



Power Play Pursuit (New York Raptors #2)

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Category: Romance

Description: In the game of love, can she learn to trust again?

After a disastrous relationship, my heart is closed to men—especially smoldering hot hockey players.

Only problem? James Adler, star player of the New York Raptors, hasn't received the memo. He flirts with me like it's a full-time job, but I'm not about to fall for his charm—no matter how many abs he sports.

But when my ex crosses a line, James swoops in. He sends him packing and ends up injured in the process. The doctor says James can't be on his own, and before I can second-guess myself, I'm offering to be his temporary roommate.

Living with James reveals a different side of him, and I discover there's more to him than a goofy, charming hockey player—including a slight home fragrance addiction and a complicated past that speaks to me in ways I can't ignore.

With each passing day bringing us closer, he melts the ice I carved around my heart, and I find it hard to stick to the no-flirting rule I established.

Everything about being with James feels right, but is risking my heart again worth the chance at something real?

Power Play Pursuit is a closed door hockey romcom with enemies to lovers vibe and a lot of banter.

Follow the men of the New York Raptors NHL franchise as they chase professional success and the women who will melt their heart.

All books are standalones and can be read in any order.

Total Pages (Source): 32

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"A hug is so powerful, and mine are amazing—or so I've heard."

James Adler

Elizabeth Bowen is a woman who ages like fine wine.

Every time I see her, she's more beautiful than the last. I'm reminded of that fact again as I saunter into Rise & Grind for my morning cup of coffee.

She's grabbing something from a high cupboard, her shoulder-length blonde hair shimmering under the sunlight, her velvet skin as flawless as ever.

"Good morning," she says, flashing her stunning smile as she spins around, but it turns into a grimace when her gray-blue eyes land on me.

"Oh, it's just you."

"And a very good morning to you too! You always make me feel so special when I come in here."

"Oh, forgive me." She flicks a towel over her shoulder. "I forgot I was supposed to bow down in the presence of a Stanley Cup champion."

"Well, it certainly wouldn't hurt." I give her a wink. We did bust our butts for that trophy. Not that Elizabeth Bowen cares. But that's precisely what makes this woman so interesting.

“Hey,” Marissa calls out, hustling from the backroom with a bright smile. “Where’s Aaron?”

“Good morning, Mrs. Miles,” I say with a little bow, then step aside to reveal her beau standing outside. “He’s taking a call.”

“Got it. So, what can we get you? The usual?” Marissa asks, and I nod. I’m not really a huge coffee fan like Miles is, but stopping by Rise & Grind is still my favorite moment of the day.

“Already on it,” Elizabeth says, placing a large paper cup under the espresso machine.

The bell on the door jangles, and Aaron Miles struts inside, greeting the girls.

“Hey, you,” he croons to Marissa as they both lean over the counter to kiss. But it lasts a little longer than a quick peck.

I clear my throat. When they still don’t break the kiss, I sigh. “Oh, come on! This is a place of business. Food is served here!”

“Don’t mind him,” Miles says to his wife, kissing her again. “He’s just jealous.”

I shake my head and avert my eyes, pretending there isn’t an ounce of truth in his words.

“Okay. Here you are,” Elizabeth announces, placing the to-go cup in front of me. A new design is printed on it, with the sentence “Best Coffee in Brooklyn” scrawled proudly above their logo. I pick it up and smile. “Nice cups. Congrats again, ladies.”

“Thanks,” they both say in unison, since Marissa and Miles have finally detached.

“It’s been amazing getting all this recognition,” Marissa adds. “Wonderful for business.”

“And well deserved,” Miles chimes in, handing Marissa his own glittery pink cup. He lost a bet to her years ago, and now he has to drink from the glammed-up tumbler every day.

“So, Elizabeth,” I begin, leaning on the counter as I take out my wallet.

Her scarlet lips purse. “It’s Beth.”

I ignore her, preferring to use her glorious full name. “How about that date?” I ask, wagging my eyebrows.

She bites her lip to contain her smile. “Never gonna happen, James. You must have taken too many pucks to the head. I already told you. I have a boyfriend.”

To my utmost displeasure. But I wouldn’t be a top player in the NHL if I wasn’t persistent. Besides, I know she enjoys our banter. I can see it in the way her eyes gleam when we’re chatting.

Marissa and Miles both laugh at our exchange as she hands him his coffee.

Before I can open my mouth again, Elizabeth’s phone rings, and she glances to the counter to check the screen.

Gone is the gleam in her eyes, replaced by a flash of sadness.

It only lasts an instant, but it’s there.

She’s good at putting up a front—we’re similar in that way—but I see right through

her facade.

I wish she'd let me in, but I know she's not ready yet.

And with every week that passes, I begin to wonder if she'll ever be.

"Excuse me for a second," she whispers before picking up the phone and walking to the back.

Clearing my throat, I force a nonchalant smile and nod to Marissa.

"Well, we'd better get going," I say, my eyes drawn to the Raptors merch on the small table.

Aside from being the best coffee shop in town, Rise & Grind is also an official vendor of the New York Raptors merchandise.

I suppose it's kind of a given, since Marissa is Coach Martin's daughter.

"Have fun at practice," Marissa says before gathering her strawberry blonde hair into a ponytail. After the two lovebirds kiss again, we're finally ready to leave. I try to catch one last glimpse of Elizabeth, but she's nowhere in sight.

We shuffle out to the small pedestrian street, then continue to our hockey arena.

"What do you think she sees in that guy?" I grumble, taking a sip of my coffee as my mind wanders back to her. "Elizabeth and Rogers, I mean."

He arches an eyebrow. "What, besides the fact that he's a popular hockey player?"

"Right." Looking away, I take another sip.

I never really understood why they were together.

She's not that type of girl. Hockey means nothing to her, and the guy doesn't exactly possess other redeeming qualities.

"He treats her like crap, though," I say, Elizabeth's expression from earlier flashing in front of me again.

"I just wish she'd get out of that toxic situation. "

Elizabeth has been with Rogers for pretty much the entire time I've known her, and he's always been a total loser.

And I'm not just saying that because he plays for the Sharks—the other New York hockey team and our biggest rival—but because they've been more off than on.

The guy cheated and bails on her every other week.

Miles snickers, adjusting his Raptors cap on his head. "Yeah, we all know you've got it bad for her, dude. But even if she dumps him, that doesn't mean she'd suddenly be interested in you."

It's like he just dropped an ice bucket over my head. "Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Just looking out for you, bro."

I snap my head toward him, narrowing my eyes. "Dude, what gives? I thought you'd be all optimistic and pro-love now that you're a married man." Marissa and Miles got hitched a few months ago in a surprise wedding.

He flashes me a bright smile. “I am.”

“Clearly,” I scoff.

We steer the conversation to hockey, and I try to push Elizabeth to the back of my mind.

I can’t afford any distractions. As the defending champs, we have even more pressure to win this year.

We’re still in the pre-season, with the first official game kicking off the season tomorrow night, but we can already feel the weight of all those expectations.

From the media, the fans, the coaching staff, and most of all, from ourselves.

Winning the Stanley Cup was a dream come true, but we’re all hungry for more.

As we arrive at the practice rink that’s next door to the arena, we notice a few fans clamoring near the entrance. Raptors fans are the best fans in the NHL, and it always puts a smile on my face to meet them.

“Hey, guys!” I boom, suddenly animated. “Thanks for coming out this morning.”

They’re all smiles, stoked to meet us. As Miles and I sign jerseys and snap some selfies, I’m in my element.

I smile, tell bad jokes, and entertain them the best I can.

Hockey is a sport, but we’re also known for putting on a great show.

Ultimately, we’re entertainers. A good number of fans also ask me for a hug.

That's my thing. I love hugging. A hug is so powerful, and mine are amazing—or so I've heard.

“See? You don't even need Beth,” Miles teases as we're walking into the building. “You can pick out pretty much any girl in New York, and she'll go out with you for the hug alone.”

I just roll my eyes, though he's not totally wrong. My teammates and I do get a lot of attention from fans. But there's only one woman I'm interested in.

We reach the cafeteria, and when we arrive, everyone is still chowing down on breakfast.

“There you are!” shouts Maxime Beaumont, the other starting winger. “Thought you'd never come.”

“Relax, Frenchie Boy,” Miles says, sitting down across from him. “We know you guys need us. Adler just had to fill his hug quota for the day.”

Caleb Hawthorne—our captain—shoots me a sly grin, raking a hand through his dark brown hair. “Have you started charging yet?”

“Haha, very funny. It's called being friendly and showing gratitude to our loyal fans,” I say, snatching some bread. I admit, it does take a bit of time to get through all those hugs, but like I said, I love hugging people, and I don't want to disappoint fans who've been waiting hours for me.

“And anyway, it's Miles' fault we're cutting it close. He was all over Marissa this morning.”

A chorus of “Ohhh” echoes around us as our teammates snicker.

“Shut up,” Miles says, his face reddening. Yep, six-foot-two, two-hundred-pound defenseman Aaron Miles is blushing.

But he doesn't seem one bit bothered by our teasing, and I get it.

We might give him a hard time, but Aaron Miles has everything he wants.

The only one who comes close is Beaumont, who's getting married next month.

Professionally, we might have it all, but as I get older, I'm starting to think winning the Stanley Cup is not the most important thing in life .

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"Relationships are not always easy, but they shouldn't be this hard either."

Beth Bowen

I put down my phone with a sigh and join Marissa back behind the counter just as a customer is leaving.

"Are you okay?" she asks, her blue eyes brimming with concern.

I nod, reapplying a coat of Lip Smacker. "Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry about that."

"You don't look fine, Beth." She heaves a deep sigh. "I say this as a friend, but you really should end this vicious circle with Lucas. He's not good for you."

I turn my face away to hide my glassy eyes.

I really thought Lucas and I were doing better this summer, but now that fall—and hockey season—has come again, Lucas' demons are rearing their ugly heads.

Blowing me off, lying about what he's doing, and relegating me to the bottom of his priority list. I get how important hockey is for him.

It's his career, his life, but I can't help but feel like I'm always being tossed in the backseat, an afterthought.

I hoped moving in with him last year would help us spend more time together whenever he's not traveling for road games, but even at home, hockey is his

everything.

“You're in an enemies-to-lovers relationship with the wrong guy. You know that, right?” she says, dragging a small smile out of me.

Yeah, Marissa is a big romance reader, and she mostly discusses relationships in terms of tropes. But after ten years of friendship, I'm used to it.

“It's not that easy,” I say, biting my bottom lip.

Actually, I've broken up with Lucas countless times before, but we always end up back together.

I always forgive him, because isn't it what you're supposed to do?

Relationships require work, commitment, and sacrifices.

It's not always rainbows and butterflies.

My parents are a prime example of that. They've been through a lot.

They've fought and made up, and it's only made their marriage stronger.

“Look,” she says quietly, a hand on my shoulder. “I know it's hard. Leaving him for good is a big decision, but look at me and Aaron. Remember how scared I was to make that choice? Now, I'm happy. And you deserve that too, but I don't think Lucas is the guy for you.”

I nod. She might be right, but how can I know for sure? What if I end things with Lucas, and I miss out on the best relationship of my life?

“I won’t bug you about it anymore,” Marissa says.

“You know I’ve got your back, whatever you decide.

But as your friend, I can’t pretend I’m not concerned.

I’ve been seeing a lot of tears lately, and I don’t like it. Just remember that there’s a bedroom with your name on it at our place, if you need it.”

She opens her arms, and I fall into her embrace, her amber perfume reassuring me. “Thank you. I really appreciate you.”

“Of course. I’m your girl,” she says, flashing me her perfect smile.

A customer strides in, and I take care of his order while Marissa puts another batch of blueberry muffins in the oven.

“James looked handsome today, b y the way,” she says as soon as the customer leaves, and I almost drop the mug I’m holding.

Objectively speaking, I guess he was. Not that he’s ever anything but handsome, with his deep cobalt blue eyes, charming smile, and hair freshly cut, but even if I weren’t dating Lucas, I’m still not interested. James is the ultimate player. Flirting is his middle name.

“Huh?” I ask, pretending I didn’t hear her over the sound of the coffee grinder.

“James. He looked handsome this morning. I think he just cut his hair yesterday,” she says, coming back behind the counter, her strawberry blonde hair floating behind her.

I furrow my eyebrows in mock scorn. “You’re a married woman!”

“What? I still have eyes. And I’ll say it again, you two would look great together.”

I snort. “Never going to happen.”

She puffs out a laugh. “Okay. He’s a little extra, for sure, but he’s not that bad. You should give him a chance. He might surprise you.”

“I’m already dating a hockey player, and in case you didn’t get the memo, it’s not going so well. You were the one who told me they were decent people, and look where it got me.”

She quirks her lips to the side. “Well, there’s always an exception to the rule, right? Plus, I didn’t know you’d fall for a Shark.”

I cross my arms over my chest, amusement twitching at my lips. “So that’s what you’re after, huh? Matching me up with a Raptor to make your life easier.”

Not that I don’t sympathize with her agenda.

Heck, it’d make my life easier. I’ve been in this weird limbo with Lucas for the past two years.

Ever since Marissa moved to New York and we started our business.

With her dad coaching the team and her best friend—now husband—playing for it, it’s no surprise she’s a fierce Raptors supporter.

I also became friends with some of the guys, since they helped us with the store opening.

Athletes had been off my radar following a disastrous relationship with a college

football player, but Marissa and the guys convinced me there was something different about hockey culture.

So, when I met Lucas at an event my parents' company was catering, I let myself fall for him.

Only problem? He's a Shark, not a Raptor.

Little did I know how big of an impact that small detail would have on my life.

But I try to make it work, going to as many Raptors games as I do Sharks games.

"It's not that I want you to date a Raptor," she says, "although, it would be great to have you rooting for our red and blacks. I just want you to be happy."

I breathe out a long sigh. I get what she's saying.

In fact, I've been thinking about my relationship with Lucas a lot lately.

Ever since this year's training camp and pre-season kicked off.

We barely talk, let alone see each other.

And even if I understand why that is, it sucks to always come second.

How ironic is it that I see James Adler more often than my own boyfriend? That's just wrong. Even if he is easy on the eyes.

I hate coming home to an empty house. Lucas is playing his first game of the season tonight, and we exchange a few texts before I head over to the bathroom mirror for my nighttime skincare routine.

I start with a cleanser, then a serum, and I'm done applying my night cream in time for puck drop.

Although watching the game on TV, especially alone, isn't as fun as being in the arena, I make the most of it.

Marissa offered to come over to watch with me, but I told her to stay home.

I know the toll a hockey season can take on a couple, and I want her and Aaron to enjoy as much alone time together as possible.

I cheer on the players zooming across my TV screen, ecstatic when the Sharks score, especially when Lucas is the one to get the puck in the net.

The game ends 5–2 for the Sharks, and I do a little dance in my pajamas to celebrate. My phone pings on the table, and I pick it up, excited to talk to Lucas after his big win, but it's only Marissa texting me to congratulate them on their first win of the season.

I wait about half an hour before trying to call Lucas.

He's not picking up, so I just send him a text instead.

He'll call me back when he's able to. It's always a little crazy after a game.

As I curl up on the couch, I suddenly wish I could be there with him.

Marissa goes to road games with the Raptors sometimes, and so does Hayley, another friend of mine who's dating a player.

But every time I suggest it to Lucas, he's against it, claiming he needs to be focused.

Still, being with him when he's riding that winning high is always my favorite thing.

I put on a movie on Netflix to pass the time, yawning my way through the scenes. My eyelids are already drooping, but I really want to speak to Lucas before bed, no matter how much it'll sting tomorrow morning.

When the movie credits roll, he still hasn't called, and I'm starting to worry. Pacing back and forth in the living room, I call him again, and he picks up after a few rings.

"Hey! What's up?" he asks, his voice casual.

I swallow hard, plastering a smile on my face, even if he can't see it. "All good! Just wanted to say congratulations. It was a great game."

"Thanks. Yeah, we did good. Great start to the season."

"Absolutely." I sit down on the couch. "Do you—"

I pause when I hear sounds of movement just off speaker. There's giggling, then a not-so-quiet "shh" from Lucas himself.

"Are you at a party?" I ask, rubbing the back of my neck. Maybe he's celebrating the first win with the guys.

"Huh? Why would you say that?" he replies quickly, and my throat goes dry. I know that tone. It's the I'm lying tone. The I'm cheating tone.

My pulse hammers in my chest, and my body starts to boil. "Are you serious right now? One night away, and you can't keep it in your pants! I warned you I wouldn't give you a third chance, Lucas."

The only response is more giggling in the background and an inaudible conversation. Seriously? He's not even paying attention to me. I catch him red-handed, and he doesn't even have the decency to listen, or even defend himself.

"It's not—" he starts, but I cut him off. Too little, too late.

"Don't bother. I'll be out of your place tomorrow morning."

He lets out a frustrated sigh. "Beth, come on. Don't be like that. I'm just hanging out with a couple of friends, that's all. No need to get all jealous-possessive on me."

I scoff. Me, jealous-possessive? Now that's the news of the century. It's not in my nature. I've never been one to check what he was doing or who he was with. But after finding out he cheated on me, I admit I've been a little on edge. Can you blame me?

My throat constricts as tears fill my eyes. "Bye, Lucas."

Before he can reply, I hang up. You know the saying. Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me. And now, here we are, going on number three. It's high time I put an end to this.

Yes, relationships are not always easy, but they shouldn't be this hard either. Loving someone requires loyalty, respect, honesty. None of which Lucas is capable of, and I feel stupid for having taken so long to realize it .

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"It's like an intimate confetti cannon just exploded in here."

James Adler

Tonight is our home opener, and I'm pumped to be back on the ice with a packed arena. As much as I enjoy a little time off, hockey season is when I thrive.

Yet the moment practice is over, I still get in my car and drive to the Golden Age Nursing Home, twenty minutes away.

With the season ramping up again, I won't be able to come as often, so I want to make the most of the time I have left.

My grandma used to be a resident at the home, and I grew close to the other folks who live there.

As I walk in, I'm greeted with bright smiles by Lea and Maddie, who work at Golden Age.

"James! We weren't sure you'd make it this week. They're going to be excited to see you."

Now, it's my turn to smile. Because as happy as they are to have my company, I'm even more thrilled to spend time with them.

After a couple minutes of chitchat, I walk into the common room. It's a large space with tables and sofas scattered around for the residents' enjoyment during the day.

There's usually a wild card game being played, a focused chess game taking place, and several animated conversations being held.

"James!" Martha calls from her usual seat at the poker table. The other players—Bill, Esther, and a lady I don't know—all turn around, their faces lighting up.

"There he is," Bill says, standing up slowly, and I join them, urging them to stay seated.

"Grab a seat, boy," Martha says as I hug each of them in turn.

"And who is this lovely lady?" I ask when I make it to the woman I don't recognize.

Martha flashes a smile. "This is Lois, a new arrival. She's got a knack for cards."

"Nice to meet you, Lois. I'm James."

"Hello, James," she greets me, her eyes narrowing slightly. There's something familiar about her, but I can't pinpoint what it is. "Do you play poker?"

"Absolutely." I grin. "That's why I'm here."

We start chatting, and soon, we're fully invested in our game. Martha was right, Lois is a great card player—and a fantastic bluff. I'm going to have to up my game.

"Full house," she says, showing her hand. That's her third win in a row.

"Son of a biscuit!" I growl. I really thought I was going to win this one with my flush.

"Oh!" Esther exclaims while Martha just throws her cards on the table.

This is not good. Especially with the already-elevated blood pressure around here.

We play for another half hour before Martha calls it a day, saying she wants to go take a nap. Although she's a notorious sore loser, so she might just be sulking in her room. Lois follows suit, high on her winning streak.

"How long are you staying today?" Bill asks, putting the cards away. "Do you want to play rummy?"

"Only another hour. Season starts today," I say with a wide grin. We don't usually talk about hockey—which I appreciate greatly, given it's all I think about outside this place. The only exception is Bill, who's a hockey fan, through and through.

"Oh, golly! Is it starting up already? I didn't even know it was October yet."

I chuckle. "I know. It's crazy how time flies."

"Are you ready for the season?" he asks, stacking the cards. "I'll try to watch the game tonight."

"We are. It's always exciting to start a new season, especially as the defending champs."

"Don't let the pressure get to you," he says, squeezing my shoulder. "What else is going on with you? Anything new to report?"

I lean back against my chair. "Afraid not. Things are pretty boring out there. I'm sure you have much more exciting developments here at Golden Age."

Bill laughs, looking around. "It does feel a bit like those fake television shows they always have on."

It takes me a second to catch up. “You mean reality TV?”

“Is that what it’s called? Doesn’t seem too realistic to me,” he says with a chuckle. “Always arguing and wearing too much makeup.”

“Yeah, that pretty much sums it up.” I laugh.

He frowns, his bushy eyebrows colliding. “What’s the deal with that, anyway?”

I shrug. “Beats me.”

It’s true. I’ve never understood those new beauty standards—the blown-up lips that threaten to deflate under an angry kiss, or faces caked with ten layers of makeup.

A lot of girls look like Barbie dolls today.

It probably comes from their own insecurities, because I don’t think a single man in history has ever said, ‘Darn it! If only she had longer eyelashes!’ Thinking about this topic immediately puts Elizabeth and her naturally flawless features front and center in my mind.

Her smooth skin, the perfect shape of her kissable lips, how her gray-blue eyes widen when I flirt with her.

“So, still no Mrs. Adler?” Bill asks, pulling me back to reality.

A laugh bursts out of me. “Nope. I’d have to be dating someone for quite a while before that happens.”

He shrugs. “In my day, people got married weeks after meeting each other.”

“Wow.” I blink back in shock. I guess when you know, you know?

“It was a different time, that ’s for sure,” he says with a faint smile, looking off to the side, probably remembering that bygone era.

“Well, when I do find someone, you’ll be the first to know,” I say with a nod. “Is your family visiting this week?”

He shakes his head. “No, my eldest son is on vacation, and the youngest is working a lot at the moment—too much, if you ask me.”

“I’m sorry. I hope you see them soon. But until then, I’m here for you, of course.”

“You’re a good man, James.” His eyes crinkle with a smile. “I know Diane is looking down on you, and she’s so proud. You can count on it.”

His words touch something deep in my heart.

My grandma was everything to me. She raised me, put me through school, helped me get into hockey, and was my fiercest cheerleader.

I miss her every day. Coming to this place is always nostalgic.

I see her everywhere I look. But it’s also a painful reminder that she’s not here.

“Thanks, Bill.”

We move on to other topics, and soon enough, it’s already time for me to call it a day.

But after my visit, I feel so energized for tonight.

I know it's silly, coming to Golden Age when I don't even have a relative staying here anymore, but these are some of the only people who treat me like a normal human being.

Don't get me wrong, I love hockey. It's a dream come true, being able to play for a living. But it's also nice to have normal conversations and be liked for something other than my skills on the ice—or my looks.

It's refreshing to feel loved just for being, rather than doing.

Beth Bowen

Marissa and I finish packing all my bags into Aaron's trunk, and despite how heavy they are, I've never felt lighter.

I know I've made the right decision. Lucas hasn't even tried calling since I caught him in his lie last night.

That's how much he cares about me. It's a shame it took me another blatant round of evidence of his cheating to realize what an awful boyfriend he was.

I've already started to look at apartments to rent, but Brooklyn is crazy expensive.

I'll need a couple of weeks to figure things out and find something decent in my price range.

Thankfully, I have the most amazing friend in the world, and her husband isn't half bad either.

I know that taking me in while they're still in their honeymoon phase is less than ideal, but they didn't hesitate one second when I called this morning.

“You’re going to be okay,” Marissa reassures me, giving me a tight hug after closing the trunk. “I’m here for you.”

“Thank you,” I mutter, my voice wavering slightly. I feel the tears coming up, but I hold them back. No more crying today. Today, I’m starting over.

I’m grateful that I don’t have to worry about working this afternoon. My cousin Celia, who’s studying at NYU, frequently helps out at the shop, and she stepped in for us today so we could take care of this situation.

We drive to the modern building Aaron and Marissa call home—well, he doesn’t own the building, but he does live in one of the stylish apartments inside—and start hauling my stuff up to the elevator.

I don’t exactly travel light. What can I say?

This girl loves shopping online. And I also might have an entire bag just for my beauty products.

But a girl’s gotta do what a girl’s gotta do.

“Phew!” Marissa says, dropping the large bag she was carrying into the entryway. “That one was heavy.”

“Sorry.” I wince. “You stay here and catch your breath. I’ll go get the last one.”

“Gladly. Even with the elevator, I’m breaking a sweat. I need to exercise more.” She shakes out her shirt before gathering her long hair into a messy bun. “I’m going to take a shower, but you already know the place, so make yourself at home.”

“Thanks. I’ll be right back.”

I take the keys and ride the elevator down to grab the last of the bags from the car. It's the lightest of them all—a tote bag with my underwear. What? We ran out of space in my suitcases! I do feel bad carrying this now. I could have given this one to Marissa. She's already done so much for me.

I walk back into the building and wait for the elevator. It finally opens with a ping, and I startle when I see James Adler inside, wearing a freaking suit .

With everything happening, I completely forgot James lives in the same building as Aaron.

His brows furrow. “Elizabeth? What are you doing here? Are you okay?”

How does this man always seem to know when something's up? Does he have a sixth sense? Or maybe it's those deep cobalt blue eyes that can see straight through my skin.

“Yeah, I'm okay. Just going to Aaron and Marissa's,” I say, struggling to tear my gaze away.

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James in a suit is even harder to resist than James with regular clothes.

I want to avert my eyes, but I can't. This is the first time I've seen him in a suit in real life.

Obviously, I've seen that body spray commercial where he spritzes the product over his naked chest— s o fake, by the way, because who has an eight pack?

—before putting on a suit and racing through the city to protect the woman he loves.

“Is Aaron still up there?” he asks, emerging from the elevator. “He told me he was already at the arena.”

I sway on my feet. “Nope. It's just Marissa and me.”

“You don't look okay, Elizabeth.” He reaches out to me, his fingertips grazing my arm before pulling back, his hand balling into a fist. “Tell me.”

His words send tingles to my chest. Both positive tingles and painful ones. No, I'm not okay, but James Adler is the last person who could do anything about it. Still, he is nice to care. Even if it's probably for the wrong reasons.

I force a bright smile. “I'm fine, really.”

“Okay.” He nods subtly. “So, are you coming to the game tonight?” he asks, a gleam in his eyes.

I nod, clutching my bag of underwear. “Yeah, I’ll be there.”

“Terrific.” His lips twist into a smile. “We’re going to have a great night.”

“See you then,” I say, spinning on my heel to enter the elevator. Unfortunately, he turns unexpectedly in the same direction, knocking me off balance. I roll my ankle and collapse against his absurdly hard chest. Lord help me, James smells like musk and clean cotton.

My bag drops to the floor, but who cares right now? I’m practically inhaling fabric softener heaven.

“Sorry,” he says, steadying me. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I blurt out, trying to ignore the fact that my heart is galloping like a caffeinated racehorse.

“Oh,” James says, his tone playful. “What do we have here?”

I don’t have to lower my eyes to know the full contents of my underwear drawer are now scattered on the floor for the world to see.

But as James and I lock eyes, I suddenly realize I’d trade the entire world seeing this for James Adler gawking at my underwear.

Heat surges through my body, and I drop to my knees, gathering the skimpy delicates that are now on display.

Do I really own every color possible? It’s like an intimate confetti cannon just exploded in here.

James joins me on the floor, and it only increases the temperature. My shame meter triples when he hands me my blue silk panties.

There's a glint of amusement dancing in his eyes, but also something else. Something deeper, warmer, but I don't have time to think about it right now. I have other panties to fry.

How many do I even own? This is a nightmare. I flail my arms around, trying to gather as many as I can, but my light-pink lace panties are stuck in the elevator railing.

"Here." James chuckles softly, his large hand hovering over mine. "Let me."

I didn't think it was possible, but I feel the blush deepen on my cheeks. Great. That's just fantastic.

He tugs on the pair of panties, but it stays firmly stuck. He balls his fist around the fabric, then tries to unhook it with his other hand.

"It's fine," I say, my voice higher-pitched than usual. "Just tear it."

As if I can ever wear that thing again now that it's been balled in James' hands. Or on the floor of a public place. Yeah, that too.

"Hold on. Let me try again," he says, glancing up at me before muffling another chuckle. "It'd be a shame to rip this one. It's quite—"

"Shut up," I snap, rolling my eyes, though I'm grateful for his lighthearted teasing. At least it relieves some of the pressure. "I knew you'd never let this go."

He chokes out a laugh. "Elizabeth, you decided to expose me to what looks like your

entire collection of panties. Of course I'm not going to let this go."

Despite the heat that spreads across my face, a chuckle bursts out of me. "Touché."

After another unbearable minute, he finally unhooks the panties, keeping them in one piece by some magic.

Standing up, he hands me the scrap of clothing and traps me with his gaze, his grin still wide.

"Aren't you going to make some kind of gross comment?" I ask, matching his stare. How am I looking him in the eye right now? No idea. Maybe having my intimate clothing displayed like my own personal art gallery gave me a few bravery points.

"Why? Are you craving it?" he teases.

I just shake my head.

"And for the record, I wasn't going to make a gross comment. Only that these panties," he says, dropping his gaze to the balled-up pink lace pair still burning in my hand, "are particularly cute."

I swallow hard. How can James Adler manage to light my entire body on fire with the word "cute"? Inhaling a sharp breath, I push a loose strand of hair behind my ear. "Oh."

He arches an eyebrow. "Not the comment you were expecting?"

I open my mouth to reply, but he stalks closer and rumbles, "Are you disappointed I didn't tell you those are incredibly sexy, and I'm dying to see you in them? Because that was definitely at the top of my mind. But I decided to be a gentleman instead."

“Good,” I breathe out. There’s nothing gentlemanly about James Adler, or the fire roaring in his eyes, but I keep that thought to myself. No need to stoke those flames even more. “Well, now that we’ve settled that, I’m going back upstairs.”

The corner of his lips tilt into a smile. “See you tonight, Elizabeth.”

Rolling my eyes again, I carefully sidestep to avoid colliding with him again, then walk into the elevator.

“Oh, by the way,” he says, and I turn around.

His eyebrows furrow. “What are you doing here with a bag of underwear?”

It’s my turn to smile, knowing I’m about to drop a bomb on him. “You haven’t heard? I’m moving into the building.”

His lips part slightly, and that’s the last image I see of him before the door closes.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"In my defense, it's hard to resist smiling at James Adler."

James Adler

We're all gathered in the locker room, ready to kick some Carolina butt tonight.

The only problem is, all I can think about is Elizabeth and her myriad of sexy underwear that now live two floors down from me.

When she first told me the news, a surge of relief washed over me as I realized that meant she'd finally left that douchebag.

Of course, that doesn't mean she'll ever be interested in me, just like Aaron said.

But I'm just happy she's not with that loser anymore.

"Are you all right, Adler?" Hawthorne asks, his concerned-dad look activated. Granted, I'm not usually sitting around, thinking, before a game.

I bump my fist on his thigh. "All good, Cap. Just getting my head in the game. Ready?"

"You know it." He winks.

Miles leans toward me, hitting me with his glove. "Are you still ruminating over the fact that Beth moved in with us?"

My pulse accelerates at the sound of her name. “Nope.”

“Oh, Beth moved in with you?” asks Beaumont, who has big ears, as he saunters over. What is this? Gossip hour?

“Yeah,” Miles says. “She broke up with Rogers and needed a place to stay for a while.”

“And here I thought Adler would be the first to volunteer,” Beaumont says with a smirk.

“He didn’t know about it,” Miles replies, as if I’m not sitting right next to them.

“Oh,” Hawthorne says. “Makes sense.”

“Not that she would have accepted his offer,” Beaumont adds, and I try to kick him in the crotch, but the idiot has good reflexes.

I sit back and sulk, though they’re not entirely wrong. I’m still planning to ask Elizabeth, just in case, but I doubt that’ll be a winning move.

“Well, good for Beth,” Hawthorne says, playing with his mouth guard. “Plus, now she can be a real Raptors fan.”

“All right, gentlemen,” Coach Martin says, marching into the room.

Everyone falls silent and takes their seat.

“First game of the season. We’ve got to dictate the pace tonight.

Play as fast as you can. Be crisp with the puck, and win all your one-on-one battles.

You've got this. Let's rock and roll!"

Everyone cheers and claps as Coach hands me a printed list. As the team's official entertainer, I've taken on the job of announcing the starting lineup.

I walk to the center of the room and peer at my teammates.

"Rrrraaptors! Let's get this show on the road.

In the front we have Max 'The Hair' Beaumont!

"I point at him, and everyone cheers. He bows, showing off his perfect curly hair that got him that nickname.

"We also have our fearless leader, Captain Caleb Hawthorne!"

More whoops and hollers erupt around the room.

"And the best left winger in the league . . . Yours truly!" I add, giving them a twirl and making everyone laugh. "Defending James Norris trophy winner, Aaron Miles, will be in the back," I continue, pointing at Miles, who waves at the guys.

"And the toughest defenseman in the NHL, David Johnson!"

He stands up and pumps his fist under the rain of cheers.

"And defending our Raptors cage, the one, the only, the great Noah 'Wally' Wilcott!" I announce, pointing to our goalie. Being the grump that he is, he barely acknowledges my introduction.

"Come on, Wally," I tease. "I know you want to smile." I walk up to him and start

boxing him for fun, but he's not having it.

Well, at least everyone else is laughing and pumped up, which means my first job of the night was a success.

"Let's go, guys!" I call out, clapping my hands together before walking back to my stall to grab my helmet. Everyone slaps my back or shakes my hand as I pass them, and minutes later, we're in the tunnel, ready to get this game started.

The music is blasting, and the crowd's cheers crescendo to a roar. I hop on my skates, excited to be back on the ice.

Tonight's the home opener, which means a pregame ceremony will mark the unveiling of our Stanley Cup championship banner.

The deep voice of the PA announcer cuts through the roaring of the crowd as he presents tonight's game.

A video plays of last season's highlights, and even though we can't see it from where we're standing, we can hear the audio mixed with the crowd's booming cheers.

Emotion and adrenaline surge through me as I recall that magical moment when the announcer spoke those eight words: "The New York Raptors won the Stanley Cup!" It was a few months ago now, but I still get chills when I think about it.

The rest of the guys feel the same. I can tell from the elated smiles on their faces, the gleam in their eyes, or the way they clap their hands with fervor.

That moment bonded us forever. Miles slaps my back, and I bump my shoulder with his.

Finally, the announcer calls us on the ice, and I stride forward.

I always lead the way. I love stepping on the ice first and hearing the roar of the crowd multiply.

Tonight is particularly wild, and I don't think I've ever experienced such a fantastic crowd before as we skate onto the ice.

Spotlights are roaming around the rink, and fans are cheering at the top of their lungs.

We thought we had a warm welcome when we started our warm-ups, but this is ten times more insane.

I skate around, waving my stick at the fans, soaking in their energy, their smiles, the love they're giving us.

We drop our sticks and helmets on the bench before gathering at center ice as the announcer says, "And now, please welcome the Stanley Cup."

The cup itself gets an even crazier welcome from the fans.

"Carried by Team Captain, Caleb Hawthorne!"

Hawthorne steps on the ice, holding the large cup and showing it off to the crowd. He places it on a table next to a trunk containing our banner before skating toward us.

The trunk opens, and the banner unveils, being lifted to the ceiling. The crowd claps and cheers while we stand arm in arm, watching it with pride—smiling as we reminisce on our past accomplishments, but also dreaming of recreating those memories.

We take one last group picture with the cup before doing some free skating around the rink, applauding our fans and thanking them for their support. I even blow a few kisses to the crowd, making people laugh.

The Carolina Kings enter next, and our fans quiet down as we grab our helmets and sticks. It's time to get our heads back in the game.

Beth Bowen

Going to a hockey game after ending a complicated relationship with a hockey player doesn't seem like the best idea on paper, but in reality, it's exactly what I needed.

Even if I was never a huge fan of the sport—or any sport, for that matter—one thing is undeniable when it comes to hockey. It's one heck of a show.

That's especially true tonight, with the pre-game banner-unveiling ceremony and one last look at the Stanley Cup.

All our friends are here to support the Raptors tonight: Marissa, of course, in her full Raptors gear as she sports Aaron's number, but also the No Shelf Control girls from across the street.

There's Hayley, who's engaged to Maxime Beaumont, plus Maxime's sister, Alice, and her boyfriend, Deacon.

He doesn't make it to the games often, but now that he's hired someone to help him manage the bar, we might see him more.

His niece, Lola, is here too with one of her friends from school.

Finally, we have Emma and her fiancé, Auston Buckley, the famous movie—now

theatre—star.

During season games, it's usually only Marissa, Hayley, and me, so it's great to have the entire gang here.

The banner-unveiling ceremony was more emotional than I'd anticipated. Watching the guys standing arm in arm like that gave me chills. It's crazy how many emotions a simple sport can conjure up.

Once the ceremony ends, James, Maxime, and Aaron skate toward the bench to grab their gear.

Since our group is sitting behind the glass, right next to the team bench, they wave at us with bright smiles.

James, of course, can't help but blow me a kiss.

The girl behind me squeals, and as I turn around, I see that she's waving back at James, who just grins.

I shake my head with a scoff before reapplying some Lip Smacker.

He's such a flirt, but his methods work well with the feminine population.

You should see the number of girls wearing his jersey tonight.

Which reminds me, I don't own any Raptors gear.

Lucas would have thrown a fit. Well, I kind of understood where he was coming from, but now I'm free to show my support for our red and black.

I'll get a numberless hoodie or a cap later.

The players take their positions at center ice, and the puck drops. They go hard at it from the get-go, probably fueled by the explosive crowd tonight, or the fresh reminder that they have a title to defend.

James seizes the puck after a rebound and shoves it into the Carolina cage barely three minutes in.

The horn blares, followed by the sound of the Raptors cheering.

Everyone is on their feet celebrating. James skates around the rink, brandishing his stick and encouraging the fans to amp up their volume.

When he reaches our spot, he just winks at me, and I can't help but smile.

In my defense, it's hard to resist smiling at James Adler.

Yes, he is the ultimate player and flirt, but he wears his empathy on his sleeve.

That said, as happy as I am to count him as a friend, I won't fall for his act. I know his type. They like the chase, but as soon as they get what they want, they lose interest. Ask me how I know.

Besides, after what happened with Lucas, I need a break. This heart is closed off to men for the time being—hockey players in particular. Actually, there's a special section just for them locked behind a fireproof door, and I just threw away the key.

The game ends with a win for our Raptors, and fans are delighted as they trickle out of the arena. Tonight's atmosphere was fun and fueled with adrenaline, and I'm glad I came. We're all gathered in Deacon's bar now—our usual postgame hangout.

Word got around that some of the players hang out here after the game, so more and more people are cramming into the space, but the crowd is chill. And we have a private backroom.

The cheers and applause rippling from the front of the bar tell us the guys have just entered the building.

Sure enough, when Marissa opens the door, we see them walking toward the back.

Not all the Raptors come to Deacon's bar, but we have a circle of friends with about eight players.

As they make their way to the back, they stop and take a few selfies, sign some autographs, and—in the case of James 'The Hug' Adler—hug a lot of people.

No, scratch that. Hug a lot of beautiful women .

He's clearly enjoying himself, an elated smile plastered on his face as he hugs each of them in turn and takes selfies with them.

It's fascinating to watch, even though, if I'm being honest, it's also kind of gross.

These girls don't even pretend not to check him out or feel him up as they wrap their arms around his strong torso.

James doesn't seem to care. Of course he doesn't.

What guy doesn't like when a sexy woman wraps her arms around him?

I know all about that from dating Lucas for eighteen months, though the Sharks didn't boast quite the same level of fandom.

And for some reason, it never bothered me as much.

I guess Lucas was closer to his fans in private.

I almost throw up my nachos just thinking about it. How dumb was I?

By now, everyone but James has made it through to the backroom, and Marissa closes the door behind Aaron before falling into his arms.

We congratulate the guys on their first win, and chatter fills the room. Deacon puts some music on from the jukebox, and we all grab a drink.

I'm talking with Emma and Austin about his next Broadway play when James finally joins us.

He sweeps the room, his gaze only stopping when it falls on me, and I immediately avert my eyes.

No need to give him any more ammunition.

The fact that he's the only man to have ever witnessed my entire panty collection doesn't help with the fire burning inside me whenever I look at him.

I manage to ignore James most of the night, but when I leave the restrooms, I chance upon him in the hallway, speaking on the phone as he leans against the wall. There's nowhere to hide.

His face lights up, and I offer a feeble smile before slipping past him.

"I'll call you back," he says into the phone before tucking it in his pocket and catching up with me. "Elizabeth, we haven't had a chance to talk yet."

“Right,” I say, stopping. “Congrats on the game, and your goal and assists.”

He grins. “Thanks. Glad you enjoyed the show.”

I smile, my insides scorching beneath the look he’s giving me. Like I’m just too tasty to resist. “So, you moved into the building? Why not stay with me? My place is bigger than Miles’, and I’m all alone there.”

A chuckle escapes me, but I roll my eyes. “Not gonna happen.”

“Aww, why not? We’d have fun together.”

“I wouldn’t want to intrude. After all, you need to keep the coast clear for your harem of girls.”

He splay a hand on his chest. “You hurt my feelings to think so little of me, Elizabeth.”

“Speaking of,” I mumble, glancing behind him to where two girls are patiently waiting with their phones.

He looks at them, then back at me. He opens his mouth to protest, but I’m faster.

“Enjoy your night, James. ”

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"I've had a lot of crazy fan requests during my career, but this is probably the best one."

James Adler

I don't even have time to call after Elizabeth before she's gone. Pushing down my disappointment, I turn to the girls waiting for me and take photos with them.

"Great game tonight," the brunette says before opening her arms for a James Adler hug.

"Thanks." I offer a genuine smile before giving her a quick embrace. "Thanks for your support."

"You were amazing," the other girl says, waiting her turn to hug me.

As we chat about where they're from, the purposeful glint in their eyes, coupled with the constant touching of my forearms, gives me a clear indication that they're not just fans looking to catch up with their favorite player.

Most people assume guys love this, and maybe some do.

But not me. As much as I adore entertaining the crowd and interacting with my fans, I know these girls are only interested in dating James Adler, number eight of the New York Raptors.

They dig my looks, my fame—probably my abs too, thanks to that commercial—and

weirdly enough, that's a complete turn-off for me.

I like to pursue, not to be pursued. Which isn't an easy task when you have my occupation.

I politely excuse myself, then hurry back to the private area.

"There you are," Hawthorne bellows, apparently having been looking for me.

"Where were you?" Miles asks, readjusting his cap. "Flirting with innocent girls again?"

I just shake my head. "For your information, I was on the phone with Mark." He's my agent and the one who's been helping me diversify my income by booking me commercials and endorsement gigs. "What's up?"

He and Beaumont start arguing about a play from earlier and suck me into the conversation. It's always fun to put the blame on Beaumont.

After that, it's one heated debate after another, until I feel a migraine coming on and head outside for some fresh air.

I can't dodge another round of selfies and hugs as I make my way out, so I'm forced to put my James 'The Hug' Adler mask back on for a minute.

"Are you following me now?" Elizabeth's voice hits my ears the moment I step outside the bar. She's leaning against the wall, a finger twirling her hair.

"You caught me." I smirk. "What are you doing out here alone?"

"Just thinking." She sighs, a shadow of melancholy lingering behind her eyes.

“Actually, I think I’m going to grab my stuff and head back to Aaron and Marissa’s.”

“Can I walk with you?”

She hesitates for a second, then nods. Good. I wasn’t about to let her walk home in the middle of the night by herself. Even if it’s only a fifteen-minute stroll.

“I’ll go grab the keys and let them know we’re leaving,” she says.

I wait outside for her, striking up a conversation with a dude wearing my jersey.

“Great game tonight,” he says with a grin. “Excited for the season?”

“Thanks, man. We’re pretty confident. Were you at the game?”

“Nah, we watched in here tonight,” he says, tipping his chin toward the bar. “Couldn’t get tickets, but we’ll be there tomorrow. Which is even better. It’s my girlfriend’s birthday, and I’m going to propose.”

“No way!” A smile lights up my face. “That’s amazing.”

“Actually, since I ran into you,” he says, twisting his mouth. “Do you think you could bring the ring?”

I wrinkle my forehead in surprise. “Really?”

“We’re both big Raptors fans. We actually met at a game, which is why I’m planning to propose at the arena. But you’re her favorite player, so it would be a dream come true if you were part of it.”

A feeling of pride washes over me. This dude, who I don’t even know, wants me to

be part of his big moment. I've had a lot of crazy fan requests during my career, but this is probably the best one.

"I'd be honored. How are we making this happen? Where are you guys seated?"

"We have glass seats for the occasion, not far from the bench. You could skate over and give me the ring during warm-ups?"

I nod. "Are you sure, though? I don't want to steal your thunder."

He shakes his head vehemently. "No, no. She's going to love it. Where can we meet so I can give you the ring?"

My eyes widen slightly. Right. I didn't consider the part where a stranger has to entrust me with his most precious piece of jewelry. "Um, at the last possible moment would be best," I say with a chuckle. "How about we meet at the player entrance around four p.m.?"

"Perfect. Thank you so much, man." He starts moving toward the bar entrance.

"Absolutely. My pleasure. Hope it goes smoothly."

"Are you kidding? With you bringing the ring," he says, turning back with a smile, "there's no way she'll say no."

I bark out a laugh. "Smart move, man."

After the door closes behind him, Elizabeth comes back, and we walk home in silence. It's a warm night for this time of year. There's a slight breeze, but we've been having spectacular fall weather so far. She stares straight ahead, her gaze distant and unfocused.

“Are you okay?” I finally ask. I know, it’s pretty much the only question I’ve been asking her lately. But one look at her, and it’s all I can think about.

“You always ask me that,” she says, echoing my thoughts.

I arch an eyebrow. “Only because you keep lying to me.”

She looks at me, then brings her gaze to the pavement before sighing heavily. “Fine, I’m not okay. But isn’t that to be expected after a breakup?”

“I think so.” Not that I’ve really ever dated. “But I also think you made the right decision.”

She rolls her eyes, smiling. “Of course you do.”

“I mean it. He wasn’t good for you, Elizabeth.”

She puffs out a laugh. “And let me guess, you would be?”

My heart quickens as I imagine us walking down this street hand in hand. “Absolutely. You deserve someone who sees you, who values you. Not a dumbass who jerked you around for all those months, never realizing how amazing you are.”

Her cheeks pink ever so slightly. “Thanks for saying that. I don’t know why I stayed with him for so long.”

Beats me.

“But it’s hard sometimes,” she murmurs. “You feel so many things about a person, you can’t even label them all.”

I shove my hands in my pockets. “And what are your feelings now?”

She glances at me, her grayish eyes piercing through to my heart. “Relief?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Is that a question?”

“Relief,” she repeats with more certainty. “Yes, that’s what I feel. I’m glad it’s over with Lucas, and I can concentrate on myself again. He was a bad boyfriend, and I won’t keep looking into the past.”

“Good for you. Now that you’re a full-fledged Raptors fan, maybe you can wear my jersey instead of that generic one you have on?” I tease, glancing at her top.

She shakes her head, smiling. “You’re impossible. I like this jersey, and I just got it tonight. Plus, I know how you guys get worked up when a girl you know wears your jersey. I don’t want to give you any false hopes.”

“There she goes breaking my heart again,” I breathe out, and she chuckles.

She shrugs. “What? How could I date a hockey player again after what happened with Lucas?”

“Wow. He really screwed this up for me, didn’t he?” I say it with a lighthearted tone to make her feel better, but deep down, I mean it.

“Yeah. I’m afraid that ship has sailed,” she replies.

“Crab. I hate that guy—and his stupid name. Always made me think of mucus.”

I glance at Elizabeth, and her pupils dilate before she explodes into laughter. I follow along, her laughter contagious. “What? It’s true!”

“Oh my gosh,” she says, a hand on my forearm as she catches her breath. The contact makes my skin burn through my shirt. “I never thought of that.”

“Really? I see mucus pouring out of his nose every time I see his face.” That, and blood after I mentally punched him. But let’s not spoil the mood. I finally have Elizabeth laughing again, and that’s exactly where I want her .

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Just pretend he's wearing a swimsuit."

Beth Bowen

It takes me a second to adjust to my surroundings when I wake up, but then it all comes back to me. Leaving Lucas. Moving in with Marissa and Aaron. Laughing with James.

Tingles of excitement spark beneath my skin at the reminder of last night. James always manages to put smiles on people's faces. That's why he's so popular.

When I get up and grab my phone, I see seventeen missed calls from Lucas. I guess he finally made it home. I bite my lip. Should I call him back? No, I need coffee—and possibly a pep talk from my best friend—before I make any decisions regarding Lucas.

I burst out of my room and come face to face with Aaron and his naked chest.

"S-sorry," he stammers.

I snap my gaze away, my cheeks suddenly burning. "Crap, no. I'm sorry. I'm the one who's intruding."

"You're not. I just forgot we had a guest over," he mumbles. "I'll go get dressed." With that, he hurries to the back of the hallway.

I take a deep breath as Marissa walks down the corridor, chuckling at our exchange.

“Sorry about that. He feels bad. He likes to hang out in his boxers, probably because he wears so many layers at work.”

“It would have been nice to know that bit of information beforehand.”

She waves a hand in dismissal. “Relax. It’s nothing. Just pretend he’s wearing a swimsuit.”

I arch an eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure he doesn’t wear Frozen swim trunks.”

She explodes in laughter. “Right. That’s actually from a time he lost a bet. We—”

“No! I don’t want to know.” I think I’ve intruded on their private lives enough for one day. Or one lifetime.

With a chuckle, she wraps an arm around my shoulders. “Let’s go get you some breakfast.”

We start working on breakfast—eggs and bacon with toast—and a few minutes later, Aaron walks into the kitchen, now fully dressed. “Sorry again,” he says, offering an apologetic look.

“Please, don’t worry about it. My fault.”

He walks up to Marissa, who’s frying the eggs, and drops two kisses on her temple. Her smile widens as she leans into him. I swallow hard, looking away. Somehow, witnessing this tender gesture feels way more intrusive than seeing Aaron in his Olaf boxers.

“So, how are you holding up?” Aaron asks me, grabbing a few plates from the cupboard.

“Good.” I nod. “Thanks again for letting me stay here. I’ll be out of your hair soon. I’m going to browse apartment listings today.”

“Feel free to stay as long as you want,” he says.

“No sign of Lucas yet?” Marissa asks, turning around to look at me.

My lips twitch into a smile when I hear his name because now, all I can hear is how much it sounds like mucus. “He tried calling me seventeen times last night. I’m not sure what to do.”

Aaron whistles dramatically. “W ow. Guy crossed into crazy ex-boyfriend category ten phone calls ago.”

“I’m with Aaron,” Marissa says, scooping the eggs onto our plates. “Definitely don’t call him back.”

“Yeah, you’re right. I won’t,” I say, biting my cheek. He doesn’t deserve any explanation beyond the one I gave him on the phone. It’s not like I ghosted him, or he couldn’t see it coming.

Our conversation shifts to what we’re doing today.

And since hockey season has officially started, it means practice and another game tonight for Aaron.

Luckily for the Raptors, they have a streak of home games and tri-state area games before they hit the road.

That’s the advantage of playing for a city with so many opposing teams close by: another one in New York and New Jersey, two in Pennsylvania, one in Boston, and

one in DC.

All less than four hours away by car, which means they're pretty much home games.

The guys can come back home right away, sometimes even the same night.

As for Marissa and me, we're due at the coffee shop later today. Whenever Celia can step in for us the morning after a game, we always take her up on her offer.

We're discussing new recipes we want to try when my phone rings. I don't recognize the number. Hopefully, it's not Lucas using another phone.

"Hello?" I say tentatively .

"She's alive!" the voice of my grandma blares through the receiver. I don't miss her sarcastic tone in her voice.

"Hi, Grandma. How are you doing?"

"I'm good. I was just afraid you might be dead, considering you haven't called since I stepped foot in this death hole."

"Grandma! Don't be so dramatic," I say, slumping my shoulders in exasperation. She's only been in the nursing home for a couple of days. "I know I said I'd call on your first day, but life's been crazy. I'm sorry."

"Are you still coming to visit me tomorrow?" she asks in a quiet voice, and my throat tightens.

My grandma is the strongest person I know, so moving to a nursing home is a major adjustment for her.

After she took a nasty fall a few months ago, I promised I'd come visit her every week if she moved into the home, and that I'd call her even more. So far, big failure on my end.

"Absolutely. I promised you last week before you moved. I'll be there. How is it going so far? What are the other residents like?"

"Old," she grumbles, and I can almost see her rolling her eyes. "I'm probably the youngest person in this place, but they're nice enough. And some of them even play cards. Poker."

"Oh, that's great. Have you played a game yet?" I'm not sure it's her best move for making friends, since she's a great poker player, but at least she has fun with it.

"I did. A young boy even stopped by to play with us. We have some sore losers in this place, but we'll see."

I chuckle, feeling a lot lighter. "Well, I'll be there tomorrow, and we can play together."

"Don't bring that boyfriend of yours. I want you to myself."

My mouth goes dry. "Actually, Lucas and I broke up."

"Oh, okay. Well, in case you forgive him for whatever he's done by tomorrow, still come alone."

Her comment both stings and makes me laugh. That pretty much sums up my relationship with Lucas. Even Grandma caught on to that. "I won't. See you tomorrow."

The doorbell rings as I'm ending the call. I'm closer to the front door, so I tell Marissa and Aaron I'll get it.

I swing the door open to reveal James, who's wearing loose joggers and a T-shirt that seems to highlight his excessive muscles. "Elizabeth!" he says, his eyes sparkling. "How are you this fine morning?"

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "I'm good. What's up?"

He stuffs both hands in his pockets. "Just wanted to check on you, see how you were doing."

"Well, I'm fine."

His intense eyes study me for a moment, and he offers a small smile. "I believe you a bit more than I did yesterday."

This man is way too perceptive for my liking.

"Hey, bro!" Aaron's deep voice booms behind me. I step aside so they can bro-hug.

Aaron steps back. "What's up, man? Do you need a cup of sugar or something?"

James' cheeks redden slightly as he crosses his strong arms over his chest. "Nah, you're the cook in this building. Hawthorne's down for a game against the Spaniards in an hour. Are you in?"

Aaron glances at his watch. "Sure. Here?"

James steals a quick glance at me, then nods. I'm not exactly sure what I'm still doing here, so I give James an awkward wave and return to the kitchen.

“But why would you come two floors down to ask me that?” Aaron says. “You could have texted—ohhh!”

I stop in my tracks, hoping to hear James’ reply, but he speaks too low for me to catch it.

Still, my heart pounds out a steady beat, because I know he came down here to see me.

Even if James Adler is pretty much a walking red flag who’s only after me because I’m not interested in him, the fact he cares so much is a boost to my ego and self-esteem.

After spending months chasing after a man who was supposed to be my boyfriend, it’s a welcome change of pace.

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"You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don't take."

James Adler

Yes, I'm well aware I'm a little desperate. But ever since I woke up this morning, all I've wanted to do was see Elizabeth again.

I loved putting a smile on her face yesterday, and I'm hungry for more. But above all, I want to make sure she's okay. Rogers did a number on Elizabeth, and I'll hate his guts for the rest of my life for what he did to her.

Jasper, the assistant coach, signals us onto the ice for warm-ups.

As always, I'm the first one out, skating around the rink while savoring the reassuring cold that's hitting my cheeks.

The atmosphere is a repeat of yesterday.

Explosive. I take a shot into the empty net, then scan the glass shielding above the boards in search of Jim, the soon-to-be engaged fan.

There are so many people lined up against the glass, it takes me a minute to locate him.

Finally, I spot him next to his girlfriend, a brunette named Liliana.

I skate toward them, and his face lights up when he sees me.

I stop a few feet away, giving him a small nod, and he turns to his girl while getting down on one knee.

Her eyes widen, and she claps her mouth with her hands.

From the corner of my eye, I spot Elizabeth, Marissa, and Hayley walking down to their seats. They usually wait until the end of the warm-ups since everyone hangs out around the glass.

Tearing my eyes from her, I focus back on the couple-of-the-moment, just in time for them to both look at me.

That's my cue. I skate closer and wave at Liliana, and her teary eyes widen.

Removing my gloves, I fumble through my inside pocket, retrieve the small box, and pass it to Jim through the camera hole.

By now, we've drawn the attention of players and fans alike and have quite an audience.

Jim thanks me as he takes the box, then turns to his girlfriend. She nods vigorously before falling into his arms. Cheers and applause fill the arena, and I find myself wiping a few drops of sweat from my cheeks. What else could it be?

Glancing away, I lock eyes with Elizabeth.

Her grayish eyes are watery, which somehow makes her even more beautiful.

Jim waves at me through the glass, and I smile at the newly engaged couple.

He passes his phone through the camera hole, and I take a selfie of the three of us,

Liliana holding her hand up to show off the ring on her finger.

When I glance up at Elizabeth and the girls again, she's still watching me, her expression unreadable. It only takes Hawthorne bumping into me, telling me we have less than ten minutes of warm-ups left, to finally get me moving.

Beth Bowen

The Raptors seized another win tonight, to the utmost pleasure of the entire arena.

We're now gathered at the bar, as per our usual post-game ritual, hanging out and chatting about the game.

I won't stay long, since Celia can't make it tomorrow and I offered to open.

But I still wanted to spend some time with my friends and congratulate the guys.

I haven't had a chance to talk to James yet—no surprise there. He's been overwhelmed by beautiful ladies and hasn't even made it to the backroom yet.

I'm caught between Marissa and Emma, who have been trying to get me into reading for the last twenty minutes.

"You need this hobby," Marissa says. "It'll help you grow as a woman."

"And it's entertaining," Emma adds, licking the straw from her drink. "Romance is so fun to read."

"I don't know," I sigh, just like I have a hundred times before. "I've tried a few times, but I haven't really found a book I loved yet. It's not that I don't like reading., It just doesn't captivate me the way a good TV show does."

“You sound like Auston,” Emma scoffs, rolling her eyes. “Well, I guess he’s more into movies, but TV shows are still a step ahead of books for him.”

“See? He gets me. Maybe I should ask him for recs,” I say, scanning the room to locate him.

Marissa shakes her head. “We’ve lost her for good this time, Emma.”

I spot Auston in the back, talking with Maxime and Hayley, so I walk up to him.

“Elizabeth,” a deep voice rumbles from my right, and I don’t need to turn to know it’s James. He’s the only person who calls me by my full name—or makes my heart rate spike when he says it.

“Hey,” I say, smiling as I turn to him. “Another great game tonight.”

He smirks. “Yep. That’s pretty much the new standard for the Raptors.”

“You know, I never took you for a hopeless romantic.”

His forehead creases, and it takes him a second to understand what I mean. “Oh, the proposal.” He shoves his hands in his pockets. “Yeah, it was fun. Guy needed an assist to score a yes, so I lent him my irresistible charm.”

I roll my eyes before turning away. I hate when he gets all cocky like that. It’s impossible to have a normal conversation with him.

“Wait. I’m kidding. The guy asked me to be a part of it, and I was honored, so I said yes. And yeah, I am a romantic, Elizabeth. In fact, there’s plenty you don’t know about me.”

A smile breaks onto my lips, and I wheel around to face him again. “Is that so?”

His eyes gleam. “Yep. I could take you on a date and show you.”

Here we go again. “You’re unbelievable.”

“Is that a yes?”

I feel the blush scorching my cheeks. “Nope.”

His deep blue eyes trap me. “Oh, come on.”

With some struggle, I look away. “I just broke up with my ex, James. I need time to reflect and heal.”

“Fair enough,” he says, scratching his stubble. “I’ll check back tomorrow.”

“James!” I scold.

“And the day after that. And the one after that.” He winks, making my mouth suddenly run dry. “Until you’re finally ready.”

My cheeks are on fire now. “You never give up, do you?”

“You miss a hundred percent of the shots you don’t take,” he says, his eyes peering right through me.

I scoff. “Very wise. Is that a hockey saying?”

“Hockey quote, actually. From the great Wayne Gretzky. Some people think it’s a Michael Scott quote from The Office , but he totally stole that one.”

I breathe out a laugh. “Sorry, I never went to hockey school.” Something Lucas was always shoving in my face.

“It’s all right.” He winks. “You don’t need a degree in hockey to go out with me.”

I shake my head, but I can feel my blush deepening.

“So, is that a yes?” His glimmering eyes hold me hostage.

I wring my hands in front of me. “No.”

He arches an eyebrow. “But it ’s not a no, either?”

Everything inside of me burns, and I need to quench this inferno, so I say the only thing I know will put an end to this conversation. The only thing I really want to say. “Fine. It’s not a no.”

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"James Adler is no boy!"

Beth Bowen

My awkward half-naked encounter with Aaron didn't repeat itself this morning, but I was still glad to leave for work early. Marissa and Aaron are touchy-feely in the privacy of their home—as they should be—and I feel like I'm intruding on their lives. Actually, I know I am.

When business is slow, I spend every spare second on my laptop, trying to find an apartment to rent, but so far, nothing meets my pre-selection criteria. They're either way too far from work or way too expensive.

At two o'clock, I leave Marissa solo for the rest of the day and take the subway to Golden Age Nursing Home to see my grandma.

Once I check in at the reception desk, a staff member leads me through a corridor and into a large living area with sofas and tables. A TV is mounted in one corner, and several lively conversations are taking place.

"There she is," Grandma says, standing up from her chair. She's at a table with a man and two other women, about to start a game of cards.

Warmth radiates through my chest. "Grandma!" I hustle toward her and squeeze her tight against my chest, her strong floral perfume filling my senses. "I missed you."

We break our embrace, and she scrutinizes me. "You look well."

“I am. What about you?”

“Same old, same old,” she says with a cheeky smile. “Still alive and kicking, but some of the joints aren’t as well-oiled as they used to be.” She rubs her lower back.

“Your sciatica giving you trouble again?”

She rolls her eyes dramatically. “Longest relationship of my life.”

I laugh, following her back to the table where she introduces me to Martha, Esther, and Bill. They seem like a friendly bunch, and I’m glad my grandma’s good luck hasn’t scared them away yet.

“Do you want to play with us?” Bill asks. “Lois says you’re even better than her so we’ll play with chips, not real money.”

I chuckle. “Works for me. And I’ll only ever be as good as her. She taught me everything I know.”

“I wish my grandkids would play,” Martha says, shuffling the deck. “They’re always glued to their video games.”

She deals the cards, and we start playing.

In a way, it feels like old times, playing cards with Grandma, laughing—and definitely not letting her win.

But it’s also the start of a new era, one where I come to visit her here and we play with her friends.

Being here is for her own good, I know that.

But even if she's still fairly young, it's a stark reminder that she's aging and won't be around forever.

"Hey," Grandma whispers, elbowing my stomach as we're taking a small break, since Martha and Esther needed to use the restrooms. "Look. There's Janice."

I frown, peering at the woman she's subtly gesturing to. She's wearing a white cardigan over a light blue dress. "What about her?" I whisper.

"Don't you notice anything suspicious about her?"

I glance at her again. She looks even younger than my grandma. Her hair is tied up in a neat bun, and she looks very classy. "I don't know. Is she famous?"

Grandma's brows furrow. "I don't know. Is she? I don't really keep up with that stuff. But there's something off about her."

"Why do you say that?"

"Don't you see how youthful she looks? She doesn't wear glasses, doesn't have a walking aid, a hearing aid, or any apparent disability."

I blurt out a laugh. "Is that a crime?"

"In this place it is." Her eyes narrow. "I'm telling you, there's something wrong here."

I tilt my head to the side. "What are you getting at?"

"Maybe she doesn't really belong here. Maybe she's been sent here, either by the government or a foreign country, and she's on a secret mission. Haven't you seen the

Ted Danson show Man on the Inside ?”

My forehead wrinkles. “Um, no, I haven’t. But I don’t think—”

“Shh!” She suddenly sits up straight. “She’s looking at us. Act normal.”

I offer the lady a polite smile, then let my eyes drift off to the side, worry gnawing at me. There’s a strong possibility my grandma is losing her marbles in this place. I need to call more, and I’ll tell my parents to visit her on their next day off.

Movement near the door catches my attention, and I almost choke on my own saliva when I see who’s walking in.

Jumping up from my chair, I hurry over to James. He’s wearing jeans, a dark blue sweater that matches his eyes, and a pair of black-framed glasses that bring his hot meter through the roof, to my utter annoyance. “What are you doing here?”

He frowns in confusion, then smiles. “Hello to you too, Elizabeth.” He shrugs. “I like to come here. My way of giving back to the community.”

I cross my arms. “Really?” Okay. I’ll admit his one-liners and unapologetic flirting are flattering, but this is just plain weird. “I have a hard time believing that.”

He blows out a breath. “Why else would I be here?”

“You’re following me.”

He looks taken aback, then laughs. “Absolutely not. I’ve never seen you here before, and I’ve been coming for years.”

I blink back, stunned. Is this for real? “Wait. Years? What is this, some kind of a

mandatory charity thing you do for the team?” Or community service to pay for his constant outrageous flirting. But I keep that one to myself. No need to throw the dog a bone.

“What? No. My grandma used to be a resident here. What are you doing here? If anything, you’re the one following me .”

I scoff. “My grandma is a resident here. Lois Bowen,” I say, nodding toward her.

His eyes light up. “Oh, you’re Lois’ granddaughter! I knew there was something familiar about her. I’ve heard you’re a good poker player, Elizabeth. We’re going to have some fun today.”

He walks over to the table where Bill and Grandma are still sitting, and they both greet him like a long-lost friend, hugging him in turn. What on earth is happening?

Grandma stands up and shuffles over to me. “Do you know James? He’s a great kid. Ah, Martha and Esther are back. Let’s get back at it. James can join us.”

“Wait. How do you even know him?” I ask, my eyes still trained on James, who’s now chatting and laughing with Martha.

“He’s the boy I told you about. Apparently, he visits quite often.”

My eyes stretch wide. “ Boy ? James Adler is no boy! He’s a,” I stammer, sputtering. “He’s a hockey player!”

She waves a hand in dismissal “Anyone under forty is a kid to me, sweetheart. And is he really a hockey player? I didn’t know that. Is he friends with your ex?”

I set my lips in a tight line. “Nope. Quite the opposite, actually.”

“I knew there was a reason we got along so well,” she says with a chuckle, and I can’t help but smile.

Grandma was never a fan of Lucas, and being as outspoken as she is, she never hid it from me—or him, for that matter.

Frankly, it’s a mystery why I stayed with him for so long when literally everyone around me disliked him.

But in my defense, I was in love. Or at least, I thought I was.

“So, it’s really over with him this time?” she asks.

I nod, wringing my hands. “It is. I moved out. Living with my friend Marissa for now.”

“Good,” she says, taking my hand and squeezing it. “Now, let’s go play some cards.”

We walk back to the table, and I end up sitting between Grandma and Martha, right across from James.

The fact that he’s a regular here becomes immediately clear. He knows everyone by name, he talks with them like they’re old friends, and he even asks them about their doctor’s appointments.

Even through his glasses, his eyes seem to see right through me. I have a feeling it’s going to be tough to fool him with my poker face .

"You won't be flirting your way into my chips."

James Adler

I calmly gather the cards, but my heart is still racing like I'm dribbling a puck across the ice. Elizabeth Bowen is here, at the Golden Age Nursing Home, and I can't help but feel like the universe is on my side. This is the last place I expected to run into her.

I shuffle the deck with a little flair, more for show than anything. I like to keep my pals entertained, especially Martha. She always smiles like I've just pulled a rabbit out of a hat when I do the bridge shuffle.

"All right, folks," I say, distributing the cards. "Let's see if anyone can take down Esther. She's still the Golden Age poker champion to beat."

Esther cackles, waving a wrinkled hand. "Don't get your hopes up, sweetheart. I've still got some tricks up my sleeve." She winks at me, and I grin. This woman is all of five feet tall, but when it comes to poker, Esther plays like she has nothing to lose—which, at age ninety, is probably true.

Bill, seated to my left, squints at his card numbers through thick glasses, muttering something about the "government" under his breath. Martha, next to him, hums softly, seemingly unconcerned with her hand. But Lois is laser-focused next to Beth, her poker face locked in. Must run in the family.

"Okay, Elizabeth." I arch my eyebrows when our eyes meet. "Ready for your first

Golden Age Nursing Home poker game?"

"I thought your name was Beth, dear," Martha says, frowning.

"It is," Elizabeth snaps, casting me an icy glare. "And yes, James, I'm ready. Bring it on."

A rush of adrenaline courses through my veins. "Let's play some poker."

Bill and Martha start the bet, and before long, it's Elizabeth's turn.

"So, Elizabeth." I grin, peeking at my cards. "You gonna fold already, or are you brave enough to stay in?"

"I'm not falling for that charm, James. You won't be flirting your way into my chips." She leans forward slightly, her eyes challenging despite her playful tone as she tosses her chips on the table.

Lois calls too, still laser-focused and ready to wipe the floor with all of us. Esther does the same, and so do I.

The second round starts as I turn the next card, and Bill nods. "Calling."

Everyone else follows suit, except for Esther, who raises the pot with a reckless confidence only the elderly can pull off. "Call that, you whippersnappers."

A general groan echoes around the table, and the players start arguing, throwing various curse words at each other. Well, they're mostly old people swear words, like "dagnabit" or "mother of pearl."

"It's a game," Esther cackles, leaning back against her chair. "If you can't handle the

heat, Bill, don't sit at the table."

Elizabeth's eyes widen, and she leans toward me. "Are they always like this?"

I grin at her. "Only when they're awake."

I'm rewarded with a full smile, which seems to put the entire table at ease. In a matter of seconds, the temperature cools down a notch, and there are smiles all around. My job here is done.

We keep playing for another hour or so, and the vibe is back to being relaxed and playful.

Everyone wins at least one hand, which I'm sure helps lighten the mood.

Ultimately, Lois clears the floor, but at least the players haven't devolved into arguments or glasses of juice accidentally spilled on each other.

"Oh, did the nurses tell you?" Martha turns to me. "We're having our own Halloween costume fashion show here."

"You are? That's fantastic. When is that happening?" I ask, genuinely interested. I'm happy the home organizes events for the residents, and I always try to participate when I can.

"On Halloween night."

"Well, six p.m.," Esther chim es in. "That's probably still afternoon for you kids."

Everyone chuckles, and I pull my phone from my pocket to check my schedule.

Luckily, it's not a game night, and we'll be getting home from our road game that morning.

"I'll be there," I say with a nod, and I'm rewarded by full smiles—albeit with a lot of fake teeth.

But hey, who am I to judge? I'm already sporting three of those myself.

"Great," Martha says, trembling slightly as she clasps her hands. "We'd love for you to be the emcee."

"Really?" My smile stretches so wide it hurts. I've always said that if I wasn't a hockey player, I'd be the PA announcer at the games. This is probably as close as I'll get. "I'd be honored."

"And Beth, you're invited too," Esther adds. "You can even enter as a contestant, if you want."

"Oh, thank you, but I wouldn't want to steal your thunder.

I'll come and support you all, though," Elizabeth says, hooking an arm around her grandmother's.

The simple gesture breaks my heart. What I wouldn't give to be with my grandma again.

I'm glad Elizabeth still has the opportunity, and I hope she cherishes it.

We stay huddled around the table, chatting about everything and anything.

Sadly, visitation time is coming to an end, since the residents have baths and

medication to take before dinner is served.

We all say goodbye, and I hug each one dearly.

The heartbreaking reality of this place is that even if I'll be back next week, I can never be certain they'll all still be here.

Elizabeth hugs her grandma extra long, promising to come back soon, and vowing to remind her parents to visit too. After waving goodbye, we start walking toward the exit.

"It's weird, leaving her here," she says out of the blue, and my chest constricts. I know the feeling all too well.

"I get that. But it's a great facility. They take good care of the residents, and Lois has made plenty of friends already."

She glances up at me, but this time, there's no annoyance in her gaze like there so often is. "Yeah. I guess she has."

We keep walking in silence until we reach the pavement.

"How did you get here?" I ask, looking around. "Do you have a car?"

"Nope," she says, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I took the subway."

"Let me drive you back, then."

Her cheeks flush a cute shade of pink. "Oh, no. You don't have to. It was a direct train ride here."

“We’re going to the same place, Elizabeth. Don’t be silly. I can drive you.”

She looks down, and after a moment, her eyes meet mine again. “Okay. Thank you.”

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"I'm kind of like Clark Kent, except I actually need the glasses to see."

Beth Bowen

"So," I begin, "you're not half bad at poker."

I guess it's the many years of experience," I say, unable to stay silent as we step into James' extravagant car—the thing is pretty much a Batmobile.

All that aside, it's better that I control the conversation than leave it to James and his flirty comments.

He chuckles, starting the engine. "That, and also pure, raw talent."

I roll my eyes, but a giggle escapes me. Really? "Anyway, it's good that you take time to come and see them. They seem to care for you deeply."

"Feeling's mutual," he says, backing out of his parking spot. "They've been a great support system ever since Grandma died. I love visiting them. Brings me out of my world, you know?"

"Yeah," I say, studying him from the corner of my eye. I feel like I just stumbled on a new piece of the James Adler puzzle. "But I thought you loved your world. Being a pro athlete is a dream for a lot of people. It's great that you get to live it."

He adjusts his hands on the wheel. "It is. I love it, but it's also nice to talk about something other than hockey once in a while, you know?"

I nod, though to be honest, I'm a little surprised. Hockey was all Lucas ever talked about. And even though I'm sure Caleb, Max, and Aaron have interests beyond the rink, I mostly just hear them talk about hockey when they're together.

"Speaking of poker, you were pretty good yourself," he says. "I'm guessing you've played a lot before?"

I smile, remembering our heated family games. "Yep. My grandma, as you saw, is a fierce player. She passed all her card skills on to me. We used to have a family game night every week."

"You don't have them anymore?"

I shake my head. "We're all busy with work, and our schedules usually conflict.

So it's hard to get together as often as we used to.

I see my parents maybe twice a month, even though they're right here in New York.

As for Grandma, well, I think I might start seeing her more often.

I'm trying to find a place near the coffee shop, and that'll put me close to the home as well. "

"Oh, you're looking for an apartment?"

"What, you thought I'd be bunking with Marissa and Aaron for the rest of my life?" I say with a chuckle. "I do think they want kids, but they're probably hoping for a cute little baby, not a grown woman."

He snorts a laugh. "Right. So, have you found anything yet?"

“Honestly, no.” I sigh. “The market is super saturated here, but I did set up notification alerts on all the real estate websites, so fingers crossed that I’ll find something soon.”

“Well, if Miles and Marissa ever get tired of you, you can always stay with me, Elizabeth,” he offers again.

I’m about to roll my eyes and throw back a snarky retort. But when he glances my way, the look in his eyes is neither playful nor flirty. More like dead s erious. And extremely sexy.

“I mean it. You’re welcome anytime. I have three extra bedrooms.”

I swallow hard, staring at my lap. The tension in the car thickens, and I need to say something before I burst into flames. “So, you wear glasses? I never noticed that before.”

He shifts in his seat. “You’ve mostly only seen my public persona. I play hockey with contact lenses. I’m kind of like Clark Kent, except I actually need the glasses to see.” He chuckles. “And I don’t have heat vision.”

Oh, I beg to differ.

Before long, we arrive at the apartment building we both call home. James parks out front, and we get out of the car.

“Thanks for the ride,” I say as we walk toward the front door.

“My pleasure. Let me know when you want to go back. Maybe we could go together?”

I cock my head to the side. “Don’t you have away games coming up soon?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Look who’s following my schedule now.”

“I’m following the Raptors’ schedule,” I clarify, shaking my head. “I am living with one, after all.”

“Right. Well, we’re free tomorrow. After that, it’s our last home game before a week on the road. But I’ll probably swing by Golden Age the day after.”

“Okay, then yeah, maybe we can go together.”

He flashes his signature bright smile as we file into the elevator. The space feels small—way too small—and I struggle to take my next breath.

“This is you,” he says, stepping out of the elevator once we reach my floor. “Have a good night, Elizabeth.”

His eyes capture me, and a smile pulls at my lips. “Thanks, you too.”

“Oh, by the way,” he says, holding the elevator door open. “What color is it today?”

I frown. “What do you mean?”

“Is it the satin purple one?” he continues, stepping into the elevator. “Because that one’s a winner.”

Realization hits me, and my mouth drops. “James! You’re—this is—” I stammer, my cheeks on fire.

“Fine,” he sighs, but his lips are twitching. “Don’t tell me. My imagination will fill in

the blanks. Like it always does.”

The door closes on his smirk, and I stand frozen on the threshold, unable to move my feet as I try to process everything that happened today.

From the surprise of seeing him at the nursing home to the car ride, and now him betting on the color of my underwear .

Glancing around to make sure no one is looking, I tug at the hem of my jeans to check.

My cheeks burn up when I realize he was right.

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"My only weapon is a wooden broom."

Beth Bowen

"Hey! There you are!" Marissa greets me as she marches into the shop the next day. "Smells good in here."

"Thanks." I step out from the back, my apron firmly secured. "I couldn't sleep, so I came in early to test a few new recipes."

"Wow." Her eyes widen as she steps behind the counter. "You're on fire."

I glance over my shoulder at the small back room, now filled with trays of muffins, brownies, and pies covering every surface.

I tend to bake when I have something on my mind.

Images of yesterday keep flashing in front of my eyes, and I can't seem to get rid of them.

They robbed me of my sleep—and apparently my mental health, if we go by the number of pastries scattered around this place.

I don't know what it is about James wearing glasses, but that did it for me.

It makes him look so different, yet somehow, even more handsome.

But most of all, for once, I think I just saw the real him.

Not the cocky player who entertains the crowd and makes flirty comments—well, aside from that underwear remark—but the caring man who visits the retirement home where his grandma used to live, giving hours of his precious time to bring joy to the remaining residents.

“Thanks,” I say, shaking my head into focus. “I thought we could try some new pastries for the fall. I made apple crumble, pumpkin pie, apple spice muffins with caramel glaze, and caramel apple brownies.”

“Wow,” she breathes, her eyes sparkling. “Those look incredible, and tempting. But I need to watch my weight.”

“Oh, come on, Marissa,” I say, wiping my hands on a towel. She’s always had insecurities about her body. “You look fantastic.”

“You’re sweet,” she says with a small shake of her head, signaling that she doesn’t fully agree.

I scan the baked goods again. “I’m going to start on a couple of batches of pecan pie brownies. Can you handle the front?”

“Absolutely,” she says, turning on the faucet to wash her hands. “By the way, my dad invited the three of us over for dinner tonight.”

“Oh, that’s thoughtful of him,” I say, grabbing another bag of flour from the cupboard.

“But I think I’ll stay in, if that’s okay.”

I just want a quiet night at home. We've been going out almost every day this week, and at this point, I just want to curl up in front of the TV.

"Not to mention I've been intruding on their private lives enough.

I'm not going to join their family dinners too.

"Sure. I get that. Well, my first choice would be a book, but . . ." She shrugs, placing all the pastries I made in the display case.

The bell on the door announces the first customer of the day. No surprise, it's Emma.

"Hey, guys," she groans, her face still stuck in its pre-coffee setting. "What's up?"

"Hey, Emz," we both call back. "Your coffee is almost ready," Marissa adds, grabbing a cup. "Can we tempt you with some fresh pastries as well?"

She leans forward to check out the display. "Wow, you guys are killing it with these."

"It's all Beth," Marissa corrects her, turning to me.

"Give me two muffins, two brownies, and a slice of pumpkin pie. I'll share with the girls."

"Great. Make sure you spread the word to anyone else you come across as well," Marissa says. "Just in case a school bus of hungry teenagers doesn't stop by today."

Emma snickers. "Right. This might be going a bit overboard for Warlington Lane. But with your claim to fame, anything's possible."

"Exactly," I say. "That's the spirit."

“And if you’re stuck with any leftovers,” Emma adds, “do consider your wonderful neighbors across the street.”

It’s half past five, and to our delight, we don’t have a lot of pastries left. All our customers complimented them, and a few regulars even circled back around to grab some more. I’m glad the festive treats were a hit, and I’m already excited for tomorrow. I have a few more recipes up my sleeve.

“You should head out,” I tell Marissa, who’s clearing the two tables we have for eat-in customers. “I can close and finish cleaning up.”

“But you opened,” she says, throwing the towel over her shoulder. “And you made all of those pastries. It’s the least I can do.”

I appreciate her trying to balance the scales.

It is important when you’re in business with a friend—something the girls from No Shelf Control taught us.

But unlike Marissa, I have no plans tonight.

“Pff, that was nothing. Just doing my part. But you should go get ready for tonight. Take the rest of the pastries too, for dessert.”

“All right. Dad and Aaron will love that,” she says with a chuckle. She places the remaining pastries into a kraft bag and hugs me goodbye. “See you later, or tomorrow.”

“Have a great night.”

Once she leaves, I finish wiping the counter, then decide to scrub both ovens as well.

With all the baking I did today, they definitely need it.

I'm just finishing sweeping the floor when the bell on the door jingles.

Shoot. I must have forgotten to lock the door.

I spin around. "Sorry, we're clos—oh! It's you. "

Standing in the middle of the shop is Lucas, wearing his Sharks tracksuit. "Hey, Beth. How are you?"

"Lucas, what are you doing here ?" I ask, still holding the broom.

"It's time we end this stupid game, don't you think?" he says, his eyes darkening. "When are you coming home?"

I blink back. Is he serious right now? "It's over, Lucas. I'm done."

He scoffs, looking around. "Sure. Just like every other time."

"Exactly." I clutch the broom so hard, my knuckles are turning white. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I have work to do."

"You don't leave me, Beth. Don't you get that?" He slams the wall with his open palm, causing the frame that's hanging there to shift.

The sound startles me, and he smiles apologetically. "Sorry. I didn't mean that," he says, straightening the frame. "But let's end this stupid break. I know you still love me. Let's just pick up where we left off."

I take a step back. "I'm not interested."

He grins, stalking toward me. “Oh, come on. We were great together.”

“I’m seeing someone else!” I blurt out, not sure how else to get out of this mess. He’s a two-hundred-pound hockey player, and my only weapon is a wooden broom.

He snickers, leaning against the wall. “Really? That’s the best you got?”

“Yes, really,” I say, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear. “You know him, actually. James Adler.”

His face turns white, and he sputters in response. I know I shouldn’t be lying, but I also knew that fib would catch him off guard. All because of that stupid rivalry. As the two New York teams, you’d think they’d want to help each other out. Guys make no sense sometimes.

“You’re lying,” he finally says, defying me with his gaze as he towers over me.

“I’m not. And I’m done talking to you,” I say before spinning on my heel. But before I can leave, Lucas grabs me by the wrist.

“You’re lying,” he says again.

“I told you, I’m not. Stop,” I yell, trying to pull my hand back, but he only squeezes harder. “You’re hurting me. Leave me alone.”

He yanks me toward him, and I defend myself in the only way I can—with a strong kick to the crotch before I shove him away and whack him with my broom.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"I'm going to kill him."

James Adler

Miles mentioned he left for the arena early to practice, so I walk there alone, stopping by Rise & Grind on the way. I couldn't come in yesterday because I had back-to-back meetings for new endorsement deals on top of practice, so I'm making up for it today.

To my utmost pleasure, Elizabeth is working this morning, and she's even more beautiful than ever. She's wearing a white sweater under her work apron that makes her look like an angel.

"Top of the morning to you, Elizabeth," I call out, stepping through the door.

As usual, she answers with her famous eye roll. "Hi, Clark Kent," she says, withholding a smile. "The usual?"

"Yes please."

Seeing that they got some new Raptors merch in, I sit down at one of the tables and start signing posters, something we all like to do when we stop by. "Didn't miss me too much yesterday?" I ask, unable to shut up in front of her. "I know it must be hard after spending such an awesome day with me."

I'm pathetic, I know. How much clearer can I make it that I was the one thinking about her all day long?

“I managed,” she says, pressing her red lips together before bringing my coffee to the table. As she sets it down, the sleeve of her sweater pulls back, revealing a red hand print around her wrist.

“What’s that?” I immediately ask, blood rushing to my head.

“What?” She frowns, then hides her wrist. “Oh, nothing.”

I fly to my feet, almost knocking over the table in the process. “Elizabeth, what happened to your wrist?”

She swallows hard, not daring to look me in the eye. “It’s fine. I—”

“It was that douche Rogers. Wasn’t it?” There’s a buzzing in my ears as the only explanation hits me.

When she closes her eyes, I know I’m right. All the blood seems to drain from my body, and so many thoughts race through my head. “I’m going to kill him,” I say, but it comes out strangled.

“No!” She glances up at me as she places a hand on my chest. “Please don’t get all worked up. It’s really nothing. I’m fine.”

I close my eyes to calm myself, taking a small breath. “You’re fine? Look at your wrist, Beth! He hurt you. That prick. I’m—”

“Please, James. I don’t want you getting in trouble,” she pleads again, her voice desperate.

She takes my hand, and her soft touch is all it takes to ground me in the moment.

We gaze into each other's eyes, and I've never been so close to kissing her.

It's all I want right now. To hold her tight, be there for her.

To protect her and kiss those beautiful red lips.

I exhale slowly, and she squeezes my hand. "Please."

I stay silent, focusing on her touch.

"Besides," she adds, "I kicked him in the nuts, and I don't think he'll be coming back for seconds."

That almost makes me smile. My girl.

She looks down at our hands, still clasped together. Then, she clears her throat before slipping her hand away. "Just promise me you won't go and find him, okay?"

I swallow hard before grabbing my cup of coffee. "I'd better get to practice."

"James, promise me," she begs me again, her eyes earnest.

I release a sigh. "Fine. I won't."

Her shoulders sag in relief, and I get out of the shop, my blood still simmering.

I don't need to go and find that bastard. We're playing them tonight.

I work myself extra hard during conditioning, not leaving a single muscle unprepared. I start with my upper body, then do some leg presses before we all skate onto the ice for practice.

“All right, let’s do some one-on-one drills,” Coach Martin bellows, and we all get into position. I’m up against Miles, and Hawthorne takes on Johnson.

“We got this, bro,” Hawthorne says, bumping my fist.

We start the play, and I go hard at it.

As I skate back, I’m a little out of breath.

“What’s up, dude?” Miles says. “That was intense.”

I shrug. “Just making the play.”

From the corner of my eye, I notice Miles and Hawthorne exchanging a look, but I keep my eyes ahead as I skate to the bench to grab some water.

“That was great, Adler,” Coach calls out, clasping his hands together before addressing the rest of the team.

“That’s what I want to see. Be hungry for the puck, gentlemen.

Good job,” he adds again, slapping my back as I return to center ice.

“Let’s go again. You can sit this one out, Adler.

Lap around, and Beaumont will take your spot. ”

I shake my head. “Nah, I’m good to go again.”

He frowns slightly, then nods. “Okay, one more time, then.”

We skate back into position, and Hawthorne glances at me. “Are you all right, man?”

I don’t reply, instead carving my skates into the ice the second Coach blows the whistle.

After a few more rounds, we finish the on-ice training and walk back to the locker room, but Hawthorne, Beaumont, and Miles won’t stop pestering me.

“You’re sure you’re okay, bro?” Miles prods, and I sigh.

“How many times do I have to tell you guys? I’m great.”

“You don’t seem great,” Hawthorne says, crossing his arms.

“Yeah, dude,” Beaumont chimes in, running a hand through his hair. “You didn’t even brag after that play back there. That’s not normal.”

I scoff. “It’s just practice. Who cares?”

They all burst into laughter. “Um, excuse me?” Hawthorne says, arching an eyebrow. “You’re always the first to rub it in our faces when you outperform us at practice.”

I guess I do that sometimes. Instead of answering, I just groan and continue back to the locker room.

“Okay. Now I’m positive something is wrong. You sound like Wally, man,” Hawthorne’s deep voice shouts behind me.

“Hey! What did I bloody do now?” grumbles Wilcott, who’s sitting in his stall, taking his gear off.

“We’re worried about Adler. He’s gone to the dark side with you,” Beaumont says, throwing his gloves on the bench.

“Is it because we’re playing the Sharks tonight?” Miles asks. At the mention of our rival team, I ball my fists at my sides. “We’ve got this, bro,” he continues. “We’ll get them.”

I nod. “We have to.”

“We will,” Hawthorne agrees, slapping my back as he passes my stall.

When I step back into the arena for tonight’s game, I’m as tense as ever.

The guys have stopped bothering me, attributing my heightened focus to the first derby of the season.

Their explanation isn’t wrong, but also not entirely true.

I haven’t told them the other, bigger reason because I want Rogers to myself, and I know they’d be in his face the second he hits the ice if they knew what happened.

Plus, we can’t have everyone in the penalty box at once.

The first blow is mine. They can follow suit.

“Soccer time?” Beaumont asks, juggling the ball as he enters the gym.

I nod as I step off the treadmill. Playing with the guys before a game is a great way to both release the pressure and pass the time while keeping our bodies warm.

I trail after him until we meet up with Hawthorne, Kraz, Johnson, Miles, and Wally.

It's pretty much the only pre-game activity Wilcott participates in.

He usually just broods in silence on the bench.

But he's British, and soccer is in his blood.

His brother is actually a top player in the UK—or so I've heard.

The game we play is called two-touch, which means the ball can be touched only twice before it hits the ground. We play in a circle, and the first person who loses the ball is out. We keep going until only one man remains.

After that, it's time to hop back on the bikes and strap on our pre-game skates.

I do a short on-ice practice, because every time I skate toward the center of the ice, I see Rogers' stupid smug face, and I want to bash it with my stick.

I try to focus on completing my warm-ups and keep my gaze on my side of the rink.

We retreat to the locker rooms, and one of the guys plays the "Baby Shark" tune on his phone. Everyone relaxes and laughs, singing along and changing the lyrics to how bad we're going to beat them tonight—most of the new lyrics being my invention.

I'm still getting weird looks from Miles and Hawthorne, so I plaster a smile on my face and focus on getting ready.

Finally, Coach strides into the locker room, and we all sit down.

"Let's do this, gentlemen. You know it's going to be a tough one.

Just be tougher, okay? They're going to get physical.

Be ready for that, and keep yourselves out of the box.

Do everything right, but don't leave them any room to breathe.

Short but intense shifts. Let's go," he adds, and everyone claps as he hands me the starting lineup sheet.

I stand up and walk to the center of the room, my tone serious. "Okay, boys. We got Beaumont, Cap, and me in the front, Johnson and Miles in the back, and Wally kicking in the cage. Let's do this."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Touch her again, and I will end you."

James Adler

We skate into position for the first face-off of the night. And because he's a winger, just like me, Lucas Rogers is just inches away.

I keep my eyes trained on him, the annoying glint in his eyes only fueling my anger. I know Elizabeth is in the stands tonight, but I don't allow myself even a fleeting glance. Right now, Rogers has my full attention.

I throw off my gloves the second the puck drops and launch myself at him. My attack takes him by surprise, but he retaliates fast. "What, not enough to have my leftovers, Adler? Now you want a piece of me too?" he sneers, and I punch him right in the face.

The referees are quick to end the fight. Too quick. My wrath is nowhere near unleashed yet, but I'm forced to skate to the penalty box, my fists clenched and chest heaving.

Those five minutes feel like five hours.

And when my time is up, Coach is waiting on the bench, red-faced and yelling at me.

His words barely register—something about keeping my head in the game and not letting him get to me.

But Rogers has it in for me too and keeps coming after me.

So naturally, I return fire. He's skating along the boards when I line him up, pure instinct taking over.

When I crush him into the glass with everything I've got, the impact reverberates through my body like the recoil of a gun.

He slumps forward, momentarily stunned, but then he speeds off.

The grin plastered on his face stokes the fires of my mounting frustration.

We're nearing the end of the first period, and with zero goals scored, we're all a little on edge.

I dig my skates into the ice, going hard after the puck.

Miles snatches it from the Sharks' center and sends it flying, so I hurry after it.

It's just me and Rogers, and I'm not letting him get possession of it.

I'm ahead of him, only a few feet from the puck.

I extend my stick and take control of it, but then I feel a sharp hit in the middle of the back.

I'm propelled forward, my head smashing into the boards.

Everything gets loud around me, with players hitting each other and cursing. Then, it's all quiet. And blurry.

I want to tell them I'm fine, that they can stop. Heck, I want to get in on the fight, but when I try to stand up, I fall backward.

Something warm rolls along my cheeks, followed by an intense pain in my face. And then, nothing. Before long, my headache overwhelms me, and there's a ringing in my ears. I open my eyes to see the docs kneeling down beside me.

"Do you know where you are?" asks Clark, one of our team docs.

"Hockey game. Just got hit."

"That's right. Can you move your arms and legs?" he continues, speaking directly in my ear.

I kick my feet on the ice, though they're heavy as a ton of bricks.

"What about your fingers? Can you feel your back?"

"Yes, I can."

"Any head pain?"

"Yes," I reply, glancing to the side to see some of my teammates with dark looks on their faces. I want to make a joke, tell them I'll be back on the ice in a minute, but that headache keeps kicking me down.

"Okay, James. Your nose is bleeding pretty heavily, and you lost consciousness for a second, so we're going to take you to the hospital to run some tests, okay?"

"Can't we do it after the game?"

“Afraid not. You got hit pretty bad,” he says, standing up.

Moments later, they’re strapping me to a backboard and lifting me onto a stretcher. It feels a little extreme. We’re hockey players, after all. We’re tougher than that.

“They got you,” Hawthorne says, stopping next to me and patting my leg. “You’ll be fine, man.”

“Get better, bro,” Miles says, a deep frown etched onto his face as he looks at me.

The crowd bursts into cheers followed by stick taps and applause. The stretcher starts moving, and I give the fans a thumbs-up to show them I’m fine. Louder cheers erupt, and I’m bombarded by more well wishes and pats from my team and the Sharks as I’m being taken away.

In my peripheral vision, I notice Rogers, looking a little pale. I stretch my arms, signaling for the medical team to stop the stretcher, then I beckon him toward me.

The arena quiets down as he shuffles forward. “Look man, I’m sorry,” he starts, leaning over me. But I don’t want his apologies. It was a bad hit , and it was intentional. He’s only regretting it now because things got serious.

No, I’m not looking for an apology. There’s only one thing I want to say to him.

“Touch her again,” I growl, looking him dead in the eye. “And I will end you.”

His eyes widen slightly, and he straightens his back as they haul me toward the edge of the ice and through the Zamboni tunnel.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"If it's any consolation, I will die one day, Eli zabeth."

Beth Bowen

That was the single most terrifying thing I've ever seen.

James getting slammed against the boards, then lying motionless on the ice as the medics rushed onto the scene.

I'm still shaking when the entire arena claps and cheers their support as James is evacuated on a stretcher.

I haven't been to many hockey games, but I've never seen this happen.

The players usually get back up right away after a hit.

The thought that they sometimes can't never really occurred to me.

They look so strong, almost i nvincible with all that gear on.

But beneath the pads and helmets, they're just men. Humans.

And now, James is on that stretcher, and it's all because of me. He and Lucas have been at each other's throat since the game started, and the hits became more and more intense.

"I'm going to the hospital," I tell the girls, my throat suddenly dry. "You all can stay

and watch the rest of the game.”

“No, we’ll come with you,” Marissa says, standing up.

I nod, and we gather our stuff.

“That was a hard hit,” Hayley says in a quiet voice as we’re leaving our seats. “Crap. I really hope he’s okay.”

My heart clenches tight, and I feel the air drain from my lungs. “Me too.”

We walk up the stairs toward the exit, and we’re almost at the top when the referee announces that they’re reviewing the hit for a possible match penalty.

We hurry out of the arena, but it takes us forever to flag down a cab.

Finally, we pile into one. And after fifteen excruciating minutes of weaving through the city, we reach the hospital.

We barge into the emergency room, quickly finding the team’s doctors.

It’s a good thing Marissa came along. She knows every single Raptors staff member and found them right away.

“They’re looking at him now, but I suspect a broken nose,” says Barry, the older doctor, as he hitches his thumb in his pocket.

“I also think he has a mild concussion, but he should be healed up within a few weeks,” adds Clark, a younger doctor, before excusing himself to go talk to the nurse.

Soon, more Raptors staff flood into the room, including Jenna from PR and a few

others I don't recognize. The wait is unbearable. We sit in the waiting room, and every time I close my eyes, images of the hit resurface. Dang it. Why didn't he just listen to me? I told him to forget it.

Marissa and a few other staff members are watching the game on their phones, but I never want to hear a thing about hockey again. Instead, I pace around the room, anxious for the moment the doctors give us some news.

After what feels like an eternity, a doctor finally comes into the waiting room, and we gather around.

"Mr. Adler is alert and responsive," he says, and there's a general sigh of relief.

"He has a minor nose fracture that I already tended to, and he suffered a mild concussion, but there doesn't seem to be any additional injuries to the head.

I'm still waiting for the CT results to come up.

Right now, we have him on medication for the pain, and he's getting some rest."

"Can I see him?" I ask, and everyone turns to look at me. My cheeks flush, but my determination doesn't falter. "Please, just for a minute. I'll be quick."

The doctor glances at Barry and Clark, who nod back at him, and I shoot them a grateful look.

As I follow the doctor out of the waiting room and into the hallway, my heart rate increases with every step.

We pass various rooms until we finally come to a stop, and the doctor turns to me.

“He’s going to need some rest. So make it short. ”

I nod. “I will.”

With a small intake of breath, I open the door, and my heart almost breaks in half when I see the strong and cocky James Adler lying on a hospital bed.

“Ah,” he mutters, smiling weakly when he sees me. “I see I finally got your attention.”

A laugh and a sigh burst out of me at the same time as I hurry to his side.

“I never thought this is what it would take to have you in my room, Elizabeth,” he says, wagging his eyebrows.

This man! Another surge of relief rushes through me, and I hit him softly in the stomach. “You scared me half to death, James! Are you crazy?”

“Hey!” he scolds. “Don’t hit me.”

“I’m mad at you.” Despite my words, my body relaxes with each passing second. “I thought you were dead!”

He gives me an exaggerated frown. “If it’s any consolation, I will die one day, Elizabeth.”

I shake my head. “You’re unbelievable. And a liar,” I scold. “You said you wouldn’t go after him.”

He tuts, raising a finger. “I didn’t lie. I said I wouldn’t go out and find him . I never said I wouldn’t smash his face on the ice the first chance I got.”

I sigh, taking his hand. The move is spontaneous, but I don't anticipate the tingles dancing through my arm. "You didn't have to do that."

He squeezes my hand once. "I absolutely had to do that. And I'll do it again if anyone else ever lays a hand on you."

Our gazes lock, and I see the sincerity, the protectiveness in his eyes, and it makes my heart soar.

I get lost in his ocean-blue eyes, hating the part of me that feels good in this moment.

Flattered to have a hot, strong hockey player defending my honor on the ice.

I shouldn't be that person. It's not right. And yet, here I am.

"You're an amazing woman, you know that?" he murmurs, and I lean forward a notch. His gaze flickers to my lips, and I swallow hard before shifting my eyes away, clearing my throat.

What am I doing? Was I about to give James Adler a thank-you kiss for getting into a fight with my ex just now?

Dropping his hand, I stand up and take a step back, my chest suddenly tight.

This is crazy. I shouldn't want to kiss him, but with the way my heart is hammering right now, it's obvious that I really, really want to .

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"I'll make sure he stays alive."

James Adler

"Wait," I breathe out the second she tugs her hand from mine. "Please stay."

She glances at me, hesitation dancing in her eyes. She looks at the door, then at me. Finally, she returns to my side and takes my hand again. I pull her closer until she's seated on the edge of the bed, leaning over me.

I push a strand of blonde hair behind her ear and cup her cheek.

"I'm crazy about you, Elizabeth Bowen," I say, and she leans into my hand. "Don't you see it?"

I caress her cheek with the back of my hand and stop when I reach her chin.

Just when I'm about to pull her a few inches closer, she closes the gap between us. Her lips taste like cherry, probably from that lip gloss she always wears. And just like I imagined they would be, they're soft. Like a cloud or a pillow.

Something touches my foot, and I chuckle against her lips. "Stop it. That tickles," I say, but she keeps going, clearly intent on starting a war.

I want to retaliate, but all of a sudden she disappears from my grasp.

"Stop it, dude," a deep voice chides.

“But it’s weird that he can’t feel it, isn’t it?” someone else says. Wait. Is that a hint of a French accent? “Maybe the doctors missed something,” he continues.

“The doctors didn't miss anything. He's fine. Look, he’s smiling.”

Wait a minute, I know that voice. It sounds suspiciously like . . .

“Miles,” I croak, opening my eyes to find him next to me, wearing his game suit. Elizabeth is nowhere in sight. A twinge of disappointment hits when I realize that kiss was only a dream.

“Aw. Let the record show that he said my name first,” Miles says with a grin, leaning closer and squeezing my shoulder.

“You scared us, bro,” he adds, and I notice a large cut on his cheek.

“Glad you're okay. The entire team is sending their love, but we thought it would be best if only a few of us came in.”

“Good to see you again, man,” Hawthorne says from my other side. His beard looks even more full right now, and his eyes are bloodshot from exhaustion.

“Welcome back, mate,” Wally says, his large frame taking up the entire width of the bed.

“Did you feel that on your foot?” Beaumont asks, a shadow of concern over his face. “Can you move your toes?”

I frown. “Was that you tickling me just now?”

Everyone laughs. Even Wally’s deep and boisterous laughter fills the room.

“Do that again, and I'll kick your butt,” I add to Beaumont, who breaks into a smile.

“Yes, sir.”

“Oh, by the way, how did the game end?” I ask, suddenly remembering that I left them shorthanded.

“We won,” Miles says, grinning ear to ear. “Three to one.”

My eyes widen. “Shut up!”

“What? You think we need you to win?” Beaumont asks, stretching his arms over his head.

“Obviously,” I reply without hesitation, and everyone laughs.

Beaumont lets out an exaggerated breath. “Phew! He’s back.”

“Frenchie Boy and I scored,” Hawthorne explains. “Went at them strong too. The game was heated after you left, as you can imagine.”

Wally shakes his head. “And Rogers got a match penalty.”

I let out a long breath. “Thanks, guys. For having my back.”

“Anytime.” Hawthorne taps his fist on my leg.

“What about me? How long am I out for? The doc hasn’t said anything yet.”

“We don't know,” he replies. “Coach is talking with the doctor now. They should be back in shortly.”

Right on cue, the door opens, and Coach and the doc step inside.

“All right, we’ll give you the room,” Miles says.

They all pat my legs—Beaumont a bit stronger than the others—before leaving the room.

“Glad you’re in one piece,” Coach says, squeezing my shoulder.

“Thanks, Coach.” With a sharp breath, I turn to the doctor. “What’s the damage, doc?”

“You suffered a nose fracture and a mild concussion. I already realigned your nose, so you shouldn’t see any difference in your appearance once the dressing is off.

Right now, I’m just waiting on the CT scan results to ensure we haven’t missed anything.

As for the game, you’re going to be out for a while, I’m afraid.”

“Well, I’ll go take care of the paperwork,” Coach says with a sympathetic smile, and they both leave the room.

I stare at the hospital bed sheets, my chest constricting.

Hockey is everything to me. I’ve been dreading a major injury that would take me out for my entire career, but up until now, I’d been lucky.

As much as it sucks, I don’t regret starting that fight. There are just certain things you can’t let slide when it comes to the women you love.

The word hits me like another slap in the face, but at the same time, it's oddly comforting.

I'm in love with Elizabeth. This isn't just a crush, it's more than that.

I've known for a while, but actions speak louder than words, and the fact that I just put my body and my career on the line to defend her, without an ounce of hesitation, is practically shouting it from the rooftops.

I know she's nowhere near ready, but I'll wait. All I have is time.

I don't know how long I lie there, alone with my thoughts, until I finally hear a knock on the door. It opens slowly. Marissa walks in, followed by Hayley and Elizabeth. "Hey. We know you need to rest," Marissa says. "But we just wanted to see you quickly before we go. How are you feeling?"

"Thanks, ladies. I'm okay."

"Are you sure?" Hayley asks with the same look of concern that her fiancé wore.

"That was really scary. It's in those moments you realize how dangerous this sport is.

" She suppresses a shiver, and my heart clenches.

Hockey players may not have the most dangerous job in the world, but the occupational hazards are yet another downside to being married to one.

I flash her a big, reassuring smile. "Positive. But thank you for caring."

"Of course we care," Elizabeth says. She steps closer, and at once, my world feels fuller.

She looks tired, and her eyes are way too glassy for my liking.

When she places a hand on my leg, it's like my skin just caught fire.

I should tell Beaumont. That'll put him at ease. Because right now, I'm definitely getting all the feels.

Memories of my interrupted dream from earlier come to mind, and the heat spreads to my entire body.

"Absolutely," Marissa adds. "You're our friend, and we're here for you. Does it hurt?" She glances at my nose.

I shrug. "They say it's broken, but I can't feel it. Probably the drugs they gave me." That, or after years of hockey, I've developed a higher tolerance for pain.

"Good to hear." She nods, smiling. "We'll let you get some rest, but take care of yourself, okay? And don't hesitate to reach out if you need anything once you're home. We're only two floors down."

I smile back. "Will do."

Elizabeth shoots me one last look, and it almost breaks me. I have never seen so much pain in those beautiful gray eyes. "Bye," she says, walking toward the door with Marissa and Hayley.

"Wait," I call out. "Elizabeth, can you stay for a second?"

She shares a glance with her friends, then nods before closing the door behind them.

"Thank you for being here," I say.

“Of course.” She stares at the floor, then off to the side. “I’m so sorry, James. It’s my fault you’re in here.”

My heart constricts when I hear the waver in her voice.

“See, no. I knew that’s where your head was at,” I say, sitting up straighter and extending my arm to her.

She takes my hand, and my entire world tilts on its axis.

She sits next to me, her eyes still downcast. “None of this is your fault, Elizabeth. I promise you,” I say, squeezing her hand.

But she’s still avoiding my gaze. “Hey, look at me, please.”

Finally, her eyes meet mine, and the pain reflected in them hurts me so deeply, there’s no medication strong enough to make it disappear.

“I’m a grown man. I went after Rogers, and I got hit.

It was my decision. I’m just stupid and reckless, okay?

I know violence isn’t the answer, but I couldn’t let him get away with what he did. And you know what? I don’t regret it.”

Her mouth twists to the side, then she shakes her head. “Yeah, it was stupid. Now your career is on the line.”

I wince.

Her voice drops a few notches. “How long are you out for?”

“Not sure yet, but at least a few weeks, I'm guessing.”

Her gaze softens. “I'm sorry.”

“I'm not.”

Our eyes lock, and suddenly, I'm not in some sterile hospital room anymore. I'm lost in the storm of her eyes. It's beautiful and sad. Complicated and hopeful.

And it's exactly where I want to be.

The door swings open, interrupting the moment. “Got your test results back,” Doc says, hustling in. “Sorry,” he adds, noticing Elizabeth. “I didn't know you still had company.”

“I'll go,” she says, releasing my hand.

“No. Please stay,” I plead. It's nice to have someone next to me, especially when the doc might hit me with some crappy news.

With a small nod, she folds her arms and takes a step back, giving the doctor some space.

“CT is clear,” Doc says, “but let me do a few more quick tests.” He takes out a light pen from his vest, then asks me to follow it with my eyes. After that, he checks my pupils and tests my reflexes.

“Okay,” he says, studying my chart again.

“So, am I free to go?” I ask, eager to get back to my apartment and lie down in my plush king-size bed.

He looks at me, then at the chart again. “Actually, I would feel more comfortable keeping you here for observation tonight, just in case you lose consciousness again. Unless you have someone who can stay with you.”

“I can.” Elizabeth steps forward, catching me by surprise. She dances on her feet, wringing her hands. “I’ll make sure he stays alive.”

“Great,” Doc says, clasping his hands. “Make sure you ice your nose to keep the swelling down. I’ll go ahead and write you a prescription, then I’ll sign your discharge papers.”

“I’ll spend the night at your place. That is, if the offer still stands,” Elizabeth ventures, glancing at me as the doc is leaving.

I press my lips together, nodding. “Always.”

Yeah, maybe this thing wasn’t so stupid after all.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"How many serums do you have, Elizabeth?"

Beth Bowen

After James changes into a clean tracksuit the guys brought, we stop by the hospital pharmacy to get his medication and some ice packs. Once we're all geared up, Aaron and Marissa drive us home.

"Thanks again, bro," James says when we reach his apartment.

He turns the lights on, and I blink back in surprise.

Though I'm not sure why. It's not like I ever took the time to imagine what his apartment would look like, but I would never have guessed it'd be so nicely decorated.

The entrance corridor alone holds a couple of paintings, an elegant mirror, and a classy console table.

It also smells really nice, like vanilla or balsam, thanks to a diffuser sitting on the tabletop.

"No problem," Miles says. "Tomorrow, I'll grab your stuff from the arena and drive your car back."

James snickers. "Looks like it's your lucky day. You'll finally be able to drive the Lambo."

“I don’t give a crap about the Lambo,” Miles grunts, and Marissa glances at me, shaking her head.

James smirks. “Yeah, you do. You’ve been wanting to sit behind the wheel since I got it.”

“Fine,” Miles says, rolling his eyes. “Guess that’s the other upside of you being injured.”

James barks out a laugh, and the sound warms my heart. “Don’t worry. I can still drive, so I don’t need you to get it for me.”

“I’m not so sure,” Miles teases. “We have to see if there’s permanent damage to your head. Jury’s still out.”

“I think it’s time for you to go,” James replies, flashing a bright smile.

“Can I grab my stuff from your place quick?” I ask Marissa, and she nods.

“You girls go ahead. I’ll stay with this one in case he faints again,” Miles says, and they keep bickering about the car and James’ head as Marissa and I exit the apartment.

Once we’re in the elevator, Marissa turns to me. “Are you going to be okay?”

“What? Taking care of James?” I swat a hand through the air dismissively. “I’ll be fine.”

“Were you the one who offered?” she asks, her blue eyes set on me.

I stare at the floor. “Yeah, I did. Felt bad about him having to stay at the hospital

because he didn't have anyone."

"Well, Aaron would have stayed with him, for sure," Marissa says as the elevator chimes open.

My cheeks heat up. "Oh, right." To tell the truth, I didn't even think about that. Of course he would have. Half of the team would have stayed over.

"But it's better this way. I'm sure James would prefer you taking care of him. He wouldn't get any rest with Aaron," she says with a chuckle.

"Yeah," I say quietly as she unlocks her front door and pushes it open. "Honestly, I wasn't really thinking when I offered. It just felt right, I don't know. Plus, I'm kind of in between places."

I almost tell her that I feel guilty about what happened, but I don't want to invite even more prying questions. Right now, everyone thinks that fight was just the product of that stupid Sharks-Raptors rivalry, and I'm cool with that.

I grab a change of clothes for tomorrow, my beauty products, and a set of pajamas. "I think that's all I'll need for one night," I say, scanning the room to make sure I've got everything.

She arches an eyebrow. "That's your overnight bag?"

"What?" I say, glancing at my large tote of skincare products. "We won't be twenty-eight forever, Marissa. Gotta take care of our skin."

She bubbles out a laugh as she walks me back to the entrance. "Do you need help with that?"

“I’m good.” I give her a nod. “Talk tomorrow?”

“I already called Celia, and she said she can open for us. Feel free to come in whenever. Heaven knows if you’ll get any sleep with that one.”

My cheeks effectively burst into flames, and I try to stutter out a reply.

“He’s probably going to love you taking care of him. And I think he’ll need a lot of attention.” She winks.

“Marissa!” I blurt out, almost dropping everything I’m holding.

“I’m kidding,” she says. “But seriously, it’s two a.m. already, and you do have to keep an eye on him, so I’ll open with Celia.”

“All right,” I say, shaking my head. “See you tomorrow.”

I walk back to the elevator, my heart still pounding with every step that I take.

When I get back upstairs, their laughter carries from further in the apartment.

I close the door behind me and venture inside.

On the left, at the end of the hallway, is a large living area with a dining room, living room, and the most beautiful kitchen I’ve ever seen.

White marble countertops, shiny stainless-steel appliances, and plenty of counter space for making elaborate preparations.

“There she is,” James says from the couch, and they both stand up.

“All right, bro,” Aaron says, wrapping him in a hug. “Get some rest, okay?” He taps my arm as he walks past me, offering a smile. “Later, Beth.”

“Here. Let me help you with that,” James says, grabbing my beauty bag. His eyes widen. “Wow, that’s heavy. What do you have in here? Is it kinky?”

I roll my eyes. “Beauty products.”

“Beaut—” He breathes out a huff, shaking his head. “What kind of nonsense is that? I’m pretty sure you don’t need half the things in here.”

“Um, I do, actually.”

He frowns, opening the bag slowly just to gauge my annoyance. Frankly, I don’t really care. “Hmm. Let’s see what we have here. Day cream, serum, night cream, some kind of weird-looking patches, serum, another serum.” He stops to gawk at me. “How many serums do you have, Elizabeth?”

I pause, taking in the sight of him holding my vitamin C serum in one hand and the retinol serum in the other, and a laugh bursts out of me. Never in a million years would I have ever thought I’d be in James Adler’s apartment as he rifles through my beauty stuff.

“Just the right number,” I shoot back, a smile still teasing my lips. “That’s enough inventory for one night. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Yes, please,” he says, standing up with a smirk. “By the way, I didn’t know the private nurse gig was your thing. I’m into it.”

I roll my eyes. “You wish. I’m only here because you need a babysitter. And since I’m respons—”

He tuts, cutting me off, and I smile.

“Fine, since I’m somewhat responsible for what happened, it works.”

“Right. Let me show you around first, and then we can get me to bed,” he says with a wink.

His apartment has the same layout as Aaron’s, although a bit bigger. He has four bedrooms while Aaron has three, plus two full bathrooms. Everything is nicely decorated and smells like clean linens and vanilla.

“You’re really into diffusers and candles, aren’t you?” I muse, spotting more.

“Oh, yeah. Nothing worse than the stench of hockey gear,” he says. “Even though I don’t really bring it home anymore, I kept that habit.”

“I like it.” I pick up a cotton-scented candle, then set it down.

“Here’s my room,” he says once we reach the end of the hallway. It’s the biggest of the four, and I’m pretty sure I spot an en suite closet and bathroom. “Maybe we should sleep in the same bed. You know, just to be cautious.”

I burst out a laugh, partly because I know he’s just playing, but also because I’m glad to see him back to his old self. “Not gonna happen. But I’ll set my alarm to check on you.”

He studies me for a second, then a small smile appears on his lips. “Take whichever room you prefer,” he says before retreating into his own room and shedding the jacket of his tracksuit.

I quickly avert my gaze. “Okay, thanks.” I grab his medication from my bag, placing

it on his nightstand. “The doctor said you can take two of those if you wake up feeling pain, okay? I’ll go grab you a glass of water.”

“I can do it,” he says. “I can still walk, you know.”

“I know you can,” I say with a smile. “But I’m dying to take another look at that kitchen.”

He rumbles out a laugh. “Right. I forgot I was hosting the best pastry chef in town.”

I step back into the hallway and let out a small sigh when I see his glorious kitchen again.

I run my hand along the cold white marble, and my eyes widen when I glimpse the state-of-the-art oven.

Wow. This is beyond incredible. After opening a few cupboards, I finally find a glass and fill it with water from the dispenser on the fridge.

“So, what’s the verdict?” he asks when I come back. He’s sitting on the edge of his bed, his shirt off, and I almost drop the glass.

“Um.” I avert my gaze. “It’s amazing. Do you love to cook or something?” Please say no, or I might combust into a pile of ash on the ground.

“No,” he says, a hint of amusement in his tone.

Thank heavens.

“But my grandma used to bake, and she taught me a few tricks. The apartment came furnished with that cool kitchen. Maybe you can make use of it.”

A thrill courses through me. “Are you kidding? I’d love to.”

One corner of his lips tilts into a crooked smile. “Perfect.”

“Well, I’ll let you get some sleep,” I say, carefully placing the glass on the nightstand. “I’ll check up on you during the night, but if you need anything or don’t feel good, call for me, okay? I’ll leave my door open.”

He nods, and my eyes fall to his perfect chest. Darn it, why am I looking? Probably to see whether that commercial was a lie. Unfortunately, with the way he’s sitting, I can’t really check out his abs.

“Thanks, Elizabeth. For being here. I really appreciate it.”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I’m happy to. Sleep tight.”

“You too.”

“Door open or closed?” I ask when I reach the threshold.

“Open, please. That way we can be sure I’ll wake you up if I’m screaming in pain.”

I shake my head, smiling. “All right. Good night.”

Right. As if I’ll get any sleep tonight with James Adler only a couple of doors away.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Okay, the eight pack is totally real."

James Adler

The next morning, I feel like a man who just slammed his head at full speed against the boards. Fitting.

I shift in my bed and grab the bottle of painkillers, washing them down with water.

Even if they'll take a while to kick in, I already feel a bit better as Elizabeth's glittering smile flashes through my mind.

She volunteered to take care of me, made sure I had everything I needed.

I even heard her coming in to check on me during the night.

It was hard not to when she knocked over the vase I have in the corridor.

Movement by the door catches my eye, and I put my glasses on. She's wearing a beige satin pajama set, leaning against the doorframe.

"You don't know how many times I've dreamed of waking up and seeing you here," I say, feeling a smile stretching across my face.

She rolls her eyes. "I guess now we can definitely rule out brain damage."

I chuckle, which only increases the sharp pain in my nose. "Thanks for last night. For

being here.”

She shrugs, trying to appear casual. “You needed someone to look after you, and my living situation is up in the air. It made sense, that’s all.”

“So, this nurse fantasy is really not going to happen, huh?”

She bellows out a laugh. “I’m afraid not. Thank you for defending my honor, though. It wasn’t necessary, but—”

“It was absolutely necessary. And I would do it again in a heartbeat.” I bolt upright, then clutch my forehead, the throbbing pain making me wince.

“Are you all right?”

I nod, adjusting my glasses painfully. “What’s the damage? Is my moneymaker ruined?”

She crosses her arms, then grimaces. “You might want to count on something else to pay those bills. This face is—”

Panic rushes through me as my eyes fly wide. I hop out of bed, rushing toward the mirror at the other end of my room, Elizabeth giggling in the doorway.

When I catch a glimpse of my face, I sigh. I don’t look great, but it’s not that bad, either. Beneath the dressing over my nose, I can see a bruise that will probably change colors ten times before going back to normal.

“You’re mean,” I scold, turning to her. “I’m already a wounded man.”

She muffles her laughter, the sound making everything better. “Come on, wounded

man. Let's get you some breakfast."

"Yes, ma'am. Can I also get a side of ice pack for my nose?" I say with a grin. "It hurts like the dickens."

"That can be arranged."

I follow her through the hallway, and this whole thing feels surreal. Elizabeth is here, in my apartment, and we're joking around naturally. In a way, I always knew it was possible, that she just needed to get to know me, but it still seems out of this world.

"Did you sleep well?" she asks. "I didn't hear you scream, but . . ."

"Are you serious?" I stop, a hand on my hip. "I yelled and yelled for you. No one heard me. I think you need to retake that nursing test."

Her eyes widen in horror. "What? No. I barely even slept. I came to check on you every two hours. I—you're messing with me!

" she says, giving me a pointed look. "You're unbelievable.

" She playfully pushes me, and I laugh, catching her hand.

It's soft, and it feels so right to have it back in mine.

We held hands a few times yesterday, the memory still vivid, but somehow, it still feels like the first time.

"Seriously, though. Thanks for checking on me."

She swallows hard, glancing at our joined hands. "Of course. That's what I'm here

for.”

She doesn’t know it, but no one has ever really taken care of me other than my grandma, and having Elizabeth here means the world to me.

Beth Bowen

Okay, the eight pack is totally real. How is that even possible?

I avert my gaze, not wanting to stare, but I suddenly wish he played field hockey or any other field sport so I could watch his firm chest and rock-hard abs for extended periods.

I knew hockey players were fit—I’ve lived with one, after all—but James’ body is a work of art. Every muscle is sculpted to perfection.

“Are you all right?” he asks, and I shake myself back into focus.

“Absolutely. What do you want for breakfast?”

“Um. I don’t know, but I’m starving. I don’t suppose you can whip us up some of your to-die-for muffins right now?” he asks, shooting me a goofy smile.

I chuckle. “Depending on what ingredients you have, I could make something, but it’s going to take a while.”

“I’ve got all day. Actually, I have several of them.” A shadow falls over his face before he smiles back at me.

“I’m sorry you can’t play,” I say, opening the fridge.

“It’s all right.” He adjusts his glasses on his nose as best as he can over the bandage.
“With a nurse like you, I’ll be back on my feet in no time.”

I turn around, shaking my head. “Where do you keep your dry ingredients? Flour, sugar, et cetera. Do you have a pantry?”

He gestures behind me with his chin. “The door right there.”

I open it, and holy moly, this thing is huge. The room probably runs the entire length of the kitchen, lined with fully-stocked floor-to-ceiling shelves.

“By the way,” he calls out from the kitchen, “I was thinking maybe you could stay for a while.”

I drop the pack of flour I was holding, and the powder goes flying everywhere, blinding me. I cough, trying to wet my dusted throat.

“What’s going on?” he asks, sounding closer. I spin around to see him standing in the doorway.

“It just fell out of my hands. But I’ll clean it up. Do you have a Handvac?”

“Don’t move. I’ll go get it.”

Thank goodness for the flour whitening my whole face, because I’m probably as red as a red velvet cupcake.

He comes back with the handheld vacuum and kneels down, but I hold my hand up.

“No way. It’s my mess. I’ll clean it up.”

He cocks his head to the side. His mouth opens to protest, but I grab the Handvac.

I raise my eyebrows. “You’re a wounded man, remember?”

Chuckling, he stands up and leans against the shelf while I vacuum the floor.

“So, I don’t know if you heard what I said before you floured my pantry,” he begins when I turn off the vacuum. And even through the flour dust lingering in the air, his piercing blue eyes still have the same effect on me.

“Um, no?” I peep out, regretting it instantly.

He grins, seeing right through my lie.

“Well, I was thinking you could stay for a while,” he repeats. “You know, since you don’t have a place to stay, and I have this big kitchen that would be so happy to welcome you.”

I chuckle, feeling a blush coating my cheeks. “I don’t know.”

“Aw, come on. I’m not that bad. Plus, without hockey in my life, I could use the company.”

I bite my lip, sweeping the last specks of flour off the floor. I felt like an intruder while staying with Marissa and Aaron, and this place is really nice—not to mention bigger. And anyway, I should find a place of my own soon enough. “Okay, thanks for offering. I’ll be out of your hair soon.”

“No need,” he says, flashing his devastating smile. “I like having you here.”

I bring my eyes back to my task, trying to cool myself down, but being next to

shirtless James, and with him acting so thoughtful and sexy, I doubt this furnace will be cooling anytime soon.

“Do you have everything you need?” he asks.

I frown in confusion.

“For the muffins, I mean.”

A smile breaks onto my face. “Men. Always thinking with their stomachs.”

He chuckles, and we both return to the kitchen.

“Actually, I can make some chocolate chip brownies, if that works? Not exactly a healthy breakfast, but I think you deserve it after yesterday.”

“Yes, please. I’ll go put on a shirt.”

Part of me is disappointed, but it’s probably for the best if we don’t want to set this gorgeous kitchen on fire. I grab a bowl and prep all the ingredients as sunlight filters through the window, hitting his collection of trophies on the shelves and making them shimmer.

“That’s a lot of trophies,” I say when he comes back. “I’ll have to take a closer look later.”

“Yeah,” he says, drumming his fingers on the marble counter. “Well, those aren’t the actual trophies. They’re replicas they get us.”

“You won two last June, right? Apparently, you put on quite a performance.”

He smiles. “I did. The Maurice Richard and the Hart Memorial trophy.”

“Let me guess,” I tease, pouring my wet ingredients into the bowl. “Goofiest and cockiest player.”

He flashes a big grin. “Nailed it. Can I help you?” he asks, watching as I stir.

“You’re not supposed to do anything.”

“Please.” He gives me a pleading look I’d dare anyone to resist. “I need to do something.”

“Fine.” I cave. “Can you mix the dry ingredients? The sugar, cocoa powder, flour, and chocolate chips.”

“Sure thing.” He bends down, grabbing another bowl from the cupboard.

“Oh, and salt. Just a pinch.”

He nods, adding the ingredients and stirring them carefully.

“By the way, I was kidding,” I say. “About the trophies. I know the dedication and sacrifice your sport demands. You deserve them.”

The corner of his lips pulls up. “Thanks.”

“So, what were they for, anyway?”

He grins. “Curious, aren’t you?”

“Maybe a little.” I shrug. “I only know about the Stanley Cup—having sipped

champagne from it in June helped—oh, and the Prince of Wales one.”

“That’s a start,” he says with a smirk. “Well, the others are awarded to players for recognition in specific areas of the game. Like sportsmanship, best defenseman, best goalie, that kind of thing.”

“So, you got Best Winger?”

He bursts out a laugh. “Gosh. That just made me even more hungry. No, we don’t have any winger-specific trophies. The Maurice Richard is for Top Scorer, and the Hart Memorial for Most Valuable to the Team.”

I glance at him over the mixing bowl. “Wow. That’s pretty impressive. You must be proud.”

“Thanks. I never thought I’d catch your attention by displaying my stats and trophies.”

I chuckle. “Frankly, neither did I, but I’m glad you’re getting recognition for your efforts. I see how hard you work.”

He arches his eyebrows. “Same goes for you and the Best Coffee in Brooklyn award.”

“I guess, yeah,” I say with a smile, adding the contents of my bowl into his. “That was a nice surprise. We take extra care selecting our beans, and the place we found in Venezuela to buy direct from is amazing.”

“What time are you working today?” he asks, then looks at the bowl with a confused frown. “Wait, what am I supposed to do with this now?”

“Just keep mixing. I’ll find a baking pan and some parchment paper.”

“Top drawer on the left for the paper. Bottom drawer on the right for the baking pan.”

“Got it,” I say, cutting the paper and placing it on the pan. “Oh, and Marissa is opening, so I can go in later. After we eat, I’ll take a shower and head out. Unless you need me.”

“No, no. Please, go on with your day. I don’t want you to feel stuck here because of me.

But I’ll walk you to work, if that’s okay?

I could use some fresh air. After that, I have no idea,” he jokes.

“I haven’t had this much free time in a while, and Doc said no exercising for at least a week, so . . .”

“Might not be such a brilliant idea to eat brownies for breakfast, then,” I tease, and he belts out a laugh, tapping his chest.

“Crab . I didn’t think of that.”

That makes me laugh. “Why do you always swear like that?”

He arches an eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Well, most guys are so foul-mouthed, especially hockey players, and you’re all, ‘oh crab’ and ‘son of a biscuit.’”

He joins in my laughter. “I don’t know. It’s more fun, you know? Plus, I hang out at

the nursing home way too much.”

“Makes sense,” I say with a nod. I kind of like it, actually.

It’s refreshing to see a guy mindful of his words, not to mention it fits his goofy personality.

“All right, let’s spread this batter on the paper,” I say, grabbing a spatula.

He pours the batter, and I spread it evenly.

The smell of chocolate and sugar fills my nostrils, promising a delicious breakfast.

“Dang, I think I gained ten pounds just by looking at it.”

I shake my head, then lick the spatula. I keep the thought to myself, but I think James could eat an entire pan of brownies every day for a week, and those abs would still be there. Or maybe it’s just wishful thinking.

"I'm a patient man."

James Adler

After some delicious brownies and a cup of well-deserved coffee, Elizabeth and I both take a shower—separately, obviously—and walk downstairs to Aaron and Marissa's place to grab the rest of her stuff.

"Leaving us already?" Miles says to Elizabeth as we step into his apartment. "I get it, though. His place is pretty cool with all the scented candles."

"And my collection of sparkly trophies," I add with a grin. "She loved those."

Elizabeth just shakes her head.

I give her a nudge. "Come on, you totally did."

She sighs, walking past me. "Fine, they were kind of cool."

"I have some trophies too," Miles says. "But I keep mine in my office. Less braggy than this one." He hits me with a light punch in the stomach.

"Right. Well, I'm going to get my stuff," Elizabeth says, a smile dancing on her lips.

Once she leaves, Miles turns to me. "So, you finally got her to stay with you," he says, eyeing me suspiciously. "You'd better be a gentleman."

I cock my head to the side. “When am I ever not?” In a more serious tone, I add, “You know I like her. I’d never do anything to make her uncomfortable. I’m just goofing around. She needed a place to stay, and you know I don’t like being alone for too long.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” he says, rubbing his buzz cut. “I couldn’t get one weekend alone with my wife this summer.”

“Oh, come on. I went to Europe for an entire week with Hawthorne to see the Grand Prix. You had plenty of time alone with her.”

He bursts out a laugh. “Yeah, one week. You leech. And that was before the wedding.”

“What can I say? I love you, bro,” I say, bumping his shoulder.

“Careful there,” he teases. “Don’t want to exhaust yourself. Remember, you’re still in recovery.”

“Haha. Very funny. I can still kick your butt if I want to.” I throw him a kick, and he traps my head under his arm. I know he’s going easy on me, but I’m not.

“Hey!” Elizabeth calls out, her tone stern. “What is going on here? I leave you alone for five minutes, and this happens! You have got to be kidding me.”

I press my lips into a thin line, and Miles swallows hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. The situation is pretty ironic. We might be two burly grown men, but this woman has all the power in the room.

“Sorry,” Miles mutters. “We were just playing around. He’s fine.”

“Yeah, it’s all good.” I nod, smiling. “But thank you for worrying about me.”

She shakes her head, then sighs. “Well, I have everything. Can you help me bring this upstairs?” she asks, and I grab her suitcase.

“What time are you going to the arena?” I ask Miles.

“Actually, I should already be there,” he says, checking his watch, and a pang of disappointment hits me. “But come back later today—around three for a game of NHL Master.”

I force a smile. “Sounds good.”

“You two had better behave this time,” Elizabeth warns as she hauls her other bags toward the door.

“Don’t worry, we’ll stick to video games. No risk getting injured there,” I reassure her. And as much as I like playing, that’s also why it’ll never be as thrilling as a real hockey game.

“See you later, bro.” Miles waves as we head out.

We take the elevator back up to my place, and I notice a familiar underwear tote bag in her hand.

“Don’t you need help with that?” I ask with a grin. “All those panties must be hard to carry.”

“Haha, you’re hilarious.” She narrows her eyes. “Don’t make me and my panties regret moving in with you.”

I pretend to zip my mouth shut and throw away the key.

Once we bring her stuff to my apartment, I walk her to work. It's a sunny fall day, and it's nice to get out and enjoy a breath of fresh air.

"So, I've been wondering, where does your love for baking come from?" I ask as we stroll side by side.

"My parents," she says, turning to me. "They actually ran a restaurant in New Jersey for twenty years. When I was younger, I spent all my free time there, helping them, learning the ropes. It was how we spent most of our time together. If I wasn't in the kitchen with them, I was at Grandma's playing cards. "

"Ah, now it all makes sense," I joke.

She smirks. "Yep. You've uncovered all my secrets."

"I take it your parents don't have a restaurant anymore? You used past tense."

"They closed it down when I finished college. Actually, it was my idea. The hours were crazy, and it was getting more and more difficult to make a good living between the rent, supplies, energy costs, and staff wages. Instead, we opened a catering business together."

I do a double take. "Wow, really? How did I not know that about you?"

"It was before Marissa moved to New York and suggested we start a business together. I always knew I wanted to be an entrepreneur, just like my parents. That's why I majored in business."

"That's amazing. So, they're running the catering biz alone now?"

“Yeah. I transitioned little by little as Marissa and I were getting the coffee shop up and running, and then I transitioned to full-time. Although If they have a big event, I still help out.”

“So, I take it you’re an excellent cook as well?”

She chuckles, her cheeks flushing pink. “Maybe.”

“Looks like I really won the lottery with my new roommate,” I tease, bumping my shoulder with hers.

“What about you? Was it always going to be hockey?”

“Pretty much,” I say with a grin. “I grew up just outside Chicago, so it’s practically in my blood. There was a small lake—well, more like a pond—in our backyard, and I’d skate there for hours and hours. We also had hockey in PE, and the rest is history.”

“How amazing that your work is your passion.”

“It is amazing. We’re both lucky in that department, I guess,” I say as we turn onto Warlington Lane.

With the weather being so nice, the small pedestrian street is bustling today.

Mrs. Edibam has a display of flowers outside, the door of the barber shop is propped open, and Mr. Darcy, the bookstore cat, is lounging in the sun.

“Well, this is me,” she says, tucking a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Thanks for walking with me.”

“My pleasure. That was pretty much my exercise for the day, so I should be thanking

you.” I give her a curt bow.

She chuckles, and I don’t think I’ll ever get over that sound.

“What time do you finish?” I ask, swaying on my feet. “I could go crazy and walk you home—double my steps for the day.”

Her smile widens. “I’m going to close, so six—well, six-thirty because I have to clean up.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up then.”

A light breeze frees her hair from her face, and I’m suddenly reminded how beautiful she is.

“Listen, James.” She clears her throat. “I just want to say, I’m beyond grateful for you giving me a place to stay, but I meant what I said the other night.

” She swallows hard, avoiding my gaze. “I’m not ready to jump back into a relationship, and I’m not sure I ever will be.

I really don’t want to lead you on or give you any false—”

“Whoa, whoa.” My eyes widen at the realization of what she’s trying to say.

“What is this about? No, you’re not leading me on,” I say, giving her an earnest look.

“I’m just glad I can help you, and frankly, it’ll be nice to have the company, especially now that hockey is out of the picture.

” I take a deep breath, leaning against the wall.

“I don’t know what kind of movies you’re into, Elizabeth.

But this is not that type of arrangement. ”

She swats me on the chest. “Shut up.”

“Seriously, though. I’m just glad I can help out. We’re friends, right?”

She gives me a firm nod, her gray eyes softening. “Yes, we are.”

“As for the rest,” I say, tilting my head with a smile, “I’m a patient man.”

A shadow falls over her eyes as she says, “And what if I never get there?”

I shrug, smiling. “Then, friends.”

“Friends,” she repeats, almost in a whisper.

“Um, okay then,” I say, clearing my throat and averting my gaze. I need some breathing room, or I might do a very unfriendly thing, like pin her against the wall and kiss her senseless. “See you later, Elizabeth.” I turn on my heel to walk away.

“You know,” she calls, and I turn back around. “All my friends call me Beth.”

I fight a smile and pretend to think it over. “Nah. I like Elizabeth better.”

Her shoulders drop, and she chuckles. “See you.”

It takes everything in me to turn back around and walk away, but I have to. Baby steps. Plus, I meant what I said. I’d settle for friendship if that’s all she can ever give me. Which is why I need to learn to keep it together. For my own sanity.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"I've never seen a kitchen make a girl blush that hard before."

Beth Bowen

When I push open the door to Rise & Grind, I find Marissa leaning over the counter, wearing a full grin—Cheshire cat style. "Look who has a personal bodyguard now."

"I think the word you're looking for is friend ," I say, unable to suppress my smile as I think about the talk I just had with James.

"Suurrre. If that's what you're going with."

"I mean it , Marissa. There's nothing else going on between us. I'm not ready for a relationship. Definitely not with a hockey player. And especially not with James Adler. "

She arches an eyebrow. "What's wrong with James Adler?"

I avoid her gaze as I walk behind the counter. "Well, James Adler is just—he's just too— hot ." And so are my cheeks as the confession spills from my lips.

She lets out a loud snort. "Yeah, 'cause that's a huge problem. Also, why are we using his full name?"

The bell on the door jingles, and the expression "saved by the bell" never made so much sense.

“ Bonjour! ” Alice gushes, marching in with Emma.

“Hey, guys. What’s up?” I ask, tying my apron on.

“Nothing much,” Alice says, walking in. “We just had a spicy lunch, so now we need some sweet treats.”

Emma nods, her black fringe bouncing with the movement. “And coffee.”

Marissa and I both chuckle. “Of course,” she says. “I’ll get right on it.”

“What about you?” Emma asks, leaning her elbow on the counter while Alice perches on the stool. “What’s got you so worked up, Beth? Oh, by the way, how’s James?”

I really wish I could control the blush that’s spreading over my cheeks right now.

“James Adler is too hot ,” Marissa says, turning around as she grabs a cup. “That’s what’s up.”

“Marissa!” I scold.

“What! It’s true, isn’t it?” she says with a smirk.

Emma nods, lacing her fingers. “I mean, I’m very happy with Auston . . .”

“And me with Deacon,” Alice continues, her brown eyes sparkling like they do every time we discuss relationships—or Deacon. “But yeah, James Adler is particularly handsome.”

“Why is that a problem?” Emma asks.

Alice brings her brown hair into a ponytail. “Or in any way related to his well-being?”

“It’s not,” I blurt out. “James is okay.”

“And Beth spent the night at his place,” Marissa sings, her pitch matching the ambiance music.

“Ohhh!” Alice and Emma both say. “I approve!” Alice adds.

I groan. “It’s not like that. I only offered to watch him so he could be released from the hospital,” I say before turning the faucet on to wash my hands.

“That’s nice of you,” Emma says. With a smirk, she adds, “I’m sure it was a real sacrifice.”

I just roll my eyes. “What kind of pastries do you guys want?” I swing around to face them. “We have—”

“And he walked her here,” Marissa continues.

I give her a pointed look. “He just wanted to be nice and get some fresh air.”

“She argues they’re just friends,” Marissa sighs, looking at the girls and shaking her head dramatically.

“Yeah, we’ve heard that one before, right Marissa?” Emma puffs out a laugh, and everyone follows—including me, although I recover quickly, realizing it’s not helping my case.

I clear my throat. “Anyway, it’s not the same with me and James. He and I haven’t

been friends for years with all that pent-up tension boiling between us. So anyway, the pastries?" I ask again, tapping the pastry tong against the display window.

"Touché," Marissa says, her eyes on me. "But when are we going to talk about the fact that you're moving in with him?"

"What!" Emma and Alice both practically shout while Marissa turns to grab Emma's cup.

I guess the pastries are a no-go. I turn to Marissa with a wince, setting the tongs down on the counter. "Aaron told you?"

She grins. "He texted the moment you left."

I let out a sigh, bracing myself on the counter behind me. "It just makes more sense, that's all. You and Aaron are still in your honeymoon phase, and James appreciates the company. And his kitchen is amazing."

"Oh, so that's why you moved in?" Emma says with a smirk. "The kitchen."

"Not the abs?" Alice teases, twirling the end of her ponytail.

"Guys, come on," I growl, my voice loud enough to cover their laughter. "Stop it."

Emma nods, staring at me with a sweet smile. "Fine, but just FYI, I've never seen a kitchen make a girl blush that hard before."

"Okay, switching the subject," Alice says. "He is really okay, right? How long is he out for?"

"A few weeks, and yeah, he's doing well. Some swelling, but he'll be all right."

“Good.” She nods. “Give him our best.”

“What was that all about, anyway?” Emma asks, wrapping her hands around her cup of coffee. “We saw the replay. It was brutal.”

A shiver courses through me. “Yeah, it was.”

“Those guys were at each other’s throat all night,” Alice continues.

My blush betrays me again.

“Ohhhhh!” they both blurt, realization seeming to dawn on them.

Yep, here we go.

“Wait,” Marissa says, her blue eyes studying me. “Is this really because of what happened between you and Lucas? Was James, like, retaliating because Lucas cheated on you?”

I wring my hands in front of me. Might as well come clean now.

It’s not like it can get any worse. “Not exactly. Lucas came here the night before the game, when I was closing. He was insistent and grabbed my wrist,” I say, showing them the remnant of the pink mark lacing my wrist. “James saw it the next morning, put two and two together, and used the game as a chance to go after him.”

“Whoa,” Alice breathes out.

“See?” Marissa says, shaking her head. “The whole friends thing isn’t going to cut it.”

“Exactly. The guy ended up in the hospital for you,” Alice says, probably swooning over his grand gesture or whatever. This girl is way too romantic.

I cross my arms in front of me. “Well, I didn't ask him to.”

“I mean,” she continues, “we always knew he had a thing for you. It's not like it's a secret. But this is definitely next level, right?”

“Definitely,” Emma and Marissa agree.

“Touch Her and Die vibes, for sure,” Emma adds.

I arch an eyebrow. “Isn't that a little dramatic?”

She flicks her hair. “You know me. Queen of Drama. I am a dark romance gal, after all.”

Marissa and Alice both chuckle, and I let my gaze drift, trying to make sense of all the emotions whirling in my head. Is it really that different from his usual playful flirting? I guess it is a step up. But if that's the case, could it be more than just a little crush for him?

His words from earlier echo in my head. “I'm a patient man.”

Part of me wishes I could just see where this leads us.

Let myself fall for another man. Another hockey player.

But I can't. I'd never feel secure with James.

He's ten times the flirt Lucas is, and look where that got me.

He hugs every fan who asks, and even if it's a sweet gesture, and I love that about him, I'd never be able to fully trust him.

I wasn't exaggerating earlier. I don't know if I'll ever be ready for another relationship, and that scares me.

And if I do ever get there, will he still be waiting?

I'm sweeping the floor when a knock raps at the door. The noise startles me, despite the loud music I have blasting on the speakers. When I turn around, I see James with a bright smile on his face. I pause the music and unlock the door.

"Hey. I'm not done yet."

"No worries," he says, squeezing through the doorframe. "I know I'm early. Walked as slowly as I could," he jokes.

"How was your day?" I ask, locking the door behind him. I've learned my lesson.

"Meh. Saw my housekeeper for the third time in five years. Played video games with the guys. Ran some errands."

"Slow day?" I say with a smile.

He nods. "Slow day. Can I help you? I could use the cardio."

"You're supposed to be resting."

"I can sweep a floor, Elizabeth. When they say 'no exercise,' they're talking to regular people, not athletes. This is peanuts to me."

I chew my bottom lip, then nod. “Okay. You take the broom. I’ll clean the espresso machine.”

“Perfect. And feel free to turn that music back on.”

I grin, pressing play on my phone before getting started on the machine.

After a few minutes, I hear James singing, his voice getting louder and louder.

I turn around, and there he is, singing with the broom as a microphone.

He’s swaying to the music with all his heart, not caring if anyone outside witnesses his impromptu concert.

Actually, bystanders would probably be into it, screaming his name at the top of their lungs as if he were a rockstar.

That’s the James effect for you. An instant magnet with the ultimate charisma.

“Come on,” he shouts, a smile lighting up his face. “This would be even better as a duet.”

Chuckling, I turn back to the machine, continuing my task. “You’re insane.”

He keeps going, singing at the top of his lungs and changing the lyrics to “She’s so mean, letting me sing on my own. She doesn’t want to have fun, doesn’t want to release the pressure.”

I do my best to withhold my laughter, but he keeps going, and I eventually crack. Finally, I sing, matching his volume, and he stops. I wheel around, grabbing a bottle of water from the counter to act as my microphone.

James chuckles, his eyes sparkling as he points at me and continues to belt out the lyrics like we're singing a duet.

I go along, because frankly, he 's right. It's super fun, and it's been a while since I've let loose like this, or even danced at all.

The song ends, and the next one begins. It's one of my favorites, so I up my moves, making him laugh even harder. He matches my energy, and we just keep dancing and singing until the end of the song. By now, I'm out of breath, catching the counter for support.

"Man, you weren't kidding about the cardio," I joke. "It's been a while."

Of course, James isn't out of breath or dripping with sweat like I am. "Got to keep in shape. I'm thinking we do this every day, and my training will be complete."

I laugh. "Who knew pro-athlete training was that easy?"

"Well, if everyone was in on the secret . . ." he trails off, leaning against the wall.

"Good point. Well, let's finish up, because I do need a shower now," I joke, walking back behind the counter to finish cleaning the machine.

"Another shower! My water bill will be through the roof. This girl is going to ruin me," he teases.

I turn to give him a pointed look. "Too late. You can't take it back. I'm staying."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," he says, and I'm suddenly relieved I have my back to him, because I'm blushing hard. And not because of the exercise.

We finish cleaning, sans the cardio workout, then walk back to the apartment.

“Oh, by the way,” he says as we’re turning off Warlington Lane. “The guys just texted. They want to go out for dinner tonight before they hit the road. The girls are going, and you’re invited too.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised to be invited. I know they go out to dinner sometimes with Marissa and Hayley, but I usually don’t tag along. Well, I was mostly with Lucas or at home watching his games.

“But obviously,” he continues, “you don’t have to come. Just because we live together doesn’t mean we need to have the same plans.” He scratches his temple. “You’re free to do whatever, but I just thought I’d ask.”

A warmth spreads through my chest. For the first time ever, James Adler isn't full of confidence and hotter than the sun itself. He’s awkward and cute. And for some reason, that’s even more intimidating—and charming.

With a smile, I glance up at him. “Eating out sounds fun.”

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"We're not supposed to flirt, remember?"

James Adler

Once we're home and Elizabeth takes a shower—even though she smelled heavenly, like cookies and cinnamon rolls—we meet with Marissa and Aaron in our residence parking lot.

Together, we drive to Monsieur Leon, a restaurant we often frequent together.

It's a French restaurant Beaumont discovered earlier this year and declared it to be our new food headquarters.

I can't believe Elizabeth isn't a typical part of these dinners. Usually, it's just Miles, Hawthorne, Beaumont, Marissa, Hayley, and me. Wally, if we're lucky.

Having her with us tonight feels right, like I'm one step closer to getting everything I've ever wanted.

But I know I shouldn't get my hopes up. I need to accept the fact that we might only ever be friends.

I'd be lying if I said it was easy for me, but if friendship is all I can get, that's what I'll settle for.

Still, I'm hoping that with time she'll heal and see that I can be good for her.

We arrive at the restaurant and sit down at our usual table.

It's tucked away in a secluded part of the restaurant, which allows us to eat in peace.

Because, yes, even when we're eating, fans interrupt us to ask for selfies.

While most of the time we're happy to oblige, dinner isn't the best time.

We're hockey players. You don't mess with our food.

The waitress hands us our menus, and Beaumont shows off by pronouncing every word à la française.

"It's Quiche Lorraine ," he says with that French flair, and everyone laughs.

"Qweesh lorraine," I say, trying to articulate.

He chuckles. "Nope. Quiche ."

"Pretty sure it'll taste the same," I shoot back, shaking my head.

"Um, definitely not," he says , and I swat the air in dismissal. The French sure are weird with their food.

"So," Hawthorne begins with his deep captain's voice, "did you enjoy your day off, Adler?"

I grin. "You bet! Right up until I had to see your sorry faces," I joke. "I wasn't yelled at by Coach, didn't have to share the smelly locker room with you guys, and I ran some errands—it was a dream come true."

“And don’t forget getting your butt kicked at NHL Master,” Miles chimes in, flashing a smile.

I roll my eyes. “Only because of my head injury.” I cast a glance at Elizabeth, who’s watching with amusement. “Oh, and I helped out with the end-of-day cleaning at Rise & Grind.”

Beaumont claps his hands loudly. “Great. Now you have a back-up plan in case your injuries never heal.”

“You wish. You think I’d let you have the winger spotlight all to yourself? Don’t count on it. No matter the number of games I’m out, I’ll still beat all your stats. Just like I did last year.”

Everyone laughs.

“So, you helped Beth clean tonight?” Marissa says, twirling the end of her strawberry-blond hair. “That’s interesting.”

Elizabeth tenses next to me. I do n’t know if I’m hallucinating because of the meds I’m taking but I’m pretty sure, she just kicked Marissa under the table.

I don’t have time to figure out what this is about because the waitress comes to take our drink order.

Once she leaves again, Hawthorne leans forward. “When will you know exactly how long you’re out for?” he asks, true to his duty as captain.

“Honestly, I’m still not sure. Coach called me today.

Apparently, he set up a meeting with the team docs next week for a checkup, but their

initial guess was four to eight weeks, so we'll see.

I can't exercise for the next two weeks, but after that, I'll build an off-ice routine and take it from there.

"I don't know if it's because I'm speaking about it, but my face suddenly hurts like the dickens.

"Crap, that's a long time," Miles breathes out.

"We'll miss you on the road, for sure," Hawthorne adds. "It won't be the same without you."

"Yeah," Beaumont says, wrapping his arm around Hayley. "But probably not as much as the female population will miss you."

Everyone chuckles, and I just roll my eyes. "Guess we'll see if you're still able to fill an entire arena without me in the lineup."

Miles slaps my back, and I hold back a wince at the shooting pain it triggers. "I don't think you've ever been injured this badly before, bro. Have you?"

"Nope." I force a big smile. "First time. Hopefully, you'll manage without me. I know, it's going to be tough to win and have fun out there, but I have faith in you."

"Did we say we were going to miss him?" Beaumont cocks his head playfully, looking around. "I don't think that's what we meant."

I know they're just kidding around, but it does sting that I won't be there for the away games.

Though as an NHL player with almost ten years under my belt, it's a miracle I've never been out this long before.

Sure, I've had sprained wrists and knocked-out teeth, but I was never out for more than a game or two, and I never missed an away trip.

Unfortunately, when you're not playing, you have no reason to hit the road.

So it's going to be weird to sit this one out.

"I'll miss your energy on the ice, for sure," Marissa says with a wink.

"Yeah," Hayley adds. "You know how to make the fans laugh, and your upbeat attitude is contagious."

"Thanks, ladies," I grin, then look to Elizabeth, who offers a soft smile.

"We should kick LA's ass, no problem," Miles says. "Even without you, Adler."

"Vegas is going to be tougher, though," Hawthorne adds, taking a sip of his drink. "Their goalie is really good."

"And their D is strong," Miles adds. "Breaking into it is going to be a challenge."

They start talking hockey, and I find myself drifting from the conversation, listening instead to what the girls are discussing.

Their quieter voices make it easier to focus with my head throbbing.

It's weird, but I really don't want to talk hockey tonight.

It just feels like it's not my world anymore, and that sucks.

I meet Elizabeth's gaze, and she frowns, a hint of a question in her eyes, as if she's wondering if I'm okay.

I ignore the pounding in my head and flash her my signature smile. After a moment, she nods, looking back at the girls.

The rest of the night passes pretty fast, and despite how bittersweet our time together is, I enjoy being with my friends.

I appreciate it even more since I won't be seeing them for an entire week.

The only problem is, my head feels like a pressure cooker, and I chide myself again for not bringing my meds.

Finally, the night comes to an end, and I hug each of them in turn in the restaurant parking lot.

I'm both sad to see them go and eager to get home at the same time.

"Later, man," Hawthorne says, wrapping me in a tight bear hug. "Take care of yourself, okay?"

"Watch us on TV," Beaumont adds before slapping my back.

I force myself to smile, but this goodbye hurts as much as my face does. These guys are my family. They're all I've got. It may sound cheesy as heck, and I'm never going to admit it to them, but it's the truth. And it sucks to see them go.

Marissa, Miles, Elizabeth, and I drive back together, and when the elevator stops at

their place, Miles gives me a hug too.

“Kick some butt out there, okay, bro?” I say, tapping his back.

He nods. “And you get well.”

I offer a tight smile. “I will.”

Marissa waves at us as the elevator closes, and I suck in a small intake of breath.

“Are you okay?” Elizabeth asks, glancing at me with concern in her eyes.

I frown, staring at the floor of the elevator. “Yeah, of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t know. Saying goodbye, missing out on your first road games . . . I’m guessing it’s not easy for you.”

I run a hand through my hair. “It’s fine. I’m glad for the time off. I’ve been working since I was eighteen years old, so it’s a nice change of pace.”

She studies me for a second as the elevator stops. “Okay. Just wanted to check. If you need to talk, I’m here.”

“Thanks,” I say, touched by the sincerity in her voice. No one has had my back in a long time, at least not in my personal life. This is a nice change of pace.

“Don’t forget to take your meds,” she says as we enter my apartment.

I chuckle. “Yes, Nurse Elizabeth.”

She spins to face me. “James!”

“Sexy Nurse Elizabeth?” I suggest, arching an eyebrow.

She sighs. “You’ve got to stop saying stuff like that. If we want this living situation to work, you have to tone down the flirting.”

I crease my forehead. “What? That’s hardly flirting. It’s teasing at best.”

She pins me with a stare. “James, I mean it.”

My shoulders fall. “Fine. I won’t flirt with you anymore.”

“Great,” she says, flashing a big smile before taking off her shoes.

I follow suit, then stretch my arms. As I do, a shooting pain radiates through my face, and I wince before stumbling slightly. I hold the wall for support, steadying myself before she catches my reaction. Last thing I want is to be a burden or a Debbie Downer.

“James, you’re not okay,” she says, her voice laced with panic.

Too late.

She rushes to me, then takes me by the arm, guiding me to the kitchen stool. “What’s going on? Should I call the doctor?” She studies me, her face tense with worry. “I knew you were doing way too much today. I read online that concussions, even mild ones, require a lot of rest and supervision.”

I take her hand, touched that she took the time to research my injury, even if all this fretting is totally unnecessary. “I’m okay. Just maybe grab me an ice pack along with those meds? I feel like my head is going to explode.”

She stares at me for a second, probably debating whether or not to call the doctor.

“I promise I’m fine. I just skipped my last round of meds, and the guys really like to slap my back.” I wince at the reminder.

Her face twitches. “Right. Hopefully, it’ll take some of that swelling down. You look like an eleph—”

“What! Why didn’t you say anything earlier?” My eyes fly wide.

I push the chair back, eager to check the mirror, but Elizabeth’s giggles mix with the scrape of the chair.

“Are you pulling my leg again? You’re mean. How did I not notice that about you before?”

She only laughs harder, clutching her stomach.

“You look so sweet, with your blonde hair, pretty eyes, and perfect smile, but underneath that, you’re a meany.”

She bubbles another laugh. “Sorry, I couldn’t help myself. You’re fine. You’re great. You look—yeah, I’ll grab the ice pack.”

She hands me my meds before pulling the ice pack from the freezer. As she passes it to me, our fingers brush. I swear, the heat coursing through me right now could melt the pack in seconds. Our eyes meet, and the intensity in her gaze tells me she felt the same sensation.

I open my mouth to speak, then close it right away.

She frowns. “What is it?”

“Nothing,” I say, my eyes flitting away before returning to hers.

The intensity in her gaze deepens. “Tell me.”

“We’re not supposed to flirt, remember?”

Her face flushes a deep red, and she clears her throat. “Well, I’m off to bed. I’ll check on you a few times throughout the night to make sure you’re okay, if that’s all right with you.”

I nod, a small smile pulling at my lips. “That’s perfectly reasonable.”

Her eyes linger for a moment. “Have a good night.”

“See you tomorrow, Elizabeth. Sleep tight.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"You have to wear my jersey. "

Beth Bowen

I first had an inkling after our dinner at Monsieur Leon, and I'm sure of it now: James is not well, and it's deeply troubling to see him so down.

He's usually full of life, goofy and fun, but I haven't really heard him laugh in days.

The last time he cracked a joke was a week ago.

It doesn't help that a couple of nights ago was Miles' birthday, and they video chatted.

The team and their girls were all getting ready to go out to dinner since it was a night off.

And even if James said he was fine, I can see that the light in his eyes has dimmed.

He may be taking it easy physically, but his mental health is suffering, I can tell.

I know it's technically not my fault that he's in this situation. But at the same time, it kind of is, and I really hate what it's done to him.

He's now sitting at the kitchen counter, eating the muffins I just brought back from work in an attempt to cheer him up. But so far, it's not working.

“Excited for the guys to come back tomorrow?” I ask between bites. “Are you going to the game?”

He shrugs. “Honestly, I don’t know. It’s weird enough to watch them on TV, and it would probably be even weirder in real life. I might just sit this one out.”

My heart aches because I know how much hockey means to him, but clearly, it’s starting to weigh on his mental well-being. “Oh. I guess it’s a bad time to ask you for a favor then?” I venture, suddenly feeling inspired.

He frowns in confusion, his curiosity piqued. “What is it?”

“Well, my dad’s birthday is coming up, and I wanted to surprise him with tickets, but maybe I can just ask—”

“Your dad’s a Raptors fan?”

I nod. “Yep. Always has been.” Which is why I suspect he never liked Lucas, or made a real effort to get to know him.

A small spark lights up James’ eyes, and it warms my chest. “Well, that changes things. We should definitely go to the game and show him a good time. I could take him behind the scenes, and he can meet the guys. We’ll grab seats in the VIP suite. That’s always fun.”

“Really?” I lean forward, happy my idea is working. It’s great that he’s been taking it easy this past week, but all the down time messes with his mood. We have to find a balance. “Isn’t that too much?”

He finishes his muffin and shrugs. “Piece of cake. Will your mom come too?”

“If she can, yeah. That’d be great.”

“Awesome. I’ll text Jenna, our PR manager,” he says as he gets up to rinse his plate. He turns to me with an intense glint in his eyes. “There’s just one condition.”

I cock my head to the side, a grin tugging at my lips. “And what’s that?”

He flashes a bright smile. “You have to wear my jersey.”

I press my lips, struggling to contain my own smile. “Fine. It’s a deal.”

As soon as he turns back to the sink, an elated smile stretches across my face. I must say, I’m proud of myself for crafting this plan. But most of all, I’m glad that James Adler is back.

The next day, James wakes up early. He even sings in the shower again. Seeing him back to his old self eases my worry a little. He told me he’ll take care of everything today, including getting me my own Number 8 jersey.

When I reach the coffee shop and tell Marissa about it, however, she immediately eyes me with suspicion.

“Why did you ask him? You know I could have gotten you the same deal.”

“I know, but it was a spur-of-the-moment thing, and he was there. Don’t read too much into it.” I sigh. “Besides, he needed it. It’s been hard on him, being away from the game and the guys.”

“Oh,” she says with a frown. “I didn’t realize that. I don’t think the guys have either. He looked fine when Aaron chatted with him on the video call.” Marissa traveled with the team for a few games to be there on Aaron’s birthday.

“Please don’t say anything,” I beg. “I don’t think he wants the guys to know, but yeah, it’s been rough. Talking about surprising my dad seemed to help, though. He’s excited for it.”

“Good,” she says quietly, probably worrying over James. “I won’t tell Aaron, I promise, but I’m glad he’ll be back for a while. Looks like his friend needs him.”

“Thanks.”

Her face brightens slightly as she asks, “So, does your dad know yet?”

“Nope.” I smile. “We’re going full surprise mode on him. We’re meeting my parents at a restaurant not far from the arena. He thinks we’re eating there.”

“Ohh, nice. They’re going to love James, I’m sure. They’re goofy like him.”

I can’t fight my grin. “Yeah. That’s what I thought too.”

“What about you?” She arches an eyebrow.

I give her a pointed look. “Nothing has changed. We’re still friends, and I like it that way. Honestly, he’s the perfect roommate. And I love cooking in his kitchen, so it’s a win-win.”

I return to my batch of brownies, happy she’s not pressing the issue further. Frankly, I haven’t given our relationship much thought lately. With James being so down, it wasn’t really on my mind. Not to mention I still have trust issues to overcome before I can even think about dating anyone else.

"I don't need the Raptors gear. I am one."

James Adler

I love making people happy. Whether it's signing a kid's jersey, giving a hug, helping someone propose, or crafting the perfect birthday surprise. It's in those moments that I feel most like myself. And if it involves Elizabeth Bowen, well, that's just the cherry on top.

"Come on, we've got to go," I say, adrenaline pumping in my veins as I wait for Elizabeth in the living room.

"Hold your horses, I'm here," she says, stepping into the room. When I turn to see her, she takes my breath away. She's wearing a pair of jeans with a women's version of my jersey.

With a smile, she gives me a little twirl, and I get shivers when I see my name spelled on her back. "I think red and black is definitely more my color," she teases.

I blow out a breath. "One hundred percent. I've been wanting to see you wear my jersey since the first time I laid eyes on you."

Her arms fall to her sides as she gives me a scolding look. "James, we said no flirting."

"What do you expect?" I say, taking a step back. "You've got my jersey on. I get a free pass."

She blushes, looking down at her shirt, then back at me. “Wait, what about you? Why are you not wearing your jersey—or any Raptors merch for that matter?”

I look down at my black T-shirt and jeans. “I’ll wear the cap. But I don’t need the Raptors gear. I am one.” I wink.

Rolling her eyes, she turns around. “Come on, let’s go, Raptor.”

I try to make the velociraptor sound they play at the games when we score, but I don’t think it lands, because I don’t get so much as a giggle. Much less a laugh.

I’m grabbing my keys from the entrance bowl when she turns around to look at me. “Wait, was that supposed to be the Raptors sound?”

I wince. “Gotta work on that, huh?”

She giggles, opening the door. “Yeah, a little bit.”

As we drive to the rendezvous point where we’re meeting her parents, my excitement grows by the minute.

Most guys would be nervous about meeting the in-laws—well, you know what I mean—but not me.

Sure, the fact that they’re not technically my in-laws—yet—probably helps.

But I’m also just eager to meet them and see who raised this amazing human being named Elizabeth Bowen.

I’m also kind of excited for some hockey time, even if I won’t be on the ice.

Sharing my passion with like-minded people, especially as a surprise, is going to be a treat.

When I park near the restaurant, I recognize them instantly. Sure, they're the only two people standing on the sidewalk seemingly waiting for someone, but I also see the resemblance. Elizabeth has the same face shape and hair color as her mom, and those icy gray eyes obviously come from her dad.

He wrinkles his forehead as we're approaching, and I detect the exact moment he recognizes me, because he does a double take, and his eyes widen like two pucks. "Holy—what?"

"Happy birthday, Dad," Elizabeth gushes, chuckling as she takes him into her arms for a hug.

"Hi, Mom," she says, hugging her next. Both women are wearing the same elated expression as they look at her dad. "Dad, Mom, meet James Adler."

He just shakes his head in disbelief. "Nice to meet you, James. I can't believe this."

We shake hands, and his grip is firm but not intimidating. I immediately like him.

"Likewise, sir. Happy birthday."

"Please," he says, waving a hand. "Call me Richard."

"And I'm Pam," Elizabeth's mom says, taking a step toward me.

"So nice to meet you," I say, flashing my best smile as I shake her hand.

"Well—whoa," Richard breathes out, still gaping at me in disbelief. "I knew my

daughter had some kind of connection with the Raptors, but not the eating-out-together kind.” He blows out a laugh. “How are you doing, by the way? That was a nasty hit you took.”

“I’m on the mend, sir. Thanks for asking.”

“And you’re wrong, Dad,” Elizabeth says, wincing. There she goes again. Miss meany girl. Although, this time, it’s actually really funny. “We’re not going out to dinner together.”

Richard frowns, glancing between us. “We’re not?”

I look at Elizabeth, then nod. “We thought you’d like to go to a hockey game instead,” I say, placing my hands in my pockets. “But it’s your call.”

He bellows a loud laugh, and I can’t help but smile. “You two! And you,” he says with an accusatory look at his wife, who’s all smiles.

I arch an eyebrow. “Is that a yes on the hockey?”

“Heck yes it is,” he says, giving me a high-five.

“Let’s go then,” Elizabeth says, her eyes sparkling brighter than ever.

We walk to the arena, blending in with the sea of hockey fans and merchandising vendors outside. No one even spares us a second glance. I guess you wouldn’t expect a hockey player to be walking alongside you on your way to a game—even an injured one.

“Oh, we’re using the players’ entrance,” Richard says with awe as we pass through the first gate using my badge.

It's strange. I thought I'd feel a weight on my shoulders or a shroud of disappointment coming here tonight, but truth be told, I'm still loving every second.

"You're getting the VIP treatment tonight." I smile, leading them toward the second door. There, we meet Clay, the security agent.

"Good to see you, man," he says to me, shaking my hand. "How are you feeling?"

"Peachy." I flash a smile. "Should be back on the ice in no time. Coming as a fan today, and I've got some friends with me."

He nods to them in greeting. "Sounds good. Have a good night, folks."

We continue inside. It's not as sleek and pretty as the lobby or concourse, but Richard and Pam are all "oh" and "wow" as we make our way through.

We stop by the PR office, where we talk to Jenna and grab the VIP lanyards she set aside for them.

"Do you also want some merch?" she asks, scrutinizing me, as if I'm a disappointment to the brand, only wearing a cap.

I chuckle. "I'm good, but definitely some for our friends."

"I already have mine," Elizabeth says, opening her coat to reveal her jersey.

"Okay." Jenna nods. "Let's see what we can find."

We follow after her to a room full of Raptors merch, and she tells Pam and Richard to help themselves to whatever they want. Being modest, they only take a single jersey each, and I grin when I notice it's mine.

“You should also grab a cap,” I tell Richard. “They’re super comfortable.”

He chuckles, and Jenna hands him one.

“No one else?” She glances at Elizabeth and me.

I roll my eyes. “Fine, give me one of those Raptors pins.”

Jenna’s eyes light up. “The one with the flashing light and sound effect?”

I nod, and Elizabeth chuckles. “Oh, yeah. He needs to work on his raptor call.”

Jenna gives me the pin, and I secure it on my denim jacket. “All right, let’s get this show on the road.”

We continue our tour through the event level, and I have to stop every five seconds to say hello or chat with people. Most of them texted me this past week, but it’s nice to see their faces again, and to know that they’re genuinely happy to see me.

Finally, we reach a corner, and I stop. “I’ll be right back. Can you guys wait here?”

Elizabeth furrows her eyebrows, silently asking me what’s going on, but I just raise my index finger, begging them to hold on for just a second.

I follow the smell of dudes and hockey equipment until I reach the locker room. It’s weird to be here dressed in my normal clothes.

“Adler!” bellows Stan, the equipment manager, giving me a hug the moment I step into the room. That attracts everyone’s attention, and soon, they’re all huddled around me, slapping my back and shaking my hand. Thankfully, the hearty back slaps don’t come with a splitting headache this time around.

“James Adler is in the house,” Beaumont shouts, coming toward me with a big smile. He gives me a bro hug, then holds me at arm’s length. “Let me see, how’s that face healing up?”

I roll my eyes. “Still looking better than yours.”

Everyone laughs, including Beaumont. I move on to greet everyone else, and Miles gives me the longest hug, even though we literally just saw each other a few hours ago.

“Good to see you, man,” Hawthorne says, squeezing my shoulder.

“What are you doing back here?” Wally asks, already dressed in his goalie pads.

“Just wanted to see if you guys were decent. I have Elizabeth and her parents with me tonight.”

A chorus of “Ohhh!” fills the room.

Here we go.

“It’s her dad’s birthday. I’m just part of the surprise,” I say, as if I didn’t orchestrate the whole thing. If they knew, I’d never hear the end of it. “So keep your clothes on, and be on your best behavior.”

They all nod, laughing as I walk back to the end of the room. Once I return to the spot where I left my guests, I beckon them to join me.

“I thought it’d be fun to meet the team you’ll be rooting for tonight,” I say, a hand on my hip.

“Who?” Richard asks. “The Dallas Cheetahs?”

I look at him for a second, then burst into laughter. “Now I know where Elizabeth gets her sense of humor from.”

“I’m just pulling your leg, son.” He pats my arm, and my chest warms. Being called “son” when I’ve never had a dad is both foreign and strangely comforting.

“You call her Elizabeth, not Beth,” Pam muses, throwing me a soft but questioning look.

I rub the back of my neck. “Yeah. I just think her full name suits her better.”

Elizabeth’s smoldering eyes are fixed on me, and I avert my eyes. “Right this way.”

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"I'm pretty sure it's my name on your back."

Beth Bowen

James really thought of everything. My dad got his jersey signed by every player on the team, and now we're watching the warm-ups from the bench, right next to the coaches.

"Are you sure we're allowed to be here?" I whisper to James, feeling the eyes of the entire arena scorching into us.

I'm used to ice seats, but this is different.

It's the actual bench. There's no glass in front of us, and we can feel the speed of the players as they whiz past and cold air rushes over us.

"It's fine," he says with a smile. "Obviously, we're not going to watch the game from here. But since we'll be all the way up in the VIP section, I wanted your parents to get a taste of being close to the ice."

"More like on the ice," I joke.

He turns to me with a frown. "Are you scared you're going to catch a stray puck?"

I swallow. "No—does that happen?"

He bumps his shoulder with mine. "Highly unlikely. But don't worry. If it does come

flying, I'll catch it. The broken nose hasn't affected my reflexes."

I roll my eyes at his classic cockiness, and though I won't admit it to him, I'm glad it's back. My parents don't even notice our little exchange, completely enthralled by the warm-ups. Occasionally, the guys skate toward us to grab a drink or high-five my parents.

"So, how long are you out for?" Mom asks, looking at James. "Do you miss the game?"

He offers her a genuine smile, and my heart melts just a little. "A few weeks. And yeah, I do. It's definitely an adjustment, since hockey has been pretty much my entire life, but I'll be fine. Besides, with Elizabeth keeping me company, it'll go by in a flash."

My mom frowns in confusion, and it's like someone just pressed my face against the ice. Crap . Why didn't I think of this possibility? I haven't told them James was the friend I'm currently living with. I should have warned him ahead of time.

"What's that?" Dad chimes in, clearly paying more attention to our conversation than I was giving him credit for.

When I open my mouth, stammering, James glances at me, wearing the same confused look as my mom.

Finally, I croak out, "Um, I'm kind of staying with James until I find a place of my own." I deliberately avoid looking any of them in the eye, instead focusing on Noah Wilcott, who's blocking all the shots from the Raptors with dexterity and ease.

"Elizabeth," Mom says in that tone I know too well, and I know I'm in trouble.

“Sorry.” I wince. “I didn’t think it was a big deal. Rent near the coffee shop is expensive, and James offered to let me stay. I’ve been looking at places these past few days, but it’s not easy to find something that fits my budget.”

“And we’re just friends,” James adds, a hint of anxiety clouding his eyes as my dad’s face turns a dark red.

“Why didn’t you move back home?” Dad asks, his stern gaze focused on me. “You know you’re always welcome with us.”

“I know, Dad. But it’s so far from work.

I was staying with Marissa and Aaron for a while, but they’re newlyweds.

Plus, James couldn’t be discharged from the hospital without someone to look after him, so it just worked out.

Like he said, we’re good friends, and I have my own room,” I add quickly, feeling the clarification necessary.

“All right,” Mom says, surprising me. “That’s very kind of you, James.”

“Please, it’s nothing,” he replies, his shoulders relaxing. “I’m happy to help. And like I said before, it’s good for my mental health not to be alone when I’m out of the game.”

Luckily, my parents don’t push the subject. The warm-ups come to an end, and some of the guys stop by for one last hand shake. Hawthorne even gives my dad a puck as a souvenir.

Leaving the bench, we follow James to the event level again and up to the VIP

section.

As we approach the suite, a bunch of fans recognize James and clamor around him.

We pause so he can take a few selfies with them and, of course, give out a few of his world-famous hugs.

I can't help but feel a pang of jealousy when he hugs a pretty redhead.

I mean, sure, we are only friends—we've established that numerous times by now—but I have yet to receive a James Adler hug.

Although, it might be for the best. I'm not sure I'd survive having his strong arms wrapped around me.

Just like the redhead, who's two steps away from fainting on the floor.

We finally move on, and the VIP suite is fantastic. I can't believe I've never stepped foot in it. The space boasts a large buffet, a full bar, and a dining and lounge area, all decorated in red and black, of course.

"Whoa," I breathe out as we explore the sprawling suite. Everything looks so fancy, with leather lounge seats and marble accents. "How is it that I've never been here before?"

James swings to face me, his eyebrows furrowed. "Wait, really?"

"Never. We always have ice seats."

"I just assumed you'd come here before the game and during intermissions."

“Nope. I’m going to have a few words with Marissa and Hayley about this,” I say, my eyes scanning the space.

“It looks wonderful,” Mom gushes. A hostess comes to check our credentials before finding us a table. James shakes a few hands—and gives some more hugs—before we head to the buffet.

The number of choices is overwhelming with everything from salads to cooked-to-order steaks and pizza. I’ve already scoped out the pastry buffet for later.

My parents, who love food just as much as I do, are both ecstatic, their eyes sparkling as they load up their plates.

I walk back to the table first, and James is right behind me.

“Thanks again,” I say as he takes a seat to my left. “This is amazing. My parents are loving every minute.”

“You’re welcome.” His eyes crinkle with a smile. “They’re really nice people. Hope we win to make it a perfect night.”

Right, the game. With everything going on, I completely forgot about it.

My parents walk back to the table, their plates piled high, and sit across from us. As we enjoy our meal, they seize the opportunity to get to know James.

“So, where are you from, James?” Mom asks, forking a floret of broccoli.

“I’m from Chicago originally, but I moved around a lot for work before I eventually settled here with the Raptors a few years back.”

“No plans on leaving the city, then?”

He smiles, glancing at me. “Nop e. I love it here. As long as they want me, and I can be of service to the team, I’m staying.”

“You certainly bring a lot to the team,” Dad says with a look of admiration. “Heck of a player.”

“Have you ever played, Richard?”

Dad’s loud laughter garners some attention from the rest of the room. “Me? No. I was always happier behind a grill than on the ice—or any type of field.”

“Ah, yes,” James says. “Elizabeth told me you were both fantastic cooks, and that it’s where she got her talent from.”

They both look at me with pride in their eyes. “She’s doing amazing,” Mom says. “We’re so happy for her.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I say, reaching over the table and squeezing her hand.

“James,” she continues. “You should come to our house with Beth for dinner sometime. It’s the least we can do after everything you’ve done for us tonight.”

“Oh, Mom,” I say, shaking my head. What’s with this woman and her tendency to invite everyone she meets over for dinner? I guess it’s a sign that she likes James, but still. “I don’t—”

“I’d love to,” James says, flashing a bright smile.

Dad leans over t he table and slaps James’ back. “I’ll make my famous chili.”

Oh gosh.

“It’s been a while since you came over for dinner, Beth,” Mom says in a scolding tone, her eyes fixed on me. “It’ll be nice.”

Darn it. She got me with that one. Ever since Marissa and I opened Rise & Grind, I’ve been swamped with work, and as a result, I’ve been seeing them less and less.

Between their business and mine, it’s not easy to find time to get together.

So we mostly just text or call. “You’re right.

” I nod, giving her a soft smile. “It will.”

“When are you free?” Mom asks James and me.

“Any time works.” He leans back against his chair. “I have a lot of free time on my hands at the moment.”

“How about Saturday, then?”

“Sounds good,” James says, giving me a side glance. “It’s a date.”

My insides scorch, and my mouth goes dry. I want to tell him that he’s breaking the flirting rule again, but that might be hard to explain to my parents.

“Should we go find our seats?” Dad suggests. “I don’t want to miss the puck drop.”

James nods. “Absolutely.”

We make our way to the block of seats reserved for the VIP section. Correction, the

block of super comfy leather seats. Seriously, why don't we ever get these seats when we come to the games?

We're seated in the first row with an unobstructed view of the rink. It's different from the glass seats, but I like this elevated view, which lets us watch all the action happening on the ice at once.

Dad and James are deep into hockey talk, and as soon as the game starts, James commentates each play with eagerness and excitement, to my dad's utmost pleasure.

Maxime catches the puck and passes it to Caleb, who speeds towards the Texan gate. Everyone is on the edge of their seats as he sends it back to Maxime, who shoots but misses.

"Son of a teapot," James curses, bouncing his knees. "Should have passed it to Gurkie." John Gurk is the guy currently playing at James' position.

"Oh, it's not over," Dad says, pointing at the rink.

They're all scrambling in front of the net, and Maxime, Caleb, and John all raise their arms in celebration, indicating a goal. The air horn blares, followed by the Raptors screech, and James and I exchange a knowing look.

He presses on his pin to play the sound again. "Yes!" he says, clapping his hands.

"Hold on, what's happening there?" Mom mutters, a hint of worry in her tone.

Caleb and Maxime are arguing with one of the referees, the Cheetahs chiming in.

"Goal review," James whispers. "They're not sure it's legal."

“Oh no,” Mom whispers, and James’ knees start bouncing again, brushing against mine. I try to stay cool. It doesn’t help that they have heaters in this area, unlike the regular seats down below.

“What do you think?” I ask James.

He shakes his head. “Hard to tell from here. Wish I could see the tape.”

“That’s right. You always check the tape when there’s a goal review,” I say. “I’ve noticed that.”

He glances toward me, a hint of a smile on his lips. “You have, huh?”

I shrug. “Yeah. It made me curious. The other guys don’t do it.”

“I like to see what’s happening,” he says. “Those are always the longest minutes of the game. Plus, I have to start thinking of a retirement gig.” He grins, his knees still bouncing.

Finally, the referee skates to the center of the rink and extends one arm over his head, then points both arms toward the rink.

“Goal!” James bellows out, and he and my dad hug. “Let’s go,” he says, rubbing his hands. Then, glancing at me, he activates the Raptors pin again to make me laugh.

First intermission comes around, and my parents head to the restrooms together.

“Enjoying your night?” James asks me, bumping his shoulder with mine. “You’re kind of quiet.”

“What? Thought I’d be heckling the players or something?”

He chuckles, running a hand through his hair. “Something like that. You’re always so chatty, usually. I see you with the girls.”

I press my lips together. “You do? Shouldn’t you be paying attention to the ice?”

He smirks. “I can multitask.”

I shrug. “Well, you know how it is when us girls are together. Plus, Marissa is the heckler of our group.”

“Why does that not surprise me?” he says, chuckling. “Still, I thought you’d be more vocal, that’s all.”

“Well, it’s because my favorite player isn’t on the ice tonight,” I say, suddenly feeling brave. Although I’m really not sure where that came from.

“Favorite player, huh?” he asks, eyes lighting up. “I’m touched.”

“Who said I was talking about you?” I arch an eyebrow.

“I’m the only one out right now. Besides, I’m pretty sure it’s my name on your back.”

I bite my lip. “Yeah, it is. Don’t tell the other players.”

All of a sudden, a clamor erupts around us, and someone next to us points to the jumbotron. There we are, James and I talking. Then, the words “Lookalike Cam” appear, and an official NHL picture of James is displayed next to him, making everyone laugh.

“Oh, Ben’s being funny tonight,” James says, waving at the crowd, who cheer even louder before the video moves to a guy who looks a lot like Keanu Reeves.

My parents come back from the restrooms, and I take the opportunity to go as well—before Ben switches to the Kiss Cam and tries to be funny again.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Mom, you're not showing my—you're not showing James pictures of me naked."

James Adler

I've been feeling a lot better these past few days. I'm glad Elizabeth thought of me for her Dad's birthday surprise, because it was as much a treat for me as it was for him. I'm excited to see them again tonight, even if Elizabeth has tried to cancel twice already.

"Pretty house," I say to Elizabeth as we get out of the car. "I'm excited to see where you grew up."

She tilts her head to the side. "So that's why you were so eager to come tonight? To see my teenage bedroom?"

"And for the food." I flash her a grin before walking up the steps to the front door.

She mumbles something that sounds a lot like "unbelievable," then brushes past me, ringing the doorbell. Seconds later, the door swings open.

"Hello, you two!" Pam says, hugging each of us in turn. "It's so good to see you."

"Good evening, Pam. Thank you for the invitation. This is for you," I say, handing her a gift basket from my favorite home fragrance store.

"Wow," Pam says, peering at the contents of the basket in awe. "This looks amazing. Thank you."

“James is big on home fragrance,” Beth says matter-of-factly as she steps into the house to hug her dad.

Once they break their embrace, Richard and I shake hands. “Good to see you, son.”

My heart spikes at the nickname again. Not to mention, it’s been a while since I’ve been invited to a family gathering. Even if it’s small and casual, I love feeling like I’m part of the family.

“By the way,” Richard says in a low voice when the women retreat into the living room. “I never thanked you for smashing that jerk, Rogers. I know it cost you a few games, but I’m glad you did it. Never liked that prick.”

I press my lips together, struggling to hold back the huge smile building on my face. “You’re welcome.”

“Well, Beth,” Pam says from the other room. “Do you want to show James around?”

“It’s a small house,” Richard adds, shaking his head as we’re joining them. “I don’t think he’ll get lost, honey.”

She gives him a pointed look. “I know, but maybe he wants to know where the facilities are.”

“Oh, that’s a fair point,” he says firmly. “Chili.”

I nearly laugh, but I contain it the best I can.

Elizabeth catches it, and I can see she’s fighting a chuckle too. “All right.” She loops her arm around mine. “I’ll give you the grand tour. So, this is the main living area with the living and dining room, and the kitchen is back there,” she says, pointing to

the left.

“You have a lovely home,” I tell Pam and Richard, and they both beam. I mean it. The atmosphere is cozy and warm with the hardwood floors and furniture, patchwork throw pillows, and picture frames dotting the walls. Everything a family home should be.

“Sorry.” Elizabeth wrings her hands when we reach the entrance hallway. “My parents are a bit goofy. They’re—”

“Are you kidding? I love them. I have since the game.”

She smiles, then continues her tour, showing me the bathrooms and bedrooms. “And this is mine,” she says, opening the last door.

Curiosity piqued, I step inside. It’s very much an adult room—a bit generic, if I’m being honest. There’s a double bed, nothing on the walls, a bookcase, and a desk. “Uh. Not what I was expecting.”

“Oh,” she says, hands on her hips. “You were expecting My Little Pony and Barbie stuff everywhere?”

I turn and grin. “Or posters of your favorite boy bands.”

She chuckles, her cheeks tinting pink. “Sorry to disappoint, but I lived here for a few years after college, so we got rid of all that stuff.

“Darn it.” But I’m only half joking. It would have been interesting to see what kind of men she fantasized about when she was young.

I skim the bookshelf, looking for romance titles she might have enjoyed.

Hey, why not put all this free time to good use, right?

Unfortunately, they're mostly textbooks and horror, which won't help my case.

We make our way back to the dining room, grabbing our seats as Richard brings out the pot of chili.

The food is amazing. I already had high expectations, since they're in the food business, but this surpasses every one of them.

"It's delicious," I say, wiping my mouth. "Not too spicy. Just perfect."

"Thank you, dear," Pam says with a beaming smile.

"You should come back on Thursday," Richard says, taking a sip of water. "It's Roast Day. We have a special recipe that's to die for."

"Dad," Elizabeth starts, just as I knew she would. I don't know why she insists on keeping me away from them.

"I love roast," I say, spooning another bite of chili. "I'll be there."

"Lovely," Pam says, clasping her hands. Elizabeth just shakes her head, looking defeated.

We finish our chili, and after a glorious apple crumble for dessert, I even get to see some of Elizabeth's baby pictures.

"Mom, stop," Elizabeth pleads, pacing behind us. Pam, Richard, and I are sitting on the couch, the photo album spread on my lap. "It's embarrassing."

“Oh, don’t be silly,” she says, stroking one of the photos. “You were the cutest baby. Just look at those chubby thighs.”

“Hey, do you remember when . . .” Richard starts reminiscing with Pam, and I turn to Elizabeth.

“Truly adorable,” I tease.

She pins me with a stare, then mouths the word “flirting.”

I shake my head, point at the picture, and mouth “baby.”

“Oh, look!” Pam says, startling me. “She was the cutest baby in the bath. Her hair used to curl—”

“And, that’s enough,” Elizabeth bursts, walking around the couch to grab the album.

“Mom, you’re not showing my—you’re not showing James pictures of me naked.

” She hugs the album against her chest, probably afraid one of her parents will wrestle her for it.

Which, by the look on Pam’s face, isn’t that far-fetched.

“Oh, don’t make such a big deal about it,” Pam says with a sigh. “We can’t see anything embarrassing. Plus, you were six months old. It doesn’t look anything like that anymore—”

“Mom! Stop it.”

Covering up my chuckle with a cough, I finally say, “It’s all right, Pam. Thank you

for showing me all those beautiful pictures, but I don't want to invade Elizabeth's privacy any further."

"Thank you," Elizabeth breathes out, still hugging the album.

We spend the rest of the night with no more baby pictures, just good conversation, and it's exactly what I needed. A fun evening with people who don't care about my fame and money. We talk about Rise & Grind, and I love how proud they are of their daughter and her accomplishments.

When it's time to say goodbye, we leave with a large box of leftovers and long hugs that make me feel like I'm part of the family. I might linger a couple extra seconds on those hugs—after all, they're my favorite thing—to soak in all the family vibes I can get.

"That was fun," I say once we're in the car. "Your parents are great."

She buckles up. "Thanks. They are. I love them, even if they don't understand boundaries sometimes."

"Don't worry," I say with a chuckle as I put the car into drive. "I didn't see anything."

She wipes a hand over her forehead. "Phew!"

"And I'm excited for Roast Night. What can I bring—"

"Oh, no, you don't really have to come," she says, shifting in her seat. "Don't worry. I'll think of some excuse."

"And rob me of a home-cooked meal? I don't think so." I throw her a pointed look.

“Why are you so intent on keeping me away from your family?”

She arches an eyebrow. “Really? You still have to ask that after tonight?”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I think they’re amazing. They just love you, and they’re proud of you. That must feel nice.”

“It does. But I’m sure you know all about that. Your family must hold you to superstar standards, with all those trophies. And you’re one of the best players in the league.”

I grin. “Checking out my stats now, are you?”

She clears her throat. “No—I mean, I checked the other players’ stats too.”

I sigh, gripping the wheel a little tighter.

I want to tell her the truth, but there's this fear gnawing at me—that once I say it, she'll see me differently.

I’m the goofy guy, the one who cracks jokes and makes light of serious situations.

Despite my reservations, I decide to go for it.

Elizabeth and I are close now, and opening up to her just feels .

. . right. “Actually, I don’t really have a family anymore.

My dad bailed on my mom before I was born.

My mom followed suit soon after, running after him.

Even before that, she was never big on having a kid and would leave me alone for hours. ”

A shadow falls over Elizabeth’s face. “Oh, James. I’m so sorry.”

I keep my gaze fixed on the road. “Yeah. I wasn’t exactly her top priority. That’s why I went to live with Grandma. She was all I had.” My fingers fidget on the steering wheel. No one except Miles knows this story, and it feels weird sharing it with her, but not a bad weird. It’s kind of relieving.

“I knew your grandma was important to you, but not that she was your only caregiver.”

“Yep. She raised me, and she was amazing.” My heart clenches when I think about her, how she always put me first, made sure I had everything I needed.

I remember the way her smile would make me feel better, and the power of her hugs, which were almost like magic.

No matter how many people I hug every day, I’ve never found one that feels like hers.

“I’m glad you had her,” Elizabeth mumbles softly, placing a hand on mine, now resting on the gear stick. Her touch has the same effect as my grandma’s smile. “She did a great job raising you. You’re an incredible human being.”

A warmth spreads through me. “Thank you.” Normally, I’d say something flirty—even if it’s against the rules—or ask her on a date again. But I don’t. I’m happy to settle into this moment a while longer. I think Grandma would be proud.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Now, let me get you all bloody."

Beth Bowen

James' story went straight to my heart. After getting to know him, I could tell there was another side of him hiding behind the goofy, cocky guy I've come to know.

It hurts to find out how right I was. But I am glad he told me.

It helps me understand him better, but it also muddies the water a little.

How can it not? My view of James was already rapidly changing.

Add to the mix a man who's known loss since such a young age, and it completely shifts the playing field.

All the flirting, the larger-than-life attitude, the show he puts on for the fans, it's just a way for him to feel the love. Something to fill his void.

It also explains the connection he maintains with the Golden Age residents and why he's so stoked for the Halloween costume contest tonight.

We're going as Little Red Riding Hood and the Big Bad Wolf—James' idea—and I'm currently doing his makeup.

"Stop moving," I scold, holding the brush high.

“Sorry, but it itches,” he says, scrunching his nose. I scratch his nose with the end of the brush, being careful near his scar. “Thanks.”

“All right, let’s keep going.” I glance at the photo of the model on my phone, trying to duplicate it on James’ face. It’s not bad, but I certainly won’t be pursuing a career in makeup anytime soon.

Finally, I paint the last bit of facial hair on his jaw and nod in satisfaction. “Okay, we’re done.”

“Hallelujah. Can I see?”

I hand him the mirror, and he examines his face from different angles. Then, he howls.

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Much better than your raptor call.”

“Drat . I’ll have to change teams.”

I tilt my head. “Is there even a Wolves team?”

He looks up, thinking. “I think there’s a rugby team called the Wolves, but I don’t remember where they’re from. I could play rugby. It’s pretty fun.”

I cross my arms. “You like your sports highly dangerous, don’t you?”

He barks out a laugh. “I guess I have a type. All right, your turn, Red.”

“Wait a second. You’re not putting anything on my face,” I say, taking a step back. “The costume alone will be enough. And I’ll throw in some red lipstick for good measure.”

“Unacceptable. In the picture we found online, the girl had bloody claw marks on her cheek. That looked cool. Besides, we already have the fake blood makeup.”

I look at the pic again. He’s right, it does look cool, but I don’t follow a grueling skincare routine every day to just slap anything on my face. “Nah, I’ll pass. Let’s go get dressed.”

He places his hands on my shoulders, forcing me to sit back down. And as usual when we touch, my body ricochets between extremes in temperature. “We’re doing the bloody makeup, Elizabeth. Come on.”

“Fine, but we’re doing a full skincare routine afterwards. And that means you too.”

“Sounds like a plan. Now, let me get you all bloody,” he says with a menacing grin, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Careful, your serial killer side is showing,” I tease.

He howls again, then gets to work applying the makeup.

I have a hard time sitting still. But after he almost pokes me in the eye twice, I steady myself and wait patiently for him to finish.

It’s not unpleasant. I like the feel of the brush against my skin, and James is gentle in his movements. Finally, he puts the brush down.

“Are you done?” I mumble.

“Wait, I’m going to smudge it a little so it looks more natural,” he says, rubbing my cheek with his thumb.

I look him in the eye, and I instantly regret it, because his face is just inches from mine. His thumb caresses my cheek, and just like that, I'm overheating again. As his gaze falls to my lips, I wonder if he's thinking about kissing me. I know I am.

As we're staring into each other's eyes, my phone rings, effectively ruining the moment. We study each other for a second longer before he takes a step back to let me answer the phone.

After glancing at my screen, I pick it up. "Hi, Mom. How are you?"

"Wait. Why is the screen all black? I can't see anything—Richard!" she yells.

"Hold on. I didn't know it was a video call," I say, holding my phone in front of me so I can see my mom's smiling face. "Hey, Mom."

"Oh, you look great, honey. Love the makeup."

"Thanks. It's all James' doing." I point the phone at him, and he waves.

"And who's this beautiful lady?" he croons, channeling all his charm even with his wolf makeup. "Love the blouse."

"Oh, you're too sweet," Mom says. "It's just an old rag. But you sure look handsome as a wolf."

"What's up, Mom?" I ask, directing the phone camera back to my face before the exchange of compliments continues to ping-pong between them. With these two, it could go on for hours.

She gives me a sympathetic look. "I'm afraid we have to cancel Roast Night on Thursday. We have to work. It's a regular client, and we can't turn him down."

I shrug. “Oh, that’s okay. Don’t worry about it. We’ll do it another time.”

“I’m terribly sorry, James,” she says in a louder voice, so I point the phone at him to let her see that he’s right here.

“It’s absolutely fine, Pam. Roast Night can wait.”

“Great. Well, maybe you can come for Pizza Night on Saturday instead?”

“Mom,” I groan, but she prattles on about how Pizza Night is just as fun.

“I’d love to, Pam,” he says, taking the phone. “But we have our friends’ wedding on Saturday.”

“Oh, right.” She shakes her head slightly. “Well, in that case, I might have to look at the calendar again and get back to you.”

“Sounds good,” he says with a smile.

“Well, you two have a good night at Golden Age. We just went to visit Grandma today, and she’s very excited.” Her shoulders fall. “It’s a shame we’re working tonight. I would have loved to have seen it.”

“We’re excited too,” James says. “And don’t worry, we’ll send you pics.”

“Thank you.” She beams.

“Do you want me to put Elizabeth back on?” he asks, glancing at me.

“Actually, I have to get going, but it was nice talking to you two.” She waves into the camera. “Bye, bye!”

Returning her wave, he hangs up and hands me my phone back.

“Oh, you’re done,” I say, taking it with a smirk. “You had a nice chat with my mom?”

He laughs, cocking his head. “A w, don’t be like that, Elizabeth. There’s space in my heart for all the Bowen women.”

I shake my head again, but this whole exchange—and his last words—trigger a tsunami in my chest. No matter how hard I try not to fall for James Adler, I’m losing the battle, one flirty remark at a time, and it scares me to death.

Okay. I know we’re supposed to embrace death, with today being Halloween and all.

But if I’m being honest, I don’t know if I can handle this new development.

The staff at the Golden Age Nursing Home weren’t kidding when they said they were throwing the residents a Halloween party.

The entire common area is decorated with fake spider webs, glowing jack-o-lanterns, ghosts hanging from the chandeliers, and paper bats fluttering from the ceiling.

All the chairs have been lined up to form a makeshift runway down the center of the room, and there’s a judging table at the end with three seats.

They also put on spooky ambiance music and prepared some tasty snacks with sugar-free options in the mix.

“Grandma,” I call out when we spot her and her friends in the corner. She’s wearing a witch costume inspired by Wicked, and she looks amazing.

“There you are!” she says, turning around and hugging both of us in turn. “You look great.”

“So do you, Lois!” James says before hugging the other members of her friend group.

Martha is wearing a spooky fortune teller costume, Esther is a vampire, and Bill is a pretty convincing Albert Einstein.

We compliment them on their costumes, then chat for a bit before one of the nurses approaches James to tell him they’re ready to start the contest soon.

“On it,” he says, wagging his eyebrows at us before following after her.

“Oh, I’m excited,” Martha says, shaking her fake crystal ball.

Soon enough, the nurses gather all the contestants while the rest of us sit down to watch. There’s a saved seat with my name on it in the first row, right next to Martha’s daughter and Bill’s son and grandchildren.

As we’re taking our seats, James appears on the runway, howling into a microphone and waving at the residents and their families.

He taps the mic, grinning like he’s about to address an auditorium packed with fans.

“Welcome, ladies and ghouls, to the first annual Golden Age Halloween Spectacular!” He bows, winking at me, and I join the applause.

“We’re all full of tricks, but we have a very special treat for you. The best Golden Age models have teamed up to offer you the spookiest Halloween fashion show of the season. Are you ready?”

“Yeah!” the crowd shouts back, some a bit weaker than others.

“All right. Before we start, give it up for Maddie, Carlos, and Lea, our wonderful and fair judges.”

The nurses stand up, waving at everyone with a warm smile as the crowd applauds.

“Without further ado, let’s get started!”

Upbeat music blasts on the speakers, taking me by surprise. I assumed it was going to be a little more low-key. Martha takes the stage first, strutting down the runway faster than I expected, delicate scarves fluttering around her as she shakes her crystal ball and holds it aloft.

“Ladies and gentlemen, witness Madame Martha, diviner of fortunes—and the only one here who knows where you misplaced those missing dentures.”

Martha grins, waving a hand theatrically over her crystal ball in front of the judges before leaving the runway at the end. After the contestants walk it o nce, they take their seats next to the judges.

“And here comes Esther, the blood-sucking beauty of Shady Pines!” James announces as Esther shuffles onto the runway at a slower pace, her velvet vampire cloak billowing behind her. “Hide your necks, folks—she’s on the prowl for her next victim.”

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The crowd laughs, and Esther bares a set of plastic fangs in a surprisingly menacing hiss. James throws me a surprised look, and I can't help but chuckle along.

Bill is up next, wearing an Einstein wig that's barely attached and a scowl that would make the real Albert proud.

“And now, presenting Bill, the smartest man in the room, who also happens to think the microwave is haunted!” James winks as the crowd cracks up.

Bill gives him a dismissive wave, gripping a large chalkboard with $E=mc^2$ scrawled in wobbly chalk.

He shows off the board and does a little dance, causing his wig to fall off, but he walks away without noticing.

“Oh! A demonstration in gravity!” James quips, not missing a beat, and everyone laughs. I stand up to retrieve the wig and give it back to Bill. He just laughs, waving at the crowd again.

“Oh, looks like we have a surprise contestant. Little Red Riding Hood,” he says, shooting me a grin.

I give a small wave, probably as red as my costume by now.

“The only woman who's brave enough to come near the big bad wolf,” he adds in a low growl, waving his claws, and I give him a pointed look.

“How can anyone resist her? She’s devastating.”

Our gazes lock, and I’m trapped in his cobalt eyes. Until I remember we’re both standing in the middle of a nursing home runway, frozen in front of a crowd of spectators. I quickly return to my spot, blushing even harder than before.

James clears his throat loudly. “All right, let’s move on to our next contestant.”

Janice struts onto the runway dressed as a classic film star, complete with a black-and-white feathered dress, long satin gloves, and still not a wrinkle in sight. I sneak a glance at Grandma, who’s up next, and her eyes narrow at Janice.

“And now, Janice as . . . Hollywood Glamour! Or perhaps an undercover agent?” James raises an eyebrow, as if he, too, senses something fishy. “We’ll have to check her ID later to see if she’s old enough to be here.”

A sea of chuckles washes over the room while Grandma straightens herself, adjusting her long black gown.

“Everyone beware!” James bellows dramatically. “Here comes Lois, the wickedest witch in the West—who may or may not turn you into a toad if you don’t clap loud enough.”

She raises her arms like she’s about to cast a spell, and I join the whole room in cheering for her with a little added fervor.

Five more participants shuffle on stage in a parade of costumes, each more realistic than the last—especially that terrifying mummy costume. When the runway stands empty, James walks forward.

“This is it, the moment you’ve all been waiting for,” he announces gravely. “The

results are in, everyone.” He walks to the judges’ table, and Carlos hands him a folded piece of paper, which I’m assuming holds the winner’s name.

“And the winner of the Golden Age Halloween Spectacular is . . . Madame Martha!”

Eager applause fills the room as Martha joins James on the runway, her shawls and scarves floating around her. “Congratulations,” James says before drawing a beaming Martha into a warm hug. “Anything you’d like to say to the crowd or the judges?”

He holds the microphone in front of her, and she says, “Thank you, but this is hardly a surprise.” She points to the crystal ball. “I saw it coming.”

Everyone, including James, burst into laughter, and the two of them exit the runway under a roaring round of applause.

After we move the furniture back into place, we all dig into the sprawling buffet and chat with everyone.

“I’m with you, kid,” Grandma tells James in a secretive voice when it’s only the three of us. “Janice is definitely up to something. We should check her ID.”

“Grandma!” I scold. “You’re not going to rummage through Janice’s stuff. That’s insane.”

“I was only kidding, Lois,” James says, and I’m glad he’s on my side. “I’m sure they checked everything before she moved here.”

“Fine, I’ll just have to continue my investigation on my own,” she harrumphs, popping a baby carrot in her mouth.

“Hold on. I’ll be right back,” James says when he notices Martha beckoning him at

the other end of the room.

“Even if he won’t be my partner in crime, I like this kid,” Grandma says, watching James as he jogs up to Martha. “A lot better than that moron you used to date.”

“Right, but James and I aren’t dating. I told you that.”

She frowns, her hand trembling slightly. “Well, why on earth not? I don’t understand it. If a handsome gentleman in his prime was looking at me the way he looks at you, I would be in his arms in a heartbeat.”

“Grandma!” Laughter bubbles out of me. “We’re just friends. Besides, he looks at me the way he looks at everyone else. It’s just the way he is.”

She pins me with a stare. “Darling, I’m old, but I’m not blind. I recognize a man in love when I see one.”

My heart skips a beat. Love? Does she really think he’s in love with me?

Then again, how much can I trust my grandma when she’s dead set on the idea that Janice is an actual spy?

I glance at James, and my cheeks burn when our eyes meet.

He’s leaning against a wall talking to Martha and Bill, but his gaze is fixed on me, carrying the same intensity I saw earlier on the runway, and this afternoon when we were getting ready.

It stirs something inside me, and a flock of butterflies take flight in my belly.

Darn it. This is going to be a problem.

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"Your pores are definitely clogged."

James Adler

Miles called me first thing this morning, inviting me for a game of NHL Master with the guys at his place, and I jumped at the opportunity. They've been gone for a few days and are leaving again tomorrow—coming back just in time for the wedding—and Elizabeth is at work all day.

Hawthorne and Beaumont are already at Miles' place when I get there, but shockingly, Wally sat this one out. I'm starting to miss our British grump.

"How are you holding up, man?" Hawthorne shoots me a concerned look as Miles brings out a bowl of popcorn and sets it on the coffee table.

"All good. Nose is healing up. It doesn't hurt as much. Still a little bored, but I'm stoked to kick some butt today, at least virtually." I glance over at Beaumont. "What about you, Frenchie Boy? You'll be a married man in a few days."

A smile spreads across his face. "Can't wait." He turns to Miles, who is taking a seat on the couch. "Honestly, Miles, I get why you just went for it like that."

"Yep. When you know, you know," he says simply. Elizabeth's face appears in my mind, and there's a sting in my heart. Even if I've been feeling a different vibe lately, we're a far cry from where Miles and Marissa are.

"How's Hayley doing?" Hawthorne asks Beaumont while Miles starts up the gaming

console.

“Good.” His lips tilt into a smile. “She’s excited, though lately, she’s been getting more and more anxious when I take a hit.”

“Last night was kind of brutal, dude,” Miles says, and Hawthorne nods.

“Bad hit?” I ask with a frown. “I haven’t had time to catch the replay yet.”

Beaumont rakes a hand through his wavy hair. “Yeah, I guess it was. You know how Dobrovsky is, but it’s fine. Hayley is just a little worried, that’s all.”

“Understandable,” Hawthorne says, throwing a few pieces of popcorn in his mouth. “Dating a hockey player isn’t exactly a walk in the park. You’ve got the impossible hours, the away games, the routine, the fame, and the violence of the sport. Hardly a treat.”

Beaumont arches an eyebrow. “Is that why you don’t date, Cap?”

Hawthorne nods. “Yep. And because I want to perform my best while I’m at my peak. I don’t think I could juggle having a relationship and being pro.”

“You’ll never know until you try,” Miles says, handing us the controllers. “All right, ready?”

We all nod, but I’m still ruminating on what Hawthorne said.

Suddenly, I understand where Beth is coming from.

Dating already isn’t easy. You need to make concessions, you’re vulnerable, and there’s always the risk of getting your heart broken.

But when you add all the baggage that comes with being a pro athlete, it can be even harder to take the plunge.

Especially when you've already been burned by one in the past.

"Dude, come on," Miles says, snapping his fingers in front of me. "You said you were ready."

I swallow hard, shifting back into focus. "I am. Let's play."

After enjoying a sumptuous meal of lasagna that Elizabeth prepared—her parents' recipe—we're now doing the dishes together.

"Do you want to watch a movie?" I ask, handing her the lasagna dish to dry.

She arches an eyebrow. "We already have plans for tonight, or have you forgotten?"

I blink back at her. "Wait. We do?"

"It's Skincare Night," she announces with a full grin.

I cough out a laugh. "Do you Bowens have a theme for every night of the week?"

"You betcha," she jokes. "Anyway, we talked about it yesterday before I let you put fake blood on my face. We had a deal."

"Yeah, yeah." I shake my head. "I remember." I'm not sure slathering oils and creams on my face will do my sex appeal any favors with Elizabeth, but a promise is a promise. And if I'm being honest, a skincare night doesn't sound that bad. Nothing involving Elizabeth does.

“Great.” She slides the dish back into the cupboard and scurries out of the room.

After I finish tidying up in the kitchen, I take a seat at the counter. I’m guessing whatever we’re doing will require running water.

“Okay,” she says, walking in with a huge beauty bag on her arm and additional products clutched between her fingers. “We’ll start with a full cleansing routine followed by a few treatments.”

“Terrific,” I say, using my best “sarcastic Elizabeth” voice.

“Don’t be like that,” she chides, placing the products on the counter. “Your skin will thank me. After this, you’ll be begging me to come back once I move out.”

I frown, my insides twisting. “You found a place?”

It may sound crazy, but I’ve enjoyed having her here so much, I completely forgot this situation was temporary, or that she was even looking.

She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear. “Not yet, but I came across an apartment that might work. I’m touring it tomorrow.”

My heart falls to my shoes. “You are?”

She shoots me a confused look. “Yeah. Is that a problem? Did you—”

“No, no,” I blurt out, forcing a smile. “That’s great. Is it far from here?”

“Only a few blocks. It looks good in the pictures, but you know how it goes. I’ll know when I see it.”

I nod. “Do you want me to come along?” I ask, trying to not sound desperate, when what I really wanted to say was, ‘Please, can I come with you?’

“Oh.” She averts her eyes, her cheeks flushing pink. “If you want to, yeah.”

“Never hurts to have an extra pair of eyes. I’ll be there.” I smile, my shoulders relaxing.

“Thanks.” She glances at me, then brings her eyes back to her products. “Okay, let’s start with a deep cleanse. Your pores are definitely clogged.”

“My what?” My forehead creases.

She chuckles, then starts explaining what pores are and how we’re going to unclog them.

She’s so passionate as she shares her skincare knowledge, and I’m really enjoying listening to her.

We wash our faces with soft cloths and apply various cleaning products, including a gel with little grains in it, while massaging the skin using specific movements. Then, we rinse them off.

“Here,” she says, handing me a tissue.

I stare at the piece of tissue as if it’s an alien being.

“Place it on your face, like th is,” she says, demonstrating by placing the tissue over half her face and pressing down before doing the other side. “It’s to dry out the excess water.”

I do as I'm told, and when we remove the tissues, she unscrews a couple of bottles.
"All right, now—"

"Wait, isn't it over yet? My skin has never felt so clean," I tease.

She breathes a sigh. "I told you this was long overdue. We've deep cleansed. Now, our skin is ready to receive treatments for lasting results. I'm thinking a charcoal mask for you, since your T-zone is a bit shiny, and I need hydrating."

"My T-zone isn't shiny," I huff. "It's fine, whatever it is."

She laughs, the addictive sound making my heart jolt.

"This is your T-zone." She traces her finger over her forehead and down to her chin, forming the letter T, and my mouth opens to form an "O." She continues, "An oily T-zone is totally normal. We'll be careful over your nose, but it should be fine."

First, let's make sure your hair doesn't get in the way." She grabs a pink headband and hands it to me.

"What am I supposed to do with this thing?" I ask, glaring at the hair accessory.

"Put it in your hair like this, " she says, sliding one onto her head until her hair is trapped underneath it.

"So, you've decided to completely rip my masculinity apart tonight. Is that the goal?" I give her a pointed look, and she bursts into laughter.

"Come on. It'd take more than a pink headband to undermine your manliness."

I grin at her words before putting it on. She knows how to boost a guy's ego.

“Okay, I’m going to start on your mask. Stay still. It might feel cold.”

Dipping her fingers into a white cream, she applies the mask on my face in smooth motions. The way her soft fingers feel against my cheeks electrifies my body.

“Stay still,” she repeats. “Or I’m going to poke you in the eye.”

I open my eyes wide. “Crab , okay.”

She keeps going, and I can tell she’s being extra careful when she reaches my nose. Her touch, combined with the chill of the cream, is surprisingly soothing.

“Let me know if I’m hurting you.”

“No,” I breathe out. “Quite the contrary. It’s nice.”

“Okay,” she says after a while. “I’m done. I’ll apply mine, and then we can let it sit for about twenty minutes.”

She does her face a lot quicker, then looks in the mirror to make sure she didn’t miss a spot. “There! We’re a good-looking pair now.”

I chuckle. “Who knew that’s what it took for you to call me pretty?”

She shakes her head. “As if you didn’t know it already.”

I shrug. “Sure. I know a lot of women find me attractive, but I’ve never heard it from you, Elizabeth. And some opinions matter more than others. More than most.”

She flits her eyes away for a second, then catches my gaze again. “Are you saying you need me to tell you you’re handsome?”

I lean forward a few inches. “Only if you mean it.”

She swallows hard, and I’m pretty sure there’s a pretty blush under that mask. “We said no flirting.”

I grin, my face itching under the cream. “Nicely played, Elizabeth. But I already have my answer.”

“Really?” She tries to arch an eyebrow, but it barely budes.

“If you weren’t attracted to me, you wouldn’t call that flirting.”

She pauses a second, then shakes her head. “You’re unbelievable.”

Nice deflection on her part. And I’m not going to push it, because after all, I did get my answer.

After we wash our faces, Elizabeth insists we apply at least four other products—a mix of serums and creams—before we finally sit down on the couch and relax.

“This skincare business is no joke,” I say with a sigh, checking my watch. “I’m beat.”

She settles a throw pillow on her lap. “You gotta do what you gotta do. Also, you’re clearly out of shape if you’re exhausted by a little skincare regimen.”

“Haha. Just you wait, I’ll be working out again soon enough. And trust me, half the things we did back there were completely unnecessary. Maybe a daily face wash and some moisturizing cream. But all the other things? I don’t think so. You don’t need that stuff to be beautiful.”

She hugs the pillow tighter, a blush coating her cheeks. “You’re such a flirt.”

“But I don’t lie,” I say with a wink. “All right, what are we watching?”

“I don’t know.” She settles into the couch. “Whatever you want.”

Scrolling through the streaming catalog, I find a comedy that looks fun and put it on.

Before I know it, we’re laughing and snorting our way through the movie.

And as the glow from the TV catches her face, my heart soars in my chest. I don’t think I’ve ever been as happy as I am in this simple moment.

Watching TV and laughing with a cool girl who’s as pretty as she is sweet. It feels normal, and so right.

We decide to do a double feature. And when the second movie ends, I know Elizabeth is a bit groggy, because she fell asleep after the midpoint. Frankly, that movie kind of sucked, but having her use my shoulder as a pillow sure didn’t.

“Time for bed,” I mutter, and she yawns.

“Gosh, I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

I chuckle. “It’s fine, but I do think your bed will be more comfortable.”

I turn off the TV, and we walk to the hallway, stopping at the doors of our respective rooms. “Thanks for tonight,” I say, leaning against the wall. “I had fun. Even during the skincare routine.”

“Me too,” she breathes out, capturing me with a raw intensity in her eyes. The kind that makes me want to pull her close and kiss her gorgeous red lips.

There's a shift in her gaze, and tension builds between us. Suddenly, we're closer than before, and I wonder who moved first. She places a hand on my torso, and the skin beneath my shirt might as well have just burst into flames.

I cover her hand with mine, and she closes her eyes. "James," she whispers.

I swallow hard, squeezing her hand. "I know. You're not ready." Which is why I don't go for a kiss. Instead, I kiss her on the forehead, which still smells like the rose-scented product she applied earlier.

Then, she surprises me by throwing her arms around my neck and hugging me tight. "Thank you."

I hold her close, embracing her like a long-lost treasure.

I love the way her body fits into my arms. This is probably the best hug of my life, enveloping me in the same comfort as my Grandma's hug, but meaning something totally different.

It lasts for a solid three Mississippis, which leaves my heart pounding like a jackhammer in my chest. Never doubt the power of a hug.

Sometimes, it's even better than a kiss.

"Sleep tight, Elizabeth," I say softly when we finally break the embrace.

She looks at me again, a small smile pulling at her lips. "Good night, James."

Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:37 am

"How else does he have to demonstrate that he's perfect for you?"

Beth Bowen

Last night was close. So close. I really thought James was going to kiss me, and if he had, I would have let him.

The fact that he pulled back only made me fall for him a little more.

Frankly, I don't know why I didn't just go for it myself.

Fear, maybe? Not of James, or how good we'd be together, because living with him has shown me how compatible we are.

No. My fear comes from whether I'm capable of once again dating a man who's under the spotlight and playing such a grueling game.

In any case, I'm glad I went for the hug.

My first James Adler hug did not disappoint, and somehow, it felt even closer than a kiss. Being in his arms just felt right.

Skincare Night was even more fun with James. It's refreshing to be with a man who's willing to try new things and support my passions, not the other way around. Lucas never wanted to do things I liked. It was always about his hobbies, his passions, and me following behind.

But even after last night, I'm still visiting that apartment this afternoon. Who knows? It might be a good fit. The fact that James is tagging along will only make it more fun.

I head to work early to open the shop, and Marissa joins me two hours later.

"Here comes the bride," Marissa calls out in a singsong voice right as I put a new batch of brownies in the oven.

"Hey," Hayley chirps from the doorway. "How are you guys?"

"We're great," I say, walking from the backroom. "How are you, with the big day coming up?"

"Good. Stressed." She sighs, rubbing a hand over her pink hair. "Well, as stressed as any bride with a demanding mom would be."

Marissa winces before grabbing a cup to start prepping Hayley's usual coffee. "Ouch."

"Is she still bugging you about the dress?" I ask, leaning over the counter. Hayley doesn't really do dresses. She has some body complexes—who doesn't?—and wearing dresses only makes them worse.

She sits at the counter. "Nope, that drama is over. Now it's the no-makeup that's giving her a few new gray hairs."

"I'm sorry," Marissa says, placing her coffee in front of her. "You don't need makeup. You're gorgeous."

"Except I actually might budge on that one, which is annoying me even more. Look

who decided to show up,” she says, turning her face to show us a large zit on her cheek.”

Marissa shakes her head, giving her a pitying look. “That sucks.”

“Oh!” I clasp my hands in front of me. “Maybe you won’t need that makeup. I have the perfect product, if you want it. That pimple will be gone in a couple of days.”

“Of course you do,” Marissa says with a chuckle. “You could be a beautician at this point.”

I bow, relishing the compliment. “Don’t worry, it’s all natural,” I add when I notice Hayley’s hesitation. “James was skeptical too, but I wore him down. We did the full beauty routine last night.”

“Ohh,” Marissa exclaims. “So that’s why you’re glowing! I thought you and James finally kissed or something.”

Hayley’s brown eyes stretch wide. “What!”

“Marissa,” I scold. “We haven’t kissed. Will you let it go already?”

She pins me with a stare. “Beth, the guy did a full skincare routine with you last night. How else does he have to demonstrate that he’s perfect for you?”

My whole body is suddenly burning, and my mind goes back to that hug, back to the fire I saw in his eyes, mirroring the one I felt raging inside of me.

“See?” she presses. “You’re not denying it. Trust me on this, Beth. The only person who hasn’t realized James is the man for you, is you.”

My face warms, and I swallow to wet my dry throat. “I don’t—”

“Hey, I get it,” Hayley says. “After dating a hockey player for two years, you’re probably not too eager to date another one. Especially after seeing him injured. I’m equally paranoid about that part.”

“I am too,” Marissa adds, to my surprise. She’s usually the first person to throw her fists in the air when one of the guys bodychecks another player. “But they’re professionals. They know what they’re doing, and we have to trust that.”

“Trust,” Hayley repeats. “That’s the most important thing in any relationship, but even more so when your boyfriend is away half the year.” She takes a sip of her coffee, her face pensive. “I had a hard time with the fame and the fans at first, but I know Maxime, and I trust him.”

Marissa twirls the ends of her hair. “Yeah, they’re not all jerks like Lucas.”

“Plus, judging by the way James looks at you,” Hayley adds, “and how he’s been pursuing you from the moment you guys met, I think he’s serious. Reliable too.”

“Absolutely.” Marissa nods.

Hayley leans her elbows on the counter, her eyes fixed on me. “Take it from someone who’s about to be married to another cocky, goofy hockey player. It’s even more fun once you surrender.”

I open my mouth to reply, but before I can get my words out, a customer enters the store, rescuing me.

Frankly, I’m not even sure what I was about to say.

That they're wrong, and I'm not interested in James? That we're just friends? To be honest, I don't even believe that anymore. Because friends don't send your body temperature through the roof or make your heart pound every time they look at you.

James walks over to Warlington Lane to pick me up from work—I ignore Marissa's obvious looks—and we stroll to the apartment showing together.

“Thanks for joining me,” I say. “I have a good feeling about this one.”

He shoots me a smile. “Of course. Finding a place isn't easy. I want to make sure it's perfect for you.”

I clear my throat, Marissa's words from earlier echoing in my mind.

“Well, the walk was pleasant,” I say when we reach the address. “And short.”

“Right.” James looks around, his eyes lingering on the asphalt. “Lots of traffic, though. I bet it's going to be noisy.”

I draw my eyebrows together, glancing at the near-empty street. Only a couple of cars have driven by so far. “I don't—”

“Hi, Beth?” a woman's voice greets me, and we both turn around. She flashes a winning smile. “I'm Kirsten, the real estate agent.”

Of course she has to be drop-dead gorgeous. She's almost as tall as James, with long, sleek black hair that looks like something straight out of a shampoo commercial. Perfect figure and flawless skin that immediately makes me want to ask her about her routine.

“Hi, nice to meet you,” I say, extending my hand.

“Likewise.” She shakes my hand, then turns to James, the intensity in her eyes doubling.

“And this is James.”

“Oh.” She glances back at me. “I thought you said you were renting the place solo?”

“I am.” I nod. “He’s just a friend, here to help me to decide if it’s a good fit.”

He extends his hand, and she shakes it, her eyes crinkling slightly. “Why do I have the feeling we know each other?”

He smiles, still shaking her hand. “I don’t think we’ve met. But I’m—”

“Oh, the body spray commercial!” she gushes, adding her other hand on top of his. “Seriously—total fake advertising. My ex used it, and his abs didn’t look anything like yours.”

They both chuckle, and a nervous laugh escapes me, prompting them to glance at me.

“I’m also a hockey player,” he says, finally dropping her hand. “James Adler. Nice to meet you.”

“Such a pleasure,” she replies in a sickeningly obvious way, although James doesn’t seem to notice. Instead, his eyes narrow at the shop that neighbors the apartment building.

“Is that a tattoo parlor right next door?”

“Oh, do you have any?” Kirsten asks, batting her eyelashes.

“Um, how is that relevant?” I ask between gritted teeth, forcing a fake smile.

James shoves his hands in his pockets. “Don’t those places have a tendency to draw in a bad crowd?”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Kirsten says, as if suddenly remembering she has a job. “This is a perfectly safe neighborhood.”

“Right. Should we go upstairs?” I ask, suddenly eager to get this over with.

“Absolutely. Follow me.”

We take the stairs to the second floor, and Kirsten’s hips are swaying so much, I’m afraid she’s going to bump the walls.

“Stairs aren’t ideal,” James says from behind me, and I turn to look at him.

I shrug. “Yeah, I guess that’s true.”

We finally reach the threshold, and Kirsten unlocks the door, inviting us in first.

“So, James,” she says, flicking the lights on. “Which hockey team do you play for?”

“Oh, um, the Raptors,” he mumbles back, examining the electricity panel as if he’s some kind of home inspector. “Is this up to code?”

“Yes, absolutely. Everything is up to code. They just installed new smoke detectors too.”

James runs a hand along the edge of the panel, his brow furrowing, like he has a personal stake in this decision. He glances at the ceiling. “I’ve heard these new smoke

detectors are sensitive. Wouldn't want them going off every time someone makes toast."

"Oh, I'm sure they work just fine," Kirsten reassures him, stepping closer to James. "They're top of the line." She grazes her fingers along his shoulder. "And let me know if you ever need recommendations for good places to eat around here." Her eyes linger on him a second too long.

Thank goodness those detectors don't get triggered by flirting.

"Can we see the kitchen?" I ask, plastering on my fake smile again.

"Certainly. Right this way," she says, leading the way.

James makes a beeline for the cabinets, opening each one and checking the hinges. Kirsten watches him, her gaze flickering between him and the appliances he's now examining. "The appliances are in good condition," she says, clearly hoping to steer his attention back to her. "Pretty modern, right?"

"Yeah. They look great," I exclaim, even though I barely looked.

"Oh, and the kitchen's close enough that you could bring your breakfast straight to bed!" She sneaks a glance my way, adding quickly, "If that's something you're interested in."

I grind my teeth. "Great. Should we see it, then?"

"Sure. It's the most important room of the house, after all," she adds, winking at James. But he doesn't notice, too busy studying the ceiling with a deep frown.

"Are the vents in good shape? A place without proper ventilation is a nightmare."

“Everything’s up to code,” she assures him again as she saunters to the bedroom, hips still swinging like a pendulum as she describes the “charming character” of the older building. I’m not sure if she’s talking to me or James at this point. Probably James.

We reach the bedroom, and James marches to the other side, squatting to check the baseboard heater while muttering something about potential air leaks from outside.

“It sure is a big bedroom,” I say honestly, looking around. “I love that.”

“It is.” She nods before giving me a rundown of the closet space and the lighting. She tries to re-engage James every few seconds, but he’s busy tapping on the window frames, checking for drafts.

He hums in thought. “This insulation feels thin. That could mean higher heating bills, Elizabeth.”

Kirsten waves away his concern. “Oh, it’s nothing you couldn’t fix with some cozy blankets, right, James?” She smiles, but he doesn’t seem to notice.

“Right,” I say, struggling to keep my frustration in check. “Well, thank you, Kirsten. I think we’ve seen enough.”

Her eyes widen. “Oh, but you haven’t seen the bathroom.”

“No need to waste your time any longer,” I say, trying to be polite. “I already know this place isn’t for me.”

Her smile fades. “All right. Well, maybe I can tempt you, James.”

“I’m not looking,” he says, seeming more relaxed now. “We’re only shopping for Elizabeth, but if she says it’s not for her, then we’ll keep looking.”

“Thanks for your time, Kirsten,” I add.

“Of course. I’ll let you know if anything else in your price range opens up,” she says.

“And James, maybe our paths will cross again. Go Raptors.”

He chuckles. “Yeah. Have a good one.”

We walk back downstairs, and if I could run to the sidewalk, I would. We need to put some distance between James and Kirsten before she literally jumps him.

“Sorry it was a bust,” James says, hands in his pockets as we’re trudging back down the pavement.

I release a quick breath. “It’s okay. I’ll find something else soon enough, just not from her.” I glance over my shoulder to make sure we’re not being followed.

He frowns. “Why not? She seemed all right.”

“Of course you’d think so,” I scoff, rolling my eyes. “She was flirting with you since the moment we got there.”

He blinks, a confused look scrunching up his face. “No she wasn’t.”

“Um, yeah she was,” I breathe out, my voice sharp with irritation. I hate that I’m this transparent. “She was more focused on getting you to notice her than actually selling me the place.”

He rubs his fingers along his stubble. “Really? Well, she didn’t do a very good job. I didn’t even notice.”

I press my lips together, but my grin breaks through. Because no matter how obvious

and gorgeous Kirsten was, James wasn't the least bit interested. And that's the best news I've heard all day.

"All of them."

James Adler

It's the day of Beaumont's wedding, and I can't stop pacing and fidgeting as I wait for Elizabeth to come out of her room.

Everything has been great between us these past few days, and I feel closer to her than ever.

We hung out at my place, baking and watching TV—acting like a normal couple. Well, except for the kissing part.

Finally, the door opens, and she walks into the living room wearing a floor-length, light pink dress that seems to float around her body. Her blonde hair is wavier than usual, and her makeup is discreet while bringing out her beautiful eyes even more.

"Wow, you look breathtaking. Just . . . wow." A smile builds on my lips. "You always look gorgeous, but this is next level."

She brings her eyes to her shoes, blushing. "Thanks. You look great too, but we said no flirting, remember?"

I take a step back, my jaw falling open. "What! Nuh-uh. There's got to be a loophole when you look this hot. Or when we're going to a wedding. You know flirting is kind of a staple at weddings, right?"

She cocks her head to the side. “Really, is that a thing?”

“It is in my book. I will absolutely flirt with my date at a wedding. End of story,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest.

She presses her lips together. “Your date, huh?”

“What, are you not my date?” My eyes sweep over her, and a playful smirk pulls at my lips. “That blush confused me for a second. But in that case, maybe I should call Kirsten.” I’m not going to lie, seeing Elizabeth getting jealous was quite enjoyable.

Her mouth drops open. “You said you didn’t realize she was flirting with you. Liar.”

I let out a chuckle, shrugging. “Honestly, I didn’t. Most women act like that around me. It’s hard to tell the difference.” My voice drops. “That’s why I like you, Elizabeth. You’re not like most women.”

Our eyes meet, and once again, the air around us charges with a burning intensity. I don’t know how much longer I’ll manage to keep my act together around her, but I do know she’s worth the wait.

Biting her bottom lip, she grabs her purse. “We should go.”

I tear my eyes away and start walking out of the room when she clears her throat.

“You know,” she says. “I expect my date to offer his arm when we walk together. I’m not exactly used to walking in these things.” She gestures to her high heels.

My heart pounds so hard, my pulse is ringing in my ears. Spinning to face her again, I flash a grin before marching back to her, offering my arm like a gentleman. “Shall we?”

With a soft giggle, she takes it.

“Just to clarify,” I say. “This is a date, right?”

She glances up at me, her beautiful gray eyes trapping me. “Yes, it’s a date.”

The wedding is being held in a beautiful event venue in Brooklyn, with exposed beams and large windows that give the space a lofty openness with elegant vibes.

The main room is huge and divided into three distinct spaces—the cocktail reception, where we’re now gathered for a pre-ceremony drink; the dining area with round tables covered in white cloths that are clustered around a dance floor; and a ceremony area where rows of chairs face a wedding arch made of white flowers.

“Hey, guys!” Miles calls to us, raising a hand to get our attention. We skirt around a big group of people prattling in French at an incomprehensible speed—probably Beaumont’s family—and join Miles. He’s with Marissa, Wally, Hawthorne, Auston, Deacon, and Lola.

“Where are Alice and Emma?” I ask, surprised to see the guys alone.

“They’re helping Hayley get ready,” Auston explains. “I just checked on Maxime, and he’s fine.”

“You know they only said ‘no bridesmaids and groomsmen’ because they didn’t want us to tease him, right?” I say.

They all laugh. “My thoughts too,” Miles says. “I mean, he was willing to make that stupid bet just so we’d ease up.”

“It doesn’t change anything, though,” I say. “When it’s time for the toasts, we’ll take

the stage.”

When our laughter subsides, we all grab a drink and start brainstorming how we’re going to roast Beaumont during the reception.

Finally, an attendant asks everyone to take a seat because the ceremony is about to start.

“After you, beautiful,” I say, inviting Elizabeth to sit down in our row, and she chuckles. Yeah, I’m going to milk this date for all it’s worth. For once, I’m allowed to flirt, and I can’t let the opportunity go to waste.

The officiant begins the ceremony, conducting it in both French and English to cater to everyone present. I love that Hayley is rocking a white pantsuit that matches her personality perfectly. They keep the ceremony short and sweet, but Elizabeth is hanging on every word.

Beaumont stands facing Hayley, his eyes fixed on her with a level of adoration that would convince even the biggest cynic of the whole "soulmate" thing. He’s far from the cocky, annoying hockey player we all know, and I kind of like this softer version of him.

“I never thought I’d find someone who saw me for who I really am,” Hayley begins, her voice steady. “But then you came into my life. You were the real man I never thought I needed, and before I knew it, you surpassed every single one of my book boyfriends.”

“Phew,” Beaumont says, a hand to his brow. “That wasn’t easy. I had to read a lot of romance to get there.”

Everyone chuckles, and he takes her hand. “Sorry, keep going.”

Hayley smiles softly, squeezing his hand. “You taught me that love isn’t about finding perfection—it’s about finding someone who makes all your flaws feel like they belong. And I promise to keep loving you, in every page, in every chapter, for the rest of our story.”

Beaumont’s eyes flicker with emotion, but he doesn’t break. When his turn comes to say his vows, he takes a breath before speaking. He’s more hesitant than usual, as though he’s not used to putting his feelings into words.

“Hayley, the second I met you, I knew you were the one,” he starts, his voice rough. “You wanted nothing to do with me.” He chuckles. “But I pursued you, and I’m glad I did. Because now here I am, standing in front of you, the luckiest guy alive.”

As he pours his heartfelt words out to her, I can’t help but glance at Beth. Beaumont and I have a lot in common. Not just our skills on the ice and our position, but also how we both knew from day one that we’d stumbled on someone special, someone we could envision a future with.

“I promise to protect you,” he continues. “To push through your walls, and to love you every single day, even when you’re lost in the pages of a book and I’m just a little bit jealous of your characters.”

A few people laugh, but even in that moment of humor, it’s clear he’s speaking from the heart.

And Hayley, despite her usual reserve, is visibly touched.

As I watch them, I can’t help but think how perfect they are for each other.

They’re opposites in so many ways, but somehow, that balance works.

And I hope that someday, I'll have the same happy ending as they have.

"It's so beautiful," Beth whispers as the bride and groom hold hands, about to kiss.

"Is this the kind of wedding you want?" I ask, leaning in and matching her hushed tone.

Her cheeks tint red. "Maybe. Do you ever want a wedding?"

"Absolutely," I say without hesitation. It's true. I've always imagined that I'd get married one day. Honestly, I thought I'd be married by now. But life didn't go the way I planned it. Hopefully, that's all about to change.

We both turn back to the altar when the officiant says, "You may now kiss the bride. Vous pouvez embrasser la mariée. "

Frenchie Boy tugs his girl toward him, then kisses her under the applause and whistles of the crowd.

After we congratulate the newlyweds and have our pictures taken with them, we head to the dining area and find our table. We're seated with all our friends, except for Hayley and Beaumont, who are at a table with their close family.

I lean back, my arm draped over the back of Elizabeth's chair, and immediately, everyone's eyes zero in on it.

I give a nonchalant shrug. "What? Elizabeth and I are on a date, didn't I tell you?"

"I grin, proud of my big reveal. I purposely hadn't said anything until now, waiting for the perfect moment.

“No way! You guys are dating?” Alice exclaims, her eyes sparkling. “That’s great.”

Elizabeth shakes her head. “We’re not dating. We’re on a date. Tonight.”

“Wow,” Miles says, leaning back. “Good for you guys.”

“Yeah, who would have predicted that one?” Marissa says with a hint of sarcasm, winking at Elizabeth.

Before I can say anything, Beaumont’s dad stands up and proposes a toast to his son and his new daughter-in-law. His English is pretty fluent, and he even makes a joke or two. Then, Hayley’s mom, Emma, and Alice give their toasts.

“All right,” I say, taking the microphone when Alice hands it to me.

“I guess it’s my turn.” I glance at Beaumont and Hayley, who are watching me expectantly.

“Well, when I first met Frenchie Boy, he was just a young, promising rookie player hoping to make it big in the NHL. Today, he’s still all that, but he’s also a married man. ”

Everyone chuckles, and Beaumont clears his throat, flipping me the bird.

I shoot him a grin. “Okay, maybe you got a little better over the years. After all, you’ve been working with the best winger in the league.”

Some people laugh, but not nearly enough, so I add, “ I’m the best winger in the league.”

Now everyone is laughing, and Beaumont just rolls his eyes. “But none of that

matters. Because you've won the most important prize, man," I say, glancing at Hayley, who's all smiles. "You found the perfect woman for you. Someone to love, and who loves you back, even with your many, many flaws."

More laughs ripple around the room.

My tone sobers a little. "And that's what matters most in this life.

If I could trade my stats and trophies for what you have, I'd do it in a heartbeat.

" My eyes instinctively fall on Elizabeth.

She's gazing up at me, and my heart leaps in my chest. Because I meant every word of this speech.

If I could give everything I have to make her see how much I love her, I would.

"To Beau mont and Hayley," I say, forcing my eyes back to them, and everyone applauds.

Beth Bowen

I'm just getting back to the table following a long restroom break. After those speeches, I needed a hard reset. But somehow, James' words are still echoing in my head, torturing me.

"There you are," James says, approaching the table. "I was looking all over for you." He extends his hand, a devastating smile on his face. "May I have this dance with my date ?"

I press my lips together, then smile. "Absolutely."

He guides me to the dance floor, where several other couples are already swaying to the slow ballad.

He settles his hands on my waist, and I wrap my arms around his neck.

As we start moving to the music, a blissful sensation washes over me.

Everything about this day has felt like a dream, too perfect to be true.

But it's still going strong, leaving me wondering if this could really be my life.

Being in James' arms every day, joking around, listening to him tell me how beautiful I am.

Our eyes meet, and once again, I'm sucked into his smoldering gaze.

"I'm crazy about you, Elizabeth," he murmurs into my ear, his voice husky. It's like he's reading my mind. "What will it take for you to go out with me for real?" He caresses my cheek, his fingers leaving a trail of fire in their wake.

"You're a hockey player," I blurt out, not taking the time to edit my thoughts. As much as I wish that wasn't a problem, I think it's still what's preventing me from trusting him fully.

"No," he says softly. "I'm a man who plays hockey. I don't define you by your occupation. Why is it any different for me?"

I look down, trying to find an answer to his question. That's when I realize there's something else preventing me from finally going after what I want. "You're going to break my heart," I whisper, pressing my forehead to his.

“Never. I’ll worship you, like I have since the second we met. You were just too stubborn to notice it.”

A lone chuckle escapes me, and I pull back slightly. “Is that so?”

“Are you finally ready to surrender, Elizabeth? Because I’m hopeless here.”

The sincerity in his eyes, combined with his speech from earlier, sends a whirlwind of emotions through me. And just like that, all my walls are completely shattered. He’s right. For so long, he’s been showing me all the ways he’s good for me. I just wasn’t paying attention. But I am now.

My heart is thundering in my chest, the sound so loud, I can’t even hear the music anymore. Finally, I meet his eyes again. “Yes,” I breathe out.

A glint of pure joy touches his eyes, and he caresses my cheek before drawing me closer.

His familiar scent of clean cotton and musk embraces me, sweeping me off the dance floor and into our own bubble.

Our lips touch, and I melt against him, unable to resist any longer.

His hands slide down my back, pulling me tight against him as I run my fingers through his hair.

Every brush of his lips feels desperate, like he’s been waiting for this forever, and I’ve never felt so wanted.

He pulls away, and I release a small moan at the loss of contact.

“I want everything with you, Elizabeth,” he says, the back of his hand grazing my cheek. “Not just one night, but all of them.”

A smile breaks onto my face, and I nod in agreement before kissing him again. “All of them.”

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"Don't expect me to go easy on you just because we're dating now."

James Adler

I'm a happy man. Not because the doctor cleared me this morning to return to practice—with the stipulation that I wear the ugly no-contact canary-yellow jersey, which will definitely earn me some teasing—but because Elizabeth and I are finally dating.

After two years of waiting, she's finally my girl, and it's the best feeling in the world.

We're now walking hand in hand toward Rise & Grind, but I might as well be walking on air.

Everything is brighter, the colors are more vivid, and even the rain was more intense last night.

The crazy thing is, if I wanted to right now, I could stop and kiss Elizabeth's perfect lips.

In fact, that's exactly what I'm going to do.

I twirl her with one hand, and she giggles as I pin her against a wall, hungry with anticipation.

"James," she laughs, her giggles growing louder by the second. But when I kiss her, she instantly wraps her arms around my neck, deepening the kiss.

Having Elizabeth's lips on mine is even better than in my wildest fantasies.

I know, it doesn't make any sense. But nothing can beat the real deal.

Her lips are softer, tastier, more addictive than I could have ever imagined, and I need my fix.

With one touch, they scorch every inch of my body, sending bolts of electricity sparking through my veins.

It's the most amazing sensation in the world.

The most intense too. I know I said hugs were sometimes better than kisses, but nothing will ever come close to kissing Elizabeth.

"I knew your lips would taste like cherry," I say, taking a step back and tucking my thumb under her chin.

She chuckles. "Actually, I also have a strawberry and a raspberry one."

"Ohh," I say, placing another kiss on her saccharine lips. "Then I'll have no choice but to try them all."

"I think that's fair."

Pulling away and taking her hand, I force myself to continue walking. Otherwise, we'll never move from this spot.

Soon, we step onto Warlington Lane. And it might be November, but I swear, the street looks brighter than ever.

“Top of the morning to you, Susan,” I say, spotting the pharmacist in front of her shop.

“Hi, James. Hi, Beth.” She beams.

Next, I tip my imaginary hat to Mrs. Edibam, who’s arranging the flower display in front of her shop. She just laughs and waves at us.

Elizabeth tenses next to me, so I turn my head to see what’s troubling her. I clench my jaw when I spot Rogers stalking out of Rise & Grind. I tuck her closer to me as we approach the shop.

“What are you doing here, Rogers?” I ask through gritted teeth. This day was too perfect to be true. Of course he had to come and ruin it.

“Actually,” he mutters, stuffing both hands in his pockets, “I came to apologize to Beth.” He turns to her, his eyes pleading. “I’m really sorry for everything. For being a jerk and hurting you.”

He looks sincere enough, but I can’t help balling my fist.

“And I guess I want to apologize to you too, Adler. It was a low blow on my part, hitting you in the back like that.”

I nod, my nostrils flaring slightly. “Yeah it was.”

“So, you two really are together, huh?” he mumbles, his eyes falling on our entwined hands. “Well, I wish you the best.”

Beth presses her lips, not offering a reply, and he walks away.

“Rogers,” I call out, and he glances back over his shoulder. “You too.”

He frowns, then a small smile pulls at his lips. “Thanks.”

With a grin, I look back toward the shop, preparing to open the door for Elizabeth.

What? Wishing I’d have smashed his head on the pavement instead?

Yeah, a part of me wanted to. But we're hockey players, and there’s a code among us.

We never let our rivalries go too far. Best to leave that to the other sports.

We fight on the ice, and that’s where it stays.

Hockey is built on community and sportsmanship.

Besides, I’ve already won. And he might have helped a little.

“Soo,” I draw out, grinning as I recall Rogers’ words. “What was that really together all about?”

She blushes hard and looks away. “Um, I don't know.”

“Liar. I think you do know,” I say, bringing her toward me and lacing my arms around her waist.

She continues to avoid my gaze, proving my point. “No I don't,” she says, swallowing hard.

“You want to know what I think?”

She glances up at me. “What?”

“That night when he came to the coffee shop, you told Rogers that you and I were dating.”

Her blush deepens, and I bubble out a laugh.

“I knew it.”

“Fine.” She rolls her eyes. “So?”

“So, that proves what I’ve been claiming all along. That you were already into me back then. Am I wrong?”

She wets her lips, then drops a sweet kiss on mine. “You’re not wrong.”

My heart bursts at her admission, and I can’t suppress my wide grin. See? I knew I wasn’t just being cocky. All this time, she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

Beth Bowen

This afternoon, we’re going to visit Grandma and the other residents at Golden Age. We don’t have a lot of time before visiting hours end, but James is planning to take me to a restaurant nearby afterward, and we really want to tell our elderly friends the news. Cheesy, I know.

We find Grandma in the corridor, and she beams. “What are you two doing here? This is a nice surprise.”

“We were in the neighborhood, and we wanted to see you,” I say, drawing her into a hug. “How are you?”

“Still alive,” she jokes before hugging James.

He offers her a warm smile. “Hi, Lois.”

We follow her back to her friend group’s usual table, where they’re—of course—playing poker. We greet everyone, and they talk us into a game.

As usual, James puts on a show, shuffling the cards with finesse. “Are you guys ready?”

“Boy, we’ve been playing poker since before you were born,” Bill grunts, shaking his head, and we all laugh.

“Fair enough. Elizabeth,” he says, glancing toward me. “Don’t expect me to go easy on you just because we’re dating now.”

Even among the crowd of octogenarians, James’ bombshell drops hard, and they all gasp.

“You are dating?” Esther asks, eyes darting between the two of us. “That’s fantastic.”

“Took you long enough,” Grandma chuckles, placing her hand over mine.

“Grandma!” I exclaim with a laugh. Really! Was everyone waiting on me to finally cave? Because it certainly seems so.

“And you,” she continues, eyes narrowing on James. “Don’t break my granddaughter’s heart, or you’ll be answering to me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He nods vigorously, then shoots me a wink, clearly unfazed by my grandma’s threats.

Granted, she's probably not that scary to him.

But even still, there's a determination and a sincerity in his eyes.

I don't know how I didn't notice it from the beginning.

"Although she's more likely to break mine."

He smirks at me, and I just shake my head.

We play a few rounds, but before long, it's already time to go. We say goodbye, and I excuse myself to use the restrooms. As I step back into the foyer, my bag hooks on a doorknob, and some of the contents of my bag fall to the floor. I crouch down to pick them up.

"Here," someone says, handing me my favorite night cream.

"Thanks." I lift my head to see Janice grinning at me.

She gives me a knowing look. "It's a good one. I've been using it my whole life."

I blink back, surprised. "Oh, really! I love it too. Glad to know it really makes a difference."

"It does." She gestures to her skin. "Just look at my face. Not a lot of wrinkles for an eighty-two-year-old, right?"

My smile widens as I nod, placing the rest of my stuff in my bag. "Definitely not. You look great."

As I stand up and wave her goodbye, I bite my lip. Now, I have to find Grandma,

ASAP.

After I track her down, I spill the beans on Janice's big secret.

Grandma is still highly suspicious of her youthful neighbor despite my explanation, so I leave her to ruminate on it.

With that settled, we can finally go to the restaurant.

We stroll hand in hand, as if we've been dating for months, but in a way, that's how I've always felt with James.

Comfortable. I just needed a little push, that's all.

We approach the restaurant, and a couple of women stop dead in their tracks when they spot us—well, James.

“Oh my gosh, you're James Adler. We're huge Raptors fans,” the shortest one gushes. “It's so crazy to meet you here.”

“Hi,” James says with a smile. “It's nice to meet you.”

She agitates her hands, her beaming smile stretching across her face. “Can we take a picture together?”

He casts me a glance, and I nod, taking a step back.

“Absolutely,” he says, grabbing one of their phones and taking a selfie with them.

“Can we also get a hug?” her friend asks, blushing.

He hugs them both in turn, and I'd be lying if I said it wasn't a little weird. True, he's not giving them the same hug he reserves for me, but I don't know if I'll ever get used to seeing my man with other women in his arms. Maybe with time.

"That was weird, right?" James says once they're gone.

I shrug. "What do you mean? Isn't that a pretty standard fan interaction for you?"

He frowns. "Yeah. But I don't know. Now it feels different, somehow. It's the hug. Maybe I should switch to fist bumps instead. They'll call me, James 'The Fist'—nah. James 'The Bump' Adler?" He winces. "We'll work on the name."

I laugh. "Yeah."

"Or maybe, for once, they'll give me a nickname based on my actual game. How crazy would that be?" he says with a chuckle. "The scorer? Crab, no. It's already taken. Or why not The Chaser? That works pretty well."

I shoot him a smile. I love it when he rambles like that. "It's perfect."

"Then it's settled," he says, taking me into his arms and holding me close. "Because the only woman I want in my arms is you."

"I like the sound of that, but I don't want you to change your entire behavior around your fans for me." I nuzzle my face into his chest. "Even if it's a little weird, it's your public persona. I know you don't see those women the way you see me."

"Absolutely not," he reassures me, caressing my cheek with the back of his hand. "There are things I'll only ever do with you. Like the delicious kisses, the hand holding, the—"

“Wait, wait. Rewind a bit.” I grin. “What was the first one?”

He smiles, tightening his grip around me. “Delicious kisses?”

“Yes.” I nod eagerly. “Can I see what that looks like, please?”

His eyes shine. “Absolutely.”

He brushes his hands over my shoulders and up my neck, stopping when he's holding my face. We lock eyes, and everything glows brighter around us. I graze my fingertips over the light stubble of his jaw, and his lips capture mine in a delicious kiss that melts my heart into a puddle. If there's one thing I can count on with my boyfriend, it's his ability to deliver on all of his promises.

Beth Bowen

It's been thirteen months since the Beaumont wedding, and James and I are still head over heels for each other. He flirts with me every single day—in fact, he implemented a mandatory flirting rule, so whether he's here or on the road, I always get a few one-liners worthy of an eye roll.

We're at the Raptors game tonight, and the arena is roaring with fans who are high on adrenaline.

James hasn't stopped hugging his fans—I know they need him as much as I do—but he's giving them out more sparingly.

He's also switched to a one-arm side hug when it comes to women.

Which is more than fine by me. Even if I know James is devoted to me, I'm not sure I'll ever get used to seeing so many women vying for his attention.

Unfortunately, the boys lost the cup in the finals again last year.

It was difficult to accept, even if Coach Martin reassured the team that if history repeats itself, the cup will be theirs again next season.

I guess it wouldn't be too bad, winning the Stanley Cup every other year.

The crowd goes wild as the puck drops, and the raptor sound plays over the speakers. It's meant to go off just once, but there must be some kind of glitch, because it keeps

going in a loop, distracting the players and making everyone laugh.

I search for James on the ice, and when I spot him, he's grinning at me. It's still his favorite sound, although he hasn't really mastered it yet.

"That's hilarious," Hayley says, drying her tears.

We all grip our sides, laughing as it keeps repeating for at least another full minute before it finally stops, and the crowd erupts into cheers as the game starts back up.

"What is even that sound, anyway?" I ask. "It's so strange. Doesn't even sound like an animal."

"I know," Marissa laughs. "I'll have to talk to my dad about that."

"Actually," Hayley says, looking at her phone. "It says here it's a turtle mating noise."

"What!" Marissa and I exclaim. No wonder it's so hard to imitate. I can't wait to tell James.

"That's too funny," Marissa says. "And they just blasted it on repeat for all of us to hear."

Suddenly, a shattering noise and a general gasp in the crowd catches our attention.

At first, we can't tell what's happening, but then we look up at the jumbotron and see one of the Raptors draped over the broken board surrounding the rink, his body limp, the glass shielding panels shattered around him.

My heart accelerates as I sit frozen, transfixed by the accident displayed on the screen. Then, I whip my head toward the rink, trying to spot James, but I don't. I

stand up, shuffling closer to the ice, craning my neck to see which player just crashed over the boards.

“It’s Hawthorne,” someone sitting above us shouts. I know it’s wrong, but I let out a relieved breath. The feeling lingers for only a second, because Caleb is a good friend, and I’m still worried about him.

I exchange a look with the girls, and I know they’re just as concerned.

“How did this even happen?” I breathe, still staring at the screen, which now shows a group of staff members helping to extract him.

His upper body landed on the first row, where we’re seated, and medical staff are rushing onto the scene, but it turns out they’re not focused on Hawthorne, but on a woman who was hit by the impact.

“Strong hit, I think,” Marissa mumbles, eyes fixed on the screen. “I’m guessing they’ll review the play to see if it was a good hit or not.”

“It has to be a bad hit,” Hayley exclaims, shaking her head.

Marissa shrugs. “Not necessarily. Just strong. It put pressure on the glass, and it broke. It’s not the first time this has happened, and it won’t be the—uh-oh. They’re evacuating the woman. I hope she’s going to be okay.”

“Oh my,” I whisper as they’re lifting her onto a stretcher. She doesn’t seem conscious. Caleb is being checked by a doctor too, but he’s already sitting up, and from what I see on the screen, he only has a few cuts.

Still, it’s a reminder that this game can be dangerous—even if you’re not on the ice. Hopefully, the girl will pull through.

“That was scary,” Hayley says as we’re sitting down.

I shake my head slowly. “Tell me about it. We’re already worried for the players. Now we have to wonder about the fans too.”

“You guys are overreacting,” Marissa says. “It’s fine. Besides, everyone knows that’s a risk you take when you get glass seats.”

“Um,” Hayley says, her wide eyes matching mine.

My jaw drops. “Yeah, you definitely never told me about that.”

Marissa blushes. “Oops. Well, I figured it was obvious. Plus, would you give up these seats? I mean, you’re right here in the action. It’s exhilarating.”

“Yeah.” I blurt out a chuckle. “Until you’re being taken out on a stretcher.”

“Right.” She winces. “Well, I’ll check with my dad after the game. Hopefully it’s nothing too serious. They’ll probably give her season tickets after this.”

I sigh. “Let’s hope she’s as much of a die-hard hockey fan as you, then. Because I don’t think even a lifetime of tickets would be worth a hit like that.”

When the game ends, no one is in the mood to go to the bar after what happened—not to mention their loss—so we just go home. Yes, home. I still live with James, but I pay rent now. Although I’m pretty sure I’m only paying for his home fragrance addiction, but at least I’m participating.

“Are you okay?” I ask him, hanging my coat on the hook in the entrance.

He’s focused on his phone, a deep frown etched on his face. “Yeah. Hawthorne’s at the hospital with the girl he hit. He just sent a text in the group chat.”

A shiver runs through me. “Oh, is she hurt bad? That was so scary.”

“They’re still running tests, and he's staying there to see what he can do.”

I release a sigh. “He's a good guy.”

“Yeah. Feels terrible too.” James puts his phone on the console and takes his coat off.

“But who knows? Maybe the hospital will bring them together, just like it did us.”

A small laugh escapes me. “Right.”

His face grows more serious. “Actually, I was going to do this tomorrow at Golden Age, but after this reminder that life can shift in an instant . . .”

I furrow my eyebrows. “What—”

He raises a finger before turning away and jogging down the hallway. “Hold that thought. I’ll be right back.”

A few minutes later, he returns clutching something in his large hands, a grin spreading across his face.

“What are you up to?” I ask, crossing my arms.

“Elizabeth.” He gets down on one knee, and everything around us fades. Wait a second. Is he doing what I think he’s doing? His eyes plunge into mine as he says, “Will you marry me?”

“Oh, James,” I say, my gaze roving to the ring he just revealed. Set on a minimalist white gold band is the most mesmerizing light-pink diamond I’ve ever laid eyes on. “It's gorgeous.”

“I know it might seem premature, but I've been in love with you for so long, I'm ready for the next step. But if you're not, we don't have to get married right away. Just the promise of being with you forever is enough for me.”

I sigh, my arms falling to my sides. “James. Who knew you were so sweet?”

“I know.” He smiles. “You could eat me up, right?”

I chuckle and fall into his arms. “Definitely.”

He wraps his arms around my waist, bringing us both up.

“You're the most amazing man I've ever met, James Adler. I love you so much, and I would be honored to be your wife.”

His smile widens into the biggest grin he's ever sported, and he dips me low before kissing me, as though we're at the end of a movie.

As I giggle against his lips, I know I made the right choice. Marissa couldn't have said it better. James is the perfect man for me.

He brings me back up, then takes the ring out of its box. “Now, I don't know if it'll fit, but we can always resize it.”

I put it on, and it's a little loose. “We should put it back for now. I'm afraid I might lose it.”

“Shoot. I was hoping you'd have her finger size,” he says, caressing my hands.

My forehead creases as I meet his eyes. “Um, what are you talking about?”

“Look inside the ring.”

When I bring it to my eyes, I see that it's engraved. "To my Diane. Now and forever."

"James, what—" I gasp, a hand flying to my mouth. "Your grandma!"

"Yep." He nods, his eyes glassy. "It was her wedding ring. My grandpa gave it to her before leaving for the war and, well, he never came back."

My heart falls. "Oh no."

He takes my hand and squeezes it softly. "But she loved that ring—and my grandpa—all her life. When she was in the nursing home, she gave it to me and said, 'One day, you'll find the perfect woman to give it to.'"

I shake my head slowly, my heart nearly bursting. Could this man be any cuter? I don't even know how I'm still standing at this point. He was on the ice, body checking other tough guys, merely two hours ago. And now, my boyfriend is opening his heart to me. No, my fiancé.

My eyes stay glued to the treasured ring. "I—this is beautiful, and perfect. I'm so honored that you're giving such a precious heirloom to me. I promise to take care of it."

"I thought about giving you that ring the first week I met you, Elizabeth Bowen. I always knew you were the one. I just had to make you see it too."

"It's crystal clear now," I say, brushing my fingertips over his jaw before dropping a long kiss on his lips. He kisses me back before dragging his lips along my jaw, exploring every inch of me.

Out of nowhere, he makes the Raptors sound, and I chuckle, pulling back to look at him. "By the way, did you know they use a turtle mating sound to create that raptor

call in the movies?”

He freezes, still holding me. “Well, that’s disturbing.”

“So, are you gonna stop now?” I ask, defying him with my gaze.

He bumps his forehead with mine, a smile on his face. “Not a chance.”

As he lifts me up, his lips blaze a trail of heat down my neck, and I burst into a fit of giggles. This is exactly how I imagine our future together. Full of kisses and giggles—and probably a few turtle mating sounds.