and calling out to Harvey, welcoming him inside our house so enthusiastically I hear it all clearly from inside the kitchen.

“Elsa?” Mom calls, impatient. “Harvey is he-ere!”

I'm very nervous right now, but I guess I can use it to play the role. A bride-to-be would be nervous upon meeting her fiancé's family for the first time, right?

As long as it doesn't turn into an all-out panic attack.

Taking a big gulp of water — for courage — I leave the dirty cup on the counter and head back to the living room, where mom is clinging to Harvey's arm and grinning from ear to ear.

He's looking good, his blue eyes glinting, but I still roll my eyes at his goofy grin.

As unimpressed as ever, dad doesn't even stand from his chair.

"John, come here to say hi!" mom insists.

Dad just waves her off. "He's young, has two legs, and I have a bad back. He can come here!" he says, not moving his eyes from the morning news.

"I like you, John. You know what you want." Harvey leaves mom's side and goes to greet my father.

Dad seems pleased with his handshake.

"I'm sorry nobody here knows who you are, son, but we're a basketball family," dad says, to which Harvey snickers.

"Hello, Elsa," he says, his voice suddenly seductive and I force myself not to roll my eyes.

"Ready to go?"

"U-hum. My luggage is by the door." I go kiss mom and dad goodbye and keep on waiting for him to haul it to the car.

After several excruciating seconds where he just stares at me, he finally puts two and two together and takes the suitcase by the handle.

"Heavy!" he says as we cross the lawn and get to the sidewalk.

"Oh, you take hockey pucks to the face for a living. You can handle it!" I retort, and he laughs like a schoolboy.

Today he is driving an enormous pickup truck, silver with black trimmings, with an extended cabin and a faint smell of

gas to let me know this monstrosity is a guzzler like none other.

He places my luggage under the bed's covering, closes the tailgate, then unlocks the truck with the key fob and orders, "Come on in."

I nod, then climb up into the passenger seat. The insides of the truck are clean and have that entrancing new car smell, so either this truck is brand new, or he just had it cleaned to impress me.

"It's this truck new?" I ask as he turns on the engine.

"Yes," he says with a nod, backing away from the curb. "Just got it today."

"Oh," I say. "Who are you trying to impress?"

He steps on the pedal and looks at me sideways, suspicious of my intentions.

"My brother, my father, my uncles and cousins," he says, defensive.

"So, every male in the family?" I respond, amused.

"Basically, yeah." He takes a right turn to get to the highway.

"You know what they say about guys with big trucks, right?" I cross my arms and have some fun at his expense.

"No, what?" It takes him a while, but then he says, "Hey! I can guarantee that's not true!"

I start to giggle, covering my mouth with my hand.

We drive west for a few hours and arrive in Springfield, where his parents live. Harvey guides the truck into a neighborhood of large two-story houses, and he parks it in a street where there are several other vehicles parked.

“Wait, one second,” he says when I reach for the door handle. Turning to him, I see he’s got the ring outstretched. I can’t help it. A wave of shivers rolls through me when I see it. It’s a simple but stunning princess-cut diamond set on a silver band. I inspect it more closely than I did last night.

My eyes wide, I watch how it sparkles, reflecting light around.

He chuckles, bringing me back to reality.

Hoping I’m not turning too red, I grab it and slide it on the ring finger of my left hand.

He pouts, “I wanted to do it.”

I just snort and open the door.

Once we are both on the sidewalk, he offers me his arm. “Time to start working, Ms. Hollywood. Thanks again for not giving up on me, by the way.”

I smile, resigned and anxious, and take his arm to hold as he walks me toward his parents’ house. As nervous as I am, I can help but enjoy the feel of his muscular arm around mine.

Plus, he smells *really* good.

I shake my head and pay attention to where we are going. His parents’ house is quaint and lovely. It’s a two-story

redbrick home, and the front lawn is decorated with golden and white balloons. There's a big sign saying 'Congratulations, Kiera and Michael!' right in the middle of the lawn.

I'm shaking, and he knows it because he reaches for my hand, linking his fingers through mine. To my surprise, it helps.

Just take deep breaths.

He lets go of me to ring the doorbell, and I hide behind him, like the shy girlfriend I was painted to be.

I hold on to him once I hear and see the doorknob turning. Surprising both of us, it's a toddler. She's a beautiful little girl with dark hair and big blue eyes, just like Harvey's.

"Abby!" Harvey says, in a low, deep-throated monster voice.

Abby giggles like crazy while Harvey takes her in his arms to blow raspberries on her stomach. It's adorable and he steps inside with her like this, and I follow him in. I am greeted by a crowd of voices gathered in the foyer and in the living room.

Harvey places the little girl on the floor and moves his attention forward to a short blond woman. "Hey, Donna, where's Grant and dad?"

"In the living room, playing video games..." Donna rolls her eyes, then turns her attention to me. "And who might this be? The famed lady?"

"Yeah, this is Elsa!" Harvey confirms.

Donna comes to greet me but stops mid-step. “Wasn’t her name Marcella?” she asks, an eyebrow raised, and a finger pointed at me.

I’m screwed. My blood is running cold. I just got caught and I’m not even five minutes in.

“Marcella is my middle name!” I spout at the last second.

“Oh, okay!” the woman walks over and hugs me tight. “Which do you prefer?”

“Elsa!” Harvey and I say at once, and we both giggle nervously.

“Donna is my sister-in-law, Elsa,” Harvey says with a hand on both of our shoulders. “She’s married to my older brother, Grant.”

“Nice to meet you!” I say, forcing a smile, already overwhelmed by everything going on around me, but I do recognize the familiar faces and names after my little crash course last night.

“And grandma? Where is she?” Harvey asks, jumping in place.

“Backyard, with your mom and your sister. I’m just here because I was looking for Abby!” Donna shrugs, looking tired.

She then collects her daughter by the shoulders, muttering something about “daddy’s turn” while Harvey takes me by the hand and begins to walk me to the back of the house.

“What if your grandma doesn’t like me?” I moan, ready by anticipation to be rejected as the fraud I am.

“You’re female and you’re marrying me, so she loves you already!” he says. “But if you can down a whiskey sour in one gulp, she’ll respect you even more.”

Faces walk by us, some amused, some friendly, and all of them very curious about me. Harvey wastes no time with them and takes me straight to a table by the pool. It’s under a parasol and looks like a haven under the bright mid-day sun.

Three generations of women are seated underneath — grandmother, mother, and daughter together for a whole day of gossip.

I recognize each from their photos I saw yesterday. His mom stands up and rushes toward Harvey. She looks just slightly out of middle age, but her way of walking, her voice, and everything else about her tells me she is a couple of decades older than she looks.

She comes straight to me, and I freeze in place, looking at Harvey and waiting for him to rescue me.

But the rescue never comes.

“Oh, Harvey; she’s beautiful!” His mom wraps her arms around my neck, so tight I can’t breathe. “Why didn’t you bring her here sooner?”

“Life got in the way, mom...” Harvey approaches her for a kiss, but she does not let go of me. “Elsa, this is Lorna, my mom. Mom, this is Elsa!”

“Pleased to meet you, Elsa,” Lorna is all smiles and loving squeezes, and I feel bad for fooling her like this. “Now come you two; come sit with us!”

Lorna animatedly guides us to the table, where Harvey greets first his sister and then his grandma.

His sister is a tall woman, strong and powerful who looks just like Harvey. The second is a sweet old lady with a head full of snow-white hair, and a sly expression on her face as she holds her drink and looks at me.

“Elsa, this is Kiera, my twin sister, and the one getting married. And this is Rose, my grandma.”

“She’s too pretty for you, Harvey,” the old lady says to my face. “Switch her for another; she’ll give you too much trouble!”

Grandma Rose begins to cackle, and she is quickly followed by the other women at the table. Right after it, she brings me close, kisses me on the cheek, and says, “Welcome to the family, hun.”

And as I take my seat beside Harvey, and he holds my hand in his, I realize this has barely started and has already gone too far.

Chapter Ten

HARVEY

“So, what are the boys doing tonight?” One of my aunts asks, barging into the living room where all the men, looking fine and dandy, are reunited and getting ready for the night’s program.

“Just a bar, Margot.” My uncle Tom whisks her off her feet to kiss her. “We’ll be safe and sound at home before 2 AM.”

“You better be!” Aunt Margot slaps him gently on the shoulder and lets him go.

“And where are the girls going?” Uncle Tom retorts, hands on his hips.

“Jennie made us a reservation at a southern food place in town,” she says.

“Careful,” I say, looking intently at the sports newscast on TV. “You’re not going to fit in your dresses for tomorrow!”

“Oh, stop it, Harvey!” Aunt Margot waves me off and readies herself to leave.

Michael comes walking downstairs. He's my sister Kiera's fiancé, her soon-to-be husband, and I used to not like him all that much. But the guy grew on me with time, and now I couldn't ask for anyone better for my sister.

"Okay, I'm here!" he says. "Let's go?"

"Let's!" My father says. He's more excited than anyone to party a little tonight because mom never lets him go out. Not even my eighteen-year-old cousin James is more excited about a strip club than him.

"Just let me say goodbye to Elsa. Have you met her?" I ask Michael.

"Upstairs," he points up. "Kiera is parading around in her wedding dress; she didn't even let me in to say goodbye..."

I see Michael kick an imaginary can, and I smile in pity of the guy. Right after, I run upstairs and knock on Kiera's door, knowing I will be rejected like Michael was.

"Elsa!" I call in a loud, friendly voice.

I hear a commotion inside, and Elsa comes to the door a moment later. She gives me a gorgeous smile and is looking entertained by my crazy-ass family.

"Are you leaving now?" she asks, holding onto the door frame.

"Yeah," I say. "Are you going to be okay?"

She nods with confidence, and I feel relief.

“I’m getting along with them just fine. They’re not so interested in me as they are in me getting interested in them,” she whispers.

I think for a second. “Pretty sure that was an offense to my family, but okay. Just be careful not to drink too much.”

Elsa snickers. “Why?”

I shrug. “I don’t know how you are when you’re drunk. What if you spill the beans to my mom and my grandma?”

“Don’t worry, Harvey.” She rolls her eyes but then smiles with empathy. “I’m a better actress than I look. And I’m over my original nerves.”

“Alright. See you later, then.”

Without realizing it, I lean down to kiss her, getting a whiff of her hair. She smells like strawberries. When she giggles and dodges me, I refuse to be defeated and kiss the corner of her lips instead.

She blushes, getting beet-red, and I know that my cheeks have acquired a reddish color as well. We part ways without a word. She goes back inside the bedroom, and I head back downstairs.

“Okay, now I’m ready to go,” I say, and everyone instantly flees for the front door.

We drive two towns over to the famed strip club Grant claims to be the favorite of a *friend*.

The place is fancy, and the girls are young and pretty, I will give him that. But I always feel like a fish out of water in these places because paying for female attention feels uncomfortable to me. I've never had to pay for it, even before getting rich.

Grant, who takes the lead of the group, looks around, lost for a second, and then walks up to the bartender.

“Um, we're the group here for the Champagne Room?” he asks.

The man looks at him intently with one eye, the other hidden behind his eye patch, then looks to the side and cups his hand around his mouth to yell, “Hey, Ross! The bachelor party is here!”

A man immediately comes out from behind a wall of beauties. He's short, stocky, and very bald, and comes to us with open arms and a huge grin on his face.

“Come on in, boys. Your room is ready!” he signals widely with his arms, “Follow me!”

It's Saturday night and the place is packed, so we dodge all kinds of sleazy types and topless girls to reach our room.

I see James' father shove a bunch of singles into his pocket as we walk in; the place is as finely decorated as much as a strip club can be.

Couches encircle the area of the strip poles and champagne-colored curtains drape around what are supposed to be Roman-styled pillars. At the end of the room, there's a wall full of small monitors, each of them showing a different porn movie.

“Can we switch the channel on those?” I ask Ross, raising a thumb toward the TVs.

The man looks at me with wide eyes and a frown, clearly taking offense. “That’s not a request we normally have, sir...”

“Dude, do you know who he is?” Uncle Mark says. “Harvey Baker, center for the Boston Arctic Wolves!”

“Oh, the NHL team!” Ross slaps his forehead, “Of course! Any preference?”

I look at my phone and see one of my favorite adult cartoons is airing now, and I tell him.

“I’ll change it now!” Ross tries to shake me by the shoulders, but our size difference is so massive that he’s the one who ends up shaken.

“Now make yourselves at home. There’s a complimentary champagne bottle, and I’ll send the ladies right along!”

I take a seat near James and Tucker, both hairless family specimens at age eighteen and twenty-one. We all watch as Michael is pushed by Grant to take the lead and open the champagne, but first, of course, he has to say a few words.

“Guys, guys!” He tries in vain to call for their attention.

I decide to give him a hand and call out, “*Guys!*”

Everyone stops talking.

I continue, “Michael, the floor is yours.”

“Thank you, bro!” he says, with a wave in my direction.

“I’ll be brief, I promise! I just... Well, my father is no longer with us. I have very few men in my family, and none of them could be here today. I didn’t have a strong masculine figure in my life until meeting you, George!”

My father gets slapped on the back by several members of our entourage. Michael goes on, “George, Grant, Harvey... You gave me a family I could have only wished for. And now that I am going to start a family with Kiera...”

He starts to get emotional. Me and the boys at my flanks try to hold back the laughter. “I feel like, as a man, I am complete!”

Grant, dad, and I jump at him to hug and give him noogies. Somebody yells “Enough of this shit; let’s drink!” Michael pops the champagne, the first of the night.

“Drinks on me, boys!” I yell and my words are received with roaring cheer, which only grows louder once the ladies comes in: two girls, a blond and a brunette, waltz in wearing exotic clothing and claws at the ready to take all our money.

The blond comes in with another bottle of champagne and comes straight at me with it. “Are you the hockey player?” she says in a forced sensual tone.

“Yes, I am,” I can’t help but wonder what she is doing here. Raising a kid on her own? Trying to pay for college?

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Krystal,” she says as she sits on my lap, but I push back as politely as I can.

“Listen, Krystal...” I open my wallet, pull out a hundred-dollar bill, and place it under the strap of her bikini top.

“Why don’t you open that champagne with those two over there? Because I’m a committed man.”

I point to Tucker and James, who seem ecstatic that she is looking in their direction. I just point out that James can’t drink first.

I take a seat again, near the TVs, while the party goes on. I watch the cartoon, and even if there’s no sound, I’m more interested in it than in the party going on around me.

My father notices my sulking mood and comes over to me with a concerned expression on his face. He is already a little buzzed.

“Hey, pal, what’s wrong?” He places a hand on my shoulder, and I give him a small smile.

“Strip clubs make me sad, dad,” I say without looking at him.

“How’s that possible?” He slaps his thigh, excited. He turns his head towards the little show going on with the brunette dancer, and then turns back to me. “Why don’t you have a little fun?”

He elbows me in the ribs, but I just wave him off. “I’m here to support Michael. Let the girls do their work with those who care. All I can do is feel pity for them.”

Dad gives me a crooked look but lets the subject go.

“Well, you can have some booze, can’t you?” he says, handing me a glass of champagne.

“I can’t! I’m one of the designated drivers, remember?” I say.

Dad just nods and looks at me as if I were a saint.

I mainly hang out with Grant, who tries to maintain control of the party and make sure Michael returns to Kiera in one piece.

Around 1 AM, some folks decide they want to strip alongside the ladies, and Grant appeals to me to put some order in the house and herd everyone together to leave.

Much to the male audience’s chagrin, the girls leave full of hugs and kisses, having made a killing in tips. Michael behaved, enough to dodge a kiss on the lips from Krystal, and I’ll give the guy my kudos because the girl is gorgeous.

“Okay, this was fun!” Michael shouts into the parking lot, completely drunk, as we all search for our cars to leave, each with a designated driver.

“When’s the next one?”

“Well, who’s the next one getting married?” Uncle Mark yells, just as wasted.

“Harvey, of course!” Grant shouts.

“Have you set the date yet, boy?” Dad joins him in the fanfare.

“Not yet...” It’s my turn to kick the imaginary can and look sad for a change.

“Are you flaking on that hottie?” My cousin Frank asks, his face contorted in pure disbelief.

“I’m not the one flaking, okay?” I get my car keys and look over at James with a questioning look. He gives me a thumbs up. He’s the designated driver for the other car since he can’t even drink.

“No way!” Frank exclaims. “What’s in that girl’s head? You’re filthy rich!”

“I know, right?” I say, shrugging, and then I get in the car and urge the boys to come in.

“You must love her very much, son,” dad says, in an emotional voice. He always gets this way when he drinks.

“Say what?” I strap on the seat belt and look over my shoulder.

“To put up with her being flakey.” He completes his thought, then sniffles heavily, signaling he is going to cry.

“Oh, come on, dad!” Grant turns around to face the back seat. “That’s Harvey’s problem, alright?”

“Don’t worry, dad,” I try to soften his view of her. If he remembers this tomorrow, he’ll be having a very stern talk with Elsa, and we don’t want that to happen. “She’ll come around.”

When I finally end this lie and tell everybody that Elsa and I broke up, he will definitely be devastated.

Good job, Harvey. Breaking people's hearts effortlessly left and right.

You should win the prize for Worst Son Ever.

Chapter Eleven

ELSA

They are loud as cackling parrots, but I realize I'm actually enjoying this time with Harvey's family so far.

His grandma is adorable, and I sit by her side in the car as we move toward the venue of the party.

"Have I told you that you look like Lorna when she was young?" Grandma Rose says to me, holding my hand lovingly.

"Grandma, only about seven times!" Kiera says from the front seat.

Donna, Harvey's sister-in-law, holds onto Rose's other hand and says, "Don't worry, Rose. We know your memory is running away from you!"

"Because my memory is scared of me!" Rose cackles in the most lovable way.

We arrive at the place, a big family restaurant in the downtown center of the city. Rose doesn't seem happy, and I

hold back a giggle when I hear her mutter, “No strippers?” under her breath.

We settle in and enjoy the night. Just like I told Harvey, what they really want is to have me interested in them, so I ask a lot of questions and give out three dozen compliments to everyone and anyone who wants to hear them.

The only thing out of the well-behaved ordinary is how much Harvey’s sister drinks. Very quickly, she is miserably drunk, so Lorna and Donna decide to take her home at around midnight.

I tag along since they were my ride here. Grandma Rose is also spent, so I keep her company in the car again.

On the way back to their house, Kiera sobs like a child, face buried within her hands and a voice so hapless it is as if she just lost a loved one.

“I waited for so long to get married. Am I doing the right thing, mom?” She turns to Lorna, who’s behind the wheel.

“Of course, you are, darling! Michael is a great boy!” Lorna reassures her.

“Eh, grab a man while you can, hun. You’re almost too old to have kids and the clock is ticking!” Grandma Rose adds, but it only increases Kiera’s tears.

When we get to the Baker’s house, Donna takes Rose upstairs while Lorna takes Kiera to the kitchen for a glass of water and some tea.

I follow her there, and ask politely, “Do you need any help with anything Lorna?”

“No, Elsa, thank you!” Lorna says, looking grateful, which warms my heart. “She’s just having cold feet, but that runs in the family...”

“Oh, okay!” I smile. “I’ll be going up to our bedroom, third door to the left, right?”

“You got it!” Lorna says, and I leave her be for now.

Getting upstairs, I find the room quite easily, confirming it the right room when I see my suitcase in the corner. I close the door behind me and reach for my bag, setting aside my pajamas, and looking into the ensuite bathroom to see if there are towels.

I take one of the best showers of my life, as the water pressure is strong, and the temperature is warm and nice. I get out of the shower wrapped in a fluffy green towel and grab the body oil from my case to get ready for the night.

I’m naked and with my back turned to the door when it’s cracked wide open and the shadow of Harvey projects over me.

Harvey gasps, started. “Sorry!” he says and closes the door right after.

My cheeks red, I quickly put on my set of matching jammies and go alert him at the door, “You can come in now,” I say.

He’s there, waiting patiently for me, and talking to one of his numerous relatives about how much fun they had at the club.

When I call, he excuses himself and walks in smelling like cheap perfume.

“You smell nice.” He stops briefly to sniff me.

“And you smell like a strip club. There’s even glitter on you!” I say, batting some of the shiny powder off his shirt with my hand.

“Would you be jealous if you were really my fiancé?” he asks, smiling, sly as a fox.

I cross my arms and smirk sideways, “Go take a shower, Harvey.”

He’s tired. His eyes are half-closed, and his breathing is heavy, so I can imagine he needs a good night’s sleep to be ready to be in church tomorrow on time.

“Good idea!” He raises a finger in the air and goes to reach for his own suitcase.

I’m blow-drying my hair when he walks out, wearing a battered t-shirt and shorts. He abandons his towel at the foot of the bed, which reminds me this is just a twin mattress his family expects us to share.

“So, what are we going to do about the bed?” I ask, unsure I want to hear his answer.

“I have an idea, but you might not like it,” he says, sitting down on the edge of the bed, but not lying down just yet.

“Yeah, don’t tell me, then...” I stand up to store my blow dryer back into my suitcase. “God, I need to iron my dress!”

I take my dress out; it's all pink silk, with exposed shoulders and a flared base. It's under the plastic cover still, as it's been since after my graduation party, which is the last time I wore it two years ago.

“Oh, it's fine!” he says, gathering a pillow and a comforter. “My suit is under a pile of clothing too.”

“So, you're not going to be one of the groomsmen?” I ask, hanging my dress over the window.

“No... There are already going to be journalists and photographers over there because of me. I don't want to draw even more unwanted attention.”

“Gotcha,” I say, turning to him again.

“You're doing great, you know? They love you!” Harvey says, and I puff up my chest with pride.

“Good,” I smile at him, but look longingly at the bed. “You're not going to sleep with me, right?”

He widens his eyes. “Do you want me to?” he asks, looking hopeful.

I frown, “What do you mean?”

Harvey pauses, takes his sweet time scratching his chin, sighs, and then finally gives me the most anti-climactic of answers. “Never mind. I'll sleep on the floor; you can have the bed for yourself.”

He agrees with my terms but seems unhappy about it. He wraps himself in a blanket and disappears from my sight.

Now all that's left is setting the alarm on my phone, turning off the light and getting to sleep, but listening to Harvey tossing and turning on the floor makes me feel bad.

After a while, I turn on the bedside lamp and look down over the bed at him. I can't help but laugh when I see him, laying on his back, one leg bent out towards the side. He looks extremely uncomfortable as he turns a sleepy blue-eyed gaze toward me.

I just sigh and tap on the bed, and he grins, sliding in next to me.

I turn my back to him, and I act like it's no big deal, but I feel goosebumps cover my body as he curls up behind me, his chest close enough to my back for me to feel him breathing.

Trying not to be too obvious, I lean back a bit more against him and fall asleep like that, my body pressed against his warm muscular chest.

Chapter Twelve

HARVEY

I wake up early with an arm around Elsa and to the scent of her strawberry shampoo.

And to something else. Eyes wide, I slowly move away from her, so I don't inadvertently poke her with my morning wood.

As I get out of bed, I wake her up. Keeping my back towards her, I look back as she stretches, her eyes still closed.

She looks so adorable I just want to scoop her up, but I control myself and go inside to use the restroom.

I look in the mirror and see red-rimmed eyes. I feel exhausted and have a headache, and I didn't even drink last night. I can only imagine how Michael, who drank like a fish, is feeling.

I hear Elsa's phone alarm go off and she groans. I step out of the bathroom to see her grabbing her dress and looking for her shoes.

“Good morning, sunshine,” I say as I get back in bed and watch her.

Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she just grabs the rest of her things and heads to the bathroom to change. I think I fall back asleep because a little while later, she is shaking me awake.

“What?” I mumble and when I open my eyes and see her in her pink dress, I immediately am dazzled.

I start to sit up to get a better view. “You look great,” I say more clearly.

She just shoos me away and says, “I’m meeting the other women downstairs to go to the hair salon. I’ll meet you later at the church, okay?”

“Alright, *sweetheart*,” I say with a crooked grin.

She turns as pink as her dress before rushing out.

I set my phone alarm for another hour then lay back down. That will give me enough time to get ready and go check on the rest of the guys. I’m sure they will be nursing their hangovers.

My alarm goes off what feels like seconds later. As I get ready, I find my mind wondering back to last night when I walked in on Elsa, the towel barely covering her naked body, and then to how nice it was to wake up with her in my arms.

I shake my head as if to clear it.

Get a grip, man!

At 9:30 AM our convoy hits the church grounds. The ladies are already there except for Kiera, who should be arriving half an hour later.

“Looking spiffy!” I hear Elsa’s voice call to me from the back and I turn around to see her, pretty in pink, ready to break some hearts.

“Now let’s get this over with!”

She wraps her arm around my arm, and we walk together down the church aisle to find out seats.

As we walk down to sit in the front row, I can’t help but feel proud as I walk there in front of everyone with Elsa. Our relatives are on both sides of the aisle — Michael’s family is so small that ours had to fill in the blanks.

As we wait for the ceremony to start, Elsa leans over to me and says, “Thank you for the opportunity, Harvey. It’s been a while since I’ve been to a wedding.”

“Yeah...” I nod. “I like weddings too.”

I have the urge to hold her hand and give into it. I let out a smile when she doesn’t resist.

Amid the chaos, mom and dad arrive, each one flanking grandma from one side.

“What’s wrong, grandma?” I let go of Elsa and lean forward to hold grandma Rose’s hand. “You don’t look so well.”

“I’m fine, I just need to take a seat!” Grandma protests, plopping on the pew on my other side. “My big strong

grandson will protect me.”

If there’s one thing grandmas are experts at, it is to make you feel loved, and my grandma is no different. I hold her by the shoulders and tilt my head sideways to talk into her ear.

“I will always protect you, grandma!” I gently kiss the top of her head with care so I don’t ruin her hair.

“I know, boy. I know.” She taps my hand, full of affection, then looks over me to see Elsa. “And you, girl. Did Harvey let you sleep?”

“Grandma!” I say, and Elsa laughs out loud, echoing through the church walls.

“He was a good boy, grandma,” Elsa informs her, to which Grandma Rose just shakes her head in disapproval.

Dad goes back outside, and just a few moments later, the music starts. The procession begins with the flower girl, a cute little blonde girl from Michael’s family, no older than five, and then it’s Michael and his mother, followed by the bridesmaids and groomsmen. After them, comes my niece, Anna, bearing the rings, and finally, the bride.

The music changes, becoming deeper, more serious, and dramatic, all to welcome Kiera to the place where her life will become one with Michael’s.

And Kiera looks gorgeous as a bride. The dress is form-fitting, and since she’s muscular, everything looks enhanced. It’s all embroidered with stone and pearls as well.

The ceremony goes well, except for grandma, who keeps on fanning herself.

“Wanna go outside and get some fresh air, grandma?” I ask, moving my arm from her shoulders so she can breathe a little better.

“I’m fine, boy.” She caresses my hand. “Now let’s watch Kiera get married!”

Elsa watches my interactions with grandma with a sweet smile on her lips. I squeeze her tight, just to tease, and she shakes her head and lets out a small giggle.

The bride and groom walk down the aisle together, now as husband and wife, and everybody stands to clap on their way out, except for grandma, who has a hand on her chest and is breathing with difficulty.

I pull mom aside and loud whisper in her ear, “I’m taking grandma to the hospital.”

Now she places a hand on her chest. She looks at grandma and talks to her; once again, Grandma says she’s fine, but it’s hard to believe a single word the woman says.

“I have her blood pressure gauge in the car. Let’s go get it,” mom says, already helping grandma to walk down the aisle between the pews.

“Stay here. Get to the party with Grant,” I tell Elsa, then focus on Grandma Rose.

“I’m going with you,” Elsa says firmly, following me. “My job is to impress your grandma and your parents, right?”

I just stare dumbly at her for a moment, being distracted about granny, but then nod my head in agreement because she is right.

We try to be discrete and head out without too many curious glances, as everyone else is filing out too after the ceremony and heading over to the party.

We get to the parking lot, where I sit grandma gently in the passenger side and turn on the air conditioner, while mom takes her blood pressure.

“Incredibly high.” Mom shows me the display on the device. It’s bad.

“We need to get her to the hospital, but I don’t want to ruin Kiera’s day...”

Mom starts to cry, which leaves Grandma Rose even more altered.

“It’s all my fault, isn’t it?” she says, still feeling her chest.

“No, it’s not,” Elsa kneels beside her. “No one can predict this sort of thing!”

“Gimme your keys, mom. Elsa and I will take grandma there,” I say, already extending my hand to take the keys.

“I’m going with you!” mom says in protest.

“No, stay. Kiera needs you. Don’t call off the party, preferably don’t even tell anyone yet. Just say we took grandma home because she was tired. Okay? I’ll call you in case something happens.”

“She’ll be fine, Lorna,” Elsa says, still kneeling beside granny. “We’ll take care of her.”

Elsa smiles at granny, and granny smiles back at her.

“I’m so glad Harvey is marrying you, darling!” she says, immediately breaking my heart.

I switch keys with mom, and we part ways. Mom is in distress. After all, it’s her mother, but her daughter’s wedding doesn’t need to be ruined by something that is likely just heatstroke.

The hospital is on the other side of town. When we get there, grandma is wheeled in immediately.

“Okay, I need someone to go in with her, and someone to fill out this form,” the nurse, an older woman with a very stern face, tells me and Elsa.

“Okay, I’ll fill out the form.” The nurse hands me a clipboard and pen and leaves my side to guide Elsa and grandma away.

As I fill out the form, my heart is pounding. Suddenly my mind is flooding with memories of my childhood moments with grandma. Grant, Kiera and I used to spend summers at her house, a big place by the lake with plenty of spots to play hide and seek.

I hand the form over at the reception desk, and feel my throat tighten. She can’t go now, not only two years away from her big 100th birthday.

But I'm not going to cry. Grandma wouldn't want me to. To me, what's left is to drink some water, take a deep breath, sit, and hope for the best.

I look at the emergency doors obsessively, and don't stop until I see Elsa walking out of them in her pink dress and her white heels, her hair tied in a beautiful bun that looks like a flower...

"Harvey?" she looks at me worried.

"Huh. How is she?" I jolt out of my distracting thoughts.

"She's sleeping," Elsa says. "I don't know exactly what's going on, but she has to stay here at least for the next twelve hours."

I nod, feeling relief that grandma is resting and is in good hands.

"If you wanna go back home..." I say.

But Elsa doesn't let me finish my thought.

"I'm staying," she interrupts. "Now I'm worried too."

"It's impossible not to get attached to grandma, huh?" I say, taking my phone out of my pocket.

Elsa nods and comes to sit right next to me.

I dial mom's number, hoping she can hear it over the noise of the reception party.

"How is she, Harvey?" It's the first thing mom says.

"Too early to really say because we've had no word from the doctors." I hear her let out a sob and I'm quick to reassure her.

“But she’s sleeping! She’s under observation. Everything is going to be alright!”

Mom breathes with relief, and after composing herself, she asks, “Want your father and I to go there?”

“No, have lunch, wait for the party to die down, then you can tell everybody,” I say. “She’s okay now, mom. But stay close to your phone.”

She bids me a tearful goodbye and I hang up the phone and sigh deeply.

“Is she okay?” Elsa asks me.

“Not really,” I say, juggling my phone with one hand. “But she’ll only be happy when grandma is out of here. Speaking of which...”

I turn fully to Elsa, completely crooked in my chair and not caring even a little. “You’re not doing this just to guarantee your money, right?” I continue, “Because your work is pretty much over, you can leave at any time...”

But Elsa just shakes her head and looks down at her shoes before replying, “I know, but I appreciate it all, even this. Your family is loud and so affectionate. They love each other deeply and are so welcoming. I saw how kindly they treat Kiera’s new husband. I was treated like a princess too.”

Once again, I nod, lost in thought.

“How long do you plan on staying?” I ask, my finger pointing at her.

“Until you go back to Boston,” she shrugs with one shoulder.

“No,” I shake my head, leaning forward to face her. “I’ll be leaving from here and going straight to Vancouver for a tournament. Really, you can leave whenever you want to.”

I reach over to rest a hand over hers and she doesn’t stop me.

“Something tells me I shouldn’t go now,” Elsa says, sounding reasonable despite this crazy situation we are in. “Let’s give it a day. I’ll feel bad if I leave now.”

This girl is either too kind or too dumb to realize she is no longer needed, and I don’t know how long I can keep pretending that I don’t want her to stay.

I’m about to say something stupid when a young, friendly doctor comes to us, adjusting his glasses to read the clipboard.

“Mr. Baker? Mrs. Connelly’s grandson?” he says, talking to me.

I stand the same instant, approaching the doctor as a kid approaches candy. “Is she okay, doctor?”

“Um,” the doctor looks around, then from me to Elsa and vice versa. “Please follow me to my office.”

Elsa and I follow him, apprehension weighting heavily on our shoulders.

Chapter Thirteen

ELSA

The doctor tells us that Harvey's grandma is going through heart failure and that only a transplant can fix it.

But at her age, the doctors recommend we just keep her comfortable and wait for the best outcome, and considering the best outcome here is for her to pass away in her sleep, this isn't a happy day.

Harvey's parents, Lorna and George, arrive by the end of the day to relieve us, saying they still hadn't said a thing to anyone in the family. Harvey makes his mom promise to tell Grant and Lorna's sisters when they arrive back home and then Harvey and I head back home as well, to finally change out of the formal clothing, eat something, and rest.

Harvey is very quiet on the way back, now driving his own truck. My heart goes out to him, and I want to comfort him.

He made it clear he doesn't need me around anymore. I'm not sure why I want to stay.

Is it because the whole act doesn't feel complete yet?

That the loyal fiancé should stay around until the bitter end?

Or is it because I've come to like them, and him, for good measure?

I'm not specifically trained as a method actress with skills to be able to distinguish effortlessly between what's real and what's not.

We're alone in the house when we arrive. As Harvey disables the alarm system, I take a seat on the couch, and he comes to sit next to me.

We look at each other in silence, so intently that we end up laughing nervously, and so loudly the neighbors probably think we're crazy.

"We shouldn't be laughing." But he slaps his belly as he does. "Oh God, grandma. Why now of all times?"

I look at my feet and smile sadly, just recovering from my own fit of anxious laughter. I then look at Harvey and can see clearly in his eyes that he is sad too; he needs to hear something to reassure him.

"You must really love her," I say. It's a completely stupid sentence and I instantly regret it.

He shrugs with one shoulder. "Don't you love yours?"

It's my turn to shrug. "Both of mine died when I was little. Mom's mom lived in Toronto, and dad's mom was a difficult person. My grandpas... They gave me money every time they

saw me. However, in the end, we were never close. I think it runs in the family.”

“Nah...” Harvey jumps from the chair to the couch to sit close to me. “Parker speaks fondly of you. And your mother seems very loving.”

“Don’t let that cute facade fool you. The woman is a control freak,” I warn him, raising a finger.

“What about your dad?” He inches closer, and I can’t help but feel butterflies. “Girls are usually very attached to their dads.”

“Well,” I smile. “Dad loves me in his own way.”

Harvey leans all the way back and gives me a confused look. “Okay,” he starts. “You’re telling me you have *no* happy memories with your family?”

It takes a moment for the question to hit me, but when it does, it hits hard.

“No!” I startle after a few seconds. “I do have happy memories of them! It’s just...”

He leans forward again, this time touching my arm.

“Just what?” he gently asks.

I sigh, look at him even closer, and blush violently. “It’s just that they don’t seem to be the same ones you have with your family.”

Harvey kisses me on the cheek, and I widen my eyes, feeling the spot of the caress with the tips of my fingers.

My mind goes blank and all I can see are his penetrating blue eyes.

“Harvey...” I’m not sure how to continue. “What are you doing?”

He puts one of his arms around my shoulders and gets so close I can feel the slight stubble on his face.

In the same hushed tone, he goes on, “I’m thanking you. You didn’t have to be so nice to my family or stay with me at a time like this. I truly appreciate it.”

I look at him, smiling, and suddenly I’m feeling so shy I don’t know what to do with myself.

“I just did the right thing,” I say, my tone hushed like his.

It happens very quickly. He presses his lips against mine and kisses me sweetly. I kiss him back, a pleasant warmth growing throughout my chest, and we stay like that for a good while, until he pulls back and pierces me with his eyes.

“Do you want this to end here, or...?” he asks.

My reply is instant. I don’t think. I just jump on top of him and push his back against the couch cushions and straddle him. I think he gets the message because while we kiss in desperate passion, he is already fumbling with the dress zipper on my back.

He groans and I look down at him with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t have any condoms.”

I just shake my head. “We should be ok. I’m on the pill.”

He raises an eyebrow at me. “Are you sure?”

I nod and in the next moment, he’s kissing me again and I get lost in the scent and taste of him. He slides my dress down and then lifts me up to pull the rest off and it falls to the floor. I start to undo his tie then the buttons of his shirt, desperate to feel his strong arms and chest.

He pulls me close, my chest against his, kissing me and causing shivers to go down my spine. He runs a finger down my arm and chuckles, “Goosebumps?”

I just giggle and nod, feeling even more of them spread across my body as he kisses my neck then brings his hand to my bra strap, which he unclasps the next instant.

With his hands all over my chest, I just sigh and lean back, enjoying his touch. When he brings his lips to a nipple, I feel another shiver pierce through me. Watching him makes me want him even more, and I bring my hands to his shoulders and start to rock against him, feeling how hard he’s getting through his pants.

He reaches down and undoes his pants, sliding both them and his briefs down several inches. I can’t help but gasp in anticipated pleasure when I see how big and hard he is.

Whatever I said before about guys with big trucks... Boy was I wrong.

His mouth still on my chest, I hover over him and start to grind against him, feeling him against my panties and it

already makes me start to tremble.

“You are such a tease,” he says in a hoarse sexy voice, his breathing heavy.

In one swift move, he reaches down, and with my panties still on, he just slides them out of the way, then brings his tip against me.

I let out a small cry when I feel him touch me. He slowly slides inside me, just the tip, then pulls it out, and does that a few more times, driving me crazy.

As I quiver above him, he says, “I can tease too you know.”

Putting my hands firmly on his shoulders, I look deep into his blue eyes before pushing down hard, watching his eyes go even darker and hearing him moan as I slide all the way down, letting him fill me up.

We start to move in unison and his hands move to my butt. I enjoy feeling him inside me, my chest against his, feeling him everywhere. I’m riding on the crest of a wave I don’t want to ever break.

I lean over and kiss his neck and he grabs a fistful of my hair and brings my mouth down on his. I cry out as he takes full control, moving up and inside me faster, causing me to fall against him and squeeze my legs even tighter around him.

The sound of my moans, accompanied by his heavy sighs, makes a lustful symphony that echoes through the empty house.

“Faster,” I ask of him, and I don’t have to ask twice.

An electric shock suddenly spreads all over my body, and I climax with a loud cry, my body fluttering over him, and right after he presses his pelvis tight against mine and pours himself inside of me.

He holds me close, staying inside me, as we catch our breath.

His hands running down my back, he gently kisses my neck and then he slowly gets up and starts to pick up his clothes.

As I sit on the couch alone watching him, an awkward feeling starts to gnaw at me.

Why did I just sleep with him?

This wasn't supposed to happen!

Harvey leans toward me to kiss me, but I stand up at the same time and act like I didn't notice.

I feel weird now, and all I want is to escape as quickly as I can.

"I'll hop in the shower first, okay?" I say, not meeting his gaze.

I don't wait for a response and just grab my clothes and head upstairs.

Chapter Fourteen

HARVEY

She *had* to make it weird.

That went from being incredible to being awkward in an instant.

Our afterglow was very short, almost non-existent; she showered alone and slept in my bed alone.

If she had given me just a little more, I would be happy.

Or would I still be wanting more?

One way or the other, there are more important things to worry about right now.

I can't sleep, so I leave the room and head downstairs. The living room is now full of people camped out and fully asleep, so there's no way of hanging out there, so I go to the kitchen for a beer and maybe a snack.

When I get there, I find dad sitting alone on the other side of the glass doors, chilling on the pool deck with a bottle of beer and a bag of chips.

I grab a beer of my own and walk towards him. He taps the chair beside him, welcoming me without words.

“Can’t sleep?” he asks as I crack my bottle open.

The satisfying buzz of the carbonation reaches my ears, and I take a gulp before replying, “Sleep won’t touch me with a ten-foot pole.”

“Problems with the missus?” Dad asks, a hand capping my shoulder.

I sigh. There is no ‘missus,’ just a confusing mess of feelings surrounding a session of great sex. But I need to say something soon, and the best I can muster is, “We might break up.”

Dad leans back, eyes wide with surprise. “But she seems so dedicated to you,” he says, disappointed.

‘She’s only dedicated to me because I’m paying her’ is what I *want* to say, but instead, I say a big fat lie.

“She doesn’t wanna get married. We talked about it and...” I scratch the back of my head, uncomfortable.

“She keeps on stalling?”

“Yeah.”

From the corner of my eye, I see dad shake his head, take a sip of beer, and rub my shoulder, trying to give me reassurance.

“If she’s not ready for commitment, you can’t force her, son. If she said yes to your proposal in the first place, I would give

her some time, but if you feel that's betraying your expectations of her, break up. Everyone these days is just one phone call away!"

I look at dad and give him a smile full of sorrow. He's all worried about something that doesn't even exist; good ol' George Baker, always ready to jump to the aid of anyone in need, with some good advice and a friendly shoulder to lean on.

"Thank you, dad," I say, downing half of my beer bottle.

"I'm going, came home just for a shower and to change clothes," dad says, standing up. "I need to convince your mother to do the same."

"It's her mom. I would be in the same state if it were her in the hospital."

"Try to get some sleep, boy," he pats my shoulder as he walks away. "Tomorrow is going to be a long day."

"Um, do you want me to go in your place, dad?" I ask, concerned. "You must be really tired."

He looks at me with heavy eyes, stretches, and accidentally cracks his back as he does.

"Are you sure, Harvey?" he asks.

"Absolutely. Go to bed!" I leave my half-finished beer bottle on the table and stand to accompany him inside. "I'll just change and head on out."

Dad accepts gratefully, and after leaving him at the door of his and mom's bedroom, I go change. I get rid of my shirt, shorts, and flip-flops, and instead put on sneakers, jeans, and a button-down shirt.

I get in the car and leave the windows open to enjoy the cool breeze of the night air. I listen to the crickets and frogs as I try to clear my mind. I remember driving down these same streets as a teenager, where I first learned to drive.

Then my thoughts turn back to grandma. I feel a pang of guilt because I haven't seen her much lately. In fact, it's been years. Ever since I got drafted into the NHL, my life became hockey. Most of my memories with her were back when I was a kid.

I feel a bittersweet smile cross my face when I remember those cross country trips we'd take in the summer to go visit grandma in California. My eyes tear up when I remember eating her deliciously famous peach and blueberry pie. My summer wasn't complete without one of those.

She'd also been the one who got me into hiking. We'd get up early and explore nearby trails. Kiera would always sleep in, so it had been good bonding time for grandma and me.

The hospital is just fifteen minutes away, and it's not long before it comes into view. I take a deep breath, park, then walk in, making sure my eyes are dry. I introduce myself at reception to be let in. Grandma has been transferred to her own room by now, and mom is there, sitting by her bedside and looking devastated.

“Mom...” I go to her and lean down to hug her. “Dad wants you to go home and rest.”

“I can’t, Harvey. I need to be here,” she says. It breaks my heart that she looks so tired and is still in the wedding clothes and uncomfortable shoes.

I crouch down to be at mom’s eye level, and holding her arms, look tenderly at her and say, “Come on, mom... Nothing will happen if you at least go home for just half an hour to change and take a shower.”

She sighs painfully and averts her gaze from me.

“Your father took the car,” she says, running out of excuses.

“Take my truck,” I dangle my keys in front of her. “But rest a little, mom...”

She sighs and takes the keys but doesn’t move from her spot yet.

“Where’s Kiera and Grant?” I ask.

“We didn’t tell Kiera anything,” she confesses. “Let her wedding day be a happy one. And Grant will be here in the morning. He went to drop Donna and the little one at home.”

“Nobody else asked about grandma?” I ask, weirded out.

“Oh, they know she’s here. They just think it’s not serious and I told them that her wishes were for them to visit after they rested,” she says.

I reach for my phone the moment she finishes speaking. “I’m calling your siblings at least; you can’t take this on all by

yourself!”

Mom opens her mouth, about to say something, but then joins her curled fists under her chin in an exasperated act.

“What good would they be here, Harvey?” she says in a tearful loud whisper. “They’ll just stay in the waiting room losing sleep like us.”

I swallow a dry gulp of air and curl my fists as well.

“They might *want* to be here, mom,” I say. “Tell you what: go home and rest a little. Then in the morning, you tell everybody, okay?”

“Oh, Harvey, you can’t be this spent. You have a game to play...” mom says, caressing my face.

“The game is a week away, mom,” I smile, kissing her hand. “Grandma will be home way before then.”

I say it with confidence, but of course I have no idea what is going to happen.

Making her decision, she stands to leave, and I follow her. I hold her tight and kiss the top of her head, and she lets out a single sob before parting ways with me for the night.

I head back to face grandma. She’s breathing through a machine and plugged into so many others that I lose count.

She looks so frail it tears my heart to pieces. Not that at her age she looked particularly strong, but she was always so full of life.

I sit by her side and hold onto her tiny, cold hand. Lulled by the beeps and bops of the machines, I fall asleep with my head at grandma's lap.

When morning comes, Uncle Joe, mom's older brother, comes to relieve me and I leave.

Everyone is in the waiting room, even Kiera and Michael, who postponed their honeymoon.

Someone I didn't expect to be there is Elsa.

"Hey, you're still here," I say, genuinely glad. I go in for a quick peck on her lips and she's not fast enough to avoid me.

"We still have business to deal with," she says, her voice very sweet, but I feel myself crumble even more, but this is just me being sensitive — I don't need her anymore, and I promised to pay her at the end.

"Alright, let's go outside," I say, gesturing for her to follow me.

We're at the entrance of the emergency area, and there's little movement there for that hour. Even the two ambulances allotted here are calmly parked, the technicians animatedly talking and having coffee.

I stop, and Elsa stops right in front of me. I take my phone, unlock the screen, and sort through my apps to find what I need.

I find my online money transfer service and ask her if she takes it.

“Yes, I do,” she says in a sheepish voice.

I make the transfer, quick and easy. She even checks her phone notifications when it hits, but she doesn't seem as ecstatic as I hoped she would be.

“This was one hell of a ride,” she continues, now smiling, all pretty like she is. “I suppose we're breaking up soon?”

“Yeah...” I let my shoulders slump. “I'll just... Help take care of grandma and then sometime later I'll put on the final act of the farce myself. I gave you some more for going the extra mile.”

“I saw it, thanks!” she says, and then looks at me as if longing for something.

We look at each other for a long time, all without it feeling weird or uncomfortable.

I feel a pull towards her, and I give into it, leaning down to kiss her. However, in that same instant, Elsa turns her brown eyes from mine and says softly, “Goodbye, Harvey.”

I just grit my teeth and nod.

This is the last time I'll see her, and I feel a pang in my chest as I let her go.

Chapter Fifteen

ELSA

I considered taking a plane to go back home, just because *I could*, but something told me to save that money for a rainy day, so I take the bus.

Since I'm an aspiring actress outside Hollywood or New York, there will be many rainy days in front of me.

The one-night stand with Harvey was... amazing, but I am left feeling confused. It was an emotional weekend and I think that coupled with playing his fake fiancé really messed with my brain. And my hormones.

Shaking my head as if to clear my thoughts, I decide to distract myself by

organizing my debts, paying one by one online, with a focus on taking care of my student loans. This is a huge relief because they'd been snowballing into something much bigger and were getting out my control.

I arrived in Boston three hours later, wondering if I should ask dad for a ride, but ultimately deciding not to. From all the stories I heard from the Bakers, tales about raising independent kids were the ones that hit closest to home for me.

I didn't even know how to do laundry when I first moved to college.

Mom welcomes me home with a plate of cookies and cold milk. She sits me in the living room and tells me that she completely redid the basement for me. With a dramatic wave of her hand, she says, "You're not going to believe your eyes!"

I sigh, face stuffed with snickerdoodles and milk. I swallow, and it all goes down like peanut brittle, sideways and rough.

"That's great, mom," I say, distant. "I'll check it out later."

Mom crosses her arms and looks at me with her nose twisted up as if smelling something rotten, and that something is my nonsense.

"Elsa, what's wrong with you?" she asks, demanding. "Didn't you have fun with Harvey?"

Once again, I sigh, weary. "I did, mom. I'm just tired."

"Oh, then let's go see your room!" mom interjects, animated, and pretty much forcing me to follow her.

We walk past the living room, dining room, and kitchen, and get to the stairs that lead down to the basement. Mom climbs down the stairs in a hurry, while I, still carrying my heavy luggage, struggle down and do not pay attention until reaching the bottom.

Well, she had organized my boxes, and my clothes are hanging from a big PVC pipe screwed to the wall.

My old bedroom set is all there, still battered from my high school days. Mom also transferred an old shelf from the garage to the basement, and there she placed all my books and trinkets.

There's new wallpaper, a tacky floral gray and green over white that fortunately gets buried under the furniture, frames, and poster that she hung.

“What do you think?” she smiles widely, arms open and chest puffing out with pride.

“Okay,” I say, bobbing my head. To be completely frank, everything is god-awful, but she made an effort, and I can truly appreciate that.

“I love it, mom!”

We hug, and she kisses my temple and rubs my back.

“I'm glad you like it, dear. Your dad and I put all our love into it.”

She looks at me and smiles. “We're going to install a shower in the bathroom here. You're gonna see how nice it'll turn out.”

I sit on the edge of the open couch bed. The comforter is something I grew out of eons ago, and it smells slightly of moth balls.

Mom is still talking about all the renovations she and dad made and still plan to do when I blurt out a question.

“How long do you expect me to be here, mom?” I ask my voice barely audible.

She is taken aback by my question, and looks at me wide-eyed, confused. “What do you mean, Elsa?”

“You’re fixing up everything as if you don’t expect me to move any time soon.” I get teary.

But the real reason I am about to collapse into tears is not because of this basement — it’s my heart knowing that I won’t see Harvey again and because of the emotional roller-coaster the past few days have been.

Mom sits by my side, holds me, and rocks me side to side just like she used to when I was a child.

Being home is nice, but I feel so lost without knowing what my next steps are.

With what’s left of the money, I can use it as a down payment for my own place. But how am I going to pay a mortgage without a job? And how am I going to explain the down payment money to mom and dad?

If I can’t spend this money, maybe I should just give it back...

“You can stay for as long as you need, Elsa!” She presses me tight against her chest. “No one will pressure you!”

“Okay mom, okay!” I gently giggle, pulling myself away from her. “I need some rest. Can you please give me some

space?”

She looks at me with her nose turned up again, not used to having her kids establishing their boundaries.

“Alright, you can have your space!” she slaps her thigh and stands to leave. “I’ll call you when lunch is ready.”

“Thank you,” I say, but she doesn’t turn back to reply.

I plop backward in bed, my shoes still on and my purse over my shoulder, and just stare at the ceiling.

Getting a theater degree in Los Angeles sounded like a great opportunity and a way to chase my acting dream, but the truth is that at the end of everything, I was jobless and out of money, and my father had to send me the money to bring me and my belongings back.

Now I’m relying on someone else’s money to save me, and the more I try to convince myself this was just an acting gig, the truth is I’m realizing I grew too attached to Harvey and his family to keep it professional.

A notification causes my phone to vibrate, but I ignore it. It might be Harvey and I’m still too overwhelmed to think about him.

I kick off my boots, nestle myself in bed, and take a little nap. After I wake up, I look at my phone, only to find a text from Parker there.

I’ve been dying to know: how was it? Did they eat you alive?

I scoff momentarily, already typing my reply:

His family is lovely, Parker.

I put the phone away and get to changing. It takes me a while to locate which piece of clothing is where, but soon I find sweatpants, a t-shirt, and slippers.

I look at my phone again before going upstairs to find mom, and there's a new text from Parker.

Really? They're not brutes like him?

Frowning, I quickly text him back.

Why would you call him that? I thought he was your friend!

I start climbing the stairs and halfway up, another message comes.

He's my best friend, Elsa, and you need to be careful with him.

Anyway, did he pay you?

I'm now at the top of the stairs facing mom in the kitchen as she gets started with cooking lunch.

With my shoulder against the doorframe, I text Parker back:

Yes, he did. Already spent some of it, but I don't think I can spend the rest.

Parker is typing. I take a seat at the kitchen table, and mom places a glass of water in front of me.

My phone buzzes a few times with his texts.

Are you CRAZY?

Give the money to me, then!

I shake my head.

“What is it, dear?” Mom wants to know.

“Parker is being a tool,” I say, nonchalantly.

Mom goes on a rant about how I shouldn’t disrespect my brother even if he’s being a tool, but I’m not listening anymore.

I’m too busy texting Parker back.

I wish it were that simple.

I can see it as Parker types. And types. I am expecting a giant message but all that finally comes is:

You are crazy! Harvey doesn’t need that money, Elsa! But you do!

Suppressing a laugh, I text him back.

Are you suggesting I give the money back? I send it with a smiling emoji.

Elsa! No! Please! he texts back, desperate.

Thank you for the great idea, Parker! I send the last text to him as I laugh to myself and put my phone away.

“You weren’t listening to a single word I said, were you?” mom asks, indignant.

“No mom, sorry...” I apologize, still laughing. I pour myself a glass of water and say, “I was just talking to Parker about

Harvey.”

“Oh, Harvey!” She puts her hands in front of her chest and comes to sit next to me. “He’s such a nice boy! No, not boy... That’s a man!”

She takes a deep breath to emphasize her point. Indeed, Harvey is much older than I am, likely in his late thirties, not that it slows him down in the least.

“Are you seeing him again?” mom continues, approaching me one inch closer.

My heart crumbles in response to her question, and all I want to do is lay down and cry. I started to get feelings for him, and I feel like an idiot.

I mumble something about needing to rest and head back downstairs to be alone.

Chapter Sixteen

HARVEY

Grandma Rose passed away three days after Elsa left. She didn't wake up to say goodbye, and simply went away in her sleep.

I wanted to talk to Elsa about it, but she hasn't reached out to me since we parted ways, and I've been kept busy trying to make sure my family is alright.

It's raining cats and dogs, and the family is all here at the cemetery, waiting for the priest to finish the last rites so we can go somewhere warm to reminisce about her the way she would want us to.

The casket is lowered; grandma's firstborn throws in the first shovel of dirt, and we all toss in little handfuls as we walk by on our way out.

Now the place that gave way to a post-wedding reception will give way to a wake.

I sincerely don't feel like taking part in it. I want to go wallow alone by myself for a bit. The guilt from me not seeing my grandma for years is feeling overwhelming. But I stay because I know my family needs me.

We arrive at my parents' home, all in our separate cars. Kiera and Michael, who postponed their honeymoon trip to stay with us, run to the door first along with mom and dad. Once dad opens the front door and clears the way for the visitors, everybody goes inside.

I find mom busy with uncovering dishes of food on the dining room table. She's in distress and I give her a hug from behind, and she crumples into tears.

"She wouldn't want to see you like this, mom," I say gently.

"I know, Harvey," she says with a snuffle. "But she's not here to cuss me for it, is she?"

Mom giggles, and I smile too.

"She would want life to go on," I pat her on the arm. "Who knows? Maybe you'll get a new grandbaby when Kiera comes back from her honeymoon!"

"Aw!" Mom puts her hands over her heart. "That's all I want, son!"

"Need some help?" I take an interest in what she's doing, even removing the foil wrapper of a casserole.

"No, dear. Everything is under control. Go sit with everyone," she says. "I want to stay busy."

I go find a seat somewhere in the living room and end up sitting near Uncle Mark and Cousin Joe, father and son and the loudest of the family.

Drinks then food are passed around. Everybody talks about grandma, always fondly and dearly. I remember she could be mean when she wanted to, with her shoe in her hand and her deadly aim, but not that it diminishes the love and good memories I have of her.

Mom runs around, checking in on everyone and asking if the food is good enough or if the drinks are cold enough.

Words are spoken around the room, words about grandma. Everyone has something happy to say, even the children.

My turn comes, and I stand from my spot, feet fumbling and head swaying thanks to the few cognacs I have in me.

“Grandma was the best,” I start, not knowing exactly where this’ll go. “Her food was the only food better than mom’s, her Christmas cookies were great, her lullabies were the sweetest. I can’t think of summers growing up without thinking of her. I’m only speaking of these childhood memories because they’re the ones I’ve got. I was always so busy in adult life that I didn’t see her that often. So, everyone: let’s cherish each other while we can and not take each other for granted, okay?”

Mom and dad start clapping and my face, already beet red due to the drinking, turns purple with cringe. As soon as Uncle Mark gets to his talking, I start heading for the stairs, feeling exhausted.

On my way up, mom heads over and stops me. With a hand on my hip and pleading eyes, she asks me, “Are you okay, Harvey?”

I sigh deeply, but then smile, and hold her hand to reassure her. “I’m fine, mom. Just tired.”

“You didn’t even eat anything!” she complains, but I pat her hand and wink at her.

“I’ll eat something later,” I say, and then leave for my bedroom.

I’m drained so it doesn’t take me too long to blackout, still in the black suit I had to rent in town. An unknown number of hours later, there’s a knock at my door, and I jolt up in a seated position and say, “Come in!”

It’s mom, carrying in a tray of leftovers with a big glass of milk to complement it.

“Everybody is out like a light already, even Grant,” she says with a small smile.

“Kiera and Michael?” I yawn it out as I reach for the tray and lay it over the bed.

“Both fast asleep. They have an early flight tomorrow,” she says, sitting on the opposite side of the tray.

I start to eat, and with a mouthful, I inform her, “My flight is not that early, but I’ll hitch a ride with them.”

“I’ll wake you up!” Mom says with pep. “Are you sure you are okay, dear?”

She places a hand on my back and rubs it very gently. After a moment, she goes on, now scolding me, “Harvey, go change out of these clothes; they’re still wet from the rain!”

“After I eat, mom!” I complain, shoving even more food into my mouth.

“Okay, then, I’ll leave you be,” she stands, kisses my temple and heads for the door.

She stops by the door frame, however, looking thoughtfully over her shoulder.

“Sweetheart,” she continues. “I know you feel bad you didn’t see her a lot, but Grandma Rose knew you were busy with hockey and fully supported you. She always knew you loved her. Please know that.”

I feel like I’m being punched right straight on in the feelings when she says that, and I need the aid of milk to make the latest food go down.

“Thanks, mom,” I say. “That means a lot.”

She smiles and leaves me be. With the door open, but on my own and at peace to eat as much as I can, and man, did she put a lot of food on my plate.

I place the empty tray on the floor and go take a hot shower. It’s peaceful and allows me space to think, and this time the shower makes me relive Elsa and our intimate moments. It was only a couple of days ago, and I can’t get that woman out of my mind.

As I pay her due homage with my bare hands, I come to the conclusion that I need to see her again. When I get out of the shower, the first thing I do is look for my phone, but... I can't find it anywhere.

After searching all throughout the room, I get dressed and go look for it downstairs, even calling it using the landline my parents still insist on having.

However, it goes straight to voicemail.

I must have dropped the phone somewhere. I rub my temples, feeling a headache coming on. With a sigh, I then call my service provider to tell them I lost my phone and have them temporarily deactivate my service and suspend my SIM card.

I use my laptop to change all my passwords to any accounts that could be accessed through my phone. I double check that none have been accessed, and luckily, they haven't. Even though I have to use my fingerprint to get into my phone, I don't want to take a chance in case someone could still get into it.

Feeling like I did all I could, I head back upstairs and just crash on the bed. I fall asleep, so hard I wake up aching, all to mom knocking loudly on my door.

“Harvey! We're leaving in half an hour!” mom announces, and then leaves to knock on the next door.

I get dressed in a flash, and carry my duffel bag downstairs, all in under ten minutes.

Just as I should have known, mom woke us all up early and we aren't leaving for another hour. Mom would always get us up earlier when we were kids and looks like she's still using that trick.

I'm left to brew some fresh coffee while everyone else comes down at their own pace.

We go in my truck just to carry all the bags from me, Kiera, and Michael, and I'll leave it with dad while I'm in Vancouver. After all, he's been drooling all over it since the moment he saw it.

Dad bids his goodbyes to the neighbors, whom he is close friends with, and we head on out.

My sister and Michael, now my brother-in-law, are already in a hurry, and I help them with their baggage.

Once we get to security, I bid them goodbye. They are heading to Italy for their honeymoon. I shake Michael's hand and get to hugging Kiera then rub her stomach.

"Bring me a nephew as a souvenir if you can!" I say.

Kiera blushes and starts to cackle, and Michael pats my shoulder and says, feigning seriousness, "We'll do our best Harvey!"

Kiera pretends slaps Michael, kisses everyone again, and says, "We better get going! See you in two weeks!"

She pulls poor Michael behind her and the two disappear towards security.

Dad has an arm around mom's shoulders, and still feeling tired, I take on my own baggage cart and say, "We still have time. Do you guys wanna eat something?"

Dad widens his eyes "In the airport? No way. Everything here is freaking expensive!"

"Dad, please..." I facepalm. "When will you get used to your son having money?"

He sighs, slumps his shoulders and waves me off. "Whatever! I want waffles!"

We start to walk, and mom says, "Promise us you'll get a new phone as soon as you get there, okay?"

"Okay, mom..." I stop to kiss her cheek, knowing she will always be there for me.

Chapter Seventeen

ELSA

My willpower didn't last very long. I've been trying to call Harvey.

The problem is that he stopped answering his phone.

I take matters into my own hands and decide to head back to Harvey's parents house to see him. The trip is all the same, except it feels longer this time.

Parker wasn't able to talk to Harvey either, but he told me he should be leaving for Vancouver today. Therefore, it's a race against time for me to find him.

I get out of the bus station and into a car I booked, which happens to be with a very chatty driver.

"You seem like you're in a hurry!" he says, energetic, as if he'd just drank ten energy drinks.

"A little," I smile awkwardly. "If you know a shortcut, feel free to use it."

“Oh, I will!” he says. His energy is contagious, I must admit, but right now it comes across more as annoying than anything. I think my nerves are kicking in, but I don’t want to stop and question what I’m doing.

Luckily, he does step on it and speeds up ahead towards what I remember from the address. We get on the same street, and I guide him towards the beautiful house Harvey’s parents own.

I leave the driver with his fare and a good tip, take out my bag, and head towards the door. I ring the doorbell once, twice, three times. I spy through the window, and what little I can see through the closed curtains reveals it’s dark and tells me they aren’t home.

And then, I spot the neighbors going out and about their business. It’s a chubby older man, about the age of Harvey’s father, and a middle-aged blond woman.

“Hi! Excuse me!” I call for their attention, and I finally get it, at least from him. She doesn’t seem so happy to see me.

“Do you know if the Bakers are home?”

“No, honey,” the man says politely. “They went to drop their kids off at the airport. Their girl just got married!”

“I know, I was at the wedding!” I say, smiling, but the truth is I want to dart out of here immediately. I’m starting to feel awkward and am starting to question what the hell I’m doing.

“Thank you so much!”

“Do you need a ride?” the man offers.

“Abner!” his wife protests, elbowing him in the ribs. “We’re in a hurry!”

“No, we’re not, Celia. We’re just getting groceries!” Abner argues back. “Come on, hon. We’ll take you there!”

“Are you sure, mister...?” I ask, fishing for his name.

“Jenkins! Abner Jenkins!” he says, shaking my hand. “This is my wife, Celia.”

“Hi,” Celia greets me, without much enthusiasm.

“Well, let’s go!” Mr. Jenkins signals me to follow him and begins walking to his car.

Mrs. Jenkins, on the other hand, is not happy to have me. She says she needs to use the restroom since it’s going to be a long drive and goes back inside.

“So, what you are to the Bakers?” Mr. Jenkins asks lightly as we wait for his wife to return.

Well, once in a lie, why not go deeper...

“I’m Harvey’s fiancé.” I finish, my heart racing.

“Oh, Harvey! The hockey player!” he says with a puffed up, wide chest. “The kid is a legend all around town! I wonder if he’s retiring after this season...”

Now it’s my eyes that widen. “Retire? I thought he was at the height of his career!” I say.

Mr. Jenkins says, “He’s past his prime, but still a great player. Could play well into his forties! But...”

“But what?” I raise an eyebrow. I don’t know why I am worried. The man is a billionaire and can afford to retire any time he wants, but hockey seems to be such an integral part of his life that I’m not sure how’d he feel about this conversation.

“But that’s what’s being spread around,” Mr. Jenkins shrugs. “I’m betting against it, though.”

“Oh, you’re a betting man!” I say, full of cheer. “My father likes to post a bet or two, but on basketball.”

“Abner doesn’t bet anymore,” Mrs. Jenkins says, walking back out with her arms crossed, and face twisted into a frown. “Right, Abner?”

“Right, hon...” The man nods weakly, cold sweat dripping down his temples.

As I’m about to get inside their car, my heart jumps a beat when I see Harvey’s new truck pull into his parent’s drive.

I smile, remembering how I’d teased him about guys and big trucks, only to be proved deliciously wrong.

I see his parents in the truck, and they apparently see me too, because they immediately wave and point at me. They park and quickly jump out and rush towards me as if they’re meeting an old friend.

I thank Abner and his wife, who is looking very relieved that they won’t have to drive me, as they get in their car and drive off.

“Elsa!” Lorna says, waving her hand like crazy and bringing me in for a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I...” I freeze for a second but decide to just speak the truth.
“I need to talk to Harvey, but his phone isn’t working.”

“Oh, he lost his phone,” George says with a frown. “But he promised to get a new one as soon as he reaches Vancouver.”

I start to wilt. “I’m guessing I missed him already?”

“Yes, unfortunately...” Lorna says. “But what’s so important you need to talk to him this urgently?”

“Yeah, we thought you were working!” George adds.

“Working?” I hold back laughter. “Yes... I was. But something popped up.”

“Oh, tell me, tell me, tell me!” Lorna does jazz hands out of excitement.

“It’s...”

It’s just me using money as an excuse to see your son again and quench my thirst of him.

I shake the thought from my head.

“It’s kind of personal, Lorna...” I continue.

They both place their hands under their chins and let out a playful ‘Hmm!’ directed at me. It’s clearly in a joking manner, and their lighthearted approach puts me at ease, making me smile.

“Okay, since Harvey is not here and you don’t want us to pass on the message, let us at least offer you lunch! Come on in. We have plenty of leftovers from...” Lorna’s voice tapers

off and she leads me into their house, wrapping her arm around mine.

Over a lunch of leftover lasagna, I learn that Grandma Rose passed away. I had to pretend like I already knew because why on earth would Harvey not tell his fiancé about it, so I try to hide my shock and apologize for not being able to make it to the funeral.

To my surprise, my eyes tear up as I think about Grandma Rose. Even though my time with her was brief, she left an impression on my heart, and I feel even more guilty for lying to her.

Lorna wipes her eyes with a tissue then offers me one. “Oh no, dear. We understand. It was sudden and Harvey told us you couldn’t take off from work.”

I’m debating whether to head home after lunch, but they invite me to stay with them.

“Humor us old folks. We are empty nesters and would love to talk to you for a bit longer if you have time?” Lorna asks, and I don’t have the heart to leave.

“Do you know when Harvey is coming back?” I ask, following them into the living room.

“His team is playing against the Vancouver Thunderhawks in the Conference Finals for a place in the Stanley Cup,” George turns around to inform me with an excited look on his face.

He continues, “He’ll be back in a couple of days, but then they’ll play a few games here in Boston. They’ll go back to

Vancouver to play until whichever team wins four games first. It's a best of seven situation."

Yet again, I wilt. A lot of what he said went over my head, but it sounds like Harvey will be busy for a while.

My face must have fallen because he says quickly, "But don't worry, you'll be able to talk to him soon. He promised he'd get a new phone as soon as he landed."

"God, whatever you have to tell him must be important!" Lorna says, trying to fish out my secret again.

"Yeah, kinda," I say as nonchalantly as I can.

Once more, I'm feeling overwhelmed by Harvey's family. I probably shouldn't stay longer with them, but they're nice, I like them, and I can bid them one last goodbye.

It's not like Harvey is going to find out, anyway.

Chapter Eighteen

HARVEY

“So, this is your latest model?” I ask, perusing the device in my hand.

I’m in Vancouver and still at the airport. Luckily my cell phone provider has a store here.

The salesperson nods enthusiastically as she gives me the speeds and feeds. “It’s pretty much a computer you can carry in your pocket!”

I nod. I don’t need a phone for much more than to exchange messages and watch videos when I’m bored, but I like the best.

“And can you make sure it has my old number and my service is resumed?” I push it towards her and cross my hands over the teller’s desk.

“Oh, absolutely!” she says with a smile. “I’ll get started on it right away!”

A half hour later, I walk out of the store and back into the airport, with a brand-new phone in my hand.

The limo driver, who I find waiting for me at the arrival area holding a sign with my name, guides me out to where he parked.

“Busy day?” I ask, my bags slung at both shoulders.

“You’re the first one so far!” the driver says. “It’s nice to drive the players around. You guys are nice tippers!”

I snort at his sincerity and pat him on the shoulder for it. “Alright, uh... What’s your name?”

“Joseph, sir!”

I frown. “Okay, I don’t even call my father sir anymore, please call me Harvey. And you put me under obligation, Joe! I’m not even carrying paper money!”

“Oh, it’s alright, Harvey! A picture should do it!” he looks at me and says animatedly.

“Once we get to the hotel,” I say, crawling inside the car and dodging the eyes of a group with hockey jerseys.

Joseph gets inside the car as well and wastes no time in starting the engine.

“Not comfortable with the fans?” Joe asks slight concern in his voice.

“No, I am!” I say, leaning back and relaxing a little. “I’m just going through a tough spot right now.”

“In sports, or...?” Now he’s genuinely concerned.

“Nah, it’s personal,” I say. “My grandmother recently passed, and it’s been tough on all the family.”

“Oh, I see,” Joe nods, taking the car away from the airport and on the road to the city. “Do you think that will affect your game?”

I scoff, half swallowing air, half holding back laughter. “You’re quite the inquisitive type of guy, aren’t you, Joe?”

“Hey, a guy’s gotta make a living!” he says, laughing.

The heater is on inside, but I roll down the window to take a look at the bright shiny Vancouver day going on outside, quite different from the gloomy rain that was going on in Boston.

Joe and I say goodbye to each other after we take a picture by the doors of the hotel where the team is staying.

We’re occupying a whole floor, and when I get there, I announce my arrival by pounding on each door and making as much noise as I can, because everybody needs to know Baker is here.

“Hey, Baker!” Tchekov, our left winger, opens the door and yells from the other end of the hallway. “Remind me to keep on knocking at your door when you’re trying to sleep!”

“Nice try; you know I sleep like a rock!” I yell back before opening the door to my room.

The first thing I do is kick off my shoes and feel the carpet. Nice and soft. I then get undressed down to my underwear and grab my phone from my jacket in order to start installing my apps and make sure it’s working.

Once I finish setting up my phone, I find a ton of texts from Kiera and three dozen texts from Elsa and Parker, all in the vibe of *'Where are you?'* and *'We need to talk.'*

I then go read Kiera's text.

On our way to Italy! Yay!

Mom and dad said that Elsa came over!

Say what? I type and text it to her but knowing she's not going to answer for at least twenty hours, I give up on her and go straight to the source.

What were you doing at my parents? I text it to Elsa.

She views it but doesn't answer.

I then go to the only other steady source of information in my life, and video call mom to figure out what's going on.

"Got the new phone already?" Mom says. She has the phone way too close. "George! It's Harvey!"

"Mom, adjust that camera. I'm seeing your brains!" I joke with her.

She turns the phone from vertical to horizontal, bringing none other than Elsa into the view. She's sitting calmly with a cup of tea in her hand.

"Elsa, what are doing there?!" I blurt out without thinking.

"I... I needed to talk to you, *honey*," she says, awkwardly, her face turning red.

"Couldn't you just wait for me to pick up the phone?" I ask, way sterner than I'd like.

Dad arrives right at that moment and gives me his own scolding. “Son, that’s no way to treat the woman you love!”

I huff, exasperated, and Elsa looks like she feels the same way.

“Mom, let me talk to Elsa. Elsa, go to the bathroom or something.”

Mom looks at Elsa and nods, handing her phone to her. Elsa scrambles away the next instant.

Locking herself in their washroom, Elsa looks at me, already making me feel bad with her teary eyes and flushed cheeks.

“What were you thinking? Do you wanna ruin everything we did?” I ask her, unable to think of anything else to say.

“I... I just needed to talk to you, Harvey!” she says, holding back a sob.

“That I already know...” I roll my eyes. “What is so important, anyway?”

Elsa looks down, sighs, looks to both sides and sighs again. “I need to give you back your money,” she finally says after a long while.

And I spit out laughter. “That’s it? That’s what you wanted to tell me? If you say just one thing out of place to my parents they will know my lie, and you’ll risk everything.”

Now she’s full-on sobbing and suddenly I feel terrible.

“You’re wrong in this too, you know!” she defends herself. “You were wrong in the first place for creating this lie!”

I take a deep breath, count from one to ten, then open my eyes and look at her. She is so freaking beautiful; when Parker talked about introducing us, I could never have imagined how pretty she'd be.

Now she's finding her way into my heart and I'm here, acting like a jerk in front of her, pushing her away.

"You're right..." I sigh. "I'm sorry."

"You're not forgiven," she pouts.

"I know, take your time," I give her a thumbs up.

I continue, "Just do me a favor and get out of there as soon as possible, okay? If my parents get too attached to you, they might give me even more trouble when I tell them we broke up."

She looks at me with death in her eyes. Elsa seems to be the type of girl you don't ever want to wrong, and right now, I don't seem to be on her good side.

"Okay, Harvey. I'll go," she says bitterly. "Please know I didn't intend to confuse your parents further. I came to see you but missed you and ran into them instead. They insisted I stay and spend time with them. Anyway, I truly do care about them. I will do as you ask. I don't want to hurt them."

Elsa hangs up the phone and I'm left with a pang in my heart and a weird feeling at the bottom of my stomach.

Is it nausea? Stomachache? I don't know, but I'm smart enough to know that hurting Elsa took a grave part in it.

Chapter Nineteen

ELSA

I'm back in Boston later that same day, arriving late afternoon to a pair of parents who still don't know why their daughter had left in such a hurry this morning.

"Was it something with your boyfriend, dear?" Mom asks, climbing down the basement stairs with a concerned look on her face.

"He's not my boyfriend, mom..." I say, grabbing t-shirt and sweatpants to change into. "He's Parker's friend, and I pretended to be his fiancé as a favor."

She reaches the bottom of the stairs, and leans against the banister, crossing her arms and looking judgmental as hell.

"I don't understand that story, Elsa. It's too complicated!" she says.

"You say as if I don't have the mental capacity to play a role in it!" I try to joke but it falls flat. "And I went to college for it!"

“Oh, Elsa, it’s not that!” She comes to sit on my bed, straightening the comforter with one hand while picking up my loose hairs out of it with the other. “It’s all too convoluted for my tastes! Why does a handsome man like him need a pretend girlfriend?”

“I don’t know, mom!” I stomp my feet on the ground, feeling a desperate need to flee this conversation. “He just wanted one!”

She puts a hand under her chin and looks at me all pensive. “And why did you agree to it?”

I gasp for air with that question. ‘Because he paid me’ doesn’t seem like a suitable answer, so I’ll appeal to her by playing with her heartstrings.

“Because he’s Parker’s friend. And I didn’t want to disappoint him,” I say, putting on a pity-worthy face.

Celebrating her kids getting along, mom claps once and joins her hands in front of her chest with a huge smile on her face.

“Oh, Elsa! I had no idea you cared for Parker this much to do a favor like that for him!” she says, bursting with happiness.

“Well, of course I do!” I say. I do, but the truth is the weight of a hundred grand talked louder than my love for my brother.

“I raised you well!” She stands and comes to give me a hug. “So, have you thought about what’s next? Are you going to start looking for a job soon?”

I sigh. The best I can aim for a job around here is giving theater classes for kids — not that it's not a noble occupation, but it's not what I want. I still want to follow my acting dream but am feeling stuck.

“I'm still trying to figure out what I want to do, mom...” I say in a tired tone.

She holds me, tight, ignoring the clothes I'm holding in my hands. “Well, don't wait for too long, darling. Life doesn't stop to wait for you.”

She goes back upstairs and promises to call me for dinner. And that's the way it goes for days on end: me feeling aimless and hiding downstairs, and mom calling me back into the world of the living at least three times a day.

I try to look into audition listings here in Boston just out of curiosity, but as I peruse them, I feel my palms get clammy and my rapid heartbeats echoing in my ears like a distant drumbeat.

I do need help. Maybe therapy is the way to go.

I decide to do something fun and sponsor a spa day for the friends I still have around here. Even though I want to give Harvey the money back, I figure this will be the last time I use it.

Monica and Becca were high school friends who went to college locally and chose sensible careers in which they are already employed.

We meet in the morning for breakfast and at first, I am excited. But, as soon as I get there, I realize this was a mistake, as they are both with their boyfriends in tow and I'm here, sad and alone.

“Oh, hi!” I force a smile and go around the table, greeting everyone and hugging Monica and Becca. “Who are these handsome fellas?”

“This is Kevin!” Becca points to the man by her side.

“And I'm Brian,” Brian introduces himself with a handshake.

“We ordered pancakes. Hope you don't mind,” Monica says over her cup of frosted latte.

“Oh no, I love pancakes!” I raise my hands in surrender, causing laughter all around the table.

A strange silence falls. As I look around for a waiter or waitress to get my drink order, Monica comes with a dreaded question. “So, how have you been?”

“Monica told us you studied theater,” Brian says, sipping his black coffee. “How's that working out for you?”

I purse my lips into a thin line of repulse due to how judgmental that question sounds.

“Swimmingly!” I say, once again in forced cheer. “I'm unemployed and living with my parents, but otherwise I'm fine. How about you?”

Weirded-out faces surround me now, and more silence accompanies it, filling me with uneasiness that's enough to make me want to run away from them.

With an artificial laugh, I try to clear the air, and Becca thankfully switches the subject. "So where are we going today?"

"Oh!" I turn to her after placing my order. "It's a place called The Zen Gardens, near the river shore. They do everything! Are the guys going?"

"We came just to meet you," Kevin says.

"And we wouldn't want to put much burden on you, of course," Monica says, judging me again.

"I can take care of it, Monica!" I try to reassure her, in a forced nonchalant manner. "Wouldn't have invited you otherwise!"

"Are you sure?" she says, worried. "We could just pay for ourselves—"

My phone rings, thankfully cutting off the conversation. To my surprise, it's Harvey and I excuse myself from the table before answering,

"Hey?" I say nervously, now standing in the middle of the restaurant's lobby.

"Hey, stranger," he says with nervous laughter. "I just wanted to check in and see how you were doing."

My heart warms up a little upon hearing that.

“Not the greatest. I just left a table with my friends before college and am receiving their judgement for the life choices I’ve made. How about you?”

“Um...” I can picture him massaging the bridge of his nose. “Thinking about you.”

With that, I take a deep breath; I realize that’s all I wanted to hear but didn’t know it.

However, I’m not fully ready to forgive him yet.

“Listen...” he starts, sounding insecure in his words. “You were right. I am in the wrong in this situation. I should have never faked having a fiancé and gotten you involved in it. Do you forgive me?”

Another deep breath, this time, to help me swallow my pride. “Okay... I’m sorry too.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” he says, firmly.

“No!” I protest. “I shouldn’t have gone to your parents’ place before without your permission!”

I hear his smile. “Don’t worry. I know that was unintentional for you to end up spending the day with them. Plus, they love you even more now. So much I might need you again.”

“No. Please, don’t!” I plead, almost placing the phone away from me. “Not unless...”

“Unless what?” he asks, curious.

‘Unless we’re together for real’ is what I want to say, but I will obviously not say that.

“Never mind,” I say quickly.

“Well,” he takes a deep breath. “We made it through the conference finals and won against the Vancouver Thunderhawks! This means we’ll be one of the teams playing in the Stanley Cup!”

“Are you serious?” I’m still pretty lost with all this hockey lingo, but I know making it to the Stanley Cup is a big deal.

“Yup! We are just waiting to see who wins the western championship to see who we’ll play against in the Stanley Cup.”

“Congrats!” I say, then promptly tease him. “Lose any teeth?”

“Oh, stop!” he says in jest, and I laugh loudly, feeling more at ease. “I’m self-conscious enough as it is. I don’t need to lose even *more* teeth!”

“Did you lose some already? No one can notice!” I say.

“Yeah, I paid good money for no one to notice,” he says, but soon changes the subject. “Anyway, I’m back in Boston but my family wanted to celebrate us making it into the Stanley Cup today, but I’d be free tomorrow.”

He’s going somewhere with this conversation, and I think I know where, but I’ll let him get there himself.

“Do you want to get together? You did say earlier you needed to see me,” he asks, sounding very unsure.

I give him an audible smile and say, without wasting any time, “I’m already screwing things up with your parents. Are you sure you want me messing with you too?”

“Oh, you can mess with me as much as you want, Elsa,” Harvey says, sly.

“Um...” I consider his request.

All I really needed to do was to give back his money and get it over with him because this has already been such an emotional confusing roller coaster ride for me.

But also... the truth is I *do* like him.

“Elsa? Hello?” he asks upon my long silence.

“Oh! I’m here!” I say. “Well... Come pick me up tomorrow. You know where I live.”

“What time?” he asks, clearly perking up.

“Any time! I’ll be home all day!” I say in my unemployed nonchalance.

“I’ll pick you up at six,” he says, setting the date.

We say goodbye, and now I wonder if I should even go back to the table with those supposed friends of mine.

Feeling empowered because a billionaire is interested in me — take that, dad! — I return to the table triumphant and sit down to meet my plate of strawberry pancakes and hot cocoa on the side.

“So...” I start, fearing what I’ll say, but saying it anyway, “Are we going to keep on talking on how unemployed I am, or

can you two please enjoy the gift I'm trying to give?"

Monica and her boyfriend didn't stay for the whole breakfast, but Becca and her boyfriend do, confirming who my friends really are.

Chapter Twenty

HARVEY

I t's close to six, but I arrive way too early, so I just park down the street from Elsa's house until the time comes so I don't seem too eager to see her.

Do I honk or walk to the door?

This might be the beginning of something bigger, and I don't want to ruin it. But then again, I might be fooling myself. Plus, her parents already met me, and I can afford the extra time.

So why not step down and go greet her at the door?

I walk with a confident gait, but Elsa decides to demolish my plans and walks out of the door before I can reach it.

"You have quite the view from the basement, don't you?" I tease, walking just slightly behind her to touch her shoulders as she walks towards my truck.

"No, I recognized the sound of your engine," she says with a small smile.

She lets me open the door for her this time. I'm driving the same silver and black pickup truck, still not tired of it, and she does seem to know every inch of it by the way she comfortably gets into the passenger seat.

After I get into the driver's seat, I look over at her and ask, "Is it okay if we just grab some food then relax at my place? I've been travelling and in and out of restaurants the last few weeks and just feel like being a home body if I'm being honest."

She looks at me, unsure, then nods and says, "Okay, that works for me."

We decide on Thai food, and we grab it to-go then head back to my place. I hate to admit it, but I'm a little nervous.

"This is your house?" she asks incredulously as I pull into the drive. I park and grab the bag of food then reply, "Yeah, this is my place." I look around as I press my thumb on the electronic lock. "Too fancy?"

She shrugs and holds onto my arm as we go in. "Hey, you can afford it. If I could, I'd live in a house like this."

I ask my voice-controlled system to turn on the lights and immediately lights flicker on, revealing spacious environments decorated in a modern and minimalistic manner. I have some sports-themed artwork displayed along with some large-scale black and white photographic prints of the city.

"Who helped you decorate your place?" she asks as I guide her by the hand into the kitchen, placing the bag of food on the

counter and grabbing plates and cups.

“Mom and Kiera,” I say as I start dumping the pad thai and drunken noodles onto the plates.

“What would you like to drink?” I ask, grabbing the cups. She shrugs and says, “I’ll just have some water please.”

I nod and get her some fresh water and get myself a Coke.

I hand over her Pad Thai and glass of water then grab my own. As she walks to the dining table, I say, “We can just eat on the couch. It’s fine.”

She raises an eyebrow as I walk into the living room and sit on my oversized leather sectional.

“At least it’s easy to clean,” she says, and I laugh.

I take a break from chowing down on my noodles to ask, “So, what’s next for you? Have you thought anymore about acting?”

She leans back, looks up, then looks back at me, only then releasing the breath she was holding.

“I still want to act,” Elsa says, bobbing her head around. “But I don’t even know where to start!”

“You have the money,” I say. “Get help for your panic attacks and you can do anything. Oh, speaking of which...” I bring out my phone and starts scrolling.

“I don’t know how long I would last,” she shrugs, looking down to the floor.

“You’re not this insecure, come on,” I say, reaching for her hand, but she is looking lost in thought and doesn’t acknowledge it.

“Maybe I am,” Elsa finally says, looking sad.

I want to cheer her up and smile when I find what I am looking for on my phone. I immediately text her, hearing her phone buzz.

“There you go. Those are the therapist recommendations I got that can specifically help with panic attacks and stage fright. They specialize in helping with actors too.”

She finally looks up at me then and I see gratitude and excitement clearly in her eyes. She nods, “Thank you. This means a lot.”

Then she looks down and sighs, “Will you just take the rest of the money back and get this over with?”

I just rub my forehead and think. “So, you are still going on about that, huh?”

She nods, “Yes! That’s what I’ve been wanting to talk to you about, remember?”

I sigh, “So, you’ve spent part of the money?”

“Yes,” she nods. She reaches for her glass of water on a coaster on the coffee table and downs half of it in a single gulp.

“I paid my student loans, like you and Parker told me to. And the rest I’ve spent going back and forth from your

parents' house to my parents' house, and a spa day for me and a friend. I couldn't even tell mom and dad about the money."

Elsa looks at me as if expecting a scolding, but I'm smiling broadly, more than pleased with what she did for herself.

"I didn't give you this money to spend on boring things," I say, reaching for her hand again, and this time, she doesn't reject me. "Go crazy. Buy your favorite car. Do something that makes you happy!"

She looks at my hand on top of hers and places hers on top of mine.

"That's easy to say when you have your life made," she says, sounding disheartened.

"Oh, my life is not made," I say. "I live every day thinking about what will happen if I lose it all."

"You're *that* attached to your money?" Elsa asks, scoffing.

"I'm attached to what it can do to my family," I say without batting a lash, "Both the one I have now and the one I will have in the future."

She waves me off. "Your family is awesome. They deserve it."

"Why don't you buy something for your parents?" I suggest, eagerly attacking the rest of my noodles.

"And how do I explain the money?" she tilts her head back, considering.

“Ah, you’re just finding excuses.” Now I’m the one who waves her off.

“It’s not that, it’s just...” She buries her fingernails into her scalp. “Ugh, just take the money back!”

I support the weight of my head on my free hand, and look at Elsa dead serious, only to say, “No.”

She looks back at me, deeply offended, and I need to hold back the laughter that is threatening to overtake me.

“But—”

“No buts!” I raise a finger. “And if you keep on insisting, I will send you double!”

“Harvey!”

“Triple!”

Elsa wilts in place, and I lean back, victorious.

“Why did you have to chase me all the way back to my parents’ house a few weeks ago just to ask me this in person anyway? Couldn’t you have just reversed the transaction in your cash app?” I ask.

“Well...” she posts her index at her cheek and tries to think. “I... I...”

I lean forward, a cocky smile in my face. “You missed me that bad, huh?”

I watch as she huffs and rolls her eyes so hard it could drop bowling pins. I give her all the time she needs, still munching on my noodles when she lets out a huge sigh.

“Fine, I’ll keep the money.”

I laugh, “But you won’t admit you missed me? Fine, well I’ll admit that I’ve missed you.”

Her eyes meet mine and I stare back, meaning every word I said. Her face turns red, and I see a hint of a smile on her lips before her gaze moves away from mine.

I clear my throat and take her plate, now empty, along with my empty plate and place the dishes in the sink.

I hear tiny footfalls and look behind me to see Elsa standing there, her eyes bold and beautiful.

“I missed you too.”

Chapter Twenty-One

ELSA

Not one second after getting the words out, Harvey's eyes go dark, and he immediately leans down and kisses me hungrily.

I squeal as he lifts me up and places me on the kitchen counter, grabbing a fistful of hair and kissing me even more deeply.

I get lost in the moment and stop thinking altogether. I reach down for the bottom of his shirt and start to lift it up. He throws it off and I run my hands across his broad chest and muscular arms.

He stops kissing me long enough to pull my shirt up over my head and undoes my bra all before I can even catch my breath. He's kissing me again, pulling me close, my chest against his.

He bites my bottom lip and then brings his lips over to my neck. He kisses my neck, and I push his head down to my chest. Chills wash over me, and I get goosebumps all over my

body when he looks up at me, a nipple in his mouth and his fingers rubbing the other.

Tingles ripple throughout my body. I can't help it and lean my head back and start to sigh, my breathing getting heavy, and my fingers digging into his hair and down his broad muscular back.

His lips are on mine again, a hand on my chest and the other on my back. Then one of his hands moves down and starts to undo my jeans. With one move, he has them off and he brings a hand down to rub me over my panties.

I moan and push my hips closer to him, wanting him to touch me so badly it aches. I had no idea how much I wanted this. How much I needed this, needed him.

When he slides a finger under my panties and inside me, I gasp out loud and quiver against him.

I reach down and undo his jeans, helping him slide out of them. He brings my hand to his briefs, where I can feel him, hard and throbbing. I have flashbacks to our first time together and quiver in anticipation of having him inside me again.

He slides off both his and my underwear in record time and pulls my hips closer to him, my elbows behind me supporting me on the island as I watch him slowly slide in one finger, then two inside me, moving in and out and driving me mad.

I move my hips against his hand in the same movement and he says in a husky voice, "I want to hear you say it."

I feel goosebumps spread all over my body.

Barely able to talk, I say in between trembling breaths, “I need you... inside of me... *now*.”

He wastes no time and slides me up against him. I feel the tip of him against me and push my hips up, wanting all of him inside me. He surprises me taking my legs and bringing them over his shoulders, his hands coming under my butt as he slides his entire length into me. I cry out, my entire body trembling as we look at each other as he slowly moves in and out.

I can feel every inch of him at this angle and it’s incredibly sexy how he keeps his eyes locked on mine the entire time. I get lost in the moment and enjoy the feeling of him inside me, looking up at him and meeting his piercing gaze.

When I nod my head at him, it’s as if he can read my mind and he goes faster.

And faster.

I’m close. I can feel it building up as I feel him deep inside me and watch him over me. I arch my back and cry out, my hips shaking underneath me.

He finishes too and stays inside me for a moment as we breathe heavily together. He smiles and leans down to kiss me softly. Then he lifts me into his arms, and still out of breath, he says, “To the shower we go.”

I giggle and don’t argue, perfectly content in his strong arms.

After the shower, we’re both wrapped in our towels, and I start to feel a little self-conscious and confused.

When I reach down to grab my clothes, Harvey knocks my clothes out of my reach.

“What are you doing?” I look at him, covering myself with the towel as if he just hadn’t seen me naked.

Now that my passion has chilled, I don’t know if I should be here. I’m not sure what we are doing or what this means for us.

He shrugs and says, “There’s no one around for at least half a mile. No need for clothes. Come relax with me in the hot tub.”

I hesitate and he says, “Look, I know we have things to talk about. We can do it out there.”

I nod, still covering myself with the towel and follow him outside. His backyard is huge, with grassy patches and stone-lined paths leading to a wooden deck by the pool, and a jacuzzi with full-on bubbles next to it.

The sun is just starting to set. He flips a switch and lights turn on leading to the jacuzzi and hang from above it.

“How many girls have you impressed with that jacuzzi?” I cross my arms and stop, looking at him half indignant and half amused.

And he laughs, a throaty laughter that makes me want to punch him.

“None of them matter now,” he extends his hand to me. “Because I have you.”

I stare at him as if he's full of it but do take his hand and abandon the towel, following him into the hot tub.

He places me on his lap, and I smile at him, but then pull away, sitting to face him, the bubbles covering us.

He continues, his voice husky, "It's true. haven't thought about anyone else or wanted anyone else since you."

I look over at him and his eyes look open and honest.

I sigh and ask him, "What is happening between us?"

He looks at me earnestly and says, "I know that we started out as a fake couple, but I want to try for real with you. I can't get you out of my head, but it's also deeper than just physically wanting you. I care about you and want to get to know you better. Plus, my family loves you and—"

I close my eyes and sigh, "That's just it, Harvey. I feel so guilty about lying to your family like that. How can we build a relationship based off a lie?"

"So, you're saying you won't even invest in me because I made it weird with my family?" He frowns.

I take a deep breath, trying to get my thoughts and feelings under control. The truth is that I do like him. A lot. I want to be with him, but it feels almost impossible under these circumstances.

I continue, "I don't want to start dating you for real while pretending that we were always together. It leaves a bad feeling in my stomach, and I don't know how we could have a good relationship that way. I don't want to lie to your family

anymore. Look, I care about you too, but I need to give this some thought, okay?”

His eyes grow heavy, and he just nods.

I try to joke, “Oh c’mon. Don’t whine because you aren’t getting your way.”

He rolls his eyes but then says, “Well I’m here if you want to talk, okay?”

I nod, grab my towel, and quickly cover myself with it as I head out of the hot tub.

“Thank you again for the therapist recommendations. I’m motivated now to get help with my panic attacks. You’ve helped me to get out of the funk I’ve been in and to see a way to start pursuing my acting dream again.”

He nods with a smile and then I say softly, “I should probably get going.”

I can tell he wants to argue, but he finally just nods.

With a sigh, he gets out of the hot tub too and says, “Let’s dry off and change. I’ll take you home.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

HARVEY

I'm on ice, but my mind is not in the game. It's just a charity game anyway.

I pass the puck to the right winger, and all I can think about is Elsa and her indecisiveness and it's killing me. It's been almost a week and she still hasn't told me her answer.

I enter the goal crease of the adversary and am immediately tackled by the spryest of their defensemen, banging my ribs sideways on the plexiglass and making me fall flat on my face over the ice.

"Penalty! Penalty!" I shout, pointing fingers at the defenseman.

"Shut up and play, Baker!" the referee yells in response, ordering me back into the rink.

I'm now fueled by rage, which I eagerly give into as a distraction. I feel rage towards the defenseman and this referee.

The puck comes back, and I hear myself growl with anticipation. This is it, the tiebreaker, one push and I send it right in between the legs of the goalie.

And boom. There it goes. But contrary to what I was expecting, the goalie defends it, we tie, and the game is over.

I toss my stick very far away, take off my gloves, and go straight to the referee.

“Why didn’t you give us that penalty, huh?” I say, pure rage flowing from my lips. “We coulda *won!* Are you bought by the other team, huh?”

By now I am so close to the poor man that we could just as well do the tango, but my teammates come to break us apart quite quickly.

“Harvey!” Tchekov says, “What’s your problem? This is a charity game!”

Only then does my anger subside, but I still keep on pointing my finger at the referee’s face, still indignant about what he did.

“You’re one dirty asshole, Williams,” I call out to the referee. I’m still catching my breath, but I manage to make it sound like I’m half joking.

“And you’re one short-tempered ass-wipe, Baker,” the referee skates by me, pats me on the shoulder, and moves on.

I head to the locker room with the rest of the guys, handing out autographs and stopping for selfie requests on the way there, For the fans’ sake, I can chill out and handle it. There’s

no need for them to see a fully grown piss-baby throw a tantrum because of a tie and because he can't get ahold of his emotions.

With the skate guards on my feet, I go ahead and join the others. I remove my pads and my jersey, and sit down for a little while, my head in between my knees.

“Are you okay, Harvey?” Phillips, our goalie, asks, a hand on my shoulder.

“Huh...” I say, feeling suddenly overwhelmed by the many pairs of feet encircling me. “What was I thinking?”

“Yeah, your head was really in the game,” Pinchon, our left defenseman, says.

“No, I was way too far off the game, I think,” I say and start removing my skates.

Everybody seems pleased with what they achieved and goes about their business. Fortunately, that leaves me be for a while, a quiet loner amid many merry voices.

I open my locker to get my clothes for a shower and see that my phone is ringing. It's Parker — of course, he's the one doing the local sportscast and must want an interview, so I answer as my mood allows me.

“Not in the mood for talking, my friend. Can we just skip this one?”

“Harvey, this is serious,” and just by the tone of his voice, I can tell he means it. “Can you get to the press' skybox now?”

“Sure, man, but what happened?” I ask, worried — which is ironic considering I’ve already been feeling vulnerable all day.

“I prefer to speak in person,” he says. “Now, please.”

“Okay, give me a few minutes,” I say. “I’ll hang up now and head over.”

He hangs up first, leaving me all weirded out and wondering what could have possibly happened for him to behave like this.

We met in the local circuits, not too long after he graduated college, and I was already a veteran of ten years. Parker was different than the other reporters and had taken the time to befriend me. We bonded over the love of the sport and eventually he became the only newscaster I would interview with and my best friend.

Now... Something tells me this is about to change.

I take a quick shower, and now in plain clothes, I head for the skyboxes and quickly locate the one designed for the press. By its door, and with his back turned to me, Parker speaks on the phone, and I just eavesdrop on the conversation.

“Elsa, I told you not to call me today! No, we haven’t spoken yet, but we will!” he paces from one side to another as he listens. “What? You’re at the stadium? Ha! Good luck getting to me without credentials!”

“I got to you without credentials,” I say, my voice dry and confused.

“Harvey!” Parker immediately hangs up the phone. “Good, you came!”

“What is so important for you to be so dark and somber, man?” I say, “You sounded so depressing on the phone!”

He snickers, very nervous, and doesn't seem to be able to pick a point where to focus his eyes. Finally, he cracks his fingers, one by one until he's repeating them.

“I need to talk to you about something important, Harvey,” he commences. “How could you have sex with my sister?”

My eyelids flutter more than the wings of a butterfly in the middle of a hurricane. After I pick up my stomach from my feet, I reply, “How do you know?”

“How do I know?” Parker snorts with disdain. “She fessed up, Harvey! I took her for lunch yesterday, to catch up, and I asked why she was so down, and after much insistence she finally said it's because of you! What should I do to you, Harvey?”

“I dunno,” I shrug. “Wanna square this off outside? Because if you're going to act like a child about this, I can kick your ass and be done with it.”

But Parker grunts in frustration, digs his nails into his scalp, and recoils in desperation.

“Harvey, this wasn't part of the deal!” he explodes. “You shouldn't have taken advantage of my sister. I trusted you! How do you expect me to feel?”

“Bad, apparently. But your sister is an adult, I am an adult, and no one took advantage of anyone. We both consented to it.”

“Parker, what are you doing?” I hear Elsa’s voice and look over my shoulder and see her, fuming at the nostrils and gritting her teeth so loudly it looks like saws cutting through wood.

“Elsa, get out of here!” Parker pleads.

But she stops with her arms crossed and legs at guard in between me and him — completely ignoring me, to be frank, and what hurts the most is that she didn’t even look me in the eye.

“Why don’t we ask Elsa’s opinion about it, huh?” I say, crossing my arms as well.

Only then does Elsa look at me, with a thousand-yard stare and her lips parted with incredulity.

“Ask my opinion about what?” she says it quite eloquently.

Parker curls in a very red ball of shame, while I explain to Elsa what I mean. “Parker is bothered that we had sex, and now wants to fight me. I said I’ll do it if he really wants to, but what do you think *he* should do?”

She looks from one to the other and seems to be unable to decide which one is more stupid.

“I know you two were idiots around each other, but I didn’t know it was *this* bad!” she sneers and storms away.

I look at Parker, still balled up like a coward, and I then look to myself internally, trying to decide who’s the best fit to go talk to Elsa. Likely, none of us is, but I take the burden on

myself and dart after her before she leaves the stadium for good.

“Elsa!” I yell for her in the parking lot, packed with people all around.

I spot her a few yards away and, too polite to flee on me, she crosses her arms again and waits for me to catch up.

“What the hell do you want?” she says, angry. “Wasn’t it enough to talk about me like I’m an object?”

I grab her by the wrist; she tries to fight me but gives up very soon.

“Your brother was the one treating you like an object. Hell, since the beginning! He only agreed to introduce us if he got paid.”

“So, he sold me...” She makes an offended grimace and bobs her head up and down.

“Precisely!” I gesticulate broadly in front of her face, trying to make her see I was not the wrong one in all of this.

“And why all of that stupid talk about what I think you should do? Why would you pit me against my brother like that?”

I cover my mouth with both of my hands and say in a muffled voice, “I was just trying to protect you, Elsa.”

Still offended, she laughs, and while laughing looks at me from the corner of her eye in a manner that puts a healthy fear of the almighty in me.

“I don’t *need* your protection, Harvey,” and she vanishes into the crowd, and I am left hating myself and cursing the air around me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

ELSA

Several days later, I am still fuming. Why men feel the need to be chivalrous in the most inappropriate moments is beyond me, but both Parker *and* Harvey surpassed the limit.

I've been seriously considering being in a relationship with Harvey, but him and Parker being so pig-headed really made me angry and even more confused as to what I should do.

Checking my phone, I see that I have some texts. I know they aren't from Harvey because after what happened at the game, I blocked his number just so I could cool off a bit before hearing from him.

The texts are from Parker. He is pure apologies as I read his texts.

Elsa, I'm sorry!

But Harvey is a brute and doesn't deserve you!

I'm frowning so hard I'll end up with wrinkles by thirty. My stomach aches out of hunger, as I couldn't fathom having

dinner yesterday, and my hands are itching to cuss Parker to the moon and back, and my foot looks like a fan moving in the most obvious nervous tick.

I prepare to send back a reply and delete and rewrite it several times, until finally getting to something satisfactory.

Parker, the person who needs to decide if I should be with Harvey or not is ME.

You have nothing to do with it.

He views the messages but does not reply right away, so I decide to get dressed and climb upstairs to check if there's still breakfast on the table.

I called the therapist recommendations that Harvey gave me, but so far, they either said they were fully booked, or I haven't heard back from them yet. So, I decide to take my computer upstairs to look into other therapy options.

There's just one problem, though: there's a male voice accompanying mom in the kitchen, and dad is in the garage, so I know it's not him.

I stand behind the door for a moment and try to recognize whose voice it is. My heart skips a beat when I realize who it is.

“Harvey!” I say as I open the door.

And there he is, a stupid smile on his face and arms wide open to receive me in the land of the living. “I thought you were never waking up!”

“Elsa, Harvey didn’t want to wake you up so has been talking to me while waiting for you,” mom says, excited.

“What are you doing here?” I’m taken by surprise.

My icy heart melts a little when I see him.

His smile drops and he says, “I didn’t like how we left things and wanted to apologize.”

Mom stands, takes a plate of scrambled eggs from the kitchen, and places it in front of me.

“Let me get you something to drink Elsa and then I will give you two some privacy!” she says, then shoves her nose inside the fridge.

Mom returns to me with a tall glass of milk, from which I take a big gulp to calm my nerves.

She gives me a hug and whispers in my ear, “Don’t ruin this, Elsa!” before waving bye to Harvey and heading outside to the backyard.

Harvey pulls up a chair next to me and steals one of my eggs.

His aftershave and the overall musky smell of him is distracting me and my stomach is so tied in knots I can’t possibly eat. I slide the plate over to him.

But he ignores it and looks me in the eye with sad eyes.

“I’m sorry, Elsa. I didn’t handle that conversation with your brother very well. I’m sorry to show up like this, but I couldn’t reach you on your phone and didn’t know what else to do.”

I sigh, “No you didn’t. But I guess I should apologize too. I didn’t mean to tell my brother about what... happened between us. It’s just that he flat out asked out of the blue and I was so shocked I couldn’t deny it. And yes, I blocked you—”

His eyes bulge and his face turns so red it almost makes me laugh. I hurriedly continue, “I blocked you because I didn’t want to say something I’d regret and wanted to give myself time to cool off.”

Harvey takes a deep breath, nods, then pulls me in close. “I’m sorry I put you in this fake relationship situation, but I’d be lying if I said I’m sorry I ever met you.”

He pulls away and looks me straight in the eye again.

“Because I’m not sorry about that. And even though we may have got to know each other because of a lie, I promise I’ll show you that you can trust me.”

My eyes start to tear up, and I start eating the eggs just to give me something to do. When I look up at him, he says with a grin, “You know I don’t care if you talk with your mouth full. Go ahead.”

I snort, narrowing avoiding eggs up my nose. After I drink some milk, I say, “I’ve been thinking about our last conversation and I have no idea how it would work, but I think we should try...”

His eyes sparkling, he jumps out of his seat as if his favorite sports team just won a game.

“Are you saying we can date for real?”

I wipe my eyes and shake my head, “I’m not saying that yet, but I want to try and figure it out. We still have some things to sort through, especially with your family—”

Before I can continue, he lifts me out of the chair and into a kiss.

We both hear a squeal and turn to see my mom, hands over her mouth, staring at us through the backyard glass door.

We both start laughing and wave her inside.

“Elsa and I kissed and made up!” Harvey says with a grin.

“I’m so happy to hear that! Isn’t he a charmer?” Mom claps her hand once. “Before you woke up, he was saying he’d like to take us sailing, Elsa!”

“And you said yes...?” I ask her, surprised.

“Of course not. You know I hate boats!” she says, waving my idea away. “But you can go with Harvey and your father, can’t you?”

“Sure,” I look at Harvey, and my heart jumps in my chest at the thought that he could be my boyfriend soon.

“Well, I’m going to tell John that you are here. He still doesn’t know. Give me just a second!” Mom pats Harvey on the hand, and then leaves in the direction of the garage.

Harvey and I look at each other and laugh.

“My parents can’t stop talking about you,” he admits out of nowhere.

I smile but feel a pang of guilt as well. “We need to talk about how to handle that situation the best way, especially if want to try dating for real.”

The garage door opens, and mom walks back into the kitchen.

“John said you can go to the garage if you want to talk to him, Harvey. He is busying himself with the car and is not moving an inch away from there!” Mom announces, coming back into the kitchen as loud as a raven.

“I’ll take you there,” I say, offering him my hand.

Dad is there, and just as mom said, he has his face deep into the car’s engine.

“Dad, Harvey is here,” I say, letting go of Harvey just slightly.

“Oh, hi Harvey!” He doesn’t move his attention from the car. “Pass me that wrench from the table, will ya?”

Harvey hands dad the wrench and looks at the engine as well.

“Any trouble, John?” Harvey says.

“Just a little noise,” dad says. “Tinkering around with it is mostly to keep me busy.”

“As long as you don’t break the car again, mom will be happy!” I say, holding back a laugh.

“Oh, keep quiet, Elsa!” Dad looks over his shoulder to say. I giggle and dad turns his attention to Harvey. “But what brings

you here, boy?”

Harvey takes a step back and flexes his biceps as if getting ready for a fight.

“Elsa told me you enjoy sailing, so I was wondering if I could introduce you to my girl at the marina,” he says, his voice shaking a bit, which melts my heart.

“Oh!” Dad moves his head out from under the engine, now getting genuinely interested. “I could only wonder what a couple million could do to a boat!”

“Billion, dad,” I correct him with a laugh. “He’s a billionaire, remember?”

“Eh, so be it. Both are amounts of money I will never have!” Dad shrugs, defeated. “Count me in. When shall we do it?”

“Today,” Harvey offers him his hand. “This afternoon I’ll take you to meet the Queen of the Marina!”

“Beautiful name! Mine is called—”

“Roadrunner!” Harvey points a finger gun at him. “Smart name, John!”

And all I can do is watch them getting along, the smile on my face growing wider and wider.

Chapter Twenty-Four

HARVEY

I am looking forward to getting to know Elsa's dad better and am just relieved there is something we both have in common: sailing.

We are meeting at 3 PM, and I arrive at 1:30, busying myself with knots, weights, masts, and sails while I wait.

After a while, I hyperfocus and completely blank out everything around me. This is a nice thing I do, a refuge from everything, and I always say I should do it more, but I always forget and don't.

After a while, I realize the sun is changing and look at my phone. It's almost 4 PM and none of them have arrived.

I realize I left my phone in the truck, so I dismount from the boat in a single, swift jump. With my back turned to the boardwalk to tie ropes properly, I don't see that I have company until it is too late.

“Are you just arriving or just leaving?” Elsa’s voice reaches my ears, and I turn to her with a smile.

“I was just going to grab my phone from the truck and call you to see if you were still coming! I always get distracted while I am on the boat and lose track of the time. Is anything wrong?”

She rolls her eyes and lets out an “Ugh!” that feels like a knife to my heart.

“I was wondering why you weren’t picking up! I unblocked you by the way. Well, dad messed up the car again and I booked a ride to come tell you since I couldn’t get you on the phone.”

“Oh,” I widen my eyes to her. “That’s a bummer. I was looking forward to getting to know him better, but maybe it’s good that it’s just us. I know we still have unfinished business to talk about. Let me help you up in a second.”

I turn my back to her and finish the knots. I help her up and follow her through, sitting at the bow of the boat, while she takes a seat just ahead of me. I then look at her and feel the ocean breeze on my skin. It’s sunny, but the wind is cold which makes an interesting contrast and stimulates my brain.

I look at her playfully. “Just for a second. Just think about what we could have been if none of this fake fiancé situation had happened. If Parker wasn’t such a tool and had introduced me to this wonderful sister that he has much earlier.”

I can tell that she's trying to picture it, because her eyes are closed, and she has the sweetest smile on her lips.

"Maybe we could have gone to your sister's wedding not as an engaged couple, but as boyfriend and girlfriend," she says, in a day dreamy voice.

"I say we could be engaged for real." I release the ropes of the boat, and it starts moving without Elsa noticing.

"No, you travel too much, and I would have been too busy with college then chasing my acting dream. There wouldn't be enough time," she says, and then opens her eyes. "Wait! Where are you taking me?"

"To international waters! Where nothing is a crime!"

The face she makes is priceless, and my laughter corresponds to it to the same degree. I sit by her side, but with my legs to the opposite side, just so I can maneuver the sails a little bit better.

"We have everything to make this work, Elsa..." I continue as we leave the marina and enter open waters.

I hear her sigh, and with her sigh, I see a strenuous pang growing in both of our chests, as a sign that things could in fact, have worked if I wasn't so stupid.

I feel the winds and correct the sails for us to go around the bay. Elsa continues "It's not that simple, Harvey. It's a matter of trust."

Nodding, I sigh along with her and feel a dark, somber spot hiding at the edge of my soul. "I understand. But don't

underestimate my family, they would understand.”

“Understand?” she asks in pure disbelief. “How so? We say that we were already dating, but the engagement thing was just for grandma? They will hate me for that!”

The way she puts it, I feel ridiculous. That was exactly my idea and she reduced it to ashes.

“Well...” I try to come up with another solution.

“That would still be lying, Harvey!” Elsa cries.

The sails are set on course, just a quick trip and I’ll bring her back to land. Taking advantage of it, I reach for her hand and lean back to look Elsa in the eyes.

I really want to show her she can trust me.

“I’ll tell them the truth, then.”

She seems surprised, and that’s a positive in my book.

“Everything. From way before you got involved, up till the day you showed up on their doorstep.”

Elsa doesn’t squeeze my hand back, doesn’t draw the minor emotion in her face, nothing. She just looks ahead, with a thousand-yard stare and a visible longing for answers I cannot give her.

“I’m not sure I can face that...” she says, feeling her shoulder.

“Then think about it,” I touch her hair and she doesn’t stop me.

The day is stunning, a beautiful sunny day with sparse white clouds decorating the sky. But none of us can appreciate it. Instead, she just crosses her arms, looking like she's cold, and I am too busy with my thoughts and almost don't acknowledge it.

"Here, please," I say, taking off my flannel shirt and placing it over her shoulders.

I smile seeing her cozying up to it. She is still lost in thought.

Then she turns to me and with a small voice says, "What if they hate me when you tell them?"

I pull her in and hold her tight, her back against my chest. "Elsa, they could never hate you. If you want to tell them the truth, let's tell the truth. We can talk about it and figure out when would be the best time to do so. What do you say? Will you be my girlfriend?"

I cough because my throat starts to get choked up.

She looks up at me and I get lost looking in her beautiful brown eyes.

Please say yes. Please say –

"Yes."

Chapter Twenty-Five

ELSA

Harvey is training with his team and getting ready to play for the Stanley Cup. They are still waiting for the western team to be awarded apparently and once that happens, they will know who they will play against, and the Stanley Cup games will be scheduled.

I'm starting to learn more about hockey, and I'm glad that it gives me something to do because I'm here stuck at home, still in my parents' basement.

I miss him but what's really on my mind is what he said about being willing to tell his parents the truth.

I care about his family, and I don't want us to keep lying to them, but I'm not sure I'm capable of unveiling the full-blown lie of the fake engagement to them. At least not yet.

What if they hate me after we tell them?

Harvey is convinced they won't, but I'm not so sure. If I were in their shoes, I don't know how I'd feel.

For now, I'll let it rest and stop driving myself crazy.

I hear a notification on my phone and look to see a new video from Harvey.

I snort and roll my eyes as I watch a video Harvey sent to me as he undresses in the locker room. I'll never get tired of seeing those muscles.

"Elsa! Lunch!" mom yells from the top of the stairs, causing me to almost drop my phone.

I put my phone in my pocket and get to climbing two steps at a time.

I sit at the kitchen table and look at the time on my phone. Few minutes till noon and just then I receive a call from the very place I've wanted to hear from.

"Hello, may I speak to Elsa Thompson?" a polite female voice asks.

"This is her, hello," I say, in my best business voice, enough to get mom's attention and make her sit right across from me.

"Hello, Elsa, this is Sheila from Dr. Hallebrand's office," I curl one fist high in silent cheer. Mom leans in closer, eyes wide with curiosity.

She continues, "You left a voicemail with us recently, and an opening in her schedule has come up. We do have availability to take on another client. Are you still needing to see a therapist?"

The exuberance on my face is clear and mom mouths, “What’s going on?” and I ask for her silence with a sign of my hand.

I clear my throat then say, “I am. When would she be available?”

“I know it’s short notice, but it would be 2 PM today. You would need to come 30 minutes early to fill out paperwork,” Sheila says. “Would that work for you?”

“Absolutely!” I say, unable to hide my cheerfulness. “See you in a little bit!”

“Bye-bye!” she says with the same energy.

I end the call, look at it for a moment, then look at mom, who’s been waiting for an answer to her questions for almost thirty seconds now.

“I have found someone to talk to about my acting career,” I say, vaguely.

I still haven’t told my family about my panic attacks. I don’t need their well-meaning advice in the form of convincing me not to do acting altogether.

I’m here expecting mom to be at least a little bit happy for me, as her little girl is piecing her life together and showing signs of self-reliance. But instead, Mrs. Judith Thompson lets out an “Oh no!” and brings her hands to her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, confused.

“How will you maintain your relationship?” She splays her hands to me, looking deeply concerned, “With him traveling so much and you with your acting career, how will you two ever find time to see each other?”

I furrow my brow and cross my arms, as angry as I can get with her.

“You’re worried about that instead of being happy for me pursuing my dream?” I say, indignant.

“It’s not that, Elsa!” She stands to go tend to the stove. Meat and carrots are ready, so she transfers them from the pan to a dish. “It’s just that you need to set up your priorities; don’t you love this man?”

“Mom!” I explode, getting wildly defensive. My emotions have been all over the place and I just snap.

“Stop putting so much pressure on me!”

“What are you saying, Elsa?” mom feels her heart, and as if taken by angina, leans over the counter to catch her breath.

“What you heard, mom!” I slam my fists over the table and let everything out. “Yes, I care about Harvey, but I also care about my acting dream, which I’ve had since I was a child. As you know! Why can’t I do both?”

Mom slowly places her hand in front of her mouth and shakes her head. Without a word, she keeps on placing the food on the dishes to serve them on the table, and only when my father walks in does she say anything.

“Elsa has something she wants to tell you,” she says, as if dad would be able to fix the situation.

But I just shake my head, refusing to speak.

Luckily, dad could tell I didn’t want to talk and didn’t push it.

I finish lunch quickly and silently, then wash my plate and head straight to my basement to get ready for my appointment.

I don’t know if it’s the nerves or what, but I end up puking in the basement bathroom. When I drink some ginger ale afterward, I feel slightly better.

I change into jeans and a sweater and put my hair up in a high ponytail. I take a few more deep breaths, drink more ginger ale, then brush my teeth.

I grab my things and with my head held high, I walk out of my parents’ house to get into the car I booked and head to my therapy appointment.

I’ve never been in therapy before so I’m not sure what to expect, but I’m looking forward to getting the help I need.

The office is small and there isn’t a single living soul in the lobby, so I wait around for a while until an older woman shows up with a broom and pan at hand.

“Excuse me, do you know where I can find Sheila?” I ask the lady, who looks at me with curiosity.

“Last door down the corridor,” she points.

“Thank you,” I say with a smile, and she nods back at me.

I walk down the corridor. When I knock on the semi-open door, I see a brunette woman furiously typing on a laptop. My knock draws her attention, and with a shy sign of her hand, she smiles and invites me in.

“You must be Elsa,” she says, walking around her desk to greet me.

“That’s right,” I nod and smile.

“Lovely to meet you in person. I’m Sheila. Please take a seat and I’ll bring the necessary paperwork over.” She points me to a free chair across from hers.

After I feel everything out, I sit patiently. I feel grateful to Harvey for helping me get this far. I know I can be stubborn and not only was it a relief to tell him about my stage fright, but now I feel empowered with the ability to finally do something about it.

As if I need any more reassurance, when Dr. Hallebrand opens the door to her office and invites me in from the reception area, I feel a sense of calm as she welcomes me in.

Afterwards, I’m taking the bus to go back home and I’m already looking forward to my next appointment with Dr. Hallebrand. We talked about my goals and how the panic attacks and stage fright had been preventing me from reaching them since graduation. It felt so good to get it all out, and she was so encouraging and has helped so many others before.

I look down when my phone buzzes with a notification and see it’s a text from Harvey.

Can't wait to see you tonight, sweetheart. We have to celebrate that our team made it to the Stanley Cup!

The butterflies start again and I smile as I text him back.

Congratulations! But are you sure you can cook?

He's picking me up for dinner at his place and a movie. I like that he enjoys staying in when he's back home and getting a break from his competitions.

My phone buzzes again.

It's a take-and-bake pizza so I don't think I can screw it up. You pick the movie!

Laughing to myself, I feel more certain than ever that I *can* do both – be in a relationship with Harvey and go after my acting career.

Chapter Twenty-Six

HARVEY

“So, you’re not going to retire this year?” Parker asks me, and I think that’s the trillionth time he has done so since those stupid rumors started.

We finally made peace after Elsa put him in his place and told him we are in a relationship, and we are finally talking again.

“Parker...” I take a sip of beer and lean back in my chair, while he’s left to the four-seater, where I normally sleep when I’m drunk.

“I’m not a spring chicken, I know I’m nearing the end of my days as a hockey player. But while my performance doesn’t get lower, why bother about it? I’m scoring the best I’ve been in my whole career...”

“Your best year was eight years ago, Harvey,” Parker tells me over his beer. “And the three following years were good

too. But since your injury to the Achilles heel, your numbers have only been going lower and lower.”

“Then why am I still on the team?” I ask indignantly.

“You’re too stubborn to quit and the public likes you,” he shoots it straight to my face. “You’re also a safe bet for the coaches. And compared to the new crop of players, your numbers still do very well.”

I turn my attention to the sportscast on TV. We’re watching a very important game. It’s the game that will decide which team we’ll be playing in the Stanley Cup.

Parker and I got together to see as part of our truce and that is the reason why Parker is in my place instead of cowering in a corner.

Our team has made it through to the Stanley Cup and I’m especially interested in the outcome of this game because there is one team in particular that I want to win – The Los Angeles Vipers.

If they do, then we’ll be playing them in the Stanley Cup. Our team has been watching their gameplays and video playbacks like crazy and we feel confident we can beat them.

Currently the game is in overtime, and the forward of the team I want to win moves and collects the puck. I jump up, my eyes glued to the screen.

“Do you think he’ll pull it off?” I ask, nervous.

Parker is going to be involved with the sportscasting of the Stanley Cup. It’s a huge opportunity, but I know he’s nervous.

I know we can crush the California Vipers. Our team has been studying videos of their games and we know their players, performance, weaknesses, and strengths like the back of our hands.

Parker is as glued to the screen as I am.

We watch as the forward flies down the ice and then moves left and then right to stop the opposing defenseman from getting in his way. My eyes widen as he makes one final move and lifts the puck over the opposing goalie's pad and into the top left corner of the net.

The red goal light flashes, and just like that, I erupt in cheers along with the fans.

“Congratulations, man!” Parker high-fives me and comes in for a hug, but I cut it short. “This might be your last Stanley Cup! I can't wait to see you play against them and be a part of the coverage of it!”

His words cut me like a knife, but they ring true. Do I see myself playing next year when I'm thirty-nine?

“Yeah, you might be right,” I sigh, scratching my chin, the adrenaline starting to fade from my veins.

“It's not like you need to play hockey anymore, I mean... Your other companies do more than well enough,” Parker says.

I narrow my eyes at him, feeling something odd. Not afraid to show it, I say slowly, “Are you trying to convince me to retire, Parker?”

“No!” he splays his hands in front of his body, defensive and cowardly. “I’m just worried about you, Harvey. The more time you play, the bigger the chances of you getting hurt!”

I leave my beer at the side table, and then cross my arms, feeling furious inside, but surprisingly chill on the outside,

“Parker,” I start, now feeling my forehead, “Did you gamble your money on me retiring?”

Parker turns paper white, as if I needed a better confession to his crime.

“You did!” I clap my hands and say very sarcastically, “Why are you betting against me, dude?”

I’m indignant, and he’s rubbing his face crimson, unable to justify himself with words. I’ll give him all the time he needs, but he’s not leaving my house without explaining this betrayal.

“Harvey,” he groans then sighs. “I’m in debt.”

I scoff, “From gambling?”

“Yeah...”

“Why didn’t you ask me for a loan, Parker? Hell, I would even give the money! No questions asked! But please, don’t use your advantage to win a stupid bet!” I say, pissed.

“I don’t want to look like I’m leeching off you, man,” he says, finally looking at me. “You’re so freaking successful, and I’m here, on the verge of losing my house and going to share a basement with my sister!”

Now I’m rubbing my face red, unsure of what to do.

“What you have is beyond a simple problem, Parker, it’s an addiction. You have to seek help!”

As soon as Parker got involved in sports, and got insider knowledge on most matches and stats, he got involved with gambling, and from he’s told me, not all of it was legal.

Then suddenly, it’s like a light bulb goes off in my head, and I get an uneasy feeling. Over five years ago, I was approached by some guy to throw some games. They offered me money, but I refused and got the police involved. It turned out that he was with the mafia.

I hadn’t heard anything else from them since then, but what if they were behind this rumor?

Nah, it couldn’t be.

Parker brings me back to the present moment.

“I know, Harvey!” he places his head in between his knees. “This is the first and the last time I’m asking you, man: help me help myself.”

Cutting the conversation short, my phone rings. I stand to go grab it at the TV rack, and while I’m getting there, I pat Parker on the back and say, “We’ll get you help, dude.”

I look at my phone, and it’s mom, starting a video call, certainly to talk to me alongside dad. Sitting back on my chair, I answer it, only to see two awkwardly placed, smiling faces looking at me.

“Boy! Did you watch it?” my father says, enthusiastic.

“We’re so excited for you, Harvey! We know how badly you want to play them in the Stanley Cup and now you are!” mom adds, hands joined in front of her body. “Are we interrupting something?”

She looks around me, trying to see someone hiding behind me, and I snicker at her effort, turning the camera toward Parker.

“Nothing, mom. It’s just Parker here,” he waves. “Thank you for the support and taking such an interest in my career. You guys are the best!”

“Of course!” dad says.

“I appreciate it!” I raise my fist up.

“We are your biggest fans,” mom says.

A notification for a second call comes in, and I have to interrupt them. “Mom, dad, I have another incoming call. Talk to you later!”

“Alright, darling!” mom bids her goodbyes.

The next call is from Tchekov, and we celebrate. We both know that if we end up playing against the Los Angeles Vipers, we have a really good chance of winning.

All the while, Parker remains there, silent and resigned, and waits patiently for me to finish until finally saying, “I better get going...”

“No. You stay there!” I wave a finger at him. “Let me just grab my computer and we’ll make sure you get the help you

need man!”

I head upstairs in a hurry, my phone in my hand and my mind on finding a gambling addiction group for Parker.

My laptop is on the floor, almost under the bed, and I take it from there before sitting on the bed. I’m looking at my phone and thinking about Elsa, so I give her a call. I know she had another therapy appointment earlier, but she should be out now.

“Hey, Harvey!” She says brightly and I smile back.

“I just wanted to see how you were and how your therapy session went today?”

As she tells me about it, my heart warms at how excited she is about the progress she is making.

“That’s awesome, babe. I’m so proud of you.”

She hesitates then asks, “When will we tell your parents the truth about us?”

I bite my lip and reply, “I’ve been thinking about it, and I think we should wait to tell them until after the Stanley Cup. Guess what? We know who we are playing now! We’ll be against this team from California that I’m pretty sure we can beat. Are you going to come to our games?”

I hear her hesitate and frown, “Don’t tell me you are getting cold feet? I know hockey isn’t your thing, but you said you’d go!”

She is quick to reassure me. “Of course, I’m going! I was just wondering if we should tell your parents sooner, but I understand if you don’t want to take away any focus from the Stanley Cup.”

I nod, “Yes, I want to make sure I give it my full attention when we explain everything to my parents, and I can do so better after the Cup.”

“Harvey?” Parker yells from downstairs. “I’m leaving!”

“No, Parker! Wait there!” I yell firmly. “I have to go, Elsa. Have a good rest of the day sweetheart.”

“Goodbye, you too,” she says softly then hangs up.

I head to the staircase right on as to not keep Parker waiting any longer. Getting there, he encircles me, sitting by my side on the couch as I open the laptop and unlock it.

“What are you doing?” he asks me, interested in what I’m typing.

“Here...” I hand him the computer. “It’s a list of gambling support groups you can join.”

He takes the computer and looks at me, upset. “I’d prefer you loan me the money...”

“And you just spend it on gambling again?” I slap the back of his head. “Come on, pick one, and let’s go there.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

ELSA

I've been working on the breathing and relaxation exercises Dr. Hallebrand has taught me. I've also been practicing monologues in front of a mirror and recording myself.

I still feel nauseous and lightheaded and have been throwing up a lot lately, but I think it's just because I'm finally starting to face my fears head-on.

There's a community theater near where my parents live that I want to try and be a part of just to get my feet wet and practice getting over my fears. I want to be ready to ultimately audition for film and television roles again, but this time, without the panic attacks.

At the moment, I'm with Becca, and we just walked over to get to a cotton candy vendor on the other side of the street. She got a pink one and I got a blue one.

Becca has a nursing degree and is a nurse in a plastic surgeon clinic in one of the most prestigious addresses in

Boston.

And even though I'm the same age and am still figuring out my life, I'm not so hard on myself. Dr. Hallebrand's sessions are already helping me see things differently.

"So, what's it like dating an NHL star?" Becca says, stealing a clump of my cotton candy.

"Hey!" I steal a clump of hers, "You have your own!"

"Ha!" she tilts her head back. "Anyway, I pretty much know the answer by the glow you have about you."

I shrug. "I like him a lot, but there's just a lot to figure out."

My voice sounds more like a lament than I'd like to, and Becca feels my pain, bringing a hand to rub my back.

"What happened?" she wants to know.

Deciding I don't want to get into the fake fiancé situation, I just shrug and say, "Oh you know, he travels so much, and I am trying to pursue an acting career. Just a lot of unknowns."

She gives me a side hug. "I know you want to be an actress, but you can have that and love too. Don't give up on either one."

I smile and steal some of her cotton candy.

"Are you excited his team will be playing for the Stanley Cup?" she asks.

I nod, my heart warming that she's taken such an interest since she's not really a hockey fan either.

“Yes, the first game is in a few days, and we fly out to California tomorrow! After the first two games, the next two will be back here so I’ll be back in Boston soon. I guess whoever wins four games first will win the Cup.”

I stop, feeling impressed with myself at how much I’ve learned in such a short time.

“Anyway, it will be fun to see Harvey in action! My brother will be there too because he got invited to help host the Stanley Cup. He’s so stressed out! I want to make fun of him but I’m trying to be nice.”

Becca laughs. “I don’t have any siblings, so the sibling rivalry thing is hard for me to relate to, but I always wanted an older brother.”

“You can have mine!” I joke, but the truth is I’m glad Parker will be there too.

My mom is beyond thrilled that I’m going to support Harvey and my dad doesn’t say mean things about him, so I think he is taking a liking to him, or at least doesn’t mind him.

I book a ride and then hug Becca. “Thank you for dinner earlier! I’m going to head home!”

She hugs me back, “Of course! I owed you one for the spa day. I’m glad you reached back out when you came back home. I’m glad things are going well for you and best of luck with your new boyfriend!”

On the drive back home, I smile to myself as I realize that by going on this trip with Harvey, even with him playing multiple

games, I'll still get to see him more than I've been able to lately.

I can't wait.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HARVEY

I'm heading to California today and already feeling completely spent.

Nursing a mean hangover from a celebratory party last night and having to put up with Parker freaking out about the biggest opportunity of his life is not doing me any favors.

But to add to it all is the excitement I have that Elsa is coming and supporting me.

My stomach flutters with thousands of butterflies inside, proving to me that even brutes can love.

Parker is here with me too. He was invited to help cover the Stanley Cup games and to help provide analysis, conduct interviews, and offer insights.

I agreed to give him exclusive interviews as usual, but that was before I knew he had a gambling problem.

We met at the airport a few hours before the flight.

Elsa is meeting us later because she has a therapy session before the flight.

“Dude, I can’t do this!” Parker places his hands on his head, still in panic. “Why did I say yes?”

Chilling at one of the many lounges within the airport, I look at him, cross my arms and say, “You shouldn’t have said yes. You should be focusing on getting better, Parker. I’m glad you are going to those gambling meetings, but don’t lose focus, okay? Don’t get sucked back into betting. Anyway, now that you said yes, you need to take responsibility, and do the best job you can, alright?”

Parker sits by my side, still clawing his scalp, and looking up, cries into the heavens a plea for help.

“You’re going to kick it out of the park, dude,” I say, massaging his shoulder.

“I’m not so sure,” he says in complaint.

“It’s a big deal, yes. But don’t overthink this. Plus, wasn’t you who wanted to reach national news by the end of the year?”

“Yeah, but...”

“No buts!” I cut him off.

“How are things going with Elsa? She seems happier lately and mom absolutely can’t stop talking about you dude,” he says, changing the subject.

I smile, “Well she makes me plenty happy so I’m glad to hear she is too. And she is amazing. Thank you for being understanding about us.”

The voice of the airport announces our flight will begin boarding soon, and I look around, full of longing, for the one I truly want to see there.

“She told us she just got through security, so she’ll be here any minute dude,” Parker says with a smile.

“I know, I know,” I say, looking over my shoulder anyway.

“Harvey!” I hear Elsa call out my name and see her running toward us. When she reaches us, she wraps her arms around me for a kiss, making me the happiest guy around.

“You sure know how to cut it close!” I say, holding her by the shoulders, barely able to contain my smile.

She waves a hand at my worry. “I am just bringing a carry-on since we’ll be there less than a week, so I didn’t even have to check anything in.”

She leans her head against my chest, and I hold her, kiss the top of her head, and welcome her with my body as with my whole spirit.

Meanwhile, Parker looks at us awkwardly then coughs and says, “Hi, Elsa.”

“Hi, Parker!” she replies, giggles stuck in her throat.

And then we begin boarding.

As we walk onto the plane, hand in hand, I'm assured that all is fine.

After all, I'm heading out to play for the Stanley Cup with my incredible girlfriend by my side.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

ELSA

The plane is making me feel even more sick than usual and this bout of nausea is worse than I've ever had before.

“Are you okay?” Harvey touches my arm, noticing my distress.

“My stomach is churning,” I complain, leaning against him. “All I've eaten today was a croissant and cotton candy!”

“You bad girl!” he jokes. “Want me to call the flight attendant and see if they have any medicine?”

I shake my head, softly smiling to politely decline his offer. “Maybe some ginger ale?” I suggest.

He presses the button overhead to call the attendant, and in a moment the lady arrives, polite and kind.

“How can I help you sir?” she asks, leaning forward with interest.

“Bring some ginger ale for Elsa here, and...” he thinks for a second. “Some orange juice for me please.”

“I’ll be back in a minute!” the flight attendant says and walks away.

He asks, “So how did your therapy session go earlier today?”

I reply, grateful for the distraction, “Good! I’m feeling more and more confident. Also, I’ve applied to join a local community theater group to get back in the game.”

“That’s incredible. I’m so proud of you,” he says, caressing my hand.

I giggle nervously. “I still can’t believe I’m here going to California with you!”

He smiles widely, “Me too! I’m so happy you are here and that you are moving forward with your acting career.”

I lean forward to take deeper breaths when the nausea hits again and I feel Harvey gently rub my back.

Luckily the attendant arrives carrying a cart with our drinks, and I take mine gladly, as my stomach is screaming for help.

“Whoa! It’s not going to run away from you!” Harvey says as he watches me down half of the ginger ale in a single gulp.

“My stomach fills like a washing machine.”

“You should eat something! Put some salt in you!”

“Ha, why does this feel like something your mother says?” I ask him, amused.

“Because it is!” He laughs, but then turns to me full of concern. “Elsa, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Um,” I frown. “Not really, why?”

“Because you’re paper white!” He presses the button again, but I stand and ask him to move so I can get out.

“I’ll go to the bathroom. I think I’m going to barf,” I say.

“Then use the bag!” Harvey says and grabs it just in time.

Some turbulence hits the plane, and my stomach turns inside out. I put my hands on my knees, and vomit straight into the bag Harvey holds out.

Before I know, I black out.

I wake up in Harvey’s arms, with a cup of water shoved into my face. I sit, reach for the cup, and ask, my voice sounding muffled, “How long was I out?”

“Just a few seconds,” Harvey laughs nervously. “How are you feeling?”

“A little better, I think,” I say, leaning back in my seat.

“Parker?” I see my brother standing in front of me, His seat is a few rows ahead so he must have walked over.

“Are you okay?” Parker asks, concerned.

“Sir,” the flight attendant who served us in the first place speaks from behind Harvey. “We’re almost landing. Please take a seat.”

I reassure Parker I’m okay and he walks back to his seat. The poor flight attendant takes the barf bag and Harvey is rubbing

my shoulders.

I'm taking deep breaths and feel slightly better as we prepare for landing.

As we exit the plane and walk to baggage claim, I feel much better.

"Let's get to the hotel so you can rest," Harvey says at the luggage pick-up.

"So, you two are just going to be all lovey-dovey in front of me all the time now?" Parker asks, standing behind us like a third wheel.

"Yes!" we shout back to him as one, and then kiss, as if to prove our point.

The three of us get into the same cab, but Parker climbs out much sooner than us since he's staying in a different hotel.

We check in and head to our room.

"I'm glad we got here early for some time to ourselves." Harvey says, jumping in bed and inviting me to join him.

We arrived a few days before the games start just to spend time together and Parker came early too to get his nerves under control and sightsee a bit on his own.

Harvey and I shower together, have dinner, and then go to a mall afterward to walk around.

"Are you feeling better?" he looks at me, loving to see me in his leather jacket, I bet.

“I’m fine!” I say, in a squeal, holding tight to his arm to shun the cold of the night away from me.

“Okay, but you’ll do me a favor...” he says, “You’re going to see a doctor tomorrow, okay?”

I roll my eyes. So absorbed by the conversation, I don’t pay attention to where we’re entering, but I soon realize that a single purse from one of these stores could buy me a luxury car.

“Harvey... No! Uh... Are you sure we should be here?” I say, feeling awkward as hell.

“What do you mean?” he asks.

“I don’t deserve this much!” I speak in between my teeth, pure nerve, and cold sweat.

It’s then that Harvey takes me by the waist and brings my body close, and I shiver as I breathe in the scent of his cologne and feel his arms around me. My eyes are glued to his, and we look so deeply into each other that I feel like I could willingly drown in that ocean of blue.

“You deserve the *world*, babe!” He dips me to kiss me, and I can’t stop giggling.

“But you are going to the doctor, right?” Harvey asks me, poking me in between my shoulder blades.

“It was just some motion sickness, Harvey. I’m okay!” I wave him off.

“Really? It happened just this once?” he asks, eyebrows raised to me.

I sigh, resigned. Maybe I should see a doctor since I’ve been having bouts of nausea over the past few weeks.

“Okay, you win. I’ll go,” I lean onto him, and he holds me with one arm.

“Thank you,” he squeezes my arm, making me feel protected and safe.

Early morning the next day, we’re at a private clinic where I pour out all of my medical history to a tiny doctor with big glasses. I go through a complete clinical exam and urine samples, and one hour later, I’m called back into the doctor’s office to receive the news.

“Well, Ms. Thompson,” the doctor says, his hands tented in front of him. “We found the reason for your nausea and vomiting.”

“And what is it, doctor?” I lean forward, hanging on to his words.

He separates from a pile a white envelope with my name. Before handing it to me, he smiles, a bit sly.

“Congratulations, mommy,” he says, leaving me dumbfounded.

“What...?” I barely can get anything out as my jaw drops. “That’s not possible. I’m on the pill!”

“I know it can come as a shock, but it is still possible to get pregnant on the pill. And you are on the mini pill, which means you have to be extra careful. Do you take it perfectly at the same time every day?” the doctor says.

“I...” I pause to think for a good while. “I take it first thing in the morning so yeah, usually.”

“Well, my guess is that maybe you accidentally missed one or were too late in taking one. Even if you are a few hours late, you can get pregnant,” he says, somber. “But even if taken perfectly, there is still a chance.”

“I was on the regular birth control pill, but it gave me horrible headaches, so my doctor suggested this one,” I say softly, feeling in shock.

After a few moments, I realize the doctor is staring at me expectantly, and I whisper, “Is there anything else, doctor?”

“I’ve written you a prescription for some nausea medicine. Just make sure to schedule a follow-up with your regular doctor when you return home,” he says, waving me goodbye.

I leave his office and find Harvey patiently standing in the waiting room. I don’t know what I am going to tell him yet, I just keep on approaching him, until finally...

“What did they say?” he asks, interested and concerned.

But then I put my hands against his chest and push him again and again. It’s not hard but I feel a sense of release as I do it.

I’m scared and needing someone to blame.

Finally, he holds my hands together and repeats, “What did they say?”

I bite down on my lip, tears beginning to choke me.

“This is all your fault!” I shout to him.

The receptionist looks at me, unsure if she should intervene or not. Harvey looks at me confused, and demands to know, “What did I do?”

Now I’m in full-blown tears, and I know he is in distress, still unable to understand what’s going on. I need to clear things up, even if it’s just to curse him a little better.

“I’m pregnant, Harvey!” I shove the envelope with the test results in his face. “Look at what you did!”

His eyes wide, he just drops the papers, and they float to the floor. He just stares at them but makes no move to pick them up.

Suddenly he utters defensively, “Hey, I didn’t do this on my own!”

I collapse in tears by his side. Harvey attempts to hold me, but I dodge his advance, so he just keeps his hands to himself. Picking up the scattered papers from the floor, he says, trying to act calm, “This is a good thing, Elsa.”

“No, it’s not!” I keep on sobbing like a child. “I was just discovering my life, and—”

“You can keep on discovering your life!” Harvey kneels in front of me and looks me in the eye. “I will take care of you,

Elsa. Of you and the baby!”

I sniffle, feeling slightly better. “Harvey... I’m still not sure what I want for my life, and I was hoping to figure it out this year... With you... I was going to figure out how to have an acting career and be with you. But a child changes everything.”

Still kneeling in front of me, I see him wilt, chewing on the insides of his cheeks, and looking all over the room for the right words to say.

“This is the first time this has happened to you, right?” I nod positively. “Well, this is the first time for me too. I might not have a lot of experience, but I have great examples in my family. I can be a good father, Elsa! Please let me take care of you and the baby!”

I scoff, feeling bitter. “So what? Are we going to get married and live happily ever after?”

“Not necessarily,” he shrugs. “We will keep on dating, and if we want to get married, we will. We’ll figure this out together.”

He squeezes my hand and I look down at our hands, still refusing to believe that he is being this flexible for the sake of loving me, the sake of becoming a father, or both.

“Maybe you’re right. I just wasn’t expecting this. This wasn’t in my plans.” I crumble down in tears again.

“Come on,” he stands. “Let’s get out here and get some lunch in you.”

He offers me his hand as a haven for a direction still unknown. And I take it, scared but not alone.

Chapter Thirty

HARVEY

I didn't think anything could distract me from the fact that we are about to play for the Stanley Cup, but finding out I'm going to be a father is a hell of a distraction.

It's a lot to take in and I barely have time to process any of it.

The team goes into training camp tomorrow, and I'll have to leave Elsa alone while I'm there, and that is the last thing I want to do.

The woman *can't stop crying*. I'm exerting my patience to the limit, but for this sort of thing, there's only one person I can rely on.

"Mom!" I waited until Elsa was taking a bath to video call her. "How's it going?"

"Fine and dandy, darling, how about you? Are you excited to start playing? Your father and I will be glued to the TV!" she says with a big smile.

“Doing great and absolutely! By the way, I have good news!”

“Oh, tell me!” she widens her eyes and brings her face even closer to the screen.

“Guess who’s going to be a grandma again?” I say, trying to be funny.

She thinks for a second, and it’s hilarious to witness the cogs in her head turning. “I don’t know, I mean... Oh! Me?”

“Yes!” I shout, full of energy.

“Yay!” she tilts her head back, delighted to hear my words. “Wait... Is it from Kiera or you?”

“Me, mom!” I tell her once and for all. “Elsa and I are in California, and we just found out.”

“Oh my God, son, congratulations! Thank goodness you are both engaged!” she says, tears in her eyes.

My heart drops a little. I still haven’t told my parents the truth about us, but it will have to wait until the Stanley Cup is done and I’m face to face with them.

I cough, “Yeah, and mom...”

Now my mood turns darker; I scratch my chin and falter in my words. “I need to ask you a question about it.”

Mom blinks and says, “Shoot, Harvey!”

“Is it normal for Elsa to be non-stop crying? I mean, she’s been like that ever since we received the news. She’s not accepting it very well.”

“I take it was a surprise?” mom says.

“Yeah, you take it correctly,” I say, bobbing my head.

“Um...” she puts a hand on her chin, pensive. “It’s going to grow on her, darling... Just be by her side, love her, and it will all come together.”

“I guess you’re right,” now I’m the one holding my chin. “Should I do something special for her?”

“Oh!” she laughs, “Something special is always nice! But anyway, your father is coming in, wanna talk to him?”

“Nah, leave the old man alone,” I say. “Thank you, mom. You’re the best.”

“Remember that her hormones are haywire now. She is going to cry for no reason one way or the other,” she says, then turns off-screen. “Hey, George, Harvey is having a kid!”

“Atta boy, Harvey! Let us know when you set the wedding date!” he says, stopping to look at me through mom’s phone. I can see his eyes starting to tear up too. “We’re so proud of you son. You and Elsa will make wonderful parents.”

I start to choke up.

“I’ll let you go, darling, bye-bye! And good luck at the conference finals!” mom says.

“Bye!” I reply, my voice cracking.

I lean over the desk where I’m sitting and start to wonder what the future holds for me, for us, because now I’m not alone anymore.

Will her hormones make her kick me in the ass halfway through the pregnancy? Will the baby be healthy? Will I be a good enough father?

Tough questions, all of them useless for me to concern myself with right now.

My concern at the moment is the goddess coming out of her bath in a fluffy robe and a towel wrapped around her head.

“Getting busy?” she asks, heading straight for the closet.

“Yeah, I called mom.” I place a hand over my mouth as soon as I let that slip.

She wasn’t supposed to know I spoke to mom because then she would know I told her about the baby, which we said we’d keep a secret during this trip. But now, since I’m on fire, let’s get roasted.

“Please don’t hate me,” I quickly continue, feeling like a dog who got into mischief.

I’m expecting a scolding, but she just lets out a heavy sigh. Following it, comes a sob, and then another, and then she is full-blown crying again and I have no idea what to do.

“You weren’t supposed to say anything!” She complains amid tears, her body stance defensive, protecting her belly by instinct.

“Oh, babe, we couldn’t hide it forever, right?” I stand up to hold her, but she dodges, making me frown.

“Harvey.” Now she’s angry, laying out her clothes to wear. “I haven’t even told my own mother and you go and tell yours?”

I shrug, confused. “Want my help to do it?”

“No!” She cries out. “I want you to behave!”

She moves from the closet to the bed, setting the clothes on top of it and peeling off her robe, of which I take full advantage and go hold her from behind.

“That’s too bad, because I’m a wild one...” I whisper in her ear, biting down on her earlobe just slightly.

“Not in the mood, Harvey,” she walks away from me.

“Okay,” I keep my hands in front of my crotch to keep the physical embodiment of my emotions at bay.

“Why don’t you go out, have some coffee, and come back with a clear mind, huh?” I suggest.

She has put on her underwear and now is hooking up her bra. It’s the type that opens in the front, just the way I like it. I look at her with complete adoration.

“Harvey, I don’t want to go out,” she frowns, putting on a pair of the fancy warm socks I recently got her.

“Come on,” I slap my sides with floppy arms. “I have a surprise for you, but you can’t be here for it to happen!”

“Surprise, eh?” I see the hint of a smile on her lips.

“Yeah...” I lean down, trying to kiss, but having to make do with a kiss on the top of her head. “Go to the hotel bar, have a coffee, then come back. Simple as that.”

“Um,” Elsa crosses her arms, with her pants only halfway up. “Lemme get dressed.”

She gets dressed, and finally gives me some sugar on the way out. Now I have only about half an hour to fix everything, but when everything is in place, I look at myself in the mirror and wink.

There are rose petals and candles on the floor guiding her to me, all the way into the balcony, where I’m waiting with oysters and sparkling apple cider, in a shawl spread over the floor.

“What is this?” She seems delighted, cringing a bit at my exaggeration, but surprised as I hoped she’d be. I raise a hand to help her join me, and she comes along very willingly.

“The surprise I got for you!” I say, holding tight to her hand.

“You’re not going to ask me to marry you, are you?” Now Elsa’s eyes open wide in shock.

I laugh, shake my head, and kiss her hand. “Didn’t even have the time to buy you a ring or anything. And I know it would just freak you out...”

She winces, but also smiles. She tilts her head toward me, which drives me to steal her a kiss.

“Then what is this for?” she asks as I reach for the bottle of sparkling apple cider.

“*This*, my love...” I pop the bottle. A small amount of liquid pours out, but she catches the drops with one of the glasses. “Is to show you that I will take care of you. No matter what,

no matter how, I will always be by your side, because now there's something beyond uniting us.”

“The baby?” she asks, her voice very small.

I place the bottle back in the ice bucket and hold her by her shoulders.

“It's not just a baby, Elsa. It's a bond uniting us forever. Do you understand that?”

After I kiss her jawline with lustful intent, I grab up an oyster from the ice, squeeze a lemon on top of it, and bring it to her lips.

As she swallows it, I kiss her, adamant in showing that I will protect her with my body and my soul.

She hums into my lips, then pushes me back gently. “You ordered oysters because they're aphrodisiacs, right?”

“It was because they'd get here the quickest, but it's a nice coincidence, isn't it?”

She giggles, and while giggling, sneaks her hand under my shirt. “I guess so...”

I take it as a cue to further things along. I set my glass to the side, hold her by the waist and her back, and lean her over one of the pillows I brought along for ambiance.

She spills her glass. I just cover her spill with another pillow and keep on kissing her, with a desperate need to please her.

Above us, night falls. Dim stars shine over clouds, and everything is perfect just the way it is.

Chapter Thirty-One

ELSA

It took me so long to figure out that I wanted to be with Harvey and move forward in a relationship with him.

On the other hand, finding out I'm pregnant is a whole other story and just hit me like a freight train out of nowhere.

And to make matters worse, I can't tell my parents about it until I've had time to process it all myself.

I think I'm in shock. And a bit in denial too.

"Oh, hey, mom!" I say, picking up the phone and trying to sound nonchalant.

"Elsa, how's everything going?" she asks, concern clear in her voice.

She was so excited to hear I was joining Harvey and Parker in California, but now she looks worried.

Maybe it's how emotional I've been because of the pregnancy and all, but of course she doesn't know about that yet. I don't plan on telling her until I get back home.

“Everything is alright, mom!” I say, trying to calm her down and forcing myself to sound calm at the same time.

“Harvey is amazing, just like you said he would be!”

“Okay,” she says slowly. “What are you doing today?”

Her question makes me pause because I realize I have no idea what I’m doing.

“I don’t know,” I answer truthfully. “Harvey is in isolation with the other players, and Parker is busy covering their training sessions and doing interviews. Harvey told me to hang out with the wives of the players, but I don’t know anyone!”

“Oh, don’t be silly, hon!” mom says with nonchalance typical of her. “You will be the wife of a player soon, won’t you?”

“Mom!” I yell without thinking, then continue in a softer tone. “I mean, I don’t know!”

“Yes, honey. You will marry this man. I just know it!” She says it with the firm conviction of a fortune teller. “Anyway, go mingle with the girls; it’ll be fun!”

I sigh, utterly defeated. Mom has her way of convincing me to do just about anything.

“Okay, mom. I will try!” I say with a forced smile. “Want me to bring you anything from California?”

“How about a grandson?” she jokes, and it causes me to snort so heavily I’m forced to hang up the phone.

At least I know she will be thrilled about the news.

It's almost midday, so they must be gathering for the famed luncheon Harvey told me about. I decide to go downstairs to the hotel restaurant and search for the biggest table full of talkative women and kids, conversing animatedly.

“Are you gals the players’ missus?” I say jokingly, hoping to fish out a laugh.

The woman I approach — a dark haired lady accompanied by an adorable little boy — smiles broadly and says “We are! You must be the new girl. Find a seat somewhere, and welcome!”

I bring a finger to my lips and peruse the table, finding no chairs available. Noticing it, the woman I first spoke to signals a waiter for him to bring me a chair.

“What is your name?” she asks, very interested.

“Elsa! How about yours?” I reply with the same intent.

“Lucy!” she says.

The chair arrives and they position me right beside Lucy. Right after, plates, cutlery, and a menu come.

“You are married to Baker, right?” Lucy asks me, making me beet red.

“Oh no, we’re not married!” I put my hands in front of me. “We’re just dating!”

“Don’t you know Baker, Lucy?” A blond, and very pregnant woman sitting to my right says. “A different girl each championship!”

I frown hard. “A different girl each championship, huh?”

“I’m sure this time is different!” She puts a hand on my shoulder and then proceeds to cackle like a maniac.

“So, whom are you two married to?” I ask, desperately trying to change the subject.

“Blackrock, first defensemen,” Lucy says, with a huge grin. “This little guy is our Frankie!”

“Hi!” Frankie says over his plate of meatballs.

I wave back to the kid, thinking I better get used to them now that I’m expecting.

“I’m Mary Johnson, married to James Johnson, goalie,” another blond introduces herself and her absent husband.

“Yeah, my brother said Harvey is a center...” I say, unsure, deciding to devote a bit of my attention to the menu, since my stomach is grumbling.

“And thinks he’s the last cookie in the jar for it!” Mary laughs. I start to realize that I don’t fully think she’s being catty; it’s just her exuberant and loud personality.

“Oh, come on. Centers work hard to be where they are!” Lucy comes in Harvey’s defense. “Do you know yet if he’s going to be a starter player?”

I blink. “What’s a starter player?”

Lucy and Mary begin to laugh, and I hide my face in the menu, unsure if I should be ashamed or laughing along with them.

“It’s the players who start the game,” Lucy explains.

“I don’t know the first thing about hockey...” I shake my head, and then signal the waiter, having decided on my order. “Spaghetti carbonara with your biggest glass of cherry coke, please.”

The waiter, a very young man with an already majestic mustache, takes note of my order and leaves, prompt and spry.

“You’ll end up learning with time,” Mary pats my hand, now sounding very sincere.

“Yeah, it’s all they talk about during the season,” Lucy says, sipping a green smoothie that looks so refreshing I wish I had ordered that instead of my coke. Goodness, I’m already eating for two. Everything looks good.

“So that’s what it’s like to be married to a hockey player?” I ask. “Hockey talks and lots of longing?”

Both Lucy and Mary place their hands under their chins and nod, “Pretty much!”

“Oh, it’s not just that!” a redhead in front of me says, a huge diamond rock in her finger. “They’re fierce guys, full of testosterone, but also very loving and protective!”

The words from the redhead make me warm up inside because Harvey comes across as very protective. I nod my head and smile.

“What’s your name?” I ask, offering my hand to shake.

“Bree! And you’re Elsa!” she says, energetic.

“You just got engaged, didn’t you?” I ask, curious. I remember Harvey saying one of his teammates just got engaged to a redhead.

“To Pinchon!” Mary says with a smile.

“Congratulations!” I say. My food arrives and I attack it, famished. “We’ll be seeing each other around, then!”

Bree looks unsure. “Isn’t Harvey retiring after this season?”

“What?” I don’t remember if we talked about it or not but doesn’t seem like something he’d be very enthusiastic about. I do remember the neighbor of Harvey’s parents saying something similar now though.

“It’s been the rumor floating around lately,” Lucy says. “Joe said Harvey was the last one to know!”

“This is weird,” I say. “Harvey doesn’t seem willing to do that at all!”

“Well,” Mary speaks over her steamed vegetables and fish. “Maybe he should. I mean, let’s face it. He’s getting old! Still a great player, don’t get me wrong, but he should quit while he’s on top!”

“Don’t mind Mary. She speaks faster than her brain can think!” Lucy says, much to Mary’s chagrin.

“So, what are you girl’s doing after this?” Bree asks, pointing at us.

I get excited all of a sudden, because now I’ve been included in the plans, and maybe will be able to make some actual

friendships.

“Oh, I don’t have any plans!” Mary says, pushing her plate forward, done with it.

“Me neither!” I say, finishing my pasta.

“I’ll go back to the hotel room and put this one to sleep, but you girls have fun! Especially you, Mary! Have fun while you can!” Lucy says.

“Hmpf!” Mary puts up her nose. “I will!”

“How many months are you in?” Bree asks.

“Eight!” Mary says.

Bree widens her eyes, opens her mouth, and shakes her hands. “Oh my God, you’re almost there!” she says.

“Uhum!” Mary says, proud of her bump.

“Boy or girl?” I ask innocently.

“We’ll be waiting to know until our baby is born! We wanted to keep it a surprise!”

I smile but all the while I wonder what it is with people who like surprises. Life gives you enough surprises as it is in my opinion.

We keep on nipping at each other’s heels until we’re all done eating, and then we bid our goodbyes to Lucy and get dragged to an arcade by Bree, where we play table hockey until my arms hurt.

Only when it’s almost evening and I’m heading back to my room, Harvey surprises me with a video call. I’m excited and

exasperated because I'm worried that he's breaking some kind of rule by calling me.

"Harvey!" I'm in the elevator, free to shout as much as I want. "Aren't you supposed to be in isolation?"

He laughs, "I can still call my loved ones."

"So, I'm a loved one?" I say, feeling all giddy inside.

"Of course you are, babe," he winks at me. "Are you going to watch our practice session tomorrow?"

"I'll be bored as hell, but I will. Go, team!" I say, cheering.

"That's the spirit!" He gives me a thumbs up. "So, what did you do today?"

The elevator gets to my floor, and I climb out already dreading the coldness of that big room all for myself. "I made friends with some of the player's wives. It was fun!"

"Nice!" he smiles.

"Yeah, and... Harvey," I pause, considering my next words. "Have we talked before about you retiring? Rumors are going around."

I open the room with the card, and after kicking the door closed, I head straight to bed.

"That's a lie, Elsa!" Now he looks upset. "These rumors are getting annoying. I gotta put an end to it."

"Won't you guys be doing a press conference soon or something?" I ask.

“Yeah!” He has his ‘a-ha’ moment. “Your brother will be interviewing me. I can talk about it then! Thank you, Elsa!”

He throws me one hell of a sexy kiss, and I catch it and then give him one back.

“Have you ever done naughty things over a video call?” he asks, insinuating.

“Save your energy for the game, *stallion*,” I say, shutting down the call.

Chapter Thirty-Two

HARVEY

We're in the most simple rooms of the hotel, but at least they're individual — I'd hate to share a place with the likes of Mr. Farts-A-Lot Johnson.

Talking to Elsa cheered up my mood, but not the part about the retirement again. Everybody's been talking about this, and I'm here, always feeling like I was the last to know.

I'm looking at my phone, juggling it with one hand, wondering whether I should call my manager. Andrew Downey had me settled on the Arctic Wolves almost twenty years ago. He does a decent job of managing my contract negotiations and getting me involved in charity events, but for the most part, he stays in the background.

He was a huge help when I first joined the NHL when I had a million questions, but these days I rarely have a reason to reach out.

I call him and place the phone to my ear. It rings several times before he answers. “Hello! Harvey! Long time no see.”

“Hello, Andrew,” I say, frowning. “Listen: why didn’t I know anything about this rumor of me retiring? Has the mob approached you?”

“Huh,” Andrew sounds confused. “No. I thought you were the one who started it! It made complete sense to me why you’d do it.”

“And why would I do that, Andrew?” I start to motion my arm around like crazy, but realizing he can’t see me, I sit on my hand to try and calm myself down. “I don’t wanna retire!”

“Oh, but think about it, Harvey! What a publicity stunt this could be! The biggest center of all time retiring victorious after the Stanley Cup, huh?” He continues, “Do you think you can get the team into the finals? It’s looking good so far.”

“Of course, I can, but that’s not the point! The point is...” I hiss, feeling my temples. “I don’t want to retire, man! And you should have come to me on this!”

“Alright, alright, but I figured you’d come to me when you are ready to talk like you always do. Anyway, the truth is it’s been getting harder and harder to get you gigs, okay?” Andrew says it with sincerity.

He continues, “And as you know, your current contract isn’t up for two more years, but that doesn’t mean they can’t just buy you out. I would say you are pretty dang close to being on the permanent bench if you know what I mean.”

My eyes widen, both offended and taken by the realization that...

He is right.

“Andrew, then what am I even doing here then?” I plop back in bed, one arm over my head.

“Coach Dawson is sentimental and knows you helped score winning points for the last two Stanley Cup wins the Arctic Wolves had, remember?”

“That’s right! He must want me to help win another under his watch before he sees me off then,” I say, nostalgic.

“Yup,” I can hear him nodding. “Harvey, my friend, this may be the final roll of the dice. Don’t waste it. Come out on top. Even if Coach Dawson lets you keep going until your contract ends, you want to consider your next steps.”

“Eh, I’ll think about it...” and I hang up before the conversation gets even more depressing.

I have some dinner on my own, take a shower, and then go to bed early, just watching silly video playlists on my phone to distract me. Soon I’m sleeping and having the most frustrating dream about missed shots in hockey and missed shots in life.

I wake up in cold sweats, forcing me to hop in the shower again.

There is a voice in the back of my head saying that maybe it’s time. After all, I’m going to be a dad and I can spend more time focusing on my relationship with Elsa and being more involved in my businesses.

But I'm nothing if not stubborn, and I want to have it all. I'm not ready to give up on hockey. It's been my life for so long, and they will have to force me out.

From the hotel to the bus and from the bus to the stadium, I'm back into the old routine of distributing selfies and autographing jerseys for fans hanging outside the stadium. However, I notice that the younger players are far more popular than me, especially with the kiddos.

The ones who come to me are mostly the old school fellas, men over thirty-five, forty, who were my fans when they were the same age as those kids.

But I don't let it bring me down. I decide to shake it off as I walk inside the stadium. We gear up in the lockers and head to the ice, hear a good lecture from Coach Dawson, and start the first exercises.

Yet again, my head is not in the game. I keep on searching for Elsa in the bleachers, and only when I find her does my heart feel at ease.

We're working through the cones, moving the pucks in and out for the goalie to defend or take it in, when I see her behind the goal, face stuck to the plexiglass and smiling like the sweetest of the fools, just the way I'm smiling at her, though I doubt she can see over the amount of protective gear covering my face.

It's fun to see her like this. I hope she is feeling less anxious about the pregnancy. The truth is, I'm feeling calmer about this situation than I thought I would. Maybe retiring soon

wouldn't be the worst thing in the world, although most of me still isn't ready to let go of hockey. Maybe in the next few years I could retire, but I don't want to right now.

When the practice ends, she's waiting for me on the way to the locker room. I take off my helmet and we kiss, briefly, and I stop to chat just for a second.

"I talked to my manager, and he thinks I should retire too!" I say, appalled.

"Didn't even know you had a manager," Elsa clings to my jersey. The smell of sweat is nauseous to me, but I hear some women like it.

"Yeah, I barely even talk to him anymore. I wonder if the mafia is after him again," I say, not meaning to speak my thoughts out loud.

But she looks *extremely* concerned about it, approaching my face as if to inspect if I am in one piece.

"Harvey... What are you talking about?" she asks, gently demanding.

"It's too long and complicated of a story to tell," I dismiss the subject with a wave of my hand. "Listen, I have to go, but if you wanna see me tonight, I'm in room 401."

I wink, take her by the chin and kiss her one last time. As I do, I almost fall forgetting I'm no longer on ice — I'm over carpet and with skate guards.

I enter the locker room and focus on getting rid of my gear and ready for lunch.

We have our lunches at the stadium, rest a little drabbed all around like lazy cats, and soon we return to the ice rink.

Nothing is out of the ordinary: that is until I notice a big guy sitting behind Elsa.

I know that guy.

If, and I say *if* this guy is who I think he is, then he's with the mafia and I put him in jail five years ago.

Is my mind just playing tricks on me? Am I getting paranoid?

In a brief pause over the ice, I signal to Elsa to move away from that guy. She takes a moment to understand what I'm trying to tell her, but she does move away.

I get sucked back into the practice, and when I look up again, he's gone.

When I finally get the chance, I go talk to Elsa, completely ignoring skate guards or any safety measures.

"That guy sitting behind you earlier? Where did he go?" I shoot it straight and quickly like a machine gun.

"Huh," her big brown eyes widen, and her hands go as if by instinct to cover her belly. "What guy?"

"Tall guy, overweight, blond hair, black jacket?" I shoot it like a freestyle rapper.

"I don't know, Harvey! Who is he? What's going on?" she looks me desperately in the eye.

“Ugh...” I grit my teeth. “Never mind, babe. I’m probably just being paranoid. But pay attention during the next game.”

“Okay... I will,” she says. “Where are you going from here?”

She’s there, all insinuating, and I don’t have the mind to pay attention to her.

“I’m sorry, babe,” I take her hand and kiss it. “We have a bunch of bullshit bonding exercises and I have to be there. But you remember my room?”

“Four-o-one...” she says, her index twirling around my jersey.

“After 10 PM,” I kiss her goodbye and then leave.

I put on the damn guards and go back into the locker room to change and wait for what the night has in store, all the while worrying about what that guy is doing here.

I’m still not sure if it’s him, but I’m going to find out.

Chapter Thirty-Three

ELSA

I knock on his door, antsy. Getting here was already an exercise in battling anxiety, now waiting only adds to the pile that my nerves are right now.

“Hi!” Harvey finally opens the door and welcomes me inside, holding me with my feet dangling off the ground and my mouth stuck on his.

But I push him back. There’s something I need to know first, and I need to know it now.

“Harvey... What’s going on? Why were you questioning me about a guy sitting behind me during the game?” I ask, patient yet concerned.

He slaps his sides in frustration, then invites me to walk with him toward the bed. “It’s nothing... I think. I think he may be a guy who bothered me in the past, and I don’t want him bothering you, sweetheart.”

He kisses my hand as we sit down, but I'm still feeling anxious.

“Does this have anything to do with the mafia thing you were talking about?” I ask.

“Damn it, you're smart...” he says, feeling his head.

“Yeah, kinda. He approached my manager about five years ago and asked him to introduce me. He acted like he was some kind of liaison to get me involved in a charity game, but when my manager introduced me to him about five years ago, it turned out he wanted me to throw some games in exchange for money, but I put him in jail for good measure.”

I shudder involuntarily as he speaks, my eyes wide.

He pulls me in close and continues, “Don't worry. I called the police earlier. I'm pretty sure it's the same guy, but they told me they can't do anything unless the guy acts first.”

I push him away to look into his eyes, demanding to know the truth, “So you picked a fight with the mob and now they're back to return the favor?”

He blinks, eyes fluttering like the wings of a butterfly, and losing track of the conversation, stutters “I... Huh... Elsa!” he slaps the mattress, frustrated. “I can always call the police again!”

“Yeah,” I cross my arms and say, resigned. “Now they'll know you have the guts to do it and they'll break your legs before you can.”

“It won't come to that.”

He holds me and kisses me, bringing me to lie in bed by his side. “If I see that guy again, I will ask for a restraining order. I’m sure that will solve it and honestly, I’m not even one hundred percent it was him. These rumors about me retiring have got me paranoid. What if the mafia is behind it?”

“What if he’s not alone?” I ask, my concern only growing.

“He was alone the last time. Don’t worry.” He comes in to kiss me, lustful and passionate.

Sideways, facing each other, Harvey puts a leg in between my legs and reaches for my breasts underneath my shirt, playing so skillfully with a sensitive nipple that it makes me tremble and shiver.

Meanwhile, I reach for his back and down to his firm, tight buttocks, clawing his soft skin and making him moan.

Harvey rolls me on top of him, his hands incentivizing my hips to start moving. In return, I start to grind against him while I kiss him, and he digs his hands under my jeans and grabs my bum.

Soon he lifts my shirt up and over my head and throws it aside. My bare skin gets hit by the cool air, and the heat of his fingers unhooking my bra creates a contrast so deep my body quivers with lust.

I straddle him harder, squeezing my legs around his muscular body and lean down over his face, so my breasts are an easy reach for his lips.

However, I grow impatient, undoing the zipper of my pants, even rolling to the side to get a better grip on my clothing.

Harvey helps me slide off my pants and then my panties. Now completely naked, he lays me down and hovers over me, kissing me on my neck. I reach down and help him take off his shirt as he goes lower.

He teases me by gently bringing a nipple in his mouth and then doing the same to the other, making me quiver underneath him and moan already. He takes his sweet time going down my body until reaching between my legs.

As I feel his tongue inside of me, I can't help but reach down and grab his hair, pushing his face even closer. When he reaches a finger inside, I let out a small cry and lift my hips, my desire to have him inside me almost unbearable.

I sit up and reach down to help him slide off his sweatpants and then his briefs. I feel how hard he is, making him moan when I touch him. He pushes me back down and moves on top of me, kissing me so deeply that I have to struggle for air.

I love the feel of his body over me and the musky scent of him is intoxicating. He reaches down and brings his tip to rub against my entrance, and I quiver under him, wrapping my legs around him and digging my fingers into his back in a desperate plea for him to go deeper.

He starts to push himself in and I let out a loud moan as he does, enjoying feeling every inch of him inside me. He takes his time at first, slowly going in and out and kissing my neck.

As he steadily goes faster, the fire around my lower belly dances, slowly spreading through my entire body.

Moving my hips with his same rhythm, I feel myself getting there and when I do, I moan, shameless and quivering underneath him. When the world breaks apart to be assembled on the other side, the words “I love you” escape my lips, and now it’s too late to take them back.

He moves a few more times, then finishes inside me with quivering breaths and kisses. We lay like that for some time, just being in the moment and catching our breath, him still inside me.

Then he moves to lay down next to me, tickling my neck like crazy with his kisses and it makes me giggle.

“You better take better care of yourself, Mister...” I say, my fingers in his hair as I bring him in for another kiss. “I’m pregnant. I can’t be risking my neck out for you!”

Harvey brings me close for another kiss, then rests his head on my shoulder. “I know. Don’t worry. Like I said, the police already know, and I’ll call them if I see him again.”

“You bet you will,” I say, kissing the top of his head.

And then he brings his arm around me, and with his lips next to my ears he says softly, “I love you too.”

Goosebumps spread throughout my body again as I smile in the dark, leaning against him and falling asleep in his arms.

Chapter Thirty-Four

HARVEY

We play the California Vipers in the first game of the Stanley Cup, and I would have said we kicked their asses all the way back home, but they were already home.

I didn't begin in the starter lineup, but that was okay. I still played from the end of the second period till the end, when we scored the bulk of our goals and guaranteed our win.

Very engrossed in the game, I was barely able to see Elsa, only spotting her because I spotted *that* guy sitting a few rows behind her again.

Stephen Talarico. I remember his name now. Strong arm for the mob, went down without saying names and walked out free after five years due to good behavior.

I still haven't had the chance to talk to him one-on-one, but I soon will.

After the game, I put on the god-forsaken guards on my skates and head straight to that motherfucker sitting right

behind Elsa, but he's gone again.

“Hey, you missed me that much?” Elsa jokes around but her smile falls when she sees my serious expression.

“What's wrong?” she asks, her eyes huge. Then she starts turning around and whispers fearfully, “Did you see him again?”

I sigh then nod, “I know for sure it was him. Let me change and I'll meet you back here. Stay with the crowd and don't move.”

I rush back to the locker room where the guys are all celebrating. “Man, we were right,” Tchekov slaps me on the back. “I think we got this in the bag against the Vipers!”

Distracted, I nod then quickly head to the showers, dry off, then quickly change.

“Hey man, come join us all later for a beer!”

I wave as I head out to meet Elsa, who is sitting in the same place looking white as a ghost.

“Let's go to my room. We can order room service and I'll call my manager to see what he thinks.”

“Hey Harvey! You owe me an interview man. You aren't answering your phone, so I had to track you down.” I turn around and see Parker and my mind goes blank.

Elsa says in exasperation to Parker, “The mafia are back! Harvey saw one sitting close to me!”

White-faced, Parker turns to me and mutters, “They are back, man?”

This had all happened shortly before we’d met five years ago, but I’d talked to him in length about it.

I nod, “Yeah, let’s get out of here and figure out what to do.”

They both nod and follow me out of the stadium.

“Shouldn’t we call the police?” Parker asks.

I shrug, “I’m not sure. I mean when I called them yesterday, they said they couldn’t do anything unless he acted first. He hasn’t approached me or done anything.”

There are team buses to transport team members and their family members to the hotel from the stadium. We all hop on one and sit down as it drives us over.

“But what do they want?” Parker whispers, growing more and more anxious about the situation. “For you to throw games, again?”

I shake my head and collect my thoughts. “No, Parker. The more I think about this, the more I think they want me to retire. My guess is that they are behind these rumors somehow and are betting a lot of money that I will.”

When we get dropped off at the hotel, we all walk hurriedly to the elevator. I push for the fourth floor, and we walk quickly over to my room. I lock the door and use the deadbolt once the three of us are in.

I sigh and sit on the edge of the bed and reach for my cell phone to call my manager.

But before I can do anything, the hotel phone rings.

We all jump, and Elsa lets out a small scream.

I hesitate for a moment before reaching over to answer it.

“Hello?” I say, uncertain.

A raspy voice belonging to none other than Stephen responds, “You will announce your retirement before the Stanley Cup is awarded.”

I scoff, “I know who you are. Are you threatening me?”

He says, “You can retire by choice or by force. It’s your call.” Then the line goes dead.

Fuming, I am barely able to hang up the phone before I reach for my cell phone again and call the police.

I feel bad but I’m ignoring Parker and Elsa’s wide-eyed questions.

Well, the son of a bitch has definitely taken action now.

Chapter Thirty-Five

ELSA

After a terrifying last few days, I'm finally feeling a bit calmer once Harvey, Parker, and I are on a plane back home to Boston.

Harvey's team also won the second game against the California Vipers and now we're heading back to Boston for them to get ready to play two more games against them in the next week.

Luckily, Harvey didn't receive any more calls or threats, but the initial one still haunts me.

What are they going to do to him if he doesn't announce his retirement?

A few days ago, Harvey had called the local California law enforcement and they got in touch with the Boston police officers who helped him out five years ago with the initial mafia issues.

The police said they'd provide additional security during the games and keep an eye out. They also issued a restraining order against Stephen.

It helps to calm my nerves a bit, but I'm still worried.

My stomach is anything but calm though and I throw up again on the flight over.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart." Harvey frowns as he rubs my back and hands the stewardess the used throw up bag. Luckily, we are landing, and I just close my eyes and take a few deep breaths.

He sighs, "Are you sure you don't want some ginger ale, sweetheart?"

I just shake my head and feel immense relief when the wheels touch the ground.

After Parker and Harvey grab their luggage from baggage claim, I hug my brother goodbye and head out with Harvey.

"Are you feeling better?" Harvey asks, his blue eyes creased with worry as we walk to his truck.

I smile and nod. After securing his luggage and my small bag in the flattened-out seat space behind us, we both get in.

He leans over and kisses me. "Why don't we go to my place and unpack, and you stay over tonight?"

I agree and we head on over. I feel less afraid once we are back at his place.

Once there, he opens the freezer and brings out two ice cream tubs. “Do you want mint chocolate chip or cookie dough?”

I point to the cookie dough, and he begins spooning it out into a bowl.

“Your wish is my command, missus!” he says.

I giggle. “Don’t call me ‘missus’ in public or else people will end up thinking we’re married!”

I push him jokingly in the chest, but Harvey apparently takes offense to what I said.

“And what’s the problem with that?” he says. “We are getting married, aren’t we?”

I feel a cold sweat start. “Harvey... Having a baby together doesn’t require a signed contract!”

He frowns, upset.

“Elsa, this is about the right thing to do!” he says, arms crossed, angry. “My father always told me, if I put a baby in a girl, I should marry her!”

I’m taken aback by a sudden fit of giggles that just won’t go away, only to see him turn red, then purple — God, soon this man’s head will explode, and I will be the one to blame.

“Harvey, but you don’t have to!” I’m still laughing in an appropriate fit, both hands over my mouth. “You didn’t even propose to me, I mean... Oh, you were planning to, right?”

He nods positively, still not looking at me. “Once the Stanley Cup ended. Preferably with us victorious,” he says, sounding inconsolable.

I have in front of me a man being sincere with his feelings, so sincere it makes me want to cry.

I hug him. He doesn’t respond at first, but as I rub his back and lay my head against his chest, he lets his arms go and hugs me back.

“So,” he starts. “Wanna go buy a ring for you right here, right now?” he tries, making me laugh again.

“No silly!” I tug at his shirt. “I want a surprise.”

I see him rolling his eyes and I laugh again. “You kind of ruined it, actually!” he says with a wry smile.

I kiss him on the lips, perking his interest. “You know, I’m hungry... Can I have that bowl of ice cream now?”

He laughs and kisses me, then finishes spooning it out and slides the bowl over.

Chapter Thirty-Six

HARVEY

I t's our third game against the California Vipers. I score a goal in the very last second of the match, bringing it all out of a tie and making the audience roar with fervor.

I hear my name being shouted, and suddenly I feel like doing a silly victory dance. The moment calls for it, but I don't have the guts.

Instead, I'm slapped on the back of the head by my teammates, hearing praises and compliments all the way into the locker room. Coach pops a bottle of champagne. I have a sip. A sip and a towel to pat myself dry and escape the full-on whirlwind this has become.

The first thing I do when I'm out of the locker room is to call the police and check in, but they still don't have any leads or updates on Stephen. He's vanished apparently and with the increase in police officers at the games, I'm feeling less afraid.

I mean, what are they going to do to me? Everyone is searched before entering the stadium and there are bodyguards and undercover police officers everywhere.

Then I text Elsa to tell her I miss her and that I'm looking forward to seeing her. We planned to meet in my hotel room after the game.

I meet up with Parker to do a quick interview then take a cab to head back to the hotel and wait for Elsa.

Even though we are in Boston, we still have to stay in a hotel during the games and Elsa is meeting me here.

However, I have to push myself through a ton of news people waiting for the team in the lobby. I do my best to dodge them hiding under a ball cap, but before long, somebody recognizes me, and the storm draws closer than ever.

After saying "I'm not going to retire," three dozen times, I grow tired of the skirmish and just head into the elevator lobby in hopes of being left alone.

But that doesn't happen.

A kid about half my age, with strawberry blond hair and thick glasses, is there with his his press badge, smiling, hopeful for the next big scoop.

"Oh, for crying out loud... What do you *want*?" I spit out.

"Donovan Sondheim with the Boston Beacon!" he says, grinning from ear to ear. "I was hoping to get a few words from you, Mr. Baker."

“Mr. Baker is my father, okay? Call me Harvey,” I beg. “So that’s your plan? Follow me into my room and hope for *a few words?*”

The kid looks antsy, and I just sigh and continue, “Listen, Donovan, I’ll give you a motherfucking full interview if you would be able to express in big letters that *I’m not retiring* and get everyone to stop asking me and leave me alone.”

Now he lights up as if struck by lightning and nods like crazy. “Of course, Harvey! We can do anything! Man, my editor is going to *love* this!”

We get to my floor and walk out of the elevator together. Donovan waits anxiously and I just look at him.

“This is as far as we are going man. The interview will be short and sweet and take place here so you can just get right back on that elevator and go back down.”

His eyes wide, he just nods then places his backpack down on the floor then puts his phone on top of it.

“So, first things first, when did the news of these rumors first hit you?” he gets quickly to the point and whips out his notebook and pen.

I lean against the wall and think. “When was the first time I heard this bullshit? A limo driver, couple of weeks back. He was trying to confirm if I was for gambling tips.”

“U-hum,” my young friend nods. “So, it’s mostly gamblers who seem to be interested in you retiring, then?”

“Apparently,” I shrug. “I even got members of the mob on my tail trying to convince me to retire, but that’s not going to happen.”

“I see,” the kid adjusts his glasses. “Do you think you should be speaking about threats from the mob so easily like that?”

I raise an eyebrow, finding the question odd, but still reasonable. “Police have been warned and are helping. I won’t cower away from anyone!”

“Interesting,” Donovan smiles a smug and confident smile, now catching me off guard. “So, you’re not scared, huh? What about your loved ones?”

I blink, more than a lighthouse, and in blinking I get a bad feeling.

“Aren’t these questions getting too personal, Donovan?” I ask, giving him a crooked stare.

“This is a human-interest piece, Harvey. Questions *need* to be personal!” he says.

Do I sense anger in his tone?

“Alright.” I smell a rat. “Well, I’d rather not talk about my loved ones.”

“U-hum,” the rat says. “To protect them, or because you don’t know what they think?”

“Say what...?” I’m dumbfounded.

“Do you care enough about them to ask their opinion on what you should do?” he asks as one asking what I had for

dinner.

I'm now convinced this kid, who acted all nervous and unarming earlier, is now in face threatening me.

I frown, cross my arms, and then I take a few steps closer to him.

“Out,” I point my arm toward the elevator, unwilling to hear any ifs or buts.

“I'm just asking my questions, Harvey,” Donovan refuses to move.

“Forget what I said about my name. It's Mr. Baker to you, alright? Now you go find your way out. These questions are far too aggressive for my tastes!”

I grab the kid by the back of his collar, push the button for the lobby, about to throw him in. But when the elevator doors open, Elsa is there, getting off on my floor.

“Harvey, what's happening?” she asks with disbelief as she steps out, nervous laughter in her voice.

“Just getting rid of the garbage, babe!” I say, tossing Donovan into the elevator without giving him any chance to speak. He reaches down and grabs his phone and backpack before the elevator closes in on him.

“Who was that guy?” Elsa asks, taking my hand and walking down the hall to my room with me. I nod at the security guard now posted outside my door.

“Freaking journalist!” I explode once inside. I start to take off my clothes for a well-deserved shower.

“I was tired of hearing all of them ask me when I’m retiring and thought this one fool could clear things up!”

“That guy really pissed you off, huh?” she asks me as I kick off my shoes and wrestle to take out my pants.

“I think he was with the mob, Elsa,” I say with pure concern as I quickly strip down and get rid of my boxer shorts.

Instead of taking on my concerns, Elsa surprises me by laughing, her brown eyes amused.

“What?” I ask.

“I just love how comfortable you are in front of me,” she says, taking in the view.

“Elsa, what I said is *serious*,” I say. “What if they sent another person to remind me of their message?”

“I know what to do,” she says, taking control of the situation. “Let’s call the police and let them know! You got his name, right?”

She grabs her phone from her purse and shows the screen to me and is about to call the police.

“No, wait,” I say, moving a hand toward her. “I can’t prove that guy did anything wrong. I just got a weird feeling is all.”

“But you’re suspicious of him?” she asks, her finger hovering over the call button on her phone screen.

“Yes,” I bob my head around.

“Then let’s call them,” she decides, calling the police and bringing the phone to her ear.

“It’s ringing.” She hands the phone to me.

I am directed to the officer in charge of my case and give them the reporter’s name and tell them that I got the feeling he was being threatening with his questions. He thanked me and told me they would look into it.

I head to the shower and tell Elsa to order whatever she wants from room service.

After talking to the police and taking a shower, I feel my mind become clearer.

I get out with a towel wrapped around my waist and the ‘missus’ orders me right after, “Get dressed. Forget room service. We’re going out!”

My mind goes back to when she laughed in my face at the idea of getting married, but also, she didn’t disregard the idea completely. I am going to propose to her soon, but I’m going to need a ring first.

I gave her a fake one for Kiera’s wedding, but now a real one is required.

“Harvey! I’m talking to you!” Elsa snaps her fingers in front of my face. “Come on!”

“Sorry, I got caught in a daydream about you!” I lean down to kiss her then start to get ready. “Where are we going?”

“Your teammates are having a celebration dinner, Harvey!” She claps at me to hurry. “Bree and Pinchon threw it together!”

“Oh yeah, I forgot!” Suddenly, I feel animated. “Let’s go, then!”

As she changes clothes and brushes her hair, I try to match my outfit to hers—although it seems my first choice didn’t quite meet her approval because she makes me choose another one.

Together, we head out for the night, hand in hand.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

ELSA

It's a cold, yet sunny morning today, and Harvey is away from me once again. Their fourth game is tomorrow, and if they win that one, then the Stanley Cup is theirs.

They're concentrating all their energy on the game, and I don't blame them — destroying the Vipers is all Harvey has been talking about.

It's good to see him in his element like this. I'm glad that we haven't had any new scares lately. The extra police officers and security around, including the guard standing outside Harvey's hotel room, do make me feel safer, but I still have worry in the back of my mind.

And I've been feeling sick ever since the celebration dinner. Then again, no one told me to eat that many pepperoni pizza slices.

I wake up in a hurry to puke in the toilet once again, dreading the day I got pregnant not because of the baby, but

because of all the morning sickness.

Still, I head out to watch the team training — maybe I can talk to Harvey a little and let him know how I've been feeling, but I'm sure he'll just tell me to go to the doctor, as practical as he is.

I meet Bree, Lucy, Mary, and the rest of the girls at the stadium, and we sit together near the lockers to watch the guys play this important game.

With all those pounds of gear, I can't tell one player from another, but I do recognize Harvey by his jersey. And he recognizes me, tossing me a kiss in the air, which I catch and store safely near my heart.

They're doing exercises with cones and several of the plastic disks when I look around just to check if that Stephen guy is around or not. He hasn't been, but I still always check in case.

Maybe he gave up after we got the police involved. I'm just glad he is leaving us alone.

I start to feel sick again and go pay a visit to the toilet. Bree comes after me and finds me on my knees in front of the porcelain, miserable and in pain.

"Oh my, what's going on?" She comes near me and gently touches my back.

"Nausea," I say, only to hurl out the contents of my stomach again.

"Um," she says, seemingly uncomfortable. "May I ask you a question?"

I spit one last time and then stand, flush down the commode and go straight to the sink to rinse my mouth.

“Yes,” I say, but I know what’s coming along.

“Are you pregnant?” Bree asks, her eyes curious and concerned.

“It’s that obvious, huh?” I say, smiling at her.

“How far along are you?” she asks, getting interested.

“Four weeks or so,” I take a deep sigh. “Why is that always the first question people ask?”

Bree laughs at what I say, a burst of sweet laughter so sisterly it makes me smile. “I don’t know! I think people are just curious about how long until they’ll be able to hold the baby.”

I shrug. “Makes sense. Would you go with me to a pharmacy to get some nausea medicine? I’m all out.”

She widens her eyes, but in the very next second, bobs her head in agreement. Smiling at me, she wraps her arms around mine.

“Of course! It’s not safe for you to go out alone!” she says.

“Uh, I’m pregnant, not sick, Bree! It’s not like it’s contagious!” I reply.

“Oh, that’s not what I mean!” Bree says with concern. “I mean about the mobsters and all!”

I roll my eyes. Harvey spoke too much to that journalist, and now I’m sure we are going to pay for it, somehow.

“Yeah... It’s tough,” I say, dismissing the subject once and for all.

We hit the pharmacy a few blocks away, where I take the few drops of the medicine and begin to feel a lot like a human being again.

Once we get back to the stadium, the guys are about to go on a break, and I get ready to welcome Harvey back into my arms after two whole days of separation.

He comes to me, eager, removes his helmet and his mouthguard, and kisses me, sweaty and disgusting, but so loving all I want is to die in that kiss.

“How’ve you been?” he asks, smiling, his eyes full of wonder about my whereabouts.

“Sick,” I feel my stomach, and he places his hand on top of mine.

“Bree went with me to get some medicine, because apparently I need an escort while going out, with the mobsters following us and everything!”

He goes to his usual reaction when confronted with surprising news, and just blinks profusely, unsure of where to go from there.

“I’m trying to be strong, and I do feel safer with all the protection around us, but I’m worried and scared, Harvey. If you win the game tomorrow, then the Stanley Cup games will be over. They said to announce your retirement before then.

What if they do something to you tomorrow? Aren't you concerned?"

Harvey punches the air, full of anger and spite, and I shake my head with my hands rubbing my temples, and a heavy heart.

"What do we do now?" I ask him, the fear coming through in my voice.

Harvey holds my hand, squeezing it tight to offer me security and it does make me feel better.

He says, "Let's keep eyes and ears peeled for anything suspicious. If anything happens, we call the cops. It's not just us we have to worry about anymore, is it?"

Harvey places a hand over my stomach again, and we look at each other and nod as one.

He kisses me again, this time just a sweet peck on the lips, and moves to meet his teammates for a sip of water and to stretch his overworked limbs.

The team is having a press conference later, but I don't plan on staying to watch it.

Instead, I'll just go back to the hotel and get room service and rest. And wait for Harvey's return.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

HARVEY

The press conference was going on without a hitch until the inevitable happened and a catty news reporter asks me the question I'm most dreading lately.

"This one is to Baker!" he says, holding onto his phone to record the interview. "About the rumors of you retiring, how much of it is true?"

I sigh, roll my eyes, and facepalm before saying with exasperation, "None of it?"

Widespread laughter ensues.

"Do you have a timeframe when you expect to retire?" the reporter continues.

"Why are you so interested in seeing me retire?" I spit out with exasperation.

"Maybe to allow a new crop of players to shine?" he says, without batting a lash.

“Listen,” I stand from my place. Blackrock, sitting by my side, launches me a sideways glance. “It’ll take me a career-ending injury to retire, alright? Any other questions?”

“Are you sure you’re not just afraid to give up now and be forgotten?” the reporter comes up with another good one.

But I’ve had enough. I’m huffing and puffing, driven by anger and fury, but I just watch as Coach begs for my silence so the interview can continue.

And it goes on, fortunately with no more questions directed at me. The guys are all eager to answer and I’m happy for them, but maybe I am really getting too old for this shit.

We go back to the hotel, and there we have dinner together, where the coach tries to give us a pep talk, but I’m still with the same upset face I left the stadium with.

As soon as I can, I head out to my hotel room to spend the rest of the evening with Elsa.

In the morning, Coach Dawson announces the lineup, and much to my surprise, I’m in the starting lineup, which brightens my mood beyond belief.

In the afternoon, we do some warm-ups at the gym and later head for the stadium, arriving there under a wave of photographers, reporters, and fans.

I focus on the fans, the guys and gals who are always there for us and are never to blame for the problems the press tosses at us. Take a picture here, sign a jersey there, kiss a blushing older lady on the cheeks, ruffle the hair of a child.

It seems like a typical day, but today is not an ordinary day. If we win today, then we'll get the Stanley Cup. I should be pumped and excited. I am, but I can't help but feel a sense of uneasiness.

"Is anyone feeling a bad omen today?" I ask the guys in the locker room.

Weirded-out looks hit me like headlights in the dark.

"Shut up, Baker!" Simmons says, jesting, but also looking concerned at my words. "No negative energy, man. Go kick some ass like usual. If you don't, I'll just replace you though and do it myself."

Simmons is the backup center in case I can't play.

"Nah, don't give him attention, Baker. You're our lucky charm!" Pinchon comes to my defense, giving me a one-armed hug and some noogies.

I'm met with massive support, and I try to shake off my apprehension. However, as we start to gear up, I feel a cloud of tension so thick you'd need a chainsaw to cut through it.

"Alright!" Coach Dawson enters the locker room, clapping his hands to gather our attention. "Everyone here? Everyone fine and dandy?"

A choir of "Yeah!" cuts through the room, and Coach nods emphatically, liking what he sees and hears.

"Are we going to send these Vipers home seeing stars?" Coach Dawson shouts, and is met with a resounding roar on our part.

“Are we going to give 110%?” once again, a roar of approval.

“Are we going to take home the Stanley Cup today?” Another wave of enthusiastic roaring ensues. “Alright, boys, alright! I know that by this time the coach from the other team is also giving them a pep talk, but I know *how much* you appreciate it...”

He says it with sarcasm. We’re famous for once having tossed bananas at a coach trying to give a pep talk.

“But some words are needed!” Coach Dawson continues. “Listen up, team. This is the moment we’ve worked for. It’s our time. Our chance. Remember the hours of practice, the pain, the sacrifices. You’re not just playing for yourselves out there; you’re playing for the whole organization, the city, and every fan who’s been with us from day one. You’ve got the skill, the heart, and the desire. Now show them what we’re made of. Show them why we’ve battled to be here. Leave it all on the ice. Win every puck, every shift, and every battle. We win this game, we win the Stanley Cup. Let’s go out there and make history!”

We all shout in unison.

“Five minutes, guys!” Coach Dawson shouts, his hands clapping loudly into the room.

I finish gearing up, tighten my skates, and grab my stick. Screaming and roaring like animals, we line up and wait to be announced, and when the announcement happens, we skate out under wild cheer.

The Vipers receive the same treatment, but as we all line up at the center line for the National Anthem, the cheer dies down for the one solemn moment of the night.

I'm not only the center, the most important player in the team, but I'm also the captain, and therefore responsible for the center pushback at the start of the match.

We face off, Miller and me, their left-winger and captain as well. The stare he gives me is searing enough to fry bacon, and I end up staring him back with the same intensity.

"Have a nice game, Miller!" I say, trying to show some good sportsmanship.

He just stares at me with a mixture of anger and fear, leaving me confused but I don't have time to think about it.

The referee tosses the coin, and we end up with the left side of the rink. He then places the puck in between us, and we lock sticks, one on each side of it.

The referee whistles, drops the puck, and all hell breaks loose.

Miller seems less interested in getting the puck than he is in hitting me in the shins and tripping me over, so I steal the puck for the team and advance through their line of attack.

I'm immediately body-checked by Miller with so much intensity that I hear something cracking.

God, I can't have a broken rib right now, I have to *win* this game.

I control the play, passing the puck to the forward, who then scores a goal from the face-off spot. As the center, I hold my position, defending against the opposing team's advances before unexpectedly being body-checked again by Miller.

"Foul play!" I scream to the referee, pointing aggressively at Miller, but the referee doesn't do a thing.

We keep on going, winning quite easily, several members of their team seem more busy using me as their personal punching bag than actually scoring.

I complain to the referee, once, twice, and nothing. Something is odd and my concerns are falling on deaf ears. When the period ends, I'm aching everywhere, and I can only picture Parker describing me to the audience as a 'mess of a man.'

"Can you keep on playing, Baker?" Coach Dawson comes to me immediately as I enter the players' bench.

"Not if they keep going at it!" I say, feeling my ribs.

"Yeah, I don't know what's going on either..." He shakes his head. "Tell you what: you're on for the next period, if they keep on bashing you, I'll replace you with Simmons."

"I don't wanna play!" Simmons says humorously. "If they're coming for the center like that I don't wanna be anywhere near that rink!"

"You're going to play if I say you are going to play, Simmons!" Coach says, not understanding that Simmons is just joking.

I turn around to see Elsa, sitting there with the other women at a distance. She has a bright smile but concerned eyes, a hand lifted as if to say she's worried about me.

I wave back and she shouts to me, "Give 'em hell!" I can only read her lips, and when I shout back "Hell yeah!" she gives me a thumbs up and smiles.

The second period starts, and it's the longest twenty minutes of my life. They pick up the pace of the match, and turn the score, but also do not forget about me or leave me alone for a single second.

I take stick blows to the front and the back of the knees, my lumbar, and my face, spitting a tooth when the strongest one hits me.

And I'm body-checked, up and down, left to right, from all possible angles and all possible positions. I can barely breathe, but now I'm seeing the end of this, or my name is not Harvey Wentworth Baker.

At the end of the second period, I pull from Elsa's acting book and put on a pretend act that I'm perfectly okay and ready for another twenty minutes.

"Baker, you're out, Simmons—"

"No!" I bellow. "Coach, you gotta let me finish the game!"

I'm angry *as fuck*. I'm *seething*, I'm on fire, and if that doesn't win games, I don't know what does.

"You're too hot-tempered right now, Baker, and injured!" Coach says. "I don't want to risk your safety!"

“Coach, *please!*” My throat is hoarse and raspy from screaming.

It’s now or never. I won’t even be able to talk past this point. The coach is making some substitutions.

When he finally looks at me, I just stare him down and say, “I’m going back out.”

He just slaps his sides and adds, “Just five minutes more, Baker!”

Determined, we head for the final period. They’re closing in, and if this goes to sudden death and I’m not there I’ll want to die. The referee whistles to start the period, and I immediately grab the puck, heading for the goal full of enthusiasm.

However, I don’t last to see the five minutes Coach handed me — a few Vipers players come to body slam me against the boards.

I feel a sharp pain in the middle of my spine, the air is snuffed out of me, and I blackout for good, not even seeing when or how I left the rink.

I do know the last thought I had was of Elsa.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

ELSA

I'm walking from side to side in this hospital's waiting room, alone, for now, but I already messaged Parker, my mom, and Harvey's mom.

I asked mom not to come because I felt like she would stress me out more, but I promised to keep her posted. I told her and dad that I was pregnant when I got back to Boston. As I thought, my mom was beyond thrilled and my dad just looked at me and said, "Is he going to marry you?"

It had been a tough conversation, but when I told my dad that Harvey said he'd take care of me and the baby wanted to marry me and I was the one having cold feet, he looked relieved and said something about how it was a good thing he'd take responsibility.

I had told Parker too, who had just looked at me with shock, silence, and wide eyes before getting excited that his sister and best friend were expecting. I'm just glad he had come around to us being together before the baby news.

“When are they going to let me see him?” I grab an unsuspecting nurse and the poor lady barely knows what hit her.

“Who are you wanting to see, ma’am?” she says, caught off guard.

I let her go and she clearly feels much better. I reply, “Harvey Baker, please!” I bring my hands close to my body.

“Oh, the hockey player!” she says, animatedly. “He’s in the ICU right now, dear, stable, but they’re still doing tests.”

I growl, frustrated. “That’s it?” I ask, losing all hope.

“I’m sorry dear, it’s all I know! Once he’s moved to a room, you’ll be able to see him,” she says.

“And when is that going to happen?” My fists are curled into angry balls.

The nurse just shrugs, leaving me exasperated and crying. She pats me on the arm as a means of consoling me, then leaves, and all I want now is a hug, even from her.

But that hug takes one full hour to occur. Parker is the first one to arrive and finds me crying with my head in between my legs, and holds me tight against his chest, on which I completely collapse and crumble in tears.

“It’s going to be okay,” Parker says in a calming tone. “He’s one tough cookie, isn’t he?”

I sniffle, trying to recompose myself, but nothing in my life ever seemed as hard as this. “He’s still undergoing testing. Oh,

Parker, why did they hurt him?”

Parker snaps his fingers. “They already got a witness. Several of the players on the other team *and* the referee were bought by the mob to force an injury on Harvey. And apparently, they got him.”

He shakes his head, and I just feel my heart being crushed.

A doctor enters the waiting room and calls out, “Relatives of Harvey Baker?”

Parker and I quickly step forward and rush up to that doctor at the speed of sound.

“I’m his girlfriend, and he’s his best friend, doctor,” I say, nervous. There’s a chance he might only want to talk to family, which I’m not sure I can handle right now.

“No immediate family here?” the doctor asks, making my heart sink even further.

“His parents are driving over and should be here soon, but for now, it’s just the two of us,” I inform him, feeling somber and impatient to see Harvey.

“Understood,” the doctor consults his clipboard. “I’m Doctor Jacobs. Harvey is responsive and stable, with no life-threatening risk.”

Parker and I breathe a sigh of relief.

The doctor takes a deep breath and continues, “But he suffered a severe spinal injury that may or may not compromise his ability to walk.”

I launch myself into Parker's arms, pouring out bitter tears of fear and shock.

"This is not fair!" I complain, "He's still young!"

"Easy, miss," the doctor smiles kindly, placing a hand on my shoulder to calm me down. "His chances are good. With correct treatment and physiotherapy, the worst-case scenario is he'll be on crutches in a couple of months."

"And at best?" I ask, my voice fleeting and weak.

"He'll walk with a slight limp," he says.

"And how about playing, doctor? Will he be able to resume his career?" Parker asks.

I wince and push Parker away from me, hard enough to make him lose his balance.

"*Parker!*" I yell. "How can you even think about such a thing in a moment like this?"

The doctor looks from me, to Parker, and back before finally speaking. "Well, I wouldn't recommend him ever putting on a pair of skates again."

My core crumbles down in tears again, and I collapse over a chair, sobbing.

Parker sits by my side but doesn't dare touch me yet. Only when I'm calming down again, and he sees some light at the end of the tunnel, does he speak again.

"I'm sorry," he says, his voice sounding genuine and pure. "It was insensitive of me to be worrying about betting results

than with my friend.”

“You’ve bet on him retiring?!” I turn to glare at him that same instant.

Parker feels the bridge of his nose, and lowers his head, gritting his teeth and moaning in physical and emotional pain.

“I did. But don’t worry, he knows that! He got as pissed as you. He’s been helping me, Elsa, with my... gambling problem.”

I widen my eyes, full-grown concern rising inside my chest. “Parker... Since when do you have a gambling problem?”

“Ever since I got involved in sports,” he shrugs. “You get some insider information here, a tip over there and before you know it, you’re making some bucks, and you want to make more. Then, all of a sudden, you’ve put your house up as collateral and you lose it, and then place an all-or-nothing bet against your best friend.”

“And what was the plan, Parker?!”

Oh God, I’m so angry.

“Gently cajole Harvey into retiring so you could save your assets?”

He rubs his face red in the most pathetic attempt to hold back tears.

“Elsa, I wasn’t thinking straight,” he says. “But I’m serious, I’m getting the help I need. I’m even seeing a group and a doctor! I swear, I swear!”

Now he's the one sobbing, and it's up to me to console my mediocre excuse for a brother.

I somehow find the will to keep rubbing his back while he cries, and I let him pour it all out until I leave his side.

First, I go to the vending machine to buy myself a protein bar and a can of soda, and after eating, I check my phone.

Lorna informs me they got a flat driving up and are waiting for a tow truck and is asking for any news of Harvey. I call her and tell her that he's stable, much to her relief.

Kiera, who got my number from her mother, says she's coming in the morning, which is the soonest that she and Michael can arrive.

I also call my mom to tell her that Harvey is going to be okay. She is so relieved and hurts my eardrums as she yells the news over to dad. But I don't care, I'm just as relieved.

And hours go by. That protein bar and soda barely make a dent in my hunger, so my stomach is still growling.

"Parker," I shake him. He's fast asleep on his chair.
"Parker!"

He startles and comically jumps in place until finally laying eyes on me. "What?" he says in a yawn.

"Go buy me a cheeseburger!" I shove some money against his chest.

He holds onto my hand but refuses to take the money. "Do you really need a cheeseburger at—" he looks at his watch.

“1:30 AM?”

“I’m *starving*, Parker! That means your nephew or niece is starving too!” I push the money on him again.

“Alright, alright, but that was a low blow!” he says, refusing the money again, then patting the pocket carrying his wallet. “Playing the baby card shouldn’t be allowed!”

“Well, get used to it!” I stick my tongue out at him.

Parker leaves, and I’m alone in the waiting room.

My brother takes his sweet time finding me food, but when he comes back with a bag from a local fast-food chain, I don’t even have the time to complain over the late delivery — I just fall mouth first into its contents.

“You’re welcome!” Parker says with sarcasm. I tell him thank you with my mouth full.

“Good cheeseburger!” I say after a while, pushing down the burger and fries with ice-cold soda. “I’m sure I’ll be craving this again soon.”

“Keep the bag to remember the name, then,” Parker says.

I’m almost at the end of my meal when Doctor Jacobs comes up, reviewing his clipboard.

“Miss Thompson!” He seems cheery. That’s always a good sign.

“Mr. Baker is in good health. He’s not awake yet — we gave him heavy painkillers — but if you’d wish to be with him for a few minutes, that can be arranged.”

“Oh God, yes!” I hand my fast-food bag to Parker and stand immediately. “Where is he?”

“Please, follow me!” he offers and then starts walking away.

Doctor Jacobs guides me through wide hospital hallways, forming a labyrinth that finally leads to the ICU unit where Harvey is currently staying.

He opens the door. There are three patients under his watchful eye there. Harvey is in a secluded corner of the room, with plenty of machinery beeping and bopping around him, but fortunately, he is breathing naturally.

I step ahead of the doctor and inspect the damage left on Harvey. He’s full of bruises and cuts, especially to his face, and I don’t feel confident enough to touch him, save for his exposed hand.

“We’re just keeping an eye on his back injury, he should go to a private room soon,” Doctor Jacobs says in a whisper. “I’ll send a nurse to come fetch you in a few minutes.”

“Thank you, Doctor Jacobs,” I manage to muster a smile.

The doctor leaves, and I’m left alone with a very unconscious Harvey. I lay my hand over his stomach, which, covered by a bed sheet, doesn’t reveal the bruises he hides there.

“Harvey, please talk to me,” I say, now touching his hair and leaning forward to carefully kiss his busted-up lips.

He groans, and my heart skips a beat. Harvey turns his face away from me, making it clear the kiss caused him pain, and

soon enough he opens his purple-rimmed blue eyes and looks at me. “Babe!”

I laugh in a mixture of giggles and happy tears. “Oh God, this is a roller coaster of emotions! I was miserable when you entered here, and now that you are awake, I’m as happy as anyone can be!”

He looks at me sideways, then tries out a smile that looks very painful to hold.

“That’s because you love me,” he says, smug and full of himself.

“Yeah, I do,” I say, taking a whiff of his sweaty, bloody scent. “And how about you? Do you love me?”

“Are you nuts, babe? Of course, I do!” He doesn’t bat a lash and I love him even more for it. “You’re the mother of my child, and one hell of a partner in crime, what else could I ask for?”

“Oh, silly!” I laugh and kiss him again, only to have him wincing and hissing in pain.

“Ouch!” he says. “Let’s not do that for now, okay? I think I’ve lost another tooth.”

“Oh, poor thing,” I lightly run my fingers through his hair, as that seems to be the one place I can touch without hurting him.

“Harvey, I think the doctor would be better fitted to tell you this, but I can’t hold it any longer: there was a spinal injury, and—”

“Oh, makes sense. I can’t feel my legs,” he says, so nonchalantly that it shocks me.

“And how aren’t you panicking?” I ask, dumbfounded.

Much to my chagrin, Harvey manages to shrug, his face looking so confident I want to punch it.

“What’s the point in panicking, Elsa? It already happened. There’s nothing I can do. What pisses me off is that the assholes won, and I’ll be forced to retire. But oh well, life with you doting on me can’t be that bad.”

“You are going to be able to walk again!” I cry out impatiently and for the lack of places on him to slap, I slap the air.

“The doctor says that you can walk again with physical therapy.”

I see hope light up inside of him, only for me to kill it right after, “However, he doesn’t recommend you to ever play again.”

Harvey sighs laboriously, averts his gaze from me, and says “Eh. What do doctors know?”

“Harvey! This is serious!” I warn him. “A second injury could be much worse!”

He taps his fingers by his side over the bed, with the wires hanging from them clearly bothering him.

“You’re right, babe,” he says, conceding defeat. “But will you be by my side through everything?”

I hold onto his hand and smile, “Of course Harvey!”

“And will you marry me?” He’s met with my silence, and an awkward smile is now frozen on my lips.

He continues, “I promise I’ll do this right, with a ring and a romantic location, but please, just tell me now to make me feel better.”

I can tell I’ve turned bright red. Since I’m cornered by the desperate plea of an injured man I deeply care about and have fallen in love with, there’s only one option left for me.

“Yes, Harvey. I will marry you!” I say, with tears in my eyes.

He pulls me close for a kiss, but remembering his wince last time, I just lightly kiss his jawline. However, he shocks me when he leans in and kisses me full on the lips. I taste blood and feel his pain, and my heart breaks at his determination.

“I thought you didn’t want kisses right now!” I say, surprised.

“I changed my mind!” he says, full of energy.

We stay like that, close together, and just enjoy the fact that despite the crazy scare we just went through, everything is going to be okay.

Chapter Forty

HARVEY

After a month, I can now feel my legs again. However, I can only stand for a few seconds and can't walk without support not even to save my life.

This whole ordeal has been challenging, but ever since I woke up in the hospital with Elsa by my side, I knew I could get through it.

I wouldn't be able to do this without her. Hockey had been my entire life before, but because of her, I know there's more to life than that and instead of wallowing in self-pity, I have a reason to get up every single day.

For now, it's the crutches around the house, and the wheelchair outside, but I'm just glad I can get around.

I'm grateful I'm not doing this alone. Mom stayed back to watch me. Elsa is here too, and so is Clyde. He's my big, burly home health aide, who assists me in the shower and chats sports while aiding my recovery.

Today, I've got an interview with JF Andrews, a columnist for a famous sports magazine.

I'm primed and primed as I wait for her, sitting on the living room couch, where I can sit my butt for hours and not hurt my back.

Clyde comes for me, and I would have found his gait menacing if I didn't know he's a big teddy bear.

"Need anything else, *boss*?" I would normally insist that he call me by my first name, but his way of saying 'boss' makes me laugh so hard I just let him do it.

"No, Clyde, thank you. Just bring in mom and Elsa please."

I put a twenty-dollar bill in his hand. "You're free for the next two hours. Go grab some coffee!"

"Hehe, coffee..." the man snickers. I know he's an avid beer drinker.

I'm left alone, and it sucks to be alone right now. Once you become dependent on other people, you learn how to predict every move of your body, and I'm pretty sure I'll have to pee in just a few minutes.

"Harvey!" Mom comes from the kitchen with store-bought cookies and some coffee and juice. "Elsa just scheduled her first ultrasound!"

Elsa comes behind her, nodding her head and smiling like a fool.

“Can I go?” I ask like a kid begging to tag along with an older sibling,

“Of course, silly!” She leans down to kiss me. Mom leaves her tray on the coffee table. “We’re going to see our baby!”

I dive down to kiss her belly. She’s only at two months now, and she’s not showing yet, but soon everyone will know that a mini-Baker is sleeping there, just waiting to come out wearing a pair of skates and carrying a hockey stick.

“Hi, baby!” I speak to Elsa’s stomach, lifting her shirt and lightly touching her skin. “I’m your dad, and don’t forget that, okay?”

“I don’t think the baby can understand these complex concepts yet, Harvey.” I see her roll her eyes as I move back into a sitting position.

Mom protests, “It’s never too early! It’s so fun when they start to move. I thought that Kiera and Harvey were karate-chopping each other inside my belly.”

“What if we are having twins? My grandma on my mom’s side was a twin,” Elsa asks softly, holding onto her belly, and looking as if she just had the realization of a lifetime.

I just laugh it off.

What are the odds, right?

Mom pours us glasses of juice, then pours one for herself. “Wow, I guess it could be possible then. What a treat that would be! I’d have twin children then twin grandchildren!”

“Seriously, hon, the scary part is that they usually come out as preemies,” mom continues.

“Preemies?” Elsa asks, confused.

“Premature!” I explain. “Kiera and I were born early at seven months.”

“But they were just fine. And they were so cute!” Mom leans over and pinches my cheeks. “I’m sure it’s pretty unlikely you’ll have twins, but we’ll be finding out soon enough!”

While Elsa takes back her jaw from the floor, the doorbell rings.

“I think it’s the reporter!” I say, getting excited.

“I’ll get it!” Elsa manages to disappear off the scene.

“Are you nervous, Harvey?” Mom asks, leaning forward to inspect me better.

After a shrug or two, I reply “Maybe a little. I mean... I’ve handed out hundreds of interviews during my career, but this might be the last one! Ugh, I wish I had gone to the dentist, first.”

I feel the extra gaping tooth in the corner of my mouth. Fortunately, it’s off to the side so all I have to do is not open my mouth too wide and it won’t show in the photographs.

Speaking of the photographer, he arrives, carrying a large camera around his neck, accompanying JF Andrews.

Elsa brings them to circle the couch, and Andrews posts herself right in front of me.

“JF, this is Harvey! And that’s his mom, Lorna!” Elsa does the honors, then waits until JF and I shake hands to sit by my side.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Harvey,” the reporter says. “I just hoped it could be at the height of your career, not the end!”

Mom offers JF and the photographer a seat, then takes a seat herself, off-panel and off-screen.

“Stop with the funereal talk. I’m still alive. I’m just not playing anymore!” I raise a finger jokingly.

“Alright,” JF smiles, then picks up a fancy digital recorder and places it on the coffee table. “Everything is going to be recorded. Does everyone consent to it?”

“I do,” I say.

“Me too!” Elsa says.

All present in the room look at mom, who is caught off guard by the attention.

“Oh, I don’t plan on talking, but I do too, if I have to!” she finally says.

“Okay, let’s get started,” JF clears her throat, meaning business. “Can you sum up your hockey journey up until this moment, Harvey?”

I pause to think. “There’s so much I can say. This is a tough question. It all started when I was a kid and I took a liking to street hockey growing up, which led me to join a youth league

hockey team. Scouts noticed me from high school games, and I got drafted into a junior league. Then I caught the attention of NHL scouts and have been playing for the Arctic Wolves ever since.”

I cough then correct myself, “Well I was, up until now.”

When I look over at Elsa, her eyes are encouraging, and she holds my hand in support.

“And I wouldn’t be able to get through any of this if it wasn’t for Elsa. She’s been my rock.”

I squeeze Elsa’s hand and she smiles back at me.

“This guy,” I point to myself with determination, “got into the sights of the wrong kind of people, and ultimately got in trouble for it. And now I’m here, hurt, but recovering, happy as a clown. I’m not as happy as if I was still playing, but, oh well, what’s one going to do?”

JF smiles, professional and reserved. “Continuing: you mentioned being pursued by the wrong kind of people. Is that Stephen Talarico and his accomplices?”

“Precisely,” I say.

But Elsa frowns at me. “I thought we agreed we wouldn’t mention those guys!” she says in a tone of warning.

“Eh, what’s the use in hiding?” I say, shrugging, “Everybody knows those guys are in jail because of me. It all came out anyway when one of the Vipers players confessed. If I had a target in my head, they would have attacked me by now since I’m weak. But things are what they are. They got what they

wanted anyway. I'm retired thanks to them and I'm of no use to them right now unless they plan on starting bets on children's hockey leagues. I hope to be able to start coaching those."

"Really?" The reporter opens a wide smile. "The great Harvey Baker coaching the little ones?"

She sounds impressed, but I catch the pity in her voice. I ignore it and nod. "Children's leagues might be a nice way to put me on the low-impact side of hockey. That being said..."

I turn to look at Elsa, who looks at me with questioning eyes.

I continue, "I got to live my dream. I want Elsa to have the chance to live hers too. If she still wants to pursue acting, I can help take care of our child while she does."

I see her tear up and quickly continue before I start choking up. "Speaking of which, I can hardly wait for my little one!"

I hug Elsa and cover her in kisses, and she giggles, delighted, wiping her eyes. Mom, from her side, just watches, all the while smiling and glowing.

"When are you due, Elsa?" JF asks.

"Oh, there's still plenty of time!" And it's her turn to wave her off. "We're just about to get the first ultrasound."

"Will we know if it's a boy or girl?" I ask. Elsa doesn't seem to know, so we both turn to mom.

"At two months, I think it's still a little too early," Mom says, a hand on her chin.

“If you’ve known about the pregnancy for over two months, you already knew about it before the incident,” JF says.

“Yes,” I say, nodding.

“Did the expectation of fatherhood also weigh in your decision to retire?”

I rub my Elsa’s belly and squeeze her tight close to me. “No, but it’s a bonus,” I say. “I was going to keep playing for at least a few more years if I could. But now that health is forcing me to retire, it’s nice to look forward to filling my time with bottles, diapers, and the whole shebang.”

“I’ll remember you said that!” Elsa says, a finger in the air.

“You bet,” I squeeze her hand.

“And what are your feelings about retirement now? Have you fully accepted it, or are you still hurting about being forced into it?” JF asks.

I let go of Elsa to cross my arms and bow down my head, in a clear sign that yeah, I’m still hurting. But I’m not going to let that take me down.

“It’s not exactly hurting, it’s just... The good ol’ shoulda, coulda, woulda. Had I retired a couple of years earlier, things wouldn’t have to be this way. My true wish was to retire on top, not because of an injury caused in the middle of a corruption scandal.”

“Thank goodness the Arctic Wolves won by merit. You did have a huge part to play in that so you should feel proud. It’s

all been a confusing mess with the Vipers and that referee now being investigated.” the reporter comments.

“I’m glad to hear they are!” I punch the air.

JF nods, a silent snicker stuck in her throat before she continues, “So Harvey! When is the wedding? Before or after the baby?”

“Oh, I’ve been asking them that non-stop since I got the news!” mom interjects at the same moment.

Elsa and I look at each other. It’s time, and there’s no holding back anymore.

“Mom...” I contort my arm around my head to scratch the ear on the opposite side. “Elsa and I aren’t even properly engaged, yet...”

I see mom getting confused. With everything that’s happened the past month with my injuries and recovery, we haven’t told my parents the truth yet.

Mom widens her eyes “How’s that possible?” she asks, stuttering.

“Mom, remember I said I’ve had a girlfriend for the past three years, and that we recently got engaged?”

Mom nods, eyes unmoving from me.

“Well,” I say, “That fiancé didn’t exist. I came up with that whole story because...”

I take a deep breath and continue, “Well because of granny really. You know how hard she was pressuring me to settle

down. She was going to cut me out of the will. So, I had to hire an actress to portray my fiancé, and that actress was Elsa.”

Mom’s eyes get even more wide, and she is looking between me and Elsa as if not understanding my words.

“We are really in love now, Lorna,” Elsa says, jumping in to help calm mom’s nerves. “It even started when we were still at your house.”

“And my mother was in the hospital?” Mom places a hand over her heart.

“Yes,” I say. “And Elsa stayed longer than she originally agreed to, just to give me support about grandma.”

Mom looks from to me Elsa, still feeling her heart and still looking confused.

“This is hard to understand, Harvey. So, Elsa isn’t even a teacher?”

Elsa shakes her head and says, “I’m so sorry, Lorna. I hated lying to you and when I started having feelings for Harvey and we decided to be together for real, we agreed we’d tell the truth. We didn’t want to lie anymore. We were going to tell you after the Stanley Cup, but then Harvey’s injuries happened, and we decided to wait.”

Mom just stares at Elsa, blinking then finally says, “You know I love you, Elsa. This is a lot to take in, but I appreciate you telling me the truth. I just can’t believe—”

She looks sharply at me and I’m glad I’m still hurt so she won’t do anything rash.

“What a crazy thing to do, son! We’ll talk about this later. You need to help me understand why’d you do all this.”

I nod and she takes a deep breath, looking between me and Elsa again before asking, “So, you’re just boyfriend and girlfriend?”

“He asked me to marry him while he was at the hospital, but I’m still waiting for a *real* proposal,” Elsa says and then gently elbows me in the ribs.

“I’m working on it!” I raise my arms in self-defense.

JF cackles, head tilted back in pure delight at the scene. “Revelations!” She snaps her fingers.

“You didn’t answer the lady completely Harvey,” mom says, looking like she is slowly recovering from her shock.

“Is this wedding going to happen before or after the baby?”

Both Elsa and JF look to me for answers.

Chapter Forty-One

ELSA

“We’re going to be late, Harvey!” I urge him, but then I feel bad about it immediately as I watch him struggle with the crutches.

“I’m sorry, babe. I can’t go any faster,” he says, slowly pacing forward with his crutches as if it didn’t have a care in the world.

“I got to give it to you,” I help him up the ramp in front of the clinic. “You’re being a trooper about these crutches, aren’t you?”

I hold the door open for him. “I’d rather be using nothing, but it’s better than the wheelchair.”

We enter the lobby. It’s a fancy medical clinic specialized just in pre and postnatal care. I’m not on Harvey’s insurance yet, but it’s not like it’s a problem for him to pay out of pocket.

I let Harvey walk ahead of me, and he seems very confident to be in this place, contrary to me. I’m feeling pretty nervous.

“This is making it all that more real,” I say, hiding behind him.

He caresses my cheeks as we wait for the receptionist. “You’re going to be great. *We* are going to be great.”

“Welcome to Winston & Cole Clinic. How can I help you?” the receptionist says upon hanging up the phone.

“Uh, Elsa Thompson, 2:30 PM.” Harvey says, thankfully taking over the conversation. My nerves really are shot.

“ID, please,” the girl behind the desk asks with a smile.

I produce my ID with sweaty hands and trembling fingers, and hand it over to the receptionist.

“3rd floor; they’ll call you by your name!” she says, very politely.

We head for the elevator very slowly at what I dub ‘Harvey’s Time’. I joke around, but the truth is that it’s so refreshing to see him up and about more and more on his own lately.

Inside the elevator, I rest my head against his chest, and he touches my hair full of love, yet amusement.

“What’s bothering you?” he asks me, knowing something’s odd.

“I’m just nervous,” I complain. “What if we have a little monster?”

“That might not be unexpected, considering what I know of you,” he says, a finger in his mouth to jostle me.

“Harvey!” I slap lightly him on the chest.

When we get to the 3rd floor, the doctor who'll perform the ultrasound is already calling out my name. I dart ahead, but Harvey keeps at his own personal pace and only arrives at the room five minutes later.

I apologize to the doctor for having to wait.

“Hey, this is the fastest I've been in a long while!” Harvey jokes, coming to sit down.

“That's okay, folks. You've arrived just in time!” the doctor says with a smile. “I'm Doctor Glaser, and I'll be with you until the end of your pregnancy. I'll be conducting the ultrasound today. Please, lie down on the examination table.”

While Doctor Glaser provides Harvey with a chair, I lay back on the table, propped up. My heart is beating frantically between nerves and now excitement too that I'm going to finally get to see my baby today.

The doctor turns on his monitor and prepares his devices. Harvey comes close to me and holds my hand. Like a puppy wagging its tail, he asks, “Can we know the sex of the baby today, doc?”

“I can try, but we'll most likely have to wait until around four months,” the doctor says.

“He's crazy for a boy!” I say.

“Oh, fathers always are!” the doctor completes my thought. “Lift your shirt please, Elsa.”

He squeezes clear goo all over my stomach and gently guides the ultrasound wand over my belly.

“Now let’s see,” Doctor Glaser takes a seat and points to the monitor screen.

He turns the monitor to us, points on the screen, and says, “You can see the tiny embryo developing here.”

I lean forward and even though it’s just a tiny dot, my heart melts into complete love.

“Wait a second...”

The doctor sounds intrigued by something, and I widen my eyes in expectation of what he has to say.

He peruses my belly through all possible angles, and finally, says absolutely nothing and just stares at us with a big grin.

“Come on, doc...” Harvey insists. “Tell us already!”

“You’re having twins!” He claps his hands.

Harvey and I look at each other, completely stupefied. But he snaps out of it first, standing up as fast as he can on his crutches, and celebrates with a fist in the air.

“Aha! Just like me and my sister!” he says, full of cheer. “I need to call my mom!”

Completely ignoring my pleas, Harvey leaves the room with his phone at hand, and doesn’t return until the doctor is giving me the details about the babies.

“The babies are nearing about an inch long and weigh about a quarter of an ounce each. Everything is looking great and you’re on your way to having a safe pregnancy, Elsa!”

“Mom jumped like popcorn!” Harvey loudly announces as he steps back into the room, leaning down close to kiss me.

“Would you like to hear the heartbeat?” the doctor offers.

We just nod our heads eagerly. Doctor Glaser reaches for a handheld ultrasound device and places it gently on my belly. The room is filled with the rhythmic sound of the babies’ heartbeats, a symphony of rapid thumps that reassure us, sparking joy that’s difficult to put into words.

When I look at Harvey, he’s crying.

“This is so fucking beautiful...” he says, wiping his eyes.

“Don’t curse in front of your children!” I slap him on the back of his head.

“Well, folks, I got everything I need. Can I answer any questions?” Doctor Glaser asks, handing me a paper towel to clean myself.

“So, they’re normal?” I ask, still feeling terrified.

“Perfectly normal for their age. Don’t worry, mommy!” the doctor says.

“I understand there are occurrences in your family?” the doctor asks me.

I nod, “Yes, my grandmother on my mom’s side.”

Harvey chimes in excitedly, “Yeah, mine too if you can believe it! My sister and I are twins too,” Harvey says, all excited. “Wow, by now mom probably has already told the whole family!”

“I think that’s it, doctor...” I slowly sit back up and start to get down. “We’ll be on our way.”

“Alright, please pass through the reception downstairs to schedule your next appointment!” Doctor Glaser bids us goodbye.

“We will!” I say.

“Can’t wait to meet again, doc!” Harvey says excitedly.

I hold the door open for Harvey, then close it behind him. He’s so excited but I’m feeling overwhelmed.

As if one baby wasn’t enough, now we are having two?

“Harvey...” I say, holding onto his shoulder as we head to the elevator. “What are we going to do with two babies?”

Irritating to me, he just shrugs lightheartedly. “Same as we’d do with just one, but double!” and he laughs.

“Ugh, I need advice...” I feel my head, getting suddenly dizzy. “Can we drop by my parents?”

“You’re driving, babe. You are in control!” he says, cheering me up.

I press the button going down and the elevator doors immediately open. We go in and from there, we schedule another appointment with Doctor Glaser for a month from now.

In the car, Harvey grabs his phone again. “I’m going to call Parker!”

“No!” I shout. “I mean... Wait until I tell mom.”

“Why?” he looks at me, confused, as I start the engine.

“Because if you tell Parker now, mom will already know by the time we get there! And I want to give her the news!”

“Oh, but then your mom will tell him before I get to tell him!” Harvey complains.

I slap the back of his head again.

“Harvey, my mom is not a gossiper!” I say, defending my family’s honor.

“Like this is the type of news one can keep!” He brings my hand to his lips to kiss it.

Epilogue

HARVEY

It's been four months since the accident, and five months since we discovered Elsa is pregnant. Talk about our wedding plans is everywhere, but an important part is still missing.

But after today it won't be.

I bring Elsa to my boat again. I can't think of a better place to do what I must do.

The doctor said that sailing would be okay if I don't exert myself too much — right now all I need is a cane for support, soon, not even that.

Just like last time we were here, I'm waiting for her arrival. It takes a while, but here she comes, pretty in pink with her cozy pink sweater, maternity leggings, and denim jacket.

“Am I late?” she asks, pure sunshine.

“You're always on time!” I say, arms wide open over the bow.

I support my weight over one of the ropes, and with my other hand, I help her up. She immediately sits down and inspects the picnic basket I brought.

“Sparkling apple cider and oysters, huh? You still remember!” Elsa says, delight in her voice.

“Yeah, pretty sure that’s the night the kids were conceived!” I release the ropes and let the boat set sail.

“I was already pregnant!” she corrects me laughing.

“Eh, whatever!”

While I work the sails to get us away from the marina, Elsa picks up the bottle and removes the cork. The cork comes out with little to no effort, and the little liquid that escapes it goes straight into her mouth.

I let go of the ropes and go sit by her side. For a second, I just take in the view. The clouds are fluffy cotton candy over an azure sky. The ocean is a calm sheet, barely touched by the wind that hits the bay, and the wind itself is soft and chill, just strong enough to pull a sail, but not strong enough to give me trouble. I do notice a subtle chill in the air since it’s now fall and the beautiful tapestry of colors from the changing leaves add to the charm.

“What are you thinking?” she asks, offering me a glass for myself.

“Nothing in particular. Just...” I take a sip and point my free palm toward the sky. “The weather is so nice. It’s not too cold

yet and it's beautiful. No one is around. It's like we have the whole ocean to ourselves."

"It is!" she says, smiling. "You picked the perfect day!"

I give her a double take, then clear my throat. "Do you *know* why you're here?"

The sly fox shrugs. "I have a *faint* idea. But don't worry, whatever you do, it's going to be a surprise!"

"Really?" I dig for an oyster and a slice of lemon. "How?"

"Because I've been waiting for so long, I've pictured it in my head three dozen times already. But I know none of them are right. Only what's real is what matters," Elsa says as she leans her head against my shoulder.

"Whew... That's a lot of pressure!" I say, letting out some nervous laughter.

She digs for an oyster herself, eats it with the little fork, and then discards the shell inside the basket alongside the ones I left there.

Once she's sitting straight again, I place my arm around her shoulders and feel for the little package in my back pocket that's been burning a hole in it ever since I put it there this morning.

"Elsa..." I start what's meant to be my little speech. I'm sure I will mess up, but I'm also sure that's part of the process.

"You turned a sad lie I created for myself into the most beautiful of truths. I... I never knew what I was looking for

until I found you. This is where I thank you for finally making my life complete and...”

I open the ring box for her to see. The woman at the store said to invest three months’ salary, so I went all in. It’s big and flashy, but it’s proof of my love for her.

“Harvey!” I hear a gasp for air suspended in her breath, and she looks at me, in complete disbelief.

“Elsa, will you be my wife?” I say, trying to keep a straight face.

She looks from me to the ring, takes it out of the box, puts it on her finger, and admires what it looks like in her hand.

“This is a yes, okay?” she says, looking at me sideways.

Growling with excitement, I bring her close to me and kiss her, a sweet peck on the lips that takes its sweet time there, allowing us to just taste each other for a while.

Soon that kiss turns heated, and we abandon our drinks near the picnic basket, and I bring her to sit in my lap facing me, already feeling hard and ready for her.

While she reaches under my shirt, I gently slide her leggings down, kissing her baby bump. I lift my arms so she can take off my shirt and then I kiss her deeply.

She brings my hand underneath her and I feel her over her underwear as she kisses me and use my thumb and index finger to massage her, feeling her quiver against me.

I fumble with her underwear and push it to the side as gently as I can. It's easy since it's lace.

Elsa distributes little kisses along my neck while running her hands down my chest and arms, and that's quickly driving me insane too, but what I want is to hear her moaning and calling my name.

I moan to her caresses, and meanwhile, she sighs to mine. As I touch her, I feel her body heat increasing, and her face is lightly blushing with the pleasure I'm giving her.

I bring my mouth to hers in a desperate kiss, and I take her hand and place it over my pants so she can feel how hard I am for her. She lightly touches it and squeezes it over my jeans. Soon enough, she's working on the zipper to bring it out and fully touch it, making me breathe even more heavily and moan against her mouth.

I lift her sweater over her head and quickly unclasp her bra so I can play with her breasts. Leaning my head down, I suck and lick them, getting them hard and making Elsa moan.

Close to the picnic basket, there's a large blanket I brought just for this purpose. I grab it spread it over the boat's floor and sit over it, inviting her to come join me with open arms.

I get Elsa's back turned to me as she lays on her side. Kissing her back and shoulder, I slide inside her from behind, a leg over her.

She cries out as I do, and I thrust into her, and it turns me on even more when I hear her shaking moans. I play with her left

breast and kiss the curve of her neck, taking advantage of a good whiff of her hair.

She moans louder and I move even faster. The moment is drawing close, and I give her all I have until I finally feel her quivering and crying out next to me.

I change my angle to go deeper and after a few thrusts, I'm soon exploding deep inside of her, moaning loudly.

Afterwards, she turns to face me, covering herself with part of the blanket and I lean forward to kiss her forehead and then her lips.

"This is the most precious moment of my life so far," she says in a whisper.

"Why so far?" I ask, kissing her hand.

"Well... There's the babies' birth is yet to come!" Elsa says, rolling her eyes with a smile. "I'm guessing that one will be hard to beat."

I wrap myself around the blanket too, and hold her close to me, to cuddle and kiss her forehead.

"Yeah. My guess is you're right."

Epilogue

ELSA

I look at myself in the mirror. My hair and makeup are impeccable, and I feel like a princess.

I look at the dress and it's perfect, pure white with clear stonework and delicate embroidery. The problem is that it had to be customized to fit me.

"I'm so big..." I lament, while all the other women in the salon run around getting properly fixed.

"You're looking *gorgeous*, darling!" Lorna shouts from under the blow dryer.

"Yeah, hon, nobody gives a damn about a pregnant bride these days!" mom says, and I'm not sure how to take that, but I just shake it off.

There are *so many* people here, and I only know personally about half of them, even people who are supposed to be from my family are only in mom's phone book. The rest are my friends and the Baker's clan.

I think the excitement is making me dizzy.

“Ugh...” I groan, then feel up my back.

“What’s wrong, Elsa?” Becca, who is one of the bridesmaids, comes to my aid.

“Just a dull ache in my back,” I inform her, looking over my shoulder. “Been feeling it since yesterday.”

Becca raises me an eyebrow. “What’s the interval between them?”

I pause to take in the blow before replying “It’s not contractions, Miss Nurse! I’m only seven months in! And those would be in the front, no?”

“Not always!” she corrects, raising her index finger.

“Oh, just find me a chair!” I shoo her away.

Not even ten seconds later, two salon assistants are by my side, one with a chair and the other with a glass of ice-cold water, fitted with a straw so as not to ruin my lipstick.

“No, no water...” I decline the offer. “Or all I will have my mind on during the ceremony is holding my pee!”

I look at the big clock on the wall. It’s 9:45 AM. “Hey, how late are we going to be?” I ask and I’m received with laughter.

“Elsa is the only bride who wants to be on time!” Kiera says as she finishes getting her nails done.

“My mom just told me that *a bride is never late, she arrives when she needs to arrive,*” Bree says.

“Wise words!” I say. “How long are you going to leave Pinchon waiting?”

The woman just giggles like a maniac and lets the subject go.

Mom gets on the phone. It’s my father, asking where we are.

“Alright, ladies. It’s time to go!” She waves both of her arms in the air, and one by one the women start getting ready to leave the building.

The church is not far away. It’s the same church where Kiera got married, the same one where their older brother got married, and the same one where their parents got married, thus keeping with the family tradition, and making Harvey’s folks happy.

The cars outside are all lined up, ready to leave in perfect order for the nuptial procession. Mine goes at the end, a custom 1920s Oldsmobile that I have all for myself — thank goodness, because there isn’t much space inside, and I’ll have to share it with Harvey until the reception.

My nervousness only grows as we approach the quaint small-town square where the church is located. Every time the car inches closer, my heart rate increases a bit, and oh! There it goes again. That same ache one more time.

Finally, we’re at the church’s door, and everybody is waiting with excitement for me to come out. I take a deep breath and then step out as a powerful woman, owner of my choices and mistress of my fate.

I pose for the photographer and the video camera, while dad assembles the procession. It's adorable. All of a sudden, my dad is acting like a wedding organizer.

In the end, he comes to me, takes me by the arm, and with a grin from ear to ear lets out a "My baby! She snatched a billionaire!"

That gets me laughing non-stop until we start to walk.

We climb up the steps, one by one. My heart skips a beat at every step we take to get closer. When I finally feel the warm heat coming from inside the church, it's the point of no return — you're getting married, Elsa, there's no turning back.

The Nuptial March starts to play, expertly by the hands of a string quartet and an organist. Dad looks straight ahead, still grinning like a fool, and the only face I want to see is right there, with an even bigger grin.

This aisle seems infinite, but we eventually get to the end. "Take good care of her, son," my father warns Harvey upon handing me to him.

"I will, sir. I promise!" Harvey says, and as bride and groom, we position ourselves in front of the priest.

When it's time for our vows, I take a deep breath as I go first.

"Harvey," I say, and then look into his blue eyes. I'm surprised to see them tearing up, which make mine tear up even more.

Sniffing a bit, I continue, “You were there for me when I thought I was alone. You helped me embrace my true self, even when the world expected different. You are genuine, unique, and have a perspective of life that few have, and for all these things, and many more, I love you with my whole heart and soul.”

Roaring applause from the guests, and I look at them, blushing. Then, I look at Harvey, looking forward to hearing his vows.

He takes the microphone, then brings out his vows from inside his jacket.

“I’ll have to apologize to everyone because I’m not as eloquent with words as my lovely bride.”

I smile and wipe my eyes.

He clears his throat and then reads, “Elsa, I promise to be your partner in all the adventures life brings us. I will cherish our moments together, whether it’s the journeys that await us in parenthood or simply watching a movie with you. I vow to be your strength in times of need and your shoulder to lean on, even with my slight limp.”

The guests chuckle and I’m full on crying now.

He wipes a tear from my eyes and looks at me with concern, and I just make a motion with my hand for him to continue.

“I promise to support your dreams. I promise to be your person, your confidante, your teammate, and your faithful husband.”

He wipes more tears from my eyes and then we exchange the rings, carried by Harvey's niece, and become husband and wife.

I feel that stupid pain attack me again. It's getting quicker and sharper.

What if Becca was right?

I feel butterflies in my stomach and smile despite the pain as I enjoy this special moment. I'm now Harvey's wife. He is now my husband.

When he comes for the kiss, our lips barely touch when that same pain comes back, and suddenly there's hot water coming down my legs.

"What's this?" Harvey asks, looking from me to his shoes, also soaked.

"I peed my pants— What does it look like, Harvey? My water just broke!"

"Her water just broke!" he shouts for the whole church to hear, his face instantly turning red.

Without asking me, he lifts me into his arms. I try to protest that he can't force his back yet, but he doesn't listen. Both my parents and his parents approach us, and then Becca comes dashing with all the knowledge of the nurse of a plastic surgeon.

"How are you feeling, Elsa?" Becca follows Harvey as he heads for the door.

“In pain!” I shout at her. “Oh, Becca, they weren’t supposed to come until next month!”

“You can’t control baby time!” Becca says and giggles, bidding us goodbye as we cross the threshold.

“Let’s get my car!” My father says, keys at hand.

“No, my car is bigger!” Harvey’s father shouts, winning this game.

And George is right, driving a seven-seater that could carry an army. He and Lorna go in the front seat, with him at the wheel, Harvey and I in the middle seat, and mom and dad in the back.

“Next stop, Babyland!” George says, trying to be cute as he steps on the pedal.

“How far apart are the contractions, Elsa?” Mom says, reaching over the backseat to hold the hand Harvey is not squeezing.

“Until we entered the church, fifteen minutes, but now they’re closer!”

“John, start counting!” she orders dad, who keeps an eye on his watch and takes it seriously, never moving his gaze from it.

“Harvey.” I say, fearing for the next contraction. “Wasn’t it supposed to be next month?”

I look at him. He’s bright red, breathing heavily, and his eyes are looking like a deer caught in the headlights.

After several moments, he says, “Kiera and I were born at seven months, babe. Right mom?”

He looks at Lorna for assurance and she reaches back to touch his face. “Don’t worry, darling! Everything is going to be alright!”

Until we get to the hospital, we time the contractions at five minutes apart.

As the wedding dress kept clinging to the wheelchair, Harvey carried me inside the maternity ward himself, and from there they get me out of that dress and Harvey out of his jacket to get on hospital gowns.

I’m lying on a hospital bed and Harvey is wearing green scrubs the hospital gave him along with gloves and shoe covers. He now looks as white as a ghost.

“Are you ready?” Harvey asks, coming to touch my hair.

“No,” I laugh weakly. “But we’ll make do as we go.”

He leans down to kiss me. It’s the last time we’ll be kissing until the end of everything, so I take full advantage of it.

The nurses arrive and promptly connect the machines to monitor both my vitals and those of the babies. They inquire about my comfort and quickly exit, making way for the doctor.

He’s not Doctor Glaser and I’m upset about it, so he better be good. He’s a short, bald man who positions himself in between my legs and informs us, “These babies are ready to be born, but there’s not enough space for a natural delivery. A C-section is our safest bet here. Do you agree to it?”

Harvey looks at me for confirmation, and I nod my head.

“Yes, doctor...” Harvey squeezes my hand. “We had one scheduled for next month, but our little ones decided to arrive earlier!”

“Yes, they are in a hurry!” the doctor chuckles. “But they’ll be born strong and healthy, you’ll see!”

As if he were the last of our wedding organizers, the doctor begins to shout out orders, and in an instant, everything is being prepped.

The anesthesiologist comes first, with a big ass needle. Harvey covers my eyes, so I don’t see it being inserted straight into my spine. As it starts to take effect, he tells Harvey, “You have one job here, okay, big fella? Don’t let her fall asleep. She needs to be awake through *everything*, alright?”

I know Harvey is even more terrified now, but still offers the man a mock salute to let him know that he understood the task and that I’m in good hands.

Nurses are all around and making me feel terrified too. I focus on Harvey and his blue eyes, wondering if one or both babies will inherit them.

We know one’s a boy, but the second’s gender remains a mystery because Dr. Glaser couldn’t confirm, and I hope it’s a girl.

A curtain divides me from the lower half of my body, and I thank goodness for it because now I can focus only on my husband, myself, and the expectations we have for our

children. I look at Harvey again; he looks at me, and no words are needed to express how we are feeling.

The fully prepped doctor arrives, and I close my eyes with anticipation. “No!” Harvey gently taps my face. “No sleeping!”

“I’m awake, dumbass!” I curse him, completely forgetting my promise to watch my language in front of the kids.

I can’t feel anything but just knowing what’s going on behind that curtain is enough to make me want to cry.

But then I truly cry, and even Harvey sobs looking over the curtain to a little desperate screaming claiming ownership over life for the very first time.

“Here’s a boy!” the doctor puts in my arms a little red blob, still covered in goo, who cries at the fullness of his lungs and makes me the happiest person on the planet.

A second set of lungs enters the world, this time, with the quality of a soprano, loud and piercing and forcing my heart to beat a little faster.

“It’s a girl!” the doctor shouts, soon after coming to put in my arms the little princess of my dreams.

She immediately stops crying once she comes to me, and just looks at mommy with curious, newborn blue eyes.

Both babies have dark hair, so they took more from Harvey’s family. Still hard to say who looks like who, but I have a feeling they’ll take it to the Baker clan too.

“Wanna hold them?” I ask Harvey.

A nurse comes to wrap the boy in a blanket and hands him to the father. He hesitates, but knowing he’ll have to do it one way or the other, decides to make it now.

“Oh my God,” he says in a fleeting voice, looking deep into the baby’s eyes. “You are going to be the best hockey player ever!”

“What if he doesn’t want to play hockey, Harvey?” I ask, half-annoyed, half-amused.

The nurse wraps the little girl and helps Harvey carry her too. “We’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Oh my God. *I’m a father!*”

He shouts, a proud papa bear with his cubs.

And I just smile with tears still flowing out of my eyes, knowing that even though my life didn’t take the direction that I wanted, it took the best direction possible.

Thank you for reading *Twins for my Pucking Fake Fiancé!*

If you loved this book, then you will love **Nanny for the Billionaire Bosshole!**

It is a steamy yet sweet surprise pregnancy romance about a grumpy billionaire who hires his little sister’s best friend to be a nanny for his little girl.

It's a page turner to read how the sparks of tension in this opposites-attract turn into sparks of passion!

Keep reading to get a sneak peek and read Chapter One!

Sneak Peek

Nanny for the Billionaire Bosshole

When I hired my little sister's best friend,
I knew I was getting a nanny for my baby girl.
What I didn't know was I would become a father again.
When little Miss Sunshine comes into my life,
All I can do is roll my eyes.
But my daughter loves her.
Despite being polar opposites, we grow closer.
And I feel my hard exterior crack.
When things get heated after a ball,
I can't stop thinking about her.
She says it was a mistake and that my sister would kill us.
I don't care.
The magnetic pull between us is impossible to resist.

And we can't stay apart.

When I make a mistake and break her trust,

She ends things.

I will stop at nothing to get her back.

Especially when I find out about those two pink lines.

Nanny for the Billionaire Bosshole is an enemies to lovers, best friend's brother, surprise baby romance. No cheating, no cliffhangers. Just steamy enjoyment, HEA guaranteed and two epilogues included! It contains some brief use of strong language.

Chapter One

JOYCE

The day is sunny and bright, and the cloudless sky is a gorgeous blue, but I've barely seen any of it because of this job interview.

I'm just one of many candidates. I look around and see eager women of various ages. We're all here wanting the job of nanny to the child of some rich real estate tycoon.

"Jones?" A woman from HR starts to call our names. She had explained that we'd be doing initial interviews with her first, then a select few would interview with the boss, Mr. Bardin, directly.

I'm nervous with anticipation, so I just close my eyes and remind myself why I'm doing this: To give my mom and little sister a better, more comfortable life.

I watch and wait as we are called, one by one.

“Andrews?”

Hearing my last name makes my heart thump even harder, but I stand up from my chair with a cheerful smile on my face. Now it's my turn to shine, and I feel like a rockstar walking by so many people.

I read Pollyanna when I was a kid and ever since I started to only see the good side of things. I imagine what the other candidates are thinking as I walk by, and I prefer to think they are wishing me luck, just as I did for them.

“How are you?” the woman from HR asks, smiling and welcoming me into her office, her brown eyes looking tired but kind. She looks to be in her mid-thirties.

“Doing great, thank you,” I reply, enthusiastic and smiling.

“Please, take a seat,” she says with a nod.

“Alright!” I make sure to sit up straight and look her in the eye.

I read the plaque on her desk and see her name is Samantha Evans right before she reaches a hand over and says, “Nice to meet you, Joyce. I'm Sam.”

I shake her hand with a smile and then her eyes go to a clipboard.

I see she has my resume on it in one hand and a pen in the other. She reviews it for a moment, and I remind myself to take deep breaths as I wait patiently.

“You’re twenty-four?” she asks.

“That’s correct,” I nod in agreement.

“I see you are in college. May I ask why you haven’t graduated yet?”

I answer quickly, “My mother is sick and I’m taking care of her. I’ve been taking just a few classes for the past year, but I should be graduating next semester.”

“And do you think taking classes will affect your ability to work?”

“Absolutely not,” I say it politely, but shake my head emphatically. “I have a support system for my mom so it’s not just me helping out, and my classes are only at night three days a week.”

“And when would you study?” She asks, taking notes as I answer.

“When I have free time. Mostly in the evenings,” I smile.

She smiles back, then turns her attention to another item on my resume. “You have three years of experience already as a nanny? That’s impressive!” She says, her face lighting up.

I feel the smile on my face deepening as I nod.

She continues, looking at me with interest, “Could you tell me more about that?”

“At first, it was my aunt and uncle who hired me to help with my nephew, all through an agency and everything, just so I could have the experience. The other two jobs after that were for different families. I had to take a break last year when things got worse with my mom, but the experience was amazing. I learned I love working with kids, which is also great since my major is in education.”

Sam is nodding with enthusiasm when there's a hard knock at the door. She opens her mouth to say something, but the knocker immediately opens the door before she can even speak. My eyes open wide when the most handsome man I've ever seen steps in.

His dark gray tailored suit accentuates his muscular body and broad shoulders. He's well over six-feet tall and has lush brown hair and piercing blue eyes.

But he also has the worst grimace on his face I've ever seen and treats Sam rudely, two things that put me off instantly.

“Any updates on my candidates?” he frowns impatiently, “It's 10 AM already!”

My eyes widen again when I realize he's the boss.

Jane is the same age as me, and fourteen years younger than her brother, so I quickly do the math and realize he is thirty-eight.

“I'm sorry, Mr. Bardin,” Sam answers, looking stressed, “I just got started not too long ago!”

Mr. Bardin rubs his face red, clenching his jaw. “I’ll interview this one while you sort the rest, okay?” He grabs her clipboard with one hand, and with the other, points firmly at me, “You! Come!”

He turns his back to me, and before I can process what just happened, Sam is urging me to follow him. I get up awkwardly as I do so, walking blindly into the unknown.

Mr. Bardin walks faster than my kitten heels can handle, and I am grateful for the carpet on the floor, which quiets my hurried steps. He guides me to a huge office at the end of a long hallway and leaves the door open for me as he passes through without a backwards glance.

Without waiting for me, he sits behind his desk. And keeping his eyes down at my resume, he says curtly, “Take a seat.”

I close the door behind me and approach with care, pulling the chair out and sitting down without a sound.

“Joyce A. Andrews... What does the A stand for?” he asks with dry curiosity.

“Athena, sir.” His overly serious tone is almost laughable, and I can’t help but hold back a giggle.

And then he finally looks at me, his guarded expression and blank blue-eyed stare impossible to read. I have no idea if he considers me a potential candidate for his daughter’s nanny or not. All I know is that I’m growing more nervous by the second, which means I will probably get very giggly if I can’t get my nerves under control.

“Goddess of wisdom,” he says, looking at me with those strong, penetrating eyes before turning back again to the papers in his hand. “You have a car?”

“Of course, sir!” I say, a giggle popping out uncontrollably. I inwardly groan and look to see his reaction, but he remains unmoved.

“Experience with children, let me see...” he nods to himself upon finding what he wants. “If I call these numbers, will someone answer?”

My eyes widen. No one has ever doubted my credentials before, at least not so openly. I quickly compose myself.

“They will,” I say, assertive. “You might want to wait until after five to call, but you can do so today. If you call on a weekend, they should be able to answer anytime.”

Now he’s the one taken aback. Apparently, I called his bluff, and he isn’t sure how to respond.

“No need,” he says a moment later, his face still moody, “How did you find out about this job?”

“Oh! That was all Jane!” Jane would kill me if I went through the interview without mentioning her.

“Jane?” He seems dumbfounded. “My sister Jane?”

“Yes!” I nod with excitement.

Now I’m bobbing in my chair with unbound energy, and he rolls his eyes at me.

“How did you two meet?” he asks, tapping his pen against my resume.

“In college. We both majored in education; I mean, I’m still majoring, and—”

“Why haven’t you finished school yet?” he interrupts, his eyes boring into mine.

Even though I knew this question was likely to come up with him, it doesn’t get any easier to talk about. I take a deep breath and repeat what I told Sam.

“My mom is sick and I’m helping to care for her. Due to that, I’ve just been taking a few classes for the past year, but I am on track to be graduating next semester.”

“What health issue does your mother have if I may ask?” It’s polite enough, but he asks it void of any emotion, which catches me off guard more than anything else.

It takes me a while to react to the question, but when I do, I reply solemnly, “Stage four breast cancer.”

“Oh,” he leans back in his chair, and for the first time, I catch some emotion in his expression. “Is she in hospice care?”

I manage a small smile, “She’s going through her last row of chemo. Then she will come home. My aunt and my sister help me take care of her.”

Mr. Bardin — I know his name is Logan, but I can’t possibly think of him on first name terms — nods his head. He appears to soften the tiniest bit, which melts my heart and makes my

smile deepen. He looks much more handsome when he's not angry.

“Well, I'm sorry to hear that,” he replies solemnly.

“Thank you, Mr. Bardin,” I reply.

All the while, I have the biggest smile on my face. He takes a deep breath and rolls his eyes again. And I can't help but giggle because I'm so nervous, all the while trying to take deep breaths to calm down.

“Everything okay?” he asks, looking weirded out and worried.

“Apologies,” I say, a hand over my mouth as I finish my fit. “I'm just nervous.”

I expect a lecture, but in the end, all I get is a shrug. “You don't have to be. You got the job.”

“What?” I ask with wide puppy eyes turned to him.

He smiles, a tiny, brief smile, but a smile, nonetheless. It illuminates his face so brightly I could easily be drawn to it like a moth to fire.

“I trust my sister. She wouldn't send me someone incompetent to take care of her niece,” he says. “Can you start today? I already have plenty of tasks for you.”

I watch as he takes some notes and stands, walking around the desk towards me. I stand too, forcing myself not to jump up and down with excitement. He hands me a slip of paper and I read it, my eyes quickly scrolling over his writing — his

phone number, the route to a dentist office downtown and a fancy address inside a gated community called *The Lake Villas*.

“Do you know where Notre Dame Academy is?” he asks, still holding onto the paper.

“One of the best private schools in town, of course,” I say. “Is it where your daughter goes to kindergarten?”

“Of course,” he’s clearly mocking me, but I find it adorable. “She has a dentist’s appointment at eleven. You need to pick her up at school, stay with her at the dentist office, then take her home. Then you can just put her to bed for a nap. Do you understand?”

He says it slowly as if I’m hard of hearing, and my immediate reaction is to giggle again, but I hold back.

“Of course,” I tease.

“I know you said you have a car, but I can get you one if you need it,” He looks at me enquiringly.

“Oh, no, I have my own!” It’s likely that my humble 15-year-old Volvo will get curious stares over in his fancy neighborhood, but it’s very functional otherwise. Plus, I pride myself on being independent.

He nods. “Well, you can go.”

Without thinking, I leap out of the chair and give him a huge, tight hug. His arms stay down by his sides, but it doesn’t curb my enthusiasm.

Afterwards, he looks at me with confusion, trying to understand what just happened.

“Thank you,” I say, my smile not dimming despite his reaction.

“Let’s not make this a habit, shall we?” Mr. Bardin says, shaking his head. “I’ll call the school to tell them you are going to pick up my daughter. You’ll just need to show your driver’s license and sign that you are picking her up. My daughter’s name is Anna.”

“Okay, Mr. Bardin.”

I leave without being told, feeling a slight pang of remorse that I got the job so easily, while all these other candidates didn’t even get an interview with him.

I leave the building, twelve floors just for a real estate agency, and skip to my car. I’m glowing with excitement, knowing that I’m now employed by one of the wealthiest men in New York.

“Girl, thank you for the job!” I send Jane an audio message as soon as I sit down behind the wheel. “Your brother just hired me!”

I enter the address of Anna’s school in my phone for directions, eager to meet her and hoping she has the exact opposite personality of her father.

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