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ELLE KENNEDY

The

GRAHAM
EFFECT

a novel



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EFFECT**

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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.”