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**GRAHAM
EFFECT**

ELLE KENNEDY



PIATKUS

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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 good-looking 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 ONE

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.