Fake friends. Real benefits.



If Only You

A BERGMAN ~~BROTHERS~~ *sister* NOVEL



CHLOE LIESE

If Only You

Chloe Liese writes romances reflecting her belief that everyone deserves a love story. Her stories pack a punch of heat, heart and humour, and often feature characters who are neurodivergent like herself.

When not dreaming up her next book, Chloe spends her time wandering in nature, playing soccer, and most happily at home with her family and mischievous cats.

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The Bergman Brothers Series:

Only When It's Us
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If Only You

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CONTENT NOTES

INCLUDES SPOILERS

This is an open-door romance that portrays on-page consensual sexual intimacy. This story includes a character on the autism spectrum and a character with celiac disease. It also includes the topic of self-medicating with alcohol and substances, as well as past experience of a verbally abusive stepparent and abandonment by a parent. With the guidance of my own experience, as well as authenticity and beta readers, I hope I have given these subjects the care and respect they deserve.

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PLAYLIST NOTE

At the beginning of each chapter, a song and artist is provided as another optional means of emotional connection to the story. It isn't a necessity – for some it may be a distraction or for others, inaccessible – nor are the lyrics literally about the chapter. Listen before or while you read for a soundtrack experience. If you enjoy playlists, rather than individually searching each song as you read, you can directly access these songs on a Spotify playlist by logging onto your Spotify account and entering 'If Only You (BB #6)' into the search browser.

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For the hard hearts that bravely learn to soften,
and the brave soft hearts that love them as they do.

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“Broken hearts, unrequited love, and inconsolable misery are subjects which, most fortunately, I have only ever read in books.”

— Jane Austen, *Sanditon*

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1

ZIGGY

Playlist: "Shame," Elle King

This just might be the perfect day. Except for one small thing:

My underwear.

Standing beside my siblings, I smile for another wedding photo and try to focus on how magical this day has been instead of how far my panties are riding up my butt. I think about this gorgeous beachfront wedding that just went off without a hitch for my brother Ren and his now wife, Frankie, who's been like a sister to me for years. I think about the glorious tangerine sun glowing on the horizon, the luscious sea breeze that's kept me cool this afternoon, despite the heat weaving through our whole chaotic Bergman brood—my parents, six siblings, their partners, and my niece and nephew.

The camera clicks as my little gratitude exercise comes to a close, unfortunately leaving me no less aware of the wedgie from hell. I wiggle my butt to try to dislodge it and force my grimace into a smile as the photographer calls for one more take.

"Okay," Frankie says after the next click of the camera, brushing back a lock of dark hair from her face. "That's

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enough memory making. This bride needs a seat, five minutes of quiet, and a very large glass of red wine."

"Coming right up," the wedding planner says, jumping into action.

The tight photographer-staged ball of our family dissolves into easy mingling—quick laughter and steady conversation. Before someone can rope me into it, I scamper away across the sand, sandals hooked on my fingers, making a beeline for the elegant venue that boasts grand doors opened wide to the sights and sounds of the beach, the dwindling light mingling with ivory candles and floral centerpieces.

Trying to be circumspect, I follow the edge of the room, racking my memory for the nearest bathroom, though, at this point, I will take a closet, nook, the first private space available, to lose these horrible panties, because I'm about to crawl out of my skin.

Not everyone gets this upset about their underwear riding up their butt; however, I'm autistic, and I have a lot of sensory issues. Itchy seams, fabric bunched where it shouldn't be, send me spiraling if I don't address the issue promptly. I need to find somewhere to deal with my sensory misery *immediately*.

As I finally locate the restroom and stumble into the lounge area—an art deco ode to shell-pink velvet and bronze accents—I come to an abrupt stop, encountering the one thing that could distract me from the underwear from hell:

People talking about me.

"Don't get me wrong, Ziggy's sweet. She really is." I can't see her, but I recognize that voice. It's Bridget, one of our just-retired midfielders from the National Team, whose spot I filled on our starting lineup. "She's just so—"

"Young," offers a voice I recognize, too. Martina, another recently retired player and former starting defender.

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"Exactly," Bridget says. "Frankly, I was surprised she made the roster at *all*. When Mal asked what I thought about her place on the team, I told him, she's talented, but she doesn't have the confidence, the…*poise* for a starting position, for the exposure and pressure that puts on you."

"She really doesn't," Martina agrees. "I mean, as soon as the camera's pointed her way, she goes silent and her face turns as red as her hair."

My hand goes to my hair. And my cheeks turn hot. My vision is starting to get blurry.

"Well, soon enough, Mal will see what a mistake he made."

Twin tears spill down my cheeks. My hands are fists, shaking as anger boils up inside me. What Bridget and Martina said is so unfair. But it's also not unprecedented. I'm painfully familiar with this attitude, this perception that I'm juvenile and naïve, some delicate innocent who can't handle the real world.

My family babies me. My peers underestimate me. I'm tired of it, and I'm sick to my stomach, thinking about what this perception, if it sticks, could cost me—what it already threatened to cost me, but for Coach Mal ignoring Bridget's warnings and putting me on the team anyway.

I'm mad that I have to deal with this nonsense on today of all days. I get why my brother Ren invited Bridget and Martina to his wedding. They're local high-profile professional athletes who partner generously with his charity. But still, right now, I really wish he hadn't.

"All right," Martina says, her voice growing closer on the restroom side of the lounge. "That's enough preening. I want to get my hands on those hors d'oeuvres. They looked damn good, and they aren't going to last forever. This place is

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crawling with professional athletes; you know how much food they can put away."

Bridget snorts. "Yeah, I do. I've seen you eat."

Martina's echoing laugh grows closer. They're about to see me, and they'll know I've heard them. Desperate to avoid that, I spin and rush out of the room, right into my sister.

"Whoa." My oldest sibling, Freya, clasps me by the shoulders as I plow into her.

I duck my head, quickly dabbing my face, but Freya hasn't missed a thing.

"Zigs, what's wrong? Did someone upset you?" She curls an arm around me and tugs me down the hall. "Hey, talk to me. I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

"I don't need your help!" I wrench myself away as we turn the corner in the hall, thankfully hiding us from Bridget and Martina. "I don't need you to manhandle or woman-handle me or whatever, and I don't need you to stick up for me."

Freya blinks, her pale blue-gray eyes, just like Mom's, wide with surprise. Slowly she lifts her hands in surrender. "Okay. I'm sorry. I get in mama-bear mode, you know that. I just want to take care of you. You're my baby sister."

I shake my head, scrunching my eyes shut. "I'm the youngest in the family, but I'm not a baby anymore, Freya. I'm a twenty-two-year-old woman." Huffing a breath, I stare up at the ceiling and try to calm myself. "I vote. I got my driver's license. I have a job and an apartment. I pay my rent. I take care of myself, okay?"

Freya lowers her hands, her voice quiet and hesitant. "Okay, Ziggy. I'm sorry."

Guilt turns my stomach sour. I've hurt Freya's feelings, and I didn't mean to. I meant to be honest, to tell the truth, but I didn't say it in a way that made her feel good.

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So often, it feels like when I'm my true, honest self, I can't do anything right.

"It's fine. I'm sorry, too, I just…" Growling with frustration, I clutch my sandals tight in my hand. My underwear's location in my butt crack is turning into my villain origin story. "I just need somewhere to lose these freaking panties!"

Storming down the hall and leaving my sister in my wake, I catch sight of glass doors opening out to a shadowy terrace, a steep roof shielding it from the last marigold streaks of twilight. Tall tropical plants cover the terra-cotta tiles and form a small, lush oasis, affording me plenty of privacy for what I need to do.

I drop my sandals and hike up my dress to reach the waistband of my underwear. With a sigh of deep relief, I hook my fingers on the waistband, then drag the offending fabric down my thighs. When it hits my ankles, I celebrate by flicking the horrible panties off my foot, into the air over my head. Then I spin around, prepared to catch them.

Except when I turn around, I see someone's beaten me to it.

Someone lounging in the shadows, long legs outstretched…

One familiar, tattooed hand, holding my panties.

I take it back. It's not the wedgie from hell or Bridget and Martina's gossiping or my well-meaning-but-suffocating family that's going to ruin this otherwise perfect day. It's the sight of my underwear dangling from Sebastian Gauthier's heavily tattooed index finger.

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Heat crawls up my throat and floods my cheeks as my

brother's best friend stares at me from the shadows. Slowly, he sits up and leans forward, elbows on his knees.

Then he gives my panties a little twirl around his finger.

Somehow, my cheeks get even hotter. I'm going to die of mortification.

"Lose something?" he asks.

It's the longest he's ever looked my way, the most words he's ever spoken to me. (We've bumped into each other a handful of times either at my brother Ren's place or after their games, which is when I've only ever been the recipient of a terse nod followed by a chilly *hello*.) Any other day, I'd probably stand here, tongue-tied, stunned that Sebastian's acknowledged my existence.

But today, I'm at my limit. I've been dealing with a noisy crowd, aggravating undies, petty fellow athletes, overinvolved family, and I'm *done.*

Cheeks burning, fire in my veins, I take the two steps between us and reach for my underwear as he swings it lazily around his finger.

At the last second, Sebastian pulls back and does some confounding sleight of hand that makes them disappear. A soft *tsk* shivers through the air as he peers up at me, one dark eyebrow lifted. "Not so fast."

I glare down at him. "Give me my panties."

Gaze holding mine, he flashes a dangerously slow, sensual grin. And in that moment, I understand exactly how Sebastian Gauthier has managed to get away with being such a despicable human: he is despicably handsome.

I stare into those rare quicksilver eyes, cold and sharp as they stare right back at me. His dark hair rustles in the sea breeze, a few loose waves caressing his temple before they're blown back, revealing the full and unfair beauty of his face. Cool gray eyes framed by thick dark lashes. A long, strong

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nose. That unreasonably lush mouth, twin faint hollows in each cheek.

Slouching in his chair again, long legs sprawled out, he wears a booted air cast on his right foot that I can only imagine sucked to wear out on the sand, though I'm not inclined to feel much of anything in the way of sympathy for him right now. Inked fingers with their silver rings drum on the chair's arms. He's dressed in a charcoal suit so dark it's nearly black, a white button-up undone way too many, revealing a deep wedge of golden skin and silver chains. From his collarbones down, every exposed inch of him is *covered* in tats.

In another world—in which he wasn't an unapologetic jerk—I could mistake him for one of those morally gray villains who star in the fantasy romances I've been reading since adolescence. Dangerous and dark haired, inked and angry. Villains who ultimately redeem themselves, revealing their true natures when they prove themselves to be profoundly good, feminist, sacrificial heroes.

I know. It's called *fantasy* romance for a reason.

As he inspects me with that cool, sharp gaze, I set my hands on my hips and glare at him, profoundly annoyed.

He is literally *the* most beautiful person I've ever seen.

But while he looks like he could spread some epic Faery King wings and whisk me off across the night sky to his palace, he is *not* one of my fantasy romance heroes. He is someone who—according to a lot of deeply damning and corroborated news headlines—breaks not just promises and property, but hopes and hearts. Which is why his devious charms have not and certainly will not be working on me.

And also why I continue to be baffled that my second oldest brother, Ren, the sweetest, most tenderhearted man, could be bonded to him so deeply.

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Sebastian and Ren are teammates—both are star forwards for the LA Kings hockey team—but beyond that, what makes them so close is a mystery to me. Ren says there's good in Sebastian, that he just struggles to demonstrate it in observable ways. Now that I'm experiencing firsthand what a jerk Sebastian can be, I'm wondering if Ren sees in Sebastian what he *wants* to more than what's actually there.

"Sebastian Gauthier," I say sternly, "give me my panties."

His cold gray eyes turn arctic as he peers up at me. He raises an eyebrow. "What panties? I don't see any panties, do you?"

I glare at him harder, my anger ratcheting up. "I don't see them, but I know you have them. I watched you do…something with them."

His smirk is wolfish and infuriating. "Better come find them, then."

Again, on any other day, I would probably throw up my hands and walk off, enjoy bursting Ren's idyllic bubble by telling him that I'd appreciate it if he asked his *best friend* to cough up my panties the next time he sees him. But today is not that day. Today I am past my limit, and my rare temper is a wild colt free of its reins.

Without preamble, I step between the bracket of Sebastian's legs, wrap a hand around his wrist, and tug up his arm, slipping my other hand inside the sleeve of his suit coat. I fully expect the panties to be there, since that's the hand that was holding them.

He laughs, and the sound is so self-satisfied, so arrogant, I barely resist the urge to scream in frustration. "Try again."

Angry, I drop his wrist. "Where *are* they?"

If they're not up his sleeve, I have no idea where else my underwear could be. At this point, the only way I could possibly find out is frisking him.

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When I glance up again and find that sardonic grin lifting his mouth, I have one of my little delayed autistic epiphanies: that's exactly what he wants me to do.

As if he's watched the lightbulb *ping* to life over my head, Sebastian stretches out his impressive wingspan, grin widening. "I suppose you'll just have to pat me down."

I roll my eyes. But before I can come up with some witty retort, my brother Viggo's voice carries from somewhere inside: "Ziggy! Get in here! The chocolate fountain's running!"

Sebastian jerks in his seat like he's been electrocuted and bolts upright, suddenly standing beside me.

Very close beside me.

He takes me by the shoulder and spins me a quarter turn, until light from inside spills across my face. His eyes widen. "Fucking hell. *Ziggy?*"

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2

SEBASTIAN

Playlist: "Broken Boy," Cage The Elephant

I have a long history of truly terrible sins, but mentally debauching my best friend's baby sister while watching her strip off her panties just might take the cake.

To my credit, I didn't recognize Ziggy at first. My vision's fuzzy, thanks to my drunkenness, and she was backlit when she walked out onto the terrace, nothing but a stunning silhouette whose defining features were hidden. Then, when she stepped closer, and I had a chance of seeing her, her hair was down—it's never been down before—and in the dying light of sunset it was a sheet of molten bronze curtaining her face, nothing like the fiery red that Ren and his little sister share.

I didn't realize it was Ziggy I was mentally undressing until I heard someone inside yell her name and watched her answer to it. Now I stand, clutching her arm, drinking her in as she glows in the harsh brightness of the venue's lights. My stomach sours. The liquor I've been drinking since before the ceremony began crawls up my throat.

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She only looks a little like Ren—the same long, straight nose and sharp, high cheekbones, and (now that we're in

proper lighting) the same rich red hair—but mostly she looks nothing like him. Unlike his ice-blue irises, hers are wide, deep-set emeralds. And while I've noticed a few on Ren, her skin is scattered with freckles, a shower of cinnamon sparks splashed across her nose and cheeks, across her arm that I'm still holding. That I can't seem to stop holding.

I think I just might be in shock.

I watched quiet, shy Ziggy Bergman viciously strip off her panties.

And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

More than enjoyed it. Got very, *very* aroused, watching her hike up her dress, looking like some ocean goddess—long, wild hair whipping in the breeze, seafoam-green fabric dancing over pale, freckled thighs that kept going and going, leading to wide hips and two full curves of her ass—

Shit. *Shit.*

I'm mentally debauching her again.

"Sebastian." There's my full name again, scolding and authoritarian. Ziggy sounds like a chiding schoolteacher faced with a naughty little boy, a fantasy I'd enjoy much more if a) it didn't involve my best friend's little sister, and b) she hadn't used my full name. I hate when people use my full name.

"It's *Seb*," I tell her icily.

She blinks slowly, curiously, as if impervious to the frigid warning in my voice. As if she's not one bit intimidated by me, even when I stand to my full height, maximizing the two inches I have on her. She lifts her chin and stares right back.

The hairs on the nape of my neck stand up. The way they always do when my sixth sense kicks in. A warning.

I should be running the other way, putting distance between us like I have the past two years.

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Since I joined the Kings and found myself inextricably

tethered to her brother, I have kept my eyes, thoughts, hands, attention thoroughly away from Ziggy Bergman. Because Ren—the kind, good, always smiling captain of my team, a man who is truly my antithesis—is the one person I haven't been able to scare off, who's not only refused to be put off by my horrible reputation and merciless streak of misbehavior, but who's insinuated himself in my life to the point that we've become profoundly close, and like hell will I risk that friendship.

That means steering clear of the people he loves. Which there happen to be quite a lot of. Six siblings. *Six*.

It hasn't been a great challenge, given most of them are partnered, not that—let's be clear about the quality of my character—this has stopped me from seducing someone before. The remaining two who are unpartnered, I swore to myself I'd avoid entirely, no matter how attractive they were.

One was easier than the other.

Viggo, his younger brother, wasn't hard to write off. While damn good looking, he's always waving around a romance novel, yelling about toxic masculinity and happy endings. I don't touch romantics, a lesson I learned the hard way after a few clingers refused to believe I'm really as disinterested in commitment as I told them.

Ziggy, on the other hand, has been trickier. Striking height and looks, but so demure and quiet, a delicious blend of contradictions that I've had to remind myself repeatedly I will not be exploring. She, I've had to *decide* to ignore. And I've done very well following through on that decision the past few years.

Until now.

"Be right there!" she yells inside, before rounding on me. I catch the whisper of a perfume that's soft and clean, so

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light, it could be only the scent of her skin, the soap she uses to bathe.

Christ. Now I'm thinking about her bathing. Bubbles frothing along those long, freckled legs, dissolving at the curve of her breasts—

"What was that about?" she demands, snapping me out of more debaucherous thoughts.

"I didn't know it was you."

Her eyes narrow. "You…didn't know it was me."

I turn away and stare out at the ocean, avoiding looking at her. God, I'm drunk. The world's tipping like I'm on a ship weathering sky-high swells.

"Yes," I say on a nauseated exhale.

She folds her arms. "We've seen each other easily a handful of times. I look just like your best friend—"

"That is patently untrue," I mutter, massaging my aching temples. My brain feels like sludge. And, like it does so often, my stomach thuds with sharp, familiar pain.

She snorts. "You really expect me to believe you didn't recognize me."

"Yes," I snap, rounding on her, making her take a fast step back as her eyes widen in surprise. "It's getting dark. You were backlit, and I'm drunk. Your hair was down, and it's never down. I didn't recognize you."

Now her eyebrows lift, twin cinnamon curves arched over those wide green eyes the color of wet glossy leaves like the ones surrounding us. "How do you know my hair's never down?"

"I don't pretend to know or care what it looks like," I tell her sharply, hoping it'll scare her off. "I mean, when I've *seen* you, it's never down."

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She tips her head, arms across her chest. "I wasn't aware

you even saw me when we *did* cross paths. You seemed to overlook the fact that I even existed."

"Yes, well, it's easy to overlook someone who obviously *wants* to be overlooked. If you've been hoping for a different response, I'd suggest revising that attitude."

Suddenly, her expression blanks. When she blinks, a sheen of wetness turns her eyes glassy.

That's when I realize I've done something even more unforgiveable than mentally debauching my best friend's little sister:

I've made her cry.

The past three weeks since I watched Ziggy run off on the verge of tears began as a typical self-loathing bender, but have culminated in a new, bleak low. With my reinjured foot propped up, I lounge on Ren's sofa, the recipient of a formidable scowl.

Frankie's.

My highly displeased agent sits in an armchair across from me in her usual head-to-toe black, long, dark hair curtaining intense hazel eyes. That paired with her severe expression, her hand flexing menacingly around her gray acrylic cane, she looks like a pissed-off witch, ready to curse me. I think, one more wrong move on my part, and she just might.

"You," she says flatly, "are an ass of unfathomable proportions."

"This is not news." Shutting my eyes, I drop my head back on the arm of their sofa.

Frankie jabs my thigh with the tip of her cane. Hard.

"Ow!" I whine. "Ren, Frankie hit me."

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"Don't talk to him," she snaps. "He has no part in this conversation."

"So we're having this meeting at your house while Ren makes us lunch, why again?"

"So I won't murder you," she tells me darkly.

I swallow. Frankie's wrath is just about the only thing I'm scared of. That and losing my hockey career.

I might also be a teensy bit scared of finally having done something that could cost me Ren's friendship, too. Not that I'd ever admit that to anyone, especially Ren.

I glance toward the man in question, who still exhibits no signs of having written me off, considering he drove me to and from my most recent doctor appointment in his minivan and is now making me a meal. Still, he's got me nervous, standing with his back to me, focused on whatever's cooking on the range while he wears his theater-nerd apron covered in doodled William Shakespeares.

"Ren," I whisper-plead.

He gives me an apologetic glance over his shoulder. "Better listen to her. You know I'd step between you and anything, Seb, except my wife."

As he says that, Frankie's expression transforms from a scowl to a smile, which she beams his way. He beams a smile back.

Their mutual gaze is disgustingly affectionate.

"Stop doing that in front of me. It's making me nauseous."

Frankie cuts me another scathing glare and pokes me in the hip this time, making me yelp. "Sure that nausea isn't a response to your self-sabotaging bullshit finally coming back to bite you in the ass?"

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"I know I fucked up. I told you, I understand, okay? Now

it's your job to help me fix it. That's why I pay you the big bucks."

Frankie snorts, leaning back in her chair, and—thank God—dropping her cane beside her. "Seb, I am brilliant at my job. I am a damn good sports agent. But this is pushing the limits of even *my* abilities. If it were simply managing your image, that would be one thing—"

"Managing my image is exactly what I need you to do."

"No," she says flatly. "It's not. Your image does not need 'managing.' It needs a goddamn resurrection."

I frown. "It's not *that* bad, is it?"

Frankie blinks at me slowly, as bleak silence thickens the air. Ren bites his lip and keeps his eyes on the stovetop, stirring steadily.

"Yes, Gauthier," she finally snaps. "It is 'that bad.'"

Oh fuck. I've been Gauthier-ed. I'm in trouble.

"So I crashed my car," I concede diplomatically. "But it wasn't into anyone else."

"No," Frankie mutters between clenched teeth. "Just an *after-school outreach program facility*."

Ren winces.

"At least it was two in the morning? No one was hurt?"

"Oh, people were hurt," she says. "These kids don't have a place for their program until it's fixed; that hurts them. I have to figure out how to spin some tale justifying your reckless endangerment on the road and tens of thousands of dollars of property damage caused by wrecking a luxury sports car while driving with a busted foot, that doesn't finish off your career and make you look like a selfish, irresponsible prick."

"How about emphasizing that I wasn't drunk driving? I never drink and drive. I feel like I should get brownie points for that."

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"There are no brownie points!" she yells, eyes wide. "There is nothing redeeming about your behavior, Gauthier. You're sure as shit paying for all damages, but the facility is unusable until the repairs are made. Even throwing money at them, this will take time to fix, and the story will linger. If this were your first misguided offense, that would be one thing, but it's not. You already broke your foot in the world's most pointless of bar fights—"

"He took a swing at me. I had to defend myself."

"You didn't have to let it devolve to a full-on brawl with someone wearing steel-toed boots, a James Bond-level chase across the bar, and you jumping off the bar's rooftop patio into a dumpster! I *thought* it couldn't get any worse," she says sharply. "But now, you, one of the team's highest scorers and most pivotal players, had to go and crash your car into a community service building and bruise your nearly healed foot again because you drove when you shouldn't have. You were about to start preseason conditioning and kick off a huge press junket."

"I hardly need preseason conditioning anyway," I tell her, plucking a piece of lint off my dark jeans. "I'll pick up right where I left off. And I'll be fine to do the press junket with my foot. It'll be healed up soon."

"I can't." Frankie stands slowly out of her chair, like always. She has rheumatoid arthritis, and transitioning from standing to sitting, I've observed, takes her a little longer than it does most. "I cannot with you. I've never throttled a client, but I am so close to it right now. Pazza!"

At being beckoned, her white and black Alusky, Pazza, bounds down the hallway, straight toward me, and jumps onto my throbbing foot.

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I grunt in pain as I shove the dog away. She pivots back, licks me from chin to forehead, which is *disgusting*, then

twirls, chasing her tail a few times. Finally, she parks her ass in front of my face and blows a violently loud, foul fart.

"Good girl." Frankie snaps her fingers, yanking open the sliding door to their back patio, which Pazza bounds onto, then slamming it shut with surprising force.

A painful, echoing silence ensues. Ren clears his throat, stirs whatever's in the pot one more time, then sets down the spoon he was holding.

After crossing the open-concept space from his kitchen to the couch, Ren drops onto the chair Frankie vacated and leans forward, elbows in his knees. "Seb, you know I love you like a brother."

I shut my eyes. "Ren—"

"And you love me like a brother."

"The only thing I love," I remind him pointedly, "is—"

"Hockey," he says, a smile in his voice. "Yes, I know. Even though you have this funny way of doing loving things that protect me and look out for me, like that check late in the season that got you concussed, which you threw yourself into so I wouldn't get hit—"

"I tripped," I say offhandedly.

"Uh-huh. The fastest, most agile skater in the league 'tripped' into a concussive hit. Sure. My point is this: though you clearly cannot stand to admit it, you are capable of good things. You aren't beyond redeeming yourself."

A hot, sharp pain carves down my chest as I meet his eyes. "That's where you're wrong. Even Frankie thinks so."

"Nah." Ren stands, then gently squeezes my shoulder. "She didn't say you're irredeemable. Frankie said that fixing this is going to be hard, that it's going to take time. Good things, healing things, that lead to growth, are often like that. Victories are won with patience, endurance, and tiny, incremental steps. You know this, already, Seb. You've lived it.

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Yes, you're talented, but you're also profoundly dedicated—look at how hard you've worked, day after day, for two *decades*, to become the elite hockey player you are, to get where you are professionally. You're telling me you don't think you're capable of that personally, too?"

That sharp pain's hotter and deeper, burrowing dangerously close to the shriveled-up organ in my chest that's best left unacknowledged. "Is there a point to this motivational speech?"

When Ren speaks, his voice is unusually somber. "My point is, Frankie can help you as much as possible, but ultimately, this is up to you, your motivation, your belief in yourself. You've got to dedicate yourself to making the changes that will turn this around, Seb."

I groan and rake both hands through my hair. "Yes, I know."

"I think you need to cut back on drinking," Ren warns. "Or preferably, stop entirely."

I grimace. "That seems a little extreme."

"And no carousing."

"Carousing?" I snort. "What is this, the nineteenth century?" I'm walloped with a pillow. "Fine," I grumble. "No 'carousing.'"

Ren stands, arms folded across his chest. "If you keep to the straight and narrow for a while, heal your foot, give Frankie some time to figure out a way to rehab your image, you'll be back in the team's good graces in no time—"

"And my sponsors'," I remind him. "Let's not forget the sponsors."

He rolls his eyes. "You'd be fine money-wise, even if you lost a few sponsors."

"Ah, yes, but then how would I afford another hundred-thousand-dollar car to wreck?"

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Ren's eyes turn a rare icy cold.

"Joking," I tell him, sitting up. "That was a joke."

"Too soon," he mutters, turning back toward the kitchen. "You could have seriously injured yourself or someone else."

I slump back on the sofa and stare up at the ceiling. Ren's right. To get myself on the team's and my sponsors' good side, I have to appear to behave myself for a while, to have turned over a new leaf. And I do mean *appear*. I'm not actually going to change, of course.

If I don't put on a good show of having cleaned up my act, I might really lose the only things that matter to me. Hockey. The rare friendship that's burrowed its way into my existence. The lifestyle that brings me the indulgent pleasures I so thoroughly enjoy.

Stretched out on Ren's sofa, I rack my brain, wondering for the first time in my adult life how I could possibly pull off the ruse of being a decent human being.

I don't have the first idea where to begin.

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3

ZIGGY

Playlist: "Body of Mine," Liz Brasher

Sunday family dinner used to be my favorite part of the week. All the local Bergmans, and when they're visiting, the Washington State siblings with their partners, seated around the long, worn wood table at my parents' place. Laughter and conversation over a spread of my Swedish mother's family recipes and flickering candlelight.

But now Sunday family dinner is just another place where I feel trapped in a role that fits like old clothes after a growth spurt—too small, aggravatingly tight. And I don't know exactly how to change that. I know I've outgrown the labels I used to wear, but I can't for the life of me figure out what I want to put on now, what will feel right.

I guess I wish that my family of all people could make a little space for me, act even just a *little* open to the possibility of my growth and change, while I figured that out.

I'm sitting with my niece at the kids' end of the table, surrounded by coloring books and tiny squishmallows, to give you a sense of how far that wish is from coming true.

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Don't get me wrong, my niece, Linnea—Linnie, as we call her—is adorable. Three and a half, highly verbal, she's so

precocious, she has me worried she's going to give my mischievous brothers, Viggo and Oliver, a run for their money.

However, while we eat a delicious meal, candles down at the other end of the table so they're out of her reach, I'm keenly aware that I've been listening to her poop and fart jokes—albeit very clever poop and fart jokes—for the past twenty minutes, while my parents sit at the other end of the table, deep in conversation with the rest of my local siblings and their partners. Linnie's parents, my sister, Freya, and her husband, Aiden, who burps their infant son, Theo, on his shoulder, sit across from my brothers Viggo and Oliver, and Ollie's partner, Gavin. Beside them are my sister-in-law, Frankie, and my brother Ren. They all lean in, elbows on the table, heads close, glasses of wine and beer in hand as dancing candlelight illuminates their faces.

While I sit down here, with a cup bearing a lid and a straw because apparently Mom still thinks I'm nine and prone to spill. Sighing, I move a tiny squishmallow off my niece's Pokémon coloring book and start to shade Pikachu's big pointy ear.

Linnie leans in, those ice-blue Bergman eyes locked on me. Her dark wavy hair, like Aiden's, is half out of its bun, which bounces as she wiggles her eyebrows. "I got another joke, Aunt Ziggy."

I force a smile and wipe a streak of sauce off her cheek. "I'm all ears."

"What are a clown's farts like?"

A sigh leaves me. "I don't know. What are they like?"

She wiggles her eyebrows again and says, "They smell funny."

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I wrinkle my nose dramatically, knowing it will please this kid who loves to gross people out. "Ewww."

She lets out a goofy chuckle and stabs a bite of cut-up meatball. "That's my new favorite."

As Linnie shoves the meatball in her mouth, I catch the tail end of Ren's sentence: "Thankfully he only bruised his foot, but he's still out for at least another two weeks."

"The one he broke this summer?" Freya, who's a physical therapist and familiar with injuries like his, the work of their recovery, grimaces at Ren's nod. She takes a fussing Theo from Aiden, and lifts some secret flap in her shirt, then cuddles him into her arm to nurse again. "That's rough."

"A banged-up foot is the least of his problems," Frankie mutters. "His public image is in much worse shape. He crashed his damn—sorry, darn," she amends for Linnie's benefit, "car right into an after-school outreach program facility. While recklessly driving with a broken foot. The optics are terrible."

Gavin frowns thoughtfully. Like Ollie, he's a professional soccer player, though he's now retired. "His sponsors dropped him?"

"Like a hot potato." Frankie takes a deep drink of her wine. "And he's—sorry for the pun—on *incredibly* thin ice with the Kings' management."

"I'm worried about him," Ren admits. "Seb's always had a reckless streak, but this latest slipup seems more serious than before."

"It *is* more serious than a slipup," Frankie says. "It's rock bottom."

My stomach knots. I shouldn't care two figs about Sebastian Gauthier. But hearing that he drove his car into a building and hurt himself even more, knowing he's fallen out of his sponsors' good graces and is in huge trouble with the team, makes me inexplicably sad.

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I've seen Sebastian when I've been to Ren's games,

flying across the ice. The man comes *alive* when he plays. If he feels for hockey even close to what I feel for soccer, he has to be miserable with himself right now for jeopardizing his career.

I try to move my thoughts along, past empathizing with someone who's managed to destroy so cavalierly what so few dream of ever attaining, someone who really is despicable. But the truth is, my thoughts have been on Sebastian Gauthier a lot the past few weeks.

Because he treated me differently, how no one else has. Not just at first, when he didn't recognize me, when he teased and provoked me, but when he recognized me, too. Even then, he treated me like a grown woman who could handle his assholery, not some fragile, delicate thing to handle with care. He didn't let up. He dug in. He said something that cut and burrowed deep:

It's easy to overlook someone who clearly wants *to be overlooked. If you'd hoped for a different response, I'd suggest revising that attitude*.

I almost told him, *I know, for crying out loud—I* know *that if I want to be seen differently, I have to* do *things differently. I just don't know how to do it.* Except frustrating tears tightened my throat, and the words wouldn't come.

That's how I've felt so often lately, like I'm on the cusp of telling a lot of people a lot of things that are long overdue, but the truth is a knot in my throat that I can't untangle, the force to tug it free something I can't yet find inside myself.

I *want* to discover that courage and those words. I want to stick up for myself and say that I deserve the chance to grow into who I'm capable of being—on and off the pitch. I want to be recognized as a grown, desirable bisexual woman, a concept that seems wholly foreign to my social circle and siblings, despite the fact that a lot of them have single friends

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