



# Faking the Rules (Westford Wild)

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**Category:** Sport

**Description:** I never meant to become Declan Wolfes girlfriend.

The arrogant hockey star needs someone to convince his coach hes settling down, and I need an academic advantage for the prestigious Whitmore Prize. Its supposed to be simple: three weeks of pretend dates, a few public appearances, then we go our separate ways.

Except nothing about Declan is simple. Not the way his ocean-blue eyes follow me across the room. Not the way his confident smirk makes my pulse race even as I want to slap it off his face. And definitely not the way his touch—meant to convince others our relationship is real—sends electric currents racing across my skin.

This is just an arrangement, I remind myself each night, even as the boundaries between fake and real blur with every heated glance, every lingering kiss, every night spent tangled in his sheets learning exactly what that athletic body can do.

I was supposed to be immune to his charm. He was supposed to be nothing more than a privileged jock. But as championship game approaches and our charade faces exposure, Im terrified of the truth I can no longer deny: my heart didnt get the memo that were just pretending.

Now I have to decide if Im brave enough to risk everything on a love that started as a lie—and for a man who might be playing the most convincing game of all.

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# Page 1

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There are moments that split your life into before and after—mine happened at eleven minutes past midnight on New Year's Eve, when I found my fiancé in bed with my cousin.

It wasn't just the betrayal that shattered me. It was the realization that the three years I'd spent with James had been built on quicksand. The future I'd meticulously planned—marriage after graduation, teaching positions at neighboring schools, the renovated Victorian in my hometown—disintegrated in an instant.

"It doesn't have to change anything, Ellie," he'd pleaded, drunk and desperate, clutching a sheet around his waist while my cousin slipped out the back door. My cousin's name is Alexa and we weren't even that close – but still. He couldn't have picked someone I didn't know? "It was just sex. A mistake."

Maybe for normal people, finding your fiancé balls-deep in your cousin could be filed under "mistakes to overcome," somewhere between forgetting an anniversary and leaving the cap off the toothpaste. But I've never been good at forgiveness. My father used to say I got that from my mother—the woman who walked out when I was seven and never looked back.

So instead of forgiveness, I chose escape. Transferred universities mid-junior year, leaving behind the ruins of my carefully constructed life for Westford University—a school known for three things: its elite literature program, its frigid winters, and its championship hockey team.

And that's how I ended up here, hiding in the corner of the university library's third floor on a Friday afternoon in February, silently cursing Professor Harmon and his

sadistic group assignment system.

"Did you hear me, Gardner? I said I need your notes from Tuesday."

I look up from my laptop to find Declan Wolfe looming over my study carrel, one hand braced against the wall beside my head, the other extended palm-up in expectation. He's close enough that I can smell his cologne—something expensive and woody—and the faint scent of mint on his breath.

Declan Wolfe. Westford hockey god. Campus celebrity. The walking embodiment of every privilege I despise.

"And I need a winning lottery ticket and eight hours of uninterrupted sleep, but we don't always get what we want, do we?" I snap, turning back to my screen.

He doesn't move. If anything, he leans closer, his broad shoulders blocking out the fluorescent lights overhead, casting me in his shadow. That's what Declan Wolfe does—he takes up space. Commands attention. Drowns out everything around him until he's all you can see.

"I missed class," he says, voice low but firm. "Coach called an emergency practice. I need to catch up."

"Sounds like a you problem."

His jaw tightens, a muscle jumping beneath tanned skin. "Look, I get that you don't like me—"

"Don't flatter yourself, Wolfe." I close my laptop, fixing him with a level stare. "I don't think about you enough to form an opinion."

It's a lie. I've spent far too much of the past six weeks cataloging all the reasons Declan Wolfe represents everything wrong with higher education: the way professors fawn over him despite his sporadic attendance, the ease with which he navigates social spaces I find paralyzing, how he moves through the world with the entitled confidence of someone who's never had to fight for anything in his life.

And yes, the physical perfection that makes ignoring him an Olympic-level sport—all six-foot-three of hard muscle, dark hair that perpetually looks like someone's been running their fingers through it, and blue eyes so intense they should come with a warning label.

"Bullshit." He straightens, crossing his arms over his chest. The movement pulls his henley tight across shoulders built from years of competitive sports. "You've had me in your crosshairs since the first day of class."

That first day of our shared literature class. When Professor Harmon introduced me as a transfer student, and Declan had looked me over with an assessing gaze that made me feel simultaneously invisible and exposed, before turning to his friend and whispering something that made them both laugh.

I stand, gathering my things with deliberate slowness. At five-foot-nine, I'm tall for a woman, but Declan still towers over me, forcing me to tilt my head back to meet his gaze. "Contrary to what you might believe, Wolfe, not everything revolves around you. I'm here to graduate with honors and move on with my life, not waste energy on some hockey jock's ego."

He steps back, allowing me space to move—a courtesy that feels somehow more condescending than if he'd stood his ground. "You know, I've met a lot of uptight people in my time, but you..." His eyes track over me, a slow assessment that makes my skin heat despite myself. "You take it to a whole new level."

"And I've met a lot of entitled athletes, but you..." I sling my bag over my shoulder, mimicking his tone, "you're exactly what I expected."

His smirk is slow, calculated to infuriate. "And what's that, Gardner?"

"Someone who's never had to work for anything a day in his life."

The smirk vanishes, replaced by something darker, more dangerous. For a moment, I glimpse something behind the golden-boy facade—a flicker of genuine anger, maybe even hurt—before the mask slides back into place.

"You don't know the first thing about me or what I've worked for," he says, voice dropped to a low rumble that vibrates in my chest. "But since we're stuck together on this project for the next month, maybe you should stop making assumptions."

I hate that he's right. Professor Harmon's major assignment—a presentation on gender dynamics in post-war literature worth 40% of our final grade—has paired us together despite my very vocal protests.

"Fine," I say tightly. "You want my notes? Here." I pull a folder from my bag and thrust it at his chest. "I expect them back on Monday, unmarked and unspilled on. In other words, don't get them near the keg. Or any other kind of fluids."

"Yes, ma'am." He gives me a mock salute. "See you Monday, Gardner."

I watch him walk away, all loose-limbed athletic grace, drawing glances from every girl he passes. Only when he's disappeared down the stairwell do I release the breath I didn't realize I was holding.

This project is going to be the death of me.

The weekend passes in a blur of research and rewrites for a paper due in my Feminist Literary Theory seminar. By Sunday evening, I'm bleary-eyed and caffeine-jittery, hunched over my laptop at the 24-hour campus coffee shop when a shadow falls across my table.

"Thought I might find you here."

I glance up to find Declan Wolfe standing there, looking freshly showered and irritatingly alert despite the late hour. He's dressed in navy blue Westford sweats, a backpack slung over one broad shoulder, holding two coffee cups.

"Are you stalking me now?" I ask, saving my document with perhaps more force than the keyboard deserves.

"Reconnaissance," he corrects, placing one of the cups in front of me. "Black with two sugars, right?"

The fact that he's noticed how I take my coffee is both unsettling and—if I'm being honest with myself—slightly gratifying. No one pays that kind of attention to me anymore. Not since James.

"Thanks," I mutter, wrapping my hands around the cup. "But that still doesn't explain why you're here."

He slides into the chair across from me without waiting for an invitation, dropping his backpack to the floor. "Team meeting ended early. Figured I'd get some work done." He pulls my folder from his bag, placing it carefully on the table between us. "And return these."

I flip through the pages, surprised to find them not only unmarked, but accompanied by Declan's own notes—surprisingly comprehensive ones, typed neatly and annotated

with questions that demonstrate actual engagement with the material.

"You... read everything?" I can't keep the surprise from my voice.

"Don't sound so shocked, Gardner. I do occasionally crack a book." There's an edge to his voice that suggests I've hit a nerve.

"I just meant—"

"I know what you meant." He leans back, stretching his long legs out under the table, his knee brushing mine before I can pull away. "You've decided I'm a dumb jock who gets by on charm and athletic privilege."

Put so bluntly, my assumptions sound petty, unfair. But I've seen how the world works for guys like Declan Wolfe—doors opening automatically, expectations lowered, accomplishments amplified.

"Am I wrong?" I challenge.

Our conversation is interrupted by a group of giggling girls who slow as they pass our table, eyes fixed on Declan with unabashed admiration.

"Declan!" One of them, a petite blonde in a crop top despite the February cold, stops beside our table. "You're coming to Sigma Phi's party Friday, right? Everyone's saying you'll be there."

The transformation is immediate. Declan's serious expression melts into easy charm, his smile wide and practiced as he turns to the girls. "Hey, Chloe. Wouldn't miss it."

"Great!" She beams, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "I saved you a dance. Maybe several." Her eyes flick to me dismissively before returning to him. "Definitely bring

the rest of the team."

The clear implication that I'm not worth acknowledging sets my teeth on edge.

"Thanks," Declan says, his tone perfectly calibrated between friendly and flirtatious. "See you then."

The girls move on, still giggling, casting glances back at our table. One of them mimes something that makes the others dissolve into laughter again.

"Friends of yours?" I ask dryly when they're out of earshot.

Declan's mask of charm slides away, replaced by something more genuine—wry amusement mixed with what might be embarrassment. "Not exactly."

"Let me guess. Admirers? Groupies? Members of the Declan Wolfe Fan Club?"

He winces. "That's not fair."

"Isn't it? From where I'm sitting, it looks like you have half the female population at your beck and call."

His eyes—blue as deep water, framed by ridiculously thick lashes—narrow slightly. "I'm here on an athletic scholarship," he says, ignoring my comment about his admirers. "But I maintain a 3.8 GPA. I've never missed a paper deadline. And contrary to popular belief, I can read something more complex than a playbook."

I want to disbelieve him, to cling to my carefully constructed narrative of Declan-the-privileged-asshole. But the evidence in front of me—the thoughtful notes, the serious expression, the fact that he's here working on a Sunday night—makes that difficult.



Our conversation is interrupted by heavy footsteps approaching our table. A man in his fifties—barrel-chested, with silver at his temples and an air of authority that commands attention—stops beside us, his eyes fixed on Declan.

"Wolfe," he says, his voice carrying that particular blend of disappointment and anger that only coaches seem to master. "Didn't expect to find you here."

Declan straightens immediately, tension radiating from his frame. "Coach Brennan. Just getting some work done."

Coach Brennan's eyes shift to me, dismissive at first, then sharpening with interest. "And this is...?"

"Ellie Gardner," Declan says before I can answer. "My girlfriend."

The words hit me like a physical blow. I choke on my coffee, sputtering inelegantly. Declan's hand reaches around the table and lands on my back, a steadying presence that only adds to my confusion.

"Girlfriend?" Coach's eyebrows rise toward his hairline. "Since when?"

Declan's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "Been seeing each other a few weeks now. Keeping it quiet. You know how campus gossip spreads."

My mind reels, trying to process this bizarre turn of events. Girlfriend? What in the actual fuck?

"Huh." Coach looks unconvinced, or at least very surprised. "Well, Miss Gardner, perhaps you'll be a good influence. Our star player here needs to focus—less partying, more practice." He turns back to Declan, voice hardening. "Tomorrow. Six A.M. My office. We need to discuss your commitment to this team."

"Yes, sir," Declan replies, his casual demeanor replaced by something more rigid, almost military in its deference.

Coach nods once, then continues toward the counter, leaving us in stunned silence.

The moment he's out of earshot, I lean across the table, hissing, "What the hell was that?"

Declan runs a hand through his hair, mussing it in a way that shouldn't be as attractive as it is. "Sorry. Panic response."

"Panic response? You told your coach I'm your girlfriend!"

"Keep your voice down," he mutters, glancing toward the counter where Coach Brennan is ordering. "Look, I'm in a tight spot, okay? Coach has been on my ass about my 'extracurricular activities' affecting my game. He thinks I'm partying too much, sleeping around."

"So your solution is to invent a fake relationship?" I can't keep the incredulity from my voice.

"It was impulsive," he admits. "But not entirely stupid. Coach is old-school—thinks settled players are focused players. A serious girlfriend would go a long way toward getting him off my back."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. "Well, that's not my problem. Just tell him we broke up."

"I can't." Declan leans forward, lowering his voice. "The championship game is in three weeks. NHL scouts will be there. If I'm benched because Coach thinks I'm not taking this seriously, everything I've worked for goes up in smoke."

"Again, not my problem."

His expression shifts, vulnerability breaking through the confident facade for just a moment. "I need this, Ellie. The NHL is everything I've worked for since I was seven years old."

It's the use of my first name—so rare from him—that catches me off guard. That, and the raw honesty in his voice.

"What exactly are you asking me?"

"Pretend to be my girlfriend. Just for a few weeks, until after the championship." His eyes hold mine, intense and pleading. "All you'd have to do is show up to a few games, maybe be seen with me around campus occasionally. Nothing major."

I laugh, the sound sharp and disbelieving. "You're out of your mind. Why would I do that?"

"Because I can help you too." His expression turns shrewd. "The Whitmore Prize. I know how badly you want it."

My breath catches. How does he know about that? I've barely mentioned it to anyone except my dad and my friend Mia. The Whitmore Prize is a highly competitive academic honor given to the top undergraduate literary analysis work. Winning provides both a substantial cash prize and, more importantly, recognition that opens doors to elite graduate programs. It's particularly valued by Columbia University, which is my dream school. This year, they've added a special category for collaborative works, which means the project Declan and I are working on could be considered.

"What about it?"

"Professor Harmon's on the selection committee," Declan says. "He also happens to be good friends with Coach Brennan. They play golf every Sunday."

"So?"

"So Harmon values Brennan's opinion. And Brennan likes me—when I'm not disappointing him. If Coach puts in a good word about our project, about your work specifically..." He lets the implication hang in the air between us.

"That's... that's practically academic blackmail," I splutter.

"It's networking," he corrects. "Something you'd have to learn eventually if you want that PhD at Columbia."

I narrow my eyes, suspicious of how much he knows about my plans. "You're suggesting I prostitute my academic integrity for a recommendation."

"I'm suggesting a mutually beneficial arrangement." He sits back, watching me process. "You pretend to be my girlfriend, I make sure our project blows the competition out of the water, and we both get what we want. Simple."

Nothing about this is simple. I should say no immediately. Walk away. Report him to Professor Harmon for even suggesting such an unethical arrangement.

But the Whitmore Prize beckons, a golden ticket to the future I've worked so hard for. And something else tugs at me—the desperation behind Declan's carefully controlled expression, the hint that there's more riding on this than just hockey.

"Three weeks," I hear myself say, immediately wondering if I've lost my mind. "No physical stuff. No posting about it on social media. And our 'breakup' happens the day after the championship, no drama."

Relief washes over his face. "Deal."

"And you have to really work on our project," I add. "I'm not going to be the only one contributing."

"Fine," he agrees readily. "But you have to make this convincing. The hockey team, my coach—they need to believe we're actually together."

"I think I can manage to pretend I like you for a few weeks," I say dryly.

His smile is slow, almost predatory. "Oh, Gardner. You'll have to do a lot better than 'like.'" He stands, gathering his things. "We start tomorrow. Lunch. The central quad. Wear something nice."

"I'm not changing my wardrobe for this charade," I protest.

He's already walking away, but turns to walk backward for a few steps, that infuriating smirk firmly in place. "Wouldn't dream of asking you to. You look good in anything, Gardner. Especially when you're angry."

As he disappears through the coffee shop doors, a sinking feeling settles in my stomach. What have I just agreed to? Three weeks pretending to be Declan Wolfe's girlfriend. Three weeks of living a lie. Three weeks of fighting the unwelcome attraction that flares whenever he's near.

This was a terrible idea.

## Page 2

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I spend the night vacillating between panic and rationalization, thankful my room is a single – the perks of being a transfer student who transferred too late to have a roommate -- and I don't have to worry about anyone noticing how insane I'm feeling.

By morning, I've convinced myself that this arrangement is strictly professional—a strategic alliance for mutual benefit, nothing more. I can handle three weeks of pretense if it gets me closer to the Whitmore Prize and the future I've planned.

This mantra carries me through my morning classes and all the way to the central quad, where Declan and I agreed to meet for our first public "date." I deliberately arrive ten minutes late, a petty act of defiance against the butterflies that have taken up residence in my stomach.

I'm wearing a pair of jeans and an aqua top, a color my friend Mia always says suits my dark hair and dark eyes. I've even put on some makeup, telling myself it's for the ruse, not for actually wanting to impress Declan.

The quad is crowded with students enjoying the rare February sunshine, sprawled across benches and patches of grass. I scan the area, half-hoping Declan won't show so I can abandon this ridiculous scheme with a clear conscience.

No such luck. He's there, lounging on one of the central benches, impossible to miss. He's ditched his usual athletic wear for dark jeans and a navy quarter-zip that makes his eyes look even bluer in the sunlight. Several girls nearby are casting appreciative glances his way, but his attention is fixed on his phone.

I take a deep breath and approach, clutching the strap of my messenger bag like a

lifeline. He looks up before I reach him, as if he's sensed my presence, and the smile that spreads across his face seems so genuine that for a moment I forget this is all pretend.

"There she is," he says, standing to greet me. Without warning, he pulls me into a hug, his mouth close to my ear as he murmurs, "Coach is watching from the administration building. Second floor, corner window."

I stiffen in his embrace, then force myself to relax, awkwardly patting his back. He smells good—that woodsy cologne mixed with something clean and uniquely him. It's disturbingly nice.

"You could have warned me," I whisper back.

"Would you have come if I had?" He pulls back, but keeps one arm draped casually around my shoulders as he leads me toward one of the campus food trucks that line the quad during the day. "Relax, Gardner. You look like you're being marched to execution."

"I'm reconsidering this whole arrangement," I mutter, hyper-aware of the stares following us across the quad. Declan Wolfe and Ellie Gardner, together in public. The campus rumor mill will be working overtime by dinner.

"Too late now." He squeezes my shoulder, the gesture oddly comforting despite its performative nature. "What do you want to eat? My treat."

We order sandwiches and find a spot on the grass, deliberately visible without being too obvious about it. Declan sits close, our knees occasionally brushing as we eat. The physical proximity is unsettling, especially when coupled with the surprising ease of our conversation.

"So how does this work?" I ask between bites. "Do we have a backstory? How did the hockey star and the academic hermit end up together?"

He grins, shifting to lean back on one elbow, the picture of casual confidence. "We bonded over Harmon's class. You found my literary insights irresistible. I was captivated by your passionate defense of feminist interpretation."

"That's... actually not terrible," I concede. "Simple, close to the truth."

"The best lies always are." He reaches out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, the gesture so unexpected I nearly flinch. "Sorry," he murmurs. "Gotta sell it."

I swallow hard, fighting the heat that rises to my cheeks at his touch. "Fine. But boundaries, remember?"

"Noted." His eyes linger on mine a moment too long before he glances away. "So, tell me something real, Gardner. Something I would know if we were actually dating."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Your favorite book. Why you chose literature as a major. Something beyond the this whole serious prickly thing you have going on."

The request catches me off guard. I hadn't considered this aspect of our charade—the intimate knowledge actual couples share. "My favorite book changes," I say after a moment. "Currently it's *Possession* by A.S. Byatt. Before that, it was *The Secret History*."

"Dark academia," he notes. "Fits."

"What's that supposed to mean?"



"Just that you have that vibe—intense, cerebral, slightly intimidating." His smile takes any sting from the words. "It suits you."

I'm not used to compliments, especially not from someone like Declan. I deflect with a question of my own. "What about you? What would I know about the real Declan Wolfe if we were actually dating?"

He considers this, absently tearing pieces from his napkin. "You'd know that I hate cilantro. That I'm afraid of heights but still go skydiving once a year to prove I can overcome it. That I read poetry when I can't sleep, which is more often than not."

"Poetry?" I can't hide my surprise.

"Auden, mostly." He shrugs, almost embarrassed. "My grandfather taught English at Princeton. He used to read it to me when I was a kid. I didn't understand it – maybe still don't – but it's comforting."

This glimpse behind the facade—the thoughtful, complex person beneath the hockey star persona—is more disconcerting than any physical proximity. It's easier to maintain emotional distance when I can dismiss him as a one-dimensional stereotype.

"You'd also know," he continues, voice dropping lower, "that the NHL isn't just a dream for me. It's a way out."

"Out of what?"

He meets my eyes, something vulnerable flickering in their depths. "The life that's been mapped out for me since birth. Wolfe men go to Ivy League schools, then take their place at Wolfe Investments. Hockey is my one chance at writing my own story."

The raw honesty in his voice silences any skeptical response I might have made. For

the first time, I see Declan not as the privileged golden boy I've resented, but as someone fighting their own battles against expectations and predestined paths.

"I understand that," I say quietly. "Writing your own story."

Something passes between us then—a moment of genuine connection that has nothing to do with our arrangement. It's broken by a shout from across the quad.

"Wolfe! There you are, you sneaky bastard!"

Three guys approach, all with the distinctive build of hockey players. The one in front—tall, blond, with an easy smile—reaches us first, punching Declan's shoulder.

"So the rumors are true," he says, gaze shifting curiously to me. "Declan Wolfe, finally tamed."

Declan stands, pulling me up with him, his hand finding mine with casual possession. "Brady, shut up." But there's no heat in his words. "Guys, this is Ellie. Ellie, these idiots are my teammates. Brady, Tyler, and Mason."

Brady—the blond one—extends his hand. "Pleasure to finally meet the girl who's got our captain so distracted. He won't shut up about you."

The easy lie makes me falter for just a moment before I find my footing in this new role. "All good things, I hope?"

"Mostly how smart you are," Tyler says with a grin. "And how you 'challenge him intellectually,' whatever that means."

Declan's arm slides around my waist, pulling me against his side. "Ignore them. They're just jealous because their combined IQ barely reaches triple digits."

The friendly banter continues, and I find myself relaxing incrementally, allowing Declan's warmth to steady me as I navigate this unfamiliar social territory. His teammates are actually funny, their teasing gentle rather than mean-spirited. They treat me with curious respect, as if my association with Declan has automatically granted me acceptance into their closed circle.

When they eventually leave, extracting promises from Declan about practice schedules and team dinners, he keeps his arm around me, fingers tracing small, distracting circles against my hip.

"You did good," he says, voice low enough that only I can hear. "They bought it completely."

"I didn't do anything," I point out.

"Exactly. You didn't freeze up or look uncomfortable. You were natural." His smile is genuine, warming his eyes. "We might actually pull this off, Gardner."

The approval in his voice shouldn't matter to me. This is a transaction, nothing more. But I can't deny the small thrill of satisfaction that runs through me at his words.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I warn, reluctantly stepping out of his embrace. "We've got three weeks to go, and this was the easy part. What's next in this master plan of yours?"

"You'll go to the party with me at Sigma tonight."

I open my mouth to protest, but he's already on to the next thing.

"Hockey game tomorrow night," he says. "Girlfriends always attend home games."

The thought of sitting in the cold arena, surrounded by rowdy fans, is less than appealing. But I did agree to this arrangement. "Fine. But I'm bringing a book."

"Wouldn't expect anything less." His grin is infectious. "I'll leave tickets at will-call. Wear my jersey."

"I don't have your jersey," I point out.

He reaches into his backpack and pulls out a navy and white hockey jersey with "WOLFE" emblazoned across the back. "Now you do."

I take it reluctantly. "This seems excessive."

"Trust me, it's expected. Hockey girlfriends wear their boyfriend's number." He checks his watch. "I've got to get to practice. Walk you to your next class?"

"Not necessary," I say quickly. "I've got research to do in the library."

"Always working." He shakes his head, but there's something like admiration in his expression. "Text me later?"

"About what?"

"Anything." He leans in, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek before I can react. "That's for our audience," he murmurs, then straightens with a wink. "See you tomorrow, Gardner."

As he walks away, I become aware of the eyes following him, then turning curiously to me. The whispers have already started. By nightfall, everyone on campus will know: Declan Wolfe is off the market.

And I, apparently, am his girlfriend.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

“ C HUG! CHUG! CHUG!”

The chant reverberates through the crowded fraternity house, the bass from massive speakers making the floorboards vibrate beneath my feet. I press myself further into the corner, clutching a red Solo cup of lukewarm beer I have no intention of drinking.

This was a mistake. A massive, catastrophic mistake.

But Mia had insisted, her eyes gleaming with mischief when I told her everything earlier, including Declan’s plans for us tonight.

"Oh yeah, the Sigma Phi party," she'd said. "You have to go. Everyone is." I'd immediately regretted in confiding in her, especially since she seemed to think the whole thing was incredibly amusing, instead of what it really was – a complete disaster waiting to implode in my face.

"I don't do parties," I'd protested.

"You do now," she'd countered. "If you want anyone to believe this fake relationship, you have to act like a normal college girlfriend. That means showing up where he is, even if it's not your scene."

She was right, damn her. If Declan and I were really dating, I'd make at least some effort to participate in his social life. So here I am, wearing borrowed clothes—dark jeans that hug my curves more tightly than I'm comfortable with and a green sweater Mia insisted "brings out your eyes"—watching my fake boyfriend hold court across the room.

Declan is in his element here, surrounded by teammates and admirers, his easy laugh carrying above the music. He hasn't seen me yet. I'd arrived just ten minutes ago, slipping in with Mia and immediately seeking the safety of a wall to lean against.

Now, I watch as he finishes whatever drinking game he's engaged in, raising his arms in victory as the circle around him erupts in cheers. A blonde—the same one from the coffee shop, Chloe—presses against his side, saying something in his ear that makes him laugh.

Something hot and unpleasant curls in my stomach at the sight. Jealousy, I realize with a start. Which is ridiculous. This relationship isn't real. Declan isn't really my boyfriend. I have no claim on him, no right to care who he talks to or who touches him.

And yet.

"You know, glaring at him from across the room isn't exactly selling the devoted girlfriend image," Mia comments, appearing at my side with a fresh drink.

"I'm not glaring," I lie, accepting the cup but not drinking from it. "I'm observing."

"Uh-huh." She follows my gaze to where Amber is now running a hand down Declan's arm. "Though in this case, I'd say a little glaring is justified. That girl has been trying to get into Declan's pants since freshman year."

"Has she succeeded?" The question slips out before I can stop it.

Mia's eyebrows shoot up. "Thought you didn't care about his romantic history."

"I don't," I say too quickly. "Just curious about what kind of reputation I'm associating myself with."

"Right." She doesn't bother hiding her skepticism. "Well, if campus gossip is to be believed, Declan's been through a decent chunk of the female student body. But he's always upfront about keeping things casual, and he's never cheated. So there's that."

Across the room, Declan looks up, scanning the crowd. His eyes find mine with unerring accuracy, as if he could sense my presence. Something shifts in his expression—surprise, followed by genuine pleasure that transforms his features.

He says something to his teammates, then makes his way through the crowd toward me, his focus unwavering despite the hands that reach out to touch him, the voices calling his name. It's like watching water part around a stone, the way people move for him, aware of his presence even with their backs turned.

"You came," he says when he reaches me, his voice carrying a note of wonder. Before I can respond, he slides an arm around my waist and pulls me into a hug that feels far more genuine than our performance in the quad.

"Mia convinced me," I say when he releases me, trying to ignore the warmth his touch leaves behind. "Said I needed to act like a real girlfriend if we want people to believe it."

"Smart friend you've got," he says, nodding to Mia with a smile that makes her blush slightly. "Nice to meet you." He turns back to me. "I'm glad you're here."

"Could have fooled me," I say, the words slipping out with more edge than intended. "You seemed pretty comfortable with your fan club."

His eyebrows rise at the hint of jealousy in my tone. "Teammates," he corrects.

"Right."



"Hey," he says softly, stepping closer so we're nearly touching. "I meant what I said at lunch. This only works if we make it convincing." His fingers trace lightly along my arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. "People need to believe I'm genuinely into you. That I don't see anyone else when you're in the room."

His eyes, impossibly blue even in the dim party lighting, hold mine with an intensity that makes my breath catch. Is this still part of the act? Or something more? I can't tell anymore, and that's the most dangerous part of this entire charade.

"Declan!" A voice breaks through our moment. Brady approaches, carrying two fresh cups. "Been looking for you, man. Beer pong tournament's starting, and we're defending champions."

"Rain check," Declan says, not looking away from me. "I just found my girlfriend, and I owe her some attention."

The casual way he claims me, the warmth in his voice when he says "girlfriend"—it's all so convincing that for a second, I almost believe it myself.

Brady looks between us, a knowing smile spreading across his face. "Say no more. But you owe me, Wolfe. Mason's coordination is shit after three beers."

As he walks away, Declan's hand finds mine, intertwining our fingers with casual intimacy. "Dance with me?"

"I don't dance," I protest automatically.

"Everyone dances," he counters, already leading me toward the cleared space in the living room where bodies move together in various states of rhythm and inebriation. "Even serious literature majors."

Before I can formulate a properly scathing response, we're in the middle of the makeshift dance floor, and Declan's hands settle on my hips, guiding me to sway with the music. The bass throbs around us, the press of bodies creating a strange intimacy despite the crowd.

"Relax," he murmurs, leaning close so I can hear him over the music. "You look like you're being tortured."

"This isn't exactly my scene," I admit, tentatively placing my hands on his shoulders. The solid warmth of him under my palms is distracting.

"No? What is your scene, Gardner? Libraries at midnight? Coffee shops at dawn? Secret poetry readings in underground bunkers?"

There's no malice in his teasing, just a genuine curiosity that softens my reflexive defensiveness. "Something like that," I concede. "Though I draw the line at underground bunkers. The ventilation is terrible."

His laugh is warm, rich, nothing like the calculated charm I've seen him deploy on others. "There she is. I was wondering if you had a sense of humor hidden under all that academic intensity."

"I'm hilarious," I deadpan. "It's just that most of my jokes require a working knowledge of nineteenth-century literature."

"Try me," he challenges, his hands shifting slightly on my hips, drawing me closer as the song changes to something slower, more intimate.

The question catches me off guard. Most people don't actually want to hear my esoteric literary references. But the genuine interest in Declan's eyes makes me brave.

"Why did Charles Dickens keep a pet raven?" I ask.

"I don't know. Why?"

"Because he wanted to write with a dark quill."

It's a terrible joke, the kind that makes most people groan or stare at me blankly. But Declan's face splits into a genuine grin, followed by a laugh that seems to start somewhere deep in his chest.

"That's awful," he says, eyes crinkling at the corners. "Truly, spectacularly bad."

"I know," I admit, unexpectedly pleased by his reaction. "I have dozens more."

"Save them," he says, still smiling. "Parcel them out slowly. I'm not sure my literary heart can take too many at once."

Something shifts between us then—a moment of connection that feels too real for the performance we're supposedly engaged in. His eyes drop briefly to my lips, a question forming in them that sends heat spiraling through my body.

Then someone bumps into us hard, breaking the moment. A drunk fraternity brother, red-faced and swaying, mutters an apology before staggering away.

"Want to get some air?" Declan asks, his voice slightly rough.

I nod, suddenly desperate for space to breathe, to think. He keeps hold of my hand as he leads me through the crowded house, nodding to people who call his name but not stopping. We emerge onto a back porch, the February night air sharp and clarifying after the stuffy heat of the party.

Only a few people are braving the cold—a couple locked in an embrace against the railing, a small group huddled around a patio heater. Declan guides me to a relatively private corner, his body angled to block the worst of the wind.

"Better?" he asks.

I nod, taking a deep breath of cold air. "Thanks."

He studies me, something contemplative in his expression. "Can I ask you something, Gardner?"

"You just did."

He rolls his eyes at my pedantry but presses on. "Why did you agree to this? The fake relationship. You could have just said no, told me to figure out my own problems."

The question catches me off guard with its directness. "The Whitmore Prize," I answer automatically. "You said you could help with that."

"But you don't need my help," he points out. "Your work stands on its own. And you clearly hate this—the parties, the social aspects, being the center of attention."

He's not wrong. Every moment in the spotlight makes me want to retreat further into my academic shell, the safe, predictable world of books and research. So why did I say yes?

"Maybe I wanted to see how the other half lives," I say lightly, deflecting. "Experience what it's like to be part of the popular crowd for once."

"Bullshit," he says, but there's no heat in it. "Try again."

I look away, studying the bare branches of a nearby tree, anything to avoid the intensity of his gaze. "Maybe I'm tired of being invisible," I admit softly. "Of being the transfer student no one notices except to borrow notes from."

It's a truth I hadn't fully acknowledged even to myself. The loneliness of my first months at Westford, the way I've used academic focus as a shield against forming connections that might lead to more hurt. Except with Mia, who made it her mission to befriend me during my second week on campus, when she spotted me sitting by myself in our humanities class. Mia can't take anyone sitting alone, and she makes friends everywhere she goes. The exact opposite of me.

Declan's hand touches my chin gently, turning my face back to his. "You're not invisible, Ellie," he says, my first name soft on his lips. "Not to me. Not since the first day you walked into Harmon's class and proceeded to demolish his take on Hemingway with such precision that I actually felt bad for the guy."

The sincerity in his voice steals my breath. This isn't the smooth-talking hockey star or the strategic partner in our arrangement. This is something else—something genuine breaking through the performance.

"That was a good day," I manage, trying to lighten the suddenly heavy atmosphere between us. "Harmon's face when I cited his own contradictory paper from 2005..."

"Priceless," Declan agrees, his thumb brushing lightly across my cheek in a gesture that feels too intimate for our fake relationship. "You're fucking brilliant, Gardner. And anyone who doesn't see that isn't worth your time."

I swallow hard, unsure how to respond to this unexpected praise. Before I can formulate a response, the back door slams open, and Brady stumbles out, clearly on a mission.

"There you are!" he exclaims, spotting us. "Wolfe, you gotta come back in. Mason challenged the lacrosse team to a keg stand competition, and it's getting ugly."

Declan sighs, his hand dropping from my face. "Duty calls," he says to me, an apology in his eyes. "Team captain responsibilities."

"Go," I say, forcing a smile. "Save the honor of hockey players everywhere."

He hesitates. "You'll be okay?"

"I'm a big girl, Wolfe. I can handle a party." I glance at my watch. "But I'll probably head out soon. Early study group tomorrow."

"Of course you have a study group," he says, but there's fondness rather than mockery in his tone. He leans in, pressing a quick kiss to my cheek, his lips lingering just a heartbeat too long. "Text me when you get home?"

"Sure," I agree.

He smiles once more, then follows Brady inside, leaving me alone with my confusing thoughts and the persistent warmth on my cheek where his lips touched my skin.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

The hockey arena is a world I've deliberately avoided during my time at Westford—too loud, too crowded, too full of the over-the-top school spirit I've never quite understood. But here I am the next night, clutching my student ID at the will-call window, collecting the ticket Declan left for me.

"You're Wolfe's girl?" the attendant asks, eyeing me with naked curiosity.

I force a smile. "That's me."

"He left instructions to direct you to the family section." She points toward a cordoned-off area with cushioned seats near center ice. "The blue seats, not the general student section."

The family section. Where parents, girlfriends, and other important people in the players' lives sit. This is getting more real by the minute.

I make my way to the designated area, self-conscious in Declan's jersey, which hangs nearly to my knees despite my height. I'd paired it with leggings and boots, my concession to both the cold arena and the role I'm playing. My hair is down for once, falling in waves around my shoulders—another small detail that feels like a surrender to this new identity.

The section is already half-full with what appears to be an assortment of parents, girlfriends, and university officials. I hover uncertainly at the entrance, scanning for an inconspicuous seat where I can blend into the background. Mia offered to come with me, but I turned her down, hoping I could just come in and blend into the background, get through the game before slipping back to my dorm room. It becomes

clear pretty soon that isn't going to happen.

"You must be Ellie!"

A woman in her forties approaches, elegant in a cashmere sweater and pearls, her dark hair swept into a chignon. Something about her features—the high cheekbones, the shape of her eyes—strikes me as familiar.

"I'm Caroline Wolfe," she continues, confirming my suspicion. "Declan's mother."

My heart stutters. Declan never mentioned his parents would be here. "Mrs. Wolfe, it's nice to meet you."

"Caroline, please." She takes my arm as if we're old friends, guiding me toward the seats. "Declan's told us so little about you—just that you're brilliantly smart and keeping him on his toes academically."

The easy way she accepts my presence in her son's life catches me off guard. "He exaggerates," I say automatically.

"Not according to Professor Harmon." She pats the seat beside her. "Richard and I had dinner with him and his wife last weekend. He speaks very highly of your work."

Richard—Declan's father, I presume. The family resemblance is obvious in the distinguished-looking man on Caroline's other side, currently engaged in conversation with someone who looks like a university administrator.

"Declan didn't mention you'd be here," I say, trying to keep my voice neutral as I settle into the offered seat.

Caroline's smile turns knowing. "He probably wanted to spare you the parent



interrogation. But don't worry, we don't bite." She leans in conspiratorially. "Though I must say, you're quite different from his usual... companions."

There's an undercurrent to her words I can't quite decipher—approval? Suspicion? "Different how?" I find myself asking.

"More substantial," she says after a moment's consideration. "Declan has always been drawn to... let's call it surface appeal. Pretty faces, popular girls, the easy choice." Her eyes, so like her son's, assess me with unnerving directness. "You strike me as someone with depth."

I'm saved from having to respond by the lights dimming and music blaring through the arena. The crowd roars as the team takes the ice for warm-ups, skating fast laps around the rink. Despite knowing nothing about hockey, I immediately spot Declan—something in the fluid confidence of his movement, the power in his stride.

He skates toward the glass in front of our section, eyes scanning until they find me. The smile that breaks across his face seems genuinely pleased, maybe even relieved, as if he'd doubted I would actually show up. He raises his stick in a small salute before rejoining his teammates.

"He looks focused tonight," Caroline comments. "That's good. He's been... distracted lately."

The game begins with a ceremonial puck drop, followed by a blur of action I struggle to follow. Caroline occasionally leans over to explain a call or play, her knowledge surprising me until I remember what Declan said about his NHL dreams. Of course his family would understand the sport he's dedicated his life to.

Despite my initial reluctance, I find myself drawn into the game's rhythm, the ebb and flow of tension as the teams battle for control. Declan is mesmerizing on the

ice—fast, aggressive, commanding. This version of him—intensely focused, physically dominant—is yet another facet of a man I'm beginning to realize is far more complex than I'd allowed myself to believe.

During a break in play, Caroline turns to me. "Richard and I are hosting a small dinner at the house on Friday. Nothing formal, just a few of Declan's teammates and their families. We'd love for you to join us."

The invitation sends a wave of panic through me. A family dinner feels far beyond the scope of our arrangement. "That's very kind, but—"

"Declan already said you'd come," she interrupts smoothly. "Unless you have other plans?"

Trapped. "No, no other plans," I concede. "Friday would be lovely."

Her smile is triumphant. "Wonderful. I can't wait to get to know the woman who's finally captured my son's attention."

The woman who's captured his attention. If only she knew the truth—that our entire relationship is a charade, a mutually beneficial lie.

Guilt twists in my stomach, a sensation that only intensifies when Declan scores a goal in the second period and blows a kiss toward the family section. The crowd eats it up, and even Caroline looks pleased by the public display of affection.

"He's never done that before," she comments, eyes sparkling with amusement. "You must be special indeed."

By the time Westford secures a 4-2 victory, I'm emotionally exhausted from maintaining the facade. I consider leaving immediately, avoiding any post-game

interaction, but Caroline's hand on my arm stops me.

"The players usually come up after they shower," she explains. "We can wait here."

Declan's father, Richard, who never acknowledged me during the game, has disappeared somewhere, along with the important-looking man he was sitting with.

Twenty minutes later, Declan emerges from the locker room tunnel, hair damp from his shower, dressed in dark jeans and a button-down shirt. Several other players accompany him, but his eyes find me immediately, a smile breaking across his face.

He navigates the crowd with practiced ease, accepting congratulations and pats on the back, but his trajectory is clear—straight to where I stand with his mother.

"You came," he says when he reaches us, his voice pitched low beneath the ambient noise.

"I said I would." I'm unprepared when he pulls me into a hug, his body still radiating heat despite the shower. His lips brush my temple, lingering a beat longer than necessary.

"Thank you," he murmurs against my skin, and I'm not sure if he's thanking me for attending the game or for playing along with his mother.

He releases me only to slide an arm around my waist, keeping me close as he greets his mother with a kiss on the cheek. "Mom, I see you've met Ellie."

"We had a lovely time getting acquainted," Caroline confirms. "I've invited her to dinner on Friday."

Declan's arm tightens almost imperceptibly around my waist, his fingers digging into

my hip. A subtle warning. A wordless plea.

"Friday," he says smoothly, but I catch the flash of panic in his eyes. "Looking forward to it."

His father suddenly reappears, handshake exchanged with a nearby university official concluding just in time for him to join our little circle. Richard Wolfe exudes the kind of old-money power that doesn't need to announce itself—it simply exists, demanding acknowledgment. His perfectly tailored suit and calculating gaze make me instinctively straighten my posture.

"There's the MVP," he says, clapping Declan on the shoulder. His smile doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Impressive third period. Though that penalty in the second was unnecessary."

Declan's body tenses against mine. "Thanks, Dad," he says, his voice suddenly flat.

Richard's attention shifts to me, his assessment almost clinical. "And this must be Eleanor."

"Ellie," Declan corrects immediately.

"She prefers Ellie," Caroline adds at the same time, a curious alliance that makes me wonder how often they've needed to temper Richard Wolfe's natural severity.

"Ellie Gardner," I offer my hand, determined not to be intimidated. "It's nice to meet you, Mr. Wolfe."

His handshake is firm, deliberate. "Declan tells me you're quite the scholar. Top of your class?"

"She's brilliant," Declan answers before I can, his voice taking on a warmth that sounds genuine enough to make my heart stutter. "Professor Harmon says her thesis on feminist reclamation in Gothic literature might be published."

The fact that he knows this—that he's been paying attention to my academic achievements—catches me off guard.

"Interesting," Richard says, in a tone that suggests it's anything but. "And what are your plans after graduation, Ellie?"

"PhD at Columbia, hopefully," I reply, feeling strangely like I'm being interviewed.

"Academia," Richard nods. "Admirable. Though not particularly lucrative."

"Dad," Declan warns, his voice dropping.

"Just making conversation," Richard replies with a dismissive wave. "Caroline has invited you to dinner Friday, I understand?"

"Yes, I'm looking forward to it," I lie, feeling Declan's thumb trace a small circle against my waist—his silent acknowledgment of my effort.

"Excellent. We'll have a chance to get better acquainted." Richard checks his watch. "We should go. Early breakfast meeting tomorrow with the foundation board."

Goodbyes are exchanged, Caroline's warm and genuine, Richard's perfunctory. As they walk away, I feel Declan exhale slowly, his body releasing tension I hadn't fully registered until its absence.

"Sorry about that," he murmurs, his mouth close to my ear. "My father can be..."

"Intimidating?" I supply.

"I was going to say 'an asshole,' but intimidating works too." The corner of his mouth lifts in a rueful smile. "You handled him well."

"You didn't tell me your parents would be here." I pull back slightly, but his arm remains firmly around my waist. "Or that I'd be expected at a family dinner."

"I didn't know they were coming," he says, and I believe him. "As for Friday..." He grimaces. "My mother texted during pre-game. I couldn't exactly say no."

I keep my voice low, aware of teammates and fans still milling around us. "Family dinners weren't part of our agreement."

"I know. I'll make it up to you." His eyes meet mine, unexpectedly earnest. "You were amazing tonight, Ellie. I owe you."

My name on his lips still jolts something inside me—a dangerous spark I need to extinguish before it grows. "Yes, you do," I agree, trying to sound businesslike despite our intimate posture. "So what's our next move?"

"Let me walk you back to your dorm," he says, nodding to his lingering teammates in farewell as he guides me toward the exit. "We should talk strategy."

The night air is sharp with cold when we emerge from the arena, the campus quiet under a blanket of stars. Declan shrugs out of his team jacket and drapes it over my shoulders before I can protest.

"I don't need—"

"You're shivering," he interrupts. "And it's what a boyfriend would do."

"There's no one around to perform for," I point out, even as I pull the jacket closer, surrounding myself with his lingering warmth and scent. Heat slides through my body, Declan's closeness warming more than his jacket.

"Maybe I'm staying in character." His smile is soft, mischievous. "Method acting."

We walk in surprisingly comfortable silence for a few minutes, our breath fogging in the cold air. The campus is beautiful at night, historic buildings illuminated against the darkness, paths winding through carefully landscaped quads. In another life, with another person, this might even be romantic.

"You were watching," Declan says suddenly.

"What?"

"During the game. You were actually watching, not reading." There's a hint of wonder in his voice. "I kept looking for you between shifts, expecting to see your nose in a book, but you were following the play."

Heat creeps up my neck. "Your mother was explaining the rules. It seemed rude not to pay attention."

"And the goal?" He's watching me carefully, a slight smirk playing at his lips. "Did you cheer?"

I had. Embarrassingly loudly, in fact, caught up in the moment despite myself. "It was a reflex," I dismiss. "Everyone was cheering."

His laugh is warm, genuine. "Sure, Gardner. Whatever you say."

We stop at the entrance to my residence hall, a towering brick building that houses

mainly seniors and transfer students. The moment feels suddenly weighted, the script for this scene unclear.

"So, Friday," I say, shrugging out of his jacket and handing it back. "What should I expect?"

"Nothing too intense. Dinner, conversation, probably some embarrassing childhood stories from my mother." He takes the jacket, fingers brushing mine in the exchange. "Wear something nice but not formal. My parents are traditional, but they're not stuffy."

"And what's our story? How long have we been together? How did it start?"

"We still keep it simple," he advises. "We met in Harmon's class. I asked you out after a few study sessions. We've been seeing each other about a month."

"And they're not suspicious about the sudden girlfriend? When you apparently haven't had a serious relationship before?"

Something flickers across his face—a shadow of emotion I can't quite identify. "Let me worry about that."

"This is going to blow up in our faces," I mutter, reality crashing back as I consider the web of lies we're spinning. "This was supposed to be a simple arrangement, and now I'm having dinner with your family."

"It'll be fine." He steps closer, one hand lifting to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. The gesture is becoming familiar, his touch lingering against my cheek. "Trust me."

Trust. Such a dangerous word. Especially when spoken by a man with ocean eyes and broad shoulders and more secrets than I know.



For a moment, everything seems to stop, and for another moment, I'm sure he's going to kiss me. But that's crazy.

"I should go," I say, stepping back from his touch. "I have an early morning tomorrow."

He nods, accepting the retreat. "I'll text you details for Friday." He starts to turn away, then pauses. "And Ellie? Thank you. For tonight. It meant a lot."

As I watch him walk away, his jacket slung over one broad shoulder, I'm struck by how quickly the lines are blurring—between fake and real, between performance and truth. This arrangement was supposed to be simple, clinical. A business transaction.

So why does my skin still tingle where he touched me? Why am I already dreading and anticipating Friday in equal measure?

I push these questions away as I climb the stairs to my room. Whatever complicated emotions are stirring, I need to remember the truth: this relationship has an expiration date. Three weeks. That's all.

I refuse to be hurt when the buzzer sounds and this game ends.

"You know what this room needs?" Mia asks, sprawled across my bed Friday afternoon as I frantically search my closet for something appropriate to wear to dinner with the Wolfes. "Alcohol. Lots of alcohol."

"It's three in the afternoon," I point out, holding up a navy dress, then discarding it with a frustrated sigh.

"It's five o'clock somewhere," she counters, rolling onto her stomach to better observe my sartorial crisis. "And anyway, we're celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

"The fact that you've somehow landed the hottest guy on campus, fake or not." She grins wickedly. "Half the female population wants to murder you in your sleep."

"That's not funny." But it's not entirely untrue either. The past week has seen a distinct shift in how people treat me on campus—envious glares from girls who used to ignore my existence, sudden friendliness from people who've never spoken to me before, even a professor asking after "your young man" in a tone that suggested I'd somehow elevated my status by associating with Declan. It's good to know misogyny is still alive and well.

"Anyway," Mia continues, pulling me from my thoughts, "we need to pre-game before your big dinner with the Wolfe dynasty. Take the edge off."

"I need my wits about me," I protest, though the idea of liquid courage holds some appeal. "Besides, I have reading to do after."

Mia rolls her eyes dramatically. "All work and no play makes Ellie a dull fake girlfriend."

"Fine," I concede, knowing she won't let this go. "One drink. After I figure out what to wear."

"Wear the green wrap dress." She points to the garment I'd dismissed earlier. "It's classy but not trying too hard. Brings out your eyes. Makes your boobs look great."

"I'm not trying to show off my boobs to Declan's parents!"

"Not for them," she says with exaggerated patience. "For him. Your fake boyfriend who looks at you like he wants to devour you whole."

Heat floods my cheeks at her blunt assessment. "He does not."

"Please." She sits up, suddenly serious. "That boy can barely keep his hands off you in public. I've seen how he touches you—the little gestures, the way his eyes follow you. Either he's an Oscar-worthy actor, or there's nothing fake about how he feels."

Her words stir something dangerous in my chest—hope, maybe, or the reckless desire to believe that some part of this charade has become real for him too.

"It's an act," I insist, as much to convince myself as her. "He's just good at it."

"If you say so." She slides off the bed, moving to my minifridge to retrieve a bottle of cheap wine we've been saving for emergencies. This apparently qualifies. "But from where I'm standing, you're both in serious danger of forgetting this isn't real."

I don't have a response to that uncomfortably perceptive observation. So instead, I take the green dress from its hanger and hold it up against me. "You really think this works?"

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

"Trust me," she says, twisting the corkscrew into the bottle. "He won't be able to take his eyes off you."

Two hours later, I'm staring at myself in the mirror, barely recognizing the woman looking back. The green dress does indeed bring out my eyes and flatter my figure without being inappropriate for a family dinner. Mia has convinced me to leave my hair down and apply more makeup than my usual minimal amount—not dramatic, but enough to emphasize my features.

"See?" Mia says, admiring her handiwork. "Sophisticated but sexy. Perfect for meeting the parents of your fake boyfriend who's totally into you for real."

"You're insufferable," I tell her, but there's no heat in it. The one glass of wine has mellowed me slightly, taking the sharpest edge off my anxiety.

My phone buzzes with a text from Declan: Outside when you're ready.

He'd wanted to come to my door, but I'd convinced him to stay in the car – the last thing I need is for Mia to grill him or make her remarks about how he wants to “devour me.”

"Your chariot awaits," Mia says, reading over my shoulder. "Go knock 'em dead, Gardner."

I gather my coat and purse, nerves fluttering in my stomach despite the wine. "If I don't text by midnight, assume Richard Wolfe has had me eliminated for being an unsuitable match for his son."

"Drama queen," she calls after me as I head for the door. "But seriously, text me updates!"

Declan is leaning against his car when I push through the dorm entrance, casual in dark jeans and a gray button-down that makes his shoulders look impossibly broad. He straightens when he sees me, something flickering across his face that makes my pulse quicken.

"You look..." he trails off, his eyes moving over me with appreciation that doesn't feel performative. "Wow."

"Is it okay?" I ask, suddenly self-conscious. "Not too much? Not too little?"

"It's perfect." His voice has a rough edge that sends a shiver through me despite the mildness of the evening. "You're perfect."

The sincerity in his tone catches me off guard. This isn't the smooth-talking hockey star or even the strategic partner in our arrangement. This feels like something else—something genuine that makes the line between pretense and reality blur further.

"You clean up pretty well yourself," I say, trying to lighten the moment.

He smiles, opening the passenger door for me with a gallantry that still feels strange coming from him. "Ready for this?"

No, I think as I slide into the seat. I'm not ready for this dinner, for his family's scrutiny, for the growing complication of my own feelings. But what I say is:

"As I'll ever be."

The drive to his parents' home takes us away from campus and into the affluent suburb where old money Westford families have lived for generations. I try not to think about how if Declan's family just lived somewhere else, on another coast for example, we wouldn't have to do this. But of course things couldn't be that easy. Of course they would have to live a fifteen-minute drive from campus.

Declan and I make small talk about classes and the upcoming weekend, carefully avoiding discussion of the increasingly blurred boundaries of our arrangement.

His phone buzzes as we turn onto a tree-lined street of imposing homes. He glances at it, then silences it with a frown.

"Everything okay?" I ask.

"Fine." His response is too quick, too dismissive.

But something in his expression suggests it's not fine at all. A flicker of tension crosses his face before he masks it with a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes.

"Here we are," he says, turning into a circular driveway that leads to a sprawling colonial-style mansion. "Home sweet home."

The house is intimidating in its perfection—white columns, symmetrical windows, manicured gardens. Old money made architectural.

"You grew up here?" I ask, though the answer is obvious.

"Until boarding school at fourteen," he confirms, parking beside a sleek silver Mercedes. "Then summers and holidays."

"Of course you went to boarding school," I mutter, one more piece of the Declan

Wolfe puzzle clicking into place.

He shoots me a look, something defensive crossing his features. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," I backtrack, realizing too late how judgmental I sounded. "Just... it fits."

"With the spoiled rich kid image you have of me?" The question has an edge, a rawness I wasn't expecting.

"That's not what I meant."

"Isn't it?" He turns off the engine. "You've had me pegged from day one, Gardner. The privileged jock with a trust fund and no depth."

The accusation stings because there's truth in it—or there used to be, before I started seeing glimpses of the real Declan beneath the carefully constructed facade.

"Maybe I did," I admit quietly. "But I was wrong."

The simple confession seems to catch him off guard. His expression softens, the defensive tension leaving his shoulders. "We should go in," he says, avoiding a direct response. "My mother hates tardiness."

As we approach the front door, his hand finds the small of my back—a gesture that's becoming familiar. But the familiarity doesn't stop the lightning from sliding through my stomach, a heat settling between my legs.

The door opens before we can ring the bell, revealing Caroline Wolfe in an elegant navy dress, her smile warm and welcoming.

"Right on time," she says, ushering us into a foyer that could comfortably fit my entire dorm room. "Richard's in the study with the Gordons. Drinks before dinner."

Declan presses a kiss to his mother's cheek, the gesture natural and affectionate. "Mom, you look great."

"Flattery," she says, but looks pleased nonetheless. Her attention shifts to me. "Ellie, that color is beautiful on you. Come, let me introduce you to our guests."

The study is a wood-paneled room straight from a film set—leather armchairs, built-in bookshelves, a fireplace crackling despite the mild evening. Richard Wolfe stands by a bar cart, pouring amber liquid into crystal tumblers for an older couple who turn at our entrance.

"Here they are," Richard announces, his assessing gaze moving over me with the same clinical detachment as at the hockey game. "Thomas, Elizabeth, you remember our son Declan. And this is his friend, Ellie Gardner."

Friend. Not girlfriend. The deliberate downgrade isn't lost on me, nor on Declan, whose arm tightens around my waist.

"Girlfriend, Dad," he corrects, his voice carrying a warning that makes Caroline shoot her husband a look. "Ellie and I have been dating for a month now."

"Of course," Richard concedes with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes. "My mistake."

The Gordons turn out to be Richard's business partner and his wife—pleasant enough, if somewhat reserved. The conversation flows around general topics—the university, the recent hockey victory, the charitable foundation Caroline chairs. I answer questions when addressed directly but mostly observe, cataloging the family dynamics that have shaped Declan.



Caroline had mentioned at the game that other players and their parents would be here, but none of them are, and it's not mentioned. I wonder if she concocted that story to make it more likely that I would come, so she could spend more time with the girl she thinks has won her son's heart. The idea is both sweet and disconcerting at the same time.

Richard dominates without obvious effort, his presence commanding attention even when others speak. Caroline mediates, smoothing rough edges with practiced grace. And Declan—Declan shifts before my eyes, becoming a version of himself I haven't seen before. More formal, more guarded, his natural charm overlaid with a careful restraint.

I catch him watching his father, gauging reactions, adjusting accordingly. It's subtle but unmistakable—the performance of the perfect son, the heir to the Wolfe legacy.

Dinner is served in a formal dining room that could host twenty comfortably. The conversation turns to business—investments, market projections, the family company's latest acquisition. Declan participates with surprising knowledge, demonstrating a grasp of financial matters I wouldn't have expected from someone supposedly focused on hockey.

"Ellie," Elizabeth Gordon turns to me during a lull, "You mentioned you wanted a PhD in literature. What's your focus?"

"Feminist literary criticism," I reply, aware of Richard's slight eye roll at the term 'feminist.' "Right now I'm writing a paper for one of my classes on how female Gothic writers subverted patriarchal narratives through coded language and symbolism."

"Fascinating," Thomas Gordon says with what seems like genuine interest. "Any authors in particular?"

"Ann Radcliffe, primarily. But also Mary Shelley, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, even Daphne du Maurier in the modern era."

"All examining confinement and constraint," Caroline observes, surprising me with her knowledge. "Women trapped by societal expectations and limitations."

"Exactly," I agree, warming to the subject. "The haunted house as metaphor for patriarchal institutions, the madwoman as symbol of female rage against containment."

"All very interesting," Richard interrupts, his tone suggesting it's anything but. "Though I wonder about the practical applications of such study. In terms of career prospects."

There it is again—the barely veiled dismissal of academic pursuits without immediate financial value. I feel Declan tense beside me, ready to intervene, but this is a battle I've fought before.

"Knowledge doesn't always need to be monetized to have value, Mr. Wolfe," I say evenly. "But if you're asking about my career plans, I plan on pursuing a professorship after my PhD. The publishing opportunities alone make it a viable path."

A flash of approval crosses Caroline's face, while Richard looks slightly taken aback by my direct response.

"Well said," Thomas Gordon raises his wine glass slightly. "To pursuing knowledge for its own sake."

The conversation shifts again, and I feel Declan's hand find mine under the table, giving it a gentle squeeze. When I glance at him, there's something like pride in his eyes, warming me from the inside out.

Dessert has just been served when Richard turns the conversation in a direction that makes my blood run cold.

"Declan tells us you transferred mid-year, Ellie. From... where was it?"

"Pacific Northwest University," I supply, keeping my voice steady despite the sudden twist of anxiety in my gut. "In Oregon."

"Quite a change," Elizabeth observes. "What prompted the move across the country?"

Before I can formulate a suitably vague response, Declan interjects. "Ellie wanted a stronger literature program. PNU's focus is more scientific."

It's a plausible explanation, but not the truth. And something in Richard's expression suggests he knows there's more to the story.

"Surely there were closer options than Westford," he presses. "Family connections here? Or perhaps... personal reasons for the sudden change?"

The deliberate probe makes my cheeks heat. He's fishing, looking for something to discredit me, to prove I'm not good enough for his son—even in this fake relationship.

"Dad," Declan's voice carries a warning edge. "That's enough."

"Just making conversation," Richard says with false innocence. "Getting to know your... girlfriend."

The pause before "girlfriend" is deliberate, designed to undermine. I feel Declan's body go rigid beside me, tension radiating from him like heat.

"I ended an engagement," I say before Declan can respond, my voice calmer than I feel. "My fiancé cheated with my cousin. Rather than stay and deal with the fallout, I chose to make a clean break. Westford offered the best combination of academic opportunity and distance."

The table falls silent at my blunt disclosure. Caroline looks sympathetic, the Gordons uncomfortable, Richard surprised at my candor, as if he was hoping to embarrass me. But I'm not embarrassed by what happened. I didn't do anything wrong. James did.

"I'm sorry to hear that," Elizabeth says finally. "How difficult for you."

"It was," I acknowledge. "But ultimately clarifying. Better to discover someone's true character before marriage than after."

Declan's hand finds mine again under the table, his thumb tracing small circles against my palm—a gesture of comfort that grounds me, steadies me.

"Well, we're certainly glad the circumstances brought you to Westford," Caroline says, shooting her husband a quelling look. "And into Declan's life."

Richard opens his mouth as if to pursue the topic further, but Caroline stands, effectively cutting him off. "Shall we move to the sitting room for coffee?"

The rest of the evening passes in more general conversation, the sharp edges of Richard's interrogation blunted by Caroline's skillful social navigation. Throughout, Declan remains close—his hand on mine, his arm around my shoulders, small touches that feel less like performance and more like genuine connection.

By the time we say our goodbyes, I'm emotionally exhausted but oddly triumphant. I survived dinner with the Wolfe family. More than survived—held my own against Richard's subtle hostility.

The drive back to campus is quiet at first, both of us processing the evening. Finally, Declan breaks the silence.

"I'm sorry about my father," he says, his voice tight with residual anger. "The questioning, the veiled insults. He had no right."

"It's okay," I reassure him. "I've dealt with worse."

"It's not okay." His hands tighten on the steering wheel. "He was testing you, looking for weakness, for reasons to disapprove."

"And did I pass?" I ask, only half-joking.

Declan glances at me, his expression softening. "With flying colors. You were amazing in there, Ellie. Most people crumble under his scrutiny."

The praise warms me, though I try not to show how much it matters. "I'm not most people."

"No," he agrees, his voice dropping to a register that sends a shiver through me. "You're definitely not."

We lapse into silence again, but it's comfortable now, the shared experience creating a new intimacy between us. When we reach my dorm, Declan parks but makes no move to get out.

"Thank you," he says, turning to face me properly. "For tonight. For all of it."

"Part of the arrangement," I remind him, though the words sound hollow even to my own ears.

His eyes search mine in the dim light of the car. "Is that all this really is? An arrangement?"

The question hangs between us, loaded with implications neither of us has been brave enough to voice. My heart hammers against my ribs as I try to formulate a response that won't reveal how confused my feelings have become.

I'm saved from answering by a sharp knock on my window. I turn to find a face I haven't seen in months—one I never expected to see again—peering through the glass.

James. My ex-fiancé. Here at Westford.

Blood drains from my face as panic floods my system. "Oh, God."

"Ellie?" Declan's voice seems to come from very far away. "Who is that?"

I can't answer, can't breathe, can only stare in horror as the ghost of my past raises his hand in an awkward wave, gesturing for me to roll down the window.

"Ellie," Declan's voice sharpens with concern. "What's wrong? Who is that guy?"

"James," I manage to whisper, my voice strangled. "My ex-fiancé."

Declan's expression shifts instantly from confusion to something harder, more dangerous. "The one who cheated on you with your cousin?"

I nod mutely, panic rising like a tide. What is James doing here? How did he find me? And most importantly—what does his sudden appearance mean for the careful new life I've built, including the fragile arrangement with Declan?

"I'll handle this," Declan says, reaching for his door handle.

"No!" I grab his arm, desperate. "Don't. Please. Just... I need to do this myself."

Declan studies me for a long moment, conflict clear in his eyes. "Are you sure?"

No, I'm not sure of anything anymore. But I nod anyway, gathering my courage. "I'll be fine. He's probably just... I don't know. But I need to deal with this."

"I'm not leaving you alone with him," Declan says firmly. "Not after what he did."

"Then wait here," I concede, knowing I won't win this argument. "Let me talk to him first."

Reluctantly, Declan nods. I take a deep breath, straightening my spine, and step out of the car to face the man who shattered my heart and changed the course of my life.

James looks the same but different—familiar features arranged in an expression I've never seen before. Uncertainty. Vulnerability. Fear.

"Ellie," he says, his voice bringing back a flood of memories I've worked so hard to bury. "I've been looking everywhere for you."

"What are you doing here, James?" I ask, proud of how steady my voice sounds despite the turmoil inside me.

"I had to find you," he says, taking a step toward me. I back up instinctively, bumping into Declan's car. "I've been trying to call, but you changed your number. You disappeared from everything. I had to beg your father to tell me where you transferred."

The thought of James talking to my father—manipulating him, no doubt—sends a fresh wave of anger through me. "Why? What could you possibly have to say to me after what you did?"

"I made a terrible mistake," he says, his voice breaking. "The worst mistake of my life. Ellie, I love you. I've always loved you. What happened with Alexa... it meant nothing. I was drunk, stupid, self-destructive."

"Save it," I cut him off, the familiar excuses igniting a fury I thought I'd moved past. "I don't care anymore, James. I've moved on."

"Please," he begs, reaching for my hand. I pull away sharply. "Just give me five minutes. That's all I'm asking. Five minutes to explain, to apologize properly."

Before I can respond, I hear Declan's car door open and close. A moment later, he's beside me, his presence solid and reassuring.

"Everything okay here?" he asks, his voice deceptively casual. But I can feel the tension radiating from him, see the warning in his stance.

James's eyes flick between us, confusion giving way to understanding, then something darker. "Who's this?"

"Declan Wolfe," Declan extends his hand with deliberate politeness that doesn't mask the challenge in his eyes. "Ellie's boyfriend."

The word hangs in the air—a shield, a declaration, a lie that suddenly feels truer than it ever has before. James's face contorts with disbelief, then pain.

"Boyfriend?" he repeats. "But... it's only been two months since..."



"Two months is plenty of time to realize what I was missing," I say, finding my voice, my courage. "Declan, this is James. My ex. He was just leaving."

James ignores this, his attention fixed on Declan with growing hostility. "Two months," he says again. "Convenient timing."

"Not really," Declan says easily, his arm sliding around my waist in a gesture that feels simultaneously protective and possessive. "But I'm not complaining. Best thing that ever happened to me was Ellie walking into Professor Harmon's class."

The casual sincerity in his voice catches me off guard. This isn't the script we rehearsed. This is something else—something that makes my heart race and my breath catch.

"You expect me to believe you just happened to meet someone new right after leaving town?" James demands, his voice rising. "This is obviously a rebound. A way to hurt me."

"Believe whatever you want," I say coldly. "It doesn't change the fact that you and I are over. Have been since the moment I found you with Alexa."

"Ellie, please," James steps forward again, desperation in his eyes. "We were together for three years. We were going to get married. You can't throw that away over one mistake."

"She already did," Declan interjects, his voice hardening. "And from where I'm standing, it was the right call."

James's eyes narrow. "This doesn't concern you."

"Actually, it does," Declan says, the dangerous edge in his voice becoming more

pronounced. "Because Ellie concerns me. And right now, you're upsetting her."

"I just need five minutes alone with her," James insists. "Five minutes to explain."

"Not happening," Declan's arm tightens around me. "She doesn't owe you anything. Not time, not attention, and certainly not forgiveness."

James looks at me, pleading. "Ellie, come on. This isn't you. Running away, hooking up with some... some jock as a revenge play? You're better than this."

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The condescension in his voice ignites something fierce inside me. "You don't get to tell me who I am anymore, James. You lost that right when you decided our relationship meant so little to you that you could throw it away for a night with my cousin."

"It was a mistake," he repeats, as if saying it enough times will erase what he did.

"So you've said." I straighten, finding strength in Declan's solid presence beside me. "And now I've heard you. You've apologized. Consider your conscience cleared. But it changes nothing between us."

"We built a life together," James argues, growing more desperate. "We had plans, a future. You can't just—"

"She can," Declan interrupts, his patience visibly wearing thin. "And she has. Now, I think it's time for you to leave."

"Or what?" James challenges, drawing himself up to his full height—still several inches shorter than Declan. "You'll make me? Big hockey star throwing his weight around?"

I feel Declan tense beside me, his jaw clenching. For a moment, I fear the confrontation will turn physical.

"No," I say quickly, stepping slightly forward. "No one's making anyone do anything. James, you came to apologize. You've done that. Now please, respect my wishes and leave. There's nothing more to say."

James looks between us, defeat finally registering in his expression. "Is he really what you want, Ellie? Some athlete who probably won't remember your name a month from now? You know how these guys are."

The irony of James questioning someone else's fidelity would be laughable if the situation weren't so painful.

"What I want," I say firmly, "is for you to go back to Oregon. Go back to your life and let me live mine."

Something in my tone—the absolute finality, perhaps—seems to finally reach him. His shoulders slump slightly. "At least take my number," he tries one last time. "In case you change your mind. In case this... whatever this is... doesn't work out."

"It's working out just fine," Declan says, the steel back in his voice. "Better than fine, actually."

And then, before I can process what's happening, he turns me gently toward him and kisses me.

Not a chaste peck on the cheek or forehead, but a real kiss—his lips warm and insistent against mine, one hand cupping my face with surprising tenderness. I feel my body instantly relax into his, as if this is what it's been waiting for. At the same time, desire flies through my body, igniting my nerve endings. Declan's lips are surprisingly soft and firm, and there's intention behind the kiss, whispering the promise of something more. The kiss only lasts only a few seconds, but it's enough to leave me breathless, my mind spinning with confusion and desire.

When he pulls back, his eyes hold mine for a moment—a silent question, a wordless apology. Then he turns back to James, his expression resolute.

"We're done here," Declan says, not a question but a statement of fact.

James looks between us once more, the hurt and jealousy in his eyes gradually replaced by resignation. "I get it," he says finally. "Just... be happy, Ellie. That's all I've ever wanted for you."

A hollow claim from the man who shattered my happiness without a second thought. But I nod anyway, suddenly too exhausted for further confrontation.

"Goodbye, James," I say softly. Final. Definitive.

He hesitates a moment longer, then turns and walks toward a rental car parked nearby. I watch him go, an odd emptiness settling in my chest—not grief or longing, but the strange lightness of a burden finally, completely released.

Only when his taillights disappear around the corner do I realize I'm trembling. Declan's arms come around me immediately, pulling me against his chest in an embrace that feels like shelter.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his voice gentle against my hair.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "That was... unexpected."

"I'm sorry about the kiss," he says, pulling back slightly to look at me. "I should have asked first. It just seemed like the fastest way to make him understand."

The kiss. Right. Another performance, another tactical move in our elaborate charade. Not real. Not meaningful. Just like everything else between us.

"It's fine," I say, stepping out of his embrace. "It worked. He's gone."

Declan studies me, concern evident in his eyes. "Do you think he'll come back?"

"No," I say with surprising certainty. "He got his closure. That's all he really wanted."

"Are you sure you're okay?" Declan asks again, his hand reaching for mine. "You're still shaking."

"Just cold," I lie. "And tired. It's been a long night."

"Let me walk you up," he offers.

"That's not necessary."

"Ellie." His voice softens. "After everything tonight—my family, your ex showing up... just let me make sure you get to your room safely, okay? It's not part of our deal, it's just... what I need to do right now."

The raw honesty in his voice silences my objections. I nod wordlessly, allowing him to guide me into the building and up the stairs to my floor. We stop outside my door, an uncomfortable silence falling between us.

"Thank you," I say finally. "For tonight. For everything."

"Don't thank me," he says, his expression troubled. "I'm the reason you had to deal with all of this—my parents, the pressure, the performance."

"You couldn't have known James would show up," I point out.

"No, but—" He breaks off, running a hand through his hair in frustration, as if he wants to say more.

"We knew this would be challenging," I say, striving for a practical tone. "But we're making it work. Your coach believes it. Your teammates believe it. Even your parents believe it. That's what matters, right?"

"Right," he agrees, but there's a hesitation in his voice that matches the uncertainty in my own heart. "That's what matters."

We stand there a moment longer, the air between us heavy with unspoken words, with questions neither of us is brave enough to ask. I'm acutely aware of my body's response to his proximity—heart racing, skin tingling with the memory of his kiss, a strange hollow ache forming low in my abdomen.

"I don't want you to be alone tonight," he says. "I'm going to stay." He raises his eyebrows, daring me to deny him. He holds up his hands, as if saying he's not going to push anything further than it's already gone. "I just want to make sure you're okay."

I know this is a horrible idea. But I nod anyway, unlocking my door and stepping into the dimly lit space of my dorm room.

I say another prayer of thanks to the housing gods that I have a single. Small but private, with a twin bed, desk, and minimal furniture. Declan fills the space immediately, his presence making the room seem even smaller.

"Nice place," he says, clearly trying to ease the sudden tension between us. "Very... academic."

He's not wrong. Books cover nearly every surface, stacked on the desk, the windowsill, the small bookshelf that can't contain my collection. Papers and notes are arranged in neat piles, color-coded according to my meticulous system.

"It's home," I shrug, suddenly self-conscious about the plainness of the space compared to what I imagine his apartment must be like. "For now, at least."

An awkward silence falls. I'm painfully aware that we've established that he's going to stay, but haven't really specified what that means. The bed seems to loom in the corner, a minefield of implication.

"I should change," I say finally, grabbing my sleepwear—plain cotton shorts and a t-shirt—from the dresser. "Make yourself comfortable. I'll just be a minute."

In the tiny bathroom attached to my room, I take a deep breath, studying my reflection in the mirror. My cheeks are flushed, eyes bright with a mixture of fear and anticipation. What am I doing? This wasn't part of our agreement. Wasn't part of the plan.

But then, nothing about the past week has gone according to plan. The lines between real and fake, between performance and truth, have blurred beyond recognition.

When I emerge from the bathroom, Declan has removed his shoes and dress shirt, sitting on the edge of my bed in his white t-shirt and pants. The sight of him there—in my personal space, partially undressed, the fabric of his shirt clinging to the cords of his muscles —sends a wave of heat through me that has nothing to do with room temperature.

"Is this okay?" he asks, gesturing to his state of undress. "I can put the shirt back on if it makes you uncomfortable."

"It's fine," I say, though 'fine' is hardly the word for the riot of emotions his presence is stirring in me. "Thanks for staying."

"Anytime." The simple response carries weight, a promise extending beyond tonight.



I move to the bed, uncertain how to navigate this new intimacy. Declan solves the problem by shifting to one side, making space for me to sit beside him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asks gently. "About James?"

The question surprises me. I'd expected him to ignore the topic, to pretend the uncomfortable confrontation hadn't happened. "There's not much to say," I reply, settling beside him, careful to maintain a small distance. "He cheated. I left. End of story."

"Not quite the end," Declan observes. "He came all the way across the country to find you."

"To ease his guilt," I correct. "To make himself feel better about what he did. It wasn't about me, not really."

Declan studies me, something thoughtful in his gaze. "You don't think he actually regrets losing you?"

"I think he regrets getting caught," I say, the bitterness in my voice surprising even me. "Regrets that his perfect future got derailed. But me specifically? No."

"Then he's an even bigger idiot than I thought." The statement is matter-of-fact, delivered without the false sympathy or platitudes I've come to expect when people learn about my breakup.

I laugh despite myself, a short, surprised sound. "That's one way to look at it."

"It's the only way," Declan insists, his expression serious. "Anyone who would risk losing you for a meaningless hookup isn't just unfaithful, they're fundamentally stupid."

The conviction in his voice steals my breath. This doesn't sound like part of our act—there's no audience here, no one to impress or convince. Just us, in the quiet intimacy of my room, having a conversation that feels dangerously real.

"Why did you kiss me?" The question slips out before I can censor it.

Declan's eyes meet mine, something vulnerable flickering in their depths. "To make him believe. To make him understand that you've moved on."

"Is that the only reason?"

His gaze drops to my lips, then back to my eyes. "No," he admits quietly. "But it should have been."

The honesty in his answer makes my heart race. This is dangerous territory, far beyond the boundaries we established at the beginning of our arrangement. But I can't seem to stop myself from venturing further.

"And if I asked you to kiss me again?" My voice is barely above a whisper. "Right now, with no one watching. No one to convince."

The question hangs between us, charged with possibility. Declan's expression shifts, desire darkening his eyes to midnight.

"I would," he says, his voice rough with something I don't dare name. "But I'd be crossing a line we drew for a reason, Ellie."

"Maybe the line has already moved," I suggest, surprising myself with my boldness. "Maybe it was never in the right place to begin with."

His hand lifts to my face, thumb tracing the curve of my cheek with exquisite

gentleness. "Are you sure about this? Because once we cross this line, we can't go back."

The question forces me to confront the truth I've been avoiding—that my feelings for Declan have evolved far beyond our original arrangement, into something terrifying and wonderful and real.

"I'm not sure of anything anymore," I confess. "Except that I want you to kiss me again. For real this time."

No more words are needed. Declan leans forward, his hand sliding into my hair as his lips find mine with deliberate tenderness. This kiss is nothing like the performance outside—it's slower, deeper, a conversation rather than a declaration.

I respond instantly, my body making decisions my mind hasn't fully processed. My hands find his shoulders, feeling the solid warmth of him beneath thin cotton. He tastes faintly of wine from dinner and something distinctly him, a flavor I realize I've been craving since our first kiss.

The kiss deepens, transforms, as Declan's arms wrap around me, drawing me closer until I'm practically in his lap. A small sound escapes me—half sigh, half moan—and I feel his response, the subtle tightening of his hold, the quickening of his breath.

When we finally break apart, both breathing hard, the world feels fundamentally altered. The pretense has been stripped away, leaving only raw truth between us.

"That wasn't fake," I whisper against his lips.

"No," he agrees, his forehead resting against mine. "Nothing about this feels fake anymore, Ellie."

The admission sends a wave of relief through me, followed immediately by fear. This wasn't the plan. Wasn't what we agreed to. And yet, it feels more right than anything has in months.

Declan must see the conflict in my eyes. "We can slow down," he says, his thumb tracing my lower lip in a gesture that contradicts his words. "Figure this out when we're not both emotionally raw from tonight."

He's right. Tonight has been a rollercoaster—the tension with his parents, the confrontation with James, the boundaries of our arrangement shifting beneath our feet. We should wait, think, talk about what this means.

But my body has other ideas. I lean forward, reclaiming his lips in a kiss that communicates more clearly than words what I want, what I need. His response is immediate, arms tightening around me as he returns the kiss with equal fervor.

Somehow we shift, lying down on my narrow bed, bodies aligned from chest to thigh. The weight of him pressing me into the mattress should feel confining, but instead feels like an anchor in a stormy sea. His hands remain respectful, though—one tangled in my hair, the other at my waist, not venturing further despite the obvious heat building between us.

"Ellie," he murmurs against my neck, where his lips have traveled in a burning path. "We should stop."

"Why?" I challenge, my fingers exploring the firm planes of his back beneath his t-shirt. The texture of his skin, smooth over hard muscle, ignites something primal in me—a hunger I've denied for so long that its sudden liberation feels almost violent in its intensity.

He pulls back slightly, his eyes finding mine in the dim light of my bedroom. The

blue is almost entirely consumed by black now, pupils dilated with a desire that mirrors the ache spreading through my core.

"Because once we cross this line," he says, voice rough with restraint, "everything changes. And I need you to be sure."

The tenderness beneath his desire undoes me completely. How is it that this man—whom I once dismissed as nothing but surface and performance—can see through to my deepest fears? The terror of vulnerability, of giving myself to someone who might discard me just as James did, just as my mother did.

"I've never been more sure of anything," I whisper, reaching up to trace the sharp line of his jaw. "I want this. I want you, Declan."

Something breaks in his expression—control giving way to raw need. His mouth crashes back to mine, the kiss transforming from questioning to demanding in an instant. His tongue slides against mine, tasting of wine and desire and promises I'm suddenly desperate to believe.

My hands find the hem of his shirt, tugging upward with an urgency that surprises us both. He helps me, breaking the kiss just long enough to pull the fabric over his head before returning to me as if separation is physically painful. I get a glimpse of his bare torso, all muscles and hard planes, his six pack flexing as he moves. His body is magnificent, as if it's been cut from stone, and the first press of his bare chest against mine—even through the thin cotton of my t-shirt—pulls a sound from deep in my throat that I hardly recognize as my own.

"I need to see you," he breathes against my lips. "Please, Ellie."

The vulnerability in his request, shatters any remaining hesitation. I nod, words failing as he slowly, reverently, begins to pull my shirt off. He moves the fabric

slowly, revealing my skin inch by inch, which he immediately christens with his lips, creating a path of fire up my sternum.

When he finally has my shirt completely off, his breath catches audibly. "God, you're beautiful," he murmurs, eyes tracking over me with an intensity that should make me self-conscious but instead makes me feel powerful, desired in a way I've never experienced.

I reach behind me to unhook my bra, the rational part of my brain silenced by the need coursing through my veins like molten gold. The garment falls away, and Declan's expression transforms into something almost worshipful.

"I've dreamed about this," he confesses, his hands hovering just above my skin, as if waiting for permission. "About you. Every night since that day in Harmon's class when you eviscerated my Hemingway interpretation and I realized I'd do anything to make you look at me like that again."

The admission steals my breath—not just the longing it reveals, but the timeframe. He's wanted me since before our arrangement, before the pretense, before everything that's developed between us. It wasn't convenience or opportunity or strategy that drew him to me. It was me. Just me.

"Touch me," I whisper, the command barely audible above the pounding of my heart.

His hands finally, finally make contact—palms warm and slightly callused as they cup my breasts. His thumbs brush across my nipples, and my back arches involuntarily, seeking more pressure, more friction, more of everything he's making me feel.

Declan lowers his head, replacing one hand with his mouth, and the wet heat of his tongue against my sensitive skin sends electricity arcing through my body. I gasp his

name, fingers tangling in his hair to anchor myself as sensation threatens to overwhelm me.

His free hand traces down my ribcage, across my stomach, coming to rest at the waistband of my panties. Again, he pauses, eyes seeking mine in silent question.

"Yes," I breathe, lifting my hips in invitation. "Please, Declan."

The need in my voice seems to break something loose in him. He sits back on his heels, just looking at me as if committing every curve, every freckle, every imperfection to memory.

"You're staring," I whisper, vulnerability creeping in despite the desire pulsing through me.

"I can't help it," he says simply. "You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Before I can respond to this devastating honesty, he's kissing me again—deeper, hungrier, one hand sliding beneath the elastic of my underwear to find the slick heat at my center. The first touch of his fingers against my most sensitive flesh pulls a moan from deep in my chest.

"Fuck, Ellie," he mutters against my mouth. "You're so wet. So perfect."

His fingers explore with maddening precision, finding spots that make my breath hitch, my hips buck, my mind spiral into incoherence. All the while, his eyes hold mine, watching as pleasure transforms my features, as I come undone beneath his touch.

When he slides one finger inside my pussy, then another, my eyes flutter closed, overwhelmed by sensation.

"Look at me," he commands softly. "I want to see you. All of you."

I force my eyes open, meeting his gaze as his thumb circles my clit in rhythmic pressure that has me climbing rapidly toward release. There's something transcendent in this connection—more intimate than the physical act itself, this sharing of vulnerability, of unguarded reaction.

"That's it," he encourages, his voice tight with his own restraint. "Let go for me, Ellie. I've got you."

The combination of his words, his touch, and the intensity of his gaze sends me hurtling over the edge. My body tenses, then shatters, waves of pleasure radiating outward as his name tears from my throat. He works me through it, gradually slowing his movements as the aftershocks ripple through me.

As I drift back to awareness, I become conscious of his arousal pressed hard against my thigh, of the tension in his body as he holds himself carefully in check. In this moment, I want nothing more than to give him the same release he's given me, to watch him come undone the way I just have.

I place my palm against his chest, gently pushing him back until he's lying on my narrow bed. His eyes follow me, darkened with desire but also questioning, as I shift to straddle his thighs. The hard length of his cock strains against his pants, and I run my palm over it deliberately, savoring the sharp intake of breath this elicits.

"Let me," I murmur, reaching for his belt. "I want to make you feel good."

"Ellie," he breathes my name like a prayer, his hands coming to rest at my waist. "You don't have—"

"I want to," I interrupt, meeting his gaze directly. "I want to see you. All of you." I



echo his earlier words, and the recognition flickers in his eyes, followed by something like surrender.

His head falls back against the pillow as I unbuckle his belt with newfound confidence, then tackle the button and zipper. He lifts his hips to help me as I tug his pants down his muscled thighs, leaving him in just black boxer briefs that do little to conceal his arousal.

I take a moment to simply look at him—the broad expanse of his chest with its light dusting of dark hair, the defined ridges of his abdomen, the powerful thighs that speak of countless hours on the ice.

When I hook my fingers in the waistband of his boxers, his breath catches audibly. His eyes never leave mine as I pull the fabric down, freeing him completely. The sight of his cock—hard, thick, straining, undeniably affected by me—sends another surge of heat through my core.

"Jesus," I breathe. "You could have warned me."

I wrap my fingers around him, feeling the velvet-smooth skin over rigid hardness, the pulse of blood beneath my touch. His eyes flutter closed, a groan escaping from deep in his chest.

"Look at me," I command, just as he did earlier. "I want to see you, Declan."

His eyes snap open, locking with mine as I begin to move my hand, exploring what makes his breath hitch, what draws those delicious sounds from his throat. I vary pressure and speed, learning his body with the same dedication I apply to academic pursuits.

When I lower my head to take him into my mouth, his hands fist in the sheets, his

body going rigid with the effort of maintaining control. The taste of him—clean skin with that indefinable essence that is uniquely Declan—is intoxicating. I explore his dick with my lips and tongue, watching his face transform with pleasure, storing away each reaction for future reference.

"Ellie," he groans, one hand moving to tangle gently in my hair. "God, that feels—I can't—"

The broken sentences, the inability to form coherent thoughts—it's a power I never expected to have over someone like him, and it's intoxicating. I take him deeper, hollowing my cheeks, reveling in the way his hips buck slightly before he forces himself to be still, always careful not to hurt me even in the depths of his pleasure.

"I'm close," he warns, tugging gently at my hair. "Ellie, I'm going to—"

I hold his gaze as I continue the rhythm with my hand and my mouth, sucking his cock, taking him as deep as I can.

The last turn of my wrist seems to break the last of his restraint. His body tenses, head pressing back into the pillow as his release hits him in powerful waves. I watch, transfixed, as pleasure transforms his features, as vulnerability and ecstasy render him completely open, completely unguarded.

There's something sacred in this moment—this gifting of complete trust, of control surrendered. I understand now why he wanted to see my face as I came apart beneath his touch. It's a kind of nakedness beyond the physical, a sharing of something most people keep hidden behind careful masks and practiced performances.

When the last aftershocks have subsided, I grab tissues from my nightstand to clean us both, then crawl up to lie beside him. His arm immediately wraps around me, pulling me against his side as if he can't bear any distance between us.

For long moments, we lie in silence, hearts gradually slowing, breathing synchronizing in the quiet darkness of my room. I trace idle patterns on his chest, feeling the steady thump of his heart beneath my palm.

"That was..." he begins, then shakes his head, apparently lost for words.

"Yeah," I agree, understanding completely. "It was."

He presses a kiss to my temple—that signature gesture that's become so familiar, so precious—before adjusting our positions so I'm tucked perfectly against his side, my head on his chest, his arm secure around my waist.

As sleep begins to claim us both, I feel something shift and settle inside me—a piece long out of place finally clicking into alignment. For the first time since James's betrayal, perhaps for the first time ever, I'm not analyzing, not second-guessing, not maintaining careful emotional distance.

I'm simply being.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

Morning arrives with disorienting brightness, sunlight streaming through blinds I forgot to close. I blink against the glare, momentarily confused by the warm weight pressed against my back, the arm draped over my waist.

Then memory floods back—James appearing at my dorm, Declan staying over, the kisses that turned into so much more, crossing the carefully drawn lines of our arrangement. Declan is still here, still in my bed, his breathing deep and even against my neck.

Carefully, not wanting to wake him, I shift to face him. In sleep, Declan looks younger, the careful control he maintains in waking hours softened into vulnerability. A lock of dark hair falls across his forehead, his impossibly long lashes casting shadows on his cheeks. I resist the urge to trace the strong line of his jaw, the slight cleft in his chin.

His eyes flutter open, focusing on me with momentary confusion that quickly transforms into a slow, warm smile. "Morning," he murmurs, voice rough with sleep.

"Morning," I reply, suddenly self-conscious about bedhead and all the unglamorous realities of waking up beside someone.

But Declan doesn't seem to notice or care. His hand finds mine beneath the covers, fingers intertwining with casual intimacy. "Sleep okay?"

"Better than I have in months," I admit, the honesty surprising me.

His smile widens, transforming his face with boyish delight. "Me too."

We lie there for a moment, studying each other in the morning light, the air between us charged with unasked questions and unspoken confessions.

"So," he finally says. "That happened."

"It did."

"Regrets?"

The directness of his question catches me off guard, but I appreciate it. No games, no pretense. "No," I say after a moment's consideration. "You?"

"Not a single one." His thumb traces circles on my palm, the simple touch sending shivers up my arm. "Should we talk about it?" he asks, though his eyes drop to my lips in a way that suggests talking isn't foremost on his mind.

He's right. We should define boundaries, discuss what last night means for our arrangement. But right now, in the golden morning light, with his body warm against mine and his eyes still soft with sleep, talking seems overrated.

"Later," I murmur, leaning in to press my lips against his.

His lips meet mine with a hunger that matches my own, everything else forgotten in the heated exchange. My body responds instantly, nerve endings firing like sparks as his hand slides rest against the bare skin of my waist. His touch is tentative, exploring, asking permission with each inch gained.

"Ellie," he murmurs against my mouth, my name a question and a prayer.

I answer by deepening the kiss, my fingers threading through his hair, pulling him closer. The line we crossed last night is miles behind us now, the pretense of our

arrangement falling away like autumn leaves in a storm. This is real—the hammering of my heart, the electricity where our skin meets, the bone-deep certainty that I want this man in ways I never planned.

His palm slides higher, skimming my ribcage, stopping just short of my breast. Even now, he's giving me control, letting me set the pace, the boundaries. The realization makes something twist in my chest—a tangled knot of desire and fear and something dangerously close to falling.

My phone buzzes from the bedside table, breaking the moment. I reach for it reluctantly, expecting Mia with a thousand questions about my evening.

Instead, I find a text from a number I don't recognize: You two look cozy. Guess Declan found his perfect good-girl cover story. Enjoy it while it lasts.

Attached is a photo taken through what must be my dorm room window—Declan and me, asleep in my bed, his arm around me, my head on his chest. The angle is from below, probably from the courtyard outside, but clear enough to identify us both.

Ice floods my veins as implications crash through me. Someone has been watching us. Someone knows about our arrangement.

"What's wrong?" Declan asks, immediately alert to my changed demeanor.

Wordlessly, I hand him the phone. His expression darkens as he reads, the muscle in his jaw ticking with tension.

"Kaitlyn," he says, the name a curse. "Has to be."

"Your ex?" I remember Mia mentioning someone Declan dated casually for a while, a flash of blond hair moving through the crowd at the Sigma party. God, that seems so

long ago now.

“She was never my girlfriend.”

“How would she know about our arrangement?”

Declan runs a hand through his already disheveled hair, reluctance written across his features. "She... guessed, after seeing us together. Called me out on it last week."

The revelation lands like a slap. "And you didn't think to mention this?"

"I handled it," he says, defensive. "Or I thought I did. Told her she was wrong, that what you and I have is real."

"But it's not," I say automatically, then wince at the hurt that flashes across his face. "I mean, it wasn't. When she confronted you."

"No," he agrees, his voice carefully neutral. "It wasn't then."

The implication hangs between us—that it is real now, or becoming so. But the text message has cast a shadow over the fragile new thing growing between us, reminding us of how this whole thing started.

"We need to be careful," I say, pushing myself into a sitting position, putting more space between us. "If someone's watching, taking photos..." The intrusion makes me shiver.

"I'll deal with Kaitlyn," Declan says, his tone hardening. "This stops now."

"How?" I challenge. "By confirming her suspicions? By telling her she's right, that this whole thing has been fake from the start?"

"Nothing about last night was fake," he says fiercely. "Nothing about how I feel when I'm with you is fake."

The intensity of his declaration steals my breath. This is so far from the arrangement we agreed to. This is messy and complicated.

And I'm falling headlong into it, despite every instinct for self-preservation screaming at me to retreat.

"I should get to practice," Declan says when I don't respond. "Coach scheduled an early session before tomorrow's game." He hesitates, searching my face. "Will you be there? The game?"

"Of course," I say, the answer automatic now. "I said I would."

Relief softens his features. "We'll figure this out, Ellie. The picture, Kaitlyn, all of it." He leans forward, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead. "And... us. We'll figure us out too."

Us. Such a small word to hold so much terrifying potential.

I watch him gather his things, transform back into the public version of himself—Declan Wolfe, hockey star, campus celebrity. But now I've seen behind the mask, glimpsed the vulnerability beneath the confidence, felt the tenderness in hands built for dominance on the ice.

At the door, he pauses. "Text me later?"

I nod, not trusting my voice. When the door closes behind him, I collapse back onto my bed, emotions swirling like autumn leaves in a windstorm. The sheets still smell like him—that indefinable mix of clean laundry, expensive cologne, and something



uniquely Declan that makes my body respond even in his absence.

I close my eyes, drifting in and out of sleep until my phone buzzes again. With a surge of anxiety, I check it, half-expecting more threats from Kaitlyn.

Instead, it's Mia: EMERGENCY. Meet me at Central Café ASAP. The internet is exploding.

I'm showered, dressed and out the door in record time, my still-damp hair pulled into a messy bun, minimal makeup applied to hide the sleepless shadows under my eyes. The crisp morning air clears my head somewhat, but anxiety churns in my stomach as I speed-walk across campus.

Central Café is crowded with Saturday morning students seeking caffeine and carbs to remedy Friday night's excesses. I spot Mia at our usual corner booth, her expression grim as she scrolls through her phone.

"What's happening?" I ask, sliding in across from her.

She pushes her phone toward me without a word. On the screen is an Instagram post from Westford Confessions, the anonymous campus gossip account that thrives on exposing secrets and scandals. The photo is the same one sent to my phone—Declan and me asleep in my bed—but the caption makes my blood run cold:

Spotted: Hockey golden boy @DeclanWolfe9 slumming it with transfer student. Sources say it's all for show—a fake relationship to keep Coach happy and NHL scouts impressed with his "maturity." Bad luck for the dozens of girls he's strung along this year. #FakeNews #ReputationRehab

"It's everywhere," Mia says quietly. "Twitter, Snapchat, the campus forum. Someone's on a mission to expose you guys."

Nausea rises in my throat. This is exactly what I feared from the beginning—public humiliation, my private life turned into campus entertainment. And worse, the exposure of our arrangement before it served its purpose for either of us.

"Who would do this?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Three guesses, and the first two don't count," Mia says grimly. "Tall, blonde, swims like a fish, dated Declan last semester?"

"Kaitlyn," I confirm. "She texted me the photo this morning. But how did she even know? How did she get that picture?"

"The real question," Mia says, leaning forward, "is what you're going to do about it."

I stare at her blankly. "What can I do? The truth is out there now. The whole campus knows our relationship was fake."

"Was?" She raises an eyebrow. "Past tense?"

Heat floods my cheeks. "It's... complicated."

"Holy shit," she breathes, eyes widening. "Something happened. Spill. Now."

Before I can respond, the café door swings open, and the ambient noise drops instantly. Declan stands in the entrance, scanning the room until his eyes lock on mine. He's fresh from practice, hair still damp, wearing Westford sweats and an expression of thunderous determination.

Every eye in the café follows his progress as he strides directly to our booth, ignoring the whispers. Without hesitation, he slides in beside me, his arm draping over my shoulders in a gesture that's become familiar but now feels like a declaration.

"Morning," he says to Mia, his voice perfectly casual, as if the entire campus isn't watching our every move. "Mind if I steal your breakfast date?"

Mia's eyes dart between us, a mixture of amusement and concern in her expression. "All yours," she says, gathering her things. "But fair warning—you two are trending."

"I know," Declan says grimly.

"Call me later," Mia says, and then she's gone.

"You okay?" Declan asks softly.

The tenderness in his voice, the genuine concern in his eyes—it melts something frozen inside me. Whatever else is happening, whatever complications swirl around us, this feels real. He feels real.

"I've been better," I admit. "The whole campus thinks I'm a pathetic loser who had to fake-date the hockey star."

"Actually," he corrects, "they think I'm the desperate one who needed a fake girlfriend to salvage my reputation." His thumb traces circles on my shoulder, a soothing gesture that's become second nature. "But neither of those things is true, is it?"

The question hangs between us, heavy with implication. We started this arrangement for calculated reasons—his need for a stable image, my desire for academic advancement. But somewhere along the way, calculation gave way to genuine feeling. Performance became reality.

"No," I say softly. "Not anymore."

Relief softens his features. "Good. Because I have a plan."

"A plan?" Wariness creeps into my voice. Declan's plans are what got us into this mess to begin with.

"We don't deny it," he says, leaning closer. "We own it. Yes, we started dating as an arrangement. Yes, it began as something strategic. But then..."

"Then what?" I prompt when he hesitates.

His eyes hold mine, intense and unwavering. "Then I fell for you. For real. The smart, sharp-tongued girl who calls me on my bullshit and makes me want to be better. The girl who sees past the hockey star to the actual person underneath."

My heart hammers against my ribs, emotions tangling in my chest—hope, fear, desire, doubt. "Is that true?" I whisper, needing to hear it plainly, without performance or calculation.

"Every word," he says, his voice rough with sincerity. "I'm done pretending, Ellie. I want a real relationship with you. No arrangement, no expiration date. Just us, figuring it out together."

The café seems to fade around us, the audience of curious students disappearing from my awareness. There's only Declan—his eyes holding mine, his hand warm against my skin, his words echoing in the space between us.

"People will think I'm just another conquest," I say, giving voice to my deepest fear. "The plain academic you seduced as part of some game."

"Let them," he says fiercely. "We know the truth. And eventually, they'll see it too."

I want to believe him. Want to believe that this gorgeous, talented man with his bright future and endless options could genuinely choose me—quiet, serious, academically focused me. But doubt gnaws at the edges, fed by years of insecurity and the recent wound of James's betrayal.

"I need time," I say finally. "To think, to process. This is all happening so fast."

Disappointment flickers across his face, but he nods, respecting my boundaries even now. "Take all the time you need," he says, pressing a kiss to my temple as he slides out of the booth. "I'll be at the arena later if you want to talk more."

I watch him walk away, aware of the dozens of eyes tracking his movements, the whispers that follow in his wake. When the door closes behind him, the café erupts in excited chatter, and I sink lower in my seat, wishing I could disappear.

My phone buzzes with a text from Mia: Need extraction?

I look around and spot her at a table a few feet away.

She never left.

I smile despite myself. Yes. Emergency ice cream required.

She appears back at my side moments later, linking her arm through mine as we exit under the collective scrutiny of what feels like the entire student body. "For the record," she says as we escape into the crisp morning air, "that man is completely gone for you. Fake relationship or not."

Her certainty should be comforting. Instead, it feeds the anxiety writhing in my stomach. Because if this is real—if Declan's feelings for me are genuine—then I have so much more to lose when it inevitably falls apart.

And things like this always fall apart. My mother taught me that when she walked away without a backward glance. James reinforced the lesson when he chose momentary pleasure over our future together.

People leave. Happiness is temporary. Love is unreliable.

These are the truths I've built my life around, the protective walls I've constructed to survive. And now Declan Wolfe—with his ocean eyes and gentle hands and fierce declarations—is systematically dismantling them, brick by carefully laid brick.

The hockey arena pulses with energy, bodies pressed together in the stands, collective breath fogging in the cold air above the ice. I sit in what has become "my" seat in the family section, Declan's jersey hanging loose over my thermal shirt, my hands wrapped around a cup of hot chocolate that does little to warm the chill inside me.

I've spent the entire time since the cafe in a fog of confusion, turning over Declan's words, his touch, the sincerity in his eyes when he said he wanted something real. Part of me—the romantic, hopeful part I thought died with my mother's abandonment—wants desperately to believe him. To leap into whatever this is becoming, consequences be damned.

But the rational, self-protective part remains skeptical, cataloging all the reasons this can't possibly work. He's Declan Wolfe—campus royalty, future professional athlete, scion of privilege. I'm Ellie Gardner—transfer student, academic hermit, supposed good-girl.

"You look like you're contemplating world peace or nuclear annihilation," Caroline Wolfe says, settling into the seat beside me with her usual elegant grace. "Possibly both."

I force a smile, still uncomfortable with the easy way she's accepted me into their

family circle despite the artificial nature of my relationship with her son. "Just pre-game nerves," I lie.

Her knowing look suggests she's not fooled. "I saw the post," she says quietly. "The one claiming your relationship with Declan is... strategic."

My blood runs cold. Of course she's seen it. The entire campus has seen it, shared it, commented on it. Why would I think Declan's parents would be immune?

"Mrs. Wolfe—"

"Caroline," she corrects automatically.

"Caroline," I amend. "I can explain—"

"No need." She pats my hand, her smile gentle but her eyes sharp with perception. "Relationships begin for all sorts of reasons, Ellie. Some for convenience, some for passion, some for practical considerations." She glances toward the ice, where the teams are warming up. "What matters isn't how they start, but how they evolve. How they transform."

I stare at her, caught off guard by the absence of judgment in her voice. "You're not... upset?"

"About what? That my son recognized a quality young woman and found a way to bring her into his life?" Her laugh is soft, genuinely amused. "Declan has always been resourceful. And he's never looked at anyone the way he looks at you, regardless of how it began."

Before I can process this unexpected perspective, the crowd roars as the players take their positions for the opening face-off. I spot Declan immediately, his focus absolute

as he crouches at center ice. Just before the puck drops, his eyes lift to the family section, finding me with unerring accuracy. The ghost of a smile touches his lips before his game face returns, all business as the referee releases the puck.

The game unfolds with brutal intensity, bodies colliding, sticks clashing, the crowd a living entity that breathes and roars with each turn of play. Declan is magnificent—fierce and graceful, dominating the ice with a skill that makes even my untrained eye recognize his exceptional talent.

By the second period, Westford leads 2-1, both goals assisted by Declan though he hasn't scored himself. The crowd chants his name with each possession, a rhythmic thundering that reverberates through the arena. I feel a strange mix of pride and unease—pride in his obvious skill, unease at the public adoration that follows him everywhere.

During a break in play, Caroline leans closer, her voice pitched for my ears alone. "Richard won't be joining us tonight," she says, a hint of something—relief? frustration?—coloring her tone. "Business dinner in the city."

"Oh," I respond, unsure what she expects from me. "That's... too bad."

Her smile turns knowing. "It's not, actually. I love my husband, but his... reservations about you were becoming tiresome."

"Reservations?" I echo, though I'm not surprised. Richard Wolfe's assessment of me at dinner had been clear enough.

"He has very specific ideas about Declan's future," she explains, a shadow crossing her elegant features. "About the kind of partner who would best advance the Wolfe family interests."



"And I'm not it," I conclude flatly.

"You're not what he expected," she corrects. "But expectations can change, Ellie. Richard will come around, especially when he sees how happy you make our son."

The confidence in her statement—as if my relationship with Declan is a foregone conclusion, a permanent fixture rather than the complicated, undefined thing it currently is—unsettles me. I'm saved from having to respond by a surge in the crowd's energy as Westford's offensive line drives toward the opposing goal.

Declan has the puck, skating with a speed and precision that draws gasps even from the opposing team's fans. He weaves between defenders, stick handling with casual mastery, then suddenly passes—a no-look behind-the-back feed that lands perfectly on his teammate's stick. Brady one-times it into the net, and the arena erupts.

The team mobs Brady, but it's Declan they're celebrating—the architect of the play, the leader whose vision created the opportunity. As they skate back to the bench, Declan's eyes find me again, a question in them that I can read even from this distance: Are you watching? Are you impressed? Are you mine?

I smile, a small acknowledgment that yes, I see him. Yes, I recognize his brilliance on the ice. But the other questions—the ones about us, about what's real and what's pretense—those remain unanswered, churning in my chest like a storm-tossed sea.

The third period passes in a blur of tension and release, East Ridge ultimately securing a 4-2 victory that sends the crowd into ecstatic celebration. Caroline excuses herself to speak with some university officials, leaving me alone in the family section as I wait for Declan to emerge from the locker room.

I check my phone to pass the time, finding a barrage of texts from Mia ( OMG DID YOU SEE THAT ASSIST? ) and one from an unknown number: Hope you enjoyed

the show. Ice princesses like you never keep his attention for long.

My stomach twists with a familiar anxiety. Another message from Kaitlyn, presumably. Her campaign to undermine whatever is developing between Declan and me seems to be escalating, from public exposure to personal intimidation.

"There's my girl."

I look up to find Declan approaching, freshly showered, his damp hair curling slightly at the ends. He's dressed in dark jeans and a blue button-down that makes his eyes look impossibly bright. The possessive note in his greeting— my girl —sends a complicated flutter through my chest.

"Great game," I say, forcing a smile despite the turmoil inside me. "That assist was incredible."

"You noticed?" His face lights up with boyish pleasure, transforming his features from handsome to breathtaking. "I wasn't sure you'd understand the significance."

"Your mother explained it," I admit. "Along with most of the rules. She's surprisingly knowledgeable about hockey."

"She should be. She played in college." I try to picture Caroline on the ice, and somehow, it works. She has a fieriness inside of her that seems suited to the game. Declan takes my hand, fingers intertwining with mine as if it's the most natural thing in the world. "Victory party at the hockey house. Come with me?"

The invitation catches me off guard. We've carefully avoided the hockey house parties during our arrangement—too public, too many people who might see through our performance. But now, with our "relationship" exposed and in flux, the old boundaries no longer apply.

"I don't really do parties," I hedge.

"One hour," he bargains, his thumb tracing circles on my palm in a way that makes rational thought difficult. "Just long enough for me to make an appearance, then we can go somewhere quiet and talk. Really talk."

The sincerity in his voice, the vulnerability beneath the confidence—it disarms me as it always does. "Fine," I concede. "One hour."

His smile is worth the anxiety twisting in my gut. He pulls me into a hug, his arms strong around me, his lips pressing a kiss to my temple—that signature gesture that's become as familiar as my own heartbeat.

The hockey house is already pulsing with celebration when we arrive, music throbbing through the floorboards, bodies packed into every available space. The team's arrival—led by Declan, with me at his side—triggers a new wave of cheers and raised cups.

"WOLFE!" Brady appears, already well on his way to intoxication, throwing an arm around Declan's shoulders. "Fucking brilliant feed, man! Didn't even see you looking!"

"Wasn't looking," Declan confirms with a grin. "Just knew you'd be there."

"Damn right I was." Brady's attention shifts to me, his smile warming further. "Ellie! You're actually at a party! Voluntarily!"

"Miracles never cease," I say dryly.

Brady laughs, genuinely delighted. "I like her, Wolfe. Keep this one." He leans in conspiratorially. "He's useless without you, you know. All mopey and distracted

before you came along."

"Brady," Declan warns, but there's no heat in it.

"What?" Brady feigns innocence. "Just telling your girl the truth. You were a disaster after Kaitlyn—"

"And that's enough of that," Declan interrupts, his expression tightening. "Drinks? Ellie?"

"Water," I request, my mind caught on Brady's casual revelation. After Kaitlyn. What happened with Kaitlyn that left Declan a "disaster"? And why hasn't he mentioned it?

Declan disappears toward the kitchen, leaving me with Brady, who seems to realize he's stumbled into sensitive territory. "Sorry," he says, surprisingly perceptive despite his intoxication. "Didn't mean to bring up ancient history."

"It's fine," I assure him, though it isn't. "Declan's past relationships aren't my business."

Brady studies me, his expression turning serious. "Look, I don't know what's going on with you two—the rumors, the posts, all that drama. But I know my best friend. And he's different with you. Better." He glances toward the kitchen. "Don't let Kaitlyn's bullshit fool you. She's just pissed because he finally found someone real."

Before I can respond to this unexpected vote of confidence, a commotion near the front door draws our attention. The crowd parts like the Red Sea, revealing a group of girls making an entrance clearly designed to be noticed. At their center, like a queen among courtiers, stands Kaitlyn—stunning in a dress that barely covers the essentials, her blonde hair gleaming under the party lights.

Her eyes scan the room with predatory focus, landing on me with a smile that sends ice down my spine. She whispers something to her friends, who giggle in response, then begins making her way toward me with deliberate slowness.

"Shit," Brady mutters beside me. He glances toward the kitchen again. "Declan's gonna lose it."

As if summoned by his name, Declan emerges from the kitchen, drinks in hand. He freezes when he spots Kaitlyn, his expression shifting from relaxed to thunderous in an instant. She sees him at the same moment, her smile widening as she changes course, heading directly for him instead of me.

I watch, stomach churning, as she reaches him—pressing her body against his in a greeting that's deliberately provocative, her lips close to his ear as she says something that makes his jaw clench. He steps back immediately, putting space between them, but the damage is done. The entire party is watching now, phones raised to capture whatever drama is unfolding.

Declan says something to her, his expression hard, then pushes past to continue toward me. But Kaitlyn follows, her voice carrying over the music: "Running back to your fake girlfriend, Declan? How sweet."

The room quiets, anticipation hanging heavy in the air. Declan reaches me, his face a mask of controlled fury as he hands me a water bottle. "We're leaving," he says, his voice tight. "Now."

"But we just got here," I point out, even as relief floods through me at the prospect of escape.

"Trust me," he says, his voice dropping lower. "You don't want to be here for what comes next."

Before I can ask what he means, Kaitlyn appears at his shoulder, her smile venomous as she looks me up and down. "So this is her," she says, as if I'm not standing right there. "Your little academic project. Gotta say, I expected more from the girl who supposedly 'changed' Declan Wolfe."

Heat rises to my cheeks—embarrassment, anger, the humiliation of being assessed and dismissed in front of an audience. But before I can form a response, Declan steps slightly in front of me, a subtle shield against Kaitlyn's venom.

"Back off, Kait," he says, his voice dangerously quiet. "You've made your point. Now leave Ellie alone."

"Or what?" she challenges, alcohol and bitterness making her reckless. "You'll pretend to date her even harder?" She turns to the watching crowd. "You all know it's fake, right? He asked me first—wanted me to play the role of reformed girlfriend so Coach would stop riding his ass about partying." Her laugh is harsh, brittle. "I said no, so he found someone desperate enough to say yes."

The words land like physical blows, each one striking deeper than the last. He asked me first. He asked me first. He asked me first.

I stare at Declan, waiting for him to deny it, to say it's a lie designed to hurt us both. But the guilt in his eyes, the muscle jumping in his jaw—they confirm what I already know in my gut to be true.

"Ellie," he begins, reaching for me. "I can explain—"

I step back, away from his touch, away from the truth crashing down around me. The room spins slightly, faces blurring as tears threaten. Not here. I will not break down here, in front of everyone, in front of her.

"I have to go," I whisper, turning blindly toward the exit.

"Ellie, wait!" Declan calls after me, but I'm already pushing through the crowd, desperate for air, for space, for escape from the humiliation burning through me.

Outside, the night air hits my lungs in a rush, cold and clarifying. I gulp it down, wrapping my arms around myself as I stride away from the hockey house, away from the whispers and stares, away from the revelation that I was never his first choice—just the available option when his preferred candidate declined.

Footsteps pound behind me, and then Declan is there, catching my arm, turning me to face him. "Ellie, please," he begs, his expression raw with emotion. "Let me explain."

"Explain what?" I demand, anger pushing through the hurt. "That you asked your ex-girlfriend to fake-date you before you settled for me? That I was just convenient when she said no?"

"It wasn't like that," he insists, his hands reaching for mine. I pull away, needing distance to think clearly. "Yes, I approached Kaitlyn first. But that was before—before I knew you, before everything changed."

"Nothing's changed," I say bitterly. "This was always an arrangement, always a performance. The only difference is now I know I wasn't even your first choice for the role."

"You were the only choice that mattered," he says, his voice dropping to that rough register that usually makes my knees weak. Now it just feeds the anger burning in my chest. "Kaitlyn was a mistake—I was desperate, not thinking clearly. The moment I really saw you, really talked to you... Ellie, there's been no one else since."

I want to believe him. God, how I want to believe him. But the evidence of my own

experience screams caution—James's promises of fidelity, my mother's assurances of love, all proven false when tested.

"I need space," I say finally, struggling to keep my voice steady. "Time to think."

"Don't do this," he pleads, a vulnerability in his expression I've never seen before. "Don't let Kaitlyn win. Don't let her ruin what's real between us."

"Is it real?" I challenge, the question that's been haunting me since our first kiss. "Or just another performance that got too convincing?"

The hurt that flashes across his face makes something twist in my chest, but I hold firm. I need answers, need truth, need to understand what's happening between us before I fall any deeper into this quicksand of emotion.

"You know the answer to that," he says quietly. "Last night wasn't fake. This morning wasn't fake. The way I look at you, touch you, want you—none of that is fake, Ellie."

His words stir something molten in my core, memories of his hands on my skin, his lips against mine. But doubt persists, a persistent shadow over the brightness of what might be growing between us.

"I need to go," I say again, taking another step back. "Please, Declan. Just... give me time."

For a moment, I think he might refuse, might pursue this confrontation to its bitter end right here on the street. But then his shoulders slump slightly, resignation replacing the desperate intensity in his eyes.

"Okay," he concedes. "Time. But Ellie, don't shut me out completely. Please."



The vulnerability in his voice nearly breaks my resolve. "I won't," I promise softly. "I just need to think."

He nods, accepting this small concession. "Let me walk you back to your dorm at least. It's late, and after everything with Kaitlyn..."

"I'll be fine," I assure him, though the thought of walking across campus alone after the emotional turmoil of the evening is less than appealing. But I need the solitude, need space to process the chaotic swirl of emotions threatening to drown me.

"Text me when you get there?" he asks, his concern touching even through the hurt.

"I will," I agree.

He takes a step toward me, hesitates, then says, "For what it's worth, I never meant to hurt you. And I've never regretted anything less than asking you to be part of this arrangement, whatever it started as."

The sincerity in his voice, the raw honesty in his eyes—they chip away at the wall of anger and betrayal I'm trying to maintain. Before I can respond, he turns and walks back toward the hockey house, his shoulders set in a rigid line that speaks of restraint, of respect for my boundaries even at cost to himself.

I watch until he disappears inside, then turn and begin the long walk back to my dorm, tears finally falling freely in the darkness, where no one can witness my weakness.

He asked me first. He asked me first. He asked me first.

The words repeat in my head like a toxic mantra, feeding the insecurity that's haunted me since childhood—that I'm not enough, not worthy, not the one people choose

when given options.

But beneath the hurt, another voice whispers insistently: He chose you anyway. He's choosing you still, even when it's hard, even when it's messy. Even when he could walk away without consequence.

By the time I reach my dorm, exhaustion has settled into my bones, emotional and physical. I text Declan as promised—a simple Home safe that feels inadequate but is all I can manage. His response comes instantly: Sleep well. I'm here when you're ready to talk.

I collapse onto my bed, still fully clothed, curling around the hollow ache in my chest. The sheets still carry the faint scent of him from this morning—was it only this morning?—when everything seemed possible, when the line between fake and real had blurred beyond recognition.

Now clarity has returned with brutal force. This began as an arrangement, a convenient fiction to serve our separate purposes. That Declan may have developed genuine feelings along the way doesn't change the fundamental dishonesty at its core—or the fact that I was his second choice when crafting this scheme.

Sleep eludes me, my mind replaying every moment between us, searching for signs I missed, clues to his true intentions. When dawn finally breaks, I've reached no conclusions, only a bone-deep certainty that whatever is developing between Declan and me is far more complicated, far more real, and far more dangerous than either of us anticipated.

And I have no idea what to do about it.

## Page 8

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The next three days pass in a blur of avoidance and anxiety. I skip the one class Declan and I share, having Mia deliver my portion of our project notes with strict instructions not to engage beyond the academic. I take new routes across campus, eat at odd hours, and retreat to the sanctuary of the library's most obscure corners.

His texts come regularly—respectful but persistent, never demanding a response but making it clear he's waiting, hoping. Take all the time you need, but know I'm here. And: I miss you, Ellie. When you're ready to talk, I'll tell you everything. And finally, simply: I'm sorry. For all of it. But not for falling for you.

Each one lands like a stone in the still pond of my carefully maintained detachment, sending ripples through my determination to keep emotional distance. Each one makes me question whether I'm protecting myself from genuine hurt or simply avoiding the risk inherent in opening myself to genuine connection.

By Wednesday evening, restlessness drives me from my dorm room, the walls closing in after days of self-imposed isolation. The campus is quiet, most students at dinner or beginning their midweek partying ritual. I walk aimlessly, letting my feet guide me while my mind continues its circular argument about Declan, about trust, about the feasibility of something real growing from such artificial beginnings.

I'm so lost in thought that I don't immediately register where I've ended up—standing outside the library's east entrance, staring at a familiar figure seated on a bench, head bent over a notebook, pen moving across the page with deliberate focus.

Declan.

Even in profile, backlit by the library's outdoor lamps, he's breathtaking—all sharp angles and strong lines, intensity radiating from his concentrated posture. He's dressed simply in jeans and a black hoodie, his hair falling across his forehead as he writes. This version of him—the student, the thinker, far removed from the hockey star or campus celebrity—still surprises me, still contradicts the easy stereotypes I initially assigned him.

I could walk away. Should walk away, before he notices me. But my feet refuse to move, frozen in the moment of decision—retreat to safety or advance into the unknown complications of whatever exists between us.

Before I can choose, he looks up, some sixth sense alerting him to my presence. For a heartbeat, we simply stare at each other across the twenty feet of concrete and carefully tended shrubbery that separate us. Then he closes his notebook slowly, tucking it into his bag without breaking eye contact, as if afraid I'll vanish if he looks away.

"Ellie," he says, just loud enough to carry to where I stand. Not a question, not a demand. Simply an acknowledgment of my presence, leaving the next move entirely to me.

I could still walk away. But the hollow ache that's been living in my chest throbs with renewed intensity, demanding resolution, closure— or something far more frightening.

My feet move of their own volition, carrying me toward him until I'm standing a few feet away, arms crossed protectively across my chest. "What are you doing here?" I ask, my voice sounding strange to my own ears.

"Waiting," he says simply.

"For what?"

"For you."

The directness of his answer steals my breath. "How did you know I'd come this way?"

He shrugs, a small smile touching his lips. "I didn't. I've been at different spots on campus every evening. Quad on Monday, coffee shop yesterday, here tonight." His expression turns rueful. "Was planning to work my way through all your usual haunts until you were ready to see me."

The revelation silences me momentarily. He's been strategically positioning himself in my path, not to force a confrontation, but to be available when I was ready. The consideration in this approach—the respect for my boundaries while still demonstrating his commitment—touches something deep inside me.

"Can I?" I gesture to the bench beside him.

Relief washes over his features as he slides over to make room. "Of course."

I sit, maintaining a careful few inches between us, my hands clasped tightly in my lap to resist the treacherous impulse to reach for him. For a moment, we sit in silence, the evening air cool around us, the library's lights casting long shadows across the walkway.

"I owe you an explanation," he finally says. "About Kaitlyn. About how this all started."

"Yes," I agree. "You do."

He takes a deep breath, as if bracing himself. "Kaitlyn and I dated last semester. It was casual—at least, I thought it was. I was seeing other people, and I thought she was too."

"How many other people?"

"It got bad enough that Coach noticed, started questioning my judgment, my stability. With NHL scouts coming to watch, the timing couldn't have been worse."

"So you needed a girlfriend," I surmise. "A stable, drama-free relationship to convince him you were focused."

"Yes," Declan admits. "And in a moment of desperation, I approached Kaitlyn. Thought if she would go along with it for a little while, that Coach would back off."

"But she refused."

"She wanted more than I could give her," he says carefully. "Commitment, exclusivity, public declarations. Things I wasn't ready for, especially not with her."

"So you found someone else to play the role," I say, unable to keep the hurt from my voice. "Someone who wouldn't demand those things. Someone who had her own reasons for agreeing to the arrangement."

"Yes," he acknowledges, not defending himself, simply stating the truth. "But Ellie, the moment I really got to know you—not just as the scary-smart girl from class, but as you—everything changed."

"How?" I challenge, needing to hear him articulate what I've been feeling, needing confirmation that I'm not alone in this confusing evolution from false to genuine.

He turns toward me fully, his eyes intent on mine. "You challenge me. Not just academically, but fundamentally. You see through the bullshit, the performance I put on for everyone else. You expect more from me, and it makes me want to be more." His hand lifts, hesitates, then settles back in his lap—respecting my unspoken boundaries even now. "I started falling for you that day in the coffee shop, when you called me on my assumptions and refused to be impressed by anything except the content of my character."

The sincerity in his voice, the vulnerability in his expression—they disarm my defenses, silencing the cynical voice that insists this is just another performance, another role he's playing to get what he wants.

"I was never playing a role with you," he continues softly. "Maybe at the very beginning, but it stopped being fake so quickly I barely noticed the transition. All I knew was that suddenly, the arrangement didn't matter anymore. You did."

"And what about now?" I ask, the question that's been haunting me since our first real kiss. "What is this between us, Declan? What are we doing?"

"Whatever you want," he says without hesitation. "Friends, academic partners, something more—I'm in, Ellie. For however much or little you're willing to give. But I'm done pretending what I feel for you isn't real."

My heart thunders in my chest, his words simultaneously terrifying and exhilarating. This is so far from the controlled arrangement we began with, so far from the safe, defined parameters I thought I wanted.

"I'm scared," I admit, the confession costing me more than he can know. "Not just of you, or of us, but of what happens when this ends. Because things like this always end, Declan. People leave. They change their minds. They find someone better, someone who fits more neatly into their world."

"Is that what you think will happen?" he asks softly. "That I'll wake up one day and decide you're not worth the effort? That I'll want someone who doesn't challenge me, doesn't push me to be better?"

Put that way, it sounds absurd, paranoid even. But the fear remains, bone-deep and persistent. "You're going to the NHL," I point out. "I'm going to Columbia. Those worlds don't exactly align."

"They can," he insists. "If we want them to. Look, I'm not asking for promises or guarantees, Ellie. I'm just asking for a chance—a real chance, no arrangements, no performances. Just us figuring it out together, one day at a time."

The hope in his eyes, the earnestness in his voice—they crumble the last of my resistance. Because the truth, the terrifying, exhilarating truth, is that I want this too. Want him, want us, want the chance to discover what might grow between us without the artificial constraints of our original deal.

"One day at a time," I agree softly.

The smile that breaks across his face is like sunrise after the longest night, transforming his features with a joy so genuine it steals my breath. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I confirm, a small laugh escaping me at his boyish enthusiasm. "But I need honesty, Declan. Complete honesty, even when it's hard. I can't do this if I'm always wondering what you're not telling me, what's performance and what's real."

"Absolute honesty," he promises immediately. "Starting now. Ask me anything, and I'll tell you the truth. No matter what."

I consider this, the dozens of questions still swirling in my mind. But one rises to the surface, the one I need answered before we go any further: "Why me? Really. After



Kaitlyn said no, why did you choose me specifically?"

He doesn't hesitate. "Because you scared me," he admits, a small smile playing at his lips. "You were the only person on campus who looked at me and saw nothing special, nothing worth impressing. You expected me to earn your respect, not just coast on reputation or charm." His eyes hold mine, intense and sincere. "I needed that, Ellie. Needed someone who wouldn't let me hide behind the performance, who would demand the real me. Even though I didn't realize it at the time."

The answer settles something inside me, a question I've been afraid to fully articulate even to myself. Not that I was second choice, but that I was somehow less—less beautiful, less social, less suitable for someone like him. But his answer suggests the opposite—that what drew him to me, what continues to draw him to me, are precisely the qualities that make me different from the Kaitlyns of his world.

"Okay," I say, unclenching my hands from their tight grip in my lap. "One day at a time. Real, not fake. No arrangement, no expiration date."

"No arrangement," he echoes, relief and joy mingling in his expression. "Except the kind where I get to take you to dinner right now."

"I'd like that," I admit.

He stands, offering his hand—a question, not a demand. After only a moment's hesitation, I take it, let him pull me gently to my feet. His fingers intertwine with mine, warm and solid and real.

"Where to?" I ask, suddenly ravenous now that the emotional turmoil has ebbed.

"My place," he suggests, then quickly adds, "I'll cook. No pressure, no expectations. Just food." His thumb traces my knuckles, sending shivers up my arm.

The memory of his lips on mine, his hands exploring with careful restraint—it sends heat spiraling through me, settling low in my abdomen

As we walk across campus, his hand warm around mine, I feel something shifting inside me—fear giving way to cautious hope, doubt to tentative trust.

One day at a time, I remind myself. No arrangements, no performances. Just us, figuring it out together.

It's enough. For now, it's enough.

Declan's apartment is nothing like I imagined. Located in one of the upscale complexes near campus, it's spacious but not ostentatious, the furniture comfortable rather than trendy, the walls lined with books that show signs of actual reading rather than decorative display.

"This is... unexpected," I admit, turning slowly to take in the space as he moves confidently around the open-concept kitchen, pulling ingredients from the refrigerator.

"Good unexpected or bad unexpected?" he asks, glancing up from chopping vegetables.

"Good," I clarify. "I was expecting..."

"Hockey trophies and beer pong tables?" he suggests with a knowing smile.

"Something like that," I acknowledge, moving to the bookshelf that takes up an entire wall of the living room. The collection is eclectic—classic literature, modern fiction, poetry, biographies, books on hockey strategy and sports psychology. Many show signs of wear, dog-eared pages and cracked spines indicating frequent handling.

"My grandfather was an English professor at Princeton," Declan explains, noticing my interest. "Most of these were his. He left them to me when he died my junior year of high school."

Another piece of the Declan puzzle clicks into place—his unexpected literary knowledge, his appreciation for poetry, the depth beneath the surface I've been gradually discovering.

"You were close," I surmise, running my fingers along the spines, noting the careful organization by author and genre.

"He was the first person who saw me as more than just an athlete," Declan says, his voice softening with memory. "Made sure I developed my mind as much as my body. Used to say, 'Hockey may feed your future, but books will feed your soul.'"

The sentiment resonates deeply with me, echoing my own relationship with literature. "Smart man," I observe.

"He would have liked you," Declan says, the simple statement carrying surprising weight. "Been impressed by your mind, your insight. Probably would have argued with you about gothic feminist interpretation for hours."

The thought of being accepted by someone Declan clearly admired sends a warm glow through my chest. I move away from the bookshelf, drawn to the kitchen by the delicious smells beginning to emanate from the stove.

"Need help?" I offer, leaning against the counter as he expertly stirs ingredients in a large pan.

"Nope." He flashes me a grin that makes my stomach flutter. "Just sit, relax, let me feed you. Been wanting to cook for you for weeks now."

"Really?" The admission surprises me. "Why?"

He shrugs, a faint color touching his cheeks. "It's... personal, I guess. Intimate in a way going to restaurants isn't. And I wanted to show you this side of me."

The vulnerability in the confession touches me deeply. Another layer of the performance peeled back, revealing the real man beneath. I perch on a stool at the kitchen island, watching him move with the same fluid confidence he displays on the ice, though channeled now into the domestic rhythm of cooking.

"Wine?" he offers, gesturing to an open bottle on the counter.

"Please." The events of the past few days have left me emotionally raw, and a little liquid courage seems appropriate for wherever this evening might lead.

He pours two glasses, sliding one toward me before returning to the stove. The wine is good—better than the cheap varieties that usually circulate at campus parties—but I sip slowly, wanting to maintain clarity for the conversations still to come.

"So," I begin, searching for neutral ground. "The project for Harmon's class. We should discuss how we're handling it.."

Declan laughs, the sound rich and genuine. "Academic talk as a safety buffer. Very on-brand, Gardner."

Heat rises to my cheeks, but I can't deny the accuracy of his observation. "We still have to finish it," I point out. "Regardless of... other developments."

"True." He stirs the pasta he's preparing, adds a splash of something from a nearby bottle. "And we will. But maybe not tonight? Maybe tonight can just be about us, not about arrangements or assignments or obligations."

The suggestion is both tempting and terrifying—a night without pretense or performance, without the buffer of academic discussion or the structure of our original deal. Just Declan and Ellie, figuring out what exists between them when all the artifice is stripped away.

"Okay," I agree softly. "Just us."

His smile is worth the anxiety the agreement stirs. We talk while he finishes cooking—about his childhood in the Wolfe family dynasty, about my father's emotional distance after my mother left, about the pressures of being the hockey star who also wants an intellectual life, about my ambitions for Columbia and beyond. The conversation flows with surprising ease, punctuated by moments of laughter and occasional silences that feel comfortable rather than awkward.

By the time we're seated at his small dining table, pasta served in elegant simplicity, I feel a tension I didn't fully recognize beginning to unwind inside me. This—the quiet intimacy of shared food and honest conversation—feels more real than any of our public performances as a couple.

"Can I ask you something?" I say, twirling pasta around my fork.

"Anything," he responds immediately. "Absolute honesty, remember?"

"Why hockey?" The question has been lingering in my mind since I learned about his family's expectations, his father's clear preference for a business-oriented future.

"Why risk everything on a sport when you have the Wolfe legacy waiting?"

He considers this, taking a sip of wine before answering. "Freedom," he says finally. "Hockey is the one thing that's truly mine, not influenced by family expectations or traditions. On the ice, I'm just Declan—not a Wolfe, not an heir, just a player with something to prove."

The answer resonates with me more than I expected. Isn't that what literature has always been for me? An escape, a world where I'm defined by my mind rather than my circumstances, where I can explore identities and possibilities beyond the limitations of my actual life?

"I understand that," I tell him. "More than you might think."

His eyes meet mine across the table, recognition and connection flowing between us. "I know you do," he says softly.

The observation strikes deep, articulating something I've felt but couldn't name. For all our superficial differences—the athlete and the academic, the social butterfly and the introvert, privilege and scholarship—there's a fundamental similarity in how we navigate the expectations placed upon us, how we seek spaces of authentic self-expression.

We finish dinner with lighter conversation, laughing over campus anecdotes and shared observations about Professor Harmon's eccentricities. Declan refuses my offer to help clean up, instead directing me to the living room while he handles the dishes.

I wander back to the bookshelves, drawn to a collection of poetry books on the middle shelf. One volume catches my eye—Auden, the poet Declan mentioned reading when he can't sleep. I pull it from the shelf, noting the worn cover, the pages marked with small sticky notes, the occasional penciled annotation in margins.

"My favorite," Declan says, appearing beside me so quietly I start slightly. He gently takes the book from my hands. "Auden got it right," he continues, closing the book carefully. "Better to be the one who loves more, who risks more. Even if it hurts."

The simple philosophy, delivered without pretense or calculation, strikes at the heart of my deepest fear—the vulnerability inherent in loving, in opening oneself to

potential hurt. I've spent years guarding against precisely this risk, building walls to ensure I'm never again the one left behind, never again the one who loved more deeply, trusted more completely.

But watching Declan replace the book on the shelf, his hands gentle with the treasured volume, I wonder if safety is worth the isolation it requires. If protection from potential pain is worth the sacrifice of potential joy.

"Declan," I say, his name a question and an answer both.

He turns to me, his expression open, vulnerable in a way that steals my breath. Without conscious decision, I step closer, eliminating the careful distance we've maintained since entering his apartment. My hand lifts to his face, palm against his cheek, feeling the slight roughness of evening stubble beneath my fingers.

"Ellie," he breathes, standing perfectly still, letting me dictate the pace, the boundaries.

I rise on tiptoes, closing the final distance between us, pressing my lips to his in a kiss that feels like stepping off a cliff—terrifying and exhilarating in equal measure. He responds instantly, arms wrapping around me, pulling me against the solid warmth of his body as the kiss deepens from tentative to hungry in heartbeats.

This is different from our previous kisses—no audience to perform for, no arrangement to maintain, no confusion about what's real and what's pretense. Just Declan and Ellie, choosing each other with clear-eyed awareness of all the complications entailed.

His hands remain respectful even as the kiss grows heated—one at my waist, the other tangled in my hair, not venturing further despite the obvious tension radiating through his body. Always giving me control, letting me set the pace.

But tonight, I don't want careful. Don't want restrained. I want to feel everything, to experience the full reality of whatever is growing between us without the filters of performance or pretense.

My hands slide beneath his t-shirt, exploring the warm skin and defined muscle beneath. He sucks in a sharp breath, breaking the kiss to stare at me with darkened eyes. "Ellie," he says, his voice rough with desire and restraint. He captures my wandering hands in his. "I need you to be sure. No regrets, no confusion. If we do this, it's because we both want it, fully and completely. Not because of wine or emotional reconciliation or the heat of the moment."

The care in his words, the absolute respect for my agency—they confirm what I already know in my heart. "I want this," I tell him, holding his gaze. "I want you, Declan. Not because of the wine or the moment, but because I'm choosing this. Choosing us."

Something shifts in his expression—restraint giving way to hunger, control to desire. "Say it again," he murmurs, his hands releasing mine to slide around my waist, pulling me closer.

"I want you," I repeat, more boldly this time. "Now. Tonight."

No more words are needed. He lifts me in one fluid motion, my legs wrapping around his waist as he carries me toward the bedroom, our lips never separating, the kiss growing more urgent with each step.

His bedroom continues the theme of understated comfort—a large bed with simple navy linens, more bookshelves, a desk in the corner with a laptop and scattered papers. But I notice these details only peripherally, my attention focused entirely on Declan as he lays me gently on the bed, his body covering mine with delicious weight.



His weight above me is exhilarating—solid and real in a way that makes my heart race with anticipation. His eyes hold mine, intent and searching, as if memorizing every detail of my face. The moment stretches between us, charged with everything unsaid, everything we've been circling for weeks.

"You are so beautiful," he whispers, his voice raw with honesty.

My response dies in my throat as his lips find mine again, the kiss deeper now, more demanding. Gone is the careful restraint he's shown until this moment—replaced by a hunger that matches the ache building low in my abdomen. His hands slide beneath my shirt, palms warm against my skin, leaving trails of fire in their wake.

When he tugs at the hem, I lift my arms, allowing him to pull the fabric over my head in one fluid motion. The cool air prickles my skin, but I barely notice, lost in the intensity of his gaze as it travels over me.

"I've thought about this," he confesses, fingers tracing the lace edge of my bra with heartbreaking tenderness. "Dreamed about it. But nothing compares to the reality of you."

The vulnerability in his admission steals my breath. This isn't the cocky hockey star or the strategic partner in our arrangement. This is just Declan—raw, honest, seeing me with a clarity that terrifies and exhilarates me in equal measure.

He lowers his head, lips tracing a burning path from my collarbone down to the swell of my breasts. My back arches instinctively, seeking more contact, more pressure, more of everything he's making me feel. His hand slides beneath me, unclasping my bra with practiced ease that I can't bring myself to resent. Not when he's looking at me like I'm something precious, something to be cherished rather than simply consumed.

"Is this okay?" he asks, voice rough with desire but still careful, still mindful of my boundaries.

"Yes," I breathe, the single syllable carrying the weight of weeks of denial, of fear overcome, of walls carefully dismantled.

The garment joins my shirt on the floor, and I fight the instinct to cover myself, to hide from the naked hunger in his eyes. Vulnerability has never come easily to me—not since my mother walked away without a backward glance, not since James betrayed me in the most intimate way possible. But here, with Declan, the exposure feels like liberation rather than danger.

His mouth continues its exploration, lips and tongue and the gentlest scrape of teeth creating sensations that draw sounds from my throat I hardly recognize as my own. When he takes my nipple between his lips, pleasure spirals through me so intensely my fingers twist in the sheets, seeking anchor in a world suddenly reduced to sensation.

"Declan," I gasp, his name a plea for something I can't articulate.

He understands anyway, his hands moving to the button of my jeans, eyes seeking mine in silent question. I nod, lifting my hips to help as he slides the denim down my legs with agonizing slowness, his fingers trailing fire along every inch of newly revealed skin until I'm left in nothing but my underwear.

Something flares in his eyes—wonder, gratitude, and a hunger so acute it makes my breath catch. He lowers himself over me again, capturing my lips in a kiss that feels like claiming, like promise, like coming home after the longest journey.

His hands continue their exploration, tracing the curve of my waist, the flare of my hip, the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. When his fingers brush against the thin

fabric still covering my center, I gasp against his mouth, hips lifting instinctively toward his touch.

"I want to taste you," he murmurs against my lips, the words sending a jolt of liquid heat straight to my core.

The request, delivered with such raw need, ignites something primal within me. Words fail, so I simply nod, spreading my legs slightly in invitation.

His smile turns predatory as he begins moving down my body, leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses along my sternum, across my ribs, over the sensitive skin of my stomach. Each point of contact feels like a brand, marking me as his in ways that transcend the physical.

When he reaches the elastic of my underwear, his eyes lift to mine once more—checking, always checking that I'm with him, that I want this as much as he does. The care he shows, even in the depths of his own desire, makes my chest ache with an emotion I'm still too frightened to name.

He hooks his fingers under the fabric, dragging it slowly down my legs until I'm completely bare before him, vulnerable in a way I've never allowed myself to be since James's betrayal. But where I expect to feel fear, I find only anticipation, only certainty that whatever happens next will shatter and remake me in ways I've been too afraid to imagine.

Declan settles between my thighs, his broad shoulders creating space, his breath warm against my most sensitive flesh. The first touch of his tongue against me pulls a sound from deep in my chest—half gasp, half moan, wholly surrender.

He explores with deliberate patience, learning what makes my breath catch, what draws those helpless sounds from my throat, what makes my fingers tangle in his hair

seeking both anchor and encouragement. All the while, his eyes remain locked on mine, watching as pleasure transforms my features, as writhe and moan beneath his dedicated attention.

It's the most intimate thing I've ever experienced—not just physically, but emotionally. The way he reads my body, responds to my unspoken needs, adjusts pressure and rhythm with intuitive precision. This isn't performance or calculation—this is connection in its purest form, communication beyond words.

When he slides one finger inside me, then another, curling upward to hit a spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids, I know I won't last much longer. The dual sensation of his fingers and mouth pushes me rapidly toward a peak that looms like a precipice, terrifying and irresistible.

"Declan," I gasp, my voice breaking on his name. "I'm close, I—"

"Come for me," he murmurs against me, the vibration of his voice adding another layer to the building pleasure. "Come for me, I want to taste you."

It's his words as much as his touch that send me hurtling over the edge—the tenderness in them, the certainty, the promise of safety even in my most vulnerable moment. My back arches, his name tearing from my throat as wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, obliterating thought, obliterating fear, obliterating everything except the sensation and the man creating it.

He works me through it, gradually slowing his movements as the aftershocks ripple through me, as my body relaxes back into the mattress, boneless and sated in a way I've never experienced before.

When he moves back up my body, his expression holds something I never expected to see directed at me—triumph, yes, but also reverence, as if witnessing my pleasure

is a gift he treasures above his own gratification.

"You're incredible," he breathes, pressing his forehead against mine.

I reach for him, needing to feel his weight above me, needing the grounding reality of his body against mine. His arousal is evident, pressing hard against my thigh, but there's no impatience in his touch, no demand for reciprocation. Only tenderness, only care, only the steady assurance that this—whatever this is becoming—happens on terms we set together.

"I want you," I whisper against his lips, suddenly certain beyond doubt or fear. "All of you, Declan. Not just parts."

His eyes search mine, seeking confirmation that I'm sure, that this isn't just the haze of pleasure speaking. What he finds must satisfy him, because he nods, reaching toward the nightstand, retrieving what we need without breaking eye contact, as if afraid I might disappear if he looks away even for a moment.

He shucks off his pants and boxer briefs and then settles back between my thighs, something shifts in the air between us—anticipation giving way to inevitability, performance to authenticity. This is real. He is real. We are real.

But for once, change doesn't terrify me. For once, I'm not analyzing, not calculating, not maintaining careful emotional distance. I'm simply present, simply feeling, simply being.

"You're beautiful," he murmurs as he slides his cock inside of me. I gasp and hold his shoulders, not used to the fullness, how big he is. He stretched me around him, and I whimper in pleasure. "You're so fucking tight, Ellie." He slides a finger down over my lips. "So fucking good."

He starts to fuck me, harder, hitting a rhythm, finally letting this be about his own pleasure. When he comes inside of me, another orgasm rips through me, and I come undone underneath him.

After, he wraps me in his arms, my head on his chest listening to the gradual slowing of his heartbeat.

"You okay?" Declan asks softly, his fingers tracing patterns on my bare shoulder.

"More than okay," I assure him, pressing a kiss to his chest. "That was..."

"Yeah," he agrees when I trail off, unable to find adequate words. "It was."

We lie in comfortable silence for a while, basking in the afterglow of connection, of barriers breached and truths acknowledged. This is real, I think with wonder. This is actually real.

"Stay," Declan murmurs, his arms tightening slightly around me. "Stay the night."

"I'll stay," I agree, settling more comfortably against him.

His soft kiss against my hair feels like benediction, like promise. We drift toward sleep wrapped in each other, the lines between performance and reality, between caution and courage, permanently redrawn.

And As Declan's breathing deepens beside me, his arms secure around my waist, I surrender to the simple, terrifying truth: I'm falling in love with him. Have been falling since long before I was willing to admit it. And whatever comes next—whether joy or heartbreak or some complex mixture of both—I'm done pretending otherwise.

To myself, or to him.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

I wake to unfamiliar shadows dancing across an unfamiliar ceiling, my body deliciously sore in ways that instantly bring memories flooding back—Declan's hands exploring with reverent intensity, his lips tracing paths of fire across my skin, the weight of him pressing me into the mattress as we moved together in perfect, devastating synchronicity.

A flush of heat spreads through me at the memory, warming places that had been cold for so long I'd forgotten warmth was possible. I turn my head to find him watching me, propped on one elbow, eyes soft with something that makes my chest ache.

"Morning," he says, voice roughened by sleep, a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "Sleep okay?"

"Great," I admit, the truth easier in this hushed space between night and morning, when reality feels slightly suspended. "You?"

His smile widens, transforming his face with boyish delight that makes him look younger, more vulnerable than the confident hockey star the world sees. "Same," he says, fingers gently brushing a strand of hair from my face. The casual intimacy of the gesture steals my breath. "Though I'm not convinced I wasn't dreaming. Might need some confirmation that last night actually happened."

Before I can respond. The kiss is languid, unhurried, lacking the desperate edge of last night's passion but no less devastating for its gentleness. My body responds instantly, nerve endings firing like sparklers in July, heat pooling low in my abdomen.



"Convinced?" I murmur against his mouth when we finally part.

"Getting there," he teases, his hand sliding beneath the sheet to trace patterns on my bare hip. "Might need more evidence."

What follows is a slow, deliberate exploration. If last night was revelation, this morning is confirmation, a testament to something that has nothing to do with arrangements or performances and everything to do with the simple, devastating truth of two people choosing each other in the clear light of day.

After, wrapped again in the warmth of his arms, my head tucked perfectly beneath his chin, the reality of it all begins to hit me.

"What are you thinking about?" Declan asks, his fingers tracing lazy circles on my shoulder. "You've got that look."

"What look?"

"The one where your mind is racing a million miles an hour, analyzing everything." His chest vibrates with quiet laughter beneath my cheek. "It's cute. Terrifying, but cute."

I pinch his side lightly, earning a satisfying yelp. "I was thinking about how weird this is," I admit. "Us. This. Everything."

He shifts slightly, tilting my chin up to meet his gaze. "Weird good or weird bad?"

"Weird unexpected," I clarify. "If someone had told me a month ago that I'd be waking up in Declan Wolfe's bed, having...feelings for him, I'd have suggested psychiatric evaluation."

"Feelings, huh?" His grin is unbearably smug. "What kind of feelings might those be, Gardner?"

I roll my eyes, trying to maintain some semblance of the walls he's systematically dismantled. "Don't push your luck, Wolfe."

His phone buzzes on the nightstand, saving me from emotional exposure. He sighs, pressing a quick kiss to my forehead before reaching for it.

"Coach," he explains, checking the screen. "Team meeting at noon. Something about championship preparations." He sets the phone down, returning his attention to me with a smile that melts my insides. "Which gives us exactly three hours to shower, eat breakfast, and maybe..." His hand slides down my side, leaving trails of electricity in its wake. "...continue this enlightening conversation."

I laugh, pushing him away halfheartedly. "I need to get back to my dorm. Change clothes, get my books for class."

"Skip it," he suggests, nuzzling my neck in a way that makes rational thought increasingly difficult. "Stay here with me."

The temptation is powerful—to remain in this bubble of warmth and newly discovered pleasure, to pretend the outside world with all its complications doesn't exist. But reality intrudes like cold water, reminding me of papers due and presentations to prepare.

"I can't," I say reluctantly. "I have Feminist Literary Theory at two, and the paper's due today."

He groans dramatically but releases me, flopping back against the pillows. "Fine. Be responsible. See if I care."

The petulant act makes me laugh again, a lightness in my chest that feels foreign after so many months of careful emotional control. "You could join me in the shower," I suggest, emboldened by this newfound intimacy between us. "For efficiency's sake."

His eyes darken at the suggestion, desire flaring hot enough that I feel it like a physical touch. "Efficiency," he repeats, already sliding out of bed, gloriously nude and completely unselfconscious. "Yes. Very important. Conservation of resources and all that."

What follows is anything but efficient, but the waste of water is more than compensated by the discovery that shower sex with Declan Wolfe is just as earth-shattering as bed sex, if somewhat more logistically challenging.

By the time we're dressed and fed—Declan insisting on making breakfast despite my protests that coffee would suffice—it's nearly eleven, and the real world is pressing in with increasingly urgent insistence.

"I'll walk you back," he says, gathering his keys and phone.

"Not necessary," I demur, suddenly anxious about being seen together on campus after the events of the last few days. The posts about our "fake" relationship have doubtlessly continued to spread, and while what's developing between us feels undeniably real, I'm not eager to subject it to public scrutiny so soon.

Declan's expression tells me he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Hiding me already, Gardner?" The question is light, teasing, but I catch the hint of vulnerability beneath.

"Not hiding," I correct, stepping close to smooth the collar of his shirt, needing physical contact suddenly. "Just... protecting this. Whatever it is. Before it becomes public property."

His hands settle on my hips, warm and steady. "I get it," he says softly. "But Ellie, people already think they know what's happening between us. The only way to counter that is to show them the truth."

"And what is the truth?" I challenge, the question that's been hovering at the edges of my consciousness since last night. "What are we, Declan?"

"We're us," he says simply. "No labels necessary yet if you're not ready. But I'm not pretending this isn't real anymore, and I'm not hiding how I feel about you to make other people comfortable—including you."

The gentle challenge in his words silences my instinctive retreat. He's right. We've moved beyond performance into something authentic, and hiding it only feeds the narrative Kaitlyn is spreading—that we're a calculated arrangement rather than two people genuinely drawn to each other.

"Okay," I concede, rising on tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips. "Walk me back. Show the world that Declan Wolfe is willingly associating with a known academic."

His answering smile is worth the anxiety the decision provokes. "Their minds will be blown," he agrees, taking my hand as he leads me toward the door. "The scandal of it all."

The campus is busy with mid-morning activity when we emerge from his apartment building, students hurrying to classes or lounging on benches enjoying the early spring sunshine. I'm acutely aware of the stares that follow us, the whispers that trail in our wake as we walk hand-in-hand across the quad. Declan seems oblivious—or perhaps just unconcerned—his thumb tracing small, soothing circles on my palm as if sensing my discomfort.

"Ignore them," he murmurs, leaning close enough that his breath stirs my hair.

"They'll find something else to gossip about by tomorrow."

"Easy for you to say," I mutter. "Your reputation is only enhanced by being seen with someone who spends more time in the library than at parties."

He stops abruptly, turning to face me with unexpected seriousness. "You think that's what this is about for me? Reputation enhancement?"

The hurt in his voice catches me off guard. "No," I backpedal quickly. "That's not what I meant."

"Then what did you mean?" he presses, his eyes intent on mine.

I struggle to articulate the insecurity that still lingers despite the intimacy we've shared. "Just that... you have less to lose in this equation. People see you with me and think you're broadening your horizons, showing hidden depth. They see me with you and assume I'm just another conquest, or that I'm using you for social advancement."

His expression softens, understanding replacing the hurt. "Ellie," he says, his voice dropping to that register that seems to vibrate through my body. "I couldn't care less what people think about us. But I care very much what you think. And if you're still wondering if this is some kind of game or image rehab for me, then I need to do a better job showing you it's not."

Before I can respond, he cups my face in his hands and kisses me—not a casual peck, but a proper kiss, deep and thorough, right in the middle of the main quad with dozens of witnesses. It's a declaration, a claiming, a public announcement that whatever is happening between us is real and significant.

When he finally pulls back, my face is flaming and my knees are embarrassingly weak. Around us, the whispers have intensified, and several people aren't even

bothering to hide the fact that they're recording the moment on their phones.

"There," Declan says with satisfaction. "That should clarify things."

"Or fuel speculation for weeks," I counter, but I can't suppress the smile tugging at my lips. The gesture was equal parts ridiculous and romantic, pure Declan in its blend of showmanship and sincerity.

"Let them speculate," he says, reclaiming my hand as we resume walking. "We know the truth."

The simple confidence in his statement settles something inside me—a persistent doubt that has lingered despite the evidence of his actions, his words, his touch. Maybe he's right. Maybe what matters isn't what others think or believe, but what we know to be true between us.

By the time we reach my dorm, some of my earlier anxiety has dissipated, replaced by a cautious optimism that perhaps we can navigate this transition from fake to real without the entire process becoming public entertainment.

"Team meeting in thirty minutes," Declan says, checking his watch reluctantly. "But I'll call you after? Maybe dinner tonight?"

"I'd like that," I admit, still getting used to the freedom of expressing what I actually want rather than what seems safest.

His smile is like sunrise after the longest night, transforming his features with simple joy. "Great. I'll pick you up at seven?"

"Perfect." I hesitate, then rise on tiptoes to press a quick kiss to his lips. "Good luck with Coach."

"I don't need luck," he says with theatrical confidence. "I've got you."

The simple declaration, delivered with his trademark blend of arrogance and sincerity, makes my heart skip. I watch him walk away, his athletic grace evident even in this mundane movement, and wonder at the strangeness of fate—how something that began as calculated performance has become the most authentic connection I've experienced since before my mother walked out the door without a backward glance.

As I climb the stairs to my room, my phone buzzes with a text message. Expecting Declan, I check it with a smile already forming.

The smile freezes, then dies as I read: Enjoy it while it lasts, Library Girl. He always comes back to where he belongs. Always.

Attached is a photo I've never seen before—Declan and Kaitlyn in what appears to be an intimate embrace, his face buried in her neck, her expression triumphant as she looks directly at the camera. The timestamp shows last night, around the time Declan and I were having our intense conversation on the library bench.

The photo is clearly doctored—I know exactly where Declan was last night, and it wasn't with Kaitlyn. But the manipulation is skillful enough to give me pause, to awaken the dormant insecurities that have merely been sleeping, not banished. What if it was taken right before I saw him? What if --

"Delete it," a voice behind me says, making me jump. I turn to find Mia, her expression a mixture of concern and anger as she peers over my shoulder at my phone screen. "It's fake, Ellie. Badly photoshopped. Look at the lighting on his hair versus the rest of the scene."

I squint at the image, seeing what she means now that she's pointed it out. Relief

floods through me, quickly followed by anger at my own gullibility, at Kaitlyn's increasing desperation to drive a wedge between Declan and me.

"She's escalating," I say, deleting the message as Mia suggested. "First the social media post, now fake photos. What's next?"

"Nothing, if she has any sense of self-preservation," Mia says darkly. "Because if she keeps this up, I'm going to personally ensure she regrets it."

The fierceness of her defense warms me even as I shake my head. "Don't. It's not worth it. She's just—"

"Pathetic?" Mia supplies. "Desperate? Psychotic? All of the above?"

I laugh despite myself, the tension easing from my shoulders. "Something like that."

"So," she says, linking her arm through mine as we continue up the stairs. "I hear you and Declan put on quite a show in the quad. Want to tell me what's going on there?"

"We're just... I don't know, figuring things out," I hedge.

"Figuring things out," she repeats skeptically. "Is that what the kids are calling it these days?"

"Shut up," I mutter, but there's no heat in it.

She studies me as we reach my door, her expression turning serious. "You really like him, don't you? This isn't just the arrangement anymore."

"It never really was," I admit quietly, unlocking my door and ushering her inside. "Or at least, it stopped being just that pretty quickly. I just couldn't admit it to myself."



"And now?"

I sink onto my bed, suddenly overwhelmed by the events of the past twenty-four hours—the confrontation with Declan, the intensity of our connection, the looming complications of Kaitlyn's vendetta and campus gossip.

"Now I'm terrified," I confess, the words escaping before I can censor them. "Because this is real, Mia. Really real. And real means it can really hurt when it falls apart."

"Who says it's going to fall apart?" she challenges, sitting beside me.

"Statistics. Experience. Common sense." I tick off the points on my fingers. "He's going to the NHL after graduation. I'm going to Columbia. Those worlds don't exactly align. And even if they did, people like him don't end up with people like me in the long run."

"People like him?" she echoes. "You mean genuinely good guys who look at you like you hung the moon? Who defend you against psycho exes and treat you with respect and make you smile more in the past week than I've seen in the entire time I've known you?"

Put that way, my objections sound hollow, paranoid. But the fear remains, bone-deep and persistent. "You don't understand," I try to explain. "My mother left. James cheated. Everyone I've ever trusted has proven untrustworthy in the end."

"Declan isn't James," Mia says gently. "And he's certainly not your mother."

"I know that," I say, frustrated at my inability to articulate the tangled web of fear and hope and desire churning inside me. "Logically, I know that. But emotionally..."

"Emotionally, you're waiting for the other shoe to drop," she finishes for me. "For

him to reveal that this has all been another kind of performance."

The accuracy of her assessment silences me.

"Ellie," she continues, her voice softening. "At some point, you have to decide if the possibility of joy is worth the risk of pain. Because from where I'm sitting, Declan Wolfe is offering you something real. Something worth risking for."

Her words echo in my mind long after she leaves for her afternoon class, long after I've showered and changed and gathered my books for Feminist Literary Theory. The possibility of joy versus the certainty of safety. The risk of pain versus the guarantee of emotional isolation.

When has playing it safe ever made me truly happy? When has guarding my heart ever brought me genuine fulfillment?

The questions haunt me through my afternoon classes, through dinner preparations with Declan, through the quiet intimacy of his apartment as we talk and laugh and explore this new territory between us. They follow me into his bed, into his arms, into the moments of breathtaking vulnerability as we move together in the darkness.

And in the quiet after, his heartbeat steady beneath my ear, his breathing deep and even in sleep, I find myself whispering the truth I'm not yet brave enough to voice when he's awake:

"I'm falling in love with you."

The words hover in the darkness, both terrifying and liberating in their simple truth. I am falling in love with Declan Wolfe. Despite my best efforts at emotional self-preservation, despite the walls I've built and the doubts I've nurtured, despite the rational objections and the statistical improbability—I am falling, have fallen, into

something I never thought possible after James's betrayal.

The realization should send me running for the familiar safety of emotional distance. Instead, I find myself curling closer to Declan's warmth, allowing myself to imagine a future where this isn't temporary, where the expiration date we initially established dissolves into something open-ended and full of possibility.

It's a dangerous fantasy, one I've denied myself for so long that indulging it now feels almost illicit. But in the safety of darkness, with Declan's arms around me and his heart beating steady against my cheek, I permit myself this small rebellion against years of careful emotional control.

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*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

Championship week descends on Westford like a gathering storm—tension building day by day, anticipation hanging in the air like electricity before lightning strikes. The campus transforms into a sea of navy and gold, banners draping buildings, sidewalks chalked with team slogans and player numbers.

Declan becomes increasingly scarce as game day approaches, consumed by extended practices, team meetings, media obligations, and the crushing weight of expectation that follows him everywhere. I catch glimpses of him between commitments—snatched moments in the library, quick coffees between classes, late nights when he collapses into my bed or pulls me into his, too exhausted for anything but sleep but needing the comfort of physical proximity.

His body shows the strain of championship preparation—new bruises blooming across his ribs, a persistent knot in his right shoulder that I massage with careful fingers, the shadows under his eyes deepening as sleep becomes increasingly elusive. But his focus never wavers, his determination burning with quiet intensity that both impresses and frightens me. So much rides on this game—NHL scouts, his future, the culmination of years of sacrifice and dedication.

"You should rest," I tell him Wednesday night, curled against his side in my narrow dorm bed, my fingers tracing the contours of his face as if memorizing him by touch. "You look exhausted."

"Can't sleep," he admits, turning to press a kiss to my palm. "Brain won't shut off."

"Want to talk about it?" I offer.

He's quiet for so long I think he might not answer. Then, voice barely above a whisper: "What if I'm not good enough, Ellie? What if all of this—the years of training, the sacrifices, everything I've given up for hockey—what if it's for nothing?"

The vulnerability in his question steals my breath. This is Declan stripped of performance, of confidence, of the golden-boy persona he presents to the world. This is Declan at his most authentic, his most human.

"You are good enough," I say firmly, rising onto one elbow to look directly into his eyes. "But more importantly, your worth isn't determined by a single game, Declan. Not to me, not to anyone who truly matters."

Something shifts in his expression—surprise, followed by a softening that makes my chest ache. "When did you get so wise, Gardner?"

"I've always been wise," I retort, earning a small smile that feels like victory. "You were just too busy being insufferable to notice."

He laughs then, the sound rusty but genuine, some of the tension easing from his shoulders. "Come here," he murmurs, pulling me down to him, his lips finding mine in a kiss that feels like gratitude, like trust.

But Thursday brings a new complication. I'm leaving the library after an evening study session – Declan has decided to try and get to sleep early before tomorrow's final practice, and even though he invited me to join him at his apartment, I have a big test coming up in chem and needed to catch up on some studying -- when a sleek black car pulls up alongside me, window gliding down to reveal Richard Wolfe's impassive face.

"Miss Gardner," he says, his voice carrying that particular blend of authority and condescension that seems to define him. "A moment of your time?"

Every instinct screams caution, but curiosity wins out. I approach the car, stopping a safe distance from the open window. "Mr. Wolfe."

"Get in," he says, not a request but a command. "Please," he adds as an apparent afterthought.

Against my better judgment, I slide into the passenger seat, the leather cool and expensive against my thighs. The interior smells of wealth—subtle cologne, fine leather, the indefinable scent of privilege that seems to follow the Wolfes wherever they go.

Richard pulls smoothly into traffic, driving aimlessly, his attention apparently on the road though I sense his awareness fixed firmly on me.

"I'll be direct, Miss Gardner," he says finally. "The championship game is Saturday. NHL scouts will be in attendance. Declan's future—the future he has worked toward his entire life—hangs in the balance."

"I'm aware," I say cautiously, unsure where this is going but feeling dread pool in my stomach.

"Are you also aware that he's been distracted this week? That his performance at practice has been below his usual standard? That Coach Brennan has expressed concern about his focus?"

The accusation implicit in his questions isn't lost on me. "If you're suggesting I'm somehow responsible—"

"I'm not suggesting," Richard interrupts coldly. "I'm stating it plainly. Since whatever this is between you began, Declan's priorities have shifted. His concentration has wavered. His commitment to his future has become... compromised."

Anger flares, hot and sudden. "With all due respect, Mr. Wolfe, you have no idea what's between Declan and me, or how it affects his hockey performance. Have you considered that perhaps the pressure you're placing on him is the actual problem?"

Richard's knuckles whiten on the steering wheel, the only visible sign that my words have affected him. "What I know," he says with dangerous softness, "is that my son has worked his entire life for the opportunity awaiting him Saturday. What I know is that distractions—particularly emotional entanglements—are deadly to that level of focus and dedication."

"So what exactly are you asking of me?" I challenge. "To disappear? To break things off? To conveniently remove myself as a 'distraction'?"

"I'm asking you to consider Declan's future," Richard says, his voice modulating to something almost reasonable. "To ask yourself if whatever temporary gratification you're both experiencing is worth risking everything he's worked for."

The calculated cruelty of his assessment—reducing what Declan and I share to "temporary gratification"—strikes deep, awakening insecurities I've been fighting to silence.

"Has it occurred to you," I say carefully, "that Declan is an adult capable of making his own decisions? That perhaps what we have might actually support his goals rather than threaten them?"

Richard's laugh is short, dismissive. "Miss Gardner, I've known my son his entire life. I've watched him navigate infatuations before. This—" he gestures vaguely in my direction, "—is not new. The only novel element is the timing, which could not be worse."

Infatuations. The word lands like a slap, confirming my deepest fears—that I am just

another in a line of Declan's temporary interests, meaningful in the moment but ultimately replaceable. Disposable. That I've actually become the thing Declan was trying to avoid – a random hook-up that does nothing but distract him from what he's been trying to accomplish.

"If you're so concerned," I say, fighting to keep my voice steady, "why not speak to Declan directly?"

"I have," Richard says simply. "He refuses to see reason. Which is why I'm speaking to you instead."

The implication is clear: Richard believes I have more perspective, more rationality, than his lovestruck son. That I'll make the "right" decision where Declan cannot.

"What exactly do you want from me?" I ask, though I already know the answer.

"Distance," he says bluntly. "Just until after the championship. Give him space to focus, to perform at his best, to secure the future he deserves."

"And after?"

Richard's smile doesn't reach his eyes. "After, you're both adults. What happens then is none of my concern."

The car has circled back to campus, pulling to a stop where he first picked me up. I reach for the door handle, then pause, turning back to face him.

"I'll consider what you've said," I tell him, choosing my words with precision. "But you should know—I care about Declan. Deeply. And any decision I make will be based on what I believe is best for him, not what's convenient for you or your vision of his future."



Something flickers across Richard's expression—surprise, perhaps, or reluctant respect. "Fair enough," he concedes. "But Miss Gardner? Consider carefully. Some opportunities come only once in a lifetime. Some decisions, once made, cannot be unmade."

I exit the car without responding, the night air a shock after the climate-controlled interior. As Richard drives away, his warning echoes in my mind, feeding the doubt that has never fully subsided despite the intensity of what's developed between Declan and me.

What if Richard is right? What if my presence in Declan's life is a distraction he can't afford right now? What if the best thing I can do for him is step back, give him space to focus on the culmination of years of dedication and sacrifice?

These questions plague me as I walk back to my dorm, as I shower and change, as I stare at my phone debating whether to text Declan or leave him to the rest he desperately needs before tomorrow's final practice.

In the end, I send a simple message: Thinking of you. Sleep well. You've got this.

His response comes almost immediately: Miss you. Can I see you tomorrow after practice?

The naked need in his message makes my chest ache. Whatever Richard believes, whatever doubts plague me, one truth remains undeniable: Declan wants me in his life. Has chosen me, continues to choose me, even in the midst of the most important week of his athletic career.

Of course, I reply. My place or yours?

Yours. Less chance of teammates interrupting.

I smile at the practical consideration. I'll be here. Now sleep, superstar.

Yes ma'am. Sweet dreams, Ellie.

I stare at his message long after my screen has dimmed, torn between the growing certainty of my feelings for him and the nagging fear that Richard might be right—that what serves Declan best right now is freedom from emotional complication, space to focus solely on the challenge ahead.

Sleep eludes me, my mind replaying Richard's warnings, analyzing Declan's behavior over the past week for signs of distraction or divided attention. By dawn, I've reached no conclusions, only a bone-deep certainty that whatever decision I make must be based on what's best for Declan, not what's safest for my heart.

Friday dawns clear and cold, the sky a brilliant blue that seems to mock my emotional turmoil. I go through the motions of my morning routine, attend classes with minimal attention, and return to my room to wait for Declan's arrival after his final practice before tomorrow's championship.

When the knock comes, my heart leaps despite my determination to maintain emotional equilibrium. I open the door to find him leaning against the frame, exhaustion evident in the shadows under his eyes but a smile breaking across his face at the sight of me.

"Hey," he says softly, stepping into my space and pulling me into an embrace that feels like coming home. "God, I've missed you."

I melt into him despite myself, despite the doubts swirling in my mind, despite Richard's warnings still echoing in my ears. "It's been one day," I point out, voice muffled against his chest.

"Too long," he murmurs into my hair. "Way too long."

He pulls back enough to capture my lips in a kiss that starts gentle but quickly deepens, his hands tangling in my hair as mine fist in his shirt. The connection is electric, immediate, my body responding to his with a readiness that would be embarrassing if it weren't so clearly mutual.

"Wait," I gasp, breaking away reluctantly. "We should talk."

Concern flickers across his features. "Everything okay?"

I guide him to my bed, sitting beside him with enough distance to think clearly. "Your father came to see me last night."

His expression darkens instantly. "What? Why didn't you call me?"

"It was late," I hedge. "And I knew you needed sleep before today's practice."

"What did he want?" The tension in his voice, his body, is palpable.

I consider softening the truth, protecting him from his father's manipulation. But we promised honesty, even when difficult. "He thinks I'm distracting you from hockey. From the championship. From your future."

Declan's laugh is harsh, disbelieving. "Of course he does. God forbid anything compete with the almighty Wolfe plan for my life. Either take over the family business or the only reasonable excuse not to -- become an NHL superstar. Nothing else is satisfactory."

"Declan." I place a hand on his arm, feeling the coiled tension beneath my fingers. "He's worried about you. About your performance."

"No, he's worried about control," Declan corrects, jaw tight with anger. "About me making choices he doesn't approve of, living a life he hasn't scripted."

"Maybe," I allow. "But he mentioned Coach has concerns about your focus this week. Is that true?"

Something flickers across his face—discomfort, perhaps guilt. "Coach always has concerns. It's his job."

"But specifically about you? About your concentration?"

He sighs, running a hand through his hair in the gesture I've come to recognize as frustration. "I've been tired," he admits. "Distracted, maybe. But not because of you, Ellie. Because of everything—the scouts, the pressure, my father's expectations, the team depending on me."

"But I'm part of it," I press gently. "Part of the complication."

His eyes meet mine, suddenly fierce. "You're the only part that makes sense. The only thing that feels real and right in the middle of all this insanity."

The naked emotion in his voice steals my breath. This isn't performance or calculation—this is Declan at his most authentic, his most vulnerable.

"Your father suggested I give you space," I say carefully. "Just until after the championship. To let you focus completely."

"And what do you think?" he challenges, something like fear flickering behind the anger in his eyes.

I take a deep breath, weighing truth against protection, honesty against comfort. "I

think... he might not be entirely wrong," I finally say. "Not about us, not about what this is, but about timing. About the importance of this moment in your life."

Hurt flashes across his face, quickly masked by anger. "So you're taking his side? Buying into his manipulation?"

"No," I say firmly. "I'm trying to consider what's best for you, Declan. For your future. The future you've worked toward your entire life."

"And you think what's best is for you to disappear until after the game? To remove yourself as a 'distraction'?" The bitterness in his voice makes me wince.

"Not disappear," I correct. "Just... give you space to focus. To prepare mentally without emotional complications."

"That's bullshit," he says flatly. "And it's my father talking, not you."

"It's me trying to be rational," I counter. "Trying to see the bigger picture beyond what I want."

"And what do you want, Ellie?" he demands, leaning closer, intensity radiating from him like heat. "Because I know what I want. I want you—in my life, in my bed, in my future. Game or no game, NHL or no NHL."

The declaration lands like a physical blow, emotion rising in my throat. "You can't mean that," I whisper. "Hockey is everything to you."

"It was," he corrects. "Before you. Now it's important—incredibly important—but it's not everything. Not anymore."

The weight of his words terrifies me. To be someone's everything is a responsibility

I'm not sure I'm ready for, a vulnerability I've spent years guarding against. And what happens when he realizes I'm not worth it? When he realizes that he's given up his dreams for me, and that it's not what he thought, that I'm not what he thought?

"You don't have to choose," I say, desperate to reassure him, to reassure myself. "That's what I'm trying to say. You can have both—your hockey future and...whatever this is between us. I'm just suggesting a pause, a temporary separation to let you focus on what's immediately ahead."

"A pause," he repeats, his expression closing off in a way that makes my chest ache. "Right before the biggest game of my life. When I need you most."

Put that way, my suggestion sounds cruel, manipulative. But I push on, convinced that short-term pain might serve long-term happiness. "Just until Sunday," I clarify. "Just to give you mental space to prepare without distraction."

"Without you, you mean." The hurt in his voice is raw, unfiltered. "Because that's what this is about, isn't it? You're not a distraction, Ellie. You're the opposite—you center me, ground me, remind me why any of this matters."

His words strike at the heart of my insecurity—the fear that I'm not enough, not necessary, ultimately replaceable in his life. To hear him articulate the exact opposite of my deepest fear is both exhilarating and terrifying.

"I'm scared," I confess, the truth finally breaking through the rational arguments, the careful considerations. "I'm scared of how important this is becoming, how much it would hurt if it ended. I'm scared that your father might be right—that this is temporary, an 'infatuation' that will pass when the novelty wears off."

Understanding dawns in his eyes, anger giving way to something softer, more patient. "So this isn't about the game at all," he says quietly. "It's about you protecting

yourself. Using my father's concerns as an excuse to create distance."

The accuracy of his assessment silences me. He sees through my rationalizations to the truth beneath—my fear of vulnerability, of dependency, of potential abandonment.

"Ellie," he says, taking my hands in his, his touch warm and steady. "I can promise you this moment, this feeling, this truth: I am falling in love with you. Have fallen in love with you. And pushing me away won't protect either of us from that reality."

The words I've been both longing for and dreading land like stones in still water, sending ripples through my carefully constructed defenses. He loves me. Or is falling in love with me. The distinction seems insignificant in the face of the naked emotion in his eyes.

"I don't know how to do this," I admit, voice barely above a whisper. "How to be vulnerable, how to trust, how to believe this isn't going to end in heartbreak."

"Neither do I," he says with a small, sad smile. "I just know that the alternative—not trying, not risking, not experiencing this fully—seems worse than whatever pain might come later."

The sincerity in his voice, the vulnerability in his eyes—they dismantle the last of my resistance. Whatever fears I harbor, whatever doubts linger, the truth remains undeniable: I am in love with Declan Wolfe. And pushing him away now, under the guise of helping him focus, would be an act of self-protection rather than love.

"Okay," I say softly, squeezing his hands. "No pause. No distance. I'm here, Declan. For all of it."

The relief that washes over his features makes my chest ache. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I offer a small smile. "Besides, I already bought a new scarf in team colors for tomorrow. Be a shame to waste it."

He laughs, the sound releasing the tension that has built between us. "Can't have that." His expression turns serious again, his hand lifting to cup my cheek. "Thank you for being honest with me. About my father, about your fears. That means more than you know."

"I promised you honesty," I remind him. "Even when it's hard."

Something shifts in his expression—a tension releasing, a weight lifting. He pulls me to him, his lips finding mine in a kiss that feels like gratitude, like promise, like coming home after the longest journey.

His hands frame my face, thumbs tracing the curve of my cheekbones with such tender reverence that tears prick behind my eyelids. The campus hockey star, the man with a reputation for casual hookups and meaningless encounters, touches me like I'm something precious—something to be cherished rather than consumed.

"I want you," he murmurs against my lips, the words vibrating through me like a physical touch. "All of you, Ellie. Not just your body. Everything you are."

His confession strips me bare in ways that have nothing to do with clothing. I've spent months—years—building walls to protect myself from this exact vulnerability. From the possibility of being seen, being known, being left again. Yet here I am, walls crumbling beneath the steady gaze of a man I once dismissed as nothing more than performance and privilege.

"I'm scared," I whisper, the truth escaping before I can contain it.

Declan's eyes soften, understanding darkening their oceanic depths. "I know. But I



got you.”

His words loosen something tight within my chest. His lips find mine again, but the kiss has transformed from questioning to claiming. There's an urgency now, a need that makes my blood rush hot and fast beneath my skin.

"Let me take care of you," he says, the words roughened by desire but gentle in their intent. "Let me show you what this could be. What we could be."

I nod, beyond words, beyond thought. My body has already made its decision, arching toward him like a flower seeking sunlight after longest winter.

His hands move with deliberate purpose, unbuttoning my shirt with torturous slowness. Each newly exposed inch of skin receives its own attention—fingertips followed by lips, teeth grazing sensitive spots that draw sounds from my throat I barely recognize as my own. He removes my shirt and bar slowly.

"So beautiful," he murmurs against my collarbone, the reverence in his voice making me believe it. His eyes track over me with such hunger, such raw appreciation, that self-consciousness transforms into a heady sort of power. I did this—reduced the untouchable Declan Wolfe to speechless wonder.

"I want you," I breathe, reaching for him.

He captures my wrists in one large hand, pressing them gently back against the pillow above my head. "Not yet," he says, voice dropping to that register that makes my insides liquify. "Tonight is about you. About showing you what you do to me. What you mean to me."

The control in his movement sends an unexpected thrill through me. Not domination, not force, but confident possession—a wordless promise that he knows exactly how

to please me, how to take me apart and put me back together stronger than before.

His free hand traces patterns down my torso, until finally he releases my wrists to focus on removing the denim barrier between us, sliding the fabric down my legs with agonizing patience. His palms trace back up my calves, my thighs, stopping just short of where I ache for his touch.

"You have too many clothes on," I complain, reaching for his shirt.

His smile is pure sin—confident, knowing, promising pleasures I've only begun to imagine. "Patience, greedy girl."

He lowers his head, trailing kisses up my inner thigh, and rational thought dissolves like sugar in rain. His breath is warm against the thin cotton of my underwear, a teasing promise that has me writhing beneath him, desperate for more direct contact.

"Declan," I gasp, his name a plea and a prayer both. "Please."

"Tell me what you want," he commands, fingers hooking into the waistband of my panties. "I need to hear you say it."

The request should embarrass me—I've never been one for explicit verbalization in intimate moments—but there's something liberating in his demand. In this safe space he's created between us, I find the courage to voice desires I've barely acknowledged to myself.

"I want your mouth on me," I whisper, heat flooding my cheeks but determination overriding embarrassment. "I want you to taste me."

"Where?"

“My pussy.”

The groan that escapes him sounds as though it's been torn from somewhere primal, somewhere beyond conscious control. "Fuck, Ellie," he breathes, eyes darkening to midnight. "Do you have any idea what you do to me?"

He slides my underwear down my legs with new urgency, discarding the scrap of fabric with uncharacteristic carelessness. For a moment, he simply looks at me—completely bare, completely vulnerable beneath his still-clothed body. The power imbalance should make me uncomfortable. Instead, it's intoxicating, this sense of being the sole focus of his formidable attention.

When his mouth finally makes contact with me, the pleasure is so intense it borders on pain. My back arches off the bed, a cry tearing from my throat before I can contain it. His large hands grip my hips, holding me steady as he explores with devastating precision.

"You taste like everything I've ever wanted," he murmurs against me, the vibration of his words adding another dimension to the sensation. "Everything I never knew I needed."

I'm lost, adrift in a sea of pleasure more intense than anything I've experienced before. This isn't about technique, though God knows he has plenty—it's about connection, about the emotional significance that transforms physical sensation into transcendent experience.

My release builds with frightening speed, coiling tighter and tighter until I'm gasping his name, fingers tangled in his hair, hovering on the precipice of something I can't name but desperately need.

"Let go," he commands, voice rough with his own desire. "I want to watch you come

apart for me."

The combination of his words and one final, perfect stroke of his tongue sends me hurtling over the edge. Wave after wave of pleasure crashes through me, my vision blurring, my body arching as something fundamental shifts and rearranges inside me. In this moment of absolute vulnerability, of complete surrender, I feel more myself than I have in years—more authentic, more present, more alive.

As I drift back to awareness, I find Declan watching me with an expression that makes my chest ache—wonder mixed with satisfaction, desire tempered by tenderness. He kisses his way back up my body, finally capturing my lips in a kiss that lets me taste myself on his tongue. The intimacy of it ignites a fresh surge of desire.

"Now," I whisper against his mouth, hands tugging impatiently at his shirt. "I need you now."

He sits back on his heels, pulling his shirt over his head in one fluid motion that showcases the lean muscle of his torso—evidence of years of athletic discipline transformed into visual poetry. I reach for his belt, but he catches my hands, bringing them to his lips to kiss each palm in turn.

I reach up to trace the sharp line of his jaw, marveling at the contrast between his physical strength and emotional gentleness.

Something shifts in his expression—restraint giving way to hunger, control to need. He stands to shed his remaining clothes, and I drink in the sight of him—powerful, aroused, magnificent in his complete nakedness before me.

When he covers my body with his own, the first press of skin against skin pulls sounds from us both—relief and anticipation mingling in the narrow space between

our lips. He settles between my thighs, the hard length of him pressing against me but not yet entering.

"Condom," he murmurs, reaching toward his discarded jeans.

I watch as he retrieves a condom from his wallet, struck by the care he takes even in the depths of obvious desire. When he rolls it on, his hands are steady despite the tension evident in every line of his body.

Then he's positioned at my entrance, his eyes locked with mine in a connection that transcends the physical. "Stay with me," he whispers. "I want to see you."

The first press of him inside me steals my breath—a stretching fullness that walks the exquisite line between pleasure and pain. He moves with careful restraint, giving me time to adjust, his focus absolute in a way that makes me feel like the center of his universe.

When he's fully seated, we both pause, adjusting to this new intimacy, this irrevocable crossing of boundaries. His forehead rests against mine, our breathing synchronized in the stillness.

"Okay?" he asks, voice strained with the effort of control.

"More than okay," I whisper, shifting my hips in invitation. "Move, Declan. Please."

He begins slowly, establishing a rhythm that quickly has me clinging to his shoulders, nails digging crescents into his skin. Each thrust feels deeper than the last, touching places inside me I never knew existed. His lips find my neck, my jaw, returning always to my mouth as if he can't bear to be disconnected from me even for moments.

"Ellie," he groans against my lips, the sound of my name transformed into something

sacred. "Your pussy feels incredible. Like you were made for me."

His words, the reverence in his voice, push me closer to a second release I didn't believe possible. One of his hands slides between our bodies, finding the exact spot that makes stars explode behind my eyelids.

"That's it," he encourages, watching my face with fierce concentration. "Let me see you come again. Let me feel you."

The dual sensations—his cock inside mine, his fingers working magic against my clit—catapult me over the edge faster than I thought possible. This climax is different from the first— deeper, more all-encompassing, as if originating from my very soul rather than merely my body.

I cry out his name, inner muscles clenching around him, pulling him deeper. The sensation triggers his own release—his rhythm falters, his body tensing above me, inside me, a growl of completion tearing from his throat as he follows me into ecstasy.

For long moments afterward, we lie tangled together, hearts racing in tandem, breath gradually slowing. The weight of him should be crushing but instead feels like anchor in tumultuous seas—grounding, necessary, right.

"I love you too," I whisper against his skin.

He goes very still beneath me, then shifts to look into my face, his eyes searching mine with an intensity that steals my breath. "Say it again," he murmurs, a plea and a command both.

"I love you." The words come easier this time, the truth of them settling into my bones like certainty after longest doubt.

His answering smile is like sunrise after the longest night, transforming his features with joy so pure it makes my chest ache. "I love you, Ellie Gardner," he says, the declaration simple and profound in its certainty. "Have since you called me an entitled jock and refused to be impressed by anything except the content of my character."

We stay like that for hours, talking softly about everything and nothing—childhood memories, future dreams, favorite books, worst fears, the conversation punctuated with gentle touches and occasional kisses that range from tender to heated.

Eventually, reluctantly, reality intrudes. Declan has a team dinner, a last gathering before tomorrow's championship that he can't miss despite his obvious preference to remain exactly where he is.

"I'll see you tomorrow," he says as we stand at my door, his hands framing my face with gentle possession. "You'll be in the family section? I'll leave your ticket at will-call."

"I'll be there," I promise. "With my team scarf and everything."

He laughs, pressing one last kiss to my lips before reluctantly pulling away.

I watch him walk down the hallway, his athletic grace evident even in this mundane movement.

And for the first time in longer than I can remember, that possibility of joy seems worth any price.

*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

Game day dawns bright and crisp, the kind of perfect early spring morning that feels like a good omen. I wake early despite having slept little, nerves and anticipation creating a restless energy I can't contain.

Declan texted late last night after the team dinner: Can't sleep. Thinking of you. Wish you were here.

The vulnerability in those simple sentences had made my chest ache. Close your eyes, I replied. Imagine me there, telling you how amazing you are, how proud I am, how much I love you. Now sleep, superstar. Tomorrow needs your best.

His response came quickly: You are my best. My reason. My center. I love you, Ellie. See you tomorrow.

Now, as I dress in carefully selected layers—Westford colors, of course, with Declan's number discreetly embroidered on the navy scarf wrapped around my neck—those words echo in my mind, a talisman against the anxiety that tightens my chest when I think about what today means for his future.

The campus buzzes with pre-game excitement, students and faculty alike sporting team colors, classes half-empty as many have already headed to the arena to pre-game. I make my way through this carnival atmosphere with singular focus, headed for the will-call window to collect my ticket for the family section.

"Gardner!"

I turn to find Brady jogging toward me, already dressed in his pregame suit, his



expression uncharacteristically serious. "Hey," I greet him, concern immediately prickling. "Everything okay? Is Declan—"

"He's fine," Brady assures me quickly. "Well, as fine as any of us are before the biggest game of our lives. But he asked me to make sure you got this." He holds out a small envelope. "Said it was important."

I take it with a murmured thanks, curiosity warring with concern as Brady hurries away toward the arena. The envelope contains a folded note in Declan's distinctive handwriting:

Ellie,

By the time you read this, I'll be in pre-game lockdown—no phones, no distractions, just focus. But I wanted you to have these words before I step onto that ice.

I've played hockey since I was three years old. Won championships, broken records, earned accolades. But nothing in those years prepared me for you—for the way you challenge me, see me, demand my authentic self rather than the performance I've perfected.

Whatever happens today—win or lose, scouts impressed or not—I want you to know that meeting you has been the best thing that's happened to me. Not because you've "reformed" me or made me "better," but because you've shown me who I already was beneath the expectations and performances.

I'm playing for my future today. But for the first time, that future isn't just about hockey. It's about possibility. About choice. About the freedom to write my own story rather than follow the script others have written for me.

You're part of that future, Ellie. However it unfolds, whatever challenges come. I love

you. Not as performance or convenience or arrangement, but as truth. Simple, complicated, terrifying, wonderful truth.

Yours, Declan

Tears blur my vision as I refold the note with trembling fingers. The raw honesty in his words, the vulnerability, the certainty—they silence the last whispers of doubt that have lingered despite the intensity of what we've shared.

This is real. He is real. We are real.

The revelation steadies me as I collect my ticket and make my way into the arena, already filling with excited fans. The family section is easy to spot—prime center-ice seating, more comfortable chairs, a collection of well-dressed parents and girlfriends engaged in tense pre-game conversation.

Caroline Wolfe spots me immediately, waving me over to the empty seat beside her. "Ellie, there you are," she greets me with genuine warmth. "I was beginning to worry."

"Got a bit delayed," I explain, settling beside her. "How's everyone holding up?"

Her smile turns wry. "Parents are nervous wrecks, girlfriends are pretending not to be, and Richard—" she glances toward her husband, engaged in what appears to be an intense conversation with a group of older men in expensive suits, "—is networking with NHL representatives as if his life depends on it."

The casual mention of scouts makes my stomach clench with anxiety. So much rides on today's game—Declan's future, his dreams, the culmination of years of sacrifice and dedication.

"And you?" I ask, genuinely curious. "How are you feeling?"

Caroline's expression softens. "Proud," she says simply. "Regardless of what happens today, I'm immensely proud of the man my son has become." Her eyes, so like Declan's in their intensity, meet mine directly. "And grateful for the influence you've had on him these past weeks."

I flush, uncomfortable with the credit she's assigning me. "I haven't done anything special."

"You've seen him," she corrects. "The real Declan, not the performance he's perfected to please his father or impress his peers. Do you have any idea how rare that is? How precious?"

Before I can respond, Richard appears, his expression tightening almost imperceptibly when he spots me. "Miss Gardner," he greets me with cool civility. "I didn't expect to see you here."

The implied reference to our conversation makes my spine stiffen. "I wouldn't miss it," I reply, meeting his gaze steadily. "Declan asked me to be here. To support him."

Something flickers across Richard's face—frustration, perhaps, or reluctant respect. "Yes, well. I suppose we'll see how that support translates to performance."

"Richard," Caroline admonishes quietly. "Be civil."

He subsides with obvious reluctance, turning his attention to the ice where staff are making final preparations. The tension between us hangs heavy in the air, a counterpoint to the excited energy building throughout the arena.

The crowd roars as the teams take the ice for warm-ups, Westford in their home navy

and gold, their opponents in crimson and white. I spot Declan immediately—his movements fluid and confident as he circles the ice, stick handling with casual mastery that belies the pressure weighing on his shoulders.

As if sensing my attention, he skates toward the glass in front of our section, eyes scanning until they find me. The smile that breaks across his face when our gazes lock makes my heart stutter—open, genuine, transforming his features with a joy that has nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with me.

He raises his stick in silent acknowledgment before rejoining his teammates, the gesture both public declaration and private promise. I'm aware of Richard's assessing gaze, of Caroline's knowing smile, of the whispers among other girlfriends and parents, but in that moment, I don't care. Let them see. Let them wonder. Let them witness the truth of what exists between Declan and me.

The game itself unfolds with brutal intensity—bodies colliding, sticks clashing, the crowd a living entity that breathes and roars with each turn of play. I understand enough now, after weeks of watching and learning, to follow the flow of action, to appreciate the strategy beneath what once seemed like chaos.

Declan is magnificent—fast, aggressive, his focus absolute as he commands the ice with a skill that draws gasps even from the opposing team's fans. By the second period, the score remains deadlocked at 1-1, tension building with each passing minute.

"He's playing well," Richard observes during a break, reluctant approval in his voice. "Better than practice this week."

The implied acknowledgment that my presence isn't distracting Declan, might even be enhancing his performance, feels like victory. I say nothing, simply nod and return my attention to the ice where players are lining up for a face-off in Westford's

defensive zone.

The third period begins with renewed intensity, both teams sensing championship hanging in the balance. Five minutes in, disaster strikes—a brutal hit sends Declan crashing into the boards, his head snapping back with sickening force. He crumples to the ice and lies motionless.

The arena falls silent, thirteen thousand breaths held in collective fear. Caroline's hand finds mine, squeezing with surprising strength. I can't breathe, can't think, can only watch as medical staff rush onto the ice.

"He'll be alright," Richard says, the slight tremor in his voice betraying his concern. "He's tough. Always has been."

Endless seconds pass before Declan finally moves, pushing himself to his knees, then to his feet with assistance. Blood streams from a cut above his eye, staining the ice in vivid crimson drops. The crowd roars as he skates slowly to the bench, waving off the stretcher, though he's clearly dazed.

I watch him disappear down the tunnel toward the medical room, my heart lodged somewhere in my throat. Caroline murmurs reassurances I barely hear, my focus narrowed to the empty space where Declan should be.

Ten minutes pass, the game continuing with a desperation matching my own mounting anxiety. Then, like an answered prayer, Declan reappears at the bench—face stitched, eyes clear, nodding to his coach with determination.

When he takes the ice again, the arena erupts. He skates directly to the face-off circle, shoulders set with a resolve that transcends mere athletics. This isn't just about hockey anymore. It's about proving something—to himself, to his father, to the scouts watching from nearby boxes, evaluating his potential, his character, his ability to

overcome adversity.

With four minutes remaining in regulation, still tied 1-1, Declan intercepts a clearing attempt at the blue line. He cuts through two defenders, a burst of speed that seems impossible after his injury. The goaltender slides across, anticipating, but Declan doesn't shoot—instead, he slides the puck to Brady cutting toward the net. One touch, and it's in.

2-1, Westford.

The crowd explodes, a wave of sound that feels physical in its intensity. Declan is swarmed by teammates, their celebration almost violent in its exuberance. Through the tangle of limbs and sticks, his eyes find mine again—always finding me, even in chaos.

The final minutes are agony, the opposing team pressing desperately for the equalizer. Westford collapses around their net, sacrificing bodies to block shots. When the final buzzer sounds, securing the championship, pandemonium erupts—gloves and sticks thrown skyward, players piling onto each other at center ice, the crowd a deafening wall of jubilation.

I watch through tear-blurred eyes as Declan emerges from the celebratory scrum, searching the crowd until he locates me again. The intensity of his gaze pins me in place, even from this distance. In the midst of the biggest athletic achievement of his life, surrounded by teammates and adoration, his focus is unwaveringly on me.

"Go," Caroline urges, giving me a gentle push. "They'll open the gate for family after the trophy presentation. He'll be looking for you."

Family. The word resonates in my chest with unexpected warmth. Is that what I am now? Part of Declan's family?

Richard says nothing as I make my way toward the ice level, but his expression has shifted from yesterday's dismissive condescension to something more thoughtful, more assessing. Whether this represents acceptance or merely strategic recalculation remains to be seen. But it doesn't matter. Nothing matters except me and Declan.

I wait as the team accepts their trophy, as the players embrace and pose for photos. Declan stands at the center, his face transformed by pure joy despite the angry red gash above his eye. When the gate finally opens, allowing family onto the ice, I hesitate—suddenly uncertain, overwhelmed by the magnitude of the moment.

Then Declan sees me, and everything else falls away. He breaks from his teammates, skating directly toward me with single-minded purpose. Before I can process what's happening, he reaches me, lifts me off my feet, and spins us in a circle, heedless of who might be watching.

"You're here," he says against my hair, his voice rough with emotion.

I cling to his sweat-soaked jersey, uncaring about the blood and ice staining my clothes. "Congratulations, champion."

He sets me down but doesn't release me, one gloved hand coming up to cup my face. "None of this means anything without you to share it with," he says, his eyes intense despite his obvious exhaustion. "You know that, right?"

The raw honesty in his voice steals my breath.

"I'm beginning to understand," I answer, my own voice thick with emotion.

His smile breaks through like sunshine after storm, transforming his face despite the blood and sweat and fatigue. "Good," he says simply. "Because I plan to spend however long it takes making sure you never doubt it."

And then he kisses me—not a performance for watching eyes, not a strategic move in our elaborate charade, but a declaration. A promise. A beginning.

Around us, teammates whoop and cheer, cameras flash, the celebration continues unabated. But in this moment, there is only us—Declan and Ellie, no longer pretending, no longer hiding behind carefully constructed walls.

Just two people who found something real in the midst of fake, something true within the lie.

Just two people choosing each other, without expiration dates or strategic advantage.

Just two people in love.



*Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:29 am*

Six Months Later

"If you don't stop pacing, you're going to wear a hole in the floor," Mia observes from her perch on my bed, watching me move restlessly around my dorm room.

"I can't help it," I mutter, checking my reflection for the thousandth time. "The editor of Columbia University Press is going to be there. And Professor Hammond. And—"

"And Declan," Mia interrupts with a knowing smile. "Who has already read your acceptance speech twenty times and thinks it's brilliant."

Heat rises to my cheeks at the mention of his name, a Pavlovian response even after six months together. Six real months, filled with late-night conversations and early-morning coffee runs, with heated academic debates and equally heated moments in his apartment. Six months of learning each other, challenging each other, building something neither of us expected but both now cherish beyond measure.

"Declan is biased," I point out, adjusting the simple black dress I've chosen for the Whitmore Prize ceremony. After everything, I won. Not the collaborative prize that Declan and I worked for, but the solo prize. After everything, it seemed like a bad idea to submit something together after everything that happened, how it started with a fake arrangement and a promise of help. And so I submitted on my own, and I won on my own merits, not because of anything Declan or his father did. In fact, it was probably despite my connection to Declan, since Richard still isn't my biggest fan. He's coming around, though. "He thinks everything I write is brilliant."

"Because it is," comes a voice from the doorway.

I turn to find him leaning against the frame, devastating in a charcoal suit that makes his eyes look impossibly blue. His hair, slightly longer now than during hockey season, curls just above his collar in a way that still makes my fingers itch to touch it.

"You're early," I say, heart stuttering at the sight of him despite the familiarity.

"Couldn't wait." He crosses to me, dropping a kiss on my temple—that first point of contact that has become our ritual greeting. "You look beautiful. And nervous."

"Terrified," I admit, leaning into his solid warmth. "What if I trip on stage? What if I forget my speech? What if—"

"What if you accept your prize with the same grace and brilliance you apply to everything else?" he suggests, hands settling at my waist. "What if this is just the first of many academic accolades? What if I'm the proudest boyfriend in the room, regardless of what happens?"

His steady confidence washes over me, calming the restless anxiety that's plagued me all day. This is what he does—grounds me when I spiral, challenges me when I doubt, supports me with a constancy I never knew I needed.

"When did you get so wise?" I ask, smoothing an imaginary wrinkle from his lapel.

"I've always been wise. You were just too busy assuming I was a dumb jock to notice." His teasing smile takes any sting from the words, transforming them into the private joke they've become.

Mia clears her throat dramatically. "And that's my cue to leave before you two get all gross and couple-y. I'll see you at the ceremony."

She slips out, leaving us alone in the quiet of my bedroom. Declan's hands slide up to cup my face, his expression turning serious.

"I have something for you," he says. "A good luck charm."

From his pocket, he produces a small velvet box—similar to the one that held the book necklace I still wear daily, but slightly larger. My pulse quickens as he places it in my palm.

"Declan..."

"Open it," he urges softly.

Inside lies a delicate silver bracelet, elegant in its simplicity. But it's the charms hanging from it that steal my breath—a tiny book, a hockey stick, a coffee cup, a snowflake, and the Empire State Building, each one representing a moment in our shared history.

"The book is obvious," Declan explains, lifting the bracelet and gently clasping it around my wrist. "The beginning. The hockey stick for the championship. The coffee cup for all those late-night study sessions. And the snowflake for our first real snow together —the night we went ice skating and you fell so many times I thought you'd be permanently bruised. And New York for our future." New York City – where we hope to end up together, me for grad school, Declan playing for the Rangers. He should have his pick of any team, and he's made it clear to the scouts and agents that he's only interested in playing in New York.

Tears prick at my eyes as I examine each charm, each memory made tangible. "It's perfect," I whisper.

"There's room for more," he says, his voice carrying a weight of promise that makes my heart swell. “

He leans down to kiss me properly, his lips gentle yet insistent against mine.

"For the record," he murmurs when we part, "this was never fake for me. Not really. Not from the moment you called me an entitled jock in Harmon's class and I realized I'd do anything to see fire in your eyes again."

It's a fact he's reminded me of frequently, and yet I never get tired of hearing it.

"Not even when you asked Kaitlyn first?" I tease, the old wound now healed enough to become another part of our story.

He groans, tipping his forehead against mine. "I'm never living that down, am I?"

"Not in this lifetime, Wolfe."

His laugh vibrates through me, warm and rich with happiness. "Fair enough. But just remember—I may have asked her first, but you're the only one I asked twice. The only one I'm asking forever."

The words settle into my chest, a promise for future conversations, future commitments. For now, I simply hold them close, another treasure to add to the collection we're building together.

"We should go," I say finally, though leaving the quiet intimacy of this moment feels like physical pain. "Can't be late to my own award ceremony."

"Lead the way, Gardner," he says, offering his arm with playful gallantry. "I've been following you since day one anyway."

As we step out into the autumn evening, his hand warm and solid around mine, I reflect on the strange, winding path that brought us here. From enemies to reluctant partners. From fake relationship to real love. From careful performance to raw truth.

Our beginning wasn't perfect or romantic or even particularly honest. But perhaps

that's what makes what we've built so precious—the knowledge that it grew despite the rocky soil, blooming into something neither of us expected but both now consider essential.

A love that began as pretense but emerged as the truest thing I've ever known.

And as Declan's thumb traces familiar circles on my palm, his eyes bright with pride and something deeper, more permanent, I realize that sometimes the most authentic stories begin with a lie.

Sometimes, the realest things grow from the fakest beginnings.

Sometimes, you stumble into forever while just pretending to be in love.

THE END