

ELLE KENNEDY

The

**GRAHAM
EFFECT**

a novel



AMSTERDAM · ANTWERPEN

PROLOGUE

Gigi

Is he famous or something?

SIX YEARS AGO

When I was little, one of my dad's friends asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

I proudly replied, "Stanley Cup."

My four-year-old self thought the Cup was a person. In fact, what I gleaned from all those adult conversations going on around me is that my dad personally knew Stanley Cup (met him several times, actually), an honor bestowed to only the most elite group. Which meant Stanley, whoever this great man was, had to be some kind of legend. A phenom. A person one must aspire to be.

Forget turning out like my dad, a measly professional athlete. Or my mother, a mere award-winning songwriter.

I was going to be Stanley Cup and rule the fucking world.

I can't remember who burst my bubble. Probably my twin brother, Wyatt. He's an unrepentant bubble burster.

The damage was done, though. While Wyatt got a normal nickname from our dad when we were kids—the tried and true "champ"—I was dubbed Stanley. Or Stan, when they're feeling lazy. Even Mom, who pretends to be annoyed with all the obnoxious nicknames spawned in the hockey sphere, slips up sometimes. She

asked Stanley to pass her the potatoes last week at dinner. Because she's a traitor.

This morning, another traitor is added to the list.

"Stan!" a voice calls from the other end of the corridor. "I'm popping out to pick up coffee for your dad and the other coaches. Want anything?"

I turn to glare at my father's assistant. "You promised you'd never call me that."

Tommy gives me the courtesy of appearing contrite. Then he throws that courtesy out the window. "Okay. Don't shoot the messenger, but it might be time to accept you're fighting a losing battle. You want my advice?"

"I do not."

"I say you embrace the nickname, my beautiful darling."

"Never," I grumble. "But I will embrace 'my beautiful darling.' Keep calling me that. It makes me feel dainty but powerful."

"You got it, Stan." Laughing at my outraged face, he prompts, "Coffee?"

"No, I'm good. But thanks."

Tommy bounds off, a bundle of unceasing energy. During the three years he's been my dad's personal assistant, I've never seen the man take so much as a five-minute break. His dreams probably all take place on a treadmill.

I continue down the hall toward the ladies' change rooms, where I quickly kick off my sneakers and throw on my skates. It's 7:30 a.m., which gives me plenty of time to get in a morning warm-up. Once camp gets underway, chaos will ensue. Until then, I have the rink all to myself. Just me and a fresh sheet of beautiful, clean ice, unmarred by all the blades that are about to scratch it up.

The Zamboni is wrapping up its final lap when I walk out. I inhale my favorite smells in the world: The cool bite of the air and the sharp odor of rubber-coated floors. The metallic scent of my freshly sharpened skates. It's hard to describe how good it feels breathing it all in.

I hit the ice and do a couple of slow, lazy laps. I'm not even participating in this juniors camp, but my body never lets me veer from my routine. For as long as I can remember I've woken up early for my own private practice. Sometimes I assign myself simple drills. Sometimes I just glide aimlessly. During the hockey season, when I have to attend actual practices, I take care not to overexert myself with these little solo skates. But this week I'm not here to play, only to help my dad. So there's nothing stopping me from doing a full sprint down the wall.

I skate hard and fast, then fly behind the net, make that tight turn, and accelerate hard toward the blue line. By the time I slow down, my heart is pounding so noisily that for a moment it drowns out the voice from the home bench.

"...to be here!"

I turn to see a guy about my age standing there.

The first thing I notice about him is the scowl.

The second thing I notice is that he's still astoundingly goodlooking despite the scowl.

He has one of those attractive faces that can sport a scowl without a single aesthetic consequence. Like, it only makes him hotter. Gives him that rugged, bad-boy edge.

"Hey, did you hear me?" His voice is deeper than I expect. He sounds like he should be singing country ballads on a Tennessee porch.

He hops out the short door, his skates hitting the ice. He's tall, I realize. He towers over me. And I don't think I've ever seen eyes that shade of blue. They're impossibly dark. Steely sapphire.

"Sorry, what?" I ask, trying not to stare. How is it possible for someone to be this attractive?

His black hockey pants and gray jersey suit his tall frame. He's kind of lanky, but even at fifteen or sixteen, he's already built like a hockey player.

"I said you're not supposed to be here," he barks.

Just like that, I snap out of it. Oh, okay. This guy's a dick.

"And you're supposed to be?" I challenge. Camp doesn't start

until nine. I know for a fact because I helped Tommy photocopy the schedules for everyone's welcome packages.

"Yes. It's the first day of hockey camp. I'm here to warm up."

Those magnetic eyes sweep over me. He takes in my tight jeans, purple sweatshirt, and bright pink leg warmers.

Lifting a brow, he adds, "You must have mixed up your dates. Figure skating camp is next week."

I narrow my eyes. Scratch that—this guy's a huge dick.

"Actually, I'm—"

"Seriously, prom queen," he interrupts, voice tight. "There's no reason for you to be here."

"Prom queen? Have you ever seen yourself in the mirror?" I retort. "You're the one who looks like he should be voted prom king."

The irritation in his expression sparks my own. Not to mention that smug gleam in his eyes. It's the latter that cements my decision to mess with him.

He thinks I don't belong here?

And he's calling me *prom queen*?

Yeah...kindly screw yourself in the butt, dickface.

With an innocent look, I tuck my hands in my back pockets. "Sorry, but I'm not going anywhere. I really need to work on my spins and loop jumps, and from what I can see"—I wave a hand around the massive empty rink—"there's plenty of room for both of us to practice. Now if you'll excuse me, this prom queen really needs to get back to it."

He scowls again. "I only called you that because I don't know your name."

"Ever consider just asking my name then?"

"Fine." He grumbles out a noise. "What's your name?"

"None of your business."

He throws his hands up. "Whatever. You want to stay? Stay. Knock yourself out with your loops. Just don't come crawling to me when the coaches show up and kick your ass out."

With that, he skates off, sullyng my pristine ice with the heavy

marks of his blades. He goes clockwise, so out of spite I move counterclockwise. When we pass each other on the lap, he glares at me. I smile back. Then, just because I'm a jerk, I bust out a series of sit spins. In my one-legged crouch, I hold my free leg in front of me, which means it's directly in his path on his second lap. I hear a loud sigh before he cuts in the other direction to avoid me.

Truth is, I did indulge in some figure skating as a kid. I wasn't good enough—or interested enough—to keep at it, but Dad insisted I'd benefit from the lessons. He wasn't wrong. Hockey is all about physical plays, but figure skating requires more finesse. After only a month of learning the basics, I could already see major improvements in my balance, speed, and body positioning. The edge work I honed during those lessons made me a better skater. A better hockey player.

“Okay, seriously, get out of the way.” He slices to a stop, ice shavings ricocheting off his skates. “It's bad enough I'm stuck sharing the ice with you. At least have some fucking respect for personal space, prom queen.”

I rise out of the spin and cross my arms. “Don't call me that. My name is Gigi.”

He snorts. “Of course it is. That's such a figure skater name. Let me guess. Short for something girly and whimsical like...Georgia. No. Gisele.”

“It's not short for anything,” I reply coolly.

“Seriously? It's just Gigi?”

“Are you really judging my name right now? Because what's your name? I'm thinking something real bro-ey. You're totally a Braden or a Carter.”

“Ryder,” he mutters.

“Of course it is,” I mimic, starting to laugh.

His expression is thunderous for a moment before dissolving into aggravation. “Just stay out of my way.”

When his back is to me, I grin and stick my tongue out at him. If this jerk is going to intrude on my precious early morning ice time, the least I can do is get on his very last nerve. So I make

myself as invasive as possible. I pick up speed, arms extended to my sides, before executing another series of spins.

Damn, figure skating is fun. I forgot how fun.

“Here we go, now you’re about to get it,” comes Ryder’s snide voice. A note of satisfaction there too.

I slow down, registering the loud echo of footsteps beyond the double doors at the end of the rink.

“Better skedaddle, Gisele, before you piss off Garrett Graham.”

I skate over to Ryder, playing dumb. “Garrett who?”

“Are you shitting me right now? You don’t know who Garrett Graham is?”

“Is he famous or something?”

Ryder stares at me. “He’s hockey royalty. This is his camp.”

“Oh. Yeah. I only follow figure skaters.”

Flipping my ponytail, I glide past him. I want to get one last move in, mostly to see if I still remember any of the stuff I learned during my lessons.

I pick up speed. Find my balance. I don’t have a toe pick because I’m wearing hockey skates, but this jump doesn’t need to kick off the pick. I enter on a turn, gaining momentum as I take off from the edge of my skate and rotate in the air.

The landing is atrocious. My body isn’t properly aligned. I also overrotate, but somehow manage to save myself from falling on my face. I wince at my total lack of grace.

“Gigi! What the hell are you doing? You trying to break your ankle out there?”

I turn toward the plexiglass, where my father stands about twenty feet away, frowning deeply at me. He’s wearing a baseball cap and T-shirt with the camp logo on it, a whistle around his neck and foam coffee cup in one hand.

“Sorry, Dad,” I call out, sheepish. “I was just messing around.”

I hear a choked noise. Ryder sidles up to me, those blue eyes darkening.

I tip my head to flash him an innocent smile. “What?”

“Dad?” he growls under his breath. “You’re Garrett Graham’s kid?”

I can't help laughing at his indignation. "Not only that, but I'm helping with your shooting drills today."

His eyes narrow. "You play hockey?"

I reach over to pat his arm. "Don't worry, prom king, I'll go easy on you."

Hockey Kings Transcript

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Jake Connelly: Speaking of unmitigated disasters, I guess this is a perfect segue to our next segment. Massive news coming out of the college hockey world: the Briar/Eastwood merger. Talking about your alma mater here, G.

Garrett Graham: My kid goes there too. Keeping it in the family, you know?

Connelly: On a scale of one to ten—one being catastrophe and ten being the apocalypse—how bad is this?

Graham: Well. It's not great.

Connelly: I believe we call that an understatement.

Graham: I mean, yes. But let's unpack this. Setting aside the fact that it's unprecedented—two D1 men's ice hockey programs merging into one? Unheard of. But I suppose there could be some advantages. Chad Jensen is looking at a superteam here. I mean, Colson and Ryder on one roster? Not to mention Demaine, Larsen, and Lindley? With Kurth in the crease? Tell me how this team isn't unstoppable.

Connelly: On paper, absolutely. And I'm the first person to give credit where credit's due. Chad Jensen is the most decorated coach in college hockey. Twelve Frozen Four forays and seven wins during his tenure at Briar. He holds the record for championship wins—

Graham: Does your father-in-law pay you to be his hype man? Or you do it for free to score approval points?

Connelly: Says the man who won three of those seven championships under Jensen.

Graham: Yeah, all right. So we're both biased. All jokes aside, Jensen is a miracle worker, but even he can't erase decades of bitter rivalry and hostility. Briar and Eastwood have battled it out in their conference for years. And suddenly these boys are expected to play nice?

Connelly: He's got a tough job ahead of him, that's for sure. But like you said, if they manage to make it work? Come together as one team? We could be seeing some magic happen.

Graham: Either that, or these guys are going to kill each other.

Connelly: Guess we're about to find out.

CHAPTER 1

Gigi

Slutty bad-boy dick magic

A hockey player isn't just someone who plays hockey.

Someone who plays hockey shows up at the rink an hour before a game, throws their skates on, pounds out three periods, changes back into their street clothes, and scampers on home.

A hockey player lives and breathes hockey. We're always training. We pour our time into it. We show up two hours before practice to hone our game. Mental, physical, and emotional. We strengthen, condition, push our bodies to their limits. We dedicate our lives to the sport.

Playing at a collegiate level requires a staggering commitment, but it's a challenge I've always been eager to meet.

A week before classes start at Briar University, I'm back to my usual early-morning routine. The offseason is great because it lets me spend more time with friends and family, sleep late, indulge in junk food, but I always welcome the start of a new season. I feel lost without my sport.

This morning I'm running drills in one of the two rinks at Briar's performance center. Just a simple shooting exercise where I accelerate on a turn and slap the puck at the net, and while I chide myself every time I miss, there's nothing like the sound of a puck striking the boards in an empty arena.

I keep at it for about an hour, until I notice Coach Adley by the

home bench gesturing at me. I'm sweating through my practice jersey as I skate toward him.

One corner of his mouth quirks up. "You shouldn't be here."

I slide my gloves off. "Says who?"

"Says the NCAA rules regarding offseason practices."

I grin. "Regarding *official* practices led by the coaching staff. This is just me free skating on my own time."

"You know you don't have to push yourself this hard, G."

"Wow," I tease. "Are you saying you want me to perform to less than my abilities?"

"No, I want you to keep some gas in the tank for—" He stops, chuckling. "You know what? Nothing. I keep forgetting I'm talking to a Graham. You're your father's daughter."

My spark of pride is dampened slightly by a teeny sting of resentment. When you have a famous parent, you tend to spend a lot of your time in their shadow.

I knew when I started playing, I would be forever compared to my father. Dad is a living legend, no other way around it. He holds so many records, it's impossible to keep track of them anymore. Dude played in the pros until he was forty years old. And even at forty, he kicked ass that last season. He could've kept playing another year or two easy, but Dad's smart. He retired on top. Just like Gretzky, who he's constantly being likened to.

That little aggrieved pang is one I need to rein in. I know that. If there's anyone you want to be compared to, it's one of the greatest athletes of all time. I think maybe I'm just scarred from the misogynistic caveats that come with all the compliments I've received over the years.

She played really well...for a girl.

Her stat lines are impressive...for a woman.

Nobody tells a male hockey player that he played amazingly well for a man.

The truth of the matter is, men and women's hockey are two vastly different beasts. Women have fewer opportunities to keep playing after college, the professional league has fewer viewers,

drastically lower salaries. I get it—one NHL game probably draws a gazillion more viewers than all women’s hockey games combined. The men deserve every dime they are paid and every opportunity given to them.

It just means I need to capitalize on every opportunity granted to me as a female player.

And *that* means?

The Olympics, baby.

Making Team USA and winning Olympic gold has been my goal since I was six years old. And I’ve been working toward it ever since.

Coach opens the bench door for me. “Is your dad still coming this year to pimp out his camp?”

“Yeah, sometime this week. He needs some recovery time first. We just got back from our annual Tahoe trip last week.”

Every year my family spends the month of August in Lake Tahoe, where we’re joined by close friends and family. It’s a revolving door of visitors all summer.

“This year some of Dad’s former Boston teammates made an appearance, and let’s just say there were a lot of hungover men passed out on our dock every morning,” I add with a grin.

“God help that lake.” Adley is fully aware of the trouble Dad and his teammates are capable of. He used to be an assistant coach for the Bruins when Dad played for them. In fact, Dad is the one who poached Tom Adley to head up the women’s program at Briar.

Even if I wanted to escape my father’s shadow, it’s his name outside on the building. The Graham Center. Thanks to his donation, the girls’ program received a complete revamp about ten years ago. New facilities, new coaching staff, new recruiters to find the best talent out of high school. For years the program had been a pale comparison of the men’s, until Dad injected new life into it. He said he wanted me to have a solid program to land in if I decided to attend Briar when I got older.

If.

Ha.

Like I was going anywhere else.

“What are you doing here today anyway?” I ask Coach on our way down the tunnel.

“Jensen asked me to help out with his training camp.”

“Oh shit, that starts today?”

“Yes, and do me a favor and tell the girls to keep it down. This is a closed practice. If Jensen sees any of you, I’m pleading ignorance.”

“What do you mean, the girls—”

But Coach is already disappearing around the corner toward the coaching offices.

I get my answer when I enter the locker room to find a couple of my teammates congregated there.

“Hey G, you sticking around to watch the shit show?” Our team captain, Whitney Cormac, grins at me from her perch on the bench.

“Hell yes. I wouldn’t miss it. But Adley says we need to remain inconspicuous, otherwise Jensen will freak.”

Camila Martinez, a fellow junior, snorts loudly. “I think Jensen’ll be too busy trying to wrangle those frothing pit bulls to notice a few of us lurking in the stands.”

I take my toiletries out of my locker. “Let me grab a quick shower, and I’ll see you guys out there.”

I leave the girls in the change area and duck into the showers. As I dunk my head under the warm spray, I wonder how on earth the men’s team is going to survive the Briar/Eastwood merger. This is such a huge seismic shift in the program, and it happened so fast that a lot of the players were caught unprepared.

Eastwood College was our rival for decades. Last month, they went under. As in, the whole university shut down. Turns out, enrollment was down to the dregs, and basically the only thing keeping the school afloat was a few of its athletic programs, particularly men’s hockey. It was a sure thing Eastwood would close its doors, and all those athletes would be shit out of luck. And then Briar U came in clutch, swooping in to save the day and bailing them out like a boss. Which means Eastwood is now

part of Briar, a development that brings more than a few changes.

Their campus in Eastwood, New Hampshire, an hour's drive north of Boston, has officially been dubbed Briar's Eastwood Campus. Full-time classes are still offered up there, but to streamline things, all the athletic facilities were shut down, those buildings scheduled to be repurposed.

And, of course, most importantly: Eastwood men's hockey has been absorbed into Briar men's hockey.

Coach Chad Jensen now has the very unenviable task of taking two huge rosters and condensing them into one. A lot of the guys who were starters at both schools are going to lose their slots.

Not to mention they all hate one another's guts.

I'm not missing this for the world.

I finish my shower and then change into faded jeans and a tank top. I brush my wet hair into a ponytail and slather some moisturizer on my face because the air in the arena always dries out my skin.

My teammates wait for me in the stands. They wisely chose to avoid the benches, instead sitting to the left of the penalty boxes and several rows up. Close enough that we'll be able to overhear any smack talk, but discreet enough that we can hopefully avoid Coach Jensen's notice.

Whitney scoots over so I can sit beside her.

The muffled sounds of overgrown man-children in the tunnel trigger my excitement.

In front of me, Camila rubs her hands together and glances over with pure glee. "Here we go."

They emerge in clumps of twos and threes. A couple sophomores here, a few seniors there. They're wearing either black or gray practice jerseys. I notice some guys tugging on their sleeves uneasily, grimacing, as if it makes them physically ill to wear Briar's colors.

"I sort of feel bad for the Eastwood guys," I remark.

"I don't feel bad at all," Camila replies, smiling broadly. "They're going to provide us with entertainment for at least a year."

My gaze drifts to the ice. Not everyone has their helmets on yet,

and a familiar face catches my eye. My heart stutters at the sight of him.

“Case is looking good,” Whitney says, a knowing lilt to her voice. It’s obnoxious.

“Yeah,” I answer noncommittally.

She’s not wrong, though. That’s what makes it obnoxious. My ex-boyfriend is stupidly good-looking. Tall and fair, with pale blue eyes that warm into the shade of a summer sky when he’s working the charm.

He’s talking with his friend Jordan Trager. He hasn’t noticed me and I’m glad for that. Last time we saw each other was back in June, although we texted a bit over the summer. He wanted to come see me. I said no. I don’t trust myself around Case. The mere fact that my heart did a foolish flip just now tells me I made the right call by denying him this summer.

“Oh my God, I’m in love.”

Camila pulls my attention away from Case and toward another new arrival.

Okay, wow. He’s undeniably hot. Dirty-blond hair, light gray eyes, and a face that could stop traffic. He must be an Eastwood guy because I’ve never seen him before.

Camila is practically drooling. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this turned on by a guy’s profile.”

A few of the guys are warming up now, sticks in hand, skating close to the boards. I scan the players, but don’t recognize any of them.

Camila leans forward and peers below. “Which one is Luke Ryder?” she asks curiously. “I heard Jensen didn’t even want him.”

“Uh-huh, yes, he didn’t want the number-one ranked forward in the country,” Whitney says dryly. “I highly doubt that.”

“Hey, boy comes with a reputation,” Cami counters. “I wouldn’t fault Jensen for wanting to keep his program pristine.”

She has a point. We all saw what happened in the World Juniors a couple years ago, when Luke Ryder and a teammate threw down in the locker room after the USA boys took home the gold. Ryder

broke the guy's jaw and landed him in the hospital. The whole incident was kept very hush-hush, or at least the motivations behind it were. It's still never been confirmed who started the fight, but considering the other player suffered the brunt of the injuries, it seems like Ryder had a score to settle.

As far as I've heard, he's kept his nose clean since, but beating the shit out of another player is something that follows you around. It's a stain on your record, no matter what your scoring stats are.

"That's him," I say, gesturing to the ice.

Luke Ryder skates over to the blond that Cami is still making starry eyes at and another guy with close-cropped dark hair. I catch a glimpse of Ryder's chiseled jawline before he slips his helmet on and turns away.

He's still as attractive as I remember. Only he's not a lanky fifteen-year-old anymore. He's a grown man, filled out and muscular. Sheer power drips off him.

I haven't seen him in person since that youth camp my dad ran five or six years ago. To this day, I still bristle when I think about the way he disparaged me. Told me I didn't belong on the ice. Assumed I was a figure skater, to boot. *And* he called me prom queen. Dick. It had definitely been fun wiping that cocky grin off his face when we ran a two-on-one drill later, and I outskated him and another boy to score on net. It's the petty little things that make me happy.

"He's fucking sexy," Whitney says.

"It's the slutty bad-boy dick magic," Cami pipes up. "Makes them hotter."

We all snicker.

"Is he a slutty bad boy?" Whitney asks.

Cami laughs and says, "Well, the bad-boy thing is pretty self-evident. Just look at him. But yeah, he's totally got a reputation for hooking up. But not, like, in a conventional way."

I poke her in the back, grinning. "What does that mean? How does one hook up unconventionally?"

"Meaning he doesn't go out of his way to get laid. Doesn't chase

anyone, doesn't do the whole cocky player routine. My cousin saw him at a party last year, and she said this guy just stood there brooding in the corner the entire time. Didn't say a word to anyone all night, yet somehow there's a swarm of thirsty chicks throwing themselves at him. Boy basically has his pick of hookups."

A whistle pierces the air. On instinct, we all snap to attention and it's not even our practice.

Coach Jensen skates onto the ice, trailed by two assistant coaches and Tom Adley. He blows his whistle again. Two sharp blasts.

"Line up! I want two lines at center ice." His voice carries in the vast arena.

Helmets and face masks are slapped on, gloves readjusted as the team lines up. There are fewer guys here than I expected.

"Didn't Eastwood have a roster of almost thirty?" I ask Whitney.

She nods. "I heard he's splitting training camp into two practice groups. This is probably just the first one."

I give a wry smile when I notice how the team lines themselves up. Briar guys standing shoulder to shoulder. Eastwood guys doing the same. Ryder is between his two buddies, jaw set in a rigid line.

"All right," Jensen barks, clapping. "Let's not waste any time. We've got a lot to cover this week in order to finalize the roster. We're going to start with a basic dump-and-chase drill. Get some of that energy out, all right?"

The other coaches herd everyone into position behind one net. Because of the way they lined up previously, most of the player pairs feature one guy from Briar, one from Eastwood.

This should be fun.

"First player to get possession, I want you to take a shot on goal. Second player, I want to see you forechecking to get that puck back."

He blows the whistle again to get things going. It's one of the simplest drills there is, yet a thrill still dances through me. I love this game. Everything about hockey is pure exhilaration.

Jensen dumps the puck in the corner behind the opposite net,

and the first pair races along the boards toward it. Their jerseys don't have names or numbers, so I don't know who I'm looking at.

In the second pair, though, I clock Case instantly. Not for his looks, but his trademark style, that quick release. Case Colson has the most accurate shot placement in all of college hockey. He could probably give most NHL goalies a run for their money too. There's a reason he was drafted by Tampa.

"This is way more boring than I thought," Whitney grumbles. "Where are the fireworks?"

"For real," Camila chimes in. "Let's just bail—"

No sooner do those words leave her mouth than said fireworks go off.

It starts with a hard forecheck from Jordan Trager. Just like with Case, I've watched enough Briar games to identify Trager's aggressive style. He lives and breathes the goon life. He's also a raging asshole, so when the other player starts giving the aggression back good, I know Trager's running his mouth as usual.

Before I can blink, the gloves are off.

In a real college hockey game, fighting isn't allowed. Both these dumbasses would be thrown out of the game and benched for the next one. During practice, it would normally be frowned upon and likely disciplined.

Today's practice?

Jensen lets it play out.

"Damn." Whitney hisses through her teeth when the Eastwood player takes a powerful swing at Trager, connecting with his left cheek.

Trager's cry of outrage reverberates through the rink. In the next instance the two men are locked in battle, clutching each other's jerseys while their fists fly. Loud, feral shouts of encouragement ring out from their teammates, who surge closer to the fight.

When the two players tumble to the ice, legs and skates tangled up, Cami makes a sound of alarm.

"How is Jensen not stopping this?" she exclaims.

Chad Jensen stands ten feet away, looking bored. All around him

is chaos. Briar guys egging Trager on. Eastwood players cheering for their guy. I see Case try to skate forward to intervene, only to halt when Briar's captain David Demaine slaps a hand on his arm.

"Holy shit, Double-D is letting it happen too," Camila marvels.

I agree that one's kind of shocking. Demaine is as placid as they come. It's probably the Canadian in him.

It isn't until drops of red stain the sheet of white that someone finally takes charge.

My eyebrows fly up when I realize it's Ryder. His tall frame takes off in a brisk skate. Another blink of the eye, and he's hauling his Eastwood teammate away from Trager.

When Trager stands up and tries to lunge, Ryder steps between the two red-faced players. I don't know what he says to Trager, but whatever it is, it stops the guy cold.

"God, that's hot," Whitney breathes.

"Breaking up a fight?" I ask, amused.

"No, he managed to shut Trager up. Goddamn miracle right there."

"Sexiest thing anyone could ever do," agrees Cami, and we all laugh.

Trager is such a loud-mouthed, abrasive jerk. I tolerated him when I dated Case, but there were days when even tolerance was difficult. I suppose that's the one bright spot that came from our breakup. No more Trager.

Jensen blows his whistle before his commanding voice finally joins the fray. "Practice is over. Get the fuck off my ice."

"Let's get out of here too," Whitney says with a note of urgency.

I wholly agree. Jensen must know we're here, but although he didn't throw us out before, we just witnessed his practice devolve into a bloody fistfight. No way does he want an audience for the aftermath.

Without another word, the three of us scurry down the aisle. At the bottom of the bleachers, we have a decision to make. Either go toward the tunnel to the locker rooms, where the players are fleeing with their tails between their legs. Or try to exit using

the double doors across the arena, where Jensen and the coaches congregate.

Rather than risk the wrath of Jensen, we make the unspoken choice to avoid the exit. We reach the tunnel entrance at the same time as a couple of Eastwood players.

Luke Ryder startles for a second when he notices me. Then his eyes narrow—those dark, dark blue eyes I’ve never forgotten—and one corner of his mouth tips up.

“Gisele,” he mocks.

“Prom king,” I mock back.

With a soft chuckle, he spares me one last look before striding off.

CHAPTER 2

Ryder

No pets. Ever.

I'm going to go out on a limb and say we didn't make the best first impression.

I could be wrong. Maybe Chad Jensen enjoys blood and gore during his practices. Maybe he's the kind of coach who craves a *Lord of the Flies* ice battle to separate the men from the boys.

But the murder in his eyes tells me no, he's not that kind of coach.

His expression grows turbulent, more impatient, while we all scramble for a seat. Jensen only gave us five minutes to change out of our practice gear, so everyone in group one looks harried and disheveled, tucking in shirts and smoothing out hair as we file into the media room.

There are twice the number of guys in this room than there were on the ice. The second practice group was already assembled here, viewing game film with one of the assistant coaches. Everyone in group two watches the newcomers with wary expressions.

Three rows of seats home in on the huge screen that serves as the room's focal point. I won't lie, these digs are a lot nicer than the ones at Eastwood. The padded chairs even swivel.

Coach Jensen stands in the center of the room, while three stone-faced assistants lean against the wall by the door.

"Did you get that out of your system?" he inquires coldly.

Nobody utters a word.

From the corner of my eye, I see Rand Hawley rubbing the corner of his jaw. He took a nasty hit from Colson's lackey. Still, he should've known better than to let Trager push his buttons like that.

Having played against Briar these last couple of years, I'm familiar with everyone on their roster. I know most of their stats, and I know who to watch out for. Trager's always been one to keep an eye on. He has the reputation as a blustering goon and is exceptional at drawing out penalties.

He's not my biggest competitor, though. That would be... I sneak a peek at the blond junior in the front row.

Case Colson.

Really, he's the only dude in this room I need to care about. A beauty of a player. He's Briar's MVP, which means he'll undoubtedly be on the first line.

My line.

Well, unless Jensen fucks me over and puts me on the second line.

I don't know what's worse. Not playing first line...or playing on the same one as Colson. Suddenly I'm supposed to trust a Briar player to have my back? Yeah, right.

"You sure we're good here?" Coach says, still glancing around. "Nobody else wants to pull out their dick and compare sizes? Wave them around to see who the biggest man here is?"

More silence.

Jensen crosses his arms. He's a tall imposing figure with dark eyes and salt-and-pepper hair, still broad-shouldered and fit considering he must be in his sixties. He looks at least ten years younger.

Hands down, this man is the best coach in college hockey. That's probably why it stings so much, the memory that he turned me down when I wanted to come to Briar.

I had been fending off recruiters since sophomore year of high school. Even ones from Briar, my first-choice school. But come graduation, when it was time to make a choice, there wasn't a Briar scholarship on the table. I still remember the morning I